

TARGET: Zero Hunger

Episode 11

[Sandra] Hello and welcome to Target: Zero Hunger – a podcast that explores the food challenges and solutions of our time, brought to you by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization. I’m your host, Sandra Ferrari.

[Sound IN -- heavy shovel machine removing debris at Al Jazeera irrigation project. Continue low under narration]

[Sandra] The sound you’re hearing is of a large digger – one of those big caterpillar vehicles with a long neck and a shovel at the end. It’s removing pieces of an old bridge – or what’s left of it. This is Iraq. Some 30 Km west of Mosul, not far from the Syrian border.

The digger is moving heavy debris around the Al Jazeera Irrigation system – which is a network of hundreds of canals that used to feed about 250,000 hectares of farmland in the surrounding area. The bridge and most of the irrigation system were destroyed by ISIS - the armed group that took this part of the country in 2014. The area – in Ninewa governorate – is Iraq’s biggest wheat-producing region. Farmers grew vegetable crops here, too. Altogether, farming provided income and jobs for hundreds of thousands of people in the region each season.

But since ISIL took the area two years ago, farmers haven’t been able to plant vegetables here at all. There was simply no water to feed their fields. Plus, conflict left the area full of mines...

[Paul Schlunke CLIP IN]

[Paul]: Before we can start to repair the canal system, we have to make sure there is no unexploded ordinances or no IED around the canal that can cause harm to any of the local populations.

[CLIP OUT]

[Sandra:] That’s Paul Schlunke, the FAO Emergency coordinator in Iraq. FAO is working with the government to get these canals back up and running. But first, Paul and his team had to hire a demining company to clear the canal and surrounding area of explosives. The heavy digger is part of that work.

[Paul] So now we have an implementing partner whom are currently underway to clean the canal out where there’s been explosions, they are breaking it up with heavy machinery and cleaning that out. And we are also using local laborers – cash for work. The local labor is people, IDPs, who’ve lost their livelihoods. We are employing them to do cash-for-work for cleaning the canal and getting the systems up and running again.

[Sandra] As of January 2017, almost three million Iraqis remain displaced – many of them are IDPs, or internally displaced people, like Paul just mentioned. Many are travelling with their

livestock – cattle, sheep and goats – and some crossed into neighboring countries. Now that more areas are being retaken from armed groups, the UN expects that about 1.5 million Iraqis will return home this year.

But what future awaits them there? What livelihoods will they be able to build in Iraq's rural areas?

[Sound OUT]

[Theme music IN]

[Sandra] In this episode and the next, we bring you stories on the relationship between peace and food security. For today's story, we gave FAO communications officer Karina Coates a recorder to tape her visits to two FAO projects in retaken areas of Iraq. We asked her to help us better understand the impacts conflict in the region has had on agriculture and how FAO is helping farming communities regain stability. Later in the episode, I'll speak with Lucca Russo, an FAO expert on resilience-building, about why supporting farmers is so key to preventing post-conflict zones from slipping back into war.

[Theme music OUT]

[Sandra] Of course, the idea that war and hunger are interlinked is not new. But there's damage to agriculture that's often invisible in international headlines. And addressing that damage early can make or break a country's recovery.

To show us what that work looks like on the ground, here's Karina, in Iraq.

[Car sound IN]

[Karina] We're heading to our project site, where our cash-for-work project has just started. And the people who are involved are clearing the irrigation canals so that farming can start again.

[Canal scene IN]

[Karina] We're here at the canal, where there are 100 people working on our cash for work part of the project. There are 50 where I'm standing and there's another 50 down the canal. And they're clearing the debris. Putting it into wheel barrows. And the following behind will be an excavator that will bring it up from the bottom of the canal and clear it out.

[Sandra] Karina sent us some video, so we got a sense of the project site. It shows the canal they're working in is big -- about 10 meters deep and three meters wide. The men are wearing rubber boots, thick jackets and scarves around their faces to protect themselves from the wind. It's clearly pretty cold in this part of Iraq at this time of year.

But the men are in good spirits. For many of the guys working here, it's the first time in two years that they have had paid employment. It allows them to pay for heating, transport and other daily necessities. One worker, called Ghanam Ibrahim, tells Karina that his uncle, who is a farmer, will directly benefit from the work he does here today.

[Karina] What happened two years ago with your uncle's farm when ISIS came into the area?

[Ghanam] My family has farming land – specifically my uncle. When ISIS came two years ago they forced them out of their houses and they destroyed the bridge and their land. And they planted some explosives around the agricultural land. And my uncle couldn't plant anything since.

[Karina] What will it mean for your family if water flows through these canals again?

[Ghanam Ibrahim] My family will definitely benefit from resuming the water in the canal. They will resume planting wheat and potatoes and supporting the families.

[Sandra] One of Ghanam's colleagues is kneeling at the top of the canal wall next to a big cardboard box. Out of it he grabs a bunch of small containers with water and he lets them slide down the wall one by one -- another guy at the bottom catches them eagerly and distributes them to the other men. They take a minute to rehydrate, then they get back to work.

[Paul] We have a large pumping station to my right, when it's usually at a higher level obviously. This pumping station has a capacity to deliver 45 cubic meter of water a sec into the main irrigation canal damaged by ISIS.

[Canal scene OUT]

[Pump-house audio IN]

[Paul] We're going down into the pumping station to check on the mechanical repairs. By the look down here, you can see what they've been doing. Small watering pumps. Cooling pumps. And checking – as the pumping station hasn't been running for two years – they're checking that everything works and are getting ready to start pumping again.

[Paul] Mahmood, how many Kilowatts is this one? [Inaudible chatter]. Ah ok. I'll leave the floor to you, Mahmood – you're the expert.

[Mahmoud] So this pump station, this is number 1. And there is other, 2 and 3 [00:04]. [00:23] This collector is about 2000 cubic meter...

[Sandra] Mahmood is not just any technician – he's the Director of Water Resources for the whole of Ninewa governorate. That's where the Al Jazeera irrigation system runs -- Mosul is the provincial capital. He's proud of the pumping station. And he knows its workings inside out.

[Mahmoud] In the pump station we have 12 pumps. Each six pumps supply one outline discharge pipe...

[Paul] We saw on the way down....

[Mahmoud] Yea, 2.5 diameter. It's separate – it means we can operate half pump station. OK?

[Sandra] They're about 60 meters underground. Mahmood goes on to explain to Karina and Paul that the cave-like area in which they're standing would normally be fully underwater. Now it's dry -- no water has been flowing here for two years.

[Music IN] Now it's dry. No water has been flowing here for two years. But in the coming months --as soon as March, they hope – this will all change. And on the surrounding 250,000 hectares of land... there'll be wheat, barley and veggies again.

That also means that about 200,000 people from around Mosul will have agricultural work again -- a big boost for local employment. And, if all goes as planned, they'll produce enough to resume exports to neighboring countries as well.

[Music OUT]

[Car sounds IN]

[Sandra] Paul and Karina's next stop? A fertilizer distribution point in another part of Ninewa governorate.

[Karina] As we're traveling in Northern Ninewa, I can see out the window many, many fields that have been plowed, because we've just had the first rains and they're ready for the winter wheat planting. The fertilizer that's being distributed today will be used now and also again in spring to make sure that the wheat harvest are more abundant than they normally would be.

[Car sounds OUT]

[Fertilizer plant scene IN]

[Sandra] They've arrived at a storage facility, a warehouse open on one side, full of large white bags. Some two dozen men, and the occasional woman, are milling about the space.

[Paul] Today we are here in Al-Shikhan, distributing fertilizer to the farmers here. These farmers are, are on the borderline between the conflict areas with ISIS. They've suffered due to that process, plus the austerity measures from both governments... and due to that cannot afford their own fertilizer to boost the production to make their crops more viable. We're here today because the first rains have already come, they've plowed their fields, and now they're waiting for the second rains to plant their winter wheat and also put the urea fertilizer with it to boost the crops...[during the] growth period.

[Sandra] In case you didn't catch that, he's talking about urea fertilizer – that's a form of nitrogen fertilizer. These farmers produce food for Iraq's Public Distribution System, or PDS. It's kind of like food stamps in the U.S. But lately – in part because of its trouble with ISIL – the government

fell behind on paying the farmers. So the farmers, in turn, couldn't afford to buy fertilizer this season. It's a chain reaction. And in those kinds of situations, FAO steps in.

[Paul] Also they will keep some of the fertilizer for the early spring rains, when the crop is finishing growing and maturing for harvest. That will also give it a second boost. We're hoping that will boost production of wheat in this area and will also help their contribution to the public distribution system of flour... as the crops in this area are sold to the central government for the PDS distribution system. The austerity measures caused by ISIS has delayed the payments of their last crop and therefore this injection of fertilizer, at this time, is so important due to that fact.

[Outside distribution plant sound IN]

[Sandra] A red pickup truck pulls up, in reverse, and parks. Two men stand ready to load the farmer's share of bags onto the truck. It takes two to carry one bag – they're heavy.

Outside other guys are lining up in cars, lorries... even tractors. When it's their turn, they pull up, sign, get their ration, and head back to their farms.

[Outside distribution plant sound OUT]

[Sandra] Today, the proportion of undernourished people living in countries with conflict and protracted crisis is almost *three times* higher than that in other developing countries. In Iraq, almost 3 million people are now food insecure -- nearly 80 percent are women, children or elderly.

The UN expects that number will grow when more people return to their former homes. That puts tremendous pressure on communities that are already struggling to feed their families and make a living at a time when jobs are few and far between.

Evidence shows that when post-conflict countries fall back into crisis, it's often because of things like this: a lack of food and employment opportunities in the recovery phase.

To add more perspective to this story, I asked Luca Russo to join me in the studio....

[In Studio with Lucca Russo]

[Sandra] Luca, you want to go ahead and introduce yourself?

[Luca] Ok, my name is Luca Russo. I work at FAO since about 10 years, and I'm what is called a senior strategic advisory on resilience.

[Sandra] Luca, when we're looking at the Iraq example... they are issuing fertilizers and they are rebuilding irrigation... can you explain, in a nutshell, how those kinds of interventions relate to conflict prevention?

[Luca] Well, sustaining agriculture in a situation of conflict is extremely important. One of the reasons is because the intervention in Iraq avoids two things. One: it avoids that people become

food insecure and, second, avoid that people move. So that fact that people are not moving and they stay on their farm is very important because, as I mention to you, the issues or these displacements, these protracted displacements, is also a key element of conflict. Thirdly, if you want, very often, conflict are roles generated or conflict caused by economic marginalization of people, people that are discontent. So if people are provide with means of production, their opportunity to make some different choices, like entering into armed groups, substantially diminish.

[Sandra] When a country experiences conflict, what areas and populations tend to be most affected?

[Luca] Well on this, I think that the nature of conflict has evolved in the last 20-30 years. Before you essentially have seen conflict between nations. Now most of the conflict happens within a nation, between armed groups, which are part of the same country. There is a bit of difference between the things which you see every day on the press like the, high level and high intensity, like the one in Syria. And then there is the low intensity conflict, which are not much on the press, but they are very important and they are very strong impact on people's livelihood. Think for instance the Congo - DRC - I understand at the moment there are 70 recognized armed groups that operate in this country. And these armoured groups live essentially in rural areas and very often the rural people are the main victims of these, of these armed groups. And if you think that in fragile countries about 70% of the population lives off rural income, you can really easily say that most probably rural areas are the most affected by conflict.

[Sandra] Typically, what are the effects of conflict on food production and on markets and trade?

[Luca] There are a number of statistics about the impacts of conflicts on agriculture. For instance, it's estimated that losses on agricultural production due to conflict amount to something like 4.3 billion dollars per year, which is much more than the overall development assistance... So I mean... that's quite important, though there are not quite recent estimates... or think about, about impact of conflict in Syria, for instance. It's estimated there has been about a 40% drop in wheat production, in Syria. But coming back to what I said at the beginning, it's interesting to see the impact of conflict particularly on local markets, on trade at the local level. Maybe the first impact of conflict is on trade because, because of conflict, markets are very often disrupted. People don't have access to markets or don't have access to inputs and this has an impact on their production. In particular, if they don't have access to markets, that also has an impact on food security. I want just to put an example: In South Sudan, South Sudan is one of the country; is which is most in need, most affected by conflict at the moment and you think of Bahr el Ghazal which is in the north of South Sudan, where people are in a - what you call - a famine-like condition and the reason for this famine-like condition is not the conflict, as such, but is the fact that markets are not functioning anymore because of the conflict, so it's, it's quite important and has a number of cascade effects on people.

[Sandra] So, conflict, violence and hunger are closely correlated... Could you give us some examples of that?

[Luca] Now, at the moment there are three major crisis in the world. Three major crisis where, we suspect as FAO, that there is famine-like conditions. This is: North-eastern Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen. In north Eastern Nigeria, you have about 5 million in a phase of crisis, emergency and famine; in Yemen you have 14 million, over 50% of the population, in this condition; and in South Sudan it's about 4 million. So, this gives you a sense of the importance and the impact of conflict on food security. Because of the conflict in Somalia 250 000 people in 2011 died because of starvation. So basically, that's to say that the impact in terms of people's lives in conflicts is more on the food security side than on the direct killing.

[Sandra] And the other way around? How does food insecurity drive conflict?

[Luca] On the other hand, there is also an important body of evidence that shows that, that food insecurity - or marginalization of people - can also lead to conflict. We have the story of the 2008 food price crisis, the 2011 Arab Spring, which was again due to the changes in food prices, which in a way...in a way... led to conflict. It's not the only reason, but it's one of the reason, and very often... let's take an example of rural youth. Rural youth is very often, in current days, they are part of these armed militias or terrorist groups. And very often this is due to the fact that the opportunity to resort to violence are better or higher than what they can get from agriculture production, because in many cases they don't get enough income from the rural sector... so it's very important, in this case, to invest in the rural sector to provide opportunities different from reporting to conflict. So that could an example without entering into specific statistics. There are many, many examples which show how a conflict has an impact on the production of the rural people. You mention Iraq but I can, I can many others, for instance, in South Sudan at the moment, there is an estimation that about two billion GDP per year is lost because of the conflict particularly in the livestock sector, which is the mainstay for about 80% of the population. So, the relation is, is complex, is non-linear, but is quite evident.

[Sandra] Let's look at Post-conflict countries for a minute. How does food insecurity affect countries' likelihood - or a country's likelihood - to relapse into conflict? In other words, why is agricultural support particularly important in post-conflict countries?

[Luca] Ok -there are some statistics which are not very encouraging that says that about 40% of countries that have been in conflict within ten years, they relapse into a conflict situation and they relapse into a conflict situation because most often the root causes that lead to conflict have not been addressed. Therefore it's very important in such cases to try to work on these root causes. A very practical case is Central African Republic. Now there is a peace agreement which is very fragile, which has been signed, so a lot of soldiers are being demobilized - young soldiers. At the moment they are demobilized... unless some income or employment opportunities are offered to them, then there is a very high risk that in a few years the situation will happen again. I was in the conference in Brussels on Central African Republic that was one of the key teams. I was there with the central African republic minister of agriculture who said,

"Listen, FAO has a key role to play to make sure that the rural employment is offered to these young people, because otherwise in 2-3 years from now we'll have the same problem." Or I can mention issues around nature resources. If there is a conflict around natural resources, unless you address the problems related to these, the conflict may relapse.

[Sandra] What is the role of land tenure in peace building?

[Luca] We have been speaking about rural areas up to now, and most probably I would say the main elements of conflict around rural areas is around land tenure, in a way or in another. There is a tendency from groups to take away land from let's say less powerful groups. There are plenty of issues, for instance, in Sudan around the conflict between pastoralists and agriculturalists who fought access to water, access to land, and in eastern DRC it is estimated that about 80% of the conflicts that erupt in the country at the moment are due to land tenure issues. Basically, the problem is that many of these countries, land rights have not been secure and this brings to the marginalization of certain groups that then result into conflicts. In these kind of situation, if you can play a key role to insure access to land, to different groups, it's probably one of the most important things that need to be address.

[Sandra] FAO is stressing that link between peace and Food Security more and more in light of what's happening around the world, including the migrations crisis...

[Luca] We are really trying to systematize our work in these areas, which has always been happening --now we really try to move these at the corporate level. We try to say that if we want to address food security in a sustaining peace perspective you have to work on conflict. By saying we have to work on conflict, we have to work on the causes of conflict. I have mentioned the issues of land tenure, I have mentioned the issues of demobilized soldiers, there are many others. You also have to work in conflict that means, when a conflict happens you have to put in place measures to mitigate the impact of this conflict. You have, for instance, the case of South Sudan, where FAO has been able to provide fishing kits, for instance, to people which were displaced by the conflict, which is very important. Sometimes people, they cannot cultivate anymore so they have to resort to the means of production and this is again very important. And then on the long-term perspective, from the development perspective, you have to promote the sustainable development with the conflict-sensitive lands, which is very important. So, if you are able to address these three dimensions of sustaining peace, then the work of FAO can become more effective. Let me give you an example - I mention northeast Nigeria. As a result of the conflict with Boko Haram, about two million people have been displaced so, people are displaced, they move to another area and these displacement in reality are long term displacements. For a number of reasons, it is extremely unlikely that people will go back to the area or region so... and when you move to a new area where there is a host population, then there is another problem which is related to how you access resources, how you access land. In Europe we are very worried about a group of refugees that are coming to Europe but if you think at the proportion of displaced and refugees which are hosted by developing countries, you will see that our problem is a really minor one - vis-à-vis - of other countries. So, I would say that the

issues of conflict, displacement and forced migration is all interrelated and they can by themselves further aggravated the tension between different groups.

[Sandra] Luca, thank you so much.

[Luca] Thank you for this opportunity to talk about this thing that I am most keen about.

[Theme music IN]

[Sandra] When countries recovering from conflict fall back into crisis, unemployment and food insecurity are often underlying factors. **Hunger thrives in conflict – and it can drive conflict, too.** Armed groups, in particular, feed on people’s desperation. After all, people who perceive few other options, are more likely to consider those offered to them.

That’s why supporting agriculture is so critical at this very moment in retaken territories, like Northern Ninewa in Iraq. These interventions that get farming communities back on their feet and food production up and running again... they address people’s food needs, but they also to allow them to make a good living again... Even though 30 Km further east, the battle over other territories continues...

[Pause]

This episode has been produced by Kim-Jenna Jurriaans and myself, with very special thanks to Karina Coates for collecting these stories from Iraq for us.

If you have any questions or feedback for us please write to FAO-audio@fao.org. I am Sandra Ferrari. Thanks for listening.

[Theme music OUT]

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