Farmers living in Afghanistan have long been challenged by a host of issues. Political unrest has caused a significant brain drain, and farmers have limited access to new technologies and agricultural inputs. Establishing village-based seed enterprises can improve production and serve as an opportunity for women to become more empowered.

Key messages

- Shortage of certified seeds cause food insecurity
- Community-based enterprises can help meet demand
- Involving women in commercial agricultural activities results in their empowerment
Outcome Story: Village-Based Seed Enterprises Raise Food Security and Gender Equality in Afghanistan

Poor seed supply leads to food insecurity

In Afghanistan, a significant deficit in food production causes food insecurity and malnutrition, particularly for poor and vulnerable households. A nation-wide shortage of certified high-quality seeds is one of the main obstacles keeping farmers from increasing their production.

The national annual demand for wheat seeds is 300,000 mega tonnes, 11,000 mega tonnes for corn seeds, and 500 mega tonnes for vegetables seeds, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock. Yet, this demand mostly goes unmet. Despite untiring efforts by the international community and national partners, only 10 percent of high-quality wheat seeds are currently produced within the country.

To address the huge gap between the demand and supply of certified seeds, scientists have introduced Village-Based Seed Enterprises (VBSEs). These seed-producing enterprises are managed by and for farmers, can meet location-specific needs—especially in terms of adapted varieties—and can facilitate reduced transportation costs due to their proximity to farmers.

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A village-based, gender inclusive approach to entrepreneurship

VBSEs have been established in Afghanistan since 2004 with the support of the International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). During the past decade, the number of VBSEs has increased by 135 percent, underscoring the model’s financial viability and the enduring policy support that it has received.

But, the demand for seeds is still greater than the supply: Research has shown that the number of farmers that purchased certified seeds of two newly released mungbean varieties increased almost eight-fold in three years (from 5,000 to about 40,000).

Therefore, scientists recently supported the establishment of nine new VBSEs in three Afghan provinces, namely Kabul, Parwan and Logar: Three VBSEs led by women, three mixed (with both women and men), and three led by men. These enterprises were registered with the National Seed Board (NSB) and Afghanistan National Seed Union (ANSOU) in order to be able to produce and sell certified seeds.
Seed enterprises empower women

In Afghanistan, however, seed production is traditionally considered to be primarily the task of men farmers. Women farmers have few opportunities to be involved in this activity, which is often further exacerbated by their limited land rights.

To include more women in the VBSEs, scientists made concerted efforts to encourage their participation. For example, they made sure to involve whole families, both men and women, in the establishment of enterprises to gain understanding and trust. Female members of VBSEs also had their own allocated lands for seed production and shared their capital for running the business, just as the men did.

“On the one hand, women had to be encouraged to accept social and security challenges and get involved in seed production, and on the other their skills had to be upgraded to compensate for their lack of previous experience in seed production,” says Ms. Frozan Darwish, ICARDA’s Gender Expert in Afghanistan.

Now, the women are excited about seed distribution and feel confident about starting a business. This work has also further encouraged women’s participation in seed companies. “Parwan-Bastan was one of several companies with no women members previously. Now, seven women farmers have taken membership there,” informs Ms. Darwish.

Village-based initiatives hold strong potential to boost food security

All nine VBSEs, including the mixed women and men and the woman-led VBSEs, were given wheat seeds and fertilizers to start their activities, and they have all successfully produced commercial seeds. Interestingly, the three mixed-gender VBSEs produced more quality, improved seeds of wheat than the others.

All VBSEs passed the seed field inspection by government agencies, which procured the full quantity of seeds produced for distribution to other farmers in the region.

Through this activity, the women involved were able to triple their income, which will further help to improve their livelihoods. Scientists believe that engaging women in commercial agricultural activities will prove a sustainable approach to improving gender equality in Afghanistan.
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References


Outcome Story Coordinates

Country: Afghanistan
Region: Central Asia
Agricultural livelihood system: Rainfed
Cross-cutting theme: Gender and youth
CGIAR SLO: Improved food and nutrition security and health (~2.2 Food safety improved)
SDG: SDG 2: Zero hunger

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