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STRENGTHEN EXTENSION SERVICES CAPACITY AND TRANSFORM IT TO BECOME A MARKET-ORIENTED ADVISORY SYSTEM

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SDGs:



Country:

Syrian Arab Republic

Project Code:

TCP/SYR/3802

FAO Contribution:

USD 300 000

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Contact Info:

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Implementing Partner

Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MAAR).

Beneficiaries

Extensionists and farmers.



BACKGROUND

The crisis in Syria has severely impacted the national agricultural extension services, resulting in the loss of over 50 percent of qualified technical staff and leaving only about 10 percent of extension units operational. Many units have been destroyed or are inaccessible, and the remaining staff are disconnected from recent advancements in agricultural technology. This has led to a need for updating and enhancing their technical knowledge and skills. The reduction in workforce and resources has also impaired the extension services' ability to collect data, affecting agricultural monitoring and production planning. Additionally, the limited accessibility and the loss of staff have diminished field presence and eroded trust between farmers and extension services. Consequently, farmers now rely on various alternative sources for technical advice and market information, including input dealers, market traders, private advisors and farmer organizations.

In this context, the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MAAR) sought the assistance of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to strengthen the capacity of extension services, modernize the advisory system, and shift its role from providing technical production advice to facilitating a market-orientated approach to enhance farmers' profitability and income.

This assistance was carried out through the current project, which was developed in consultation with the International Cooperation and Planning Directorate and the Agricultural Extension Directorate of the MAAR. This collaboration ensured that the project was tailored to the ministry's needs and aimed at enhancing the quality and scope of extension services.

Finally, the project was aligned with the United Nations Strategic Framework in Syria, contributing to Pillar Two, "Sustainable Socio-economic Recovery," and Pillar Four, "People Resilience and Institutional Responsiveness."

IMPACT

By enhancing agricultural extension services and thereby improving farmers' ability to manage their farming activities, the project indirectly contributed to the overall enhancement of food and nutrition security in Syria.

By cultivating a sustainable institutional environment that enhances farmers' capacity to manage their farms as businesses, thereby boosting agricultural outputs and increasing incomes, this project contributes to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1, which aims to eradicate poverty, and SDG 2, which seeks to end hunger and achieve food security.

ACHIEVEMENT OF RESULTS

The project's activities enhanced the agricultural extension services' capacity to transition towards a market-oriented approach, thereby improving their ability to deliver market-oriented services (MOS) to small-scale producers, which in turn boosted their productivity and profitability. The shift in farmers' mindset towards managing a farm as a business (MOF) and the advancement of their skills along the MOF competence scale were also of great importance. The MOF approach enhances traditional farming by turning it into a profitable business, optimizing resource management, and mitigating risks related to climate and market demand fluctuations.

During the project, a total of 42 extensionists were trained and provided with learning materials and technical guides to disseminate new concepts and skills. The training programme emphasized key areas such as MOS, farmer business schools (FBS) and farm business management. To ensure broad and lasting impact, relevant technical guides and training resources were created. The training also included fundamentals of economics and market dynamics for farm management, along with guidance on how extension services should adapt. Following the training, nine trainees were selected and mentored to establish and facilitate five FBS cycles across five governorates. Over six months, these extensionist facilitators led 45 participating farmers through the FBS curriculum, significantly enhancing their ability to manage their farms as profitable businesses. Throughout the learning cycle in the five FBSs, numerous business partnerships were established, and concrete business deals were secured with identified market partners. Additionally, farmers developed farm business plans with guidance from facilitators and market consultants, and they received further coaching to implement their approved plans in practice.

Finally, a vision for transforming Syria's extension services into a market-oriented system was developed, accompanied by a detailed implementation programme.

IMPLEMENTATION OF WORK PLAN AND BUDGET

The introduction of MOS, MOF and FBS approaches needed time to effectively promote these innovations and ensure the successful completion of the FBS learning cycle. A significant challenge for the project was introducing these new concepts, along with their practical on-farm applications, while facing the risk that extensionists and local communities might resist adopting market-oriented principles for managing farms as businesses. To address this, the project team employed a variety of strategies, including behaviour change motivation techniques, enabling tools and methods to reinforce and sustain the change.

As a result, an extension of the project timeframe was necessary. This extension also facilitated the development of additional training modules on fundamental economics and market dynamics for farm management as a business, the training of more extensionists than originally planned, the adaptation of FAO global and Lebanese training materials to the Syrian context, and the translation of key FAO technical guides for use by the Agricultural Extension Directorate. Despite this extension, all implemented activities remained within the allocated budget.

FOLLOW-UP FOR GOVERNMENT ATTENTION

The training materials and technical guides developed during the project are to be distributed for nationwide use by field extensionists to support the transition towards MOS.

The FBS implementation experience provided valuable insights for both FAO and the MAAR, resulting in a flexible and scalable FBS implementation model. Building on the project's success, FAO plans to expand the refined FBS initiative across several projects in various governorates. As the FBS replication under these new projects begins, it will offer further capacity development opportunities for extensionists and farmers. This effort is expected to initiate the transformation of the MAAR's extension services towards market orientation, aligned with the proposed new vision and its implementation plan. The Federation of Syrian Chambers of Agriculture (FSCA) notably committed to providing support to additional FBS groups in expanding market linkages for their new farm business ventures beyond the project's duration. This support will aim to help them identify and capitalize on available market opportunities.

SUSTAINABILITY

1. Capacity development

The project introduced innovative approaches to extension services, specifically MOS. Acknowledging the positive outcomes of the MOS and FBS concepts, the MAAR is convinced of their values and recognizes their role in enhancing profitability and market competitiveness for small-scale producers.

The project was well-integrated into the MAAR structure, spanning from the Agricultural Extension Directorate at the national level to local level. It aligned with the Agricultural Extension Directorate's new MOS-focused training and development agenda. As a result, the MAAR is committed to sustaining the project's results and using the MOS and FBS approaches as a model for gradual expansion.

All the project activities were structured and monitored using a training of trainers (ToT) approach and coaching approach. This allowed trained extensionists to teach their peers about MOS and FBS, empowered selected facilitators to adapt and reproduce FBS exercises to suit local contexts, and supported FBS farmers in developing their farm business plans with guidance from facilitators and market consultants. Upon completing the training programme, the 42 extensionists trained their colleagues and other extension staff at the governorate and local levels on the same concepts and skills, including MOS, MOF, basic economics and market dynamics for farm business management and FBS.

2. Gender equality

The project provided support to both genders, with a notable representation of women: of the 42 extensionist trainees, 25 were female; of the nine selected FBS facilitators, six were female; and of the 54 FBS farmer participants, 26 were female farmers.

Another farm business planning strategy introduced during the project focused on value addition, encouraging farmers to advance from producing fresh produce to developing market-ready products through sorting, packaging and processing. This approach was particularly led by female participants across the five FBSs, as reflected in their farm business plans. It enabled female farmers to uncover and invest in new market opportunities, such as aromatic plants and olive semi-processing, which had previously been overlooked.

3. Environmental sustainability

Environmental sustainability topics were integrated into the training materials developed for FBS participants. The MOS approach focused on managing farm-level loss and waste to reduce costs and uncovering by-products as potential new market opportunities.

4. Human Rights-based Approach (HRBA) – in particular Right to Food and Decent Work

By fostering the adoption of improved business practices and building technical capacity to enhance incomes and food security, the project supported both the Right to Food and the Right to Decent Work.

5. Technological sustainability

The project aimed to extend extension services beyond the farm gate, reaching marketplaces and value chain partners. It introduced accessible digital extension tools, such as Facebook groups and FBS WhatsApp groups, which encouraged both extensionists and farmers to utilize simple technology to enhance farm businesses and access extension services.



DOCUMENTS AND OUTREACH PRODUCTS

- ❑ **Agricultural Extension Directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MAAR).** 2023. *Progress report.* Damascus, Syria.
- ❑ **Agricultural Extension Directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MAAR).** 2023. *Final narrative report.* Damascus, Syria.
- ❑ **Agricultural Extension Directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MAAR).** 2023. *Final financial report.* Damascus, Syria.
- ❑ **FAO.** 2023. *Internet-based extension services: system options & estimation.* Damascus, Syria.
- ❑ **FAO.** 2023. *Programme proposal for implementation of market-oriented extension services in Syria.* Damascus, Syria.
- ❑ **FAO.** 2023. *Strategic evaluation of digital agriculture systems: aligning technology with farmer-centric goals.* Damascus, Syria.
- ❑ **FAO.** 2023. *Training material for extensionists: Course 1: introduction to MOS and managing a farm as a business.* Damascus, Syria.
- ❑ **FAO.** 2023. *Training material for extensionists: Course 2: FBS concept and methodology.* Damascus, Syria.
- ❑ **FAO.** 2023. *Training material for extensionists: Course 3: basic concepts in economics and market dynamics in the context of farm business management.* Damascus, Syria.
- ❑ **FAO.** 2023. *Training material for extensionists: Course 4: Facilitation skills and FBS curriculum (exercises), methods and techniques.* Damascus, Syria.
- ❑ **FAO.** 2023. *Vision for market oriented extension services in Syria. Assessment of Extension and Rural Advisory Services in Syria.* Damascus, Syria.



ACHIEVEMENT OF RESULTS - LOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Expected Impact	Contributed to the overall improvement in food and nutrition security in Syria through strengthened extension services	
Outcome	Improved capacity of the extension service to promote market-orientation and increased productivity and profitability of small-scale farmers through improved technical and business advice and facilitation of linkages to foster innovation in the agriculture sector in Syria	
	Indicator	Number of extension service workers applying new skills to improve the quality of their work and promote market-orientation.
	Baseline	0
	End Target	40
	Comments and follow-up action to be taken	<p>At the start of the project, an assessment offered a detailed overview of the current state of the agricultural extension service system. The assessment report presented a range of solutions to enhance the system's capacity to better meet farmers' needs and improve farm profitability. The MAAR approved the assessment report's findings, along with the proposed vision and its implementation plan.</p> <p>A comprehensive training programme was conducted for 42 extensionists from across the country. The programme focused on introducing key concepts and skills in MOS, FBS and farm business management. The top nine trainees were selected and mentored to establish and facilitate a complete cycle of five FBSs across five governorates. Over six months, these extensionist facilitators guided the 45 participating farmers through the FBS curriculum, enhancing their knowledge and skills in managing their farms as profitable businesses.</p> <p>By the end of the project, all 42 trained extensionists had conducted extensive training sessions for their colleagues in their respective areas. FAO supplied them with the complete training package tailored for the Syrian context, along with 200 printed copies each of the MOS extension guides and FBS exercises book, which were handed over to the Agricultural Extension Directorate in Damascus for distribution to field extensionists.</p> <p>The national capacity development and coaching approaches employed to deliver the project outputs created a foundation for the extensionists to first embrace the innovation. These extensionists then became change facilitators and agents within their professional networks and the local communities they serve. Similarly, the FBS farmer participants began to take on this role, becoming advocates for MOF within their own communities.</p> <p>During the project implementation period, the MAAR has: i) approved the assessment report and its vision for transforming extension services to a market-oriented approach, and supported the proposed implementation plan for nationwide adoption; ii) integrated the MOS and FBS training programmes into the standard training curriculum of the Agricultural Extension Directorate and committed to including it in the annual capacity development plan; and iii) engaged in high-level discussions about the extension services digital tool for MOS, with the potential to revisit the concept for development, especially in light of an ongoing initiative to digitalize FBSs across the country as part of a regional effort.</p>

Output 1	Assessment of the current status of extension services and its capacity to respond to farmers' needs and national priorities to develop agriculture production and promote market orientation is conducted		
	Indicators	Target	Achieved
	Number of reports including analysis of the current situation of extension services provided by the MAAR and other service providers, versus the needs of farmers and priorities of agriculture development to be more market oriented.	1	Yes
Baseline	0		
Comments	<p>The assessment of the current status of extension services was conducted using the FAO's conceptual framework for pluralistic and market-oriented rural advisory services (PMOS). This framework focused on three key aspects: the enabling environment, service supply side, and service demand side. Due to limited project resources – such as time, funds and personnel – as well as accessibility challenges, a sample approach was agreed upon for the assessment. Consequently, the geographical scope was narrowed, in consultation with the MAAR and with the support of an international consultant, to the governorates of Hama and Daraa.</p> <p>Furthermore, it was decided that the assessment would concentrate on the horticulture and livestock subsectors. These subsectors were chosen as the most relevant for analysis given the assessment's focus on market-oriented systems. For instance, crops marketed by the State were excluded from the study as they did not align with this focus. Additionally, these selected subsectors received the most extensive extension services from the MAAR, providing ample opportunity for a thorough analysis and assessment of public extension services from a MOS perspective.</p> <p>Covering all segments of the value chain (input providers, farmers/breeders, collectors, processors and traders), the following value chains were selected as samples for this assessment: In Hama, the focus was on olives, pistachios, cows and sheep, while in Daraa, the selected value chains were olives, tomatoes, cows and sheep.</p> <p>The assessment report was shared with relevant stakeholders and the national counterpart, and was ultimately validated by the MAAR. The assessment resulted in three key deliverables, addressing Output 1 in full and part of Output 3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assessment of extension and rural advisory services in Syria. This report evaluated the status of rural advisory services from a market-oriented system perspective and mapped the current extension tools used for farmer communication (contributing to Output 3). - Recommendations for MOS in Syria. These recommendations were compiled into a vision for market-oriented extension services, proposed as a localized pilot programme aimed at enhancing production and market-oriented systems within a selected value chain. - Implementation proposal. A detailed logframe and chain of results were provided for the programme to implement the vision. 		
Activity 1.1	Recruit of international consultant with experience in extension and market oriented services		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	An international consultant was recruited.	
Activity 1.2	Design the scope of the assessment and tools, in line with the FAO methodology for appraisal of market-oriented advisory services		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	The recruited international consultant collaborated remotely with FAO and the lead technical officer's team to complete the assignment. Under the guidance of the lead technical officer, the assessment utilized an analytical approach based on FAO's framework for pluralistic and MOS. Consequently, the assessment design was significantly influenced by the MOS conceptual framework, which addresses the improvement of service access for both male and female smallholder farmers by examining the three key aspects of agricultural extension services: (i) enabling environment; (ii) demand side; and (iii) supply side.	

Activity 1.3	Conduct the assessment in line with the FAO methodology for appraisal of market-oriented advisory services	
	Achieved	Yes
	Comments	<p>The overall research design comprised three main phases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pre-field work. This phase aimed to understand the policy environment, legal and regulatory framework, and the Syrian context through literature review, desk research and preliminary (virtual) meetings with FAO and the MAAR. - Field work. The goal was to identify the bottlenecks in the existing extension and rural advisory service system in Syria and to recommend key points and priority actions that build on current strengths. - Post-field work/analysis. This phase focused on developing viable solutions and strategies, and evaluating knowledge to inform policy and programme formulation in support of national agricultural development and rural advisory service priorities. <p>The assessment report and associated deliverables included: i) an analysis of the current status of extension and rural advisory services, assessing their capacity to meet farmers' needs and promote market orientation; ii) a vision for improving extension and rural advisory services in the country with an emphasis on market orientation; and iii) a programme proposal for implementing this vision, including related policy and programming recommendations.</p> <p>The extension personnel involved in the assessment received training from FAO on the data collection tools to be used, including key informant interviews (KIIs), semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs).</p>
Activity 1.4	Discuss and validate the findings of the assessment with key stakeholders	
	Achieved	Yes
	Comments	<p>A validation meeting was held with the relevant national counterparts, including the Deputy Minister of the MAAR, the Agricultural Extension Directorate Director and the International Cooperation and Planning Directorate Director. During the meeting, the initial findings and recommendations of the assessment report were reviewed, along with the revisions proposed by the MAAR. The MAAR provided their written feedback, which was subsequently incorporated into the finalized, validated version of the report.</p>
Activity 1.5	Develop a vision for extension services	
	Achieved	Yes
	Comments	<p>The assessment report and associated deliverables included a vision for the extension services in Syria, emphasizing market orientation, as well as an implementation plan to realize this vision.</p>
Activity 1.6	Formulate a programme for implementing the vision	
	Achieved	Yes
	Comments	<p>A programme proposal was formulated based on the findings of the assessment and the new vision for market-oriented extension services in Syria.</p>

Output 2	Capacity development for extension workers to promote market-orientation and improve their responsiveness to farmers and agriculture sector needs is provided		
	Indicators	Target	Achieved
	Number of extension services worker trained and improved capacity on the provision of market oriented services.	35 extension services staff and five farmers business schools.	Yes
Baseline	130 (trained on basic extension skills through a participatory approach).		
Comments	<p>The training packages for extensionists and farmers were developed based on the vision outlined in the assessment report. Considering the unique aspects of the Syrian context, particularly the varying levels of business literacy among the target trainees, the MOS and FBS training packages were specifically designed to address these gaps. As a result, a training programme was created for extensionists, consisting of four courses. These courses were delivered to 42 extensionists from across the country and covered MOS, FBS methodology and curriculum, basic economics and market dynamics for farm business management and facilitation skills.</p> <p>Of the 42 extensionist trainees, nine top performers were selected, with consideration given to the factors influencing the choice of the FBS locations. Five FBSs were set up across five governorates: Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Deir Ezzor and Daraa. In collaboration with FAO field staff in these governorates, the selected facilitators introduced the FBS concept to local communities and encouraged farmer groups to participate in the schools. A field supervision team was then established for implementation and ongoing monitoring, comprising an FBS field programme supervisor, the nine selected FBS facilitators and five market consultants.</p> <p>The FBS curriculum was delivered over a six-month period by the facilitators, following the school agenda and utilizing the FBS exercises book for farmers developed by FAO as part of the complete learning package.</p> <p>The FBS cycle concluded when farmers, with coaching from the facilitators and business and market consultants, prepared their farm business plans and submitted them to FAO for final validation. Following this, a brief coaching period was provided as the farmers began implementing their plans. The process ended with a reflection period where farmers evaluated their experiences and adjusted their approach towards managing their farms as a business.</p>		
Activity 2.1	Recruit consultants with relevant experience in extension services for the design and implementation of capacity development programme		
	Achieved	No	
	Comments	FAO staff with expertise in capacity development, including learning design and behaviour change, led the implementation of the entire Output 2.	
Activity 2.2	Design a training programme on market oriented services		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	A comprehensive set of training materials was designed and developed, tailored to the specific needs and conditions of the Syrian context. This package was created for extensionists on MOS and FBS concepts and for farmers on MOF and FBS approaches.	
Activity 2.3	Train extension staff from relevant MAAR units on principles of market-orientated advisory services		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	A training for facilitators was delivered to 42 extensionists, and consisted of four courses organized in sequence: (i) introduction to MOS and farm business management; (ii) FBS concept and methodology; (iii) basic economics and market dynamics for farm business management; and (iv) facilitation skills and the FBS curriculum (including exercises, methods and techniques).	
Activity 2.4	Training of trainers and facilitators on farm business schools as a tool for promoting business and market-orientation		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	A total of 54 farmers participated in FBS weekly meetings, facilitated according to the FBS curriculum and the exercises outlined in the FBS book.	

Activity 2.5	Rollout of farm business schools with farmers in selected locations		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	<p>Five FBSs were established across five governorates: Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Deir Ezzor and Daraa. In each location, the FBS lifecycle followed this sequence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The establishment of FBSs. During this phase, facilitators introduced the FBS concept to the local community. For those farmers interested in joining, a two-stage selection process allowed for the formation of the FBS groups. - The execution of FBS meetings. In total, the curriculum included 22 school meetings and four field visits. - The submission and validation of farm business plans. Participants who completed the programme and produced the required learning outputs (individual or group farm business plans) had their plans reviewed and validated, following coaching from facilitators and market consultants. - The implementation of validated farm business plans. During this last phase, farmers received coaching from facilitators to implement their validated plans on the ground. 	
Output 3	Extension tools are mapped and modernized to improve responsiveness of extension services		
	Indicators	Target	Achieved
	Number of extension tools and materials developed.	1	Yes
Baseline	0		
Comments	<p>FAO engaged a national digital agriculture consultant to develop a concept for a digital tool designed to provide MOS to all farmers, including: i) connecting farmers to markets to facilitate the purchase of inputs and the sale of products (e-agriculture market component); ii) offering information and advice on best agricultural practices ("ask an expert" component); and iii) providing updates on market prices for a wide range of products ("market info" component).</p>		
Activity 3.1	Map existing tools and identify relevant tools to be introduced/ improved		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	<p>As part of the assessment carried out under Output 1, the tools used by the MAAR extensionists were mapped, leading to a recommendation for a coordination tool to improve MOS delivery from both public and private sectors. This includes enhancing information and knowledge sharing, such as advising on accessing and utilizing sources like market and crop price data and weather information.</p>	
Activity 3.2	Capacity development of extension workers on the newly introduced tool		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	<p>An administrative authority was established to oversee the management of the Facebook page and groups. Facilitators of the five established FBSs received detailed guidance on moderating the groups and facilitating interactions with and among farmers to achieve the intended objectives for each group.</p>	
Activity 3.3	Piloting/ upscaling implementation of the extension tool		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	<p>Once the Facebook groups were activated, the FBS facilitators managing the groups invited their extensionist colleagues to offer their services to the farmers in the groups. The group administrators, encouraged farmers from their FBS groups and other local areas to join and benefit from these services. The Facebook groups facilitated interactions among facilitators, farmers and among farmers themselves. The facilitators used the groups to share their FBS activities and experience through text, photos and videos, fostering social and experiential learning and motivating farmers within and beyond the established FBSs.</p> <p>By the end of the project, the Facebook page had 314 members, with the "e-agrimarket" group having 118 members, the "ask an expert" group having 57members, and the "market prices info" group having 71 members.</p>	
Activity 3.4	Assessment of the project outcome		
	Achieved	Yes	
	Comments	<p>The programme analyst conducted an assessment of the overall project results relative to its planned objectives. This involved data collection and analysis, concentrating on the implementation of the FBS and the use of the newly introduced tools.</p> <p>Pre- and postlearning assessments were conducted for the 42 extensionists trained in MOS, MOF and FBS to gauge their improvement in knowledge and skills. Similarly, the 54 farmers who participated in the five FBSs also completed pre- and postassessments to evaluate changes in their knowledge, skills and attitudes.</p>	

Partnerships and Outreach

For more information, please contact: Reporting@fao.org

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