

Final Evaluation Report: Resilient Agriculture and Livelihoods Initiative for Socio-economic Empowerment (REALISE) Project – Phase I and II

“Several women in our village [Raql village] learned tailoring skills from ActionAid. They are engaged in income-generating activities and earn 500 AFN a month on average. This is not a lot but previously they could not work due to family restrictions and lack of skills and had no income of their own”.

1-year old female, Raql village, Yakawlang district, Bamyan province.



Yakawlang district of Bamyan province during the winter season

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AAA	ActionAid Afghanistan
AACRS	Australia Afghanistan Community Resilience Scheme
ACE	Afghanistan Centre for Excellence
AKDN	Aga Khan Development Network
AKF	Aga Khan Foundation
AOG	Armed Opposition Groups
ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Force
ANPDF	Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework
ARM	Consulting Afghan Australian Research and Management Consulting
CBO	Community Based Organization
CDC	Community Development Council
CRSA	Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture
CSI	Coping Strategy Index
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DAIL	(District) Department of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock
DDA	District Development Council
DESA	Department of Economic and Social Affairs
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DoE	Directorate of Education
DoLSA	Directorate of Labour and Social Affairs
DoWA	Department of Women's Affairs Empowerment
DRRD	Directorate of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
EVAW	Elimination of Violence against Women
FSN	Food Security Network
GDP	Gross Domestic Production
HRBA	Human Rights-Based Approach
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
KII	Key Informant Interview
LSO	Labour Spring Organization
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MAIL	Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock
MoPH	Ministry of Public Health
MoLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
MRRD	Ministry of Rehabilitation and Rural Development
NRM	Natural Resource Management
ODK	Open Data Kit
OECD	The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHW	Organisation of Human Welfare
PAC-O	People's Action for Change
PWD	People with Disability
RC	Reflect Circles
REALISE	Resilient Agriculture and Livelihoods Initiative for Socio-Economic
SHG	Self Help Groups
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Scientists
ToC	Theory of Change
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
WRC	Women Resource Centre

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In collaboration with ActionAid Afghanistan (AAA), Afghan Australian Research and Management Consulting (ARM Consulting) carried out an independent final evaluation of the Resilient Agriculture and Livelihoods Initiative for Socio-economic Empowerment (REALISE) Project. The evaluation was conducted between February and April 2021, in line with the approved inception report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2021, ActionAid Afghanistan commissioned Afghan Australian Research and Management Consulting (ARM Consulting) to conduct an independent final evaluation of the Resilient Agriculture and Livelihoods Initiatives for Socio-economic Empowerment (REALISE) project. REALISE is a seven-year project, funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Government of Australia under the Australia Afghanistan Community Resilience Scheme (AACRS), and implemented by ActionAid Afghanistan, Organization for Human Welfare (OHW), and Labour Spring Organization (LSO) in partnership with ActionAid Australia. The Scheme aims to improve the livelihoods and resilience of rural Afghan communities.

REALISE has been implemented in two separate phases (the Foundation Phase from June 2014 to August 2018, and the Extension Phase from September 2018 to June 2021). In the foundation phase, the project worked in 97 villages with 5,909 households in the three provinces of Balkh, Bamyan, and Jawzjan. In the Extension Phase, it has worked in 68 villages in Balkh and Bamyan provinces, targeting 6,820 households¹. The overall goal of the Extension phase has been to sustain the results of phase one in Balkh and Bamyan provinces. Jawzjan province was dropped from the Extension Phase due to a deteriorating security situation.

The methodology adopted for the evaluation comprises a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The quantitative data was collected through questionnaire-based structured interviews with 615 individuals (352 women; 263 men) from the targeted households. The qualitative data was gathered through a document review as well as key informant interviews (KIIs), Outcome Harvesting Workshops, and field observations. The evaluation involved 75 interviews (32 women; 43 men) with key informants including the project implementation team, government officials, direct project beneficiaries, private sector actors, community leaders, and others. Besides KIIs, 21 Outcome Harvesting Workshops were conducted, 11 in Bamyan and 10 in Balkh. 255 individuals participated in the workshops, 162 women and 93 men. In total, 945 persons were consulted for the evaluation.

The evaluation unveils the following key findings on the project's performance:

- 1. Target groups better prepared to deal with crisis:** The target groups have become more resilient at the individual and household levels compared to the start of the project. A majority of the respondents agree (35%) or partially agree (50%) that if a crisis happens, their households are better prepared to continue feeding their family members. Besides that, a majority of the respondents (39% agree; 47% somewhat agree) reported the ability to bounce back within six months if they faced a crisis. On the other hand, relatively fewer individuals (22% agree; 46% somewhat agree) can withhold crisis if it continued over six months. In terms of sex, men are relatively more resilient to withstand or adapt to a crisis than women. Nevertheless, women's resilience has substantially improved since the start of the project as they become more self-aware about their rights, entitlement, and their skills and abilities. Women also reported more power and control over how to use their resources. The increased resilience is attributable to enhanced agricultural productivity, an increase in livestock production, and the collective social structure of Afghanistan.
- 2. Adoption of new agricultural techniques by the targeted households improved:** 41% of the respondents have adopted modern agricultural production practices, while 59% stated that they have not. Out of the farmers who have adopted modern practices, 31% are using the drip irrigation system, with which none were familiar at the start of the project. In addition, 32% reported using the line cultivation method, higher than the baseline (25%). Besides, 29% of the farmers have used drought-resistant crops, while 34% were involved in the production of improved seeds. The use of the drip irrigation

1. Based on the M&E records of the project

system, line cultivation, and improved varieties of crops and seeds are somewhat notable, the application of greenhouse and laser levelling techniques is reportedly on the lower end at 11% and seven percent, respectively. About 93% of the respondents who have used the practices indicated an improvement in agricultural production because of adopting modern agricultural practices. The qualitative data also show that there is enhanced agriculture productivity and efficiency because of the application of improved practices, thus contributing to improved food and income security in the target areas. 80% of the targeted individuals practicing the updated agriculture techniques learned them from ActionAid.

3. Crop and vegetable yield of the households engaged in the programme increased:

The average reported crop yield for wheat stands at 3,323 kilograms per hectare among the wheat-cultivating households, 20% increase than the average baseline yield (2,772 kilograms per hectare). In addition, among households engaged in kitchen gardening, the average yield for vegetables is 3,163 kilograms per hectare, a 33% increment over the baseline value. For commercial vegetables, the average yield is 3,857 kilograms per hectare, 62% higher than the baseline value (2,382 kilograms per hectare). Cotton production stood at 2,371 kilograms per hectare at the start of the project, but the evaluation found 1,917 kilograms per hectare, exhibiting a 19% decline. The baseline report underscores that the average yield for cotton is implausibly higher than the national average yield for cotton (1,162 kilograms) in Afghanistan in 2013. While there is a decline against the baseline value, but compared to the 2013 national average yield, there is a 65% increase in cotton production, a commendable accomplishment for the REALISE project. The increase in crop and vegetable yield is attributable to the use of improved agricultural practices, implementation of flood protection measures, better access to water irrigation as a result of the small-scale irrigation measures implemented by the project, distribution and multiplication of improved seed, and the training delivered to the farmers.

4. Adoption of new livestock techniques by the targeted households:

A majority of the livestock owners reportedly have vaccinated their livestock (77%), while about a quarter (23%) stated that they had not vaccinated their livestock. The baseline study shows that 62% of the surveyed households have used vaccination as a livestock technique, a 15% increment over the baseline. Furthermore, less than half the livestock-owners (48%) reported livestock disease monitoring, higher than the start of the project (24%). More than half of the respondents (59%) indicated the use of improved feeding techniques, higher than the baseline value (38%). The adoption of new livestock techniques has dropped the loss of livestock and indirectly contributed to increased dairy and livestock production. These practices have also positively impacted women in two major ways: reduction in contagious diseases such as brucellosis to women, and women spending less time on looking after livestock as vaccination and disease monitoring have improved livestock health. The increase in the use of modern practices is attributable to the livestock training provided by the project and the establishment of veterinary clinics in the target areas.

5. Households engaged in the project increased their livestock production:

The average number of cows owned by the households stands at 2.6, which is slightly higher than the baseline (two). This shows a 30% increment in cow ownership compared to the start of the project. The most notable increase is witnessable in sheep-ownership (13 per household), 44% higher than the baseline. There is also a 16% increase in the number of goats possessed by the targeted households as well as a significant 40% increment in donkey-ownership. Change in livestock is indirectly attributable to the REALISE project. Qualitative data reveal that the increase in livestock ownership is mainly due to a decline in animal mortality and an increase in household income from agriculture, which is invested by the households in livestock as an income diversification strategy.

- 6. Honey production of the households engaged in the programme enhanced:** Seven percent of the surveyed households are engaged in beekeeping and honey production. The baseline value for households involved in honey production is unavailable, which makes it impossible to quantitatively measure a change in households producing honey. The data further show that the honey-producing households have three hives on average with an annual average production of 11.2 kilograms per household, a majority of which (78%) is sold in the market while 21% is consumed domestically by the households, followed by one percent given as charity. The consumption of honey directly contributes to the households' food and nutrition security and improvement in the health of the family members. The sale of honey has contributed to women's social and economic engagement. It is worth mentioning that the REALISE project has established and supported a bee-keeping association run by women in Bamyán province.
- 7. Access to market remains restricted:** Most of the vegetable products are sold at either village level (nine percent), the local market (13%), or the district market (71%). The residual seven percent sell in the provincial and national markets. A similar trend can be witnessed in the wheat and fruit value chains. Due to the absence of baseline data, the evaluation could not quantify the change in target groups' accessibility to markets. Overall, the project efforts related to market linkages have not yielded the desired results due to a wide range of reasons including long distance to markets, inadequate economies of scale, sub-standard packaging, and low literacy.
- 8. Awareness of women on food nutrition and dietary considerations improved:** An absolute majority of women (97%) have knowledge about nutritious food requirements of household members such as children, elderly, pregnant women, and others. The awareness and training imparted by ActionAid have helped to overcome misconceptions regarding food nutrition and dietary considerations. For instance, it was believed that pregnant women should not do their routine activities and rather sleep and relax all the time. But as a result of enhanced awareness, pregnant women are now encouraged to continue their routine activities, which has helped women to better deal with pregnancies than in the past. The evaluation further indicates that 75% of the households prepare diversified food items for meals, a positive change in terms of dietary considerations, which contributed to improved nutrition security. As a result of improved women's awareness, there is improvement in the health conditions of children and a reported decline in children's malnutrition. The increased awareness of women is attributable to the work of the Food Security Networks (FSN) established by the REALISE project in all of the targeted villages.
- 9. Food and nutritional security of the households engaged in the programme increased:** When asked how many meals they eat per day on an average basis, an absolute majority of the respondents (87%) responded with three meals. 10% reported the consumption of two meals a day, and only three percent reported one meal a day. From the point of view of food security, it is a positive sign that most of the targeted households have access to three meals in a day. The baseline report does not contain data on the number of meals per day, though; it just states that around 20% of the households had come across a situation when there was no food in the households. The improved food and nutritional security are due to access to improved seeds resulting in higher and more sustainable yield, improved knowledge of agriculture and livestock practices, and availability of agriculture-related training. The evaluation further indicates that as a result of the increased food and nutritional security, community members, especially women and children, have become healthier as well as a decline in violence against women. Food insecurity was a major reason for conflicts between women and men in their families, and at times resulted in violence against women by their intimate partner. According to female respondents, the behavior of their male household members, especially the intimate partner, has positively changed due to improved food and nutrition security.

- 10. Income sources of the targeted households remain inadequately diversified:** Income diversification is a crucial risk management strategy for rural population, an absolute majority of whom are dependent on agriculture (81%) and livestock (65%) for income generation. These income sources are vulnerable to natural disasters, putting the food security and livelihood of the households at risk. At the start of the project, the average number of income sources per household was three, and the evaluation found the same. The lack of a tangible improvement in the diversification of sources of household income is attributable to two major reasons: Increased focus on farming due to enhanced agricultural productivity and decline in daily wage and formal jobs due to COVID-19.
- 11. Income security of the targeted households increased:** The data suggest that there has been an improvement in the income of the target groups. The average monthly household income stands at 258 USD (19,878 AFN). The baseline report shows that 88% of the target groups were living in pervasive poverty (1.25 USD per day), while the final evaluation reveals that 56% of the target groups fall in pervasive poverty, a 32% reduction. It is imperative to consider that the project has been implemented in a highly fragile context. The national economy has become more fragile and the country has seen a sharp reduction in Gross Domestic Production (GDP) growth since 2013. Overall, the evaluation concludes that the income security of the targeted households has increased compared to the beginning of the project. Income security has contributed to strengthening the food security of the households and resulted in higher resilience against shocks.
- 12. The economic asset base of the targeted households expanded:** Around 86% of the households stated that they had land, indicative of a 20% improvement than the baseline (66%). On average, each household possesses 6.7 Jeribs of land, higher than the baseline (five Jeribs). The increase in land ownership is related to the tendency among the targeted households to invest their surplus income in purchasing land. Land is a vital safety net for rural households, which predominately rely on farming for income generation. The increase in land ownership is a sign of improved food and income security.
- 13. Skills of individuals engaged in the programme increased, although, women's business start-ups remain limited:** As a result of the training delivered by the project, there is an improvement in the employability and business skills of the target groups compared to the start of the project. The improvement in women's skills is higher compared to men. Women also reported increased self-confidence to become independent due to enhanced skillsets. While the skills of women have increased, an absolute majority (76%) of them have not established business start-ups. This is mainly due to lack of capital, difficulty in accessing credit, limited understanding of the market actors, household responsibilities, conservative socio-cultural context, and a pessimistic macroeconomic outlook of the national economy characterized by high unemployment and low confidence to invest.
- 14. Social and economic engagement of women targeted by the project enhanced:** Almost two-thirds (63%) of the respondents agree with the statement that women have more skills to earn an income than before this project; 33% somewhat agree with the statement. Just five percent of the respondents disagreed with the notion that women were more skillful now to earn an income. Similarly, more than half of the survey respondents (58%) agree that women have more income than before this project followed by 34% who somewhat agree, and eight percent disagreeing. Moreover, 70% of the consulted individuals agree that women have increased mobility and respect in families than before the project, while 26% somewhat agree and four percent disagree. Compared to the start of the project, women exhibited higher self-confidence, awareness of their rights, food and nutrition security, hygiene, and other similar topics. Additionally, community women have a more robust role in household and community level decision-making than at the

beginning of the project. The increase in women's social and economic participation is vital given the substantial gender gap in Afghanistan.

The evaluation also examined and rated the project under the Development Assistance Criteria (DAC) criteria of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) namely relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability². On relevance and impact, the evaluation rated the performance of the project as **Satisfactory**³, while on efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability it is assessed as **Somewhat Satisfactory**⁴. The project has not received any **unsatisfactory**⁵ ratings on any of the criteria. The evaluation concludes that the REALISE project has made notable progress towards its intended goal and objectives. The targeted households are more resilient against shocks due to improved food and nutrition security. Based on consultations with the project stakeholders, the evaluation entails the following recommendations.

1. The demonstration plots and certified seed production and multiplication have played an instrumental role in increasing crop yield. These activities have the potential to be replicated at a larger scale, especially in communities not targeted by REALISE.
2. The target communities are facing water scarcity. It is therefore vital to focus on small-scale irrigation projects. The project did implement irrigation projects, but there is a need to increase these projects given the demand in the target areas.
3. The project needs to assist in linking the target producers and associations with the major national and provincial markets to improve their income.
4. Income diversification is key to a sustainable livelihood. ActionAid should consider additional focus on non-agricultural value chains in the future.
5. The SHG members need to be encouraged to use the loans they obtain from the groups for income-generating activities rather than for personal and household consumption. SHGs also have the potential to serve as a community-level referral mechanism for vulnerable individuals, especially women to service providers.
6. The M&E system at ActionAid has witnessed improvement in recent times, but the implementing partners' M&E needs an overhaul, as the current system is not sufficient to steer the implementation of a high-quality project.

2. The OECD/DAC criteria consisting of relevant, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability, have been used widely by development agencies for evaluating development projects since 1991. <http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/dacriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm>

3. Area where the quantum of findings is substantial enough to partially put the project's activities and gains at risk.

4. Area where the quantum of findings is of low substantiality and may not endanger the activities and gains of the project at risk

5. Area where the quantum of findings is substantial enough to put the project's activities and gains at considerable risk.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On 25th January 2021, ActionAid Afghanistan commissioned ARM Consulting to undertake the final evaluation of the Resilient Agriculture and Livelihoods Initiative for Socio-economic Empowerment (REALISE) project. REALISE is a seven-year project, funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Government of Australia under the Australia Afghanistan Community Resilience Scheme (AACRS), and implemented by ActionAid Afghanistan in partnership with ActionAid Australia. The Scheme aims to improve the livelihoods and resilience of rural Afghan communities.

The final evaluation employed a participatory approach involving extensive consultations with the project stakeholders including women and men beneficiaries, community representatives, influential figures, implementing partners, and government representatives. The stakeholders were consulted through household survey questionnaires, key informants' interviews, field observations, outcome harvesting workshops, and sense-making workshops.

The evaluation report is comprised of four chapters. Chapter 1 describes the project background and the purpose and scope of the evaluation. Chapter 2 presents the evaluation methodology while chapter 3 outlines the key findings from the evaluation. The last chapter of the report concludes the evaluation and presents a set of recommendations for future programming to ActionAid Afghanistan and other project stakeholders.

1.1 Project Background

As stated above, REALISE is a seven-year project, implemented under the AACRS, a DFAT-funded rural development program, commenced in 2014 to improve the livelihoods and resilience of rural communities in Afghanistan. The AACRS has worked in partnership with DFAT, and the Government of Afghanistan. The implementing NGO partners of the scheme are ActionAid Afghanistan, Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), Oxfam, and World Vision. Care International was also engaged, but only in the initial phase of the program. AACRS has been supported by the Afghanistan Centre for Excellence (ACE), the scheme coordinator. The program has the following four core outcomes. The scheme also includes seven cross-cutting themes, namely: partnership, capacity development, good governance, gender inclusion, disability inclusion, pro-poor, and Do No Harm.

1. Improvement to agricultural production (and its logical contribution to food security, nutrition, and incomes);
2. Improvement in Natural Resource Management (NRM);
3. Improvement in access to markets, and;
4. Diversified livelihoods and their contribution to overall resilience, incomes, and dietary diversity.

REALISE has been implemented in two separate phases (the Foundation Phase from June 2014 to August 2018, and the Extension Phase from September 2018 to June 2021). The project worked in 97 villages with 5,909 households in the three provinces of Balkh, Bamyan, and Jawzjan. In the Extension Phase, it has worked in 68 villages in Balkh and Bamyan provinces, targeting 6,820 households⁶. The overall goal of the second 'Extension' phase of the project has been to sustain the results of phase one in Balkh and Bamyan provinces. Jawzjan province was dropped from the Extension Phase due to a deteriorating security situation.

The project contributes to the stated overall objective through three outcomes:

1. Outcome I: Increased food and nutritional security for vulnerable men, women, and children in participating households
2. Outcome II: An increased economic asset base for vulnerable women and men in participating households, and;
3. Outcome III: Participating groups of vulnerable women and men influencing decision-making, service provision, and policies affecting their food and livelihood security.

Under Outcome I, the key activities implemented include farmer field schools and demonstration plots, seed production, extension worker training, backyard gardening, poultry support, micro-irrigation, rangeland management, and livestock production. Training para-vets and food banks support were further added in the extension phase of the project. Key activities related to Outcome II include vocational training, associations and women entrepreneur development, small-scale infrastructure projects, Self-Help Groups (SHG), and working in value chains such as almond, dairy, cotton, honey, and potato association. Under Outcome III, the project has implemented several activities including Food Security Networks (FSN), Reflect Circles (RC), advocacy, literacy training, coordination with other NGOs, and training of partners.

In the Foundation Phase, ActionAid Afghanistan itself implemented the project in Bamyan, but in Balkh, the implementation was done jointly by ActionAid Afghanistan (Dawlatabad district) and OHW (Kaldar district). In the Extension Phase, ActionAid Afghanistan implemented it through national implementing partners: Organization for Human Welfare (OHW) in Balkh, and Labour Springing Organization (LSO) in Bamyan.

6. Based on the M&E records of the project

1.2 Purpose and Scope of Evaluation

The final evaluation has assessed the extent to which the REALISE project has accomplished or made progress toward its intended goal and objectives, as stated in the monitoring and evaluation framework, theory of change, and scheme level framework. The evaluation also documented best practices, lessons learned, and challenges encountered during the project implementation and the way the project adapted to emerging challenges and unforeseen events. The evaluation used the OECD's DAC criteria: relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, and impact. More specifically, the evaluation focused on the following key evaluation questions. For a detailed breakdown of the key evaluation questions listed below, please, refer to Annex I: Evaluation Framework.

- **Resilience**

- To what extent are people more resilient, are they able to withstand crises, adapt to worsening or new crises and transform power relationships and livelihoods with the Government and other stakeholders?
- Has increased access to economic assets improved women's and men's resilience?
- Have groups/collectives increased their economic assets?
- How have economic assets improved the resilience of women and men?
- Have women experienced individual empowerment?
- Have women experienced collective empowerment?
- Are groups mobilizing collectively to influence improved service provision and policy?
- Are groups representative of women and other marginalized groups?
- Are groups/collectives strong and will they be able to sustain in the future?
- To what extent did ActionAid's implementation model with two local partners prove to be effective in ensuring ongoing local capacity and support?
- To what extent was the program able to establish a sustained partnership with relevant government bodies?

- **Food Security**

- Are individuals and families more food secure?
- What difference does food security make in women's lives?

- **Effectiveness**

- Do the assumptions that underpin the TOC hold?
- What were the intended results?
- What was the role of the project in achieving the results?

- **Relevance**

- Was the way the project designed and implemented appropriate considering women's priorities and needs and the local context?
- To what extent was the technology appropriate?

- **Efficiency**

- To what extent was the program implemented effectively given the contextual challenges?

- **Sustainability**

- To what extent will the results be sustainable?

It is worth mentioning that the evaluation also assessed the unintended positive and negative effects of the project. Relevant recommendations have been drawn to inform the design and implementation modalities of similar interventions in the future. The evaluation has aimed to capture the cumulative results of phase I and phase II; wherever possible, comparisons have been made with the baseline conducted in 2016. Geographically, the evaluation took place in Bamyán and Balkh province, where the project was implemented during the second phase. More specifically, the evaluation was delimited to the districts of Yakawlang and Panjab in Bamyán and Kaldar and Dawlatabad districts in Balkh province.

CHAPTER TWO: EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents information on the evaluation framework, sampling, data collection methods, data cleaning and analysis, and sense-making workshops.



2.1 Evaluation Framework

During the inception phase, the External Consultant, in collaboration with ActionAid Afghanistan, ActionAid Australia, and ARM Consulting, developed an evaluation framework, outlining the scope of the evaluation. The evaluation framework has captured focus areas, comprising key evaluation questions and sub-questions and the data sources and methods to draw on during the exercise. The areas of focus provided a framework around which the evaluation tools were developed.

2.2 Sampling Strategy

After reviewing the relevant literature, the evaluation team determined the types of stakeholders to be consulted at different levels (national, provincial, district, village, and household). Based on the information shared by ActionAid Afghanistan, the evaluation primarily utilized a multi-stage random sampling technique for household surveys. Samples were drawn through the following formula where n is the desired sample size, z is the z -value yielding the desired degree of confidence, p is the estimate of the population proportion, and e is the absolute allowable size of the error.

$$n = z^2 (1-p) p/e^2$$

To calculate a statistically significant sample size, the evaluation team used a confidence level of 95%, a margin of error of four percent, response distribution of 50%, and the total number of households (9,967⁷) that have benefited from the project in Bamyan and Balkh provinces. In light of the stated parameters, the proposed sample size was 567. The sample size was proportionately distributed across all respondents' categories using a stratified proportionate sampling method. However, it is worth noting that for small target groups such as beneficiaries of demonstration plots, extension workers, and others, the sample size based on proportionate calculation was relatively smaller, and hence, statistically non-representative. To overcome this challenge, the evaluation team used an 'adjusted sample size' to increase the sample size for the beneficiaries of the smaller project components. Thus, the adjusted sample size for household surveys turned out to be 609. During the fieldwork, the evaluation team conducted 630 household-level surveys. Nonetheless, 15 interviews were dropped during the data cleaning phase due to quality concerns. Thus, the analysis is based on 615 structured interviews with the direct project beneficiaries.

In terms of gender disaggregation, out of 615 households, 352 of those households were consulted whose female member(s) benefited from the project activities. In other words, the evaluation team interviewed a female member of the household. This represents 57% of the total sample size. 263 such households were sampled whose male members benefited from the project. This constitutes 43% of the overall sample size. Comparing the planned sample size with the actual sample size, it is evident that the evaluation has engaged more women compared to men during the fieldwork. The evaluation team deliberately did this because the AACRAS program and the REALISE project substantially focus on women's empowerment. Overall, the proposed sample size for women and men is statistically representative of the target population in the Balkh and Bamyan provinces.

Table 1: Planned Versus Actual Sample Size by Sex

No	Sex	Planned Sample Size	Actual Sample Size	Variation
1.	Women	317	352	+35
2.	Men	292	263	-29
Total		609	615	+6

7. Based on terms of reference

The evaluation team planned to survey 305 households (HHs) in Bamyan province, representing 50% of the total sample size. The remaining 304 HHs (representing almost 50%) were surveyed in Balkh province. Although the evaluation followed this strategy, the team ultimately removed some data regarding Balkh due to data quality concerns at the data cleaning stage. Thus, the final dataset has 298 (49%) HHs from Balkh and 317 (51%) HHs from Bamyan province. Nonetheless, the stated sample is still highly representative of the target populations in both provinces. The fieldwork was conducted in all four target districts where the project has implemented interventions. At Bamyan, the fieldwork was conducted in Yakawlang (28%) and Panjab (23%) districts, while in Balkh; it was undertaken in Dawlatabad (28%) and Kaldar (21%) districts. The fieldwork was conducted in 58 villages, 28 in Bamyan and 30 in Balkh. This constitutes 85% of all villages targeted by the project in the stated provinces. It is worth stating that due to security concerns, the respondents were invited to Mazar-I-Sharif, the provincial capital, for interviews.

Table 2: Planned Versus Actual Sample Size by Province

No	Sex	Planned Sample Size	Actual Sample Size	Variation
1.	Bamyan	305	317	+12
2.	Balkh	304	298	-6
Total		609	615	+6

In terms of age, the survey respondents' average age is 37 years with significant variations between female and male respondents. The average age of women respondents stands at 33 years, while the average age for men respondents is 42 years. The youngest recorded age of the respondents was 18 years for 19 respondents, while the oldest respondent was an 82-year-old male in district Panjab of Bamyan province.

The education profile of the respondents shows that a significant portion (40%) of them have no education, while less than one-fifth (19%) marked homeschooling/tutoring as their education level. This implies that about 59% of the respondents do not have formal education. Out of the rest of the respondents, about 10% of the respondents have primary education (grade: 1-6), while those with secondary (7-9) and high school education (10-12) stand at eight percent, and 14%, respectively. Five percent of the respondents are educated to grade 14, while the remaining five percent have university-level education. There are marked gender-based differences in educational attainment. Compared to men, a significant proportion of women are uneducated. For instance, almost half of the women (49%) are illiterate, which is significantly higher than 29% for men. Similarly, more women (23%) are homeschooled/tutored than men (13%). 17% of men have primary education, which is over three times higher than four percent for women. Likewise, more men (14%) have secondary education compared to merely four percent of women. Similarly, more men have completed high school education (16%) than women (12%) have. The data also unveiled that 11% of the consulted men have grade 14 or higher education, marginally higher than nine percent of women with similar education levels. These findings are in line with the education level of women and men at the national level. According to UNESCO, men's literacy rate in Afghanistan is higher (55%) than that of women (30%)⁸.

Out of all the households surveyed, an absolute majority (89%) are male-headed, while a residual 11% are female-headed households. The mean household size in the surveyed areas stands at 7.5 persons, marginally lower than the national average (7.7).⁹ The average number of women in the surveyed households is 3.9, while the average number of male members is 3.6.

8. <https://uil.unesco.org/interview-literacy-rate-afghanistan-increased-43-cent>

9. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-living-conditions-survey-2016-17>

For qualitative data, the evaluation team conducted 75 KIIs using the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Thirty-three KIIs were conducted in Bamyan provinces, followed by 31 interviews in Balkh. The remaining 11 KIIs were conducted with stakeholders at the national level. Out of the 75 key informants, 30 were women, and 45 were men. **Please refer to Annex I for the list of key informants.** Besides KIIs, 21 Outcome Harvesting Workshops (OHW) were conducted as part of the final evaluation, 11 in Bamyan and 10 in Balkh. About 255 individuals participated in the workshops, 162 women and 93 men. 135 participants were from Bamyan, and 120 were from Balkh.

In total, 945 persons were consulted for this evaluation through a household survey, KIIs, and OHWs. Additionally, the preliminary findings were shared and validated with 65 project stakeholders through two sense-making workshops, one each in Balkh and Bamyan.

2.3 Evaluation Tools

The Independent Consultant, ActionAid Australia, ActionAid Afghanistan, and the evaluation team jointly reviewed and finalized the key evaluation questions through a series of consultation workshops in the inception phase. All key parties agreed on a mixed-methods evaluation approach combining literature review, household surveys, KIIs, field observation, and OHWs to collect quantitative and qualitative data from different respondents' categories.

To collect quality data, ARM Consulting pre-tested the data collection tools of the HH survey questionnaire, KIIs, and the OHW guides in the Yakawlang district of Bamyan for two days. It aimed to standardize interviewing techniques, and to acquaint the data collection team with the questions, areas of focus, and the most appropriate ways of collecting the required information before the fieldwork began. During the pilot phase, the survey questionnaire was piloted with 10% of the total sample size (60 households) from five different villages. The KII guide was piloted with three individuals representing the implementing partner, government, and the community. The OHW guide was piloted in a workshop with women. After piloting, minor changes were incorporated into the household survey questionnaire in consultation with the Independent Consultant, ActionAid Afghanistan, and ActionAid Australia.

2.3.1 Literature Review

Reviewing the project documents and secondary literature on the subject helped the evaluation team to identify information gaps and other areas requiring particular attention during the data collection phase. The review also helped the evaluation team to identify relevant government entities and other stakeholders at the national and sub-national levels for consultation purposes. The evaluation team reviewed the following documents:

1. Project proposal;
2. Monitoring & Evaluation Plan;
3. Baseline study report;
4. Final Evaluation Report-2018;
5. 2019 Annual Report;
6. 2020 Annual Report;
7. Learning Assessment on Economic Livelihood (September – November 2020);
8. Learning Assessment on Partnership (June 2019);
9. Learning Assessment on Women Empowerment (December 2019 - January 2020);
10. Beneficiary profiles;
11. M&E data on advocacy groups, and;
12. M&E data on SHGs.

2.3.2 Household Survey

The HH survey has specifically captured the data on the changes in food security experienced at the household level. It enabled the evaluation team to quantitatively determine access, availability, stability, and food consumption among the targeted households. The survey also gathered data on the income and assets owned by the target groups. The household

questionnaire was categorized into six sub-sections, viz., (i) respondents' demographic characteristics, (ii) household economic status and collective engagement, (iii) household economic assets, (iv) food security at the household level, (v) collective engagement, and (vi) overall remarks about the impacts of the project on the target groups. Please refer to Annex II for the HH survey questionnaire.

A multi-stage random sampling was applied for the selection of the targeted households for structured interviews. The enumerators traveled to sampling points, randomly selected from a database containing names of all communities where the project has implemented programmatic interventions. The evaluation employed a gender-balanced staff of interviewers and used gender matching to conduct the interviews. That is, male interviewers interviewed male respondents, and female interviewers interviewed female respondents. Its purpose was to limit cross-gender social pressures and to avoid potential skewness of data. The evaluation team used the Open Data Kit (ODK) application for gathering quantitative data in the field, allowing the core evaluation team to perform real-time monitoring and correction of the data collected from the right holders.

2.3.3 Key Informants Interviews

The evaluation team conducted 75 KIIs to deepen the understanding of some of the outcomes harvested, and to evaluate the overall performance of the REALISE project. The core members of the evaluation team conducted the KIIs because qualitative interviews require skills in developing rapport, an empathetic approach, a capacity to “read between the lines” in an interviewee’s responses, and to adapt interview questions and discussion following the flow of conversation. The evaluation team conducted interviews using KII guides, comprising questions on food security, income security, collective engagement, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, impact, challenges, and lessons learned from the REALISE project. Please refer to Annex II for the KII guides.

Through the help of the KIIs, the evaluation team extensively consulted a wide range of project stakeholders including government entities, ActionAid Afghanistan, LSO, OHW, District Development Authority (DDA), Community Development Council (CDC), RCs, SHGs, FSNs, associations, women enterprises, AACRS implementing partners, ACE, DFAT, and others. The key informants were selected through the purposive sampling method to ensure that the most relevant individuals were consulted during the evaluation. The data gathered through the KIIs has been triangulated with the household survey data.

2.3.4 Outcome Harvesting Workshops

Simultaneous with quantitative data collection, the evaluation worked with a representative sample of the people the project targeted, particularly women, to understand the difference that the changes in food security and economic assets have made in their lives. To do so, the evaluation used Outcome Harvesting, an evaluation approach that allowed identifying demonstrated, verifiable changes in behavior, knowledge, practice, and attitude that the REALISE project has influenced (including unexpected ones) while assessing how REALISE plausibly contributed to them.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to sample participants for OHWs. During the inception phase, the Independent Consultant, ActionAid Afghanistan, ActionAid Australia, and the evaluation team set criteria for the participants of OHWs. Based on the set criteria, 21 workshops were conducted (11 Bamyan; 10 Balkh). Out of the stated workshops, 20 were administered with the project beneficiaries, while one of the workshops was conducted with non-beneficiary women in Bamyan to make comparisons with the direct beneficiaries. Around 255 individuals (160 women; 93 men) from diverse beneficiary groups, community women and men, persons with disabilities, CDC representatives, government representatives, implementing partners, and non-beneficiaries participated in the workshops.

A total of 152 outcomes were identified during the Outcome Harvesting Workshops, of which

the highest (60) are related to specific objective II (income and asset security) of the REALISE project. 40 outcomes are related to specific objective III of the project, which is focused on collective engagement, partnership, and community capacity building. 36 outcomes relate to the specific objective I (food and nutritional security) of the project. The remaining 16 outcomes relate to unintended results of the project and could not be classified into any of the three specific objectives of the project. Out of all the 152 identified outcomes, three are negative and the rest are positive.

Once identified, the participants determined the significance level of the outcomes. In terms of significance, most of the identified outcomes are medium-level (83). That is, they are a step towards a transformational change but may need to be strengthened in the future. Approximately 49 outcomes have been classified as highly significant by the project stakeholders, while the residual 20 are low level. The significance is “high” when it is a new attitude or practice that represents a transformational change whereby communities become sustainably resilient or empowered over time. The significance is low if the outcome represents a first step towards community resilience or in the process of community empowerment.

The evaluation also looked at the contribution of the REALISE project in accomplishing the identified outcomes. The workshop participants were asked to focus on the REALISE project’s contribution and determine whether its contribution was high, medium, or low. High contribution implies that the change would have not occurred without the REALISE project, while medium means that the change may have occurred anyway but the REALISE project quickened it. Low contribution applies to a change that would have occurred even without the REALISE project.

To enhance the credibility and validity of the emerged outcomes, less than half of the total number of outcomes (45%) were selected for substantiation with the community members, influential figures, and members of the CDCs in Balkh and Bamyan provinces. This feedback loop helped to verify the evaluation team’s understanding of the outcomes and provided a medium for stakeholders to raise issues in relation to the accuracy of the outcomes documented. Substantiation through the stated individuals improved the validity and credibility of the findings. 23 individuals were interviewed for outcomes substantiation. Overall, 68 outcomes were substantiated, making up 45% of the total number of outcomes that emerged during the workshops. It is worth noting that in the majority of cases, the corroborators were able to validate the outcome description, their significance, and the contribution of the REALISE project.

Table 3: Overview of Substantiated Outcomes

No	Sex	Outcomes Emerged	Outcomes Selected for Substantiation	Outcomes Substantiated
1.	Food and Nutritional Security	36	18	15
2.	Income and Asset Security	60	30	28
3.	Collective Engagement	40	20	13
4.	Unintended Results	16	8	4
Total		152	76	68

2.4 Training of Researchers

ARM Consulting deployed around 16 enumerators who conducted structured interviews at the household level with the right holders. Before fieldwork began, field enumerators were trained for three days in Kabul. The training covered a wide range of topics including the purpose of evaluation, sample size, random sampling technique, evaluation tools, research ethics protocols, types of respondents, interviewing techniques, reporting arrangement, consent forms, and confidentiality, quality control measures, gender sensitivity, managing interview biases, coordination with the engaged parties and other related topics. The Project Manager

of REALISE from ActionAid Afghanistan was also invited to participate in the training and facilitate a session about the project's background and theory of change. A key component of the training was mock interviews allowing the enumerators to practice the tools in the presence of the core consultants.

2.5 Data Cleaning, Analysis, and Triangulation

Once the fieldwork was completed, the evaluation team performed data cleaning, which involved coding every survey question and its relevant responses. Data cleaning was carried out through a 4-step process of screening, diagnosis, treatment, and documentation. This process involves the removal of irrelevant and duplicate data, fixing typing errors, and inconsistent capitalization, filtering outliers that could potentially skew the data from a normal distribution, inputting the missing data by either dropping the entire interview or imputing the missing value based on other interviews from similar respondents. ARM Consulting applied some filters to make sure that the collected data meets the five basic quality standards of validity, accuracy, completeness, consistency, and uniformity.

The quantitative data (household survey) was analyzed using SPSS. The researchers primarily used tabulation, frequency distribution, percentage, mean, median, quartiles, and standard deviation to make sense of quantitative data. The evaluation team used a mixed approach of manual and NVivo-based analysis to identify themes, patterns, and trends to analyze qualitative data (KIIs and OH workshops). It is worth stating that, throughout the report, the quantitative and qualitative data have been triangulated to enhance the validity and credibility of the findings.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The evaluation team adhered to the following ethical principles of research.

- **Beneficence:** The principle of beneficence expresses an obligation to do good. To uphold this principle, the evaluation team clearly articulated the likely benefits of the evaluation (and for whom) to the respondents as well as conducted a risk assessment of participating in the evaluation.
- **Non-maleficence/ Do no Harm:** This principle implies that both researchers and respondents should not be put at risk of harm, either intentionally or unintentionally. The evaluation team fully utilized the resources at its disposal to evaluate with minimal risk. This principle was upheld by fully adhering to ethical considerations and conducting a comprehensive risk assessment along with a mitigation plan. Besides that, the researchers received mandatory training on sensitive interviewing approaches to avoid the traumatization of the respondents and minimize the risks to the extent possible. Given the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic, the evaluation team strictly adhered to the guidelines of the Afghan Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and World Health Organizations (WHO) to uphold the principle of Do No Harm.
- **Informed consent:** The respondents had the right to make free decisions about participation in the evaluation consistent with their values and preferences. To respect the respondents' autonomy, they were fully informed of the purpose and contents of the interviews and their consent was sought before proceeding. The respondents were assured of their right to refuse to answer all or any specific questions as well as to stop participating at any time if they want to do so without any repercussion. The informed consent of the respondents was received before conducting the interview.
- **Inclusiveness:** The evaluation adopted an inclusive and participatory approach involving consultation with women, men, PWDs, and other vulnerable groups. The key project stakeholders were identified during the inception phase, and the evaluation team made a deliberate effort to reach out to all of them to make the exercise inclusive and participatory.

- **Respectfulness:** The evaluation team fully respected the respondents' time and interviewed at a time that they prefer. The researchers were highly trained to behave in a culturally sensitive manner throughout the different phases of the evaluation. An example of this was using a gender-matching approach to conduct interviews to respect the socio-cultural context of Afghanistan.
- **Privacy:** The interviews were conducted in a manner sensitive to the comfort of respondents and their right to privacy was fully respected.
- **Confidentiality:** The respondents were assured of confidentiality. Also, all collected information was kept strictly confidential and used only for ActionAid purposes. ARM Consulting is strongly committed that all original documents and data collected during the evaluation will not be used or reproduced in any manner without the prior written approval of ActionAid. The evaluation team also adhered to the safeguarding principle by not putting the researchers and respondents at any undue harm as well as the respondents were informed of their entitlement to refuse/withdraw at any stage of the interview.

CHAPTER THREE: KEY FINDINGS

This chapter presents the key findings from the evaluation, which are classified by the overall objective and the three project outcomes.



3.1 Overall Objective: Improved Resilience and Livelihood

The project’s overall objective is “the targeted households participate meaningfully to increase their resilience to shocks and seasonal constraints to their food and livelihood security”. Thus, the evaluation measured the resilience of the targeted groups at both household and individual levels.

Key Finding 1: Target Groups Better Prepared to Deal with Crisis

The evaluation shows that the target groups have become more resilient at the individual and household levels compared to the start of the project. The respondents primarily attributed the improved resilience to increased agricultural productivity. Secondly, livestock ownership was pointed out as another key enabler of resilience. The collective social structure of Afghanistan was also indicated as a key factor contributing to the resilience of the target groups. Individuals and families in crisis seek the assistance of family members, relatives, and villagers to survive. This was reportedly evident in the last year’s COVID-19 lockdown in which vulnerable households were assisted by their relatives and community members to overcome food shortages. Most of the respondents agree (35%) or partially agree (50%) with the statement that “if a crisis happens, my household is better prepared to be able to continue feeding my family”. This means that most of the targeted households are more resilient to deal with crises than at the beginning of the project. At an individual level, most of the respondents (39% agree; 47% somewhat agree) reported the ability to bounce back within six months if they faced a crisis. On the other hand, relatively fewer individuals (22% agree; 46% somewhat agree) reported the ability to withstand crisis if it continued over six months. This implies that the target individuals are resilient to face shorter crises but not prolonged crisis. Furthermore, most of the respondents (38% agree; 41% somewhat agree) have the relationships and power to withstand or adapt to the crisis. The relationships and power are rooted in the collective socio-cultural context of the country where households and community members assist each other in crisis.



Figure 1: Resilience of the Target Groups

The survey data further indicate that men are relatively more resilient to withstand or adapt to a crisis than women. Nevertheless, women's resilience has substantially improved since the start of the project. The in-depth discussions with community members show that women are more self-aware about their rights, entitlement, and their skills and abilities. Besides that, women have more power and control over how to use their resources. For instance, most women who are working and have a personal income demonstrated during the OHWs that they decide on how to spend their earnings for personal and household needs. Furthermore, women are now more vocal about their needs and rights and that of their children both at the household and community levels. For instance, before the project, women lacked the confidence to speak in front of a group of men to discuss issues related to women. However, women have developed higher confidence to participate and discuss women's issues in CDC meetings which are primarily male-dominated.

3.2 Outcome I: Food and Nutrition Security

The evaluation shows the following key findings related to the food and nutrition security of the households targeted by the project.

Key Finding 2: Evidence of the adoption of New Agricultural Techniques by the Targeted Households in some households

The evaluation shows that more farming households have learned and adopted improved agricultural techniques compared to the beginning of the project. When asked whether they have employed any improved agricultural practice in the last five years, 41% of the respondents responded in affirmative, while a majority (59%) stated that they have not. In terms of provincial breakdown, no major variation exists in the adoption of new agricultural practices. 44% of the targeted households in Bamyan province have adopted the new agricultural techniques, marginally higher than the Balkh province (38%). Prior to the REALISE project, farmers overwhelmingly used generations-old traditional agricultural methods, which generally resulted in frustration. The yield was not sufficient to meet their food and nutrition security needs, let alone selling it in the marketplace to generate an income.

The data show that 31% of the surveyed households are using the drip irrigation system with which none were familiar at the start of the project. The drip irrigation system wastes less water as most of it goes into the soil. This system is highly relevant with the context of both Bamyan and Balkh where water scarcity is a pressing challenge. The drip irrigation system has also proven effective in terms of saving time, as it does not require farmers' presence all the time during the irrigation.

About 32% of the farmers reported using the line cultivation method, higher than the baseline (25%). Besides, 29% of the farmers stated that they had used drought-resistant crops, which protected their harvest and minimized losses during the drought. The farmers especially consider drought-resistant crops essential to their sustainable food security due to the severity and unpredictability of the droughts in recent years. According to the farmers, the drought-resistant crops generated better yield during the 2018 drought in contrast to the crops with low tolerance to droughts. Furthermore, the data indicate that 34% of the targeted households have been engaged in the production of improved seeds. Compared to other improved practices, the use of greenhouses and laser leveling is at the lower end at 11% and seven percent, respectively. Although costly to implement, laser leveling has (1) increased the targeted households' yield manifold, (2) reduced water waste, (3) requires less efforts and inputs, and (4) led to efficient crop cultivation. The high cost of applying modern techniques and inadequate functional knowledge among the farmers were reportedly the key barriers in applying the latest agricultural practices.



Adoption of Modern Agriculture Production Practices

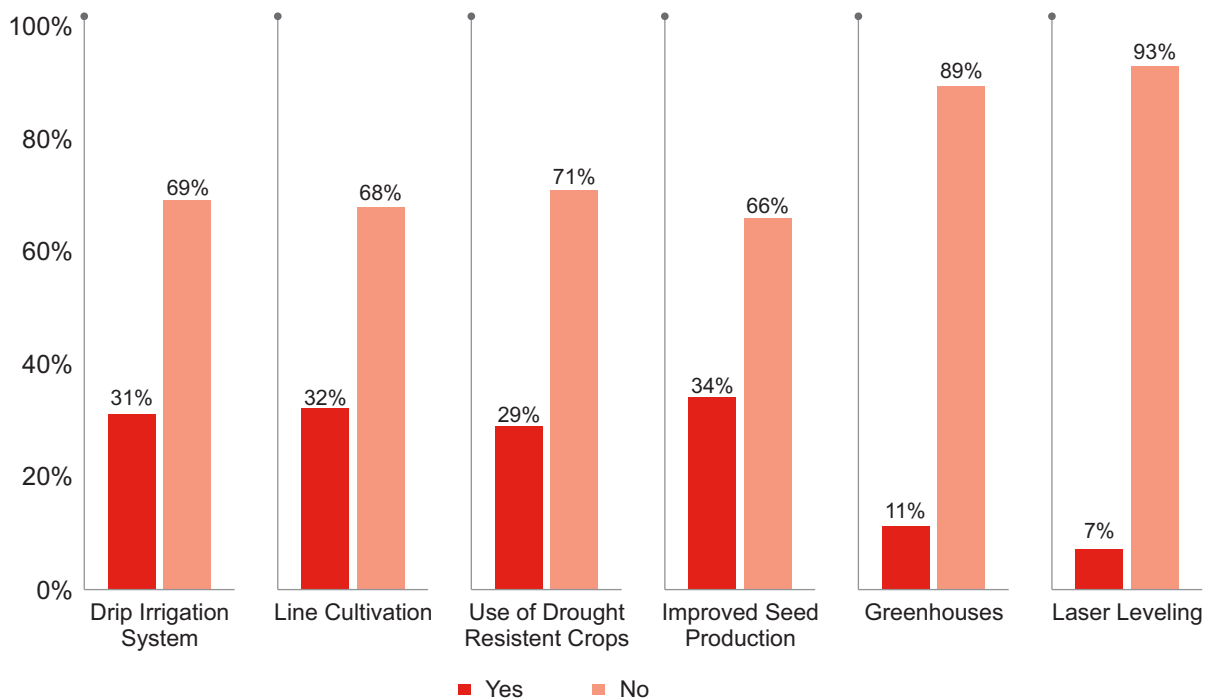


Figure 2: Adoption of Modern Agriculture Production Practices

The survey data show that 93% of the respondents increased their agricultural production as a result of applying the new techniques. In addition, when asked whether they will sustain the increase in production, 87% of respondents responded in affirmative, and only 13% expressed uncertainty about it. The outcomes harvested corroborate these findings suggesting that there is enhanced agriculture productivity and efficiency because of the application of improved practices thus contributing to improved food and income security. Now, the yield not only meets the targeted households' domestic needs, but they also earn income by selling the surplus, which is then used to fulfill other households' needs.

The project has primarily promoted learning and adoption of modern agricultural practices through the establishment of 68 demonstration plots (33 Balkh; 35 Bamyān) on land provided by the lead farmers. OHWs indicate that demonstration plots have proven an effective strategy to extend new agricultural practices by allowing the farmers to learn by practicing and observing – an appropriate learning strategy given their low educational level. The evaluation also shows that demo plots were generally well-coordinated with DAIL and farmers. Participation of DAIL in demo plots was substantial in Bamyān compared to Balkh province. The rather limited participation of DAIL in demo plots in Balkh is due to the long distance between the capital and one of the target districts (Kaldar) and insecurity (mainly in Dawlatabad). At times, planned demo plots had to be cancelled due to clashes between Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) and Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). The demand for demo plots in the target areas remained very high throughout the project, but, due to budget constraints, one per village was established. Some of the farmers indicated that their villages were larger and it was difficult for them to access the demonstration plots due to long distance. This implies that in the future government and the development actors should consider establishing more demonstration plots in larger villages, each accessible for the majority of the farmers around.

Additionally, the project has implemented interventions related to seed production and multiplication to enhance farmers' access to a reliable supply of quality seeds for sustaining production activities. Overall, the beneficiaries reported a considerable degree of satisfaction from activities related to these. The use of certified seed among farmers has seen significant improvement since the start of the project. However, the implementing partners' M&E systems

have not captured data on seed multiplication from beneficiaries who received seed from the project. Some lead farmers in Bamyan denied distributing improved seeds to other farmers. The issue was resolved by the implementing partner through the mediation of the CDC. The OHWs data point to enhanced quantity and quality of the agricultural produce because of improved seed production and multiplication. As a result, farmers sell the surplus yield at a higher price than before, resulting in higher income.

Doubling crop yield because of adopting improved seeds

Outcome Description: In November 2019, a farmer named Hussain, a resident of Raqul village in Yakawlang district of Bamyan, almost doubled his crop production as a result of using and adopting improved seeds that he received from REALISE project. Through demonstration plots, he also learned how to cultivate, grow, irrigate, and harvest potatoes. Hussain now produces 700 KGs of potato instead of 370 KG each year, and sometimes his potato harvests exceed 700 Kilograms.

Significance: Previously, farmers in this village did not know the application of modern techniques and did not have access to certified seeds. Like other farmers, Hussain had less income, and he was hardly able to cover his family expenses. This change in his and other farmers' agricultural production is important for their enhanced food and income security.

REALISE Contribution: Hussain received improved seeds and training (through demonstration plots) from the REALISE project of AAA. He cultivated certified seeds and applied his improved knowledge on cultivation, resultantly, his cultivated lands yielded double in comparison to previous years.

The respondents who have adopted the latest agriculture practices also identified the actors from whom they learned the skill. Most of the respondents (80%) practicing the updated agriculture methods and techniques learned from ActionAid, showing the REALISE project as the primary contributor in this respect. Six percent of farmers learned it from government agencies. DAILs are struggling to deliver extension services to Afghan farmers due to budgetary constraints, limited human resources, inadequate technical expertise, poor governance, insecurity, and extensive bureaucracy. The remaining 14% of the respondents learned the new agricultural practices from other NGOs.

The evaluation concludes that the project's efforts regarding increased learning and adoption of the new agricultural practices have been effective in terms of enhancing agricultural productivity. This finding is in line with the project's theory of change which stipulates that learning and application of new techniques for cropping, water, and soil management will lead to a sustained increase in crop and vegetable production. However, this assumption does not hold for all project beneficiaries, as about seven percent of the farmers reported no increase in production despite using modern practices. Assumptions A1¹⁰ and A10¹¹ are not the only factors that help transition from immediate outcome to intermediate outcome, as there is other factor in play, which is the ability of the farmers to afford certain modern agricultural practices such as drip irrigation and laser leveling.

10. Male heads of households commit to sharing information, food, and resources with the other members of their households and particularly with their wives and other females in their households.

11. Men allow women to have increased mobility.

Key Finding 3: Crop and Vegetable Yield of the Households Engaged in the Programme Increased

The average reported crop yield for wheat stands at 3,323 kilograms per hectare among the wheat-cultivating households. This is higher than the average yield in the baseline (2,772 kilograms per hectare), indicating a 20% increase. In most of the target communities, irrigated wheat is more common than rain-fed wheat. Thus, the yield of 3,323 kilograms per hectare is irrigated wheat rather than rain-fed. The reported yield is also closer to the Afghan government's the target for achieving a minimum national average yield of 3.45 tons irrigated wheat per hectares by 2020¹². The beneficiaries regarded an increase in the wheat yield as a key project accomplishment because, being a staple food, it ensured their food security. In rural areas, households' income is highly limited, and they rely on wheat yield for food security. When its production is lower than expected, the households are forced to use liquid assets such as cash or get a loan to buy wheat flour. The increase in wheat production has helped the targeted households to meet their needs for flour saving them scarce cash or preventing them from incurring debts.

The average reported yield for wheat in Balkh stands at 3,442 kilograms per hectare, marginally higher than Bamyán (3,204 kilograms). Balkh is among the eight northern provinces of Afghanistan which produce the bulk of the national wheat¹³. However, farmers in Dawlatabad district (Balkh) indicated that continuous clashes between ANDSF and the AGO affected their wheat production. Had there been better security they would have had a higher yield.

There are also notable changes in vegetable production compared to the start of the project. Among households engaged in kitchen gardening, the average yield is 3,163 kilograms per hectare (3,133 Bamyán; 3,194 Balkh), a 33% increment over the baseline value. Kitchen gardening in the context of Afghanistan refers to the cultivation of vegetables such as asparagus, coriander, radish, and others on a small piece of land within the house yard or the nearby surroundings. Vegetables such as potatoes, onions, tomatoes, carrots, cauliflower, cucumber, and pumpkins are cultivated on rather large fields for either domestic consumption or commercial purposes. The average yield for the commercially produced vegetables is 3,857 kilograms per hectare (3,913 Bamyán; 3,801 Balkh), notably higher than the baseline value (2,382 kilograms), indicating a 62% improvement. Besides, the average yield for vegetables produced in greenhouses stands at 8,917 kilograms per hectare (8,894 Bamyán; 8,941 Balkh), more than twice higher than the vegetable yields produced in open spaces in the household yard or in outside in the fields. This is because households cultivate vegetables in more than one season in a year in a greenhouse. Targeted households consider an increase in vegetable production vital for their food and nutrition security. Its production has diversified the targeted households' food intake, which was previously centered on rice and wheat and vegetable consumption was highly restricted. Women and men were found informed about the importance of vegetable consumption for their health, which has now become an integral part of their meals. The households are better able to provide diversified food, especially for pregnant women, children, and elderly women and men. As a result, there is improvement in the health of the community members as there is a reported decline in chronic diseases like high blood pressure, diabetics, and heart diseases.

Cotton production stood at 2,371 kilograms per hectare at the start of the project, but the



12. <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/afg190110.pdf>

13. <http://www.fao.org/3/W6059e/W6059e00.htm>

evaluation found 1,917 kilograms per hectare, which exhibits a decline of 19%. The baseline report underscores that the average yield for cotton is implausibly higher than the national average yield for cotton (1,162 kilograms) in Afghanistan in 2013. Compared to the 2013 national average yield, there is a 65% positive change in cotton production, a commendable accomplishment for the REALISE project. The cotton-producing farmers in Balkh province stated that cotton yield slightly changed because of a new cotton seed that they had adopted. Nonetheless, the change was not major. In Bamyan, on the other hand, cotton production was found to be highly limited, almost non-existing.

The average yield for seeds among the targeted households is 512 kilograms per hectare (523 Bamyan; 501 Balkh), while for almond and saffron it is 1,846 kilograms and 4.1 kilograms per hectare, respectively. The credible national average yield for almonds is unavailable, but the almond-producing households indicated a decline in almond yield in recent years, largely due to drought in Balkh province. Nonetheless, the almond yield in the province is higher (2,003 kilograms) than in Bamyan (1,689 kilograms). When it comes to saffron, the reported yield is lower than the average in Herat province (seven kilograms), the center of saffron production in Afghanistan¹⁴. Farmers in Balkh have recently begun cultivating saffron. The switch to saffron cultivation in Balkh is primarily driven by increased drought and scarcity of water, as these plants require less water than the other crops previously cultivated by the farmers. OHWs suggest that some farmers started replacing opium production with saffron mainly due to the high market price of the latter. In Bamyan, saffron production was found to be highly restricted among the surveyed households.

Table 4: Change in Agriculture Production (Average Yield)

	Crop Name	Baseline (kg/hectare)	Final (kg/hectare)	Variation
1.	Wheat	2,772	3,323	20%
2.	Kitchen Gardening Vegetables	2,382	3,163	33%
3.	Vegetables/ Commercial Vegetables	2,382	3,857	62%
4.	Cotton	2,371	1,917	-19%
5.	Greenhouse Vegetables	N/A	8,917	N/A
6.	Seeds	N/A	512	N/A
7.	Almond	N/A	1,846	N/A
8.	Saffron	N/A	4.1	N/A

The evaluation also assessed how the targeted households used their agricultural produce. The wheat-producing households on average use two-third (66%) of their yield for consumption thereby contributing to their food security. Likewise, more than three-fourths (77%) of the kitchen gardening vegetable yield is consumed within the households, which is understandable because the primary purpose of kitchen gardening is to increase the target groups' access to healthier and fresher vegetables and herbs to diversify and improve their food intake. Likewise, saffron and seeds are largely consumed in the household rather than commercially sold. OHWs data suggest that, though the farmers cultivated saffron for sale, their production was not of marketable quality. Thus, they consumed their saffron produce. When it comes to cotton, most of the yield (72%) is sold rather than domestically consumed, understandably because it is not as frequently consumed as wheat, vegetables, fruit, and other agricultural produces. Similarly, almond is key income-generating agricultural produce in the target areas as 65% of the yield is sold.

14. <https://afghanag.ucdavis.edu/grain-field-crops/files/saffron-manual.pdf>

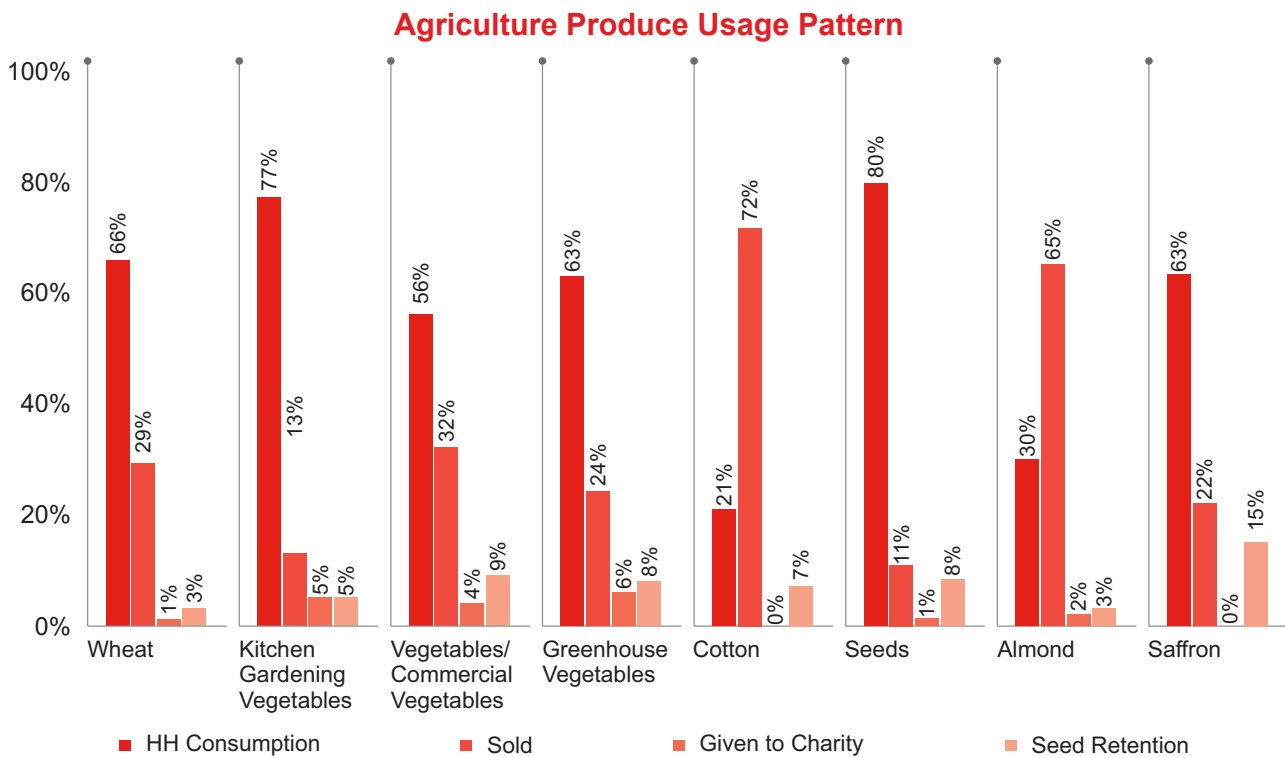


Figure 3: Agriculture Produce Usage Pattern

Flood management resulting in higher agriculture yield and income for farmers

Outcome Description: During 2019, a group of farmers cultivated without interruption by seasonal floods. Their lands and crops were protected from several seasonal floods and they reaped more and stable crops in comparison to past years and, thus, earned a stable income. Farmers now cultivate with improved confidence and thus benefit from a stable crop production throughout the year.

Significance: Previously, the lands of these farmers were extremely vulnerable to seasonal floods. Floods destroyed the lands and homes of several people in the past. Protection of their lands and homes is extremely important for their sustained livelihood. Susceptibility to floods made them even less resilient.

REALISE Contribution: The constructed retaining walls by AAA have helped the farmers of this community to feel safer and protected. From the time AAA built the retaining wall, their lands and other assets are protected.

The increase in crop and vegetable production is attributable to several strategies implemented by the REALISE project. These include the use of improved agricultural practices, implementation of flood protection measures, better access to water irrigation as a result of the small-scale irrigation measures implemented by the project, distribution, and multiplication of improved seed, and the training delivered to the target groups.

The evaluation indicates that the infrastructure projects were among the highest demanded activities, implemented by the REALISE project. In total, 128 small infrastructure schemes on the irrigation canal, culvert, water dividers, bridge, protection wall, water preserver, and potato storage facilities were completed. The target groups were highly satisfied with these projects. Even though these projects had a very limited budget, they have proven effective in irrigation, land protection, and enhancing access of remote villages to main roads. A key effect of the

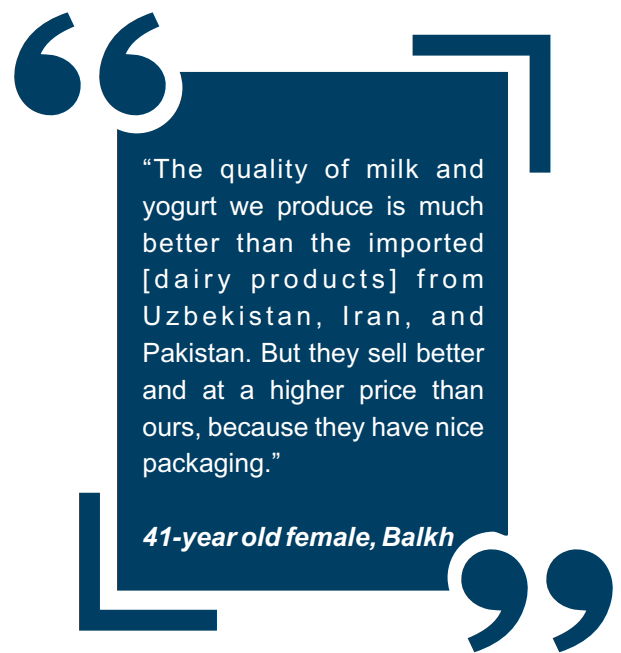
watergate project has been a notable reduction in conflict among the community members over the distribution of water. It is worth highlighting that water scarcity is a key challenge for community members and needs substantial investment by the government and the donor community to better manage it for farming and other purposes.

The evaluation has also recorded beneficiaries' concerns in Balkh province regarding the quality of the infrastructure projects. The field observations suggest that the quality of the infrastructure projects was poorer in general, especially in Balkh. Even though recently completed, these have deteriorated, requiring community members to regularly repair them to keep them in working conditions. According to the implementing partners, they had a highly limited budget, which was not sufficient to implement the projects in a high-quality manner. They further indicated that the budgetary allocations for physical infrastructure schemes did not realistically reflect market prices for resources needed to implement these projects in Balkh and Bamyan. A key lesson learned for ActionAid is that infrastructure projects have had a tangible impact on peoples' lives and are among the most popular interventions among the target groups. There is a need for expanding such projects. AA should also ensure implementing quality infrastructure projects, especially in Balkh.

The evaluation concludes that the project's efforts (extension of modern agricultural production practices, flood protection measures, and water irrigation schemes) to enhance agricultural output in the target areas have paid off, as there is a notable increase in wheat and vegetable production. The food and nutrition security of the targeted households have also strengthened as a result of the sustained increase in crops and agricultural production as well as the health of the target groups have improved. This is in line with the project's theory of change. The three assumptions (A1, A5¹⁵, and A8¹⁶) regarding improved food and nutrition security because of sustained increase in yield hold true for the target groups.

Key Finding 4: Adoption of New Livestock Techniques by the Targeted Households Improved

A majority of the livestock owners reportedly have vaccinated their livestock (77%), higher than the baseline (62%). In addition, 48% of the livestock-owners reported livestock disease monitoring, twice higher than the baseline (24%). The in-depth discussions with the targeted households suggest that they are well informed about the importance of vaccination and livestock disease monitoring to prevent loss of breeding animals. Previously, animal mortality was higher at the start of the project due to lack of awareness about the importance of livestock vaccination and treatment as well as because of the lack of service availability in the area. Now, vaccination and disease monitoring and treatment have dropped the loss of livestock and directly contributed to increased dairy and livestock production. These practices have also positively impacted women in two major ways. Firstly, it has proven effective in combating contagious diseases such as brucellosis to women, who mainly feed and milk animals. Secondly, vaccination and disease monitoring have improved livestock health. Hence, women spend less time on looking after livestock than they had to in the past.



“The quality of milk and yogurt we produce is much better than the imported [dairy products] from Uzbekistan, Iran, and Pakistan. But they sell better and at a higher price than ours, because they have nice packaging.”

41-year old female, Balkh

The use of artificial insemination and portable milking machines is highly restricted with eight

15. Improved seeds and other inputs are affordable for farmers/vocational trainees in the future

16. No large-scale conflicts over water and land resources occur

percent and two percent, respectively. 59% of the respondents indicated the use of improved feeding techniques, higher than the baseline value (38%). When it comes to the packaging of dairy products, 17% of the respondents stated that they were using better packages for dairy products such as milk, yogurt, and cheese. Lack of improved packaging was a widely reported issue in both Balkh and Bamyan. Due to substandard packaging, the dairy producers are unable to compete with the imported dairy products and to sell at attractive market prices.

In terms of dairy production, a goat reportedly produces five to eight litres of milk on a weekly basis and remain in lactation period for four to five months in a year. A sheep produces three to five litres of milk per week for four to five months in a year, while a cow weekly produces 10-15 litres of milk and remains in lactation period for seven to eight months per year. The livestock owners reported increase in their dairy production because of improved access to livestock vaccination and treatment, but, the extent of the change was difficult to quantify due to the absence of baseline data.

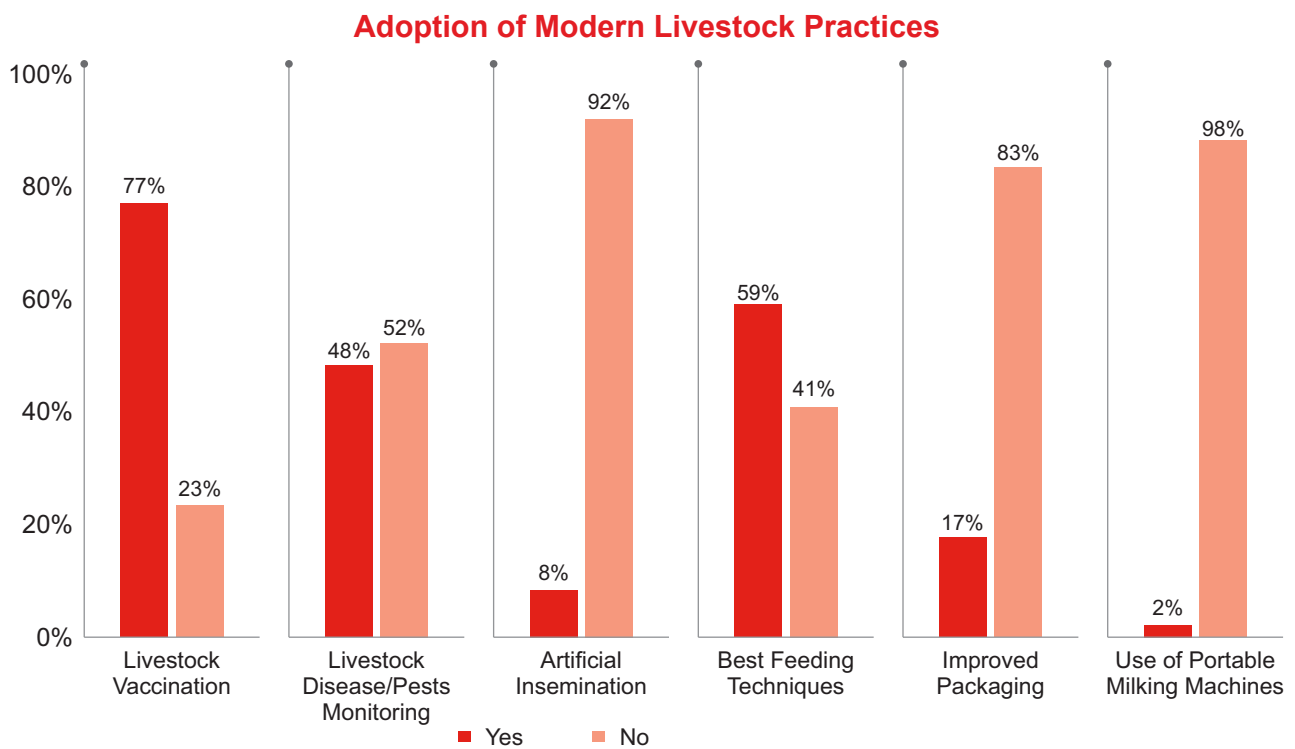


Figure 4: Adoption of Modern Livestock Practices

The increase in the use of modern livestock practices is attributable to the livestock training provided by the project and the establishment of the veterinary clinics in the target areas. Beneficiaries reported high satisfaction from the services offered by para-vets. However, a single para-vet could not meet the demand for livestock services in the entire district. It is worth noting that the project has trained and support four para-vets and veterinarians, two each in Balkh and Bamyan. The increase in livestock disease monitoring and best feeding techniques is also attributable to the livestock training delivered by the REALISE project. The improved packaging is primarily due to the project’s work with the women’s dairy association. Yet, lack of standardized packaging remains a key challenge for livestock owners in the target areas.

The project’s theory of change assumes that the learning and adoption of new livestock techniques will result in increased livestock production. The assumption holds true as there is a notable increase in livestock production in the target areas. This is further discussed in the subsequent section.

Key Finding 5: The households engaged in the programme increased their livestock production

86% of the surveyed households (89% Bamyan; 83% Balkh) have at least one type of livestock, marginally higher than the baseline (82%). Around three-fourths (73%) of the households (78% Bamyan; 69% Balkh) have cows, 15% higher than the baseline (58%). Ownership of cows is a proxy indicator for higher income in the target areas and the fact that more households have cows reflects an increase in their income. Similarly, half of the targeted households (46% Bamyan; 54% Balkh) currently own sheep, while ownership was 43% at the start of the project. There is also a notable increase in donkey-ownership from 30% in baseline to the current 47% (59% Bamyan; 37% Balkh). However, there is no tangible change in ownership of goats in the surveyed areas and a decline in poultry. Around two-third of households (55% Bamyan; 68% Balkh) owned poultry, 15% higher than presently (47%). The project stakeholders stated that the REALISE efforts in the poultry value chain have largely been unsuccessful due to high mortality rate, domestic consumption, disease, and lack of qualified and timely veterinary support. The participants reported a high degree of disease in the poultry, which at times went viral, resulting in a high mortality rate.

Livestock contribute significantly towards the livelihood of the rural population in Afghanistan. According to the respondents, livestock serves multiple purposes including milk production, meat production, crop cultivation, and providing dung for fertilizing the land and source of fuel for cooking and heating, especially during the winter season. Livestock are essential for the food and nutrition security of the households in the target area, as milk and meat are used for domestic consumption and the surplus is sold to earn an income.

Change in Livestock Ownership

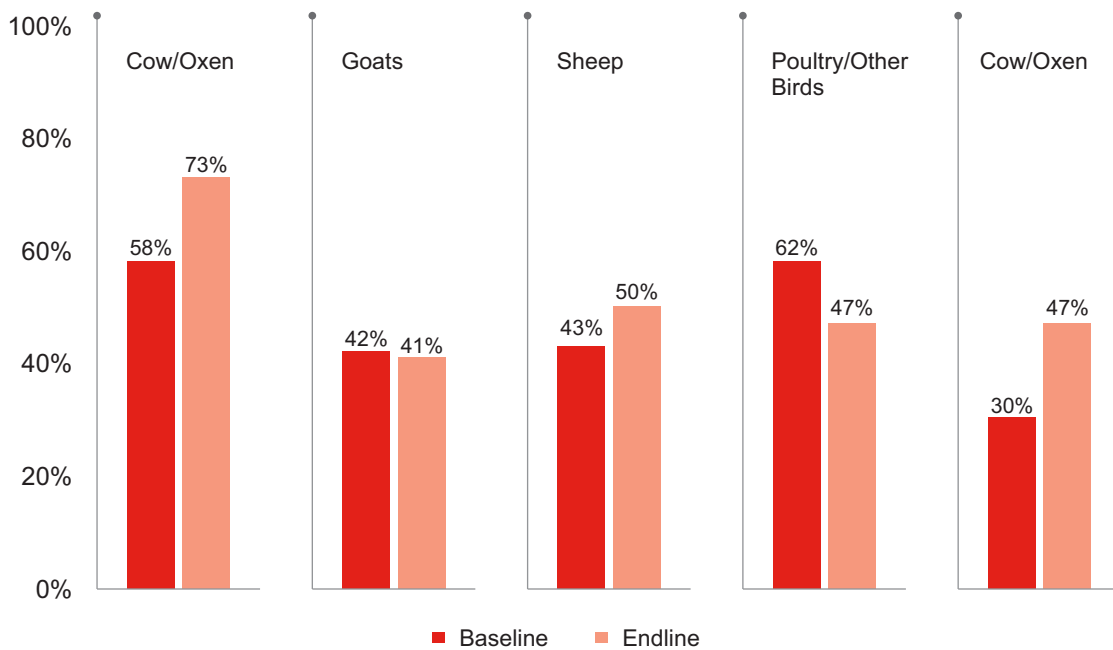


Figure 5: Change in Livestock Ownership

The average number of cows owned by the households stands at 2.6, which is slightly higher than the baseline (two). This shows a 30% increment in cow ownership compared to the start of the project. The most notable increase is witnessable in sheep-ownership (13 per household), 44% higher than the baseline (nine). There is also a 16% increase in the number of goats possessed by the targeted households (5.8) compared to the baseline (five) as well as a significant 40% increment in donkey-ownership, 1.4 per household now versus one at the start of the project. On the other hand, the change in poultry ownership is lower as the

average number of poultry per household stands at 7.5, marginally higher than the baseline (seven).

It is worth stating that the change in livestock ownership is indirectly attributable to the REALISE project. Qualitative data reveal that the increase in livestock ownership is mainly due to a decline in animal mortality and an increase in household income from agriculture. As stated above, animal mortality has dropped down due to increased vaccination and livestock disease monitoring, because of the establishment of veterinary clinics in the target areas. Besides that, the return from enhanced agricultural production is invested in livestock as an income diversification strategy.

As stated in the previous section, the theory of change assumed that the application of new livestock techniques will increase the target groups' livestock production. This holds true as there is an increased number of households now own livestock compared to the beginning of the project and an increase in the average quantity of livestock per household. The increased livestock also contributes to improved food and nutrition security through the consumption of milk and meat and to income security by selling livestock and dairy products.

Key Finding 6: Community members perceive an increase in honey production among the households engaged in the programme

Seven percent of the surveyed households, all in Bamyán, are engaged in beekeeping and honey production. The baseline value for households involved in honey production is not available. Therefore, it is impossible to quantitatively determine whether there has been a change in the households producing honey. The data indicate the honey-producing households have three hives on average with an annual average production of 11.2 kilograms per household. The female participants of the OHWs indicated that honey production was very limited in their areas as community members did not have the requisite production skills.

Twenty-one percent of the total honey produced is consumed by households, but most (78%) of it is sold in the market. The residual one percent is given as a charity to vulnerable households at the community level. The consumption of honey directly contributes to the household members' food and nutrition security, and improvement in health. The targeted households also use honey for the treatment of illnesses such as asthma, throat infections, constipation, fatigue, etc. For instance, some women indicated that they used honey along with other ingredients such as lemon to treat household members infected by COVID 19.

Women's sale of honey has contributed to their economic and social empowerment. The in-depth consultations with women from the beekeeping association indicates that their respect and participation in household decision-making has improved due to their earnings from the sales of honey. This is key progress given the barriers women face in their social and economic

“Last year, I used the income from my land to buy five goats. I like investing my extra money [savings] on livestock because we can use the milk both at home and sell it to others. In the winter, our main source of energy is the meat that we get from the livestock. Without meat, winters in our areas are unbearable.”

56-year old male, Bamyán

“I was a housewife and occupied with household chores. Now as a result of the bee-keeping training and support I got from ActionAid NGO, I earn an income and finance my needs. I split my time between household chores and bee-keeping activities. My husband and my mother-in-law help me with household tasks, especially child care.”

29-year old female, Bamyán

participation, due to the conservative socio-cultural context. Although, it must be noted that unlike the rest of the country, the socio-cultural environment of Bamyan is somewhat favorable towards women’s social and economic participation.

The change in honey production is directly attributed to the REALISE project’s support to a bee-keeping association in the Panjab district of Bamyan province. At the time of the evaluation, the association had 52 members spread over 11 communities. The project has constructed a building for the association and has provided in-kind, technical assistance, participation in exhibitions, and exposure visits aimed at boosting honey production in the target areas. The association has access to the district and provincial markets, and it has been able to find buyers in Kabul from time to time. The consultations with the government officials and private sector actors indicate that the association produces good quality honey, satisfactorily packaged, and sold within the province and outside.

Key Finding 7: Access to market remains restricted

Market access is different for different products. Most of the vegetable products are sold at either the village level, the local market, or the district market. Access to the provincial and national markets is highly restricted due to the perishable nature of the vegetables. The lack of proper packaging is making it difficult for farmers to send the products to the provincial and national markets. A similar trend can be witnessed with fruits, cereals, and honey, a majority of which are sold at the district or community level rather than in the lucrative markets at the regional and national levels. At present, the middlemen between the farmers and the end consumers tend to make a sizable profit, at the expense of the farmers. Access to regional and national markets would allow the target groups to sell their produce at a higher price and strengthen their income and food security.

Market Access of Farmers

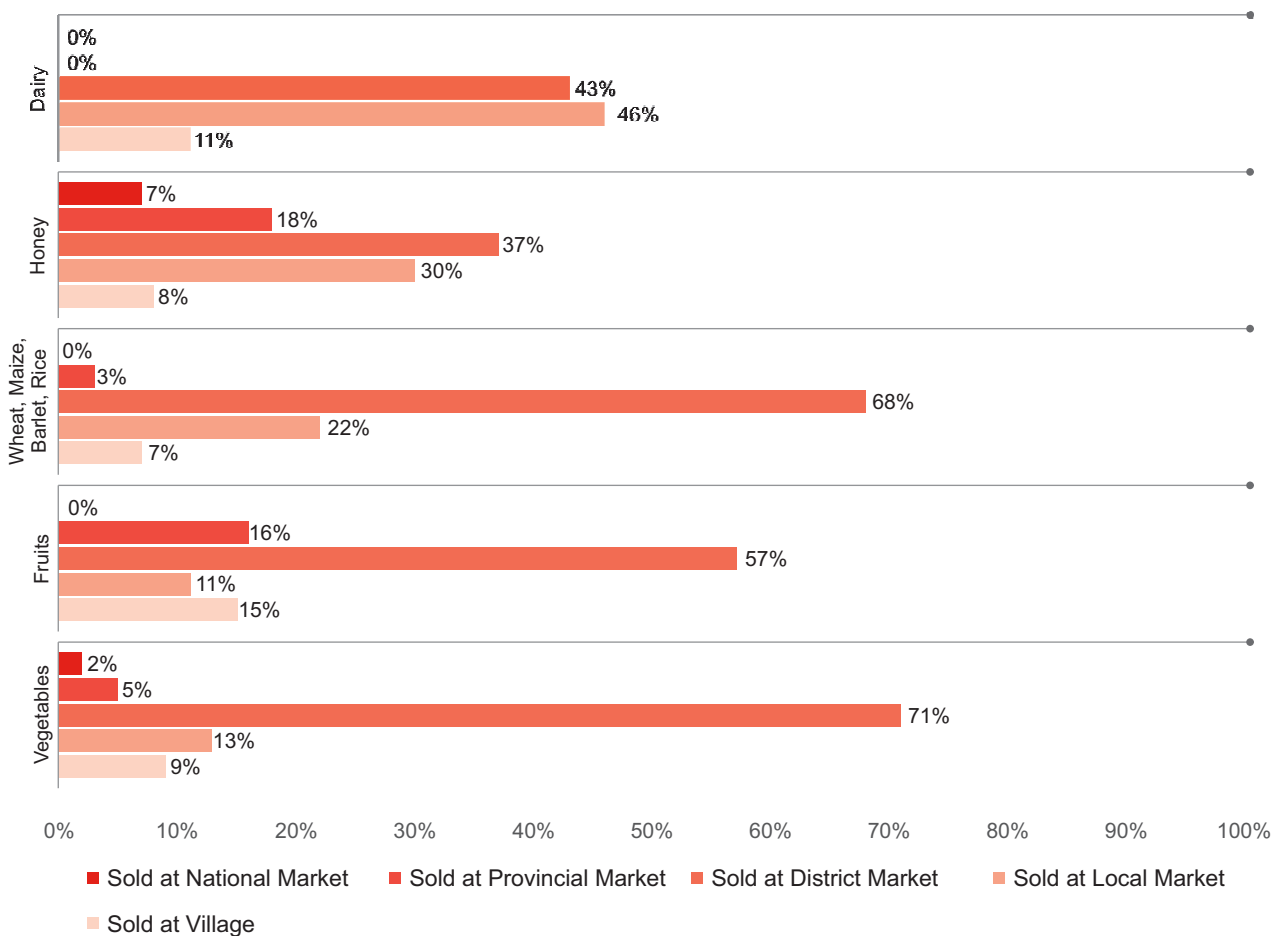


Figure 6: Farmers’ Access to Market

The REALISE project has put substantive efforts into market linkages of the producers with the district, provincial, and national level market actors. Producer groups and enterprises were given a series of exposure visits and technical assistance to enhance their access to provincial and national markets. These efforts also aimed to directly connect the producers and enterprises with wholesalers and retailers and to remove the intermediaries to the extent possible. However, these efforts have not yielded the desired results due to a wide range of reasons. Firstly, the long distance between the targeted areas and the provincial and national markets increases the bargaining cost of the products and makes them less competitive. Secondly, the producer groups and enterprises are not large enough to benefit from the economies of scale. In other words, national-level suppliers, especially those based in Kabul tend to buy a product in bulk, while the production of the producer groups and social enterprises is not at a level to supply the product in sufficient quantities. Thirdly, low literacy has also undermined the capacity of the target groups to proactively seek market opportunities and connect with major buyers and suppliers in the respective value chains. Finally, sub-standard packaging especially for perishable products also makes it difficult to supply the products over long distances.

Key Finding 8: Awareness of Women on Food Nutrition and Dietary Considerations Improved

The respondents were asked whether women in their households had knowledge about the importance of providing nutritious food to household members such as children, the elderly, pregnant women, and others. Figure 6 below shows that most of the respondents (87%) stated that women in their households knew about the significance of nutritious food. The training imparted by ActionAid has helped to overcome misconceptions regarding food nutrition and dietary considerations in the target communities. For instance, women believed that babies should not be given supplementary food items until they are one and half years or two years old as it leads to illnesses and adversely impact children's development. However, most of the women at present are feeding complementary nutritious food to children from the age of six months. This has reportedly improved the health of the babies in the target areas. Similarly, some women prior to attending the training, believed that pregnant women should not do their routine activities and rather sleep and relax all the time. But as a result of enhanced awareness, pregnant women are now encouraged to continue their routine activities, which has helped women to better deal with pregnancies than in the past.

Three-fourths (75%) of the surveyed households prepare diversified food items for meals, a positive change in terms of dietary considerations. Improved nutritional knowledge has resulted in positive changes in the behavior of the targeted households, especially women. For instance, women regularly wash vegetables with salt as well as their intake of vegetables and fruits has considerably increased than before. Similarly, 83% of the respondents reported that breastfeeding of children from 0-23 months was practiced in their households, higher than the baseline (13%). A majority (94%) stated that they feed complementary nutritious food to the children from the age of six months, which is a six percent points increase compared to the start of the project. As a result of these changes, there is improvement in the health conditions of children and a reported decline in children's malnutrition in the target areas.



“We would use to eat either rice, beans, or potatoes. Now, we consume vegetables at least once a day if not twice. We also consume more beef and chicken meat than before. My husband and I have prepared a meal schedule based on the needs of our children and ourselves.”

36-year old female, Bamyan

Change in Nutritional Knowledge

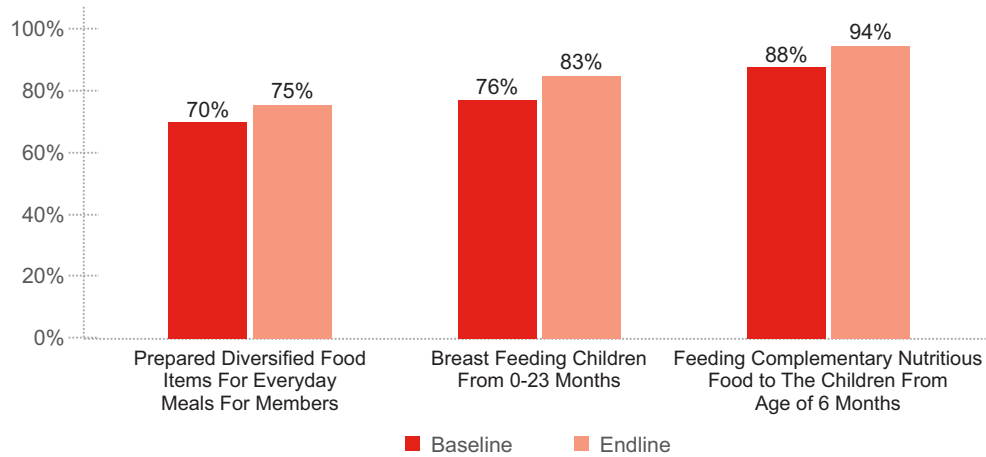


Figure 7: Change in Nutritional Knowledge

The REALISE project had established 70 Food Security Networks (FSN), 35 each in Bamyan and Balkh, comprising largely of male community members. The FSNs' primary mandate has been to create awareness about food security and nutrition among the community members. The operational mechanism for the FSN was straightforward: initially, the project trained some members who then cascaded their learning to other members of the households, especially women. During the OHWs, 11 outcomes were harvested related to FSNs, which indicate a positive shift in the nutritional knowledge and behavior of community women. Thus, the evaluation concludes that FSNs have proven an effective mechanism to increase awareness of food and nutrition security.

The project's theory of change assumes that enhanced nutritional knowledge will result in an increase and diversified food consumption by women, men, and children in the targeted households. It is further assumed (A4) that community women and men will be able and willing to buy nutritious foods to balance their diets. Since most of the targeted households are consuming diversified food, it is safe to conclude that the assumption holds true for a majority of the benefiting households. This is because households use the income they earn from enhanced agricultural yield to diversify their dietary considerations.

Key Finding 9: Food and nutritional security of the households engaged in the programme increased

When asked how many meals they eat per day on average, an absolute majority of the respondents (87%) indicated three meals. 10% reported the consumption of two meals a day, and only three percent reported one meal a day. No major variation exists between households in Bamyan and Balkh provinces in terms of food in/security.

It is a positive sign that most of the targeted households have access to three meals a day. The baseline report does not contain data on the number of meals per day, though; it states that around 20% of the households had come across a situation when there was no food in the households, which is higher than the 13% of the households with less than three meals per day. OHWs also suggest that food security has improved in the target areas. The participants indicated improvement in the quantity and quality of their intake due to enhanced agricultural productivity, diversified cropping, and an increase in livestock production. The targeted households are more food secure compared to food security at the national level. Based on Afghanistan Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), around one-third of the country's population are experiencing a high level of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above)¹⁷. The IPC classified the food insecurity situation in Balkh and Bamyan provinces to be in the crisis phases. Given that most of the targeted households are able to consume three meals a day is an indication that they are more food secure compared to the rest of the country.

17. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IPC_Afghanistan_AcuteFoodInsec_2021MarchNov_snapshot.pdf

As a result of increased food and nutrition security, community members, especially women and children, have become healthier as well as there is a decline in violence against women. Children’s malnutrition has dropped down due to improvement in the quantity and quality of their dietary intake. Similarly, women, especially during pregnancies were facing iron deficiencies. However, households at present are able to provide adequate vegetables and fruits for pregnant women, due to diversified cropping and enhanced agricultural yield. Food insecurity was a major reason for conflicts between women and men in their families, and at times resulted in violence against women by their intimate partner. As indicated by a female participant in Balkh, food shortage resulted in frustration between the household members and resulted in regular conflicts. According to female respondents, the behavior of their male household members, especially the intimate partner, has positively changed due to improved food and nutrition security.

“When we were poor and did not have enough food to feed my children, my relationship with my husband was very bad. We would argue every day about small things. It made me extremely sad when we had to send our children hungry to the bed or when I had to deny them the things they were asking for. Thankfully, our yield last year was very good and I am no longer worried about our ability to feed children”

47-year old female, Balkh

Food insecurity is on the higher end in the winter season. Households with less than three meals a day (13%) were subsequently asked to outline the months in which they experienced hunger. Hunger is the highest in January, February, November, and December and the lowest in June, July, August, and September. In Afghanistan, the winter season generally begins in mid-December and lasts until the third week of March during which agricultural cultivation does not take place due to cold temperatures except for greenhouse production at a small scale. In cold areas such as Bamyán, agriculture cultivation does not even take place in the early fall season. The fall season lasts from mid-September to mid-December. Many households store their agricultural produce harvested during the spring (March-June) and summer (July-September) seasons for consumption in the winter seasons and to some extent in the fall season. Similarly, some households rely on livestock for meat consumption during the cold winter season.

Hunger Gap Months

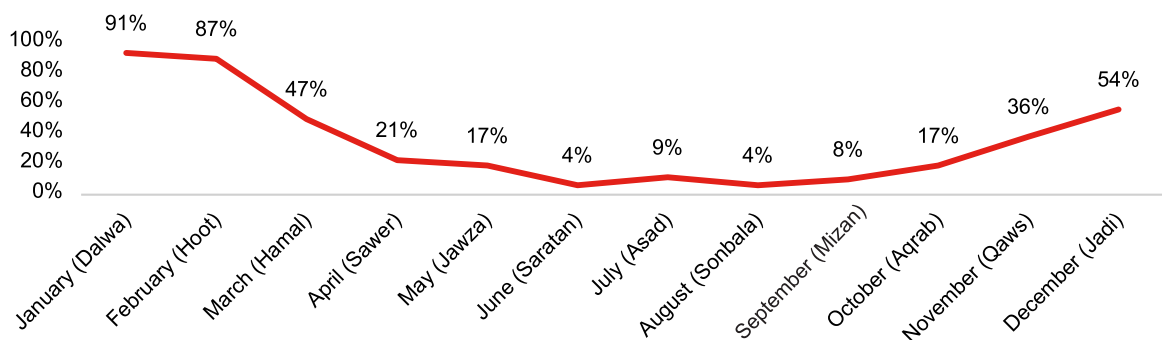


Figure 8: Food Shortage Months

The data indicate that a quarter of the households (25%) rely on less preferred and less expensive food to deal with food shortages. The use of this coping mechanism at the start of the project was at 27%. The second frequently adopted coping strategy is borrowing money or buying food on credit (20%). However, compared to the baseline (62%), there is a notable reduction of 42% in its use. This indicates that, instead of incurring debts, households can

meet their needs for food through their own yield or purchasing it through own income. Around 14% of the targeted households sell livestock to manage their food, which is a considerable reduction since the baseline (58%). Livestock form a critical part of the livelihood system in rural areas. Thus, selling livestock especially the productive ones, is considered a severe and harmful coping mechanism. There is also a reduction in limiting portion size compared to the start of the project (39%), as it is adopted by about 14% of the households to deal with food shortages. Skipping or reducing meals eaten in a day was reported by 17%, almost twice less than the baseline (33%). About 17% of the households opted for eating bread with tea when they were unable to find another type of food. The use of other coping strategies is relatively less in the target areas. Overall, the evaluation concludes that there is a significant decline in the use of drastic and severe coping strategies compared to the start of the project. Households have gradually shifted towards adopting less harmful coping strategies during periods of food shortage.

Table 5: Use of Coping Strategies to Deal with Hunger

	Coping Strategy	Baseline	Final Evaluation
1.	Relying on less preferred and less expensive foods	27%	25%
2.	Purchasing food on credit	62%	20%
3.	Selling livestock for managing food	58%	14%
4.	Limiting portion size at the mealtimes	39%	14%
5.	Skip or reduce number of meals eaten in a day	33%	17%
6.	Gather wild food, hunt	4%	1%
7.	Consume seed stock held for next season	3%	2%
8.	Rely On Help From A Friend Or Relative	N/A	9%
9.	Send Household Members To Eat Elsewhere	N/A	1%
10.	Restrict Adult To Give More To The Small Children	N/A	3%
11.	Sending Children To Labour Wages	N/A	4%
12.	Rely On Food Aid	N/A	3%
13.	Use Savings Mount	N/A	9%
14.	Nothing Did And Said Depending On Allah (Lack of coping strategies)	6%	5%
15.	Eat Naan Wa Chai (Tea And Bread)	N/A	17%

To determine food security sustainability, the survey respondents were asked whether their households would be able to maintain the same level of food in the future. About 57% of the respondents maintain the same food level, while five percent indicated that they would not be able to maintain their current food level. The remaining 38% opted for “I don’t know”, an indication of uncertainty regarding their food security sustainability. The target groups are concerned about sustaining their food security due to low precipitation in the last year and the increased possibility of drought. This will directly impact the agricultural yield, potentially putting the target groups’ food security at real risk. The participants also do not expect a tangible return from non-agricultural activities such as shop keeping, tailoring, driving, and formal employments in the face of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, growing insecurity, political instability, and the uncertain macroeconomic outlook of the country.

Change in improved food and nutrition security of the project is attributable to enhanced agricultural and livestock production after the adoption of new agriculture and livestock production practices, distribution, and multiplication of certified seed. Enhanced nutritional knowledge has also played a key role in improving households’ food and nutrition security. The project strategies related to enhanced agricultural and livestock production and improved

nutritional knowledge are already covered in the relevant sections above. A key project strategy for ensuring target communities' food security was the establishment of the food banks at the community level towards the end of the project. The evaluation shows that food banks are struggling to remain functional. Pervasive poverty and target communities' lack of trust in the operational mechanism of the food banks remain key challenges. The food banks do not have operational manuals, which has resulted in confusion among the community members, even among the implementing partners on how to run them. There is a need for developing guidelines on running the food banks and training the target communities about them. Except for the food items given by the REALISE project, none of the food banks have received food items from donors or community members. Overall, there is a consensus among the consulted stakeholders that it will be challenging for the concept of food banks to succeed in Afghanistan where poverty is high. The stakeholders further argue that adequate attention needs to be paid to the feasibility of activities such as food banks while they are being designed in the inception phase.

3.3 Outcome II: Income Security and Economic Asset Base

Findings related to income security and economic asset base are presented below.

Key Finding 10: Income Sources of the Targeted Households Remain Inadequately Diversified

Income diversification is a crucial risk management strategy for the rural populations, an absolute majority of whom are dependent on agriculture (81%) and livestock (65%) for income generation. These income sources are vulnerable to natural disasters such as drought, flooding, etc., putting the food security and livelihood of the households at risk. Hence, the need for income diversification.

At the start of the project, the average number of income sources per household were three, and the evaluation found the same. The baseline shows that 16% of the targeted households have one income source, while those with two or three income sources were 21% and 24%. The remaining 26% had four income sources. The evaluation found 11% targeted households reporting a single income source, while 49% indicated two sources, 22% three sources, and 18% stated four income sources. In light of this, the evaluation concludes that the income sources of the targeted households have not significantly diversified compared to the start of the project.

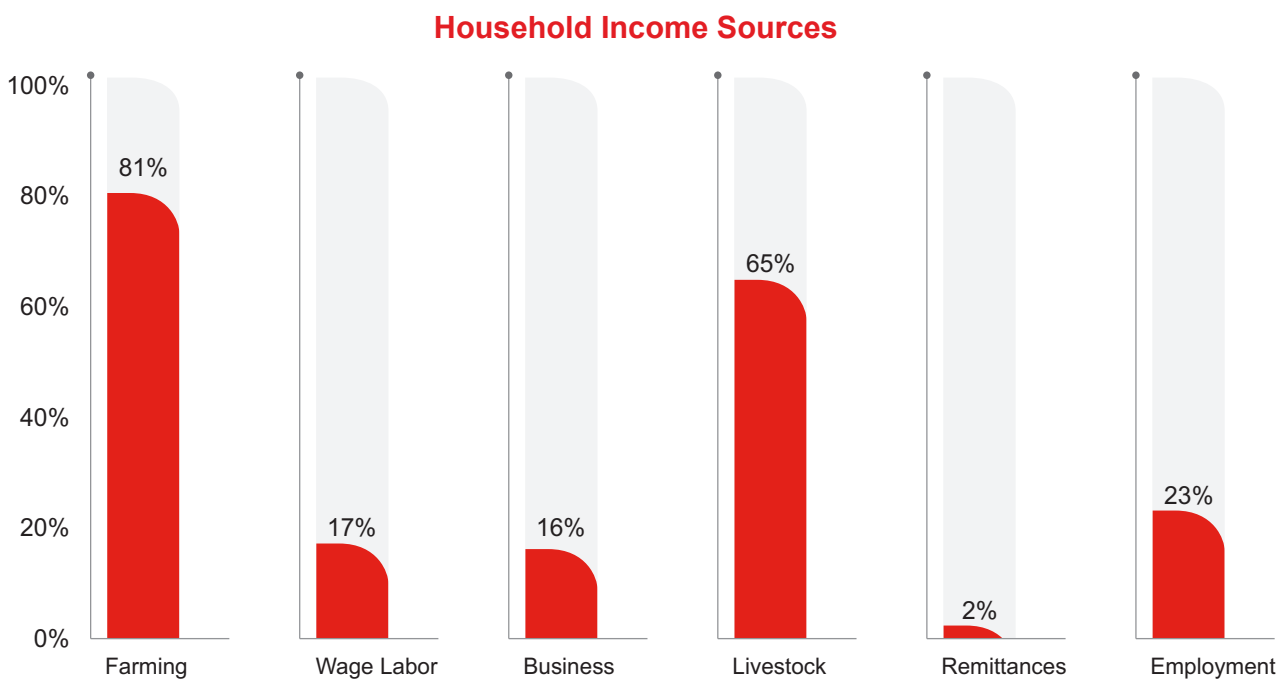


Figure 9: Household Income Sources

The project has provided vocational skills training as well as business development skill training to enhance women's and men's employability and to establish start-ups for diversifying their income. The lack of a tangible improvement in the diversification of sources of household income is attributable to two major reasons. Firstly, by design, the REALISE project has focused mainly on agricultural value chains, which has resulted in enhanced agricultural yield. The households can now sell the surplus in the marketplace. In the past, the targeted households would try to split their time between agriculture and other part-time jobs, as agricultural output was not adequate to meet their households' food needs. However, now that the agricultural yield meets the household consumption needs of most of the targeted individuals, they have fully dedicated themselves and other family members to agriculture. Secondly, COVID 19 has reduced the number of daily wage jobs and formal jobs in the private sector. The income sources have concentrated rather than diversified because, on the one hand, there are limited other income sources, on the other side there is the incentive to engage more in agriculture due to its higher productivity.

“In the past, we would take ill members of my family to a religious scholar for treatment or at most to the nearby clinic in our village, which was understaff and under-equipped. Now, our income is better and when someone within my family gets sick, I take them to Mazar-I-Sharif for treatment, where hospitals are much better. Last week, I took my mother to a specialist and her health is much better now.”

28-year old male, Balkh

The project's theory of change assumes that when women and men implement their business marketing and management skills it will lead to a sustained increase in the sale of food and non-food items and will result in income diversification. Notwithstanding, the overall trend suggests little diversification in the beneficiaries' income despite an increase in their skillsets, which makes the validity of this assumption questionable. A key assumption underpinning income diversification is A10 “men allow women to have increased mobility”. The evaluation suggests that there is increased social and economic participation for women compared to the beginning of the project. Yet, income diversification has been limited. For detail regarding an increase in women's social and economic participation, please refer to key finding 13.

Key Finding 11: Income Security of the Targeted Households Increased

Compared to the 2015 baseline, the target groups have experienced an improvement in income. The average monthly household income stands at 258 USD (19,878 AFN). There is no major variation in the income level between Bamyan (19,935 AFN) and Balkh provinces (19,820 AFN). When adjusted for inflation, the real income is calculated at 240 USD¹⁸. The baseline report shows that 88% of the target groups were living in pervasive poverty (1.25 USD per day), while the final evaluation reveals that 56% of them fall in pervasive poverty, a 32% reduction. Similarly, the baseline suggests that 80% of the target groups were living in severe poverty (0.75 USD per day), more than two folds higher than presently (29%). Hence, it is safe to conclude that the income security of the targeted households has increased compared to the beginning of the project. Income security also contributes to strengthening the food security of the households, and result in higher resilience against shocks. It is imperative to consider that the project has been implemented in a highly fragile context. The national economy has become more fragile and the country has seen a sharp reduction in Gross Domestic Production (GDP) growth since 2013. For instance, the average annual GDP growth for the period of 2013-2020 stands at 2.5%, which is significantly lower than the 9.4% annual growth rate recorded for 2003-2012¹⁹. Similarly, Afghanistan's unemployment rate was estimated at 38% at the end of 2020, which is considerably higher than 24% for 2019²⁰.

18. The average inflation rate between 2013 and 2021 stands at 3.17%. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/FP.CPI.TOTL?locations=AF>

19. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>

20. <https://www.sigarmil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-01-30qr-section2-economic.pdf>

The evaluation further shows that targeted households' income fluctuates throughout the year. The income tends to be the highest in the summer and fall seasons and the lowest in the winter season. Most of the targeted households are still dependent on agriculture for income generation and due to cold temperatures in winter, agriculture production stalls. The cropping calendar for many crops in Afghanistan begins in the spring season and the yield is generally produced in the summer and fall seasons. This explains the relatively higher income in the summer and fall seasons, compared to winter and spring.

Table 6: Monthly household income, expenditure, and saving patterns

	Spring		Summer		Autumn		Winter		Overall	
	AFN	USD	AFN	USD	AFN	USD	AFN	USD	AFN	USD
Average Income	17,233	224	24,042	312	24,243	315	13,994	182	19,878	258
Average Expenditure	17,817	231	19,099	248	17,153	223	17,470	227	17,885	232
Average Saving	-584	-8	4,943	64	7,090	92	-3,476	-45	1,993	26

Households struggle to meet their needs in the winter season. The average monthly household expenditure in the winter season is higher as households must spend on fuel or wood for heating, than the average monthly household income. The households also experience hunger the most during the winter season, as stated under “Key Finding 8” above, and are forced to use various coping strategies to deal with the food shortages. The most common coping strategies adopted by the households include reliance on less preferred and less expensive foods, followed by purchasing food on credit, skipping or reducing meals, consuming tea with bread, selling livestock, and limiting portion size at mealtimes. In the spring season, the average expenditure is also higher than the average monthly income, although, the difference is not significant. In the summer and autumn seasons, the average monthly income outweighs the monthly expenditure.

During the evaluation, the respondents were also asked whether they are aware of their household monthly income level. A large majority of the respondents (84%) knew their household income, while 16% did not know their family income. Moreover, more men (90%) have knowledge

Substantial increase in household income because of enhanced agricultural productivity

Outcome Description: During 2020, 13 families from Kata Qala village of Yakawlang district experienced a 100% increase in their family income because of increased agriculture production with improved seeds. These families have doubled their income in comparison to their previous agricultural harvests.

Significance: Families used to get less income from the sale of their crops since they used to cultivate traditional seeds. Now, after receiving certified seeds and required training from REALISE, these farmers not only increased their agricultural production, but also their income has doubled from the sale of potatoes.

REALISE Contribution: These farmers benefited from the seed production and demonstration plots component of the project. After receiving certified potato seeds and training on how to cultivate, grow and harvest potato, farmers have enhanced agricultural knowledge.

of household income than women (79%) do. The baseline for women and men's knowledge on their income household income is not available. Women in Afghanistan are generally less likely to have accurate information on household income and expenditure. This is broadly for two reasons, viz., due to limited share in family decision-making, and because discussion and concern regarding income and earnings are 'masculine' domain and as such women are neither socialized nor authorized to 'meddle' into matters related to household income. Nonetheless, most women surveyed in this evaluation representing households and who benefited from the knowledge and awareness raising opportunities provided by the REALISE project, tend to have knowledge of household income and expenditure. Women's knowledge of their household income was higher in Bamyan (86%) compared to Balkh (72%), which is due to a less conservative socio-cultural context in the former.

The evaluation also examined how the targeted households spent their earnings on major expenditure items. About 71% of the respondents spent their earnings on food, comparatively lower than the baseline (95%). The decline is attributable to enhanced agricultural production as families can meet food needs from their own farms. About two-thirds of the respondents indicated spending on education, six times higher than at the start of the project (11%). This is a positive sign since increased spending on education will lead to improved human capital in rural areas and by extension enhance the economic well-being of the households in the long-term. Furthermore, 65% of the targeted households spend their income to cater to the children's needs, followed by livestock feeding and treatment, and seeds and inputs with 58% each. Interestingly, at the start of the project, 38% of the households spent earnings on health, lower than the current 58%. The REALISE project aimed to reduce the targeted households' spending on health as it was assumed that improved food security will lead to healthier individuals. However, the evaluation shows that now more households are spending on health than before. The sense-making workshops unveiled that the increment in health expenditure is largely attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the tendency to access better-quality health services because of higher incomes. In Balkh and Bamyan provinces, the Afghan Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) provides health services through national and international NGOs. Respondents expressed concerns and an overall lack of confidence in the quality of the public health sector. Therefore, after witnessing an increase in their income level, more households tend to go to private health providers; in certain cases, they went abroad, particularly to India, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan for treatment.

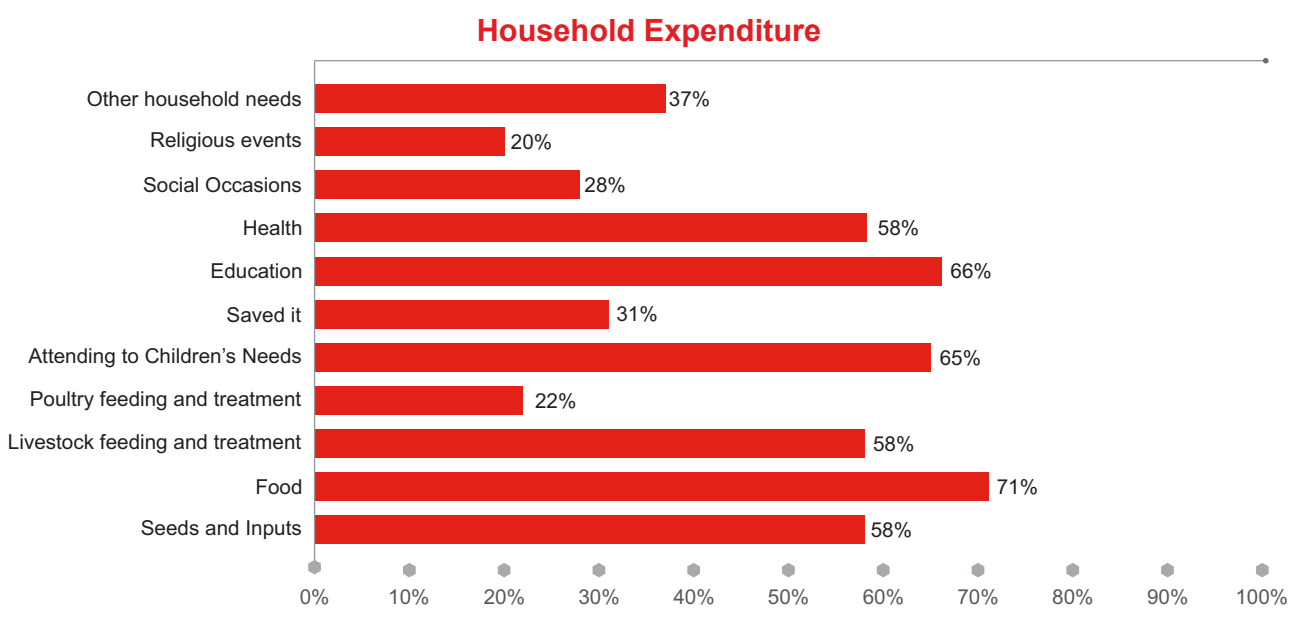


Figure 10: Household Expenditure Patterns

The project has implemented a wide range of strategies to enhance the income level of the target groups including business and management skills training, vocational skills development, formation of associations and groups in different value chains (dairy, honey, cotton, poultry, vegetable, poultry, vegetables, potato, almond, etc.) to better bargain sales prices, and support regarding market accessibility. There is a positive change in the skillsets of the target groups. However, most of them have yet to practice the skills to earn an income. Similarly, as discussed in detail under “Key Finding 6,” the project’s efforts regarding market accessibility have yet to yield the desired results. The project’s efforts regarding the formation of groups and associations to produce in bulk and negotiate better bargaining prices with the traders have been somewhat successful. Although, this is yet to fully materialize due to limited access to lucrative markets at the regional and national levels, nonetheless, the collectives were functional at the time of the evaluation and anticipated to sustain their operations beyond the project life cycle.

The project’s theory of change stipulates that the targeted households will be able to achieve a sustained increase in their income through sales of food and non-food items and by women applying their skills to find jobs and establish businesses. The evaluation indicates that there is a change in the skills of the target groups. Nevertheless, the increase in income is overwhelmingly due to enhanced agricultural production rather than through the establishment of businesses, especially for women.

Key Finding 12: Economic Asset Base of the Targeted Households Expanded

Assessing the economic asset base is important to determine the extent to which people’s livelihood and resilience have improved. In this regard, the evaluation team asked the respondents whether they have land. Around 86% of the households (82% Bamyan; 89% Balkh) have land, indicating a 20% improvement than the baseline (66%). On average each household possesses 6.7 Jeribs of land, higher than the baseline (five Jeribs). Increase in land ownership is related to the tendency among the targeted households to invest their surplus income in purchasing land. That is, households earning a higher return from farming due to enhanced agricultural productivity, have used their surplus income to buy land. Flood protection measures implemented by the project have also increased land ownership in the target areas. Previously, the land was abandoned as it was regularly flooded, but with the construction of mitigation measures, the land has fallen under the ownership of the targeted households. In rural Afghanistan, land is a vital safety net for households, which predominantly rely on farming for income generation. Owning more land is a proxy indicator for increased income and food security and an enhanced resilience against shocks in crisis situations. The fact that more households own land and increase in land size reflects an improved income and food security of the targeted groups.

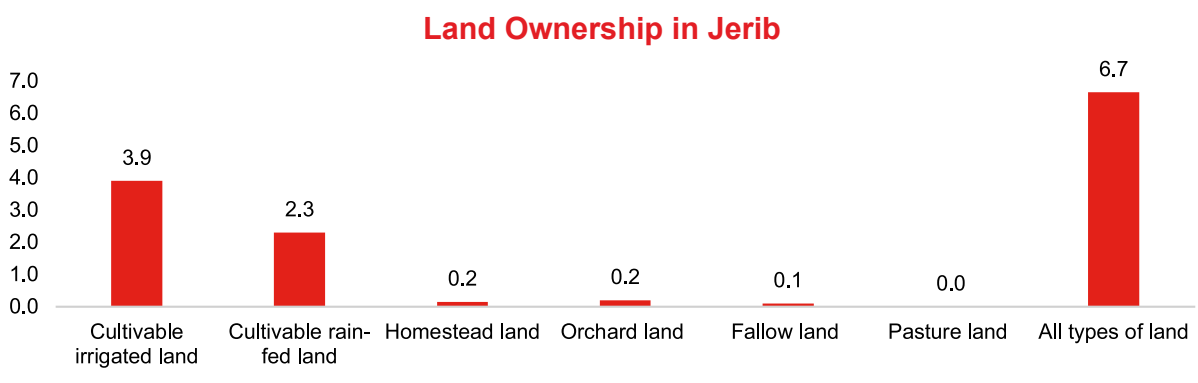


Figure 11: Land Ownership

The data also suggest that the existence of ‘homestead land’, ‘orchard land’, and ‘pasture land’ is highly limited in the target areas. Households do not have adequate access to pasture lands, which is essential for livestock sustenance. The project developed and maintained an artificial pasture in phase I, but it did not produce the desired outcomes in Balkh province. This was largely due to water scarcity and incompatibility issues, especially in Kaldar district. The artificial pasture was replaced with animal concentrate in the second phase of the project. However, due to inadequate orientation on how to feed livestock with the concentrate, people could not optimally use it. Based on the interviews with the implementing partners and the government officials, the evaluation concludes that this activity was not given adequate consideration during the design phase, which is a key lesson to learn for going forward. Additionally, it also implies that the project should identify locally tailored and context-specific solutions to socio-economic problems.

Key Finding 13: Skills of Individuals engaged in the project increased, although, women’s business start-ups remain limited

The evaluation indicates that there is an improvement in the employability and business skills of the target groups compared to the start of the project. The improvement in women’s skills is higher compared to men, which is attributable to the design of the REALISE project as it substantially focused on women community members. Improvement in the individuals’ skills helps them to become employable in the market and diversify their income sources. The increased skills among women have reportedly increased their self-confidence to become independent and contribute their income to the households’ needs. Women have also become vocal in pressuring their male household members to allow them to engage in income-generating activities.

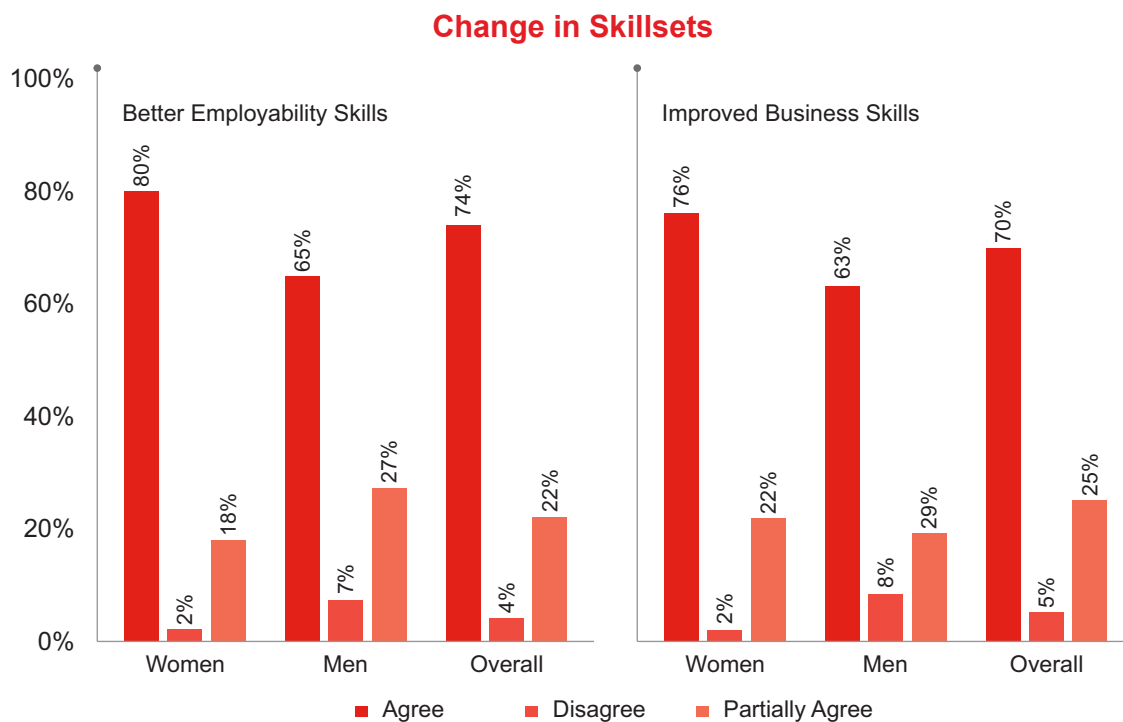


Figure 12: Change in Target Groups’ Skillsets

The respondents were asked about women’s economic activities in the last five years to determine whether they have been practicing the business skills they have learned. 76% of the respondents stated that no woman in their households had established a start-up, followed by 12% who did establish businesses and were functional at the time of the fieldwork. About 10% of the respondents confirmed the establishment of businesses by a female household

member before 2016, while the remaining one percent established businesses that were no longer operational. Based on this, the evaluation concludes that despite improvement in their business skills, most women have not established businesses due to a wide range of reasons. In Bamyan, the most significant reasons were lack of capital, difficulty in accessing affordable credit, limited understanding of the market actors, household responsibilities, and a pessimistic macroeconomic outlook of the national economy, characterized by high unemployment and low confidence to invest. In Balkh, the participants also added insecurity and conservative sociocultural context regarding women. Bamyan comparatively offers a better socio-cultural and security environment for women to establish their own businesses. Thus, one can see more businesswomen in Bamyan province than Balkh province among the project beneficiaries.

The evaluation also shows that women engaged in economic activities generate a small income. Female participants of the OHWs who have established start-ups after graduating from the vocational skills courses reported a monthly income of 2,000 AFN – 10,000 AFN on average. Despite the low income, women are highly interested in business activities and consider them a concrete step in the right direction.

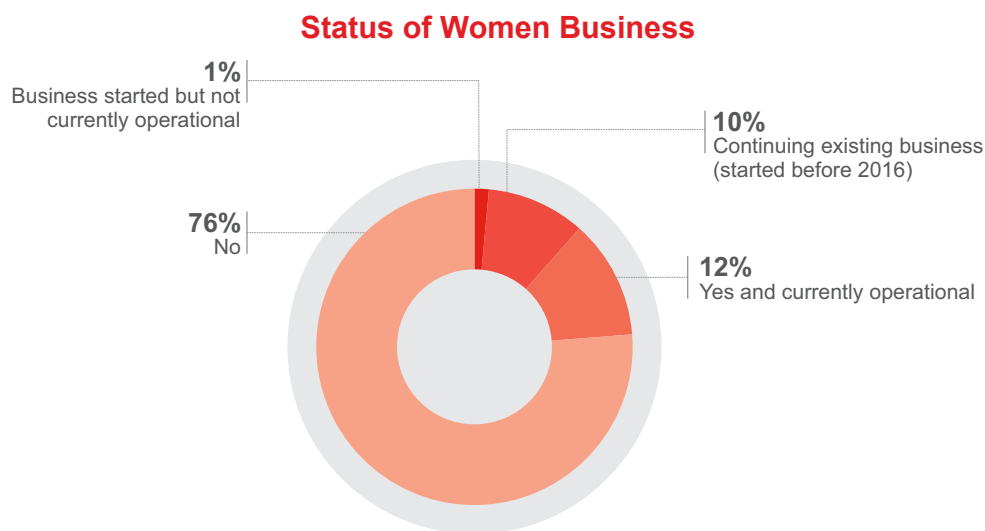


Figure 13: Women's Start-ups

To develop the skills of the target, the project has implemented six-month vocational skill training in line with the guidelines of the Afghan Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) for informal TVET education. It should be noted that given the high rate of illiteracy among the target groups, the six-month period was not sufficient for trainees to adequately learn a skill for establishing a start-up. ActionAid has implemented the REALISE project in a context where most of the target groups did not have formal education. This has adversely affected the project implementation. To address the challenges related to low educational levels, the project could have adapted its implementation approach. For instance, the vocational training courses could be made substantially practical to allow the trainees to learn through observation and learning-by-doing. There is a need for considering a long-term time horizon with a combination of literacy and vocational training followed by post-graduation services comprising mentoring, coaching, and technical assistance.

Furthermore, the selection of the skills covered during the training was done based on a market assessment. However, the market assessment could have been more robust by considering a set of criteria including profitability and income generation potential of skill, market demand and growth potential, factors and resource conditions, market risks, gender aptness (suitability for women), capital requirement, level of innovation, etc.

While the project has been successful in enhancing the trainees' skills, but its interventions related to promoting women's businesses have generated mixed results. The most important challenge as stated above is the lack of access to capital. To address this challenge, the project has established SHGs, which overall were rated as a promising activity by women. However, the amount of loans provided by the SHGs are not yet large enough to finance the establishment of a start-up. The key strengths of the SHGs include the following.

- **Community-led initiative:** Being community-driven they have a higher degree of interest and involvement in the activities and processes.
- **Sustainable microfinance mechanism:** SHGs are sustainable because the community members have realized the importance of having access to interest-free microfinance and the majority of them are willing to continue even without the REALISE project support. During the fieldwork, some community members who were not even targeted by the project also expressed intentions to establish the SHGs by themselves. This is an indication that the target communities have realized the benefits of the groups and are willing to sustain in the future.
- **24/7 availability of interest-free credit:** In contrast to the formal banks, the members can obtain the loans anytime (day or night) from their respective SHGs. More importantly, the loans are interest-free, which is in alignment with the socio-cultural and religious sensitivities of the target communities. However, the lack of interest on loans means that the capacity of the SHGs to give loans is reliant on the contributions of the group members. In other words, the loaning amount grows at a slower rate compared to an interest-driven model.
- **Developing business ideas among local people:** The awareness level of women and men about business ideas has improved, and they are thinking of new ideas to establish businesses in the target areas. If adequately supported, the business ideas have the potential to become durable means of livelihood.
- **Business expansion and improved productivity:** There are cases of beneficiaries in which they have used the internal and revolving loans to expand their business and make it more productive. However, such cases are handful and are largely in Bamyan.
- **Transparent records:** The groups were found to have basic records of the monthly deposits made by the members. These records are maintained in journals accessible to all group members.
- **Elected executive members:** The executive body of the groups consisting of a director, deputy, and cashier are elected through consultation among the project stakeholders. There was no written documentation to verify that the members were elected.
- **Regular meetings:** The written records of the groups show that most of them meet regularly every month. In certain cases, meeting minutes do not exist. The majority group members regularly participate in the meeting.
- **Enhanced social participation:** The group members, most of whom are women have indicated a considerable understanding of their rights and entitlements enshrined in national and international legislation and commitments. As a result of this, the workshop participants narrated an improvement in their social participation at the household and community levels.

On the other hand, the key weaknesses of the SHGs are as follow:

- **Limited understanding of vision, mission, rules, and regulations:** Most members, including the heads in some cases, were ill-informed about their groups' vision and mission. There is a need for orienting the group members on their organization's vision and mission as well as the rules and regulations governing the operations of the groups.

- **Limited use of loans for economic activities:** The review of SHGs record show that in certain cases, the members have taken loan for household and medical expenses. The use of savings for personal consumption is understandable given the prevalent poverty among the targeted households. A majority of the SHGs had recently started giving loans to members, which were yet to mature. Thus, at the time of the evaluation, it was difficult to measure the extent to which the loans would be paid back by the group members.
- **Elite influence in decision-making:** Executive SHG members are highly influential in decision-making, play a leading role in conflict resolution, and hold most of the responsibility. It is critical for executive members to facilitate the participation of other members in decision-making processes and share responsibility with them. This will help to make the groups more inclusive.
- **Limited advocacy efforts:** An absolute majority of the SHGs reported that they had not undertaken any substantial advocacy for the rights and entitlements of the community members, especially women. This is because SHGs still do not have adequate skills to conduct advocacy with government officials. By mandate, SHGs are not designed to conduct advocacy efforts, but given that SHGs are community-driven initiatives, they are rightly positioned to engage in advocacy.
- **Need to function as a community-level referral mechanism for women:** SHGs are well-positioned to serve as a community-level referral mechanism for women. However, the groups rarely refer women to service providers or duty bearers to address their needs and problems. This is primarily due to a lack of awareness among SHGs about relevant service providers. There is a need for mapping the service providers in each province. By design, SHGs are not mandated to function as a community-level referral mechanism because it was the responsibility of reflect circles. Similarly, CDCs already exist in each village responsible to act as a referral mechanism. But reflect circles lack the resources to conduct advocacy and CDCs are male-dominated. The role of SHGs which has some financial resources as a community-level referral mechanism for women's related issue could be essential to explore.
- **Limited funds and budget:** The evaluation also finds that most of the self-help groups have accumulated a very limited budget (from 3,000 AFN to 10,000 AFN), which is understandable in the context of widespread poverty. In fewer cases, they have accumulated a larger amount (50,000 – 60,000 AFN) of funds mainly from engaging in business activities.

The project's efforts to promote women's engagement in income-generating activities through the soap-making group and the beekeeping association were the most successful. Similarly, the project's efforts with the dairy group have been successful to a greater extent, but their key challenge is the unavailability of standardized packaging. According to dairy producers, they produce comparatively better dairy products compared to imported dairy products, but the latter sells better due to their improved packaging. In addition, the dairy producers are yet to achieve the economies of scale needed to reduce the production cost.

CASE STUDY (SOAP-MAKING)

In 2015, the REALISE project established a women's soap-making group in Dawlatabad district of Balkh province. The project delivered training in soap-making and soft skills in marketing and business development. Besides, the group received tools, inputs, packing materials, a Zarang motorcycle for transportation, solar panels for energy generation, and other related support from the project. An exposure visit to a soap-making factory in Mazar-I-Sharif was also facilitated for the group members. The production of soap began in 2016, and currently, women are producing cloth soap and liquid materials. They intend to diversify their product lines in the future. However, a key challenge facing the group is the availability of standard packaging facilities. Currently, used bottles are utilized for storing liquid soap rather than packaging it in a standardized manner.

Generally, the soap is supplied to the local village level market as well as to the district level market. The group has not supplied any soap to the provincial market in Mazar-I-Sharif due to long distances and limited production capacity. The demand for the soap is already so high within the district that the group is struggling to meet the demand.

The group members have reported notable social, economic, and health implications of the soap-making activity on their lives and that of other community members. Since its establishment, the group has produced 231,000 soap bars, averaging 46,200 bars per year. The lowest number (10,000) were produced in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions. Out of 46,200 bars, around 26% (12,200 bars) have been consumed domestically by the group members, which has resulted in improved hygiene and reduction in health issues. At the start of the project, the group members reportedly had no income. The total sales revenue recorded by the group is 1,759,400 AFN (22,849 USD), equaling 4,570 USD per year on an average basis. The group's financial record further highlights a profit of 314,400 (4,083 USD), or 817 USD per year on an average basis.

Compared to the economic implications, the social effects of soap-making activity have been more notable. According to the group members, they are more respected within the household and at the community level. At the community level, the group members play an active role in resolving conflicts and helping women who have experienced violence. They are also actively advocating for the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) and girls. Besides that, they have become influential figures at the district level. The government officials and development agencies regularly visit their factory and seek their advice on development interventions, especially those targeting women.

The evaluation concludes that the skills of both women and men have increased in the target areas. However, women's engagement in business activities is restricted. Thus, the contribution of enhanced skills to their income security has yet to materialize. The project's theory of change has assumed that with improved skills, women would be able to establish businesses and diversify and increase their household income. However, lack of access to affordable credit along with other reasons discussed above undermined the ability of women to significantly contribute towards their household income.

3.4 Outcome III: Collective Engagement, Partnership, and Community Building

Findings related to outcome III of the project are presented below.

Key Finding 14: Social and Economic Engagement of Women Targeted by the Programme Enhanced

The data suggest that the project has brought positive changes in women's social and economic engagement. An absolute majority of the respondents agree (63%) or partially agree with the statement that women have more skills to earn an income than before this project. Similarly, 58% of the respondents agree that women have more income than before followed by 34% who somewhat agree. Moreover, 70% of the consulted individuals agree that women have increased mobility and respect in families than before the project, while 26% somewhat agree and four percent disagree. The qualitative data also point to an increase in the social and economic participation of women. The evaluation team conducted a workshop with non-beneficiary women to compare their skills and confidence level with those who have benefited from the project. The team observed clear differences between the two groups, as women beneficiaries exhibited higher self-confidence, awareness of their rights, food and nutrition security, hygiene, and other similar topics, compared to women who were not targeted by the project.

The increase in women's social and economic participation in the target areas is of paramount importance given the substantial gender gap in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has scored the lowest on the 2021 Global Gender Gap Index in the World²¹. The evaluation also noted an attitudinal change in the community members regarding the importance of women's economic engagement in achieving gender equality. Women indicated that, unlike the situation at the start of the project, their participation in social and economic activities is no longer considered a strange thing. The community influencers such as religious figures, CDCs, and village elders have demonstrated favorable attitudes towards women's social and economic participation. According to women, their participation in CDCs was largely symbolic at the start of the project with little or no say in the preparation of community development plans. However, at present, their opinions and needs are taken to a notable extent by the CDCs, consultation with the female respondents indicated. The workshops also demonstrate that changes in women's lives because of the project are more pronounced in Bamyan compared to Balkh. This is primarily because, in contrast to Balkh, Bamyan's socio-cultural environment offers more freedom and mobility to women.

Table 7: Change in Women's Social and Economic Engagement

Statement	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree
Women have more skills to earn an income than before this project	63%	33%	5%
Women have more income than before this project	58%	34%	8%
Women have increased mobility and respect in families than before the project	70%	26%	4%

However, women are still heavily engaged in tasks that are carried out inside the households such as livestock feeding, milking, cleaning the barn, and processing milk into other products. They are less engaged in activities that require them to travel outside the households such as taking livestock to pasture, livestock selling and buying, and procuring medical services for livestock. Selling milk is the only task where women are equally involved with men, but this is largely because in rural areas milk is sold within the village or at the local market near the village. In addition, women's engagement is low in financial matters such as buying and selling livestock, and to some extent selling milk. Although women's social and economic participation has increased compared to the beginning of the project, their participation in household economic decisions is still lower compared to men.

21. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf

Division of Livestock Related Tasks

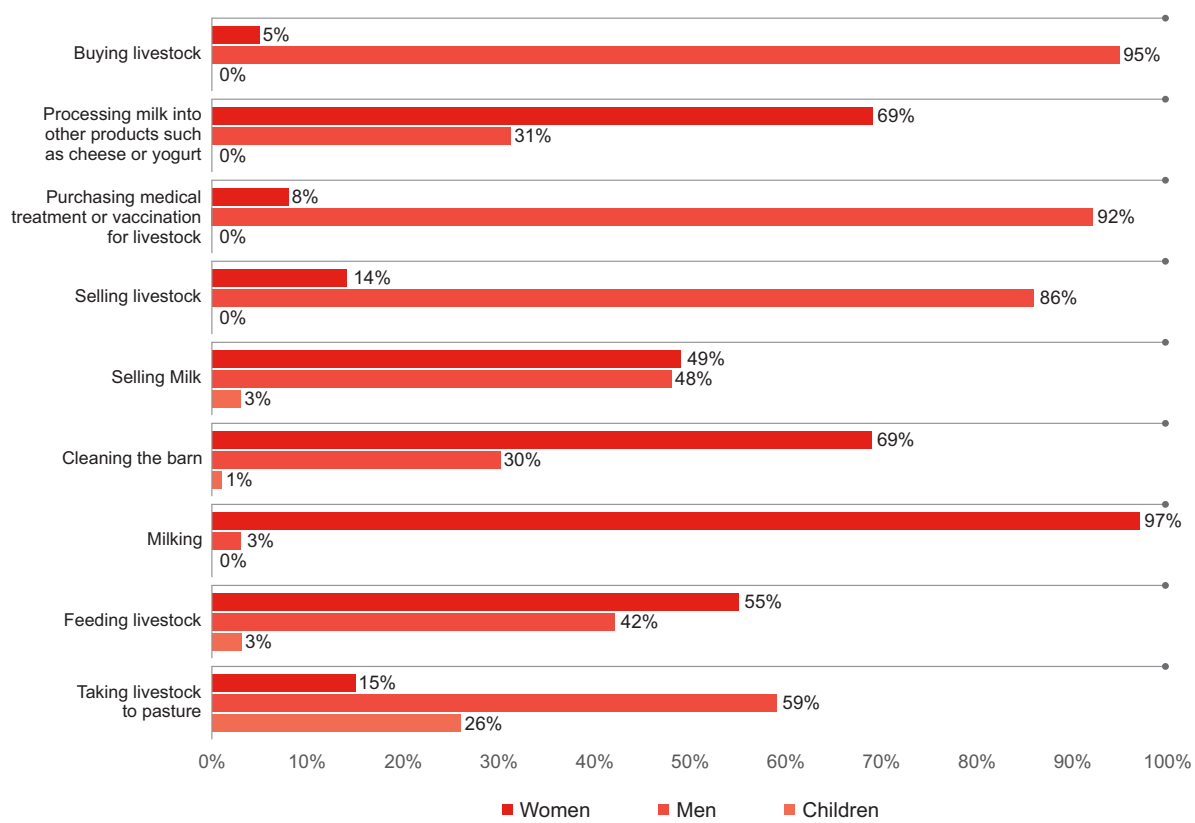


Figure 14: Division of Livestock related Tasks

A similar pattern can be noticed in relation to farming-related tasks. Selling and buying of fruit trees/saplings are largely performed by men with 98% and 97%, respectively. The involvement of women in these tasks is almost non-existing. Similarly, selling agriculture yield is largely performed by men (91%) than women (nine percent), followed by women (nine percent). Children are reportedly not involved in tasks related to economic transactions. Pruning is also predominately done by men (82%), in comparison to women and children with 11% and eight percent, respectively. Compared to other activities, the engagement of women is better in picking (38%), and sorting and grading (38%). Nonetheless, men still dominate the tasks of picking (56%), sorting, and grading (55%). The engagement of children in picking is six percent, while in sorting and grading, it is seven percent.

Division of Farming Related Tasks

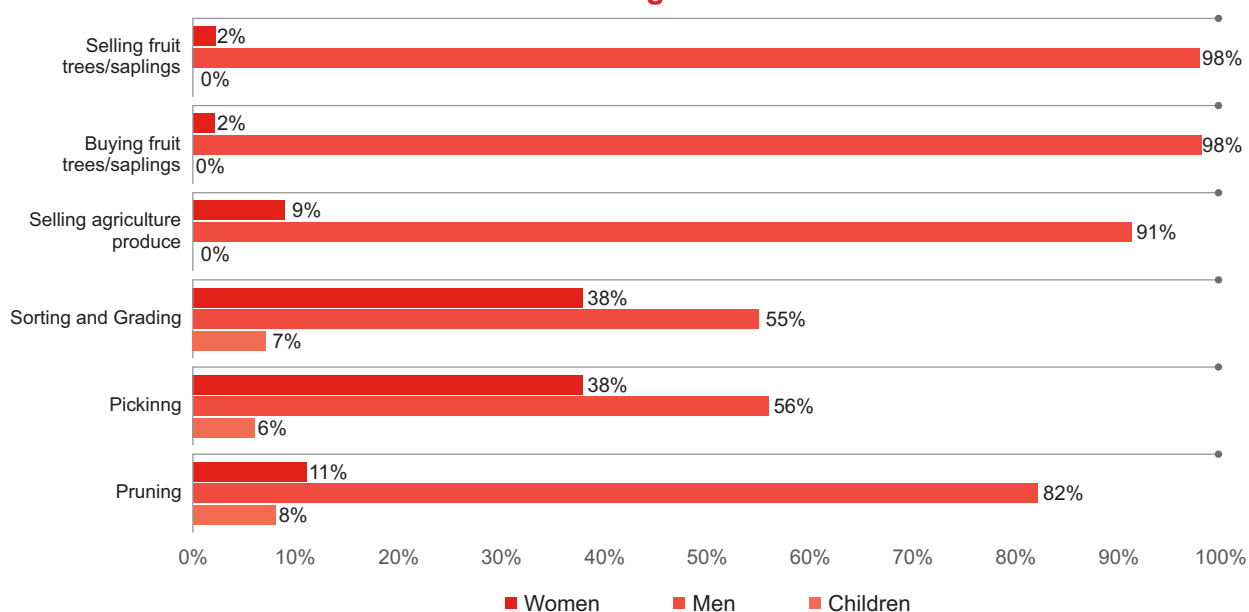


Figure 15: Division of Farming Related Tasks

Overall, the evaluation concludes that women are more engaged in tasks carried out within the household or in the fields near the households such as picking, sorting, and grading fruits. Projects such as REALISE have a long way to make a dent in the long-established and deeply entrenched gender division of labour. The evaluation states so because despite that the project primarily aimed at social and economic participation and empowerment of women, and they are still doing the culturally prescribed chores.

Key Finding 15: Groups Better Organized to Influence Policy Formulation and Service Delivery

In Afghanistan, the CDC is the main local decision-making body for addressing local issues, especially related to development and the community’s use of resources. CDC also functions as the main informal conflict resolution body in rural areas²². During the baseline, 93% of respondents reported that their community had a CDC. Although this aspect is not captured in the evaluation survey, nonetheless, none of the OHW participants reported a lack of existence of CDCs in their areas. The KIIs also suggest that all the villages where the REALISE project was implemented had CDCs, which are vital for participatory project planning, implementation, and monitoring.

In addition, 66% of the surveyed respondents (71% Bamyan; 60% Balkh) stated that either they or a member of their households had a membership of collectives established by the REALISE or by other actors prior to the project. Those who have membership in collectives were probed for the type of group. Over one-third of respondents were members of SHGs (35%), followed by RCs (24%), FSNs (19%), Potato Grower Association (nine percent), Almond Association (seven percent), Cotton Grower Association (one percent), Honey Association (one percent), Women Soap Making Association (two percent) and Women Dairy Group (two percent). The fact that two-thirds of the target groups are associated with groups indicates that the project has made strides in mobilizing the collective power of the target groups to influence service delivery and policy formulation in the target areas.

The evaluation also shows that most of the respondents remain committed to sustaining their membership in the collectives. When asked about whether they will be able to sustain their membership in collectives, 97% confirmed their ability to maintain engagement with groups in the future. Merely three percent were not sure about the sustainability of their membership in collectives.

Membership in Different Groups

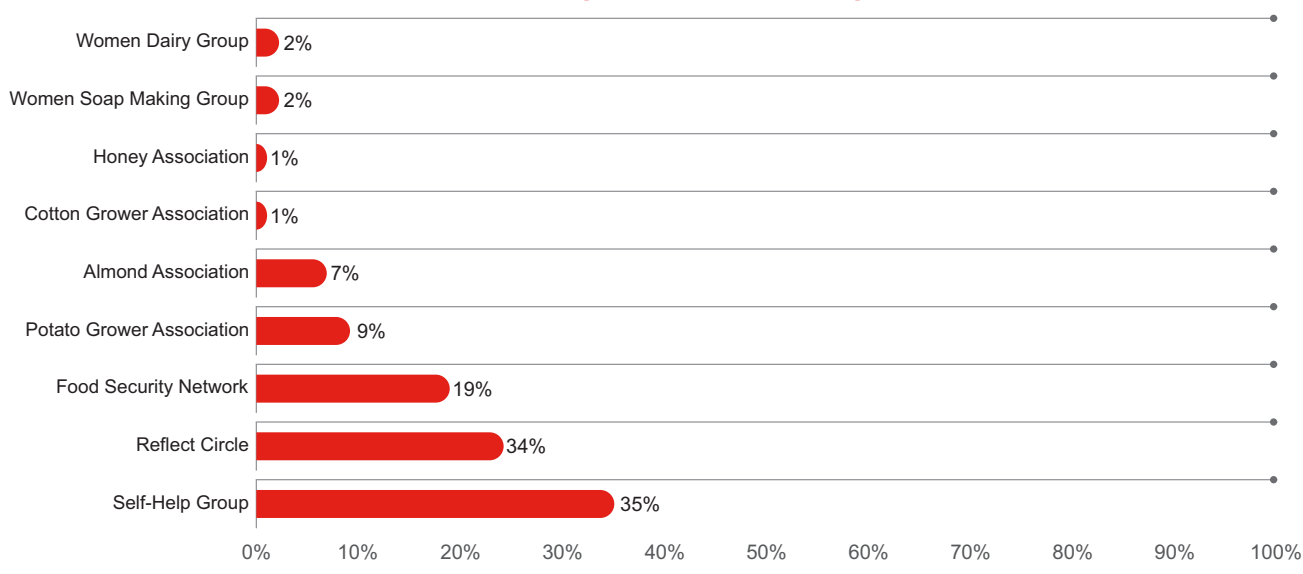


Figure 16: Extent of Group Membership

22. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/sr247_0.pdf

Members of RCs were found influential and engaged in small-scale advocacy at the community level in Bamyan. This is due to the more feasible socio-cultural context of Bamyan for women's participation compared to Balkh. Key members of the implementation team from Balkh are of the opinion that RCs should be dropped in the design of similar future projects in the province. They suggested that, in addition to providing financial services, SHGs could be strengthened to take on the function of the RCs. It is noteworthy that there is a membership overlap between the SHGs and the RCs. Hence, it will be more sensible to have a single platform.

Women members of RC have reportedly experienced positive changes in their lives in Bamyan. Their interpersonal skills, communication skills, literacy skills, numeracy skills, and knowledge on healthy diet and nutrition, women, and child rights have improved considerably. RCs are effective learning platforms for women rather than advocacy channels. RCs in Bamyan, in some instances, have been able to resolve some cases of domestic violence and familial issues for women. As yet, RCs neither have the capacity nor the vision to advocate for women and child rights at the district level or beyond. During KIIs, lack of a conducive environment for women's activities, economic constraints, cultural barriers, and lack of vision among women groups were some of the key factors impeding them to influence large-scale decisions and policymaking affecting their food, livelihood, and socio-economic and political empowerment.

A key planned activity for the project was to connect the RCs and other women's collective to the resource centers established by MoWA in collaboration with the development partners. The evaluation team did not find any evidence suggesting that women's groups had been linked with the resource centers. This could be because the resource centers exist at the provincial level, while the target groups are residing in districts located far from the provincial capitals. It is difficult for women groups to travel long distances to benefit from the resource centers. Besides, the implementing partners cited inactive women resources centers (WRC) and lack of equipment in some resource centers as other reasons for not linking women groups with WRC in the province.

The project's key challenge regarding groups' mobilization was that the target communities did not welcome it initially. Peoples' perception of the REALISE project was largely driven by misconceptions particularly due to its focus on women's empowerment. Likewise, misperceptions about ActionAid and the project resulted in mistrust in the initial few months of the project. Later, people realized the importance of the project in the social and economic empowerment of women and became highly engaged in it.

In conclusion, the evaluation reveals that despite organizing the target groups for collective power over policy formulation and service delivery their influence remains inadequate. The project's theory of change assumes that if organized in collectives, community members would influence policy development and delivery of improved services. The target groups could not meaningfully influence due to the lack of a national network or alliance representing the interests of marginalized groups. Hence, assumption A4²³ of the theory of change has not been valid.

Key Finding 16: Target Groups' Meaningful Influence on Policy Formulation and Service Delivery Remains Limited

Despite being organized in collectives, the evaluation shows that the target groups have not been able to meaningfully influence policy formulation and service delivery in the target areas. The policies are predominantly developed at the national level with little to no participation of the target groups. Similarly, the preparation of development plans and budget which form the foundation for improved services delivery is highly centralized at the national level.

The REALISE project has established advocacy committees in the target provinces, envisioned to identify community problems, identify resources, and launch large-scale advocacy efforts

23. National networks/alliances exist that can represent the interests of marginalized women and men farmers, PWD & IDPs and on women's rights.

at district and provincial levels. Both committees arranged several meetings with CDCs and community people at large. During the meetings in Bamyan province, the committee identified community and district level developmental issues and organized people for taking collective action. Subsequently, advocacy committees carried out advocacy with government officials (district level to provincial, and in some cases to national level) on development issues in their respective communities.

Nonetheless, these efforts were ad hoc in nature and the committees could not effectively utilize their collective power. The evaluation further shows that the groups and collectives do not have comprehensive advocacy plans and strategies to carry out robust advocacy with relevant government authorities. The existence of advocacy plans, and strategies would have allowed the systemization of the efforts. A more notable and troubling challenge undermining the effectiveness of the advocacy efforts is the centralized nature of policy development and budgeting in Afghanistan. That is, policies and the national budget is largely prepared at the national level in Kabul with little to no inputs from the sub-national units. The advocacy with sub-national authorities who have insignificant influence on budget allocations and other key decisions related to service delivery will at the most yield small improvements. Moreover, there is a consensus that the low education of the target groups has undermined their capacity to effectively advocate with duty bearers to seek their rights and improved service delivery.

3.5 Project Performance Against DAC Criteria

The evaluation examined the project according to DAC's²⁴ criteria, namely: Relevance, Efficiency, Effectiveness, Impact, and Sustainability. Findings for each were rated based on the following assessment criteria:

Table 8: OECD/DAC Criteria Assessment

No	Ratings	Description
1	Unsatisfactory	An area where the quantum of findings is substantial enough to put the project activities and gains at considerable risk.
2	Somewhat Satisfactory	An area where the quantum of findings is substantial enough to partially put the project activities and gains at risk.
3	Satisfactory	An area where the quantum of findings is of low substantiality and may not endanger the activities and gains of the project at risk.

Relevance

The evaluation examined the project's relevance in terms of the need of the target groups as well as in terms of priorities of the government of Afghanistan. The relevance of the project goal, objectives, and activities, and the degree to which project implementation was suited to the local context, were also assessed with this criterion. Based on the following key findings, the evaluation rates the project's relevance as "**Satisfactory**."

- The project remains highly relevant as it directly aims to contribute to one of the most pressing challenges of poorer Afghans, i.e., food insecurity. 42% of the country's population was expected to experience a high level of food insecurity between November 2017 and 2021. Similarly, 34% of the population was projected to be in a stressed food security situation²⁵.
- Afghanistan has scored the lowest on the 2021 Global Gender Gap Index in the world²⁶. The project is relevant and deserves appreciation for taking stock of the substantially disadvantaged status of women in Afghanistan.

24. Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of OECD.

25. Ibid

26. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf

- The project also remains relevant to the needs of persons with disabilities, who remain a vulnerable demographic in Afghanistan with limited access to basic services and experiencing discrimination based on their disability. ActionAid has made a deliberate effort to maximize the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the project. For instance, in phase I, ActionAid benefited from the services of Handicap International to train the project implementation team on disability inclusion, which has helped the implementing partners in understanding the basics of disability and reaching out to more persons with disabilities. Similarly, ActionAid encouraged the collectives to provide membership to persons with disabilities. Furthermore, the project implementation team has prioritized persons with disabilities in beneficiary selection. Despite these efforts, the project's statistics on beneficiaries indicate that five percent of the target individuals (seven percent Bamyan; two percent Balkh) targeted are persons with disabilities, lower than the national disability rate of 80% (The Asia Foundation, 2019)²⁷. It was noted during the fieldwork that community members mostly consider individuals with physical disabilities as PWDs while psychological and intellectual disabilities are excluded from the definition of persons with disabilities. Psychological and mental disabilities are also taboo in the country. During the fieldwork, a number of cases were documented where community members were hesitant to declare and accept some persons with disabilities because they were psychologically or mentally disabled. Considering this, the evaluation concludes that the actual inclusion of persons with disabilities is higher than reported (five percent).
- The project remains relevant with the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF) I and II. The project's efforts to create jobs, reduce poverty, increase yields, open markets for farmers and facilitate the social inclusion of women have directly contributed to the development strategy of ANPDF I²⁸. The project also remains relevant with the State-Building (TVET sector) and Market-Building pillar (Job creation) of ANPDF II²⁹. Moreover, the project is relevant with two National Priority Programs (NPPs) of the Afghan government, the Comprehensive Agricultural Development Program, and the Women's Economic Empowerment program, both part of ANPDF I.
- The project is also relevant to the priorities of ActionAid Afghanistan. The key strategic areas of ActionAid in Afghanistan are civic participation, emergency response and resilience, livelihoods, and women's rights³⁰. The REALISE project is primarily relevant to the livelihood thematic area, although it also contributes to other areas of the ActionAid work in Afghanistan. For instance, outcome III on social engagement of the target groups especially women's contributes to civic participation and women's rights.
- The REALISE project is aligned with the development component of the Comprehensive Long-term Partnership between Australia and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan³¹. Under this partnership, the Australian assistance to Afghanistan will support the development priorities and planning of the Afghan government, and as stated above the project contributes to ANPDF I and II. The partnership agreement also stipulates that the governments of Afghanistan and Australia will cooperate to build Afghanistan's capacity to develop and manage its natural resources and agriculture sectors in a transparent and effective manner. Since the REALISE project is heavily focused on the agriculture sector, it is fully aligned with the partnership agreement between the two countries.
- The project is also in line with the five key strategic goals of the Australian government's aid policy: (i) saving lives, (ii) promoting opportunities for all, (iii) sustainable economic

27. <https://asiafoundation.org/2020/05/13/disability-survey-is-afghanistans-first-in-15-years>

28. <https://www.afghanembassy.us/contents/2017/12/documents/ANPDFEnglishWebsite.pdf>

29. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-national-peace-and-development-plan-ii-anpdf-ii-2021-2025-forging-our>

30. <https://afghanistan.actionaid.org/emergency-response-and-resilience>

31. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/afghanistan/pages/comprehensive-long-term-partnership-between-australia-and-the-islamic-republic-of-afghanistan>

development, (iv) effective governance, and (v) humanitarian and disaster response³². The REALISE project directly contributes to the second and third strategic goals of the Australian government's aid policy.

- The project also remains relevant with DFAT's Afghanistan COVID-19 Development Response Plan³³, which stipulates that the pandemic will compound food insecurity, gender violence, and poverty. REALISE has contributed to these in the target areas.
- In the design phase, ActionAid Afghanistan consulted the implementing partners, government entities, CDCs, and other related stakeholders including female and male beneficiaries. In general, the scope of work of the REALISE project is in line with the priorities of the target groups, especially women's priorities and needs, and the local context. Nevertheless, certain activities included in the scope of the project could have been better aligned with the local context and local technologies could have been also adopted. For instance, the introduction of artificial pasture was not appropriate with the climate and soil of Balkh province, and it did not generate the desired outcome. Similarly, RCs have proven less effective in Balkh compared to Bamyan largely because of high illiteracy among women and conservative socio-cultural context.

Effectiveness

The evaluation assessed the project's progress against its intended targets. The evaluation also analysed the assumptions that underpin the theory of change. Based on the following key findings, the evaluation rates the project's effectiveness as "**Somewhat Satisfactory**".

- The project has been effective in promoting updated agricultural practices, which has resulted in higher crop yields. This has translated into improved food security and diverse dietary intake for the target groups. Similarly, some households sell their agriculture yield for income generation.
- The project has been also effective in increasing household income as well as expanding the asset base of the target groups. However, the project has not been able to bring a tangible diversification in income sources.
- Overall, the project stakeholders have demonstrated satisfaction with the quality of the programmatic intervention, but the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of the infrastructure projects implemented in Balkh.
- The project has put a considerable focus on developing the business development capacity of collectives and strived to improve their access to the market, but access to the market remains restricted for most of them.
- There is also a tangible improvement in the employable and business skills of the target groups. However, most female beneficiaries have yet to transform the learned business skills to establishing start-ups.
- SHGs serve as a key community-level platform for facilitating target groups' access to financial resources to establish start-ups. However, rather than investing in income-generating activities, the members usually use loans on personal or household consumption.
- The food banks have not thus far proven effective in addressing the food shortages of target communities in emergency circumstances. Community members' lack of trust in the food banks and pervasive poverty is responsible for their ineffectiveness.
- The activities of the REALISE project were well coordinated with government entities, CDCs, and community influential. For instance, demonstration plots were well coordinated with DAIL, CDCs, farmers, and community people in Bamyan province, resulting in the extension of improved farming practices at a considerable scale.

32. Ibid

33. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/covid-response-plan-afghanistan.pdf>

Efficiency

The evaluation studied the extent to which the project had adequate resources at its disposal and whether the resources were efficiently utilized. Based on the following key findings, the evaluation rates the project's efficiency as "**Somewhat Satisfactory**".

- Generally, the project has had adequate financial resources throughout the implementation. Yet, certain activities were under-resourced which undermined the quality of implementation. For instance, the allocated budget for the infrastructure projects, which the target communities so earnestly demanded, was on the lower end resulting in substandard construction work, particularly in Balkh province. Similarly, the implementing partners are of the opinion that seed production and vocational skills training were among the most impactful activities of the project but were under-budgeted. On the other hand, the project as per the implementing partners had comparatively more budget than needed for the value chains and capacity building workshops.
- In terms of personnel, the implementing partners had adequate technical and support staff to implement the project apart from the M&E personnel. That said, the institutional and technical expertise of the implementing partners, especially LSO was insufficient compared to the scope of the REALISE project. LSO as an entity lacks the institutional capacity to appropriately carry out the support functions such as procurement, financial management, inventory management, and others. Additionally, it has limited staff who have insufficient technical expertise and experience to implement the project. On the other hand, OHW is an established local NGO with operations in more than 20 provinces of Afghanistan. Yet, the staff assigned to the project were found to have limited technical expertise.
- Neither OHW nor LSO had assigned M&E personnel at the field level where the project implementation had taken place. As a result of ad hoc and limited M&E, credible data on the key results of the project were lacking. The feedback mechanism to the project implementation team on what worked and what did not was inadequate. It is worth acknowledging that ActionAid lately took steps towards improving its M&E. These include equipping the M&E department with an M&E Manager and two coordinators, the development of predefined indicators for thematic areas, and the development of an online data collection mechanism with the help of KoBo Toolbox. At the time of the fieldwork, the online data collection platform was being tested and an orientation session was ongoing for the implementing partners.
- The project has also faced a high staff turnover at ActionAid and the local implementing partners. The loss of institutional memory affected the project performance. It was probably due to this reason that during the evaluation, the project did not have credible M&E data on the Foundation Phase regarding certain cases.
- The timeline for implementation of various activities has been adversely affected by delayed approval of the budget, insecurity, and COVID 19. For instance, in certain years, the implementing partners received the approval of the budget in March, almost three months into an implementation year. The partners had to wait for budget approvals to begin implementation. Insecurity in Balkh province delayed the implementation of vocational skills, and the last round of the training could not take place due to pressures from the AOG.

Sustainability

The evaluation studied the sustainability of the project activities and gains beyond its life cycle. The criterion also looked at sustainability measures put in place by the project implementation team. Based on the following key findings, the evaluation rates the project's sustainability as "**Somewhat satisfactory**".

- More than half (57%) of the respondents indicated that their households would be able to sustain the current food security level in the future, which is a notable accomplishment given that the project has worked mostly with the poorest farmers. The target groups are concerned about sustaining their food security due to low precipitation in the last year and the increased possibility of drought, which will directly impact the agricultural yield for the target groups, and by extension put their food security at real risk. Thus, the food security sustainability for less than half of the respondents is uncertain. The project has linked the project with the CDCs in a bid to foster sustainability of the results, but given the resource constraints at the CDCs, there is little probability that they will sustain the project's gains.
- An absolute majority of the individuals (97%) reported that they would sustain their membership in collectives. The producer groups and associations are confident to sustain their operations beyond the project funding cycle. However, their continued engagement in value chains is subject to the profitability of the business operations.
- The project does not have a repair and maintenance plan for the infrastructure schemes once the project funding ends. Without a repair and maintenance plan, the schemes could become out of order in the future.
- The project has favorably changed the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the target groups regarding food security and nutrition as well as women's social and economic engagements. The benefits of such changes will remain relevant beyond the project funding cycle.

Impact

The evaluation looked at the project's impact on the target groups' food security, resilience, income, and asset-based and social engagement. Based on the following key findings, the evaluation rates the project's impact as "**Satisfactory**".

- The project has been impactful in terms of agricultural productivity. For instance, the average reported crop yield for wheat stands at 3,323 kilograms per hectare among the wheat-cultivating households, 20% higher than the average yield in the baseline (2,772 kilograms per hectare). Similar increments can be noticed in vegetable, cotton, and other primary crop yield compared to the start of the project.
- There is also a reduction in hunger among the target groups and a decline in the use of drastic and severe coping strategies to deal with food shortages.
- The project beneficiaries report an increase in the income level of their households. The average monthly household income stands at 258 USD (19,878 AFN) while considering the household size, the monthly average individual income is around 45 USD (3,444 AFN). The baseline report shows that 88% of the target groups were living in pervasive poverty (1.25 USD per day), while the final evaluation reveals that 56% of the target groups fall in pervasive poverty, a 32% reduction. Similarly, the baseline suggests that 80% of the target groups were living in severe poverty (0.75 USD per day), higher than now (29%).
- The project has also been impactful in expanding the asset base of the target groups. For instance, in the baseline, around 86% of the households stated that they have land, 20% higher than the baseline (66%). Similarly, the average number of cows owned by the consulted households stands at 2.6, higher than the baseline (2). This is a 30% increment in cow ownership compared to the start of the project. The most notable significance could be witnessed in sheep ownership, 13 per household, 44% higher than the baseline.
- 73% of the respondents reported having more skills to find a job than before the project,

and 70% believed to have more skills to start a business than before the project.

- Most of the respondents (87%) stated that women in their households know about nutritious food. This indicates that the project has been impactful in enhancing the awareness of the target groups on nutrition and dietary considerations.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of the respondents agree that women have more skills to earn an income than before the project, followed by 33% who somewhat agree. Moreover, 70% of the consulted individuals agree that women have increased mobility and respect in families than before the project, while 26% somewhat agree and four percent disagree.
- COVID 19 impacted the project results. For instance, the sales of soap-making producer groups, beekeeping association, and almond association plunged in 2020 due to the closure of the marketplaces to avoid the spread of the virus. Similarly, OHW, unfortunately, lost key staff to COVID-19, affecting the institutional memory of the project. The project's response to COVID-19 is worth appreciation. The project delivered awareness to communities on COVID 19 through RCs and other target groups and distributed masks and other hygiene items. COVID 19 signboards and posters were also distributed to the target people to inform the communities about the virus.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation concludes that the REALISE project has made notable progress towards its intended goal and objectives. The target groups have become more resilient at the individual and household levels compared to the start of the project. The increased resilience is attributable to enhanced agricultural productivity, an increase in livestock production and the collective social structure of Afghanistan.



The project's efforts regarding increased learning and adoption of the new agricultural practices have been effective in terms of enhancing agricultural productivity, as there is a notable increase in the yield of major crops and vegetables. Similarly, there is an increase in livestock production as households spend their surplus income on buying livestock as an income diversification strategy. The improved agriculture and livestock production have enhanced food security in the target areas, characterized by better access to diverse food items. Similarly, the income level and asset base of the target groups have expanded as well as they have a better skill set to find employment or start a business. Nonetheless, the objective to diversify the income sources of people was not materialized.

The evaluation also concludes that the employability and business skills of women in the target areas have improved but a majority are yet to engage in business start-ups, mainly due to lack of capital. In addition, the evaluation points to an enhanced social and economic engagement of women than the beginning of the project, which is of paramount importance given the substantial gender gap in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the target groups are better organized through the memberships of collectives to influence policy formulation and service delivery. Nevertheless, the target groups are yet to meaningfully influence policy formulation and service delivery due to the absence of regular advocacy and the lack of utilization of collective power by the community members.

The evaluation presents numerous lessons learned and best practices for ActionAid and other project stakeholders. There were activities such as artificial pasture which were included in the design of the project but did not fit well to the context of the target provinces. The project efforts in the poultry value chain did not generate the expected results. On the other hand, demonstration plots proved to be effective in promoting new agricultural practices. Reflect Circles also proved successful in organizing women to advocate for their rights in Bamyán, while they did not generate the desired outcome in Balkh. Another major lesson learned for Action Aid is that the duration (six months) of literacy and vocational training courses during the training might not be sufficient for trainees to adequately learn a skill to find a job or start a business.

Based on consultations with the project stakeholders, the evaluation entails the following recommendations.

1. The demonstration plots and certified seed production and multiplication have played an instrumental role in increasing crop yield which contributed to the food and income security, and the resilience of the target groups. These activities have the potential for replication at a larger scale, especially in communities not targeted by the REALISE project.
2. The target communities in both Balkh and Bamyán are facing water scarcity. It is therefore vital to focus on small-scale irrigation projects such as check dams. The project did implement irrigation projects, but there is a need for increasing these projects given the demand in the target areas. Similarly, there is a need for focusing on the hard components of the project as the results from such activities are more tangible compared to the soft components. The hard components help to secure the community buy-in towards the project.
3. Since the productivity of certified seeds if cultivated in the same land overtime changes. Therefore, it is imperative for farmers to exchange and circulate their seeds every year with farmers from other communities which can yield improved crops and products for everyone. The project can do this by creating a cooperation platform between farmers at the local level where they can share their seeds. The establishment of such platforms is in line with the seed law of Afghanistan, which is very restrictive especially for wheat.
4. The REALISE project predominantly focused on women's capacity development, although, it was not always the case as community men have also benefited from certain

capacity development efforts. Training and capacity building of both women and men is key to women's empowerment. Men as change agents at the community level can prove handy in promoting women's rights to social, political, and economic participation.

5. The project needs to continue linking the target producers and associations with the major national and provincial markets to improve their income. This could be done through exposure visits and participation in exhibitions at the provincial and national levels. Also, enhancing the quality of products by associations and business groups and packaging can help better market access.
6. Balkh province has notable potential for saffron cultivation because saffron has a high tolerance to drought and requires comparatively less water, while water scarcity is critical in the province. Saffron also offers a better market value compared to other crops. Therefore, any future projects related to agriculture needs to focus on the saffron value chain.
7. Income diversification is key to a sustainable livelihood. ActionAid should consider additional focus on non-agricultural value chains in the future. Although, the selection of non-agricultural value chains should be based on a thorough understanding of the market in the target areas.
8. The SHGs function as a key source of funding for establishing start-ups. However, there is a need for orienting the groups' members on its vision, mission, rules, and regulations. Besides that, the group members should be encouraged to use the loans they obtain from the groups for income-generating activities rather than for personal and household consumption. Also, it is critical for the executive members of the groups to facilitate the participation of other members in key decision-making processes and share responsibility with them, as this will help to make the groups more inclusive than they are now. The groups can also function as a community-level referral mechanism for vulnerable individuals especially women to service providers at the district, provincial, and national levels.
9. The artificial pasture did not produce the desired outcomes in Balkh due to water scarcity and incompatibility issues. The evaluation concludes this activity was not given adequate consideration during the design phase. Going forward, it is necessary for ActionAid to adequately deliberate during the design on the compatibility of activities with the context of the provinces where the interventions will be implemented.
10. The M&E system at ActionAid has witnessed improvement in recent times, but the implementing partners' M&E needs an overhaul. The implementing partners' current M&E is insufficient to steer a high-quality ambitious project like REALISE. There is a need for including adequate human and financial resources in the design phase for M&E work.

ANNEXES

ANNEX I: LIST OF KEY INFORMANTS

	Designation	Gender	Organization	Province
1.	REALISE Project Officer	Male	LSO	Bamyan
2.	REALISE Project Officer	Male	LSO	
3.	District Governor	Male	Panjab District	
4.	Director Of Rural Rehabilitation and Development	Male	Directorate Of Rural Rehabilitation and Development	
5.	Extension Worker	Male	DAIL	
6.	Group Head	Female	Dara-e-Ali SHG	
7.	Cashier	Female	Dara-e-Ali SHG	
8.	Finance Officer	Male	LSO	
9.	CDC Head	Male	Said Abad CDC	
10.	Secretary	Female	Kata Qala CDC	
11.	Group Head	Female	Said Abad SHG	
12.	CDC Head	Male	Rustam CDC	
13.	Social Mobilizer	Female	LSO	
14.	Project Officer	Male	Actionaid Bamyan	
15.	Social Mobilizer	Male	Actionaid Bamyan	
16.	Deputy Head	Female	Shahi SHG	
17.	DAIL Manager	Male	DAIL	
18.	Group Head	Female	Shahi SHG	
19.	Cashier	Female	Zardsang SHG	
20.	Head	Female	Zardsang SHG	
21.	Network Member	Female	Kata Qala FSN	
22.	CDC Head	Male	Shahi CDC	
23.	Group Member	Female	Serak SHG	
24.	Cashier	Female	Sarbolaq SHG	
25.	Group Head	Female	Kata Qala SHG	
26.	Group Head	Female	Rustam SHG	
27.	RC Head	Female	Serak RC	
28.	RC Head	Female	Said Abad RC	
29.	RC Member	Female	Raql RC	
30.	Member	Male	Potato Association	
31.	Member	Male	Potato Association	
32.	Member	Female	Honey Association	
33.	Member	Female	Honey Association	
34.	Program Coordinator	Male	OHW	
35.	Project Officer	Male	OHW	
36.	Social Mobilizer	Female	OHW	
37.	Social Mobilizer	Male	OHW	
38.	Group Member	Female	Buzaregh SHG	
39.	CDC Head	Male	Charbagh Saidan CDC	

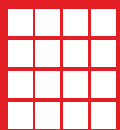
40.	Extension Manager	Male	DAIL	Balkh	
41.	Cashier	Female	Chahardawri SHG		
42.	Technical Office	Male	DAIL		
43.	CDC Head	Male	Qultaq CDC		
44.	CDC Head	Male	Sar Tapa CDC		
45.	Member	Male	Almond Association		
46.	RC Member	Female	Khwaja Kakeldar RC		
47.	CDC Member	Male	Joi Arab CDC		
48.	CDC Member	Female	Joi Arab CDC		
49.	Head	Male	Farukh Abad CDC		
50.	Group Head	Female	Soap Making Association		
51.	Group Head	Male	Almond Association		
52.	CDC Head	Female	Qultak SHG		
53.	RC Member	Female	Chekar RC		
54.	Cashier	Female	Ana Geldi SHG		
55.	RC Member	Female	Qarandoqai SHG		
56.	Director	Male	Cotton Association		
57.	Network Member	Male	Arigh Ayligh		
58.	Network Head	Male	Masjid-e-Ranga		
59.	CDC Head	Male	Masjid-e-Ranga CDC		
60.	CDC Head	Male	Naqchar Abad CDC		
61.	Group Head	Female	Aagh Masjed SHG		
62.	Community Facilitator	Male	OHW		
63.	Association Member	Female	Dairy Association		
64.	Group Head	Female	Qaria-E-Afghania SHG		
65.	Project Manager	Male	ActionAid Afghanistan		Kabul
66.	Project Coordinator	Male	ActionAid Afghanistan		
67.	Project M&E Officer	Male	ActionAid Afghanistan		
68.	Senior Program Manager	Male	DFAT		
69.	Project Manager	Male	World Vision		
70.	Project Manager	Male	Oxfam Novib		
71.	Project Manager	Male	AKF		
72.	Ace Coordinator	Male	ACE		
73.	Program Director	Male	LSO		
74.	M&E Officer	Male	LSO		
75.	Director Of Alternative Livelihood	Male	MAIL		

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