

EMPOWERMENT

raising the bar

Nestlé has teamed up with a United Nations agency to allow rural women in Pakistan to learn new veterinary skills that will help them rear their family's livestock more effectively, improving their income and status – and providing social and economic benefits to wider society

If asked to name one of the world's leading dairy farming nations, few westerners would think of Pakistan. Yet dairy farming in this huge country accounts for almost ten per cent of gross domestic product and about 12 per cent of overall export earnings. Estimates suggest that eight million families are engaged in some form of dairy farming.

The difficulty for Pakistan is that most of the industry is on a small scale, with the majority of the families raising two to three cows and maybe five or six sheep or goats in their backyards. Most of the producers make about 20 to 25 per cent of their income from milk.

Small-scale animal husbandry is, of course, the backbone of many sustainable farming communities that sell their surpluses. But there's only one vet for every 10,000 livestock animals in Pakistan and, because most smallholders are women, the majority are prevented by cultural, tribal, religious and feudal constraints from interacting with the almost exclusively male veterinary profession. As a consequence ordinary livestock conditions such as stomach worms, which can easily be cured, instead become life threatening. The health of the animals, not to mention the quality and quantity of milk they produce, is therefore not as good as it could be.

Nestlé Pakistan, the largest food and drinks company in the country with sales last year of \$433million (£208m), knows this all too well. It

relies heavily on small producers for its daily milk supplies, and would stand to benefit enormously if they could get better access to the livestock health information they need. That's why a Lahore-based subsidiary of the Swiss multinational has set up an ambitious partnership programme to train women livestock owners in animal welfare.

Through a programme called 'Community empowerment through livestock development and credit', Nestlé has taken the bold step of going into small villages, seeking out the women who care for dairy animals, and offering them basic training in veterinary skills. The aim, over the next three years, is to produce a cadre of 5000 female livestock workers who can in turn offer their new skills to other women in the neighbourhood for a small fee.

The key to the success of the programme is to make

the company

Nestlé, the world's largest food and drink company, had a turnover of Sfr98.5billion (\$89bn, £43bn) in 2006, with a net profit of Sfr9bn. It employs around 265,000 people making products such as infant formula milk, chocolates, ice cream and chilled drinks in factories in almost every country in the world. Among its best known brands are Nescafé, Carnation, Nesquik, and Kit Kat. It:

- has a Nestlé Foundation that specifically addresses nutrition problems throughout the world
- is taking part in an initiative to draw up guidelines for businesses on human rights and security dilemmas in Colombia
- produced a public water management report in 2006 showing decreased water consumption despite production growth – and works with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies on

sure the training is offered by women and not men. To this end, 35 hand-picked female 'master trainers' – all science graduates – have been trained by tutors at the veterinary sciences school at the University of Lahore, where there are no taboos about male/female contact. Since October 2006 they have been out and about in three zones of the Punjab, one of Pakistan's largest milk producing areas. After careful negotiations aimed at gaining the consent of (mainly male) village elders, the master trainers provide a month-long, hands-on training programme in basic animal healthcare to those who want it. Once trained, the new 'lady livestock workers' are provided with a starter kit of instruments, medicines and vaccines (not made by Nestlé) that allows them to act as 'basic animal nurses' to others in the surrounding area.

More than 850 women have so far been trained in this way and early research suggests that each now earns up to 5000 rupees a month (£40) in additional income – a substantial sum in the rural economy. As boys tend to be sent to school rather than girls if money is tight, this has led to more girls getting an education. There is also instruction on the microfinance and credit facilities available to small-scale producers who want to improve or expand their farms.

Underpinning the venture is a partnership agreement with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which has put in \$5m from its Gender Support Programme. Nestlé has contributed an additional \$1m and is providing the expertise for the project. UNDP approached the company with the idea because it saw that Nestlé's supply chain stretched far

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■ female ‘master trainers’ are sent into villages to train local livestock holders in animal husbandry and health techniques

and wide into Pakistan’s rural landscape, but also because the company was already offering rural women training in basic livestock management from all-female Nestlé teams in villages from which the company collects milk. The government of Pakistan is playing a supportive role, and a commercial rival, Engro Foods, is also taking part – but in Sind province, not Punjab, and with separate implementation.

Syed Fakhar Ahmed, national project director for Nestlé Pakistan, is relaxed about Engro’s involvement, as he sees a benefit to everyone in the industry. ‘The women have improved lifespan of their animals and better incomes, and we have a more reliable and higher quality supply of milk,’ he says. ‘And if the general environment within which we operate hopefully becomes more prosperous, then that can only be good for us. Of course we’re helping to treat animals on farms that sell not just to Nestlé but to other companies, so inevitably we’re also benefiting our competitors. But we wanted to give the farmers that kind of freedom, not to tie the programme to delivering to Nestlé. And in any case we see the project as being as much about empowering women as about livestock welfare.’

Ahmed says that despite the conservative attitudes of many rural Pakistani men, the programme has managed to make a convincing case for women to be allowed to operate in their own interests. ‘We make sure that a social mobilization team first goes into the village and speaks to religious leaders, schoolteachers and others to explain how the project is for their own benefit,’ he says. ‘We find that in general the elders accept that. And once they see that instructional staff are all female they usually agree quite readily.’

NGO fears that Nestlé would be using the project to overtly promote its brand and directly further its business interests were also assuaged, says Ahmed, by a decision to set up a project management arm with separate funds and auditors. ‘That’s the single best decision we made,’ he adds. ‘It kept it apart from Nestlé’s core business and makes it very transparent.’

Despite the arms-length governance, Nestlé is nevertheless gaining an enhanced reputation from the initiative. ‘In fact, because the project is at an early stage, that’s the biggest benefit we’re getting at the moment,’ says Ahmed. ‘But as things scale up and the impact in terms of economic empowerment of women becomes greater, it should be a boon for everyone. We are creating social and economic change.’

To that end, Nestlé wants to spread the programme to at least seven districts in the Punjab ‘and then see how best we can expand it with more partners’. As the early phases of the project continue, there will be evaluation by external consultants. Initial indications, however, are that the programme is being well received.

‘Our biggest problem at present is selecting the women to take part, because there are many more

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comment NESTLÉ

This case study is yet another excellent example of how partnership programmes help to meet both business and social needs. Nestlé, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, delivers essential training in veterinary skills to women farmers that improve their businesses while helping Nestlé to get a better quality supply of milk.

some outstanding features:

- the creation of further economic opportunities for women farmers through improved animal health and the passing on of newly acquired skills
- the sensitive approach to training female farmers in a Muslim country
- provision of information on microfinance savings and credit facilities
- transparent governance structure
- other companies also benefit from the programme.

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