

So What?

MEDA Fall 2011

Welcome to *So What?*, a periodic look at MEDA's long-term impact around the world. What really changed as a result of our development efforts? What got better for families and communities? This issue looks at the recently concluded Through The Garden Gate project in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan — Through The Garden Gate

It's hard to cut through endless images of bombs and body bags. Thirty years of war made Afghanistan — one of the least developed countries in the world — a poster-child of suffering. Beyond daily terror and unspeakable loss of life, carnage from one conflict or another trampled orchards, ravaged irrigation networks and laid waste to infrastructure.

Development aid has ignited new hope. Afghanistan's economy has begun to improve, and in the last six years has grown 12% annually, thanks mainly to agriculture.

One key player has been MEDA's Through The Garden Gate initiative,

which has invigorated Afghan women to redefine themselves as producers of food and community leaders.

What we did

Through The Garden Gate (TTGG) was launched in 2007 as a four-year, \$5 million project funded primarily by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

Its focus was women, who with their children dominate the frontlines of poverty. More than two-thirds of the world's poor are women. Girls are twice as likely as boys to suffer from malnutrition and childhood diseases.

Helping them, even a little, goes a long way. In MEDA's experience, in-

come in the hands of women contributes more to household food security and child nutrition than income controlled by men. It also brings them greater family status and community respect.

Through The Garden Gate's goal was to help isolated Afghan women in nine villages in Parwan Province to develop backyard gardens and boost family income. It sought to strengthen their access to markets and become robust economic contributors.

A key component was training and market linkages. After decades of war, a whole generation needed farming and horticultural skills.

The target crops were carrots, cucumbers, onions, potatoes, tomatoes and grapes — to feed their families and then sell any excess to boost income.

How we did it

In order to deliver training and technical information as widely as possible, the project employed a "lead farmer" strategy that MEDA had refined in other countries. It selected model farmers — local women with entrepreneurial zest and ability — and equipped them

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to serve as group leaders. They in turn trained other small producers who realized, "I can do that."

Each of the nine villages had a facilitator who supervised 10 lead farmers. Each lead farmer was responsible for up to 25 women farmers.

The nine village facilitators and 90 lead farmers were trained in farm operations and basic business. On the farming side, this covered land preparation, crop rotation, drip irrigation, mulching, greenhouse techniques, pest/disease management, weed control, grape trellising, solar drying and storage practices. The business

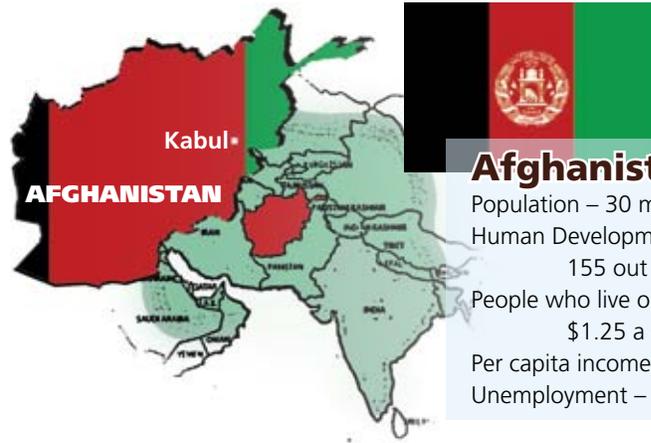
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side comprised recordkeeping, costing/pricing, marketing, packaging and food processing.

Lead farmers held weekly meetings with members to discuss what they learned and share new insights from demonstration plots.

The women farmers became adept at planning their tiny business ventures and getting a market sense of "how best to grow and where to sell." They learned what attracts customers to buy their vegetables, and how to sort and grade their products for market.

Sales agents were specially trained in how to communicate with clients,



Afghanistan snapshot

Population – 30 million
 Human Development Index rank – 155 out of 169 countries
 People who live on less than \$1.25 a day – 33.5%
 Per capita income – \$800
 Unemployment – 35%

input suppliers and markets in large centers.

Field staff helped farmers understand the importance of setting money aside for input supplies and next year's planting. Some members invested in livestock or their children's education. By the end of the project 92 percent of farmers had become regular savers.

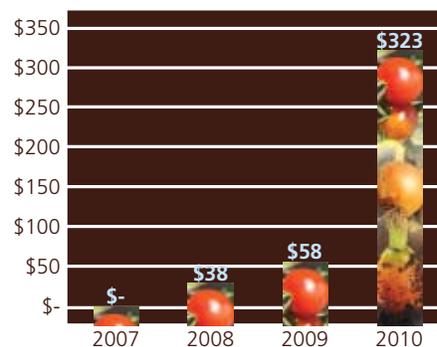
The project was an immediate godsend. "The *mujahideen* killed my husband, and I lost my young son

during the war," said one client. "My daughter and I tried to escape to Kabul, but she died along the way, and I had no chance to bury her." Working as a lead farmer restored her joy in life. She relished the chance to learn modern horticultural methods and be able to earn a living.

Mahbooba, a village facilitator, lost her son in a bomb blast in Kabul. Her husband became despondent and could not work. So Mahbooba moved back to her home village and got involved with Through The Garden Gate. "Now I am strong," she says. "Now, we have learned this new system of life, so things can be better and better."

War-zone security was an ever-present concern. The project kept a low profile. Guards were unarmed. Team vehicles were inconspicuous, with private license plates. Staff dressed appropriately for rural Afghanistan and respected cultural norms.

Farmer Member Annual Income



"Look at how much I can grow now!"

Fawzia, poor and illiterate, is only 35 but already looks like a grandmother. She was married out at age 12 into a life of misery and servitude. Her family suffered greatly under the Taliban, losing everything but a tiny plot of land on which they struggled to subsist.

One day a stranger invited her to be part of a project survey by MEDA and its partner, the Afghan Women's Business Council.

"I couldn't believe there would be people who wanted my attention," she says, recalling her astonishment.

Fawzia agreed to participate and blossomed under the training. She learned how to prepare land for planting and how to process and market her crops. "You

should see how much I can grow now!" she says.

Before long her tiny piece of land was earning \$175 a year, a huge windfall for her. She also joined a literacy class so she could learn to read and write.

"I can now send my children to school," she says. "They don't need to go to the street to work. They come home after school and help me to process and dry our vegetables.

"MEDA is like a school as they teach us how to earn money and become economically independent. What I learned from this project, I will teach other women and play the role of a trainer. I will help other women just like MEDA helped me." 🌱



metres. Lead farmers also planted more diverse crops (five) while farmers planted four or less.

All of the lead farmers reported increased knowledge on best practices and basic business management; 100% increased their farm assets

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(solar drier, storage, compost bins); 100% reported improved knowledge of pesticide spray-related hazards and use of fertilizers.

Among member farmers, productive assets used for further income generation (such as tools) rose an average of 31%. Non-productive assets (home items like carpets or appliances) rose 21%. Most reported better soil productivity and nearly all said their use of irrigation water had improved. They also reported eating more vegetables, rice, milk, eggs and fruit.

As for the role of women in a male hierarchy:

- 100% said they were confident in their role as a farmer;
- 97% were sending their children to school;
- 83% now were allowed to use the family's income;

So what?

In four years Through The Garden Gate served 2,349 clients. With households averaging 6.5 people, total reach was 15,268 beneficiaries.

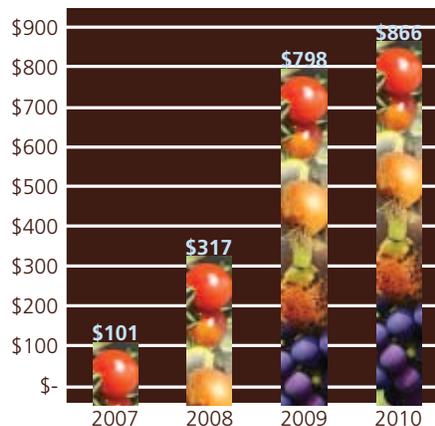
How did their lives improve? Income rose and assets grew. Women's status in the community was strengthened. Children's school attendance rose (critical to lifting a household from poverty). Household nutrition and access to medical care improved.

Farmer income rose from \$38 U.S. per year at the start to \$323 by completion. (See graph, page 2)

Lead farmers enjoyed the most dramatic increase in income. Upon entry the average lead farmer earned \$101 per year; by completion this had jumped to \$866. (See graph at right)

The lead farmers did so much better because they planted demo plots (average of 500 square metres) while farmers planted 250 square

Lead Farmer Annual Income



"I don't feel disabled anymore"

Besides being very poor, Zeba is also disabled, having lost a hand in an explosion during the war. When she became involved in TTGG she at first found it difficult as she could use only one hand, but the encouragement of group members helped her cope. "I became inspired and became part of a very active group in our village and we learned a lot of things about horticulture and business activities. Gradually, I felt strength and was able to put my learning into practice."

She and her husband erected a small greenhouse and grew cucumbers. Whatever she learned about planting and weed control she shared with him. "He was very happy that my confidence came back. He even followed my advice on cucumber trellising."

Zeba and her husband have become skilled producers of high-quality crops.

"I don't have time anymore to be depressed," she says. "Now I don't feel anymore that I am disabled because I am productive and I am earning a good income." 🌱

Impact checklist

- ✓ Incomes increased
- ✓ Assets grew
- ✓ Women's status rose
- ✓ Children attend school
- ✓ Household nutrition improved
- ✓ Better access to medical care

- 82% were allowed to express themselves in the household.

What now?

Through The Garden Gate reached the end of its four-year term in spring 2011. CIDA chose not to fund a second phase because its priorities had shifted away from economic development in Afghanistan to focus on humanitarian aid, education and health.*

But when 100 people gathered in Kabul to mark the end of the project, the women farmers at its core vowed to continue.

"When I asked if they will carry on," reports Helen Loftin, MEDA's director of women's economic development, "the response was an overwhelming 'yes, of course.' They still hold their weekly meetings and are proceeding with seasonal activities like planting carrots and cucumbers – all with skills and knowledge they gained through the project.

"Many of the women will take

* MEDA also has ongoing microfinance work in Afghanistan, as well as Afghanistan Secure Futures, a program targeted to build employment prospects for young people.

the lessons learned and not only maintain what they've got but also grow their businesses. They will continue to influence other women and their communities, as well. That's heartening."

Expectations are that in three years lead farmers will be earning

Women farmers were asked: Will they carry on now that the project is over? "Yes, of course," they said overwhelmingly.

\$1,428 per year (up from \$866 now); farmers will earn \$533 per year, up from \$323 now).

Project employees were able to find new and higher-paying jobs with other prominent agencies that need women extension staff.

Taking stock

Did Through The Garden Gate achieve what MEDA set out to do? The resounding answer is yes.

The project worked with rural women who had been suppressed

and kept immobile, and in that complicated setting it enabled them to increase incomes, and much more. It empowered them to emerge from social and physical cocoons and achieve greater potential.

"We had women who went from being completely homebound, who had been chastised for even looking outside their four walls, to being able to converse publicly and even deal with men in the marketplace," says Loftin.

"What warms my heart the most is the impact it had on their confidence and the way they enjoy life. They now see their efforts as making a tangible difference in the lives of their kids and their families. They see themselves being respected more, and they see themselves participating at the village level. Their lives have been transformed."

Loftin says an unexpected dividend was the way women were accorded political influence once they were able to ease the constraints of culture and tradition.

"Our intention all along was to work through the community development councils and strengthen the credibility of local government," she says. "And that all happened. Beyond that, some women were selected not by us but by that governance system and their communities to be representatives at a higher level, provincially. All the women who were selected say that would never have happened if it were not for this project. They told me, 'There was no way anybody would have paid any attention to us.'" 🌱

"Thank-you to MEDA!"

As a village facilitator Sharifa learned how to communicate. "I didn't have this skill before because our culture does not allow us to talk to anyone," she says. "Before MEDA came into our village, my husband did not allow me to go out. I didn't even know where our land is."

But he relaxed when he found that she would be working only with the female staff of MEDA and its partner agency.

"I am now a good leader and respected by all our villagers, both men and women," she says.

Sharifa is now accepted in the men's community development council meetings and is listened to when she suggests solutions to local problems.

Other homebound women endured similar restrictions, but as trust for the program grew many husbands gave permission for their wives to join.

"Now, almost all our women in the villages have good incomes and are sending their children to school," Sharifa says. "They have used their extra income to repair their houses and buy good food for their family.

"We are fortunate that our village was chosen for this project. We can now see the improvement in our village, our relationships with each other and our confidence because of the income we earned. Thank-you to MEDA!" 🌱

Feedback invited

Readers are invited to comment on this report. What has surprised you about the scope and impact of MEDA's work in Afghanistan? What else would you like to know? What do you think we should have done there, or could still do? Send comments to the editor: wkroeker@meda.org