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Agricultural Cooperative Provides Relief to Crisis-Affected Farmers in Southern Lebanon

USAID-Donated Agricultural Equipment Provides Farming Community with Needed Economic Boost



Rola Mohtar, member of the Saidoun agricultural cooperative, making use of the mechanical olive harvesters provided by USAID's CSP

Farming communities in Lebanon have been particularly affected by the ongoing socio-economic crisis, especially as they have been facing rising costs of production coupled with diminished incomes. Nestled in the green hills of the Jezzine District in southern Lebanon, the Saidoun cluster of agricultural villages is far from being an exception. In this remote area, the majority of residents have long relied on agriculture for their income, and farmers are supported by the local agricultural cooperative which distributes seedlings and fertilizers, facilitates irrigation, and rents agricultural equipment at affordable prices. However, with the persistent devaluation of the national currency, the cooperative was forced to raise its rental prices, which plunged many into even greater economic precarity. By 2020, unemployment in the area stood at around 60% as many farmers, unable to afford to cultivate their plots, were forced to abandon their land.

In response, USAID's Community Support Program (CSP) provided the cooperative with five rotary tillers, two trailers, nine mechanical pruning shears, six mechanical olive harvesters, and other equipment to enhance efficiency and decrease production costs for around 120 households in the Saidoun cluster. "It was heart-breaking to see so much arable land being left barren in the village," stated Maroun Al Khawand, local farmer and member of the Saidoun Cooperative. "Support from USAID's CSP significantly decreased the cooperative's costs and enabled many farmers to return to cultivating their lands, especially amidst such difficult circumstances," he continued.

"We have been facing continuous barriers that have caused all sorts of adversity and stress," shared local resident Hoda El Khawand, "By providing the cooperative with agricultural equipment and enhancing people's ability to cultivate their land, this intervention has provided a window of hope amidst these difficult times." During the harvest season of 2021-2022, 50 farmers benefitted from the cooperative's rotary tillers and were able to save around LBP 200,000 (\$5) per hour of use; while another 40 farmers benefitted from the mechanical olive harvesters and pruning shears which enabled them to save around LBP 550,000 (\$14) per day compared to previous seasons.

In addition to the equipment, Rola Mohtar, another member of the cooperative, points to the benefits of the training provided by CSP: "The trainings we received on food safety helped us ensure the highest quality for our products, while the exercises in proposal writing and social media helped us improve our branding and marketing strategy which will broaden our reach and, in turn, improve local incomes." On August 12 and 13, 2022, the cooperative made use of its newly acquired marketing skills to hold its first agricultural market, which attracted some 400 visitors and promoted the goods of 12 vendors.

To date, CSP has supported eight agricultural cooperatives across Lebanon by providing them with modern equipment while building their capacities to expand production and increase their revenues; this type of assistance is expected to benefit a total of 1,770 farming households.

"This intervention is helping us rise above all the hardship and enabling us to stay rooted in our community like our ancient oaks and olive trees."

**Hoda El Khawand,
Resident of Saidoun**