

WOMEN DAIRY FARMERS REINVEST INCOME TO SUPPORT THEIR FAMILIES



WORKING FOR farm families in Afghanistan

WORKING TO increase milk availability, income and jobs

WORKING WITH producer organizations and dairy enterprises

WORKING THANKS TO Germany, Italy, Afghanistan



Instead of the seasonal income provided by crops, a dairy enterprise, once established or improved, can supply milk that is sold weekly or even daily for cash. In the vast majority of cases, that cash goes to the women of the household. Furthermore, research down the years has shown that money earned by women goes directly to support the family, paying for food, education and medicine. In Afghanistan, an FAO project that has raised the capacity of thousands of smallholders to produce milk and, in turn, helped them establish viable and functional dairy enterprises, has improved family nutrition and food security and also contributed to income and employment generation.

From the beginning, FAO sought “inclusive” development, meaning it specifically sought to involve smallholders in the dairy enterprise activities. Set against a backdrop of constant and increasingly extreme security threats, FAO met with village councils, or *shuras*, to explain the importance of villagers working together, creating enterprises that would give them a stronger voice and better market connections for

their milk. As an enterprise, they would be able to set fair prices for their production and also work with local private providers of inputs and services, to ensure enterprise participants would have the inputs needed to continue and to grow their businesses.

Thousands of Afghan farmers, mainly women, inked their thumbs to sign letters calling for the expansion of an FAO dairy project to include their villages and homes. Those letters, written in 2010, testify to the project's success, achieved in spite of escalating security problems and a lack of proper infrastructure at the project sites. The women said they had seen how their neighbours were benefiting from the project, and hoped to see it extended to cover more people and more villages. When it began in 2005, the project focused on increasing milk production, but has gradually expanded to offer a total supply-chain approach that has increased family food security. The average annual income of participants rose from US\$550 in 2005 to US\$2 000 in 2010, and new employment opportunities were generated in Afghanistan's dairy sector.

The Afghanistan dairy enterprises are thriving, operating at between 70% and 150% capacity.



Family health has improved because of availability of milk and average incomes have quadrupled.

REGULAR INCOME BUILDS COMMITMENT

Although the income from dairy production is modest, the fact that it is regular and guaranteed gives the participants the reinforcement they need to stay committed to building a cooperative in a way that works for them. A key factor was that the main investment of the project was in activities providing direct benefit to farm families at village level. Today, villagers in some of the most dangerous areas of the country have not only found financial advantages, they have found security in working together, and this has strengthened the sustainability of their dairy production.

FAO sought sustainability from the beginning and built upon tradition and capacity in milk production. Initial support and guidance focused on improving milk cooperative organization. Once the dairy enterprises were up and running, FAO did not intervene in corporate



business decisions, but provided guidance by asking questions about the potential outcomes those decisions could have on output or profit, all designed to ensure the cooperatives would have the business acumen necessary to continue working on their own when the project ended.

Funding ended in 2010 for three of the project-initiated dairy enterprises, supplied and owned by rural producers and located in very difficult areas where local people deal with security issues, as well as poverty and lack of infrastructure, on a daily basis. Yet the enterprises not only continue, they are thriving, operating at between 70 and 150 percent capacity. On a national average, participants in the dairy enterprises have seen family health improve because of the availability of milk, and average incomes have quadrupled. The enterprises have also spawned hundreds of jobs in the sector, because of the need for people to handle such tasks as milk collection and transportation, feed milling, and marketing and retail-level outlets.

SUCCESS LED TO REPLICATION AND UPSCALING

As word has spread from village to village about the consistently successful results, the project has been inundated with requests for support for other villagers and communities. As a result, what has been learned has been replicated and upscaled in other locations. This attracted the support of donors and private partners, such as Land O'Lakes, a large United States of America dairy cooperative that contributed equipment for one of the dairy enterprises. Donors recognize the importance of the consistent returns and the involvement of women, and recent data shows that 85-97 percent of the money earned from milk goes to, and is directly controlled by, women.

Maintaining a strong focus on developing national capacity and delivering tangible results on the ground, through supporting development of locally owned dairy enterprises, has proved a core success factor. But most of all, it has proved a boon for the women of the area, who sell their milk and dairy products for cash that they then re-invest in the health, education and food security of their families.