

THE AGRICULTURAL CENTER OF THE NORTH (ACN)

By Myriam Sfeir, Assistant Editor

In 1994 the Rene Moawad Foundation (RMF), a non-governmental and non-profit organization whose objective is improving the level of human and social conditions prevailing in Lebanon through economic and development projects, started building an Agricultural Center in the North, with the financial help of the European Union, the Spanish government, and the Spanish foundation Promocion Social de la Cultura. In September 1996 the center began its operations, but the official opening of ACN took place on October 25, 1997 under the auspices of the Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Shawki Fakhoury. Through the Agricultural Center of the North (ACN), RMF plans to lessen the manifold obstacles resulting from the shortcomings of an archaic system lacking in subsidies and state protection, which impede a farmer's task.

ACN is among the first projects to be financed by the European Union, maintains Lina Raphael, the communications manager at RMF. She holds that securing a fund from the European Union and the Spanish government gives one a lot of credibility, yet, it is not an easy endeavor. According to Raphael "once the Union or Spain accepts to finance one of your projects this implies that you have convinced them that there is a real need on the field." Raphael explains that Mrs. Nayla Moawad, president of RMF and a member of the Lebanese Parliament, insisted on the idea of development and opted for agricultural and social development. According to Raphael, Moawad was eager to revive the North, a traditionally agricultural region, and the agricultural sector, threatened to disappear in the aftermath of the war.

The initial goal of the project was to eliminate the obstacles hindering agricultural development in the North, according to Gilbert Aoun, agronomic engineer in charge of the technical division at Tanmiya. He explains that agriculture in Lebanon suffers from very high production costs caused by high storage costs, expensive machines and inputs as well as the absence of sufficient funds to finance the modernization of the sector.

Also, the absence of technical support and information technology where farmers have no access to new agricultural techniques as well as the lack of available information explaining to the farmers the rules of the market succeed in accentuating the problem at hand. Moreover, the difficulty in marketing agricultural goods along with all the problems of product marketing namely the underdevelopment of the food industry; the absence of union structures, global and commercial strategies, as well as

marketing policies, discourage farmers from venturing into such a vocation.

To overcome the previously mentioned impediments, ACN came up with a number of solutions. The first measure taken by the ACN crew was to provide farmers with a refrigerating service. Five large, very modern refrigerating rooms occupying 950 square meters were installed. Aoun holds that "ACN's refrigerators can accommodate approximately 50,000 crates. We offer farmers many services at cost price all year long where no profit is exacted and our prices are 50% cheaper than the market."

The second step was to equip farmers with the necessary machinery. ACN supplies farmers with modern and practical agricultural equipment. Given that most farmers in the North own pieces of land smaller than 5000 square meters and lack the financial means to buy a tractor to plough their land, they resort to renting tractors from private companies where a very high price is exacted. So ACN placed tractors for rent at the disposal of farmers at prices 40 or 50% cheaper than the market.

In order to modernize the archaic and structureless agricultural sector, the agronomic engineers at ACN introduce agriculturalists to different agricultural techniques such as the use of pesticides, fertilizers, and fungicides which are sold to farmers at cost price. In addition, ACN counseling team provides farmers with free of charge instructions and guidance on how and when to use the products. They travel to the areas of production and assist farmers in detecting and solving the numerous agricultural problems.

Apart from the regular seminars, training sessions, and workshops organized for farmers residing in the North, ACN publishes books on agricultural subjects such as forestation, food security, food control, etc. This year ACN held two training sessions on agro-food production for house-wives whose



husbands are farmers. The aim behind both training sessions was to enable women to generate revenues by processing their husband's unsold excess crop into agro-food products. Each training session involved theory courses and practical work, absorbed 20 participants, and lasted two months and a half. The women participants were instructed, by dietitians and agronomic engineers, on how to prepare jam, apple marmalade, stewed fruits, rose water, honey, vinegar, etc. Their products were later sold at the Artisan du Liban in Ain al-Mreissi. Fady Yarak, the manager at Tanmiya, explained the difficulty involved in recruiting women candidates without acquiring the approval of their husbands: "We talked to the farmers and tried to convince them of the importance of women's participation in productive and income generating activities. We explained that teaching their women how to take advantage of their culinary talents would yield more income and a better family life."

Concerning product marketing, ACN's staff came up with a number of solutions to help farmers, namely providing relevant data through market surveys, assisting in exporting their goods, and creating quality labels for these goods "through instituting quality control, using sorting, grading, and canning equipments." The staff at ACN also help farmers market their merchandise by serving as a link between them and the merchants. Aoun explained: "We locate potential buyers and invite them to inspect the products stored in our refrigerators. Being the link, we eliminate the presence of an intermediary who will ask for part of the farmer's profit."

Young farmers, Aoun maintains, are not encouraged to carry on where their parents have left for they are fed up with the frustrations of the agricultural industry. He goes on to say that the local market is flooded with cheap imported

products, hence, young Lebanese farmers find increasing difficulty in selling their merchandise. Besides, the meagre revenues and benefits yielded from agricultural work, according to Aoun, force farmers to abandon their fields and migrate to the city. Aoun holds: "At ACN we try, as much as possible, to lessen rural exodus to the cities. By providing farmers with facilities at the lowest price possible, we minimize costs of production enabling them to make more profits."

Last but not least, through GRANJA¹, the experimental farm, owned by RMF at Alma, Zghorta, the foundation strives to ameliorate the standard of living of farmers. Aoun holds: "At GRANJA we work on improving goat and sheep production through modern techniques of intensive breeding and artificial insemination. Moreover, grazing is confined to particular enclosed places in order to preserve the forests and encourage re-forestation."

Among the future projects being prepared at RMF are small dairy industries, irrigation, establishing artesian wells and agricultural roads, as well as supplying drinking water to villages, etc. The foundation also plans to construct a professional center to acquaint women and girls with agricultural transformation techniques.

ENDNOTE:

1 GRANJA, which has been operational for the past three months, is an extension of the Agricultural Center of the North (ACN).

