

Story 2

Harvesting Prosperity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Promoting Agricultural Technologies through Mobile Communication

Global and local agriculture sectors are being severely impacted by the current COVID-19 health emergency. In Pakistan, the ongoing pandemic has brought forth challenges for all agriculture sector stakeholders including farmers, producers, agribusinesses, developmental partners, public sector actors, and agricultural technology manufacturers. There is immense pressure on the agriculture sector to ensure continuity of food production in addition to the economic strain on farmers and supply chain actors. Small farmers residing in rural areas especially lack awareness related to health, hygiene and safety measures and social distancing rules. While it is difficult to assess the overall impact of this emergency on Pakistan's agriculture sector, some dire implications and economic losses are expected. The pandemic threatens the economic livelihoods of the most marginalized – Pakistan's small rural farmers who depend on agriculture and market access. Therefore, ensuring sustainability of food systems is as critical as supporting small farmers on the front lines and helping them mitigate their losses to counter the pandemic.

The four-year USAID Pakistan Agriculture Technology Transfer Activity (PATTA) has coordinated action to respond to the COVID-19 crisis in partnership with Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by contributing towards the safekeeping of the local agriculture sector through effective digital communication strategies, mobile advisory services, and awareness-raising campaigns targeted towards small farmers. The project has developed a scaled-up response which complements its overall program objectives through continued support for agricultural technology companies to cater to small farmers' needs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. PATTA recently signed an agreement with the Department of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to collaboratively launch tele-farming advisory services to improve farmer's accessibility to critical information on agricultural technologies, increase their resilience, and uplift morale at this fragile time. In fact, the provincial agriculture department has been a key ally of USAID in its mission to enhance food security and generate agriculture sector employment opportunities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa since November 2018.

This special tele-farming initiative is PATTA and Bureau of Agriculture Information, Department of Agriculture Extension Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's collective response to tackle the current COVID-19 situation by increasing awareness of safe usage of the latest agricultural technologies and products among small farmers. ***"We are running the Tele-Agriculture Farming System in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to provide vital advisory services through Information Communication Technology (ICT) to improve farmer's accessibility to timely and relevant information on agricultural technologies. We hope to increase agricultural productivity and enhance farmers' ability for improved crisis preparedness in the COVID-19 context,"*** explains Dr. Muhammad Israr, Secretary Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Cooperative Department, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The tele-farming initiative will support PATTA's 37 private sector agribusinesses partners from across Pakistan to effectively market and promote their agricultural technologies and products to farming communities. Since it is not possible to organize agricultural technology demonstrations in the field, PATTA and Agriculture Department have jointly pledged to continue supporting farmers through ICTs. PATTA will deliver these advisory services to 50,000 farmers via 100,000 SMS and robocalls to farmers across the province including Newly Merged Districts (NMDs). The project is encouraging agricultural

innovation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by accelerating the dissemination of modern agricultural practices and technologies and creating opportunities for wide-scale adoption in collaboration with the private sector. These improvements in agricultural productivity are essential for ensuring food security especially in low-income areas and farming communities of the region. **“We value PATTA’s efforts for promoting the safe usage of agriculture technologies and creating farmers’ linkages with private sector agricultural technology companies. We are also encouraging farmers and agribusinesses to embrace digital technologies and mobile applications to tackle the pandemic,”** adds Dr. Muhammad Israr, Secretary Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Cooperative Department, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The impacts of tele-farming will outlast PATTA’s project lifecycle since it has enabled its agricultural technology partners to digitally connect with small farmers and discover new ways to adopt social distancing rules and encourage farmers’ adoption of the latest agricultural tools and practices. PATTA’s agribusiness partners also realize its time to harness the power of digital media to enable small farmers’ access to information on agricultural technology. **“There is an urgent need to increase mechanization because we have to ensure less involvement of labor in the agricultural fields. We must figure out how to transform our processes in the COVID-19 emergency. The only plausible solution is increased adoption of agricultural machinery to save time and reduce dependency on labor-intensive manual tasks,”** says Osama Shahid, Marketing Director of PATTA’s agribusiness partner Soby Ag Engineering.

Mobile communication can change the way farmers and agriculturalists access information for improved productivity and innovation. Therefore, USAID PATTA is leveraging the power of mobile-based communication to provide its agribusiness partners a dynamic digital space to continue creating awareness through customized messages to small farmers. **“We have strengthened the private sector’s linkages with public sector to collectively support all farmers and create inclusiveness, as the COVID-19 has isolated farmers. PATTA is relaying critical information to small farmers and bridging the communication gap because our vision is to employ digital technologies for agricultural innovation and development,”** explains Dr. Faheem Abbasi, Chief of Party USAID PATTA. In the long run PATTA expects to build farmers’ resilience by supporting them in adjusting to and applying enhanced health and safety measures through adoption of mechanized farm processes, which can ultimately lessen the dependence on labor and slow the COVID-19 spread in agricultural fields.