Purdue University and USWDP continue to make progress toward establishing Agribusiness BS programs at five Afghan universities: Balkh, Kandahar, Khost, Kunduz, and Nangarhar universities. Dr. Kevin McNamara (Purdue), Dr. Don Breazeale (Purdue) and Mr. Hamid Faisal (Purdue) worked with the deans at each of the five universities to develop steering committees, conduct an agribusiness industry assessment, design staff training, and develop and implement the Bridge Program for students. The Bridge Program was initiated in the winter of 2015 with students at each of the participating institutions as a means of introducing agribusiness to the universities. The Bridge Program (similar to a minor in the U.S. higher education system) is a two-year program for undergraduate students in their third and fourth years. These students participate in intensive introductory agribusiness training—divided between lecture and practical application. Each of these workshops use a hands-on approach in which students:

1) Learn basic concepts related to economics, management, finance and other disciplines;
2) Practice applying these concepts to current issues and management decisions in agribusiness in Afghanistan; and
3) Develop educational and outreach materials for university faculty, students, consumers, and other agriculture business owners based on the knowledge gained in the workshops.

Importantly, while each workshop focuses on different commodities, the concepts, technical skills and management principles are readily applied across all agribusiness firms. The knowledge and technical skills the students learn are a direct reflection of the skills urgently needed in the Afghanistan economy, ensuring the students will have much greater opportunities to find meaningful employment upon completion of the program.
Overview:

Balkh Province remains one of the key agricultural production regions in Afghanistan with potential for growth in the industry sector and is the economic center for northern Afghanistan (RRERS, n.d.). A suitable business environment, status as a trading hub, and a growing agriculture industry attract new investment in processing and packaging of dried fruits and nuts. Balkh agribusinesses import seed, fertilizers, pesticides and agriculture machinery from Central Asia. Exact provincial growth is not available, but some estimate a 20% annual growth (Fishstein, 2013). New businesses in poultry production, processing and commercial agriculture are growing and this places academic institutions in great demand to graduate students with the skills in agribusiness management and postharvest handling.

Afghanistan’s economy relies heavily on agricultural growth; the agriculture sector offers more employment opportunities than any other sector and supplies a variety of food for domestic household consumption. The agriculture sector contributes 28% to national GDP and employs more than 59% of the population. World Bank (2014) reports that the agriculture industry will continue to grow by 8% in the next ten years if the right policies are implemented to support the sector. Agriculture has the potential to create an additional 1.3 million full-time jobs in food processing, marketing, storage and transport over the next decade. As the agriculture sector continues to evolve with emerging new agriculture businesses in the domestic market, there is an urgent need for agriculture professionals with managerial skills in farm management, post-harvest handling and agriculture business management. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry highlighted the lack of skilled graduates who can offer best management practices for local agriculture firms in agriculture market analysis and price determination and who have the ability to develop marketing materials (MoCI, 2016). The initial industry assessment done by the Purdue team in
Afghanistan shows Afghan universities do not offer market-oriented degree programs in food technology or agribusiness management, two skill areas needed to meet the needs for jobs in Afghanistan’s agriculture sector (Faisal, McNamara, & Breazeale, 2016). Purdue University has partnered with five regional universities (Nangarhar, Kandahar, Balkh, Herat, Kunduz) to provide training in technical skills and support to establish bachelor degree programs in agribusiness management to fill the vacant gap in academic institutions. The Purdue-USWDP team has initiated the Agribusiness Bridge Training program to build capacity in the agriculture faculties to teach a new degree in agribusiness management.

Workshop Objectives:

Purdue-USWDP’s efforts to strengthen the capacity of the faculties in all five regional universities (Balkh, Kandahar, Kunduz, Khost and Nangarhar) continue to improve the skills they need to eventually teach in the agribusiness management degree program. Bridge Training will improve teaching skills in agribusiness management and computer application. The short-term training in agribusiness management and excel computer application is an important step toward curriculum and course syllabus development. The Bridge Training is designed to improve faculties’ teaching skills on introductory lessons on agribusiness management, economics, agriculture marketing and excel computer application.

The primary aim of the training was to improve the capacity of the faculties to teach BS degree and assess their skills if they need further support and capacity building. Therefore, three faculties from Kunduz University each Senior Teaching Assistant Atiqullah Siddiqi, Teaching Assistant Abdul Khalil Bahzan Parsa, Junior Teaching Assistant Sara Sahbzada and two from Balkh University each Associate Professor Mohammad Arif Shamsi and Assistant Professor Zarir Sharaf, who were trained last year in the Bridge Agribusiness Training Program for Instructors, led the training program. Secondly, students that have different backgrounds within the agriculture department learn new skills to succeed in their future careers, and it will make them more competitive and employable in the job market. These trainings have created strong working relationships between Kunduz and Balkh university staff for the curriculum development and academic support for the future.

Workshop Activities:

Purdue-USWDP held a weeklong Bridge Agribusiness Training Program for twenty students at Balkh University. The beneficiaries of the training were eight third year students from Kunduz University who travelled to Balkh and 12 students from the hosting Balkh University. The Bridge Training program lasted for 6 days that consisted of lectures, group activities and an industry tour.

Sara Sahbzada teaches supply and demand and its application to agriculture businesses.
Frist, Shershah Ameri, USWDP Senior Program Officer, led the first morning session on an introduction to agribusiness. The prime focus was to teach the importance of agribusiness in Afghanistan’s future economy. Students were exposed to the concepts of management functions and its importance to the agribusiness manager. Hamid Faisal, USWDP Agribusiness Program Manager, led the computer application training every afternoon, along with Senior Teaching Assistant Atiqullah Seddiqi. The excel computer application covered hands-on training in spreadsheet and basic excel function needed for decision making in agribusiness enterprises. Associate Professor Mohammad Arif Shamsi and Junior Teaching Assistant Sara Sahbzada introduced economic principles and key concepts important for business management, followed by discussions on how those concepts can help agribusiness managers for decision-making. To make sure students grasped the concepts, they were called to white boards to draw supply and demand curves and manipulate the factors that shift the curve.

Teaching Assistant Abdul Khalil Parsa led marketing of agricultural products, and he covered principles of marketing and market structure in Afghanistan. Mr. Parsa presented developing a marketing plan and engaged students to work in groups to outline a marketing plan for a local tomato paste factory. He divided students into groups of three to write an outline for a startup business in Balkh province, and then students were asked to present their outline to their classmates for discussion.

Workshop Outcomes:
Modern day agriculture education focuses on “learning by doing” to put students in working environments to demonstrate competency. Therefore, in the last day of the training, students toured three operational Agribusinesses to relate their newly acquired skills and to think more critically about daily business operation. Students visited Pakiza dairy plant and interacted with the owner and workers on marketing and supply and demand of the dairy products in the local market. Trainees asked critical questions on operation and market outreach and followed by visiting soybean processing plants and the Al-Mubashir food company. The industry tour gave students an overview of operational business and how they are managed daily. Connecting industry with academic institution is a vital step to training new graduates with skills relevant to industry needs. Linkages between industry and academic institutions will create a working environment and industry may offer opportunities to solve industry challenges. The field visit and industry tour have already linked Balkh University Faculty of Agriculture with agribusinesses with an opportunity for potential collaboration for future employment and internships for third year and fourth year students. Three food firms in Balkh province committed to accept 5-10 students for one to two
month or two internship to learn experience. Internship opportunity will give students real-world working experience that will make them more employable.

At end of the training all twenty students took post-test for agribusiness management and excel computer application sections measuring the progress level. Pre-test and post-test indicate that students have improved by 15% and 21% on basic of agribusiness management and excel spreadsheet respectively.

Next Steps:
Students learned basic skills in agribusiness and excel spreadsheet which will give them a higher chance to get jobs in the industry. Students will be able to develop marketing plans for startup agricultural business and develop careers as agricultural business managers or consultants. Group projects gave students an opportunity to apply skills in the context of commercial projects in livestock, fruit, vegetable and food processing.

References:


