FAO - EU Food Facility Programme

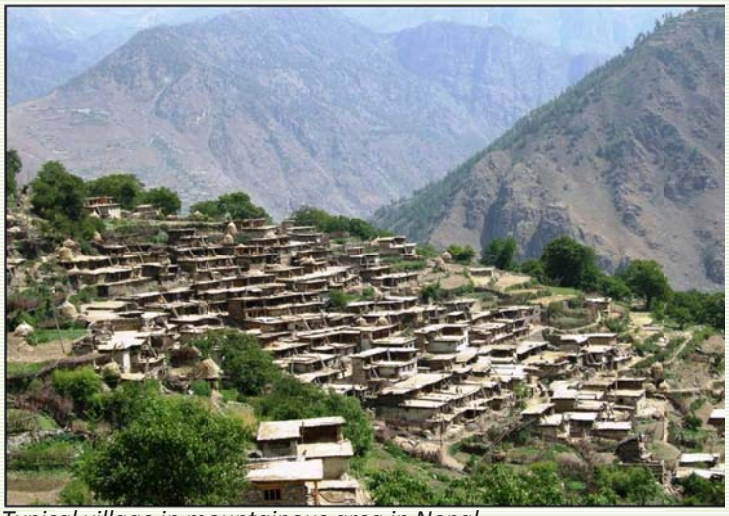
After One and a Half Year in Nepal

EU Food Facility Programme

Agriculture is the mainstay of the Nepalese economy, providing a livelihood for three-quarters of the population and accounting for 38% of the overall GDP. Erratic rainfall, droughts, floods and the result of climate change and soaring food prices on international markets have exacerbated food security in the country. Mid-hill and mountainous regions are the most affected due to geographical isolation, restricted access to the areas, and lack of infrastructure. Limited physical and economical access to quality seeds that are adapted to specific agro-ecological conditions exacerbate matters further. The prevalence of an unstable political situation has limited the capacity of the government to develop sustainable agricultural development strategies. Nepal's structural negative food balance, aggravated by the poor harvests which followed a severe winter drought in 2008, has increased the country's high dependence on food imports, making it even more vulnerable to soaring food prices. With consistently high inflation rates, the most affected section of the population is the one constituted by people living below the poverty line.

When food prices hit record highs in 2007-2008, leading to unacceptable levels of hunger around the world, the European Union (EU) responded quickly and massively with the € 1 billion Food Facility. Launched in 2009, the EU Food Facility (EUFF) programme aims to help developing countries move towards long-term food security. Over € 228 million (USD 315 million) of EUFF is being channeled through FAO, allowing the organization to implement operations in twenty-eight countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America and to contribute to the improvement of the lives of more than 9 million people in rural areas.

Under the European Union Food Facility (EUFF) programme, a total of USD 30 million was allocated to Nepal. Of this amount, USD 11 million was provided to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The remaining USD 19 million has been allocated to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and Non-governmental Organizations. The overall objective of the EUFF programme in Nepal is to mitigate the impact of high food prices and the global economic crisis, to boost agriculture productivity of smallholder farmers and to improve the Government of Nepal's (GoN) food security monitoring capacity.



Typical village in mountainous area in Nepal

Project Objectives and Activities

The project aims to enhance the food security of 106,760 vulnerable farming households and to mitigate the effects of soaring food prices through the provision of improved seeds varieties and technical training to farmers in 211 food insecure Village Development Committees of 10 districts in Nepal .

Since mid 2009, FAO has distributed 2,130 tonnes of seeds and 1,920 tonnes of fertilizers to improve food production over three consecutive cropping seasons. In addition to this, 13,851 goats and piglets, together with animal shed materials and veterinary kits, have been distributed to the most vulnerable landless beneficiaries. FAO's training programme has provided instructions on good agricultural practices for rice, potato and vegetable farming and better goat and pig rearing to more than 68,000 farmers through Farmers Field Schools (FFS), cascade training, farmer to farmers' training and demonstration plots.

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Farmer households in Jumla

Beneficiaries

The project's goal is to immediately improve the food security and livelihoods of the 32 percent poorest farmers in ten districts of Nepal. The crop sector of this project targets 103,111 farming families. It consists of 11 percent female-headed families and 33 percent Dalits and indigenous ethnic groups with an average land size not exceeding 0.75 hectares. Similarly, the livestock sector addresses the needs of 3,469 landless families. Livestock beneficiaries consist of 24 percent female-headed families and 68 percent Dalits and indigenous ethnic groups.

Achievements to date

Improve access to quality agricultural inputs to the poor

Prior to the project intervention, the extremely low seed replacement rate (about 6%), combined with the low adoption of improved seeds by farmers had resulted in a significant deterioration of seed quality, which in turn had led to low crop production and productivity. While agricultural production in Nepal is concentrated in the Terai region, the availability of crop varieties adapted for mid and hilly areas was very limited. With transportation means limited to mules and porters, or helicopters and airplanes when road access was not available (frequently blocked by landslides), distribution of agricultural inputs to the remote areas has been, and remains a challenge. Despite those limitations, the project has managed to provide essential planting inputs in a timely manner to the neediest farming households over a wide geographic area, from the Terai plains to the remote high-hill areas of Nepal.

Provide alternative livelihood for landless farmers

Community members owning very marginal, or no land, are among the poorest and most vulnerable in Nepal. Such farmers are more seriously affected by soaring food prices and a different approach is needed to address the food insecurity faced by them. In this context, livestock has played a crucial role for the farming system, particularly in the mid-hill and low-hill areas where natural resources provide plenty of pasture lands and good prospects for livestock production. The project has successfully procured quality breed goats and pigs appropriate for each particular agro-ecological zone. Live animals were de-wormed, vaccinated and tagged before being handed over to the beneficiaries who had already built their animal shed with materials provided by the project. Beneficiaries, in particular those from very remote areas, sometimes had to walk for two or three days to bring the animals back to their home. The project also organized the vaccination of more than 8,000 animals to prevent outbreaks of Peste des Petits Ruminants (PPR) for goats, swine fever and food and mouth disease (FMD) for pigs. Finally, the project has initiated the formation of livestock groups in 4 target districts and their registration with the District Livestock Service office (DLSO). Each group has been equipped with veterinary kits that can support animal health for at least one year.

Improve technical capacity of farmers and extension workers

Capacity building has been an important component of the project considering that it guarantees a lasting impact and sustainability of the project interventions. In order to address the lack of agricultural extension services, particularly in the most remote areas of the country, FAO has trained almost 700 lead farmers and farmer facilitators to promote farmer-to-farmer trainings. With the help of lead farmers, demonstration plots have been established so as to build knowledge on practical and simple technology transfer in vegetable farming, true potato seed production, and the System of Rice Intensification (SRI). More than 300 government staff have also received training of trainers (ToT) training and refresher courses on various topics relevant to the project.

Farmers Field School in Baitadi

De-worming of goats in Shinduli

Short-term impact on food security

Despite the short implementation timeframe of the project, some visible impact on the food security of beneficiaries can already be noted. The productivity of maize and paddy has increased by 54 and 23 percent, respectively, thanks to the use of improved seed and the application of appropriate agricultural practices. As a result, household food availability has increased from 4.5 to 5.6 months per year. The target is to increase this period to 6.5 months per year by the end of the project. This should provide enough food to cover household needs, if not more, until the next harvest season.

The project is also promoting kitchen gardening to improve the dietary balance of beneficiaries and to support their household income generation. Increased diversity of cultivated vegetables will have an indirect impact on nutrition security. Since the start of the project, a 28 percent increase in the production of vegetables at household level has been observed. This has led to significant improvements in the nutritional quality of the diet from a factor of 3 to 3.5 (on a 7 scale index).

Mid-Term Impact on Agriculture Development

The FAO EUFF project has supported the capacity building of government staff, extension workers, farmer leaders and local implementing partners in order to promote the retention of technical knowledge locally and to contribute towards medium term development of agriculture in Nepal. In addition, by promoting the use of improved seeds with higher yields, compared to local seeds, the project has resulting benefits lasting well beyond the duration of the programme as more than 75 percent of farmers keep the seeds from their harvest for next planting season. This should result in a good yield for three-four years to come. New technologies, such as the production and utilization of compost and manure, mulching technology and integrated pest management have been improved and introduced to enhance productivity and reduce production costs. As a result, 84 percent of farmers benefiting from the project have improved their agricultural practices adopting a more sustainable use of resources.

The project has also introduced the System of Rice Intensification in 10 Village Development Committees (VDCs) through Farmers Field School (FFS) managed plots. 25 farmers from each district participated in the VDCS and the SRI was well accepted. Extremely good rice yields were achieved through implementation of this technique: between 6.0 and 8.4 tons per hectare or 48 – 153 percent increase in yield compared to the conventional farmers practice. The production cost of SRI was significantly lower than the conventional rice growing technology, resulting in higher net return for rice farmers at an average of 84 percent. Under the EUFF project alone, a yield increase of about 23 percent could also be achieved through the distribution of improved seed. Given the potential of yielding more than 7 tonnes per hectare, a 5-person farming household with small land holding of 0.15 Ha is able to feed its family for one year. The SRI is a very promising technology for Nepal and a wider adoption should be considered to address the issue of food insecurity in the country.

Planting of single rice seedling on the SRI plot (above) and harvesting in Kailali (below)

Way Forward

Promotion of the SRI and the True Potato Seed (TPS) Technology through the FFS approach has been well accepted by farmers and its introduction, scaling up and continuation in future interventions is strongly recommended by FAO. The project has identified several critical areas needing support in order to build upon the progress made so far and to alleviate the problem of food insecurity in Nepal over the longer-term. Strengthening of government policies for in-country seed production systems, support to seed multiplication programmes to improve farmers' access to quality seeds, adoption of new and promising technologies, improvement of extension services and rural infrastructure, and investment in agriculture should be the objectives of future interventions. Livestock assistance to landless farmers should also be continued to develop and diversify livelihood opportunities. Nepal, a country characterized by numerous marginalized groups and vulnerability to natural disasters, requires that special attention be given to disaster preparedness, adaptation to climate change, environment, gender and social inclusion in the design of future interventions.

A farmer showing the corn from FAO's seed in Bajhang