

Pasadena retiree fights malnutrition in Afghanistan -- with soybeans



James Carbone

Steven Kwon, shown outside Kabul, Afghanistan, quit his job as a Nestle nutritionist and started a nonprofit that gives thousands of Afghan farmers a low-risk option: The group provides free soy seed and instruction and offers to buy the harvest.

The former Nestle nutritionist started a nonprofit that gives free seed to thousands of farmers and offers to pay for the harvest. Far from his Pasadena home, nutritionist Steven Kwon stood before Afghan government officials and agronomists in Kabul three years ago, extolling the virtues of protein-rich soybeans as a way to curb the rampant malnutrition in the war-torn nation.

The tension rose as one skeptic asked whether soybeans would generate as much money as poppies that produce opium. "The way he asked the question was very cynical," said the 60-year-old Kwon. "And all of a sudden, the other attendees seemed to realize that soybeans may not be as lucrative as the opium poppy." As Kwon tried to come up with a response (soybeans are roughly 35% less profitable), another Afghan angrily challenged his countryman: "When our women and children are dying every day, the only thing you can think about is how large will your profits be? Do you really love your country and your people?"

With the critic shamed, Kwon and his colleagues went on to sell the group on soybeans -- a new crop for Afghanistan. In 2005, 2 tons of seed provided by Kwon's nonprofit, Nutrition & Education International, produced 10 tons of soybeans. Over the last two years, 4,400 Afghan farmers in 15 provinces planted 80 tons of seed, resulting in a harvest of 2,000 tons. Kwon's group provides the farmers with seeds, fertilizer and training. It also guarantees to buy the harvest. This takes away most of the farmers' risk, and most keep the soybeans as food for their families.

"He literally, single-handedly has brought soybeans to the country," said Arthur Quinn, a retired Washington, D.C., attorney and international consultant who volunteered to help Kwon. Other groups providing aid to Afghanistan "haven't focused on the basic need of trying to solve malnutrition," Quinn said. Kwon, who worked as a nutritionist for Nestle USA for 22 years, has an ambitious goal, especially for a man whose tiny organization is headquartered in a spartan, one-room office in Pasadena. **He wants to produce 300,000 tons of soybeans annually in Afghanistan, a bounty he believes will all but eliminate malnutrition in that country.**

But before Kwon and the soybean can become the Afghan equivalents of George Washington Carver and the peanut, they must overcome barriers posed by the country's lack of infrastructure and economic base, tribal warlords and systemic corruption. None of it seems to overly concern Kwon, a thin, bespectacled man who uses humility and kindness as diplomatic tools. "When you show your heart and establish a heart-to-heart relationship, then we can overcome whatever established obstacles we have -- language, race, religion, culture." Kwon said.

In 2003, Kwon was asked by a friend to travel to Afghanistan and lend his expertise to help solve the country's severe malnutrition problem, which causes high mortality rates, especially among women and children. Until that point, Kwon, a naturalized U.S. citizen, didn't have a special interest in Afghanistan. In his work at Nestle, he developed infant formula and liquid meals for hospital patients and others who couldn't eat solid foods. He earned 13 patents in his career there.

But the Afghanistan story was sickeningly familiar to him. He earned a doctorate in food biochemistry and became a nutritionist because of the starvation he had witnessed as a child in war-ravaged Korea and as a Korean soldier in Vietnam. Before leaving for Kabul, Kwon spent evenings in his garage concocting a protein-rich powder for Afghans to use as a nutritional supplement. Kwon traveled to Afghanistan laden with 500 pounds of protein powder. He carried milk-based and soy-based versions and was surprised that Afghans preferred the soy product.

And that gave him an idea: **A bountiful soybean harvest could reduce the country's malnutrition problems, which stemmed largely from a lack of protein.** But Kwon discovered that Afghans did not grow soybeans. Undeterred, Kwon lobbied government officials for permission to test the viability of soybean farming. **After a successful harvest in 2004, the experiment was expanded to 12 of the country's 34 provinces, & the Afghan government adopted the soy initiative as a national project.**

Being officially sanctioned gave Kwon access to provincial leaders and farmers and provided protection from warlords and militia. With his new clout, Kwon and his volunteers won over thousands of farmers. Last winter, Kwon said with a trace of pride, Afghan cooks developed more than 25 recipes for the soybean. Plus, most taste-testers preferred soy-enriched *naan*, the staple bread of the country, to the wheat-only version. Even this small change in their diet would cut down dramatically on malnutrition.

Though soybeans in Afghanistan have been relatively easy to raise, funding has not. **This year, 10,000 farmers signed up to plant soybeans (mostly as a secondary crop to wheat), but Kwon's organization had enough money to provide seeds for only 25% of them.** Quinn, the international consultant, said it was frustrating to see U.S. taxpayer money spent on projects that haven't worked in Afghanistan while Kwon's nonprofit has shown such promise. Afghan officials told Kwon that they couldn't afford to fund his project. Kwon said his nonprofit was too small to attract U.S. federal funding. NEI, which operates with three part-time employees, has survived on \$590,000 in private donations since its inception in 2003 and projects \$700,000 in contributions this year.

Last year the group established four small soy-milk processing facilities in provinces with the highest infant mortality rates. But for the project to succeed nationwide, soy-processing plants would need to be built throughout Afghanistan. NEI is looking to team with private companies in Afghanistan or establish partnerships with larger nonprofits. In the meantime, Kwon shuttles between Pasadena and Kabul (he recently left for his 16th trip there), doing whatever one man can do to create a soybean industry in Afghanistan.

Kwon said his motivation is simple: **"If we're unsuccessful, people will starve."**

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