

Agricultural Voices Syria
Overview video for SSRP project webpage
Video transcript – English

Amy Sweet:

Hello from the Sussex Sustainability Research Programme (SSRP). We're joined today by the team from the project 'Agricultural Voices Syria'.

This is a jointly funded project by the SSRP and the International Development Challenge Fund (IDCF), running between January and July 2021. Thanks for joining us. Please could you introduce yourselves?

Mirela Barbu:

Hello everyone, and thank you Amy for organising this interview. My name is Mirela Barbu, I am a Lecturer in Supply Chain Management in the University of Sussex Business School and the Principal Investigator of this project.

My background is in Economic Geography and my recent research has focused mainly on the relationship between trade and labour and global value chains. I have been working since the last year on agri-food value chains.

Martin Spinelli:

Hi Amy, I'm Martin Spinelli, I'm a Senior Lecturer in the School of Media, Arts and Humanities at the University of Sussex.

I am the podcasting lead on this project and I've been working in radio and podcasting for the past 30 years, and my specialty that I'm focusing on at the moment is what makes podcasting distinctive, how it is different and novel compared to other media.

Shaher Abdullateef:

Hi Amy and everyone, I'm Shaher Abdullateef, Director of Syrian Academic Expertise organisation and Co-Founder of Academic Centre for Development and Peace Studies.

My background is in agricultural systems and advanced biotechnology. I have worked for more than 10 years on research related to food security and agricultural science in Geneva within multi-disciplinary local and international research teams and very interested in – and very busy actually – on research projects to produce new knowledge and share this knowledge, and that's why I'm very happy to contribute to coordinate the 'Agricultural Voices Syria' project within Sussex University.

Amy Sweet:

Excellent. And Mirela, please can you tell us a bit about the purpose of this project?

Mirela Barbu:

The main goal of our project is to promote sustainable agriculture in Syria through podcasting and we're doing this through knowledge exchange, mobilising researchers, practitioners and decision-makers in Syria and abroad.

We are working in a partnership between the University of Sussex, Cara – which stands for Council for At-Risk Academics, and ACDP – which stands for Academic Centre for Development and Peace

Studies. ACDP is linked to Syrian academic expertise network. So together we are implementing the project and we work basically in four stages developed over 30 weeks. We began in January by organising the activities, selecting the team, and purchasing the equipment for podcasting.

In February and March we organised the training course, after which our Syrian colleagues who are experts in agriculture, started to prepare 15 podcast episodes, and at the same time we also prepared a smartphone app which was designed for podcasts of course.

From the beginning of May until the end of June, the podcasts and the smartphone app will be promoted among Syrian farmers in Northwest Syria and following this distribution, the farmers will participate in a survey, which has been designed to collect their feedback for the first episodes and also to understand, more broadly, their use of social media.

The survey data will be analysed in July and the research results will be disseminated with stakeholders and wider audiences. By the end of the project will also organise a workshop.

Amy Sweet:

Great. And Martin, why is this project so innovative?

Martin Spinelli:

So the innovation in 'Agricultural Voices Syria' is really the fact that it's quite a bold, ground-breaking experiment in conflict zone communications. So often we find in conflict zones the traditional media – radio and TV stations – are often the first things that are targeted by military movements and with attacks. However, the ubiquity of the smartphone, even in the developing world, and the relatively good mobile phone coverage, in places like Syria means that podcasting is a real opportunity to reinvent communications in these kinds of situations.

Podcasting is very, very fluid. It doesn't require a studio or a bunker, it can be done anywhere, it's relatively inexpensive, and it's relatively easy to produce. There is perhaps – most importantly – a tremendous freedom in it. There are no gatekeepers in the podcasting space, there are no podcast police telling you what you can say and what you can't say. So, unlike conventional media, particularly in conflict zones which often function as propaganda platforms for a regime or whoever's in control at the moment, podcasting is different.

In our particular experiment with 'Agricultural Voices Syria' we're using it to connect Syrian agronomists and agricultural experts living in exile in places like Turkey with farmers on the ground in Syria to help support the agricultural capacity of the region and to help support the food security of the region.

Amy Sweet:

Fantastic. And Shaher, please could explain what this project will achieve?

Shaher Abdullateef:

Yes, for sure, as my colleagues Mirela and Martin said, the project delivered training sessions on producing podcasts so now the Syrian academics and Syrian experts gain these skills and we are going to use these skills beyond the project.

Another thing is it produced a series of 15 episodes which will be delivered by the Syrian experts also sharing five case studies on sustainable agriculture in the Mediterranean area and the Middle East which will add significant value for Syrian agronomists and farmers etc.

Conducting a survey in North Est Syria, as my colleagues mentioned before, to reach more than 600 farmers, to evaluate the podcast impact and know the farmers needs and make these requests in the future response and the future episodes within the podcast.

Finally, the project aims to achieve the very important outcomes such as promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

After more than 10 years of ongoing conflict in Syria, one of the critical impacts was the collapse of agricultural extension and this project actually aims to overcome this challenge.

The other thing is building networks between experts and the farmers and within NGOs etc. to promote and enhance the food security future in Syria.

Also to promote the values of peace and connections with the people working on this project in Syria. The connection between them and the discussion is considered a great step in building and talking and discussion with each other since they are in different regions even inside Syria.

Amy Sweet:

Excellent, and finally, how will you achieve research impact with this project Mirela?

Mirela Barbu:

Well Amy, I believe our project is already achieving impact and we'll continue working on this.

This has been demonstrated by the interest shown by many organisations working in food security in Northwest Syria.

So, first of all, we are interested in promoting networking and collaboration between these organisations.

And we believe AVS ('Agricultural Voices Syria') could become a communication platform of several NGOs who could contribute to the growth of sustainable agriculture in Northwest Syria.

After July the podcast production will continue. Also as to the organisation of a number of workshops between practitioners, agricultural researchers and local policymakers, by the end of year we aim to support these actors in the efforts towards promoting sustainable development and triggering investment in sustainable agricultural systems. My colleague Martin, I'm sure, can explain why podcasting is such a good tool in this context.

Martin Spinelli:

Sure, I think, for me, the biggest impact that we are generating through 'Agricultural Voices Syria' will come off the back of the extensive survey that Mirela and Shaher mentioned where we're asking our listeners on the ground, in Syria, what they want from projects like this in the future, and what kinds of information would be the most useful to them, and what are the means and the methods most effective for delivering them.

So my hope is that we create – off the back of this pilot project and off the back of that research into our listeners – a template for future work that can be used, not just by people interested in food security, but people interested in humanitarian efforts of all kinds around the globe in areas like this, in conflict and post conflict zones. I think a big marker of success will be the extent to which we are doing a version of 'Agricultural Voices Syria', or other people are doing versions of it, around the world.

Another really important impact as Mirela mentioned is this network building. It would be fantastic – and we've already got some enquiries about this at the moment – to develop a network of other NGOs and other entities who are interested in contributing agricultural security, food security content to a podcast network going forward. One day, perhaps in the very near future, throughout the Arab speaking world there might be a consortium of podcasts about food security that we will have started.

Amy Sweet:

Thank you so much. And a big thank you from the Sussex Sustainability Research Programme for telling us more about your fantastic, innovative and impactful project. We really look forward to seeing what's next.

For more information about this project you can visit the SSRP website at www.sussex.ac.uk/ssrp and you can follow the 'Agricultural Voices Syria' project on Twitter. Listen to the project podcasts which are recorded in Arabic on Spotify and find the English transcripts for each episode on the 'Agricultural Voices Syria' website at <https://agricultural-voices.sussex.ac.uk/> Thank you very much. Goodbye.

Martin Spinelli:

Bye.

Mirela Barbu:

Thank you Amy. Bye.

Shaher Abdullateef:

Thank you. Bye.