

# Vouchers and Agriculture in Afghanistan

**An innovative program helps farmers use vouchers to improve productivity in difficult conditions in northern Afghanistan.**

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**O**NE SNOWY MORNING LAST December, Haji Kamal stood in a queue of farmers outside a low-slung, mortar and stucco building in Sar-e-Pul, a remote province in north Afghanistan.

His weathered face reflected some sixty years of working the country's most inhospitable terrain. Recently, conditions had been unusually testing: the region had suffered almost three years of severe drought.

Now the farmers' outlook was hopeful. The snow, they agreed, was a blessing. And at the end of the queue were 50-kilo bags of seed and fertilizer that would enable Kamal and his neighbors to plant full fields at the onset of their growing season.

The supplies were part of the \$33 million Afghan Vouchers for Increased Productive Agriculture (AVIPA) program, funded by USAID and the British Department for International Development (DFID), and implemented by International Relief and Development (IRD).

Between November 2008 and January 2009, AVIPA distributed 15,000 tons of seed and fertilizer to 150,000 farmers in Sar-e-Pul and eight other provinces.

A \$27 million second phase has moved AVIPA into five more provinces, reaching an additional 100,000 farmers. Of the \$60 million total, \$50 million came from USAID. In terms of both dollars spent and farmers reached, AVIPA is believed to be among the largest agricultural support project ever funded by USAID.

Collaborating with IRD in the first

phase were CARE, the Co-ordination of Afghan Assistance (CHA), and the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR). Consultants from Land 'O Lakes quality-tested seed.

"We wanted organizations that really understood the context, could face the logistical challenge and had a sound history of providing aid in the region," said IRD emergency relief officer Yvette Gonzalez-Sharma.

The program's focus is northern Afghanistan. The region is home to an estimated 10.5 million people, about one-third of the nation's population. Because of the eastern flank of the Hindu Kush Mountains, which bisects the country, it is largely cut off from population centers such as Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad.

AVIPA's priority, said Gonzalez-Sharma, is "regions that are hard to get to. It's

farmers who have been long ignored."

For these farmers, the drought has not only forbidden commercial farming, but made burdensome the task of feeding one's family. "I have some crops and livestock, and that's how I feed them," Kamal, an ethnic Tajik, explained, his piercing, deep-set, gray-blue eyes conveying equal measures of weariness and stubbornness. Yet recent hardships had compromised their means. Kamal said that the previous winter he and his family had to sell off some of their livestock to survive.

Their seed stores have also diminished. With the land barren, the region's farmers have had to eat their seed to stay alive, leaving nothing to sow. "Our harvest has not paid off in two or three years," he said. "Now I am in need of good seeds."

Entering the distribution office, Kamal presented his identity card and AVIPA voucher, inked his right thumb, made a print on the registry and handed the distributors a small co-payment of 1350 Afghanis (US \$27), about 15 percent of the value of the supplies. These co-payments are meant to encourage market-based distribution; AVIPA is designed to support, not replace, existing agriculture supply networks. ▶



*Afghan farmers turn in seed and fertilizer vouchers through a U.S. program that seeks to replace poppy with legal crops.*

Kamal walked around the side of the building and loaded onto the backs of his two mules two 50-kilogram bags: one white, filled with wheat seed, and the other purple, containing fertilizer. He then steered the animals onto the unpaved road leading to his village, Indiska, six miles away, leading them along the bare-dirt tracks made by trucks in the new-fallen snow.

Each 50-kilo bag of seed engineered for rain-fed fields like those in Sar-e-Pul can yield 500 kilos of wheat, enough to feed a large family for an entire year. Seed for irrigated fields is more prolific, yielding twice as much wheat.

AVIPA was conceived in early 2008 by USAID, DFID and the Afghanistan Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock. IRD—a ten-year-old non-profit NGO with extensive experience in Afghan infrastructure projects, as well as sustainable food and agriculture projects in Indonesia, Lebanon and elsewhere—was chosen to administer it in September 2008. While opium farming is generally less common in northern Afghanistan than in the south, any such activity would make a farmer ineligible for the program.

Voucher distribution began in November 2008, with Sar-e-Pul among the first regions served.

Drought was only one of several factors conspiring against Sar-e-Pul's farmers. Another was local violence. Though hardly at its center, the province has been affected by the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan.

Naeem Cherik, also redeeming a voucher that snowy day, has twice been shot by soldiers attempting to seize his property: once in 2004, and then again in 2006. One of the gun-

shots pierced his right shoulder blade, resulting in nerve damage and partial loss of use of his right hand.

The conflict has also compromised seed supply, disrupting its normal routes from Pakistan through the nation's eastern frontier.

Another complication has been a worldwide increase in the price of wheat seed. By mid-2007, when prices began to spike, the limited amounts of seed that made it to the area was prohibitively expensive for most farmers.

AVIPA's context is food security, but its impact extends beyond the farmer's baseline family needs. In abating hunger and poverty, it hopes to keep people from more desperate survival measures to which some rural families have resorted. "The young boys do not have to join insurgents," said Gonzalez-Sharma. "Young women do not have to be trafficked or sold. These families don't have to put themselves in unnecessary danger to earn income."

By mid-January 2009 nearly 100 percent of the original vouchers had been redeemed. By that time, AVIPA's second phase was well underway, with over 90 percent of its vouchers redeemed.

AVIPA depots now number 248, many of them in places where no such storehouses previously existed. They form the cornerstone of an ongoing supply network for agriculture in the region.

"This is infrastructure in the strongest sense, as important as buildings or roads," said Gonzalez-Sharma. "It's a distribution system that can be used again and again." **MD**

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