

Exclusive Interview

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ICMA: How is FAO improving food safety and in vulnerable communities in Pakistan?

Florence Rolle: Over the last two years, one of the main focuses of FAO Pakistan's work has been enhancing food safety for two main reasons: ensuring safe food access for all Pakistanis and aligning with international standards to boost agricultural exports. In collaboration with the Ministry of National Food Security and Research (MNFSR), FAO will launch a comprehensive food control system assessment this summer using WHO/FAO guidelines. This assessment will identify gaps and propose improvements for an effective and efficient national food control system.

Meanwhile FAO is working on several specific fronts related to food safety:

- 1) Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a significant global threat, linked to 5 million deaths in 2019. FAO is helping Pakistan implement Codex Alimentarius AMR standards, focusing on risk analysis, monitoring, and reducing antimicrobial use in agriculture.
- 2) FAO is also supporting MNFSR in developing a national action plan to control pesticide residues and aflatoxins in food, coupled with capacity-building programs to ensure safer food and better health.
- 3) Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) causes over \$692 million in annual losses in Pakistan. FAO and the Punjab Livestock Department are running vaccination campaigns to reduce FMD prevalence and transmission risk.
- 4) Finally, FAO is collaborating with United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and MNFSR to strengthen animal health systems against zoonotic diseases, and health threats through a One Health approach.

All these initiatives aim to improve food safety, public health, and economic growth in Pakistan.

ICMA: What's FAO's plan for climate-responsive forestry management in Pakistan?

Florence Rolle: FAO's work on climate-responsive forestry management in Pakistan involves various initiatives aimed at restoring and safeguarding Pakistan's forests while increasing the income of communities dependent on them. These initiatives have been developed through extensive consultations with senior policymakers, experts, and stakeholders across all provinces, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive approach.

One key initiative is "Reversing Deforestation and Degradation in High Conservation Value Chilghoza Pine Forests in Pakistan" focusing on protecting the chilghoza forests while assuring a sustainable income to the communities relying on the pine nuts. Implemented in Sherani district of Balochistan, South Waziristan and Chitral districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Diامر district of Gilgit-Baltistan, the project aims to bring approximately 30,000 hectares of chilghoza forests under sustainable management. Activities include establishing community forest protection committees, developing multi-functional plans, and introducing Payment for Ecosystems (PES).

Another initiative targets the Astore valley and adjoining buffer zones of Deosai National Park, aiming to conserve and sustainably use medicinal plants and Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs).

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FAO works closely with the Forest, Parks, and Wildlife Department of Gilgit-Baltistan to assess and enhance the conservation and utilization of these resources through ethnobotanical surveys, management planning, and capacity building of local communities.

ICMA: How is FAO enhancing water and land resource governance at the community level in Pakistan for disaster resilience?

Florence Rolle: In Pakistan, the management of natural resources, particularly water and land, is crucial for sustaining agriculture, livestock, and overall economic development. However, the country faces numerous challenges in this regard, including water scarcity, degradation of rangelands, and the impacts of climate change. To address these challenges, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is actively involved in initiatives aimed at enhancing water and land resource governance at the community level.

For example, FAO is making a difference in Balochistan, a province in Pakistan that faces significant challenges in managing its natural resources. Balochistan's agricultural and livestock sectors heavily rely on water and rangelands, yet efficient management practices are lacking. In response, FAO is implementing the River Basin Water Resources Programme (RBWRP), a 4.5-year initiative designed to improve the income and food security of communities in selected river basins through water harvesting, saving, and its efficient use in agriculture, as well as rangeland rehabilitation. Through this program, FAO promotes sustainable agricultural and livestock farming systems based on the efficient management of water and rangeland resources. By introducing environmentally sustainable practices and enhancing governance structures, FAO aims to mitigate the effects of climate change and ensure the long-term resilience of communities reliant on these resources.

ICMA: How is FAO supporting agribusiness resilience and value addition in Pakistan?

Florence Rolle: FAO is supporting agribusiness resilience and value addition in Pakistan through a value chain approach. For example, the Growth for Rural Advancement and Sustainable Progress (GRASP) program,

aimed at poverty alleviation and sustainable economic growth in Sindh and Balochistan, focuses on 14 value chains. For each value chain, FAO works directly with groups of producers, helping them increase farm productivity and adapt to climate change. The most advanced farmers' groups are supported in establishing Farmer Marketing Collectives (FMCs), promoting value addition through packaging, grading, storage, processing, and market linkages. Additionally, FAO has collaborated with USAID over the past five years to promote agribusiness in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province by providing grants to SMEs through competitive processes.

ICMA: How is FAO addressing major animal diseases and plant pests in Pakistan?

Florence Rolle: According to national statistics, the livestock sector in Pakistan contributes more than 60% of the agricultural GDP, while most public investments are concentrated on five major crops. Therefore, FAO has been advocating for increased public investments in the livestock sector for both dairy and meat production. The issues related to the livestock sector are well known. FAO has been working with provincial livestock departments and the Ministry of National Food Security & Research on animal disease surveillance and the control of Transboundary Animal Diseases (TADs), especially PPR (Peste des Petits Ruminants) and FMD (Foot-and-Mouth Disease). FAO has provided certified PPR vaccine seed to support inland production of quality PPR vaccine. FMD is the most economically significant disease, and since 2016, FAO has been implementing a control program in Punjab. Building on its work on TADs, FAO is now implementing a more comprehensive approach to support the livestock sector, addressing not only health but also animal feed and genetics. This approach is being piloted in Sindh for the cattle and buffalo milk sub-sector and will be extended to Balochistan for sheep and goats starting in the last quarter of 2024.

Three FAO specific initiatives that are worth mentioning as they have a potential to transform the livestock sector:

- 1) Development of Pakistan Animal Identification and Traceability System (PAITS) to support disease control efforts, improve safety of livestock product and its exports. The system, developed by Punjab Information technology Board, is being rolled out after a test trial on countrywide level.
- 2) A recent assessment of Pakistan animal disease surveillance system conducted by FAO and Government of Pakistan, has endorsed its findings and recommendations aimed at getting a comprehensive surveillance mechanism, including real-time surveillance capabilities on a nationwide basis.
- 3) A review of Pakistan strategy to control Congo Virus (CCHF) led to the development of a comprehensive implementation plan for the control of CCHF (in full). Based on it MNFSR is planning to initiate a control program.

ICMA: What's FAO doing to empower women in Pakistan's agriculture sector?

Florence Rolle: Women in Pakistan play a crucial role in the agricultural sector, contributing significantly to labor across agrifood value chains, food production, storage, and processing. They also bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work. However, their contributions are largely unrecognized and unaccounted for in the national GDP.

A 2024 FAO Country Gender Assessment Report highlighted that rural women in Pakistan have less access to productive resources, assets, services, and opportunities than men. Their entrepreneurial potential remains unrealized due to the lack of equal opportunities. Without land ownership, women are excluded from government incentives and denied access to credit and subsidies, hampering their economic empowerment. The report also revealed a 34 percent gender wage gap, with women concentrated in low-paying, labor-intensive jobs lacking protection and safety. Additionally, rural women are disadvantaged in digital connectivity due to discriminatory sociocultural norms, limiting their economic opportunities.

Climate change exacerbates food insecurity and gender inequality, making women more vulnerable to related shocks and disasters. They have lower adaptive capacity and resilience, hindering their ability to diversify their livelihoods and income.

To address some of these issues, FAO is integrating specific activities targeting women into most of its projects, using the Farmer Field School (FFS) learning methodology as an entry point. Initially, FAO worked with women on kitchen gardening through Women Open School, but their lack of access to land and markets constituted barriers to harnessing the potential of these activities. Recently, FAO has been engaging women in livestock production, value addition, and nutrition-related activities.

In continuation of our initiatives, the FAO project entitled "Improved Land Tenancy in Sindh (ILTS)" introduced a written informal land tenancy agreement between landlords and tenants. This agreement ensures that upon the death of a tenant husband, tenancy rights seamlessly transfer to the wife. This proactive step has empowered women, granting them the assurance to support their families and maintain their livelihoods even in the unfortunate event of losing the head of the family.

ICMA: How is FAO strengthening nutrition policy frameworks in Pakistan?

Florence Rolle: FAO recently concluded an insightful study on the cost and affordability of a healthy diet using a globally recognized methodology based on dietary guidelines endorsed by the government of Pakistan. The study found that a healthy diet, consisting of the least expensive food items available in Pakistani markets, costs around PKR 53,000 per month for an average household. Balochistan has the highest costs, while Punjab has the lowest. With a minimum wage of PKR 32,000 per month,

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82% of Pakistani households cannot afford a healthy diet.

Interestingly, the study also revealed that even the richest quintile does not consume a healthy diet, highlighting the need for both affordability and awareness of the importance of a balanced, nutritious diet. FAO plans to launch this study soon to disseminate its findings widely.

ICMA: How is FAO assisting in disaster preparedness and response in Pakistan?

Florence Rolle: In addition to its traditional response to emergencies, such as the 2022 flood, FAO has been supporting the government of Pakistan in anticipatory action through a pilot programmatic partnership with the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO). This initiative involves exploring the possibility of establishing a district-level monitoring system that prompts action before an emergency strikes, such as a drought or flood.

For example, in the districts of Umerkot and Tharparkar, district authorities monitor a set of meteorological, agro-meteorological, and agricultural indicators for drought. They have identified a set of pre-agreed anticipatory actions, such as multi-purpose cash and cash top-ups for animal feed for subsistence-level herder households during droughts, and provision of movable silos and multipurpose cash for exposed and vulnerable households in case of riverine flooding. These actions are triggered if the indicators surpass specific thresholds.

Additionally, FAO Pakistan conducted a study on the existing financial mechanisms at the national, provincial, and district levels to identify those that could be activated for anticipatory action. It appears that the Provincial Disaster Management Fund (PDMF) could be a potential source, and FAO is developing recommendations on possible mechanisms for accessing these funds. The domain of anticipatory action merits attention as it can reduce the cost of emergency response.

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The Editorial Board thanks Ms. Florence Rolle, FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) Representative in Pakistan for sparing from her precious time to give exclusive interview for Chartered Management Accountant Journal.