**Brighter future**

BY ANDROULLA KAMINARA & PAMELA COKE-HAMILTON 2021-03-11

THEY say that growth is best when built from the ground up.

Recently, a new agricultural growth strategy was unveiled to the Pakistan cabinet. If approved, the seven-year plan aims for an agricultural growth rate of 7.5 per cent per annum by 2027. With a view to reducing poverty and generating inclusive growth, one can say that a seed has been planted with this initiative.

Agriculture represents 21pc of Pakistan`s GDP and around 68pc of the population is engaged in farming directly or indirectly through production, processing, or distribution of major agricultural commodities.

Given its role in employment, food security and the economy, it is a strategic sector for pro-poor growth and rural development.

This was the impetus behind the launch of our project `Growth for Rural Advancement and Sustainable Progress`, known as GRASP.

Together, the Pakistan government, European Union and the International Trade Centre are working to reduce poverty and promote sustainable and inclusive growth through development of rural micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan.

However, Covid-19 dealt a harsh blow to the agricultural sector in Pakistan. From a macro perspective, we witnessed lower levels of investment in the sector, national lockdowns and reduced access to inputs. These challenges were especially harsh on rural agri-businesses in Sindh and Balochistan.

GRASP is solution-oriented, and to ensure our interventions are demand-driven and relevant we needed to hear from businesses on the ground. What was their reality? How have they adapted? What support do they need? And how we can help? We reached out to agribusinesses and farmers to hear first-hand what they were grappling with. The responses were sobering but the resilience showed was heartening. Many of them adopted at least one action to counter the pandemic`s challenges.

Where possible, they sought to minimise layoffs of staff. Where financing was limited, they used savings or borrowed from informal sources. Where production was slow, they sought new suppliers, boosted marketing efforts to promote sales and fortified their online presence.

These businesses showed incredible resilience in the face of adversity. However, much more is needed to repair the economic and social damage caused by the pandemic.

In our survey conducted in 2020, we saw the real impact these business had to endure: nearly 92pc of agribusinesses and farms said their business operations had been affected by the pandemic, 75pc reported of these being moderately to strongly af fected.74pc of surveyed agribusinesses and 72pc of farmers said they urgently needed help to form strategies to foster the survival of their enterprises. They also pointed to immediate needs such as increasing input availability, market information dissemination, and support in accessing existing loans and grants.

In addition, the health crisis has laid bare some truths which if left unchecked, could deepen inequalities. Women-led agribusinesses and farmers are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and this has serious ripple effects on the social welfare of family, communities and society. Women`s economic empowerment should remain a priority for all in these unpredictable times.

Pakistani women must always be a part of the discourse andresponse.

GRASP is geared towards creating the right conditions for growth. The project`s response to Covid-19 is focused on enabling the most vulnerable of the rural population, including women and youth, to continue toearn a sustainable livelihood.

The project seeks to remedy the concerns of these MSMEs directly.

We focus on supporting applications and access to available financing schemes, providing critical inputs and support to actors to ensure the proper functioning of value chains, supporting investment insafety and hygiene, and providing emergency support through a matching grant facility.

We also offer support for developing policy measures and recommendations for rural and agriculture development.

The timing of this support will build and maintain the momentum of the government of Pakistan`s growth strategies for fast rural reforms, and anti-poverty programmes such as Ehsaas. An inclusive approach to help those in need is more urgent than ever.

MSMEs in Pakistan can play a meaningful role in the achievement of the UN Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development. Ultimately, you do indeed reap what you sow, and now is the time to think beyond just formulating policies. This is the time to lean in and play our role together to future proof against likely crises, to do this through the lens of a green recovery, and to continue to put women at the heart of our resilience building. Androulla Kaminara is ambassador of the European Union to Pakistan.

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