



What remains after exit? Not too much – lessons from intervening in northern Afghanistan’s livestock and dairy sectors

Findings from a low-cost ex-post review

Introduction

Projects using the market systems development (MSD) approach claim that their most successful interventions create impact for target groups that extends beyond the life of the project. Yet, such claims are rarely validated. Very few ex-post studies have been commissioned, and this gap represents an oversight.

In response, the [ILO’s Systems Change Initiative](#) reopened its engagement in Afghanistan’s carpet, livestock and dairy sectors from 2018 to 2021¹. It reviewed two ILO sister projects: (i) **Road to Jobs (R2J)** funded by Sweden (2015-2020); and (ii) its successor **Road to Decent Jobs for All Afghans (R2DJ4ALL)** funded by the United States of America (2020-2022).

While the [evaluation of the intervention in the carpet sector](#) reveals clear indication of sustained system-level outputs and outcomes, a rapid review of the legacies of the livestock and dairy interventions finds little of substance remains intact for further assessment. This short brief examines why earlier successes did not endure, what lessons can be drawn from key decisions made at the time, and considers whether different actions may have been pursued during the projects’ lifetimes.

► Livestock: Para-vet services

The intervention in the livestock sector aimed to strengthen the provision of basic animal health services in rural areas through the further training of self-employed community-based para-vets in partnership with the Afghan Veterinary Association (AVA). While the intervention addressed a critical challenge: the relative low incidence of satisfactory and

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trusted para-vet services operating across the northern region, the benefits to the project's target populations remained short-lived. Several factors explain the absence of any lasting impact:

► Political instability

- The regime change in 2021 triggered widespread emigration, including nearly all para-vets trained by AVA. Those that remained were effectively cut off from a functioning professional network and now operated, if at all, without reliable access to supplies and other supporting services.

► Limited systemic design and sustainability planning

- By arranging a one-off, cost-subsidised upskilling training for para-vets, the intervention departed significantly from the MSD approach. A more MSD-aligned intervention strategy may have focused on supporting AVA, or other qualified and interested parties, to test and adapt a cost-recovery (semi-commercial) or commercial training offer; for example, requesting contributory fees from para-vets and/or local farming communities.
- The project may also have trialled different courses, such as entry-level training for new para-vets (skilling), development trainings for practising para-vets (upskilling), and targeted modules on emerging risks or newly available treatments (reskilling). In the absence of a viable business model for sustained upskilling, but also due to other difficulties in the pipeline for entry-level or new para-vets, AVA was not well-positioned to continue to offer similar services after the project's closure.
- Incentives for stakeholders to behave differently were low as other donor-funded projects had been supporting para-vets directly.

► Missing functions

- The intervention failed to consider functions beyond para-vet upskilling, such as those that may have helped service users to better assess the expertise and reliability of the para-vets operating in their communities. For instance, professional accreditation or other quality assurance mechanisms may have allowed higher-calibre para-vets to distinguish and market themselves. Similarly, actions that could have supported higher-calibre para-vets to share their knowledge and promote good practices more widely (potentially extending to new geographies) were not considered.

► Dairy: Milk aggregation and transportation

The intervention in the dairy sector supported two dairy processing companies to introduce new regimes for milk collection. As a result, company representatives took greater responsibility for aggregating, chilling and recording milk delivered to converted shop premises ("collection hubs") in different peri-urban locations. From there, the collected milk was transported to processing facilities. This reduced spoilage and enabled farmers to receive higher prices by supplying more directly into formal channels.

However, little of the physical, institutional and social infrastructure remains today, with several inter-related factors contributing to its disappearance:

► Environmental shocks

- Target districts experienced a multi-year drought that severely undermined the viability of agriculture in the area, impacting water availability, grazing and animal fodder. With natural pastureland depleted, the

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sustainability of micro and small-scale dairy farming as a secondary source of income was significantly undermined. It is unclear whether complementary project investments into building adaptive capacities and increasing farmers' climate resilience would have made a substantial difference. However, the absence of such measures, particularly as severe climate events become more frequent, would likely now be considered an oversight.

► Demographic shifts

- Many cattle-owning families in the project's former target districts have exited the sector and relocated to nearby urban areas in search of new livelihood opportunities.
- These exits combined with the wider depopulation of the agricultural labour base eroded milk supply. As volumes declined, milk collection hubs became less viable, and the opportunity for families to earn higher prices from selling into processors' value chains evaporated.

► Disintegration of extension services

- The emigration of agri-extension and animal health workers left cattle farmers without key supporting services necessary for maintaining animal productivity. This heightened farmers' vulnerability and likely accelerated exits and the abandonment of micro and small-scale dairy farming.

► Market distortion

- The influx of low-cost dairy products from neighbouring countries, particularly Iran, has impacted sales and undermined the competitiveness of local and regional dairy companies. Several dairy processing companies are now operating significantly below capacity and are struggling to survive.

Amidst this broader decline, there have been isolated signs of the "collection hub" innovation being used elsewhere. Notably, one of the two former partner companies uses milk collection hubs for aggregating community-supplied milk in nearby districts (not previously targeted by the project) where some smallholder dairy sector activity remains viable.