

In southern Lebanon, farming the bitter tobacco plant gives way to the freshness of oregano

Promoting oregano cultivation is part of a comprehensive support package launched by the ILO in 2008 to assist socio-economic recovery in war-torn southern Lebanon.

By: Farah Dakhllallah, ILO Regional Outreach and Advocacy Officer in Beirut, reports

BEIRUT, Lebanon, (ILO Online) – Not so long ago, Hassan Bazzi’s farm in the South of Lebanon grew lush every summer with the tough and resilient green leaves of tobacco plants.

But the work was hard, expensive and could endanger health. What some farmers in the area had called the “plant of steadfastness” for its ability to provide cash and survive decades of conflict, was increasingly being called the “bitter plant” because of the challenges to growing tobacco.

Farmers were looking for an alternative, and they found one – with the help of the ILO. Today, many of the “bitter plants” are gone, replaced by a fresh green herb that is easier and cheaper to farm, and even goes well with a variety of local foods and cooking, including the famous Lebanese condiment zataar, a mix of herbs, sumac, sesame seeds and salt.

Oregano farming is the new face of this area’s development: oregano is easy and economical to grow, doesn’t damage anyone’s health, and smells and tastes good. Promoting its cultivation is part of a comprehensive support package launched by the ILO, and funded by the Lebanon Recovery Fund, in 2008 to assist socio-economic recovery in areas of south Lebanon affected by the 2006 July war with Israel.

“I had long wanted to make a switch but wasn’t aware of any viable alternative until our local cooperative was approached by the ILO about oregano production,” says Hassan.

Hassan is making the transition because, compared with tobacco farming, oregano is low-cost, consumes less water and requires less effort. It can also be more profitable: harvesting oregano instead of tobacco can lead to an annual income increase of 850,000L.L (US\$566) per family.

However, diversifying crops and securing sales of new products like oregano remains a challenge.

Some 25,000 families in southern Lebanon – about 60 per cent of the population in the South –continue to rely on the state-subsidized tobacco sector for their livelihood. Because of the government’s long-standing price support policy, tobacco is regarded by

many in the region as a secure selling crop – providing the average farmer with an annual income equivalent to US\$2,400.

But in addition to the well-known health hazards linked to tobacco consumption, the ‘bitter’ plant can have dire social and economic impacts.

Much of the world’s tobacco is farmed by child labourers, and Lebanon is no exception. Forty-one-year-old Hassan himself has worked since the age of seven on his family’s 8,000 square metre tobacco farm. Tobacco cultivation is often a family affair, leading to children being pulled out of school and women being overworked. Over a third of Lebanon’s estimated 100,000 child labourers work on tobacco farms.

Work in the tobacco sector is both labour-intensive and exhausting. Men, women and children endure long hours of stoop labour while suffering from exposure to nicotine and pesticides.

What’s more, tobacco farming also leads to environmental degradation: the use of wood for curing contributes to deforestation; pesticides pollute the soil and water supplies; and the great need for irrigation depletes water reserves.

Besides its contribution to a greener economy, the ILO support programme is also intended to help the rural areas of Southern Lebanon recover from the July 2006 war.

Through 12 partner cooperatives, ILO trained over 110 producers in 28 villages on how to prepare the soil, plant and cultivate oregano, and provided seeds and irrigation materials. The oregano plants also served as aromatic flowers for the beehives being maintained by ILO-supported beekeepers nearby.

Besides oregano farming, the ILO programme also supports olive farming, bee-keeping, livestock and fishing; skills training for persons with disabilities to help integrate them into the workforce; and capacity building for trade unions, municipalities and cooperatives, and micro-credit facilities.

“Our home had been badly damaged and our harvest burnt during the war, so we welcomed the ILO’s assistance. At first, we planted one dunum (1000 square metres) of oregano on a trial basis. I’m now in my third season and have dedicated half of my land – four dunums – entirely to oregano,” says Hassan.
