



## Improving food security and nutrition through cash+ in Kyrgyzstan

Combining cash transfers with productive assets, inputs, agricultural and nutrition trainings to support vulnerable and poor rural households in Jalal-Abad province

### Context

Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked, lower-middle-income country in Central Asia with a population of 7 million (NSC, 2023). Between 2012 and 2019 the level of poverty declined significantly from 38 percent to 20.1 percent (NSC, n.d. a), but poverty rates in rural areas were consistently higher than in urban areas (NSC, n.d. b). Healthy diets were unaffordable for 48 percent of the rural population in 2019 (WFP and NSC, 2021), and malnutrition was a pressing issue for children under 5 years of age, with a stunting prevalence of 11.8 percent in 2018 (NSC and UNICEF, 2019). Economic constraints in affording healthy diets continue to hinder the country's efforts to address malnutrition, obesity and micronutrient deficiency, including the rising number of overweight adults and children. Over the same period, Jalal-Abad province consistently had a higher poverty rate than the national average, with a peak of 55.7 percent in 2012 compared with 38 percent at the national level (NSC, n.d. a). The most-recent survey (2012) also found low dietary diversity with significant levels of malnutrition among children in Jalal-Abad province (14.6 percent prevalence of stunting and 2.9 percent of prevalence of wasting, compared with national averages of 17.7 percent and 2.7 percent, respectively [NSC, Ministry of Health and ICF International, 2013]).

Against this background, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) implemented the project "Developing capacity for strengthening food security and nutrition in selected countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia," which sought to improve the livelihoods, productive capacities, and food security and nutrition of poor and vulnerable households (FAO, 2021). This promising practice factsheet documents the intervention implemented in Kyrgyzstan from late 2017 to the end of 2018, with selected beneficiaries among households benefiting from the country's main social assistance programme – the monthly benefit for low-income families (now renamed Uy Bulogo Komok).

### Key facts



#### Social protection intervention

A cash+ intervention designed to complement the government-led monthly cash assistance programme for low-income families by providing additional agricultural inputs and training.



#### Geographical coverage

Suzak district, Jalal-Abad province, Kyrgyzstan.



Source: United Nations Geospatial. 2011. Map of Kyrgyzstan. In: *United Nations*. New York, USA, UN. [Cited 4 July 2024]. <https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/kyrgyzstan>

Note: Refer to the disclaimer on the last page for the names and boundaries used in this map.



#### Target group

150 rural households, totalling 842 direct beneficiaries, 56 percent of whom were under the age of 18.



#### Gender

Among beneficiary households, 22 percent were female-headed. The rapid assessment explored women's empowerment and decision-making power, showing positive trends in food security and dietary diversity for women and children.



#### Type of shock/crisis

Food insecurity

The programme transfers cash assistance every month to households with children under 16 years of age and with earnings below the country's guaranteed minimum income. At the time of implementation, the cash transfers amounted to USD 11.70 per child per month. This was deemed insufficient, given the depth of poverty at the time, and the government chose to work with FAO to strengthen the impact of the programme and explore more effective pathways out of poverty for this population group. As such, the cash+ intervention aimed to support livelihoods enhancement and agricultural productive capacities of beneficiaries while improving their knowledge of nutrition (Kangasniemi *et al.*, 2022).



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FAO supplemented the government-run cash transfer programme with additional productive inputs and training

## Methodological approach

### Coverage

The intervention targeted Jalal-Abad province because of high incidence of poverty and malnutrition. Following a field mapping exercise conducted by the project team, the central lowland area of Suzak district was selected for its accessibility and potential for economic development. Indeed, the area benefits from its proximity to regular markets and the existence of a vegetable processing plant (Kangasniemi *et al.*, 2022). Following the identification of the target area, FAO conducted a needs assessment to identify the target area. The assessment selected three villages, Bagysh, Oktyabr and Safarovka, where many residents were receiving social protection entitlements and owned kitchen gardens or land suitable for crop production. The project team ran outreach activities to raise awareness on FAO's pilot intervention among the target population and invite these households to participate in it.

### Comprehensiveness

**The intervention leveraged an existing national social protection programme, the monthly benefit for low-income families,** and complemented the regular cash transfers issued by the programme with the provision of productive inputs and assets as well as agricultural and nutrition training. This approach sought to address the multiple poverty- and nutrition-related challenges faced by beneficiary households by strengthening their food security, nutritional balance, agricultural productivity and related income opportunities.

### Adequacy

FAO designed the assistance package based on a quick field assessment of the profile of poor and vulnerable households and consultations with local communities. The assessment found low levels of agricultural production, high unemployment and small land holdings among the households involved. Based on this, the intervention designed assistance packages that included agricultural inputs, assets and training to boost productivity and improve livelihoods. The consultations with the communities helped identify crops that were easy to grow and manage, requiring limited labour and water. They also helped identify nutritional needs that could be addressed by providing beneficiaries with nutritious crops such as green leafy vegetables and pulses. The assessment also looked at nutritional knowledge, attitude and practices of the target households

Trainings focused on water saving technologies, integrated pest management, food processing and climate-smart agriculture

and so informed the design of nutrition education modules, complemented by training on food handling and commercialization.

As a result of this process, households were given a choice between three assistance packages. A total of 123 households selected the package consisting of a greenhouse and six types of seeds. The remaining 27 households selected the other two packages, which consisted of two different combinations of three and eight varieties of seeds for crops with high nutritional value and low water and labour requirements (Appaix and Rysbekova, 2019). Regardless of the package selected, **all participants received nutrition and agricultural training as well as extension services.** The training focused on water saving technologies, integrated pest management, basic home food processing and climate-smart agriculture practices.



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The intervention improved food security and dietary diversity in beneficiary households, particularly for children and women

## Results and impacts

The impact of the intervention was analysed through a rapid assessment that compared beneficiaries and other vulnerable households through quantitative and qualitative methods, a microsimulation of possible impact of the intervention if extended nationally to all eligible households (to highlight the potential for scale-up), and finally an evaluation of the whole project based on a desk review and key informant interviews. These various assessment and evaluations showed that the programme contributed to a series of outcomes in terms of food security and nutrition, livelihoods enhancement and poverty reduction as well as agency's and women's empowerment.

### Food security and nutrition

The intervention improved food security and dietary diversity in beneficiary households, particularly for children and women, who increased their consumption of fruit and vegetables, and food rich in protein and vitamin A. Nutrition education contributed to this outcome by improving nutritional awareness within households and communities (FAO, 2022). Data from the microsimulation showed that the intervention would have a positive impact on dietary diversity if it were to be expanded to cover all poor rural households in the country (Kangasniemi *et al.*, 2022).

### Livelihoods enhancement and poverty reduction

The intervention increased income from small-scale and home-based agricultural activities and reduced the self-assessed level of poverty in beneficiary households. Additionally, the microsimulation results indicated that the approach could potentially contribute to reducing poverty at the country level if it were scaled up (Kangasniemi *et al.*, 2022). The productive inputs provided, including greenhouses and seeds, and the training on food processing, enabled beneficiaries to expand their agricultural production and reduce food waste (FAO, 2022).

### Agency and women's empowerment

The intervention facilitated the integration of beneficiaries into the community and contributed to their empowerment. For instance, female beneficiaries acknowledged that they felt more included in public life and reported the emergence of new social networks. They reported meeting new people in the community, making new friends and communication more with neighbours and other community members. However, no significant change in women's decision-making power was observed (Kangasniemi *et al.*, 2022).

## Impacts during the COVID-19 pandemic

A rapid phone survey in April and May 2020 confirmed that the intervention enabled households to better withstand shocks and avoid resorting to negative coping strategies (UNDESA, n.d.). In a qualitative study conducted in August 2021, local key informants acknowledged the positive impact of the intervention on beneficiaries' resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to the vegetables produced in the greenhouses (RBC, 2021).



The intervention had good local ownership and strong support from local administrations

## Sustainability

The intervention benefited from a coherent and multisectoral approach that combined social protection and agricultural assistance to deliver positive changes in terms of food security, nutrition, income and livelihoods. As a result, it attracted the interest of both the government and the beneficiaries, with good local ownership and strong support from local administrations. **Building the intervention on a national social assistance programme facilitated the government's uptake of the approach.**

The evidence of positive impacts generated by the intervention informed a new programming approach to support food-insecure households, which was integrated in the Kyrgyzstan national food security and nutrition programme 2019–2023. The cash+ model was also included as a possible approach to the productive social contract programme, a social protection measure inserted in the National development strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for the period of 2018–2040 (The Kyrgyz Republic, 2018; FAO, 2021).

The beneficiaries were enthusiastic about the productive activities and training sessions. While their initial interest in new crops was limited, the intervention introduced recipes to complement traditional dietary habits with new food items and inform beneficiaries of their nutritional value. This increased beneficiaries' acceptance of new crops both for production and consumption and encouraged the application of the nutrition knowledge learned during the training sessions to daily cooking.

However, the lack of agricultural extension services in remote rural areas of the country hampered the sustainability of the intervention, as private services are often unaffordable for the poor. In this regard, it is essential to build capacity of local farmer groups to provide such services in close collaboration with government agencies and local communities.





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## Replicability and upscaling

The approach used in this intervention has been replicated in other FAO projects, notably in the “Nutrition-sensitive agriculture and social protection in Kyrgyzstan” programme implemented from 1 February 2020 to 31 December 2022, which provided poultry to 156 households. However, changes in government and staff counterparts led to loss of some of the capacity built by the earlier project. Replicating and upscaling this approach would require taking additional measures to increase FAO’s ability to influence policy and to build and maintain government capacity (FAO, 2021).

Additional barriers should also be addressed to better link poor small-scale food producers to stable markets, thereby increasing their income. This would include improving their access to markets and supply chains and ensuring provision of agricultural support services (Kangasniemi *et al.*, 2022).

Building coherence between social protection and other rural development programmes is a promising way to reduce rural poverty

## Key learning

- Building coherence between social protection and other rural development programmes and policies is a promising way to reduce rural poverty. **The intervention successfully increased the collaboration between government ministries in charge of social protection and agriculture** and demonstrated the benefit of working in a coordinated manner to reduce rural poverty.
- Further improvements are needed to address women's specific needs and constraints, starting from the project design phase and throughout project implementation. **A comprehensive study of gender roles in the local context could improve the impact of the intervention on household dynamics**, distribution of labour between women and men, and women's economic empowerment.
- **Climate-change adaptation and resilience-building should also be integrated** in the intervention, where possible, **to prevent rural households from falling deeper into poverty due to the impacts of increasing climate risks** (FAO, 2022). These actions can include climate-smart agriculture practices, distribution of drought-tolerant seeds, or water harvesting techniques, among others. In fact, the Kyrgyz Republic, particularly Jalal-Abad province, is exposed to drought, floods, land- and mudslides, together with a steady decline in average precipitation levels and rising temperatures (World Bank and ADB, 2021).
- **A comprehensive package of support is necessary to achieve better agricultural production, related incomes and livelihood outcomes.** Such a package includes better organization of producers, providing support for resolving irrigation challenges, the provision of productive inputs and extension services, and rural finance support. Stronger linkages with stable markets are needed and can be established in this context by providing support infrastructure including logistics, storage and processing.
- The design of the support packages provided by FAO as part of this intervention included participatory features, but this aspect should be strengthened. Future projects should be fully based on a participatory approach, with a strong emphasis on engaging beneficiaries from the very beginning. This would lead to a more robust and efficient project design (Appaix and Rysbekova, 2019). **Major efforts should be put into encouraging the participation of beneficiaries in all phases of the project while valuing local knowledge and innovations.**





Eliza is a 34-year-old woman living in the village of Safarovka in southern Jalal-Abad province, Kyrgyzstan. Eliza has five children, and her family was very poor, living on less than USD 13 per person per month. Neither she nor her husband were able to find employment opportunities in the village, other than working their small plot of land. For this reason, they are beneficiaries of the Monthly Benefit for Low-Income Families with Children.

However, Eliza found the cash benefit insufficient to meet the family needs. So, she enrolled in FAO's intervention, hoping this would help her move out of poverty. Thanks to the complementary assistance from

FAO, Eliza and her family diversified their production and improved their knowledge of nutrition.

*"Thanks to FAO our way of living has changed dramatically. I learned to grow more types of nutritious crops, including during the lean season thanks to the greenhouse. I started producing more, so we no longer have to buy what we can't grow, and we can spend that money on something else, like books or clothes for our children. I even managed to grow a bit more cucumbers and lettuce than expected and sold them to my neighbours. I got around KGS 1 500 (USD 20) for those, but it's just the beginning"* (FAO, 2023).

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## Partners

### Resource partner

- The Russian Federation

### Technical partners

- Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Migration
- Ministry of Water Resources, Agriculture and Processing Industry
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Economy and Commerce
- Ministry of Education and Science
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