Village Fund Nascent Microfinance Industry Reaches Rural Communities in Syria

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1. Country Brief on Poverty

The Syrian economy was largely driven by foreign demand on its oil. Now oil resources are depleting and the growth rate of per capita expenditure exceeds that of the per capita GDP. Incidences of poverty have risen to about 30.1%2, while II.4% of this group are the extreme poor who could not obtain their basic food and non-food needs. Sixty two percent of the poor live in the rural areas, 18% of them are illiterate. Most of the poor are in agriculture and construction.

There is already an urgent need in Syria for poverty reduction programs and the success of Jabal Al-Hoss has drawn the interest of the government. Meanwhile, the government has initiated and achieved steady reforms at encouraging private entrepreneurship, opening the economy and liberalizing the financial industry to encourage greater flow of foreign direct investment.

Jabal Al-Hoss provides an avenue for investors who are keen to participate in their poverty alleviation program. The project is targeted to end by December of 2007 but the authorities have indicated their consent to extend support in the project by another year to allow strategic investors time for decision making.

2. The area

Jabal al-Hoss is one of the poorest areas in Syria. The villages are known for the beauty of their houses in the shape of mud domes; but life is harsh, given the rocky surface of the land and the dry climate. Yet there is more of a potential than meets the eye, waiting for an accessible source of finance.

2.I Basic Information about Jabal Al-Hoss:

- I. The project, located I5 km south east Aleppo, in two administration districts: Al-Safira and Jabal Sama'an.
- 2. The area's altitude is 350 600 m, distributed at a geographic area of 157 thousand hectares named Jabal AL-Hoss, on three rain stability areas, which are the second, third and fourth. The average rainfall ranges between 150 250 mm.
- 3. The volcanic rocks cover 55% of the area, hence reclamation is needed, while there are 36 thousand hectares, that can not been reclaimed, forming 23% of the total area.

²UNDP report on Poverty in Syria, 1996-2004

2.2 Resources and Economic Activity:

According to the recent statistics, population of Jabal Al-Hoss is estimated by 250 thousand, consisting 27 thousand households, distributed in I56 villages and farms. 57% of the people work in agriculture and animal rising. Animal wealth in the area is estimated by I60 thousand sheep, I7 thousand goats and I.7 thousand cows. Crops in the area (wheat, barley, lentil and cumin) are mostly unirrigated, in addition to some fruit trees (olives, pistachios), and some other activities.

2.3 Demographic Status and Livelihood in Jabal Al-Hoss:

The general aspects of living levels are negative, and enough to rate Jabal Al-Hoss as the poorest area in Syria.

Most important indicators are:

Population:

- I) The average of population growth in the area is 3.4%.
- 2) The community is considered youth, age of 51% of the population is less than 15 years, i.e. out of the work force, and average of sustenance is 4 persons.
- 3) Average size of the household is 9 persons.
- 4) Average of individual income is 26.5 S.L. per day (under the line of global poverty).

Education:

- I) Average of illiteracy is 58%, and it is more among women.
- 2) 23% of the villages has no elementary school. Preparatory schools are restricted in the towns and big villages, while there are only 3 secondary schools in the whole area.

Health:

- I) Health services in the area are very modest and restricted to (5 dispensaries) with modest equipment and unspecialized medical staff, and there is no ambulance to serve the area.
- 2) Physically handicapped percentage in the area is 1.3%.

Residence:

46.3% of the people live in single or double mud domes, inhabited by 9 persons

in average, and used for all the aspects of life.

Services:

There is no water net in most of the villages. Water resources are surface wells or it is bought by tanks and stored in semi uncovered ground reservoir, which makes it disposed to pollution.

The area suffers from general weakness in the services, such as; sanitary drains, telephone, electricity and roads.

3. Objective:

The primary objective is the establishment of sustainable local financial institutions owned and managed by the people themselves. If successful in Jabal al-Hoss, which is one of the most disadvantaged areas of Syria, it will serve as a model for all of Syria and perhaps the wider NENA region.

Its wider objective, or development goal, is community development, encompassing income and employment generation through diversified agricultural and non-agricultural income-generating activities (IGA), and the overall improvement in the people's lives.

4. The Village Fund Model:

The model is an ancient community-based financial institution in which the community pools their resources through share capital ownership and financing members' income-generating activities.

Further injection of fund was contributed by UNDP upon satisfactory performance of the Village Funds operations.

The fund was divided into two equal contributions as equity and loan fund for the Village Funds. This loan fund is placed in the Central Fund and earns an interest/service fee of 7% pa.

The management of each Village Fund is elected by the respective share holding members and is known as the Local Committee. It consists of three members, viz. an accountant and a loan officer, who are from the male members, and a women specialist who coordinates women activities and assists in loan processing from female applicants (a cultural necessity). The Local Committee members are provided with relevant training in credit processing and record keeping.

The model involves an implementing agency that establishes individual Village Funds with about fifty to one hundred members and provides "external" capital for onward financing to individual members. Individual loans are repaid at intervals no over twelve months, at which time the Village Fund returns the principal with interest/ profits to the implementing agency.

A fund repaying in full is eligible for subsequent loans, with loan sizes linked to

- 7) Profits as a source of income to cover the costs of loanable funds, administrative costs, provisioning of bad debts, member dividends and retained earnings;
- 8) Personal guarantees, group guarantees, or physical collateral;
- 9) No deposit mobilization during the initial phase until village fund staff can handle liquidity management completely;
- 10) Integration of women in the village fund with equal rights.

4.3 Village funds net financial resources:

- Share capital: they are nominal irrevocable shares, one of the most important self financial resources of village funds net.
- Retained earnings: reserves and annual accumulating profits.
- Equity: \$500.000 to financing village funds net portfolio.
- Central fund loans: \$ 500.000 has been allocated to the central fund to be reallocated as loans to the branch village funds net.

4.4 Financial products:

4.4.I Shares:

Each share value SL.1000, as a shareholder can own maximally 50 share.

Any member can withdraw his share capital minimally after at least a year of the date of his participation.

All the inhabitants of the village can buy shares regardless of their age.

4.4.2 Dividends:

At the end of each fiscal year a stock taking conducted at the village fund and after deducting financial and operational costs for sustainability purpose, dividends disbursed among shareholders.

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Dividend % of share value	30%	41%	36%	25%	25%	18.4%

4.4.3. Loans:

4.4.3.I Credit Operations:

Loan applications are processed by the loan officer at the Local Committee and assisted by the loan officer from the Project Office. Loan decisions are made by the Project Director. Disbursement is done in kind at the market where goods are purchased and distributed directly to the borrowers under the Islamic concept of Murabaha Financing. The whole process from application to approval takes

the performance of Village Fund members in accumulating shares. Peer pressure operates to maintain full repayment, thus assuring further injections of capital, and also encourages sharing in the funds equity. Shares accumulated in a Village Fund is also be used for financing. As a Village Fund accumulates sufficient capital internally, it graduates to become an autonomous and self-sustaining institution (typically over a three-year time period).

Here, villagers buy shares and become owners of the program. Financing of course is made using the Murabaha methodology and dividends are distributed annually to the shareholders if profits are sufficient.

4.I Some of the unique features of this model are:

- i. musharaka-type structure owned and managed by the poor;
- ii. financing based on the concept of murabaha high profit rates with net profits shared among members;
- iii. good governance through committees with sound election and voting procedures;
- iv. project management team responsible for creating awareness of microfinance practices, training of committee members;
- v. financial management of the funds based on standardized by-laws and statutes for each of the village funds resulting in "fair" credit decisions and low transaction costs.
- vi. financially viable operations with repayment rates close to cent percent
- vii. equal access to both men and women as owners and users;
- viii. sanadiq apex fund for liquidity exchange and refinancing;
- ix. and (ix) support from UNDP in the form of matching grant equal to minimum share capital of village fund, and support from Syrian Government through Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform of fixed assets (Locations, furniture, computers, equipments).

4.2 Characteristics of the Village Fund Model

- I) Initial feasibility studies showed that a village needs at least 300 inhabitants in order to sustain a village Sanduq
- 2) Initial capitalization through member share capitol;
- 3) Multiple Share Ownership;
- 4) UNDP capital injection only after satisfactory performance of Village Funds as a local financial intermediary;
- 5) Flexible lending: loans may vary in terms of size, loan period, installment periods, and purpose;
- 6) Profit Margin of 0.75-1.25% per month according to Murabaha principles

about 3 days.

4.4.3.2 Loans type: according to repayment way:

- Seasonal loans repaid as a lump sum at the end of the period.
- Loans repaid by quarterly installments. (each 3 months).
- · Loans repaid by monthly installments.

4.4.3.3 Murabaha: Islamic economic principle is adopted at the villages funds where loans disbursed in-kind so the item is specified by the client (borrower) then it is bought through the village fund committee after giving an appointment to him to see his item and the committee sells it to the client with an agreed increase in its price.

Applied Murabaha rates:

Loan products	Monthly rate
Loans repaid by equal monthly installments flat rate	0.75%
Loans repaid by equal quarterly installments flat rate	1%
seasonal loans flat rate	1.25%

4.4.3.4 Loan term is specified according to the cash flow of the economic activity but it shouldn't exceed a year.

4.4.3.5 Loan size: no more than SL.50.000 in the first loan cycle as it is increased gradually through building the client credit worthiness as follows:

Loan cycle	I	2	3	4	5
Loan size in SL.1000	5-50	50-75	75-100	100-125	125-150

4.4.3.6. Loan purposes:

- Live stock: raising and fattening: (lamb calves goat- fodder honey bee).
- Agriculture: (seeds- fertilizers production inputs agriculture equipments agriculture transportation gardening medicinal plants).
- Food industry.
- Trade: (crops trade fodder- animal products)
- Manufacturing: (brake factory Sieve for grains and cereals)
- Repairing & Maintenance workshops (fridge washing machines electric equipments- tractors – cultivators – agriculture equipments)

- Professions (crafts hand crafts)
- Service (groceries- mobile shop car washing workshop)
- Transportation (vehicles).

4.4.3.7. Loan collateral:

- Two reputable grantors from the village.
- Signing promising vouchers (borrower & grantors).

An excellent feature of the Project is the incentive and penalty system.

A Village Fund with a portfolio at risk above 8% will be barred from further lending. Borrowers who are good paymasters are given repeat loans or larger loans. For delinquent loans, both the borrowers are guarantors are barred from further borrowing for a specific period depending on the level of delinquency. Such a system is necessary to ensure good repayment, financial viability and sustainability of microfinance.

4.5 Sustainability:

Here in a general view about sustainability percentages accessed in the program as of 2004 after some amendments according to CGAP measures:

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004
Operational self-sufficiency	% 30	% 63	% 85	% 9I
Financial self-sufficiency	% 27	% 54	% 68	% 75

5. Non Financial services:

5.I. Agriculture services:

- I) Offer agriculture extension and implement trails on alternative crops.
- 2) Improve honey bee keeping.
- 3) Cooperate with FAO, telefood program where many investments conducted at the area such as: mushroom planting honey bee keeping lamb raising egg laying chicken turkeys home garden. Beneficiaries were about 100 poor households.
- 4) Cooperate with Afro Asian organization for development: mushroom planting was introduced to Jabal Al Hoss through the organization in March 2002, where 86 units for producing mushroom were established on household level.

5.2. Veterinarian services:

- 1) Offer veterinarian care services as vaccinations and fodder mixture.
- 2) Establish a unit for lamb and goat raising keepers at the area of Khanaser Valley.

5.3. Social services:

Establish a village fund for handicapped investments with an amount of SL.I.5 million, offer as Kard Hasan (loan free of interest), loan disbursed number 32 one.

5.4. Special services for women:

Establish two small workshops at Harbakieh and Hwayer Al Hoss villages for the finishing of the traditional embroidery done by the women in the villages. The workshops `equipment offered through German embassy in Damascus to the rural women at Jabal Al Hoss, and market all women products through participation in exhibitions.

5.5. Training services:

- I. (97) training courses were conducted at the area where beneficiaries' number was 1688 (men and women) to prepare target groups and develop their capacities. These courses offered to the local community free of charge. And they included many development fields and specializations for income generating activities as: literacy courses- hand crafts sewing and tailoring food industry livestock keeping honey bee keeping mushroom cultivation electronic devices maintenance electrical equipment repair hair dresser barbers other vocational training needed.
- 2. (14) courses were conducted and addressed to the village funds committee members to well prepare them to manage the village funds especially in topics related to microfinance and computer operational system.

6. Partnership Model between RCDP and ACB,

Agricultural Cooperative Bank (ACB) has access to government resources for lending, but lacks an adequate distribution network of sub-branches, agencies and loan officers. Most branches are far from the villages; and it takes many visits for a villager to obtain a loan.

ACB therefore tends to offer relatively large loans with relatively long maturities to big borrowers conversely, there is a lack of flexible small loans for short terms, which are of particular importance for start-up microentrepreneurs with risky microinvestments.

As a result, most villagers have no access to ACB loans, resulting in a general lack of microentrepreneurial activity.

Villages Funds, on the other hand, are located within a village; and large numbers of villagers are members in those villages where a V.F has been established.

They have the capacity for flexible lending, including small short-term loans to women and the youth, and cost-effective loan examination and loan disbursement. As they are not integrated into the national financial market, and as donor sources are invariably limited and temporary, the main problem of the V.Fs is a lack of sustainable access to sources of refinance, resulting in a lack of funds: for bigger loans; for loans to additional members; for the capitalization of new V.Fs; for the capitalization of a Central Fund; for the capitalization of new networks of V.Fs in other parts of the country.

ACB may open a window for wholesale lending to the V.Fs through a Central Regional Fund in Jabal al-Hoss and gradually shift its microbanking operations from retailing to wholesaling throughout Syria. ACB should lend to, or invest in, the Central Regional Fund, rather than lending to V.Fs directly.

For future perspectives, 'Villages Funds Network' were linked to A.C.B since 2001, 32 current accounts was opened in the bank, in addition to the special account of the Central Fund, the value of transactions between the Central Fund and the Agricultural Bank until the end of 2006 more than 86 million Syrian pounds.

7. The Future Perspectives of the Partnership Model in the RCDP:

The main goal of the Rural Community Development project in Jabal Al Hoss, is the support and development of rural financial institutions within what might be called "the private sector in rural finance."

With the issuance of Legislative Decree No. 15 of February 2007, which passed the Council of Monetary and Credit in Syria licensing for social banking financial institutions aimed to providing microfinance services for certain segments of the population, the border between microfinance providers in private sector and government financial sectors begun to overlap, with a major role of private sector in the expansion process and development the industry. According to the decree, these institutions may create by public or private Syrian institutions or both, and also public banks may to contribute to establish such institutions.

The issuance of this decree will enable R.C.D.P from obtaining the necessary legal license for the transformation to an MFI.

Founders are public sector representatives by Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform and UNDP, and the private sector representatives of the shareholders in the Villages Funds from the area of Jabal Al Hoss.

The role of public sector is to secure all the required conditions for the success

of the licensing process to transfer the project to a private institution, where the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform will offer in-kind contributions including the headquarters of funds and furniture and fixtures, and UNDP will offer 50 million Syrian pounds. After licensing procedures, these parties will withdraw from the new institution to keep the ownership by the private sector in the area of Jabal Al- Hoss, enhancing access to financial services to largest number of the poor.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (AS AT DEC 2006)

Loan Quality	
Collection rate	95%
PAR .	9.2%
Loan Loss Provision	0.7%
Write-offs to total loan balance	0
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Efficiency & Productivity	
# loans/loan officer	207
# loans/ Staff member	31.2
Average Processing time per application	3days
Outreach Number of loans disbursed	11961
Number of outstanding loans	2279
Number of outstanding loans Average size of loan	2279 SP 40.326
Average size of loan	2279 SP 40,326 44.3%
Average size of loan # loans disbursed / households	SP 40,326
Average size of loan	SP 40,326 44.3%
Average size of loan # loans disbursed / households	SP 40,326 44.3%
Average size of loan # loans disbursed / households # outstanding loans /households	SP 40,326 44.3%
Average size of loan # loans disbursed / households # outstanding loans /households Profitability	SP 40,326 44.3% 8.4%

Outreach Indicators

Appendix 2

CONTROL OF CONTROL OF THE CONTROL OF T	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Number of sanadiq	9.00	20.00	22.00	30.00	31.00	32.00	32.00
Total value of shares	1,901,000	4,635,000	6,557,110	10,652,610	12,717,500	13,389,000	14,778,800
Total number of shareholders	1,025	3,455	2,722	6,468	7,347	7,370	7,378
Value of male shares	1,290,500	2,839,500	3,904,610	5,809,610	6,843,500	7,216,500	7,837,000
Value of female shares	610,500	1,795,500	2,652,500	4,843,000	5,874,000	6,172,500	6,940,500
Percentage of female shares	32.11	38.74	40.45	45.46	46.19	46.10	46.96
Total loans outstanding	1,789,599	20,755,503	31,935,328	63,832,571	72,593,665	78,288,478	91,902,373
Number of loans outstanding	93	737	1,033	1,724	2,102	1,952	2,279
Value of male outstanding loans	1,789,599	20,755,503	31,935,328	63,832,571	72,593,665	78,288,478	91,902,373
Value of female outstanding loans	22,950	6,402,584	9,997,112	24,146,010	30,768,171	32,605,691	40,790,075
Percentage of female outstanding loans	1.28	30.85	31.30	37.83	42.38	41.65	44.38_
Average size of oustanding loans	19,243	28,162	30,915	37,026	34,536	40,107	40,326

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VDFs						Append	lix 3
Balance sheet page 1 of 2	Dec-00	Dec-01	Dec-02	Dec-03	Dec-04	Dec-05	Dec-06
Assets							
Cash	4462420	4324781	3760961	5780481	5267678	6447781	2201732
Due from Banks	0	0	43510	57500	61500	69700	76700
Total loan portfolio	1789599	20755503	31935328	63832571	72593665	78288478	91902373
Loan loss reserve (Accumulated)	0	290321	1082042	2203807	3269564	3733937	4100146
Net Portfolio	1789599	20465182	30853286	61628764	69324101	74554541	87802227
Fixed Assets	0	2599305	3627290	3632520	5449910	5857821	6406106
Depreciation (Accumulated)	0	132470	340583	578164	885405	1237302	1622565
Net fixed assets	0	2466835	3286707	3054356	4564505	4620519	4783541
Total Assets	6252019	27256798	37944464	70521101	79217784	85692541	94864200
Liabilities							
Loans: Central Fund	0	4115000	5549145	27213218	23467249	23326071	27868709
Other short-term liabilities	0	1203876	2501395	3208296	3468366	3905000	3486331
Dividend - Financial surplus distribute for shareholders	0	1022917	1933966	2358895	2675150	3011647	2719710
Accrued expenses - personnel	0	180959	567429	849401	793216	893353	766621
Total Liabilities	0	5318876	8050540	30421514	26935615	27231071	31355040

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VDFs							
Balance sheet page 2 of 2	Dec-00	Dec-01	Dec-02	Dec-03	Dec-04	Dec-05	Dec-06
Equity							
Paid-in equity from shareholders	1901000	4635000	6557110	10652610	12717500	13389000	14778500
Cash Donations - UNDP	4300000	14550000	18500000	22200000	26900000	27800000	27187035
In Kind Donations - UNDP	0	1139305	1381240	1381240	1848905	1965010	2497045
In Kind Donations - Syrian Government	0	1460000	2242000	2242000	3578500	3851831	3851831
Legal Reserve	0	53500	274026	697573	1292136	1986135	2559170
Growth Reserve	0	53500	507943	1351955	2467360	3855357	4384127
Other Reserve	0	21522	417667	1516846	3040074	4775106	4312177
Financial Surplus	51019	25095	13938	57363	437694	839031	3939275
Total Equity	6252019	21937922	29893924	40099587	52282169	58461470	63509160
Total Equity and Liabilities	6252019	27256798	37944464	70521101	79217784	85692541	94864200

Depreciation	0	132470	219343	226329	307241	351897	385263
Depreciation for building	0	84020	134595	137000	184521	208916	217492
Depreciation for furniture	0	48450	84748	89329	122720	142981	167771
Other expenses	0	10605	53455	26152	38418	28685	50895
Total Operating Expenses	0	350811	885933	1122519	1561826	1796947	1744938
Total Expenses	0	641132	2106187	2906740	4239081	3755561	4288301
Net Operating Profit (Loss)	51019	1176534	2953035	4767468	6309742	7159511	5758140

VDFs	Appendix	4					
Income statement	Dec-00	Dec-01	Dec-02	Dec-03	Dec-04	Dec-05	Dec-06
Operating Income:							
Interest and income from loans	51019	1817666	5059222	7674208	10548823	10915072	9989912
Loans Fees	0	0	0	0	0	0	56529
Total Operating Income	51019	1817666	5059222	7674208	10548823	10915072	10046441
Financial Expenses							
Interest Expenses	0	0	402630	687879	1635084	1470080	1487915
Loan Loss Provision	0	290321	817494	1095992	1042011	488119	529165
Inflation Provision	0	0	0	0	0	0	525808
Other Expenses	0	0	130	350	160	415	475
Total Financial Expenses	0	290321	1220254	1784221	2677255	1958614	2543363
Operating Expenses							
Administrative expenses - personnel	0	180959	564994	832728	1074478	1310503	1229531
Electricity & Water	0	15762	26889	10875	77966	54150	31001
Post & Tel	0	0	7757	5225	28483	12392	2518
Transportation	0	10855	12985	20575	33960	38835	44600
Stationary	0	160	510	635	1280	485	1130