

Fodder seeds: empowering women and closing gaps in Afghanistan

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Female extension workers and farmers from Afghanistan received training on forage production. Photo: Courtesy of Mounir Louhaichi

How can fodder gaps in the water constrained provinces of Baghlan and Nangarhar in Afghanistan be reduced? What are the links between women's empowerment and sustainable fodder production systems? These were two of the questions addressed during a week-long workshop in Amman, Jordan organised by The International Center for Agriculture Research (ICARDA), CSIRO and Murdoch University – in collaboration with the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) and KIT Royal Tropical Institute (KIT).

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The Winter Forage Gap

In Afghanistan eight million farm households rely on crop-livestock production systems for food, income, and as a 'safety-net' in times of need. However, many farmers in rural Afghanistan face the constraint of an insufficient feed base to effectively support existing livestock populations. Shortages of fodder/forage in Afghanistan limit animal productivity and put households at economic risk, particularly during the country's harsh winters.

To address this “forage gap”, an international partnership is currently implementing the ACIAR funded, “Forage options for smallholder livestock in water-scarce environments of Afghanistan” project. The project partnership is made up of ICARDA, two Australian research organisations (CSIRO and Murdoch University), and several research agencies from Afghanistan (including Agriculture Research Institute of Afghanistan, and Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock). The aim of the project is to improve the livelihoods of smallholder livestock farmers in the mixed crop-livestock areas of Afghanistan that have limited access to water. In particular, the project will increase the availability of feed resources by providing seeds of improved forage varieties and developing technical options for better integration and management of forage legumes in current cropping systems.

“I know that forage is very important for farmers in Afghanistan. This workshop has taught me a lot, and I do see many similarities with the work that I do on vegetable production. Now I am excited to go back to Afghanistan to implement what I have learned, and also work with colleagues from AKF (Aga Khan Foundation) on forage and see if we can design and implement a forage program in the provinces where I work.” – Sayli Khusravbekova, vegetable production specialist at AFK Afghanistan.

Expertise from Australia

As part of this bigger initiative, ICARDA organised a week-long workshop in Jordan with the objective to train female extension workers and farmers from Afghanistan on plant propagation, nursery management, pasture production and enterprise development. The technical sessions of the workshop were facilitated by Dr. Hayley Norman and Dr. Brad Nutt – from The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and [Murdoch University](#) respectively. The sessions focused on the technical aspects of forage production, such as:

- Processing seed and germination testing
- Selection of high quality forage seeds
- Plant propagation
- Animal nutrition
- Nursery management

The technical sessions were followed by practical exercises at the ICARDA research station in Amman. During these exercises, the participants set up seed germination tests, learned how to measure pH values of different types of soils, and propagated cuttings of *Atriplex nummularia*, amongst other things.

“We have learned a lot from Hayley and Brad. For example, we now know about different varieties of *Atriplex* that we can grow in Afghanistan, and we know how to plant *Atriplex* in nurseries, and how to transfer new germination plants to the field.” – Nadia Nabizada, gender knowledge facilitator for ICARDA in Baghlan province.

“Last year, together with AKF, I tested some of the new forage seeds provided by ICRADA, and the results are good. I know that farmers, especially women farmers, are interested in growing

these seeds. So now we have to make sure that we give the knowledge that we have learned here in Amman back to farmers in Afghanistan. I hope to organise practical workshops for farmers interested in forage production since it is important that farmers have access to green forage during winter. I have seen how beneficial Atriplex is for sheep and goats. This can help farmers produce more milk and earn more income.” – Lana Royish, responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of the AKF Baghlan & Samangan Economic Inclusion Program.

Field Visit

The workshop participants also visited the Sustainable Environment and Economic Development project ([SEED](#) – learn more about the project [here](#)) funded by USAID Jordan, and implemented by the US Forest Service in partnership with the Hashemite Fund for the Development of the Jordan Badia and the Northern Badia Women’s Cooperative. The SEED project is a three-year initiative designed to rehabilitate rangelands in Jordan’s eastern desert by increasing community involvement in natural resource management and boosting the survival rate of native seedlings.

“We really enjoyed learning from the Jordanian women working in the nursery. We are now going back to Afghanistan with the desire to start our own nursery! It will be a women-only nursery, and we will use the knowledge that we have learned to grow and sell seedlings suited for Afghanistan. We will also use the nursery to teach women farmers how to increase forage production.” – Najia Noori, a farmer in Baghlan province, and member of the local women’s cooperative.

Gender and Forage Production

Women play important – but often unrecognised and undervalued – roles in the forage value chain in Afghanistan. Throughout the workshop, discussions on gendered opportunities and constraints for innovation and increased productivity in forage value chains were facilitated by [Yngve Braaten](#) from KIT Royal Tropical Institute. From these discussions, it became clear that gendered norms, roles and responsibilities within agricultural value chains in Afghanistan present challenges, as well as opportunities, for female farmers to acquire and apply new technologies and knowledge for enhanced forage production.

“In the village where I work, women participate in the production and harvesting of the forage, but it is only men that go to the market to sell forage. Men control all the income from the sales of the forage. Women do not control this money. Men spend the money on the household, but I think that the household would benefit even more if women could also control some of the income from the sale of forage. They would spend it on improved nutrition, their children and on education.” – Bomani Afzali, regional natural resource management (NRM) officer at AKF.

Nonetheless, the participants emphasised that attitudes towards women farmers, and beliefs about what constitutes “masculine” and “feminine” tasks in forage value chains are changing. A clear message from the participants was that equal opportunities for women and men in forage value chains will enhance food security, animal health, and the resilience of smallholder systems in the face of climate change. KIT will continue to work in close collaboration with ICARDA to

further identify and leverage opportunities for women in forage systems. The collaboration will continue to address gender inequalities that deteriorate the resilience of smallholder systems and prevent women from accessing business opportunities.

“Here in Amman we have learned techniques on how to sample and germinate high quality forage seeds. These techniques can be used by women farmers Afghanistan to increase forage production. When I go back, I will pass on what I have learned to other women. Together we can support each other.” – Rahila Azizi, a farmer in Baghlan province and a regional trainer (for women savings groups) for the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

The “Forage options for smallholder livestock in water-scarce environments of Afghanistan” project is ending in October 2018. To learn more about the project, click [here](#).

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