

Chapter 9

8,000 Trees: A Refuge from Ruins

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Abstract Suzanne Thompson describes an entrepreneurial version of greening in the red zone by telling the story of how Afghan women, historically excluded from horticultural activities, are adapting to the aftermath of the Afghan war by planting new cultivars. Though this case is more typical of traditional development approaches, it tells a unique story of how women in war-torn Afghanistan are recognizing and reaping the power of greening in their resilience journeys.

Keywords Deforestation • Reforestation • Livelihoods • Afghanistan • Green micro-lending

It was 2004 when the Global Partnership for Afghanistan (GPFA) first joined forces with village elders and family farmers in the war-torn plains of the Shomali Valley to help plant a few thousand trees. The landscape was dry and parched, homes were devastated, and the humanitarian situation was just as bleak. The Soviets and later the Taliban had declared a scorched earth policy on the country's orchards, vineyards and forests, making them red zones of the first order. War, compounded by internal strife, had forced millions of Afghans to flee their homes and country. Land—unattended and unwatered—fell into the vicious cycle of deforestation, further aggravated by drought.

Refugees longed for the sense of meaning and accomplishment provided by working with their land and were returning to their farms, relying on stopgaps—handouts and food-for-work programs—to survive. Orchards and vineyards, which had once made Afghanistan the second largest supplier of raisins in the world and a major producer of dried fruit and nuts, and supplied 60–80 % of its export income, were long depleted, and there was no reliable stock to replenish supplies.

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Wood—urgently needed to rebuild destroyed homes—was in short supply. Poppy production for use in the illicit drug trade was increasing.

GPFA was determined to find practical, participatory methods to address deforestation—not just by planting trees but by identifying and empowering stakeholders acting in their *own* interests to improve their *own* livelihoods. The focus would be on small, green, entrepreneurial enterprises: commercial woodlots to rebuild timber production and perennial horticulture including orchards, vineyards, and nurseries. Fruit, nuts and timber could provide a stable income for years to come, far surpassing annual cash crops like wheat, and even more income than a farmer can get from poppies.

GPFA worked with the local population to launch its farm forestry enterprises with 40,000 poplar cuttings—10-in. sticks imported from a nursery that would become harvestable timber in 7 years. Afghanistan has a long tradition of cultivating poplars, and the wood is used for construction. While Afghanistan has been consumed with fighting, improved poplars have been developed elsewhere, with rapid growth and high volume timber yield. These new trees grow faster, taller and straighter than local poplars, and within the first year, they reach 3 m, three times the size of local poplars.

GPFA hammered out a business model with farmers that reflected the tremendous pressure for annual earnings. With each poplar the farmers planted, they would be able to harvest 3–5 cuttings. They would return one cutting back to GPFA for every one they received. The rest would be sold, generating as much as several thousand dollars. By the time the poplars matured in 7 years, they could be harvested and sold for around \$30,000 per half acre.

One of the first women to become a GPFA poplar enterprise farmer was Rabia of the Farza District in the Shomali Valley (see Fig. 9.1). A once thriving center of agriculture not far from Kabul, Farza suffered some of the worst devastation of lives and land on the frontline of the war against the Taliban. Rabia was a young, pregnant mother of two children when she and her injured husband escaped. ‘We were like barbarians fleeing in the wilderness, barefoot and with nothing to shield us from the bitter cold’. Wherever the family went, sadness was pervasive. They did odd jobs and labored on others’ land to earn enough for food and shelter. ‘We lived our days and nights in torment’, she recalls. They returned home to find her village in ruins and her house destroyed. Part of her land was washed away by floods, and the rest lacked water. ‘I simply sat down and cried’, she says.

Today, Rabia stands on her two acres of land amidst 8,000 newly planted poplars, with stability and hope for her six sons and one daughter. Working with community leaders, GPFA chose Rabia to participate in GPFA’s Farmer Field Schools. In Afghanistan, women do not traditionally engage in planting trees for farm forestry, but GPFA female extensionists Wasima and Belqis selected Rabia to receive a loan of 8,000 hybrid poplar cuttings, training and supplies that she could not buy for herself. While she plants, weeds and tends her trees, GPFA’s Wasima and Belqis visit frequently to troubleshoot and share their expertise on cultivation, pruning,



Fig. 9.1 Rabia and family with young poplars. Photo courtesy of Global Partnership for Afghanistan

fertilization and other technical issues. Rabia in turn shares her experiences with other female farmers at GPFA Farmer Field Schools.

Rabia's entire family of nine depends on her. Her sons, now university students, work in the fields and as manual laborers after their lessons, earning just enough money to feed themselves and supplement the family's income a bit. With 8,000 poplars, her land is her hope. But she dreams that one day GPFA will expand its work in her village to help more families plant woodlots, orchards and vineyards, and to help her and others form an association of women woodlot owners.

When her trees are harvested, Rabia plans a pilgrimage to Mecca. There she intends to offer prayers for her country, for peace and development, for organizations like GPFA who are helping poor families like hers survive and prosper. 'But now', she asks with her face glowing, 'just let me stand here and look at my trees'.

Since 2004, GPFA has helped 29,000 families like Rabia's plant and revitalize woodlots, orchards, vineyards and vegetable plots in 2,500 villages. The income generated by the eight million trees these farmers have planted, this entrepreneurial greening of the red zone, has transformed destruction and hopelessness into renewal and progress.

But perhaps the greatest impact comes not from the planting stock and supplies, but the transfer of knowledge on modern horticulture and farm forestry. GPFA's staff of 40–200 Afghan horticulturalists, extensionists, and community workers provide technical support to Rabia and other men and women farmers.



Fig. 9.2 Sakima and Hamida's apple trees. Photo courtesy of Global Partnership for Afghanistan

Hamida, a mother of 10, has benefited from GPFA's approach to sharing expertise. After joining GPFA's orchard revitalization program in 2008, Hamida saw production from her 200-tree orchard with six varieties of apple dwindle to a few diseased apples. Sakina, GPFA's female extensionist, helped her radically prune and fertilize her trees (see Fig. 9.2). By the end harvest season, Hamida sold her apples for \$4,000, in sharp contrast to the \$600 annual income of her 55-year old husband, Abdul Shakoor, a taxi driver in the volatile, conservative Paktya Province. But Abdul Shakoor beams with pride as Hamida tells how she expects better productivity this year. He smiled as Hamida grabbed his smooth hand to contrast her calloused palms. Her income is the primary support for the 16 people in their household.

Sakina says that Afghanistan is on the cusp of great change, but progress has its challenges. 'The women and the men of Paktya are strong', she says. 'They were on the front lines as Afghanistan resisted the Russians'. Hiding her lined and weathered face from the camera with her bright green chador, Hamida, like Rabia, personifies the character of a proud, resilient people working together to rebuild a country brick by brick, neighbor to neighbor, and tree by tree.