

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

AVS project, podcasting, Cara Syria Programme, Syrian academics, agricultural farmers, case studies, survey, social media, experts, promoters.

SPEAKERS

Mirela Barbu, Kate Robertson, Martin Spinelli and Shaher Abdullateef

Mirela Barbu [00:00:00]

I would like to welcome you to the dissemination workshop of our research project. Thank you for participating in this event. We hope you will enjoy learning about our project, and we look forward to receiving comments and suggestions about how to improve these activities in the future. On this cover slide you can see the name of the project which was awarded a research grant funded by the International Development Challenge Fund and Sussex Sustainability Research Programme.

Now, as I said, on the front on the cover you could see the project name but, since it was created, we have started to use our podcast logo, Agricultural Voices Syria (or shortly AVS), which you can see on this slide and many others today.

So, this our agenda for today; we have prepared four short presentations. I am Mirela Barbu, and I am the project principal investigator. In my presentation I will introduce the podcast, the project - especially that part - explaining its rationale, the main stages and activities. I will also talk about the project outputs and various teams who were involved in their production. I will explain why this project was designed from its inception to embrace several discipline areas, and why it is impact oriented.

Kate Roberson, Middle East advisor and coordinator of Cara Syria Programme will talk about agricultural knowledge transfer in the Syrian academic context, and how Kara has addressed this goal in similar projects they are partner of, including ours.

Martin Spinelli, the project co-investigator and podcast project lead will explain the role of podcasting in knowledge exchange for development.

Shaher Abdullateef, our project coordinator for all activities in Turkey and Syria, will explain why podcasting is an innovative tool for delivering agricultural extension services in Syria,

along with its challenges and opportunities, and what future developments we can expect for AVS. After our presentation we very much welcome comments and questions from you.

So this is the cover of my presentation, and I will start with our project goals. The main goal of our project is to promote sustainable agriculture in Syria through podcasting. And we have done this through knowledge exchange by mobilising researchers, practitioners and decision makers in Syria and abroad. Providing equipment and adequate training we have introduced Syrian agricultural experts to podcasting. The episodes prepared during this project - that I will talk about shortly in my presentation, but my colleagues Martin and Shahar will develop further in their presentations - have targeted farmers in Northwest Syria.

We are also working towards the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Those concerning our project are mentioned on this slide. As I said, the project is funded by IDCF-SSRP, and IDCF is part of the UK Global Challenges Research Fund which covers different areas of intervention. Our specific area is equitable access to sustainable development and, in particular, building secure and resilient food systems supported by sustainable resources in agriculture.

And now, on this slide and also on the following one, I will tell you something about what we did when I started to work on this grant application. So, first of all, I studied the projects implemented by Cara Syria Programme, and two events in particular inspired my work. These were two roundtables organised in Izmir in June 2019. The first one is mentioned on this slide. Both these events were funded by GCRF grants held by two scholars: Professor Lisa Boden from the University of Edinburgh, and on this slide, you can see the other grant holder and the other round table led by Dr. Tom Parkinson, from the University of Kent.

Why am I talking about these two events here? It is because reading their work, I understood the importance of valuing theory and intellectual capital through activities that involve researchers, practitioners and decision makers. And also, we decided to focus specifically on areas concerning agriculture and food security. Now, why did we choose this field for our project? Of course, achieving food security is an important goal in a country devastated by war and conflict, but I became aware of the urgent need for supporting Syrian farmers when I started to collaborate with Cara, last year, and this allowed me to meet Syrian colleagues who are experts in agronomy. The idea of this project stems from those conversations which allowed me to learn about the collapse of extension services in agriculture. And from this I envisaged a way to deliver these services from abroad, during a pandemic, and using Syrian expertise.

When it became clear to me that podcasting would be the best means to pursue this goal, my colleague Martin Spinelli from Media and Communication, internationally renowned expert in podcasting, appeared to be the best partner for this project. Finally, Cara introduced us to the ACDP network, which became our partner with whom we have built the project. And now you

have a better understanding of why we designed this project in this way, and what are the origins of it.

On this slide, you can see the project activities. The project was formed of four stages. It started in January by organising the activities, selecting the team and purchasing the equipment for podcasting. We also decided the communication strategy. The project was consistently promoted on social media and all outputs are available on our website. In the second stage, February - March, we organised a training course after which our Syrian colleagues who are experts in agriculture started to prepare podcast episodes. At the same time, a smartphone app was designed and during this stage, we also started to prepare five case studies on agri-food value chains, and I will talk about them in more detail later. So we planned to produce 10 podcast episodes and we produced 15. In the third stage, May - mid-June, the podcast and the app were promoted among Syrian farmers. Following their distribution, the farmers participated in a survey which was designed to collect their feedback on the first five episodes, and more broadly, their use of social media. We planned to contact 600 farmers, but we also exceeded this target; 1,200 farmers responded to our questionnaire, 932 of these responses being statistically representative. Finally, in the last stage, mid-June - July, the survey data was analysed, and the research results have been disseminated with stakeholders and wider audiences.

So as you can see, this project was relatively short; it was developed over 30 weeks, and we had a very tight schedule of activities. We implemented all activities according to our project Gantt and I would like to thank Kate and Shaher for these excellent results which are due to their effective coordination of all activities organised in Turkey and Syria.

And now I will spend some time on interdisciplinarity. I would like to explain why our project is interdisciplinary and how we managed integration between different disciplinary approaches. On this slide, you can see a very simple representation of the agri-food value chain. When we planned the project activities, we aimed to address many elements of this framework, and we were aware that the first podcasts would focus mainly on agricultural practices and techniques. So, together with my colleague Isabella Delabre, from Birkbeck University of London, I prepared short five recordings on various value chain topics. They are available on our project website in English together with a report which includes all case studies. And, of course, we hope to translate these documents in Arabic.

On this slide and on the next one I included all the disciplines that we covered during different stages of our project. So, as you can see from the topics listed on this slide, the podcasts draw mainly on agronomic sciences and technology. For the case studies, we employed knowledge from the field of economic and environmental geography, while the survey design and data analysis were led by development studies and cultural psychology. So as you see, this is a very exciting mix of disciplines.

Now, you can see on this slide also all the case study topics. They are related, mainly, to the value chain dimensions you could see in the diagram presented before. I will not read now all the titles for you; I would just want to say that the whole idea was to disseminate this research, anticipating that a range of Syrian agricultural operators and policymakers would be interested in understanding opportunities that could be further developed at this stage in Syria, but also challenges faced by other countries. So, as a result, drawing on academic literature mainly from these disciplines - from economic geography and environmental geography - we prepared these five case studies. Of course, this research field is very rich, and the cases do not aim to provide an extensive literature review. We selected specific examples from Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries because their climatic conditions make the farming of crops and trees grown in Syria possible. So, if you're curious about this work, you will find examples from Italy, Greece, Spain, Palestine, and Jordan.

I would like to add here that it was really exciting to work with colleagues from such a wide range of disciplines. And now I would like to introduce them to you. I will not read this table but, as you can see, this is our podcast team. And also you can see the wide range of topics addressed in the first 15 episodes. Every expert worked about one week on the podcast content, and then the episode was recorded with our host, engineer Zuhier Agha. I would like to thank everyone; they did an excellent job in such a short amount of time. And here you can see also a picture with our AVS host.

Now, I would like to spend a few words on project impact, which is an important goal in all research projects. In our case, Syrian farmers have been our key stakeholders since the beginning and all activities in this project have been designed to engage with them. Therefore, apart from production of knowledge through podcasts and case studies, we dedicated time and resources to promote those podcasts and the smartphone app in Syria, and we asked farmers to provide feedback on the first five episodes or so. This was a very, very intense six-week period, and 15 promoters worked passionately in different locations in Northwest Syria, and their efforts produced great results. The wealth of data collected allows us to understand how farmers are using AVS, what potential and challenges are, and what improvements should be made in the near future. Martin and Shahar have dedicated their presentations to these topics.

And on this slide, you can see those involved in the promoters' team. We are very grateful for their work which allowed us to reach so many farmers and also to collect such valuable data which will allow us to consolidate and further develop AVS. On the map, Syria's map, you can see also the locations. I am aware this is a little bit small, but we work basically only in Northwest Syria. So we concentrated our survey and also the promotion in the Aleppo Governorate and near Idlib, Azaz; that was our area.

Finally, the project UK-based team; I would like to acknowledge their excellent work. First of all our communication officer Katherine Jones who has taken care of our website and social

media campaigns. I hope Katherine really enjoyed this project. She is a Master student in Media Practice for Development and Social Change, and our project was really a kind of hands-on practice. And we also believe that for her this was a kind of interesting training; maybe she will tell us about this later. As mentioned before, Isabella Delabre from Birkbeck University worked with me on the case studies, while for the survey data analysis Sweta Gupta worked on the analysis, while Marco Spampinato, from University of Pisa, provided valuable advice during the questionnaire design and data analysis. I should also mention that Marco volunteered on this project sharing with us his intellectual curiosity for the topic and addressing it from his discipline perspective, which is cultural psychology. I would like to thank all of them for their enthusiasm and excellent results.

And I would finish here my presentation and give the floor over to Kate who will introduce you to Cara's activities and commitments towards promoting Syrian expertise in agriculture. Kate, I will just run the presentation for you, so tell me when you are ready.

Kate Robertson [00:15:53]

Excellent, thank you and good afternoon to everybody. It is a pleasure to be here to mark and celebrate the completion of what has been a really successful pilot project. My name is Kate Robertson. I was Cara's Deputy Director for 10 years, and then step sideways in 2015 to set up and lead the Cara Syria Programme, building on the earlier Cara country programme, the Iraq Programme, which I also ran. The Syria Programme is now in its fifth year and, until the pandemic changed everything in all our lives, was being run out Turkey, but since March 2020, has been run online. However, I'm delighted to say that Cara has partnered this excellent, innovative knowledge-transfer project, which entirely reflects the aims of the Syria Programme and of course of Cara itself, helping to ensure the continued academic contribution of Syrian academics who have been forced into exile by the current crisis.

I'm going to take you back a bit in history to explain Cara's background and leave it to the experts who have been involved in the AVS project to talk about the project itself. So, slide two please. Thanks Mirela. By way of introduction, the Council for At-Risk Academics was founded in 1933 by Sir William Beveridge, then Director of the London School of Economics and Political Science, better known as the LSE. Having learned of the forced removal of German academics of Jewish origin from their university posts by the Nazi Party – the National Socialist Workers Party had just come to power – some of whom were Beveridge's friends and collaborators, he brought together a group of senior UK academics to set up Cara, with the aim of rescuing and relocating those who being persecuted, in order to allow them to continue their work in safety for the greater good. At that time, it was very much about rescuing them and relocating them to safety, whereas Cara in its modern guise is far more conscious of the importance of that intellectual capital to academics' countries of origin, so that it also works to

sustain those connections where it can and to ensure that, even during periods of exile, academics can continue to contribute towards the future of their countries.

Cara's mission in the broadest sense is to defend 'Science and Learning'. As you will see from the photo on the slide, Einstein, Albert Einstein, who fled Germany a year earlier, gave his now famous lecture 'Science and Civilization' at Cara's first inaugural public meeting, making the case of how important it was for civilization to sustain this intellectual capital for the wider public good. Those rescued by Cara in the 1930s and 1940s included 16 who went on to become Nobel Laureates, and many more who became leaders in their fields such as the biologist and physician Hans Krebs, the molecular biologist Max Perutz, the physicist and mathematician Max Born and the art historian Ernst Gombrich. They become known as 'Hitler's Gift' given the work they went on to do, and their enormous influence and contribution to the development of their fields in their countries of exile. Several of their children are now renowned academics in their own right.

The Syria Programme was launched in 2012, initially as part of Cara's core Fellowship Programme, which lies at the heart of Cara's work, and then in 2016 was expanded as a separate regional/country programme, run out of Turkey. You are all only too aware of the mass exodus and displacement of Syrians who have been forced to flee and seek safety in neighbouring countries as a result of the conflict. This exodus has included a large part of Syria's expertise, amongst which its academics and scientists, many of whom are also Syria's educators, with devastating consequences in all areas of life in Syria, including agriculture and food security, compounding the devastation and destruction of the war itself.

What has been a great disappointment, is that many of the international responders to the crisis have failed to draw effectively on, or even to engage with, that essential local knowledge and expertise that has been forced into exile. As a result, their own programmes have failed to benefit from these unique insights and extended networks, which many of those who have been forced into exile have maintained – Dr. Abdullateef is a clear example. As Mirela has made clear, it is the loss of Syrian expertise within the agricultural sector that the AVS pilot has sought to address in this University of Sussex, Cara-facilitated collaboration with the ACDP-SAE, this last, as Mirela has mentioned, a Syrian-led network of academics and engineers from the agriculture sector who are looking to support knowledge-transfer from Syrian experts who are living in exile, as well as those who remain in non-regime North of Syria, to the benefit, in this case, of farmers in the area. Could I have the next slide?

The partnering model, which the AVS has adopted, is absolutely central to the Syria Programme's approach and aims, which are to support the continued academic development and contribution of Syrian academics whilst in forced exile and to facilitate professional connections and collaborations between Syrian academics and established UK-based colleagues, or predominantly UK-based colleagues, since we also have those who are supporting us from Mexico, from Tasmania, from Austria etc. It is however mainly UK

colleagues, because we benefit from the 'Cara Scholars at risk UK Universities Network', a network of 123 UK universities that have all formerly committed to supporting Cara's work.

The ultimate aim of the Programme is to open up and facilitate new third-party opportunities in which Syrian academics are an integral part of project teams working on research of direct relevance to Syria, or to Syrian refugee populations in near exile. At the moment, we have over 440 UK-based university experts supporting the Syria Programme, of which over 50 who are currently involved in collaborative research with Syrian colleagues, which is how the connection was made with Mirela. We knocked on her door to ask her to take on the role of principal investigator for a group of nine Syrian colleagues who are working on Syrian wheat, olive and pistachio value chains. Next slide please.

The Sussex AVS project is a brilliant example of what we refer to as Syria Programme spin-off projects, by which we mean independent projects that have been conceived and led by a number of UK-based academics who are already supporting the Programme and have found ways to extend and build on the Programme's work, enhancing its impact through their own third-party-funded collaborative-research projects.

The AVS pilot project has brought together UK and Syrian experts, pooling podcasting and research expertise from the UK side and local knowledge and agricultural expertise from the Syrian side, in order to address knowledge gaps amongst farmers in the northwest of Syria, who can no longer access centralised extension services. It reflects collaboration in its truest sense, as well as paving the way to extend the use of this innovative social media approach to knowledge transfer beyond agriculture. I think there is a way in which this innovative approach can support other equally important areas of need, as well as programmes being delivered by responders to the crisis. But most importantly, I'm looking forward to seeing this being taken forward under the leadership of Syrians. We will all still be here if needed.

So, I would just like to say finish by saying that Cara is extremely grateful to Mirela and her University of Sussex colleagues for conceiving and driving this pilot project, as well as to Dr. Shaher Abdullateef and his colleagues for ensuring its successful delivery, which it has been a pleasure for us, Cara, to support and facilitate. Thank you.

This final slide shows a photo of when we were still able to meet up in Istanbul, where we brought together our Syrian colleagues with our UK academic volunteers to work jointly and develop research proposals for submission to Cara, through the Syria Programme grant stream. This is one of those events where you see we appear to have gathered pregnant women, children, and a lot of serious looking academics. We have tried to facilitate as many as possible of our Syrian colleagues to be able to join us, hence the children running around at the same time as we are doing our work. It is a great shame that we have lost that ability, which I hope we will rediscover, once the pandemic has been, I don't know, has hopefully left

us and we can all meet in person rather than having to meet online. Anyway, thank you all and if you're interested in finding out more about Cara's work, that is the link.

Mirela Barbu [00:28:50]

Okay, thank you so much, Kate. I will pass it on to Martin and I will mute some participants, those who have left their microphones open. Oh, yes, it's fine. I mean, recording workshops on Zoom poses all sorts of challenges.

Martin Spinelli [00:29:20]

Thank you for joining us here this afternoon. My name is Martin Spinelli, I'm Mirela's colleague at the University of Sussex. I've just pulled up on the screen that I'm sharing the website that Katherine Jones, our communications manager, did for us to help promote the project and to help serve as a repository for our outputs and our findings. I'm going to be talking about and Shaher is going to be talking about the survey that we ran of our listeners in Northwest Syria. Katherine has already put some of the key findings with some summaries from that survey up on the website. If you're interested it's agricultural-voices.sussex.ac.uk. And we can put that in the chat later. But the project outputs - the survey highlights - provide some tables and some infographics, some of which I'll be talking about today and Shaher we'll be talking about. And these were put together with Marco's tremendous help, we could not have done this without him. So we're very grateful for his contributions there.

So my role in the project, as Mirela said, was to direct and support the podcasts component of it. In the beginning, I sourced the right kind of equipment that we needed to get set up actually producing the podcast series on the ground. I also organised and contributed to the training sessions that happened at the very beginning to help get our Syrian/Turkish producers ready to produce a podcast. And then throughout I have worked with Mirela to guide the project and to support it from a podcasting media academic/ media practitioner point of view. The survey that I just pointed out on the website, we will, at some point relatively soon, make the full survey available in a more polished way; it is quite extensive. And again, Marco really produced a tremendous amount of cross-tabulated and rather sophisticated analyses of the data that we generated.

The survey was the first of its kind that I know of certainly in a conflict zone. We ran it in May and June of this year, and the AVS team of 15 local promoters on the ground, ended up serving about 1000 farmers and related people in the region of Northwest Syria. This included Aleppo and Idlib cities and surrounds. This was a process that began very shortly after we launched the actual episodes of the process. So the promotion and the production happened

in tandem. The outreach properly began with in-person network contacts and existing digital networks on platforms like WhatsApp, to promote it; to tell people about it. And it happened in two waves. So that first wave was getting our 15-episode agricultural support podcast, Agricultural Voices Syria, out into the world. This was produced largely by expat, Syrian agricultural experts in Turkey. The second wave of the outreach collected feedback and conducted the survey, which I'm referencing now, which Shaher is going to reference now. And that included questions about gender and age and education, relationships to the land that was being farmed, ownership and use of technology, social media use, prior podcast listening experience, the tone and the topics of the AVS podcasts, and ideas for improvements for subsequent iterations of AVS, and further support material and how best to make that available to the widest possible audience. So while the survey is obviously extremely useful in the context of food security, specifically in Northwest Syria, many of the findings I think can be extrapolated to other conflict zones and other developing regions. In particular, the findings on technology use and ownership as well as social media use and habits seem really valuable and important starting points for all kinds of NGOs working at the intersection of food security and communications technology in conflict zones around the world.

I want to start with one of the most interesting findings for me from our survey and that is the podcast awareness of our respondents. Prior to AVS, prior to agricultural voices Syria, I find this particularly interesting as a media producer and an academic. So 76% of our listeners were totally new to podcasting, which is a significant amount. This represents a huge opportunity to define what podcasting is for them, and to set expectations for podcasts. As of last week, we had 1717 unique listeners, 982 of them via Anchor, which is the platform we use from our SAE site, and 735 of them from Castbox via the app. We're currently averaging 620 listeners per week roughly. And this is extremely good for a new podcast of this kind and of this particular genre. So one of the things that this particular statistic reminded me of in the broader history of podcasting, which I thought was worth mentioning, and again, it underscores the value of taking these projects into areas where podcasting is not yet developed. Six years ago, in 2014, the podcast in America, Serial, was the gateway podcast for hundreds of thousands of listeners into the world of podcasting. So it was a project produced by WBEZ. And it was a true crime serialisation investigating a murder that happened decades before. 89% of the first-time podcast listeners to Serial went on to eagerly listen to enjoy more podcasts very shortly after this experience after being introduced to Serial so that is the kind of thing that I think we might be able to harness and to develop in our own work in this kind of podcasting--be the first set a tone for the experience, and set expectations for the genre.

I want to talk about the tone of AVS and its appeal. We not only were successful in terms of the number of respondents we reached, for our survey, and more broadly, our listeners, but the tone of the episodes seems to have been done really, really well. The pie chart down here shows that only roughly 11% thought that the podcast was either too formal or too informal. I was really surprised at that statistic, and that a significant percentage found it too formal. I was

expecting things to skew in the other direction. But apparently, as I mused at the beginning at the outset of this project, the natural resonance of good podcasting is casual informal conversation. And this shows to be what was one of the things desired by our listeners here. We knew this was true in the US in the UK. But this is a bit of confirmation that this kind of tone is also appealing among our AVS respondents and, by extrapolating, a broader set of people being introduced to the medium. The bar chart here of the appeal factor shows that we had high means for all of the categories with the highest being the first one, the green one, for the presentational style that is engaging and entertaining--something we try very consciously to cultivate. Again, this fits the understanding of podcasting more broadly in the world, that the AVS hosts their efforts to engage in a very human way were appealing. And again, this is a broad podcasting phenomenon. So it's a little bit of evidence that what's true for podcasting in the UK in the US is also true for it in a place like Northwest Syria.

From the qualitative responses to the questions in the survey about improvements and new ways to think of things in the future ways to move the project forward, a few things became clear. I'm going to look at just the ones that I've highlighted here in yellow. The first one I want to look at is the episode available offline. And the improved dissemination, which seem in my mind to work together is roughly 7% for offline and 3% for improved dissemination, roughly 10% of the people who responded to the qualitative question, so I suspect that this is largely due to problems with our app not being available, as we thought it would be through the Google Store. We wanted to use the app as the main means to distribute it. But the Google Store app was blocked by the authorities, and we couldn't use it. During the original planning for AVS, we had been informed that the Store would be available. But when we needed it, it wasn't. There were some workarounds that were sorted out on the ground, which I thought were really, really clever and, and very effective. One was to distribute the app as a file directly to farmers' phones. So numerous farmers, were given a file that had the app on it that they could use to circumvent the Google Store issues. That was a very good workaround. And some of our more tech-savvy listeners, used proxy servers or VPNs to download the app via Turkey, or other countries. And we ended up making all of the episodes available through the platform Castbox, this is another good and lateral move. But because we had the podcasts on Anchor, and on Castbox, we ended up with two different files of each episode. And this complicates keeping track of the metrics, it complicates keeping track of the listener statistics. So ideally, you always want to have just one file per episode. It's just much easier both to follow the statistics, and if you need to make a change and edit in an episode that you already have out there, it's much easier to do it in just one place rather than in two or three places. But again, this was a very good workaround.

The most significant bit of qualitative feedback was for shorter episodes, our episodes were 30 to 60 minutes long, and this does represent something of a difficult balancing act. In the beginning of the podcast, when a podcast is new, you really want to work to develop a community, a sense of participation, in an event that is unfolding before your ears. In order to

do that, things need to be a little bit looser and a little bit more friendly and even meandering to try and develop a sense of connection. However, it appears that many of our listeners wanted shorter, more concise episodes that were more precisely targeted on particular pieces of information. So the recommendation going forward might be: rather than 30 to 60 minute episodes, have them be perhaps 20 to 40 minutes, maximum. We were trying to do both things, develop a community, develop an audience and provide information and those two things are always going to be a little bit of tension. The other thing to note here: many people wanted video recordings of particular tips of agricultural practices. And this is something that is very doable going forward. We have already sourced a couple of cameras, but it would really benefit from other collaborative partners getting involved to help make the video information side of things possible.

Let's look at social media use. In our survey, if you use social media at all, WhatsApp and Facebook were clearly dominant. And this is really useful information in guiding the promotion of future AVS episodes, and similar related agricultural media undertakings. It's good to know where to find your audience so you can be more efficient reaching out to them. The use of social media among our respondents skewed mainly towards uses of communication texts that were personal, rather than for business or of an institutional nature. So not too many were using it for communicating with government or for work; far more we're using it to communicate with friends and family. These graphs look at how people use social media to search for material. The propensity across all of the platforms was clearly on local news. And when we cross reference with responses to other survey questions about social media use for communication, which showed again a propensity for using them to connect with family and friends, a picture of general social media use emerges focused on community and personal connection rather than global concerns.

So this is my last slide that I'll pass it over to Shaher. And this is just another slide that shows up that developing picture of the social media use of our listeners that I was trying to develop on the previous two slides. So these are the last few questions in our survey. This picture of social media use for local, more intimate concerns among our respondents is supported by the higher mean scores given in our last three questions about their feelings in relationship to their families, their immediate communities, and the larger Syrian diaspora; means for family and immediate community were considerably higher than for Syrians elsewhere. And this is not surprising in and of itself. But it does support a picture of more local social media use, that we were teasing out on the previous slide. So all of this is useful information in planning the next outreach campaign for the next iteration of AVS. And for other projects that are happening at the intersection of communications technology and agriculture in the developing world, and in particular, in conflict zones. So now I'm going to stop the share and pass things over to Shaher, who's going to talk more about the survey results that looked at the demographics of our listeners, and the more particular agricultural issues that were prominent in our survey.

Shaher Abdullateef [00:47:10]

Can you hear me now? Okay. Thank you, Martin, thank you, Mirela and Kate for this great introduction, for the project itself, for the survey results. Now I would like to continue talking about the importance of the agricultural voices to transfer agriculture knowledge and information and so on. I think I would love to talk in Arabic, and you will continue hearing the translation in English.

I will be talking about how the Syrian Agricultural Voices Podcast. It is an important tool for imparting knowledge and guidance to farmers, as well as some of the challenges we face. For every successful business there are challenges, and we have certainly encountered our fair share. But we also stand to benefit from these challenges by learning from them and turning them into opportunities for the further development of our podcasts and our general information archive. As we can see on this slide, we have covered a lot of agricultural topics during the first short stage. As my colleagues have already mentioned, we used this experimental stage to cover the most important agricultural topics as a way to introduce the Agricultural Voices Podcast as an important source for communicating information. We covered a large number of topics as the most important operations in agriculture involve soil preparation, planting, irrigation and fertilization, whether it be for vegetables, fruit trees or crops. We also covered topics related to plant diseases and ways to combat them, the importance of alternative crops, aromatic plants and economic plants, which have become widespread in northern Syria in recent times. We looked at the production of local seeds and the importance of preserving local crop varieties for reasons of agricultural sustainability and cost reduction for farmers, especially those with small plots of land or home gardens. We also looked into the use of organic fertilizers, an important topic in agricultural circles due to the harmful effects of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. In northern Syria in particular, the ongoing conflict means there is no control over the spread of untrustworthy pesticides whose effects on the soil, environment or public health are unknown. Specific focus was given to the cultivation of olive trees as one of the most important fruit-bearing trees.

We discussed various methods of production, how to increase productivity and new agricultural techniques, including hydroponics. We also discussed the basic household methods of preserving and processing vegetables, and how to benefit most from these products in order to link the production chain with the value chain. I will quickly point to some important results shown in this slide regarding the target group. To begin with, I would like to emphasize that our main focus has always been on the farmers themselves. We did not reach out to every member of the community but rather those who already had existing relationships with the engineers. A total of 932 farmers filled out the questionnaire. We received more than 1,000 forms, but the incomplete ones were excluded. As we can see from the table, 75% of the respondents were male. This, as you know, reflects the nature of the Syrian agricultural community, where landowners or leaders of agricultural projects tend to be men. But this result

is also important as it pushes us to reach out to more working farmers, especially since we know that the agricultural labour force on the ground is made up mostly of women, and to develop a strategy and plan that can include them in our research.

As for the age group, roughly 49% of respondents were under 29 years old and 25% were over 40 years old. This is important to be able to discern the opinions and experiences of young farmers in comparison to the over-40 who have more agricultural experience and practice. In terms of education, 35% have a college degree. This is also an interesting result as it shows that in comparison to most other sectors, the agricultural sector acts as an incubator that attracts different portions of the population. The geographical scope was largely discussed by my colleague Mirela, the main areas covered being those in northwest Syria, starting with Al-Bab and Jarabulus, Marea, Azaz, Afrin, the western countryside of Aleppo, Atarib, and also Idlib and its surrounding areas, essentially almost the entire liberated areas in the north. We also attempted to understand the current situation surrounding employment, as the results indicate that more than 29% of our respondents are not currently working. This result is somewhat expected since many of them are displaced people whom I suspect are originally farmers but no longer have access to their lands to practice agricultural work. This result is also useful for our future work, whether through the blog or other projects, where we can reflect on ways to give these people access to agricultural land and therefore get back to work.

In terms of income, 13% had almost none, while 48% had an average monthly income of less than four 400 Turkish lira. In terms of crops, most farmers usually depend on growing vegetables, then fruit trees and then other crops.

In response to a question about livestock, less than 4% were interested in rearing animals. Perhaps this reflects our focus on farmers, but can also give us an indication of the type of topics related to livestock we can include in future plans.

As for the way our respondents interacted with the Agricultural Voices blog, more than 80% of farmers listened to the podcasts, whether at home or in the field, and 93% of them have a smartphone on which to follow the podcasts. So from a technical point of view, there is no problem for the farmers to access the podcasts as most of them have phones, which is important information going forward. As my colleague Martin mentioned, WhatsApp and Facebook are a main means of communication, whether between individuals inside Syria or with their families and relatives abroad. Most farmers listened to the podcasts at home or in the field after downloading them, so the lack of constant access to internet is a challenge which we can also see as a potential opportunity.

With regard to podcasts sharing, more than 50% percent of respondents said they would want to share the podcast or listen to them with other farmers.

This tendency to want to share and participate with other members of the community indicates that those who listened to the podcast found them beneficial, which is a very important result. For us, we read it as an opportunity to connect. It is an opportunity for farmers to communicate with one another and discuss the pros, cons, mistakes and lessons learned. That is, some kind of interaction occurs between the farmers themselves which may also have an indirect impact on the podcast by creating opportunities for further interaction and communication within the farming community.

As for the topics that were listened to, their importance, and so on, the five-point Likert scale that we used shows that the impressions were similar for all respondents, ranging from four to five for all topics including technical issues, use of pesticides, sustainability, irrigation methods, etc. Also, what was interesting is that 73% of the farmers expressed a desire to have their voices heard. This applies to the name of the podcast itself – Farmers' Voices Podcast – as they find it important to include their own voices within the podcasts.

This is a very important result for us as it confirms how important it is for farmers to learn from one another. Therefore, we have included in our future plans to host farmers to talk about and share their successful experiences with others. The results do show that all the topics covered in the podcasts are important, with more than 60% of farmers lacking such information, experience and skills. It is important for us to focus on sustainable technical issues and agricultural inputs. Also, Syrian food is important, as 46% of farmers expressed their desire for the podcasts to include topics that talk about food. For us researchers, we read this as the need to talk about value added and the integrated chain of agricultural production, from production and manufacturing to marketing and consumption.

In our direct talks and meetings with the farmers, they expressed their understanding of how important it is to move towards sustainable development despite all the difficulties imposed by the conflict, a sentiment shared by most parties. We hope this will be reflected in future episodes of the podcast or in the projects that it implements, be it alone or in cooperation with organizations or related parties.

We need to study our challenges and how we overcame them, or develop future solutions for them.

My colleague has already discussed some of these challenges. For example, the need to keep the length of our episodes short, despite the fact that some podcasts were long because we wished to convey as much information as possible to the farmers.

Some technical challenges for the team and farmers include the accessibility of the Google store in Syria, access to internet, sound quality, etc. Even internally we encountered such issues. For example, when engineering and agricultural experts in Syria were keen to submit podcasts and communicated with us via the internet or phone, the connection or sound quality would often not allow for smooth communication. In the end we overcame this problem by providing instructions to all those who wish to submit a blog post or present a podcast episode to make sure that such issues do not occur.

Some other problems or difficulties we faced is the severe lack of opportunities for interactive training and practical guidance. Everyone requests practical information and instructional videos. Since opportunities for practical, visual and applied guidance on the ground are almost absent, the podcast can step in as an added, alternative tool for communicating information. This is what we hope to reach in cooperation with other organizations, institutions or concerned authorities working in or with the agricultural sector. The Agricultural Voices Podcasts can therefore act as a supplementary means of communicating information, but not necessarily the only means.

There is currently no way of spreading information in northern Syria, neither through conventional media nor electronically. Our podcast is therefore a challenge, but it also provides an opportunity for future potential work and cooperation.

The time period of the project was also a challenge for us as we had little time to prepare and implement it. Moreover, since agricultural work is so seasonal, moving forward, our podcast and blog will have to cover topics that are time sensitive in order to provide the best guidance for any particular season or time.

At first many were asking us: “What is a blog?” “What is a podcast?” “How do we find it?” And so on. On this occasion, I would like to thank our fellow guides who, despite numerous challenges and difficulties, were able to introduce the farmers to the blog and podcast, show them how to access it and guide them through it. Since it is a new technology, we need to follow up constantly and focus on reaching out to farmers. In general, however, the results so far are positive and indicate that the farmers believe in it enough to share it.

As for future opportunities, this project provides a big chance for capacity building, whether technical or scientific. We are building a team with the experience and competence to develop the performance of the podcast and thus its continuity. We know what it takes to deliver content that is both useful and scientifically valuable, but also acceptable and desirable to the farming community.

AVS popularity has spread considerably in northern Syria, with more than one 1,500 farmers following it directly, and more than 5,000 having some awareness about it and desire to follow specific topics according to individual needs or interests. This number is increasing on an almost daily basis, providing us and other organizations intent on spreading agricultural knowledge with an important opportunity to reach even further.

One of these opportunities is to support the podcast with various educational tools such as videos or field work, opening paths to cooperation with other parties and stakeholders. At its core, the podcast is there and has become known to a growing segment of the population which means it is a useful tool with which to communicate information to individuals, institutions or organizations that wish to support.

The podcast is also an important way to reach farmers quickly, especially in urgent cases such as extreme weather change or the spread of a pandemic, where such information needs to

travel fast. This pilot project provided many lessons that can be learnt and built upon in future phases.

We are working on an integrated electronic platform with a website and social media pages such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as launching a YouTube channel. These are all tools that exist already and constitute an opportunity to make better use of the blog.

We are exploring the possibility of including the Syrian Agricultural Voices podcast in agricultural projects, especially those aimed at spreading knowledge, awareness and capacity building in cooperation with other organizations and bodies interested in agricultural affairs.

Through this short pilot project, we hope to increase dissemination of the podcast and access to it. As you can see, the tables show the amount of funding we've received, which is very modest when compared with other projects. Nevertheless, we have made a sizable impact and qualitative leap. This is not just my own personal opinion, but rather what we have heard from experts, colleagues and those interested in the agricultural sector.

The good news, and here I thank our donor, is that an additional grant has also been approved to develop our podcasting capabilities and increase the impact of this project. An additional grant of £5,000 will go towards enhancing the communication strategy, including the possibility of launching a YouTube channel, as well as towards identifying or exploring collaborations with international and local organizations. There will probably be, conditions permitting, a total of three workshops: two in Syria (one in Azaz and one in Idlib) and a third one in Gaziantep. The general objective of these workshops is to develop a future working strategy for the podcast and to find ways to cooperate with local and international organizations, as well as research local institutions and individuals.

I have come to the end, I apologize for taking so long.

As for following up on this project, you can do so either through the university's website, as shown here, or through Twitter. You can also follow our Arabic content through the Syrian Academic Experiences website, or its Facebook page or Twitter.

Thank you for following. Back to you, Mirela.

Mirela Barbu [01:17:55]

Ok Shaher, thank you very much. I just want to put again the last slide; I want to provide more detail. I just want to go directly to slide number 43 also because I would like here to spend a few words on what Shaher said: the founders. So great thanks from us to SSRP, that is Sussex Sustainability Research Programme! For all researchers who have already an SSRP grant there is a possibility to apply for an extension, specifically for impact-related activities. This is what I did quite recently, and this is why we have this additional 5,000 pounds for the activities that we plan to carry on in Syria and Turkey in September, October and November.

And also, here, I thought it is a good thing to share with you how we spent the resources. As you see, for the first project - that we called Pilot Project - we had 25,000 pounds and I think it was not a large amount of money. We did so many things to date and the biggest part of this budget went to Cara and ACDP, and SAE. That budget was spent mainly for activities regarding podcast production and promotion in Syria and Turkey. For the new project with our new, smaller, budget this time 90% of resources will be spent by Cara and ACDP, and mainly by ACDP, on activities in Syria and Turkey.

This is to say that we tried to use these funds at our best capacity, and this is really what we achieved; it was great. This workshop is for us a moment of celebration of these achievements, but also, we don't want to look too much self-celebratory. And of course, we know that there are so many things that we can do, still. Let's say it: what we did, we created, is a tool that allowed us to bring Syrian expertise, agricultural expertise, to Syrian farmers. And we're seeing that this is an innovative, flexible and relatively low-cost media.

With the Impact Fund we would like to surpass this goal through the creation of a communication platform that should be able to bring together humanitarian and development organisations in Northwest Syria. We know that this is a very ambitious goal, but we think it is important to work towards achieving it, because AVS can really become an important tool for all actors who work on agriculture, sustainable agriculture, in Syria. And as Kate explained at the beginning, this is a spin-off project; it is something that we created, it will stay here and will continue to live if people will believe in it and also will try to use it and find resources to finance it, and to make it grow.

So this is why I would like to finish here our presentations and we will be very happy to receive comments from you, suggestions, anything you'd like us to ask, and also to propose. I would like to ask our translators if they help us with the questions in Arabic in our chat, and it would be great to have this conversation. We have roughly half an hour for this discussion. Thank you so much again, for your attention and I will pause recording now.