

SMART Program Profile



Stimulating Markets and Rural Transformation (SMART) is a broad 3 year development program funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Lebanon.

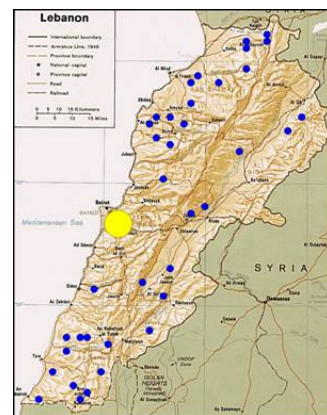
YMCA is more than capable and experienced to implement such program. The Association began its work in Lebanon early 1890. Its mission in Lebanon changed with time and the prevailing circumstances. YMCA targeted the youth since its establishment in Lebanon; but, when the Lebanese civil war erupted in 1975, YMCA shifted its mission to immediate assistance and salvation to those most affected by the war perils. When the war ended in 1990, the YMCA decided to face the new challenges of postwar reconstruction and development. The largest impact YMCA made ever since was through the five year Integrated Rural Development Program that ended in 2002. The latter established in the rural areas agricultural roads, schools, IT centers, retaining walls, ponds, demonstration farms, processing centers and waste management plants.

Walking faster and steadier on the same developmental path, YMCA pursues its mission through the SMART program. SMART is a comprehensive package since it aims at various targets and objectives in the rural counterpart of Lebanon. Mainly, SMART is an income generation program that aims also at women empowerment in their respective rural communities, fostering agricultural processing and enhancing marketing of agricultural produce. As such, the program opts for rural development at large.

In order to attain these ambitious yet achievable targets, YMCA devised a pioneer program in Lebanon and the region. Concisely, rural women will be processing food, selling it and earning money back. Actually, the whole idea of SMART taps into an entrenched tradition in the Lebanese culture, food processing. As such, it stems out from an inherent skill and taste. Nonetheless, in order to meet the set targets, YMCA plans to nurture this natural proclivity to food processing. The program aims at training 1340 women on various topics related to the implementation concept, establish 37 processing centers, set up 5 production farms and form 37 cooperatives.

First and foremost, since the program is a rural development scheme, targeted villages are basically scattered in the countryside of Lebanon. The selection of a town is solely based on socioeconomic criteria such as unemployment, literacy and poverty... Other factors pertaining to religion, sect or political affiliation are completely disregarded. Such orientation makes of the YMCA a national NGO working for all Lebanese equally.

The local community is supposed to contribute, in cash or kind, towards the funding of the implementation of the program in their village. Such contribution is essential since



it expands the available resources committed to the program. As such, the scale and scope of implementation will be wider. Furthermore, the local contribution holds a moral value and an informal binding contract. Once people commit their money to the program, they have enough personal stakes nourishing dynamism and motivation, two key elements in the program's success. As such, the local contribution becomes an investment with little money and few shares for a good cause.



Once a village is selected and the local community expressed its willingness to participate and contribute towards the program, real fieldwork begins. Building on what all women naturally know in rural Lebanon, YMCA refines this knowledge and adds to it a mixture of carefully selected topics in food safety and hygiene. Hence, women will still produce the exquisite tasty food but in a safer, cleaner and more modern fashion. This is the training component of the program; building the capacity of the women in food

processing and refining their working knowledge to comply with the toughest standards and requirements of the food industry such as HACCP, GMP and GHP.

Furthermore, although the product preserves the homemade spirit and taste, trained women process food in a small cottage center. This is another facet of SMART, rehabilitation and initiation of food processing centers. The design of the centers complies with the HACCP requirements; dairy products cannot be produced in the same room where trout is smoked for instance. Then, the center is equipped keeping in mind two key concerns: safety and employment. Processing equipment needs to meet standards related to food hygiene and safety in the first place. It must adhere to personal safety measures also. Needless to say, the women operating the machines have a very rudimentary education placing concerns of safety on top of the priorities. As for employment, the equipment should satisfy the program's aim of creating job opportunities to rural women. Equipping the centers with fully automated machines and processing lines entails cutting on the required number of working women. As such, machines should be adapted to the women's skills and to their prospective number working in the center. Finally, once the center is equipped, a women's cooperative is formed and given full responsibility of the center. Trained women join the coop's administrative cadre and assume responsibility of all decisions related to production and processing. Moreover, ownership of the equipment and center is transferred to this autonomous legal entity.





Maintaining the very same program's spirit, SMART has a pure agricultural component tackling the initiation of high value production farms. The latter ought to preserve the whole concept of income generation and women's employment but utilizing on a different principle. Instead of food processing, women will produce fruits, aromatic spices, herbs and mushrooms. The yield



will be sold on the market or to one of the centers to be processed.

On top of all, a centralized cooperative, Atayeb Al Rif or Rural Delights, was established for the main purpose of promoting sales under a unified brand name and a wider national and international outreach. Hence, all centers and farms sell their products, mainly but not exclusively, to Atayeb Al Rif, that markets and resells the produce under Atayeb's name. Products are 100% natural, chemical, coloring material and preservative free. This cooperative is considered the driving force of the program. Opening more markets, selling more products and processing more food generate more income to the women and ensure the sustainability of the program on the long run.



Until recently, SMART has completed the training of 1325 women, finished the construction and rehabilitation of 30 centers and initiated another 7, set up four farms and began working on another one, formed 20 cooperatives and prepared for the formation of another 6. Most importantly, working women have been able to earn around 100\$/month, a decent sum to a previously unemployed rural housewife.



On the other hand, Atayeb Al Rif has proved to be a success story with sales level at around 120,000 US\$ per year and exports to Kuwait, USA, United Kingdom and Germany. New markets locally and abroad are being thoroughly investigated in order to expand Atayeb's sales and extend its far-reaching arm.

SMART will end as a development program in November 2005. Nonetheless, its sustainability has been a major focus of concern to YMCA's dedicated staff. As such, although 2005 is considered the deadline for finalizing training and engineering works; yet, this year is perceived as a new phase in rural transformation: women in their centers and farms will be able to produce on their own, sell their products, secure a decent

monthly income and reinvest this money in the centers and families. As such, YMCA is not only devoted to its tangible targets in terms of number of women trained and clusters of centers erected, but also to the sustainability of the whole program, the quality of life of the beneficiaries and most importantly their expectations. YMCA, through USAID funding, is there in the field working to meet these expectations and possibly give more than initially anticipated.
