

Food Security Challenges in Northwest Syria

Mechanisms for Sharing Agricultural Knowledge

Organization and Participation

The University of Sussex (UoS), Cara (the Council for At-risk Academics) and the Syrian Academics and Experts (SAE) organized an online workshop on 12th November 2021, the third in a series of workshops to share and gain feedback on the Agricultural Voices Syria (AVS) podcast project.

The workshop was run by Dr Shaher Abdullateef (SAE), with contributions from Dr Mirela Barbu (UoS) and Prof. Martin Spinelli (UoS). The workshop was attended by 22 representatives of local and international organizations delivering agriculture and food security programmes in northwest Syria.

Methodology and Discussion Points

This third and final workshop took the form of a participatory dialogue. A briefing paper including main discussion areas was distributed to participants ahead of time to allow them to consult internally and make informed contributions to the workshop discussion.

The main discussion areas were:

1. Challenges facing food security in northwest Syria today.
2. Participants' perspectives on food security and sustainable development.
3. AVS podcast project: collaborative pathways toward consolidation and enhancement.

The workshop began with a welcome from Dr Mirela Barbu and an introduction to the AVS, a collaborative project implemented by the UoS, Cara and SAE in 2021. AVS is a knowledge transfer project central to which the development and pilot of a podcast series facilitating the transfer of knowledge from Syrian agricultural experts in exile or still in Syria, to Syrian farmers in northwest Syria. This media communication tool helped farmers who had lost all extension services to benefit from specific areas of agricultural expertise including sustainable agricultural practices. Prof. Martin Spinelli highlighted that podcasting in conflict-affected areas, such as northwest Syria can be a powerful tool to reach and build communities. Dr Shaher Abdullateef then followed with a brief outline of the main emerging findings from the two earlier face-to-face AVS workshops held in Idlib and Azaz (see report on AVS Workshops 1 and 2).

The participants agreed with the emerging challenges identified at the previous workshops, whilst introducing new insights and dimensions, as follows:

Food security versus food sovereignty

Access to food in adequate quantities and of the necessary nutritional value is central to food security. However, although a community may benefit from food programmes that ensure food security, they don't promote food sovereignty. In Syria, for example, once humanitarian 'food basket' projects are completed, local families remain food insecure and unable to produce the necessary level of food for themselves, given inadequate agricultural systems.

Lack of a central authority

Northwest Syria is referred to as a so-called 'liberated area' or more accurately as a 'non-regime-controlled area'. However, the area is administratively fragmented, under the control of different local political factions and local councils. The area suffers from the absence of central governance and has many challenges in terms of agricultural decision-making, implementation and coordination across the various actors.

Most of the challenges highlighted in the report from the first two AVS workshops relate to this key challenge including loss of government services, lack of coordination between NGOs and local authorities, the low quality of agricultural inputs and absence of product of origin certification, lack of extension services, low project impact in addition to duplication, and a lack of agricultural strategies and planning. Without a central authority most of these problems cannot be addressed.

In a conflict-affected area such as northwest Syria, it can be difficult to bring the relevant actors together. The United Nations Food Security & Livelihoods Cluster (UN-FSL cluster) is one body that might be in a position to do so in relation to humanitarian actors delivering agriculture and food security programmes. The participants underlined that promoting farmer association and collaboration between farmers and experts are fundamental for long-term development.

"We need to think in a different way and ask ourselves what we can do. There are some examples of things that can be done such as promoting ties between farmers and agricultural experts. It is therefore both urgent and important to create a local collaboration platform that includes farmers' groups or associations for effective planning towards sustainable and long-term agricultural development."

Absence of agricultural planning

Planning is essential to establishing a sustainable agriculture future, providing clear objectives and strategies to achieve agreed goals. This might address use of agricultural resources, reduced regulatory barriers, appropriate infrastructural development, the creation of new opportunities in order to support and deliver a thriving agricultural sector and food security.

A topic already discussed in workshops 1 & 2, the participants in this workshop highlighted the challenges posed by the lack of a coordinated planning of crops in northwest Syria. Although some NGOs have agreed to follow a plan in the area where they work, there is no

coordination across the region. In all three workshops there was an agreement between participants on the main constrain of this situation; this being the absence of a single governing authority in northwest Syria.

Absence of certification authority

There is no single authority in control of cross-border activities that can provide certificates of origin for agriculture related inputs and produce. An agricultural product 'certificate of origin' would enable farmers to export their agricultural products and improve their financial situation.

This issue has been discussed in numerous meetings, but the focus has usually been on the need for a single government authority to provide certification. It is considered an unsolvable situation, but other options should be explored; for example, an alternative approach involving an independent accredited third-party, such as a research center or civil society or private organization. A collective decision is urgently needed to agree a body able to provide these certificates.

Strategic crop: a halving of wheat production

The population in northwest Syria has doubled over the conflict, rising from less than 2 million to more than 4 million people, due to internal displacement. This increase has created significant pressure on the region's natural resources including land and water. Most of the internally displaced live in informal camps located on agricultural land, with a resulting decrease in cultivated land, food production and food insecurity.

Production of wheat in 2019, one of the Syria's most strategic crops, decreased by over 50% due to displacement, loss of agricultural land, infrastructure and extension services, poor quality of inputs, disrupted markets etc. in addition to drought. Many farmers have switched to more profitable crops with lower water need, e.g. black cumin. Current third-party interventions are neither sufficient nor suitable to support wheat farmers.

In addition to poor quality of agricultural inputs, the price increase of seeds and fertilizer has become a pressing challenge for both farmers and NGOs. The cost of a ton of fertilizer in 2020 rose from \$500 to \$870, and the cost of a ton of wheat seeds rose by \$400, the highest prices ever recorded in Syria for these products.

Donor-intervention policies

A point highlighted by many participants, was that donors' projects were informed by inaccurate need assessments that didn't reflect actual need. It is necessary to include experts and farmers in project planning and related policy-making to improve impact.

One specific policy raised in the workshop related to beneficiary selection, is the focus on female-led families/households regardless of need, resulting in some beneficiaries selling agricultural inputs in local markets. There was also criticism relating to inappropriate local

partners, types of interventions and crops, areas for cultivation etc. all of which have made interventions less effective over the longer-term.

Collapse of the agricultural extension system

The loss of central government extension services in northwest Syria due to the conflict, including the forced exile of a large number of agricultural experts, amongst whom academics, and the impact of the conflict on the education sector in terms of the development of a new generation of agricultural experts, has left the area without a formal agricultural support and advisory structure, leading to negative practices. For example, there is a high level of mixing between different wheat cultivars that are not suited to the northwest Syria environment, thus further undermining levels of production. Knowledge transfer and advisory mechanism and strategies need to be put in place to support farmers in the region.

The participants discussed the importance of involving researchers in the implementation of agricultural projects with the aim of assessing impact and facilitating knowledge transfer on specific agricultural practices and techniques.

Longer-term planning

Longer-term solutions to early recovery and sustainable agricultural interventions are urgently needed to address the challenges raised, increase the effectiveness of agricultural projects and enhance food security, create income and job opportunities, and empower farmers and communities to achieve. Some strategies have been discussed. For example, the introduction of new cultivation practices such as drip irrigation, greenhouse and soilless production systems etc. could help to increase productivity. One urgent concern relates to water management. Given the scarcity of water in northwest Syria aggravated by drought, repair and the development of new infrastructures such as dams and irrigation channels should be priority.

Several participants found this workshop useful for collectively identifying challenges and possible solutions to be implemented collaboratively. They also recalled that the FSL Cluster has integrated a value chain approach into their projects, mostly in relation to olive and wheat production. The participants explained that the same approach – useful for creating economic gains for many actors participating in the chain - should be followed for other essential crops such as legumes and vegetables.

Knowledge production and sharing

Agricultural extension services – i.e. advice services - are critical to sustaining an effective agricultural sector and food security in particular. Although there have been a number of projects aimed at producing agricultural guidelines as well as the establishment of a number of extension services units in northwest Syria, they are insufficient to meet needs, leaving a major gap. Workshop participants agreed that the AVS podcast could be integrated into all agricultural projects and further developed with videos as well as practical training in the field.

Another point discussed was the importance of sharing successful farmers' stories and disseminate lessons learned in the field.

Looking forward: priorities

The workshop concluded by identifying some priorities for the development of agriculture in northwest Syria:

- **Supporting livestock production.** Livestock is one of the main agricultural sectors and it plays a role in supporting certain cultivars. For example, livestock farmers should focus on cultivating fodder crops such as barley. It provides high nutritional value and creates job opportunities for women also.
- **Selection of beneficiaries of agricultural projects.** Intervention policies need to be revisited to be more efficient and to increase the feasibility and impact of the projects. For example, the neediest farmers are selected to participate but, often, they will not continue these activities after the end of a project. The beneficiary selection criteria should be improved to include farmers and livestock breeders of medium to large-sized farms and build interventions on the real farmer's needs.
- **Integrating Syrian academics and research** in project design and implementation to increase the projects' impact.
- **Prioritizing infrastructure support** to increase production quality and reduce production costs. Moreover, improvements in the agriculture sector require integration within the sector and other sectors. Agriculture cannot be improved without improving education, health or other sectors (i.e. laboratories and marketing activities). Therefore investment in infrastructure is key for the delivery of other activities.
- **Strengthening networking and lobbying.** Empower farmers and agricultural practitioners helping them to collaborate with local authorities is an effective way to influence donors' intervention policies. Building networks between farmers is also important to attract grants for buying machinery and implementing projects addressing common problems.
- **Increasing the quality of inputs.** Some vegetable seeds imported by certain organizations are from an unknown origin and the results are unfamiliar to the local farmers. The quality of pesticides and fertilizers needs to be controlled urgently for both economics and environmental impacts.
- **Improving knowledge production and sharing.** Tools such as AVS have the potential to reach all farmers and can be developed to include extension videos and practical trainings through field extension. The podcast can be a free space to present success stories from northwest Syria. In addition, providing vocational or professional training will help people to return to their professions, in particular by providing them with basic capital to start new projects.