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Sustainability: The case of Fatima’s Farmer Field School

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In rural Afghanistan, female extension agents and community leaders are promoting home gardens and teaching women to produce food and consume a healthier, more diverse diet using the Farmer Field School model. Additionally, through the AAEP II Women in Agriculture (WIA) Program, female government extension workers are being trained and mentored to establish, mentor and supervise Farmer Field School leaders. This approach addresses the common challenges that government extension services face of weak technical capacity and a lack of funds to visit farmers and provide important services. Small holder farmers, particularly women, also lack resources to access extension services, and women farmers are restricted in the quest for information and training, as well as their access to inputs.

A critical question in development programs such as these is sustainability. When the AAEP-II closes and funds dry up, will its programs and impact continue? Will female extension workers continue to provide services? Will female farmers continue to learn and teach others in their community? Fatima, a WIA Farmer Field School Leader provides us with a glimpse of the possible answer.

Fatima started with the WIA program as an illiterate farmer 18 months ago. She is widowed and has 5 children and lives in the village of Doughradad on the outskirts of Kabul. Through her regular participation, she has learned how to better feed her family through kitchen gardens and the establishment of a food processing group. Fatima’s group makes organic, high quality dried fruits and vegetables as well as pickles and chutneys for sale.

One of the things she learned last year is how to establish a self-help group within the Farmer Field School. As the leader of a new Farmer Field School, Fatima was given a budget of 3200 Afs (approximately $54) for the year to establish the school and teach the women new gardening techniques that she learned from WIA. Fatima’s Farmer Field School/ Self-Help Group has also been contributing 20 Afs (33 cents) each week to the group’s savings box as dues since it began.

When the group decided they wanted training in food processing ahead of Ramadan, a time when pickles and
chutneys are enjoyed with the evening meal, there was no budget for the classes. Instead of giving up, the group of women independently decided that they would use the money collected by the group and purchase the items from the savings box so that Fatima could demonstrate the techniques used for hygienic dehydration and canning as well as methods which improve the nutrition of the preserved foods. Fatima remarked. “After I explained about working as a cooperative the women accepted.” Together under Fatima’s guidance the women made 50 jars of pickles. Fatima explained, “This was a training, but we also sold the pickles for income.” And, Fatima’s Farmer Field School is still selling the pickles locally today!

The result of this scenario is a fully independent farmer driven and farmer funded training. This success represents a first step from the culture of dependency to independency and true empowerment.