

## EGYPT RURAL AGRIBUSINESS STRENGTHENING PROJECT

# INNOVATIONS IN AGRIBUSINESS ENGAGEMENT: NEW MODELS FROM EGYPT

## Remote Agribusiness Engagement during COVID-19

### Facilitating successful harvest seasons in the COVID-19 context

The emergence of COVID-19 in Egypt has severely stressed agricultural markets and threatens food security, with stay-at-home orders and rising case numbers during growing and harvest seasons. Good agricultural practices play a crucial role in smallholder farmers' income—particularly in remote areas of Upper Egypt and the Delta, where the Feed the Future Egypt Rural Agribusiness Strengthening Project works. During the spring of 2020, thousands of farmers who received Project technical support in the winter season started to harvest onions, potatoes, fennel, tomatoes, mangoes, and dates. The Project previously engaged in person with farmers and agribusinesses alike through capacity-building programs, technical assistance, hands-on farm demonstrations, and meetings to facilitate business partnerships. When national stay-at-home orders were extended indefinitely, the Project sought new ways to continue assistance and ensure harvest season success.

### Responsive and personalized remote technical assistance

The Project team knew business-as-usual was not realistic for the farmers who rely on the Project's technical support. The team deftly adopted new tools to implement remote technical assistance, shifted business meetings online, and creatively rethought other technical assistance to fit within the new COVID-19 reality. Remote engagement took various forms designed for different contexts and beneficiaries. Strategies included phone calls, virtual meetings, and using SMS and WhatsApp to send text and voice messages, photos, videos, and on-demand question-and-answer support. 11 WhatsApp groups, each reaching different value chains and collectively 2,578 smallholder farmers, now provide spaces for beneficiaries to receive guidance, pose questions to peers and technical staff, and even share videos of their crops for personalized support from Project staff and consultants.

In the case of milestone events, this pivot to remote engagement ran counter to conventional knowledge. However, the Project executed three successful virtual events through Google Meet, celebrating a mango festival day in Luxor and fennel harvest day in Qena by showcasing the results of Project-facilitated contracts and technical assistance to farmers, and facilitating a virtual MOU signing with USAID/Egypt and Giza Seeds & Herbs, a leading exporter of herbs and spices.



*Fennel Harvest Day in Qena, April 2020*

Though the Project built a remote model from the ground up, it reached out to pre-existing groups of participants with targeted messages linking past training with new realities. For example, the Project reached a network of nearly 900 women who previously attended diet diversity trainings, sharing gender awareness messages and information about nutrition, hygiene, COVID-19 risk management, and improved diets to strengthen immunity against infection. Most of these women opted to receive regular nutrition and personal hygiene tips from the Project's Community Nutrition Educators (CNEs), who send many of the virtual messages directly to those restricted by COVID-19.

The success of remote technical assistance relies on constant internal and external feedback mechanisms to ensure it is effective and valuable. The Project receives feedback from beneficiaries through WhatsApp and SMS messages and adjusts technical assistance to respond to expressed needs. CNEs also survey beneficiaries by phone to hear what outreach and two-way communications they find most helpful and adapt technical assistance based on these responses. The Project actively collects feedback on WhatsApp gender awareness messages via weekly phone surveys to evaluate women's satisfaction and perceived benefits.

**“The event really showcased our ability to do great work even in times of adversity and I think will echo through discussions. There is a lot of talk on the larger topic of maintaining livelihoods for Egyptian workers and supporting the productivity of the Egyptian marketplace as a whole. This partnership does an outstanding job at both.”**

*Sarah Atwood Barma  
USAID/Egypt's Program Office Deputy Director  
on the virtual fennel harvest day.*

## Invaluable support networks and productivity on the rise

From April to June 2020, the Project virtually reached more than 2,500 participants with training messages and technical recommendations. In just weeks, the value chain WhatsApp groups became invaluable tools for beneficiaries to build relationships and expand their knowledge of sustainable growing, harvesting, and post-harvest handling. Within these spaces, farmers learn through the experiences of others. In certain areas, productivity and incomes are already rising due to the Project's real-time support. In Qena, fennel productivity grew 59 percent over the previous year and is expected to raise incomes by 116 percent.

The Project's flexible response meant beneficiaries never experienced a gap in timely technical assistance during the growing and harvest periods for basil, date palm, fennel, grape, mango, onion, pomegranate, potato, and tomato. The Project also has continued to conduct virtual business matching meetings between smallholder farmers and high-end buyers to open marketing channels and uncover opportunities for farmers. The Project's partner producer organizations, for example Riad Alsaleheen Association in Aswan and Sahel Selim Agriculture Cooperative in Assiut, have disseminated Project guidance to their members, cascading information-sharing both in person and online. The Ahl-Balady Association created a website to upload photos and other guidance from the Project's remote support. In Assiut, Sahel Selim Association's female leaders are receiving Project training to support their initiative of training rural women on nutrition and hygiene.

## The future of remote assistance

While the pandemic continues, the Project will continue using remote approaches. But even after social distancing is no longer required, the Project will work to permanently incorporate remote approaches into its strategy, which would have seemed infeasible prior to COVID-19. WhatsApp groups and other virtual tools will enable beneficiaries to stay engaged with valuable technical resources to supplement and boost the long-term effectiveness of in-person trainings.

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*The Feed the Future Egypt Rural Agribusiness Strengthening Project, a USAID funded activity, is piloting and scaling up innovative agribusiness models to benefit smallholder farmers of horticultural products. In this series of Technical Briefs, we highlight the strategies and approaches the Project is taking to encourage farmers, producer organizations (groups of farmers such as farmer associations or cooperatives), and private sector actors to do business differently, ultimately increasing smallholder farmer incomes and integrating them into more sophisticated supply chains.*