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# PATHWAYS OUT OF POVERTY CASE STUDY

## INTEGRATING FEMALE FARMERS IN RURAL AFGHANISTAN INTO SUSTAINABLE MARKET SYSTEMS<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan is a country mired in strife. Its citizens have endured over 30 years of conflict, suffered severe droughts over the past decade, faced high unemployment and severe poverty: 35 percent of the labor force is unemployed and 36 percent of the population lives below the national poverty line (IRIN, 2009; World Bank, 2010). Women in Afghanistan are generally confined to life within the household. They are not engaged in public institutions; they have poor or no access to health care or education; they lack basic human rights such as mobility, safety and security, and access to economic production. Yet, studies from around the world indicate that the increased economic participation of women has a profound impact on alleviating food insecurity, building assets, and improving stability in the household and community.

Through the Garden Gate (TTGG) was a CIDA-funded, four-year (2007-2011) value chain project implemented by Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA). The TTGG project goal was to engage communities and households, women's organizations, private sector institutions and public sector agencies to facilitate the creation of robust horticultural value chains that integrated large numbers of women farmers in Parwan, Afghanistan. Rural households in Afghanistan include a small kitchen garden that is the responsibility of the women in the family. TTGG sought to boost the variety, yields and quality of the produce of these gardens to improve families' nutrition and to generate additional incomes from the marketing of surpluses.

Groups of women farmers received technical assistance, access to quality inputs, technologies (e.g., micro-irrigation, solar dryers, small-scale greenhouses), post-production handling training, and linkages to higher value markets. To reach rural, home-bound women, the project built upon the proven woman-to-woman sales agent model and the application of lessons learned from a project MEDA piloted in Pakistan. TTGG developed the capacity of select women, who for various reasons (such as age, marital status (divorced/widowed) or education) had more mobility than others, to become independent business agents, purchasing surplus produce from women farmers in the community and selling in larger urban markets.

In addition to integrating women producers into market systems, the project aimed to strengthen the Community Development Council (CDC) structure that the Afghan government instituted in 2004. MEDA worked closely with local authorities to identify the optimal villages in which to launch and run TTGG. Selection criteria included practical considerations such as proximity to passable roads so that project staff could travel to/from the village and so produce could be brought to markets. Other qualitative criteria included the functionality of the CDC and whether or not women were part

#### Box 1: Results Over the Life of Project

- 2,349 women reached; 90 percent of them engaged in horticultural production
- Income increased in excess of 800 percent
- Household assets increased 31 percent
- Contribution to household income rose to 65 percent from a baseline of 8 percent
- Income diversification, community status and food security improved
- Increased school attendance; improved access to medical care

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of the councils, the levels of trust within the village, the safety of staff, the existence of a culture of respect and concern for community members, and the potential for “spill-over” effects in neighboring villages.

## DESIGN STRATEGIES

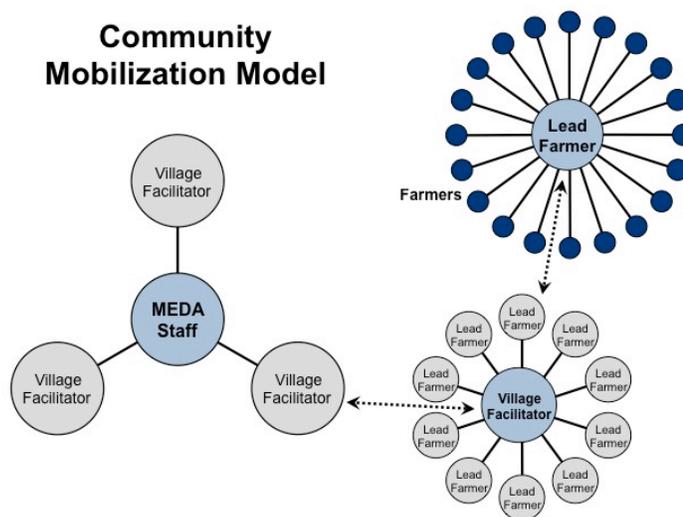
### REPLICATION AND ADAPTATION

From 2004–2007, MEDA implemented a pilot project in Pakistan to test best practices in value chain development. In that project, more than 9,000 homebound rural women embroiderers were linked sustainably to markets via a woman-to-woman business model that allowed for several constraints in the value chain to be overcome in a culturally appropriate manner. Though the success was impressive, the question remained as to whether or not the business model could be replicated in a different subsector, in a different country and/or in a weak economic climate, and whether it could still reach the poorest and most-marginalized of the economically active.

In the original pilot project there was little need for training of the producers themselves. They came into the project with a strong skill set in production, and the primary project interventions were in business linkages—as the real constraints to the women’s market participation derived from their inability to interact with market players directly. TTGG had to adapt this model since it was found that the agricultural production practices of the women required considerable strengthening to increase yields and quality due to years of war and disruption to family-held knowledge of best practices, as well as lack of access to quality inputs.

The project thus used a Community Mobilization model (see Figure 1) whereby women in the villages were organized into groups of 25 and each group selected one woman to be the lead farmer. By having the groups select their own leader, the project was better-assured that the knowledge transfer from village facilitator to lead farmer to farmer member, would occur. Lead farmers were the conduit for disseminating information to improve horticultural yields and often served as the distribution point for input supplies to the group members. The lead farmers received training from village facilitators and project staff and in turn, delivered that training to the group. Project staff monitored that the farmer members were indeed receiving all the trainings. For their efforts, lead farmers received a small stipend of US\$40 per month.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1: Community Mobilization Model**



In comparison with the original project, a much smaller percentage of women were developed as independent female sales agents. The original design of TTGG included plans to further develop the skill sets and business acumen of the lead farmers such that they could conduct the necessary forward market linkages with buyers in local or Kabul markets. However, in rural Afghanistan, fewer women are mobile and cultural barriers are steep, thus only 12 women from the ‘pool’ of 90 lead farmers<sup>3</sup> had sufficient mobility and were willing to take on the entrepreneurial opportunity to become sales agents. They received training above and beyond the curriculum’s general ‘business of farming’ training that all lead farmers re-

<sup>2</sup> In post-project analyses, in-country MEDA staff suggest that lead farmers ought to have been remunerated based on performance, since the level of commitment to ensuring the success of the group varied among the lead farmers.

<sup>3</sup> The figure shows 3 villages only for illustrative purposes only. The project had 9 villages, and therefore 90 lead farmers and 2,250 women farmers. Each village had a facilitator (who also participated in the project activities):  $9 + 90 + 2250 = 2,349$  beneficiaries.

ceived, in order to hone their capacity to interact with buyers in the markets. As in the Pakistan pilot project, much time was spent with the sales agents as they were introduced to middle- and high-end buyers in the local town and in the city. They received additional training on customer satisfaction, quality control, market research and packaging information, and additional relationship building with sources of credit, including the suppliers and buyers. One potential risk with having fewer sales agents is that they can exert some level of control over the price the women farmers receive. None of our data indicated this was the case, but as project activities ended in June 2011, it is impossible to monitor this dynamic.

## GENDER EQUITY

**Female-Headed Households (FHHs):** The project aimed to work with the most vulnerable women in the villages. FHHs tend to be the most marginalized globally and are often seen as the least valuable in their communities. In Afghanistan, FHHs comprise 1.8 percent of rural households and 2.4 percent of urban households (MWA, 2008 citing NRVA, 2005). Although a small percentage, the absolute numbers are large with estimates ranging from 70,000 to 120,000 FHHs (EU, 2009; WFP, 2011 citing CSO). In addition, Afghanistan has an estimated 500,000 to one million widows due to the high male mortality rate in the last three decades of conflict and large age differences between spouses (MWA, 2008; EU, 2009).

Due to gender inequities and gender-based constraints, FHHs are harder to reach and highly vulnerable in terms of income security, social protection and access to resources. Poverty is also more widespread with 38 percent of FHHs in poverty versus 33 percent of male-headed households, likely because women have less access to employment and widows lack support for income generation in Afghanistan (EU, 2009). In partnership with the CDC members, participants were selected from the villages and the invitation to participate went first to FHHs and those families most in need.

**Engaging Men:** Although MEDA's primary intent was to engage women producers in value chains, the project identified early on the importance of incorporating men and the broader community into the project. In previous efforts, the absence of this led to occasional family discord, community resistance and delays in production and delivery. Engaging women's husbands, brothers and sons to encourage their support and address their questions, expectations and feelings, not only helps to secure women's participation but can also improve the longer-term impacts for women.

In communities throughout Afghanistan, men are often the gateway for women's participation. In TTGG, the first step was to work closely with and to engage male "power brokers" in the villages and community management structures. Community outreach efforts included seeking explicit consent and support for the project's work, and subsequently providing ongoing updates of project activities. Men were deferred to for their guidance on matters of security and village norms, and they were included in meetings to provide an outlet for their concerns and build trust in the project's activities. MEDA found that as men's engagement increased, so did their support. Acceptance was further increased as the economic gains were seen throughout the community. In an analysis of the TTGG project, a villager relayed that because women have "proven" they can take economic responsibility with proper training and market access, and have been able to help with their household needs and savings, the husbands and sons of such women are less likely to see eye-to-eye with fundamentalist and extremist ideologies that dictate against women's rights.

## RURAL FINANCE

A key lesson learned from the pilot was the need to systematically include access to finance into the project interventions. Rural businesses can be trapped in a 'low investment–low return–low investment' cycle that perpetuates poverty. MEDA thus approached three well-known microfinance institutions (MFIs) to determine if any existing loan products would be available for the women, and if any of the MFIs were in a position to travel to the rural villages to service loans. Women for Women International (WWI) had a nearby office and was willing to work with MEDA to develop a short-term loan for

farmers' input requirements available during the harvest season.<sup>4</sup> All project participants had access to these loans (averaging \$40-100). Many used the funds for seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and small equipment, while others acquired supplies to construct very basic technologies such as tunnel greenhouses, trellises and rudimentary storage facility improvements.

WWI also worked with MEDA to develop a higher-value loan product to help the women access more expensive technologies such as storage facilities, solar dryers, greenhouses, trellis systems and drip irrigation, ranging in cost between \$100 to over \$5,000. MEDA thus provided a grant of between 40-50 percent (depending on the technology) to those that were in a position to meet the terms of these higher-value loans. The balance was the responsibility of the women and many used a combination of loans and cash, typically from family members. Although the women could not access the larger assets without a subsidy, MEDA felt it was important to get these technologies into the hands of women farmers to further develop their entrepreneurial skills and improve their incomes. The solar dryers, storage facilities and larger greenhouses also provided an opportunity for women farmers to rent space to other women so that they could delay the sale of their product until market prices increased, in order to maximize their profits.<sup>5</sup>

WWI was willing to invest in the loan portfolio in exchange for support in the logistics of servicing those loans—specifically, support with regard to travel to and from the villages and with security requirements. MFIs deem security to be an even greater risk than loan default, and the support from MEDA's logistics team was key to ensuring the MFI's regular attention to the farmers. With the revenue from their kitchen gardens, the women farmers did not need to avail themselves of the credit for small inputs as the project advanced. Having overcome the initial challenge of establishing the linkages, the pool of informed and experienced women farmers in the communities now provides an incentive for other nearby MFIs to nurture their business relationships with the women.

## RESULTS

MEDA used quantitative and qualitative data to assess project results. Substantive and sustained growth was achieved in each of the identified results areas over the length of the project, as explained below.

**Income Increase:** Upon entry, the average lead farmer was earning US\$101.38 annually. By project completion, lead farmers were reporting an average income of US\$866. Farmer members earned US\$38.42 per annum and by project end were reporting an average annual income of US\$323.

**Asset Accumulation:** From 2007 to the end of the project, average household asset accumulation increased by 25 percent. These assets were categorized as either productive assets, such as mobile phones or farming tools used for income generation purposes, or non-productive assets, such as carpets or televisions. Accumulation in productive assets indicates sustainability and income security. Between entry to the project and the end of the project, surveyed participants increased their productive assets by an average of 31 percent, as well as 21 percent for non-productive assets.

**Contribution to Household Income:** Increasing the economic contribution of women to their households is an important precursor to strengthening their status at home and in the community. Cultural constraints restricted the ability of the MEDA team to determine total household income, though data from 2008 from UNICEF assesses that the average yearly wage for an Afghan is US\$250. Assuming that a traditional Afghan household would have two working adults, the average household income per year would be US\$500. On this basis, the farmers in TTGG progressed from contributing 8 percent of family income, on average, in 2008<sup>6</sup> to contributing an average of 65 percent by the end of the project in 2011.

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<sup>4</sup> The short-term loans had a three-month grace period and a maximum of \$200. WWI contributed orientation and training to the lenders and their husbands or fathers. The communities accepted the loans and viewed the interest charges as primarily administrative costs.

<sup>5</sup> The village women discussed their priorities with project staff during TTGG's design phase. The leading request was for assistance to address a lack of adequate storage facilities. This gap in facilities forced the women to sell when prices were lowest. When they ran out of their own supply for their family's consumption, they were forced to buy at much higher prices. Having such facilities available to them, on a fee-for-service basis, better ensures sustainability of the economic gains of the farmers, and better ensures their own food security as stockpiles can be maintained.

<sup>6</sup> This indicator was not included at the beginning of the project, and therefore no data is available for 2007.

**Income Diversification:** MEDA tracked sources of income as a proxy indicator of income security. The more sources of income farmers have, the greater their ability to weather downturns or unforeseen difficulties. On the TTGG project, MEDA collected statistics relating to the number of crops a farmer produced to establish the sources of income. Through the life of the project, the percentage of farmers reporting 3 or more sources of income rose to 77 percent from a baseline of 43%, and those relying on only one or two sources of income declined.

**Supporting Qualitative Assessment:** Assessment of qualitative data from the impact stories and anecdotes of project participants provided supporting evidence for the quantitative results. A number of unintended but very positive secondary benefits accrued to the participating households, including increased school attendance of children (a critical component of lifting a household from poverty), improved access to medical care, and improved household nutrition.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The structure and processes MEDA followed in adapting this model could be replicated by other organizations working with poor, homebound women. Some key issues the project dealt with are given below.

- Minimal subsidies for initial input supply kits would have boosted the immediate participation of all women farmers and improved incomes more quickly as the yields and sales grew. Some farmer members waited several months before participating fully as they feared risking their investment capital. Subsequent results from the horticulture activities and consistent project staff assistance helped in forging trust and full commitment.
- Simple pictorial instructions and materials are most effective in ensuring consistent training and results among poor, uneducated women.
- In conflict areas such as Afghanistan, a separate staff person and budget resources devoted to security matters would alleviate pressures on other staff and activities. Eventually the project did this, but it was not in the initial project structure.
- In working in poor rural areas, where the capacity of the public and private sector is low, a competitive process for assessing and vetting potential local implementing partners is important. A local partner's inadequate internal infrastructure and management capacity can take significant project resources to rectify. Where feasible, resources should be applied to aid in the capacity development of local partner organizations, which often cannot ensure this development on their own.
- Overcoming the many constraints of the poor, including their risk-aversion, is not a quick process. A more rapid roll-out of the program activities to all the targeted communities would best ensure that the beneficiaries have adequate time to implement the horticultural improvements and reap the project benefits.
- Development of and/or outreach to women entrepreneurs within the early stages of the project is needed to strengthen market linkages and maximize project time for nurturing these linkages. A longer implementation period (such as five to seven years) would also help to solidify the project results.
- When working with women beneficiaries in Afghanistan, projects must employ women as the extension agents and trainers. Investing in female staff's technical capacity is much more effective than using male staff with existing technical knowledge but who will never have access to deliver the training.

Although targets were reached and the donor and participants were very satisfied with this project, the political climate in Afghanistan changed substantially over the course of the implementation period. Although MEDA submitted a proposal for scale-up of the project, expansion to new areas and a more deliberate intention to include men in activities, changing donor priorities—from sustainable development to more immediate aid—meant this was not possible.