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**PRESS RELEASE**

**Mercy Corps implemented Cluster Approach to Business Services (CABS) Program significantly benefits more than 2,000 farmers in the Lenkaran and Masalli regions of Azerbaijan.**

**The Program is designed to improve profitability and livelihood for rural livestock producers by increasing access to a network of trained veterinary service providers.**

**Azerbaijan, Baku** – In 2002 Mercy Corps, an international relief and development agency, has been awarded a \$750,000 grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to implement a three-year business services program. The program was initiated to address one of the farmers' key constraints - high production costs due to livestock mortality and low breeding rates. The program implementation started in October 2002 to support over 4,000 animal breeders and poultry producers in the two southern Azerbaijan regions: Masalli and Lenkaran. Activities were tailored to build capacity of 54 local veterinarians and develop farmer clusters in remote villages in order to ease their access to the veterinary and production advice services.

During the first eighteen months of activities in the region, the program has been partnering with 34 local veterinarians, trained them in business management and marketing skills, and helped improve the veterinary service quality to rural farmers. In addition, Mercy Corps supports veterinary service providers with constant access to new technical knowledge and veterinary practices. Mercy Corps also mobilizes farmer clusters to combat animal diseases collectively and benefit from the principals of economies of scale in accessing the veterinary and other business services. The program conducts awareness raising campaigns among the rural farmers on animal maladies, their first symptoms and preventive actions in order to promote timely veterinary applications, animal vaccinations and other preventive practices. To date, more than 2,000 farmers engaged in cattle breeding and poultry raising are involved in the program cluster activities. According to surveys conducted by the program, every targeted farmer on average possesses 3 cows, 2 sheep and 25 fowls making an average yearly income of US\$ 1,280. In total, the program-targeted farmers contribute more than US\$ 2,500,000 to the regional economy in yearly sales value of wool, eggs, dairy and meat products.

Another success of the program is an introduction of a new service in the target area – cattle artificial insemination (AI). Mercy Corps has provided training for two selected veterinarians in AI techniques and helped them acquire necessary equipment and frozen semen of highly productive Holstein cow breeds for conducting this service. Artificial insemination of cattle gives farmers the choice of using the best possible bulls to sire their calves, not only to increase productivity but to increase the health and well-being of the herd as well. Many devastating cattle diseases are transmitted sexually, so using stud bulls from other owners is potentially dangerous. But the tight quality controls over the insemination process not only insure the well-being of the farmer's stock, but also do so at a fraction of the cost. While a Holstein bull may cost thousands of dollars, artificial insemination costs around ten dollars. This service enables farmers to save money, increase productivity and helps create a sustainable future for the stock.

To date, the program-supported veterinarians inseminated 210 cows and 16 calves already appeared as a result of this service.

Mercy Corps is an international relief and development agency that exists to alleviate suffering, poverty, and oppression by helping people build secure, productive, and just communities. The agency launched its activities in Azerbaijan in early 1997 with a shelter program for refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and now implements or oversees three significant programs funded by USAID.

In 1998 USAID awarded Mercy Corps umbrella grant management responsibility for the six-year Azerbaijan Humanitarian Assistance Program (AHAP). Under the AHAP, Mercy Corps has provided grants for community based projects in primary health care, credit and business development services and community development in over 23 cities and regions of Azerbaijan.

In addition to the CABS project detailed in this story, Mercy Corps also began implementation of a USAID funded Child Survival (CS) Project in Masalli, Yardimli and Lerik. The goal of the CS program is to reduce infant, child and maternal mortality and morbidity through community-based preventive actions coupled with improvement in the quality and utilization of primary health care. The program will target 60,000 people which includes 20,000 children under five and 40,000 women of reproductive age.

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