




10 stories - 10 years of SDC engagement in Afghanistan

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Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC





Kahmard district, Bamyan

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Rustaq district, Takhar

Foreword

The Swiss Cooperation Office in Afghanistan celebrates its 10-year anniversary in 2012. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) opened its office after the fall of the Taliban and the subsequent Bonn Agreements in 2002. But Switzerland's engagement in Afghanistan started already in the beginning of the 1970s with the arrival of Swiss experts to advise Afghan farmers on cheese production and to provide support on water projects.

SDC continued its programmes until 1980 and left the country as one of the last development agencies following the arrival of Soviet troops. Ten years later, SDC relaunched its Afghanistan programme from Pakistan. The programme involved mainly humanitarian activities in which SDC closely collaborated with the United Nations and other organisations supporting refugees. After the establishment of the Cooperation Office, SDC concentrated its activities on meeting the enormous needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees to Afghanistan and refugees in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan.

Since 2004 the Swiss programme has gradually become a longer-term engagement for development and reconstruction. Today SDC's activities in the country focus on promoting good governance and respect for human rights as well as on improving the living conditions of disadvantaged segments of the population. The Swiss engagement is guided by the principles of neutrality and impartiality and informed by the realities and requirements of the Afghan people. Following these principles while ensuring the close collaboration with our partners with financial as well as technical advice, the comparatively small SDC programme has made a clear contribution to the enhancement of resilience and human security of parts of the Afghan population.

It is this focus on the people that is depicted in the 10 stories presented in this booklet. Covering partners, beneficiaries from different projects, and government representatives, the 10 stories give SDC's engagement a human face. They highlight the difficult circumstances the

people of Afghanistan have lived in and how war, different political regimes, widespread poverty and ongoing instability have affected the lives of men and women throughout generations. At the same time they illustrate that changes are possible and that SDC can make a contribution to a betterment of the situation and ultimately to the lives of the people.

In the current process of transition and in view of the long-term transformation of the country, SDC will stay engaged with Afghanistan. With the increased focus on working in fragile and conflict affected states, SDC will even enhance its programmes and is hopeful that – with the continuous collaboration of all stakeholders – it can further contribute to a better life for the people of Afghanistan.

Martin Dahinden

Director-General
of the SDC, Ambassador





Summary

When aid organisations returned to Afghanistan after the 2001 fall of the Taliban, they encountered an overwhelming spectrum of acute needs of an impoverished population. Key to SDC's decision, as a result of decades of experience working with the Afghan population, was the beneficiary of aid delivery: the Afghan people. Choosing the beneficiaries, the partners and the right staff, as well as building relationships with relevant authorities and personalities, was as important as programmatic decisions. The following pages take a glimpse at these key people and, through them, highlight the several faces of SDC's engagement in this country.

When it opened its office in Kabul in 2002, SDC employed Sayed Qasim as one of its first staff members. Then in his early forties, Qasim, who has stayed with SDC till now, belonged to that small group of educated Afghans who had remained in Afghanistan. The protracted conflict, stretching over decades, had led to several waves of migration as Afghans fled first from the Soviet invasion, then from the war against the Soviet, afterwards from the internecine fighting between mujahideen groups and the oppression of the Taliban, and finally from the aerial bombing during the international intervention to oust the Taliban. Most educated Afghans had long since left their country as it offered them very few opportunities for their qualifications. Qasim himself fled the country but only for a few weeks before the U.S. bombing.

Soon SDC was to induct another remarkable survivor of the conflict, Shah Mohammad. Shah Mohammad saw the violence of the conflict up close. Many members of his own family died, and his village was bombed so heavily that trees still do not grow there. Being with SDC, however, has given him new roots. As the SDC office grew, so did Shah Mohammad's career, whose eagerness for new skills was encouraged, giving him the opportunity to develop. Although he first joined as a security guard, he is now the SDC's IT and HR manager.

A key component of SDC's approach has been to work with the Afghan government, providing support to

state institutions such as the Ministry of Justice. Minister Habibullah Ghalib, whose entire career has been in law, exemplifies the long Afghan wait for justice. Justice is a critical element in the ethos of Afghans, but it has been undermined by years of conflict that subverted the rule of law and replaced it by the rule of guns. The Minister says that this challenge must be tackled by building up the relationship between government and people. The importance of this relationship crops up time and time again. Dr. Soraya Sobhrang, a Commissioner with the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), a body crucial to upholding human rights and justice, believes the Commission acts as a bridge between people and government. Mir Ahmed Joyenda, the deputy director of the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), deems that civil society plays a critical role in the relationship between the state and the people.

Sometimes impact and acceptance depend as much on the approach as on the substance. Feisty Jamila Afghani uses Islam as the gateway to her work in women's education and empowerment within a conservative society. Equally gutsy is Dr. Habiba Sarabi, who has made history by becoming the first and only female Governor in Afghanistan. Not only is Sarabi a role model in a country where few women reach high public office, she has also set standards for governance and administration in Bamiyan province, one of the poorest and most deprived in the country. Mountainous and with a harsh climate, Bamiyan has only one crop-growing and harvesting season, a short and precious period that is sometimes devastated by frequent flashfloods in this area. Najmuddin, whose own land was destroyed, is now a beneficiary of a watershed development programme. But development, like the human body, requires a holistic approach, points out Dr. Sediqi, a physician turned development practitioner, who is now project manager with the SDC partner organisation Helvetas. In Bamiyan's Kahmard district, this project required working through the community and addressing the causes of deforestation by means of other projects implemented simultaneously.

In parched Rustaq district of Takhar, where agriculture yields increasingly fewer returns, cottage industry projects like vegetable preserves help supplement family income and provide women with financial independence. It has not only helped raise the status of Bibi Ayesha in her family but, says Ayesha coyly, it has even made her husband love her more!

The stories here demonstrate that a financially small contribution can be maximised if combined with careful technical advice and commitment by partner and beneficiaries, something that underpins SDC's engagement approach. It is an ethos that has been well-communicated. SDC employee Sayed Qasim takes pride in SDC's small donor status, saying that he is convinced that, even as a small donor, Switzerland has exerted an impact on the lives of all project beneficiaries.



Sayed Qasim



“My son was going to Habibia High School (during the Taliban), but the girls were not. It was a very hard time, a challenge for me as a father. My wife is a teacher. For 22 years she had been teaching in a girls’ high school. But then she stayed at home.”

History usually plods along slowly, with changes sometimes taking place imperceptibly over decades. Not so for the generation of Afghans now in their fifties or a little older, who was subjected to convulsive change. With the overthrow of the monarchy in the seventies, Afghanistan became a Republic, only to be brought down by a Soviet-supported coup that culminated in Soviet military intervention. When a bloody decade of foreign forces and Afghan resistance had ended, infighting among anti-Soviet Mujahideen evolved. They were then replaced by the intolerant and oppressive Taliban.

Social transformations forced upon Afghan society were equally convulsive. A liberal cosmopolitan culture in the cities was swept away by cultural conservatism, while traditional practices that held communities together gave way to the predatory behavior of those who had money and arms.

54-year-old Sayed Qasim, SDC’s senior office manager and external relations officer, witnessed these events. Kabul changed from being a peaceful city to an occupied city, the stage for pitched battles, seized by rival factions, under the oppressive diktats of the Taliban and finally bombed during the Western military intervention of 2001. It changed from a cosmopolitan city to one where the presence of women was not tolerated in the streets and now again to one which buzzes with the chatter of schoolgirls. It changed from a beautiful green city to a city pockmarked by the attacks of rockets and grenades to one which now offers hope of subsistence to a large refugee population flocking towards it. The Afghanistan of Qasim’s boyhood, ruled then by the country’s last monarch King Zahir Shah, was almost a different country. “It was very peaceful then and the population of Kabul was around 300,000 compared to the 5 million it has today.”

Qasim himself was given the best of education, but during the conflict his children could hardly even get schooling. “My son was going to Habibia High School (during the Taliban), but the girls were not. It was a very hard time, a challenge for me as a father. My wife is a teacher. For 22 years she had been teaching in a girls’ high school. But then she stayed at home.”

In 2001, post 9/11, Qasim fled the country with his family again, fearing the outbreak of fighting that was to follow. It cost him his job at an international agency and he remained jobless until he joined the SDC when it opened its office in Kabul in 2002. He recalls how “the (coun-

“Even with one dollar, if you spend it the right way, you will change something. But if you spend \$100,000 where there is corruption, it will not change anything”

try’s) administrative system was at the zero level.” Things have changed since then. “Now we have an elected government, a functioning education system, security is better, my children can go to school, university, to work. Afghanistan imports electricity, which gives us power 24 hours a day and we have the Internet and can use it for further education. As an Afghan, I can easily travel from one place to another and do not encounter any obstacles. Inside Kabul, the roads have been paved, six million Afghan children go to school and everything (goods) is available.” His daughter, who was denied schooling under the Taliban, now works with the foremost telecommunication company and Qasim is amazed at developments in the telecom sector.

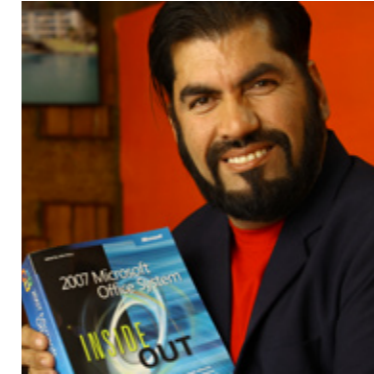
Qasim, like many of his countrymen, shares both hopes and fear for the future. While much has improved in the capital where he lives, much more needs to be done, especially in the provinces. “The government needs to create job opportunities by installing factories in the big provinces. The authorities need to work transparently, not just think of their own pockets.”

After working for a decade with SDC, Qasim understands how sound development should be implemented. It has made him aware that it is not the amount of money that is spent, but how it is spent that is critical. “Billions of dollars flowed into Afghanistan. With good governance, we could have spent this money the right way. Because of corruption in our government and partly because of corruption in the international community, it was not. Most of the budget is spent for anti-terrorism and fighting, not for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Afghanistan. Because of that, we do not see progress in Afghanistan. We (Afghans) also blame ourselves for not spending the money the right way.”

As an example of an alternative approach, Qasim cites the experience of SDC. “The SDC is a small donor with a small contribution to Afghanistan, but this small amount is spent the right way. One of our senior colleagues always says: ‘Even with one dollar, if you spend it the right way, you will change something. But if you spend \$100,000 where there is corruption, it will not change anything’.”



Shah Mohammad



“I would say to my countrymen (who are handicapped): we should try our best and not be disheartened by our handicap. Of course I am disabled, but I am capable.”

Even today trees still do not grow as they did before in Logar province, the home of Shah Mohammad, the SDC’s Human Resources and IT Officer, just south of Kabul. In 1979, after the Soviet invasion, fighting began almost immediately in Mohammed Agha and in retaliation against the Mujahideen, Soviet troops started bombing the area. “Big bombs used to fall there. Even now, when we try to grow trees, they seldom grow because there are chemicals from the bombs in the soil. Our district was completely destroyed.”

For Mohammad, the conflict in Afghanistan has always been up close and personal. It killed his uncle and his younger brother, left him with a minor injury and killed many of his extended family. As the number of deaths in the family rose, Mohammad and his family left for Pakistan. By then, the Mujahideen factions had burned down his school because they believed it was teaching a foreign curriculum. The family returned to Afghanistan when the Mujahideen took over. They tried to rebuild their lives from scratch, living out of tents because there were no houses left standing. However, factional fighting between the mujahideen groups ensued. Though Shah Mohammad, educated in Pakistan, became a school teacher, the job paid no salary. The area was occupied by one factional leader but another headed the government’s education department in Kabul. “At that time, it was impossible to find a job. The only option was to become a farmer or a fighter by joining the militia.” Shah Mohammad did not want to fight. His entire community had laid down arms after the departure of the Soviets in the belief that, since the country now belonged to Afghans and “everyone was a Muslim, they would work together.” He started growing potatoes and onions. As the fighting escalated, Mohammad left for Pakistan again to survive and began working in a furniture company.

When he returned to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, Shah Mohammad redoubled his efforts to find a job. He was not hopeful. Handicapped from birth, Shah Mohammad faced the same prospects of discrimination and extreme poverty that are the lot of Afghanistan’s large handicapped population, many of them maimed during the war. The SDC however reached out to them. “We were three handicapped people out of the 11 persons they recruited,” says Shah Mohammad proudly when referring to his organization. The SDC gave him more cause for pride. It encouraged his ambition and willingness to learn, and Shah Mohammad, who joined

as a chowkidar (guard), is today the SDC’s Human Resources and IT Officer. “I would say to my countrymen (who are handicapped): we should try our best and not be disheartened by our handicap. Of course I am disabled, but I am capable.”

Shah Mohammad has seen other changes. When he joined SDC, he had to sleep in the office, because the road to Logar was broken down and required traveling several hours. By 2005, repair of the road had halved the travel time, allowing him to commute every day. Though he continues to do so even now, security in his area has been worsening steadily and Shah Mohammad now has to use subterfuge to make that journey. Elements hostile to the government and the foreign presence question all those who work with the ‘foreign occupiers’ not differentiating between diverse international organizations or even between the civil and military components.

“My mother and my wife are saying: ‘Let’s move to Kabul. God forbid something should happen to you or your brothers.’ Of course, Kabul is a difficult place to live in but there is no option. There is no other way. The most important thing is to save our lives”

The journey has become so perilous—attacks and bomb blasts are a regular feature in Logar—that his family has been urging him to find a house in Kabul so they can shift their base. “Before, it was very calm, but now it is getting volatile. I am nervous about the future of our country if it goes back to the previous situation. Before, there were no security incidents, but now they sometimes use improvised explosive devices to target international and national military convoys. Also, from time to time, fighting erupts. Since 2007, it has changed and it is getting worse day by day. Though the government is in control in our area, anti-government elements can easily achieve their aim if they target some people or an area because they are living in the neighborhood. My mother and my wife are saying: ‘Let’s move to Kabul. God forbid something should happen to you or your brothers.’ Of course, Kabul is a difficult place to live in but there is no option. There is no other way. The most important thing is to save our life.”



H.E. Habibullah Ghalib



“One of the most important issues in restoring the rule of law is that the laws themselves should be acceptable to the people and in line with social norms”

Being the Minister of Justice may be one of the most difficult jobs in Afghanistan, but after spending nearly a half century practicing law, Minister Habibullah Ghalib is well aware of its challenges. Decades of conflict eroded Afghanistan’s judiciary system, with the State too weak and involved in fighting to be able to promote the rule of law. As the power of weapons and money usurped the authority of the State’s judicial machinery, it also degraded the very concept of justice for an entire generation of Afghans who grew up in the shadow of guns.

Restoring the State’s coercive machinery—its police and armed forces—is an ongoing challenge. But far more complex is the task of re-establishing jurisprudence and institutions of justice. Finally, restoring the sense of right and wrong in a traumatised population is as difficult as implementing the tenets of justice and the decisions of the courts.

Not only does the State have to rebuild the justice sector, it also has to reconcile differing ideas of law and justice so as to come up with a coherent jurisprudence that will be acceptable to the majority of the population. This is a major challenge because Afghanistan’s population itself has been displaced by conflict and its social structure fragmented, preventing the development of a cohesive social outlook. While his international experience—he studied at the prestigious Al Azhar University of Cairo—exposed Ghalib to international jurisprudence, he firmly believes that the laws of the land cannot be imported but must be based on local social conditions to be effective. “One of the most important issues in restoring the rule of law is that the laws themselves should be acceptable to the people and in line with social norms,” says Ghalib.

As a young official in the Department of Law, Ghalib saw the Soviets come in with ideas to improve the people’s economic conditions. But because their policies and laws were viewed as being against the local culture, there was resistance to their rule. Subsequent years saw intense fighting, and when the Taliban took over, they too imported a culture and jurisprudence alien to Afghanistan, he recalls.

Problems, however, continued even after the fall of the Taliban. Eager to get rid of all vestiges of the Taliban era, the international community took steps to install a modern judicial system—a well-meaning gesture but not adapted to the local context. “The international community, which was helping to restore the rule of law the first years, often had no knowledge of the local culture and ethos and brought in laws that

were alien to the people,” says Ghalib. One of the tasks of his ministry has been to make sure that all the laws in the country are in line with local practices. This has to be done even while ensuring that Afghanistan does not renege on its commitment to abide by the universal principles of human rights that it has pledged to uphold as a signatory to conventions and treaties. For institutions in charge of enforcing justice, this can often be tricky, as it requires them to allow certain aspects of customary laws to prevail while cracking down on customary practices that violate universal principles of human rights.

“Human rights have moved from conferences and workshops into the public domain, and we are using mosques and schools in order to spread the message more widely”

Recent years have seen greater priority being given to human rights, and Ghalib says the country is making greater progress in raising awareness about this issue. “Human rights have moved from conferences and workshops into the public domain, and we are using mosques and schools in order to spread the message more widely.” Concrete steps that have helped the government secure public acceptance have been recent gestures like the handing over of prisons to Afghan authorities, he says (Bagram prison, which houses terrorist suspects, was controlled by the United States till 2011).

Though public awareness has grown, the justice sector is still weak and exposed to manipulation, and Ghalib confirms the presence of corruption. “There are two kinds of corruption: money corruption and the abuse of power and position. When there is no security, it is not possible for government sectors to implement the role and regulation of law. It also paves the way for influential people of society to bend or even violate the law. This is the legacy of our past. Because of this, when there is a dispute, people start reaching for their weapons to settle the issue.”

Ghalib believes that one of the causes of corruption is the low wages of justice sector employees, but states that this is not the only reason. “There are some people who are so greedy that when they have a million they want a billion. Now that we have raised the salaries of the police, army and judicial staff, we will no longer accept any excuses for corruption,” he affirms.



Dr. Soraya Sobhrang



“I get phone calls telling me to stop my work that I am going against Afghan culture by doing what I do. I am not afraid. If you are doing something right, of course your enemy is not going to be happy. I would not like to die in bed or in an accident. Or even to succumb to cancer. If I have to die for some idea, for some goal, I have no problem with that”

When Soraya Sobhrang was living in exile, after having fled from Afghanistan’s escalating conflict, she drew up her last will and testament asking her husband to take her body back to Afghanistan for burial when she died. “I was insistent. I even told him: if the situation is bad and you cannot enter the country, just find a way to toss my body over to the other side of the border. I don’t mind my body being eaten by animals as long as I am on Afghan land,” she says, laughing at the morbid way she had expressed love for her country at that time.

But violence and death have never been very far from the life of Sobhrang, currently a Commissioner with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). Born in Herat to a liberal family, she went to medical school in Moscow and, after graduating, she joined the prestigious Malalai Maternity Hospital in Kabul. Life should have been easy with the Soviets’ progressive attitude towards women, but political intolerance took its toll. “You had to join them (the Soviet-supported regimes) or else they treated you as if you were against them,” she recalls. Polarisation of the political climate and the mounting number of deaths in her family (12 close family members were killed) forced her family to leave the country, seeking refuge in Iran, Pakistan and finally Germany, but she continued to be homesick for her country.

Six months after the fall of the Taliban, she was back and soon after she was appointed deputy minister of women’s affairs. But intolerance reared its head all too soon. When the government sought to make her a cabinet minister, conservative elements in the country’s Parliament blocked her appointment labelling her a ‘feminist,’ a derogatory term in their eyes. Since then she has worked in the AIHRC as the Commissioner for women’s issues. It is a job that brings her face to face with Afghan women every day, although she must put up with threats from conservative elements.

It is a culture of male domination and chauvinism that is at the root of the oppression of Afghan women, but lack of education and awareness is also partly responsible, she says. “Women victims of violence are covered into staying at home and tolerating the abuse rather than exposing their family to shame by going to the police. And the culture of impunity appears to be increasing.”

Sobhrang believes violence against Afghan women begins in the family. A large number of cases coming to her are of women commit-

“I can fight for the rights I believe in and be critical when I want to be”

ting self-immolation, or trying to commit suicide by taking poison, women left destitute after divorce and women bearing domestic violence or running away from it. “The conflict took away our good traditions and left us with a culture of violence everywhere.”

AIHRC’s role is fraught with difficulties. Its very independence, which it has fiercely guarded, has been a thorn in the flesh of many powerful groups. Whether because of political leaders and commanders who enjoyed unchallenged power which they wielded brutally during the war, or the government which often lacks the political will to implement the laws and policies it has pledged to uphold, or conservative elements with a narrow interpretation of human rights, the AIHRC is often a target of anger. Attempts to undermine it range from pointed attacks against the organisations and its individuals to the withholding of financial support by the government, jeopardizing the organisations’ survival were it not for the support of international donors.

“The AIHRC as an independent organisation has to combat conservative and intolerant aspects of the culture on two fronts—society and government,” says Sobhrang. “At the same time, it has to act as a bridge between society and government.”

Despite all of the job’s difficulties, Sobhrang feels more at home here than anywhere else. “I can fight for the rights I believe in and be critical when I want to be,” she says.

She is critical of the failure of the government and the international community to take into account the psychological violence that long years of war have inflicted on the people. “You can have new constructions, new buildings, but the trauma will be with us for a long, long time.”

The price she pays for her outspokenness is a constant one. “I get phone calls telling me to stop my work that I am going against Afghan culture by doing what I do. I am not afraid,” she says. “If you are doing something right, of course your enemy is not going to be happy. I would not like to die in bed or in an accident. Or even to succumb to cancer. If I have to die for some idea, for some goal, I have no problem with that,” she asserts with a smile that belies the gravity of her situation.



Mir Ahmad Joyenda



“My hopes are there because the Afghanistan of today is not the Afghanistan of the nineties. Now you see this young generation. About 2 million people are there using Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. Thousands of women are active in politics, civil society and media. Millions of boys and girls are going to school. If people are not ready to be recruited for extremism, how can they be recruited?”

Mir Ahmed Joyenda is a man of many parts, although he began his career as an archeologist. But it is as a member of Afghanistan’s first post-Taliban parliament that was voted into office in 2005 that Afghans know him today. Articulate and energetic, Joyenda became a popular face of Afghanistan’s new democracy till another turn of the wheel of fortune took him out of the political maelstrom as a result of the 2010 parliamentary elections. Joyenda, however, is not one to rest on his laurels or simply wait to return to power. He is now working with the respected Afghan research group, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), as its deputy director and is a lively contributor to Afghan civil society.

Joyenda shifts effortlessly from role to role, bringing to each arena an irrepressible energy and infectious enthusiasm. Many critics of the Afghan Parliament, for instance, see it as an ineffectual body that has made little progress on issues impacting the majority of Afghans. Dominated by powerful groups, individuals and lobbies, the country’s parliament has often been accused of being too focused on self-interest. Despite its drawbacks, however, parliament remains the only institution that provides a platform for reconciling differences without resorting to force, and is therefore a critical body for achieving peace in Afghanistan. “I was happy to be part of the first parliament in Afghanistan after Talibanisation and civil war,” says Joyenda. “It was a good experience. Before that, people were fighting each other, firing rockets and grenades, killing people, putting nails in their head, cutting their nose, whatever. But at least now warring factions are using the microphone to voice their views about the future of Afghanistan. Despite all of its failings, challenges and difficulties, it at least gave the people a vision that democracy and pluralism are the only way they will accept each other, tolerate each other, and work together.”

For parliament to work properly, says Joyenda, the role of civil society is critical. As a member of parliament (MP), he made sure he had close interaction with civil society groups such as journalist organizations which lobbied hard within parliament and succeeded in pushing through some of the critical amendments to a media law safeguarding their interests. With the amnesty bill, a controversial piece of legislation that was passed by parliament providing blanket amnesty to all those involved in the Afghan conflict, Joyenda admits there was much less success. However, he feels he and others played a critical role in raising voices of dissent, an important component

“Civil society reflects the structure of Afghan society. We have a fragmented ethno-political society in Afghanistan and civil society is not separated from that”

of the democratic process. Equally important, feels Joyenda, is the role of organizations like the AREU, which provides critical research-based information for policy makers. “Unfortunately, one thing that is missing is information, whether it is for civil society or the international community. Filling the gap is very important. AREU can play an important role. We (in the AREU) have always shared the information (we collected). I do not support producing reports that just stay on the shelf. We should have reports that have an impact on policy makers. Our purpose is to impact the lives of people through research.” Though Afghanistan produces vast quantities of information, Joyenda points out that the information is often produced for a specific audience and not shared widely. Studies are often conducted without any research in the field and can reflect the biases of the commissioning organization. AREU’s research is recognized as grounded in field research, rigorous in data collection as well as analysis.

When asked why civil society does not influence events and emerge as a strong force, Joyenda is candid. “Civil society reflects the structure of Afghan society. We have a fragmented ethno-political society in Afghanistan and civil society is not separated from that. The international community did not work to build civil society in Afghanistan. Usually civil society is (viewed) as a project, not a process, in Afghanistan. At the end of the year, when donors have some leftover funds, they ask civil society to hold a seminar or workshop on human rights or women’s rights or something like that. Then they report to their headquarters that they spent the money on civil society. It is very important to shift civil society from donor-driven to ownership.”

Despite all the shortcomings, Joyenda is hopeful. “My hopes are there because the Afghanistan of today is not the Afghanistan of the nineties. Now you see this young generation. About 2 million people are there using Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. Thousands of women are active in politics, civil society and media. Millions of boys and girls are going to school. If people are not ready to be recruited for extremism, how can they be recruited?”



Jamila Afghani



“One of the women in my family who used to turn her face away has now enrolled her daughter in one of my educational classes. She recently told me: ‘Jamila, I wish all my sons were daughters because I see how much my daughter is benefiting from your class’.”

Jamila Afghani is not her real name. ‘Afghani’ is the name that this feisty woman adopted a decade ago when she got involved in social activism and decided that she would be identified only as an Afghan rather than linked to any specific ethnic group or tribe (Afghan surnames usually reflect a person’s tribe and ethnicity). At first, her father objected to her unilateral decision to drop her surname, and later on her husband voiced the same objection, but Jamila stuck to her decision and is now well known by her acquired name.

It is a tenacity that she has needed. Born with a polio-induced disability, Jamila was made aware of her handicap at an early age when family members openly speculated whether anyone would ever marry her. “I decided then that I would never be a burden and would look after my own needs.” But what took her from self-sufficiency to helping others was a tragic incident in one of the refugee camps of Peshawar, a city where she and her family had fled to escape the escalating violence of Afghanistan. “In a single day, 36 women died of heat and hunger in the Shamshad refugee camp. In one day, together with some friends, I collected clothes and food for 1000 families. That is when we realised that we had the energy, we had the power, to change things.”

There was no looking back after that and Jamila set out to tackle what she felt to be most pressing need for women in refugee camps: education. Not everyone saw it that way. Each of the refugee camps in the area was under the control of one or another resistance leader, most of whom were conservative. “They had all fought all things Soviet, including education for women. Besides, they feared that women could be easily corrupted and trapped in the hands of foreigners.”

To overcome this resistance, Jamila began with the least controversial aspect: Quranic education. “This gave us a point of entry and from there we expanded to health education and then actual literacy classes.” She continued this approach when she came back to Afghanistan through the Noor Educational and Capacity Development Organisation (NECDO), a non-profit organisation whose goal is “to seek Allah’s pleasure by supporting our people through the light of education (formal and informal) & community mobilization for a just society based on gender equality.”

To achieve this, NECDO works through religious leaders, training clerics in aspects of Islam and Islamic tenets with a special emphasis on women’s rights and human rights. This enables them to tap into a

wide and valuable network. Community life in Afghanistan centres around the mosques, and weekly Friday prayers are important occasions that preachers take advantage of to talk about social issues. “Imams play a very important role in our community. We choose carefully and pick those who have some influence.” People tend to accept what their religious leaders say, whereas projects that promote women’s rights and human rights may often be seen as ‘foreign’ and therefore objectionable. “150 imams are being trained in 7 provinces and they have formed an Imam volunteer network. We hope the message will spread “like one candle lighting another.” Despite attempts to be balanced and sensitive in her approach, Jamila has many critics. Conservative elements feel she is violating religious tenets and some of the sharpest opposition has come from within her own immediate community and family.

Sometimes I feel very lonely. The conservative elements say: ‘Jamila is introducing a new Islam’ and civil society says ‘Jamila is very Islamist’

Criticism is due to a lack of awareness about Islam she says. “They are not religious but conservative.” Although many conservative practices in Afghanistan stem from custom and have no religious roots, they have been attributed to Islam by community and religious leaders, who have given them a false religious sanctity. Activists like Jamila often have a hard time convincing people of the difference between the two.

Jamila’s approach is to argue that she has the right to educate women within the framework of Islam. This in turn has often been criticised by civil society leaders who feel she is too religious in her outlook. “Sometimes I feel very lonely. The conservative elements say: ‘Jamila is introducing a new Islam’ and civil society says ‘Jamila is very Islamist’.” But some of her greatest rewards have come from the change she’s witnessed in those who criticised her. “One of the women in my family who used to turn her face away has now enrolled her daughter in one of my educational classes. She recently told me: ‘Jamila, I wish all my sons were daughters because I see how much my daughter is benefiting from your class’.” - By no means a small achievement for Jamila, especially in a country which prizes sons high above its daughters.



Dr. Habiba Sarabi



“Things have changed, especially the number of girls going to school, but still many things have not changed. For example, women in politics and women activists are facing violence. I wish we had more women in government. Unfortunately, the security situation is getting worse. That is one of the reasons why the President and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance do not want to appoint any other woman as governor.”

Afghanistan’s only woman governor, Habiba Sarabi, is busy cramming in work into every spare second, living up to her reputation as a no-nonsense administrator. In this province, one of the few that have accepted a woman as governor, she levies fines on officials if they are late for meetings or get distracted by phone calls. It is a work culture that cannot be found anywhere else in the country, but Bamiyan, remote, underdeveloped, and with its rough terrain and harsh climate has no time to spare.

Located in the central highlands of Afghanistan, Bamiyan has a long, harsh winter. Because of this, it has just a few precious months of warm weather when all its inhabitants have to do all that needs to be done, whether it is building and growing crops, meeting with donors or even getting schoolchildren rapidly through the year’s school curriculum. “The main challenge is the weather,” says Sarabi. “In other parts of the country, they have two or three harvests. Here there is only one, and the impact is on the people’s income. The other problems are land erosion, floods and drought.” Sarabi’s concern is very evident as she points through her office window to the slope outside where there is a demonstration watershed project, which Sarabi hopes will make a significant difference to the province’s predominantly agricultural communities. Such interventions are much needed. Bamiyan has little other than agriculture to offer its population right now.

The province is mainly inhabited by the Hazara people, who are racially distinct, with Mongolian features. Socially segregated, they were singled out for brutal punishment during the Taliban years for their adherence to the Shia branch of the Islamic faith, which is considered apostasy by Sunni fundamentalists. As a result, Bamiyan has always lagged behind most other parts of the country in terms of development. Sarabi says reconstruction of the province after 2001 had to start from scratch.

Despite economic deprivation, the people of the province are more progressive with respect to women, democracy and human rights. Sarabi credits her own position as Governor to the support of the broad-minded religious clerics in her province. “The character of the people is very important, especially the character of religious leaders who play a big role. We have so many open-minded religious leaders.”

The journey was a long one for Sarabi because she came very close to never attending school at all when she was a child because she was a girl. “My father did not encourage me to go to

“It was only three years ago that the first girls graduated from high school, and finding qualified teachers to work in schools in remote areas is difficult”

school, but I got encouragement from my uncle, and he is the one who pushed my father to enrol me in school.” Not only did Sarabi get an education, she also became a teacher in the medical institute in Kabul “until the Taliban came to Kabul.”

After the Taliban came to power, Sarabi and thousands of other working women were driven indoors. With her young daughter unable to attend school and herself forced to stay at home, Sarabi left for Peshawar in Pakistan. But even there she was not content to simply bide her time; instead she started schools for the refugee families living there. Though the Taliban are gone, conservatism still prevents many women from holding public office. Nevertheless, Sarabi feels the situation has changed for women in Afghanistan although not enough. “Things have changed, especially the number of girls going to school, but still many things have not changed. For example, women in politics and women activists are facing violence. I wish we had more women in government. Unfortunately, the security situation is getting worse. That is one of the reasons why the President and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance do not want to appoint any other woman as governor.”

As for Sarabi, she can be considered something of a role model, as last year Bamiyan enrolled more girls than boys in primary school and 45% of the province’s children enrolled in school are girls. The road to ensuring access to education, however, is steep, and there are still many major challenges ahead. “It was only three years ago that the first girls graduated from high school, and finding qualified teachers to work in schools in remote areas is difficult,” she says.

But the tide is turning slowly. The young people of Bamiyan, instead of all heading out of the province for higher education, are beginning to stay because the provincial university is providing them with more and more opportunities. As economic opportunities are created, education will not simply be a way to get out of the province, it will also become a good way to stay and provide the services that this remote province so badly needs.



Najmuddin



“It was not always like this. When I was growing up, Kahmard did not have any floods. These floods only started during the time of the Taliban. It was because, during the years of fighting, the government was very weak and no one acknowledged its authority. So people were doing as they pleased, cutting down all the shrubs from the top of the mountain, allowing cattle to graze there, eroding the land.”

As the village Arbab, or headman, of Roy Sang village in Kahmard district of Bamiyan, 47-year-old Najmuddin wields a certain authority. He was never rich but his land, its wheat and fruit trees were always enough, and he commanded respect in the community. So when flash floods began to repeatedly destroy the farmland in the village, villagers looked to him for a solution.

Located like a small oasis in the middle of a rocky barren landscape, Kahmard is green because it takes water from the Kahmard River to irrigate lush fields. Its apricots, said to be the sweetest of all Afghanistan, grow in the sylvan orchards of villages cradled in the mountains. But nowadays darkening skies are enough to make the villagers fearful and watchful. Floodwaters rush in without warning, washing away the fertile top soil and leaving behind silt, making the land unusable for growing crops.

Natural disasters such as flood and drought have a heavy impact on a large part of Afghanistan’s population, as an estimated 80% depends on farming for a livelihood. Living on subsistence-level farm production, the farmers have no strategies to cope with such disasters, and government help is inadequate. These disasters can lead to forced migration or the sale of farming or household assets to meet financial emergencies, leaving families even more vulnerable to such shocks in subsequent farming seasons.

During the war years, irrigation channels were degraded and community initiatives, such as the protection of forests in upper catchment areas, have withered away as a result of economic penury, absence of authority and social disruption.

“It was not always like this,” recalls Najmuddin. “When I was growing up, Kahmard did not have any floods. These floods only started during the time of the Taliban. It was because, during the years of fighting, the government was very weak and no one acknowledged its authority. So people were doing as they pleased, cutting down all the shrubs from the top of the mountain, allowing cattle to graze there, eroding the land.”

Seven years ago, half of Najmuddin’s land was destroyed. Two years ago, all of it was destroyed. “Nearly all the 50-60 families in my village suffered some damage from the floods. There were sometimes as many as seven floods a day from the steep hills surrounding the village. A few years ago the floods washed away 70 houses and killed one per-

son. Those who fled to the surrounding mountains with their livestock were saved, but not everyone could do that. There was no time.” Najmuddin, along with some community members, approached Helvetas to build a big dam, but the engineers who conducted the survey said a watershed programme would be better. Helvetas wanted the locals to contribute to the project to ensure community ownership and sustainability of the project, and Najmuddin was able to mobilise the community. “I called everyone to the mosque and we discussed the problem. No one was opposed to the idea as all had suffered. They also agreed to pay for 20% of the project. Some of this is in the form of labour and some of it is in cash. People also donated their land for the project.” Fruit, vegetables and spices have been planted in the watershed area, and the area is guarded to make sure there is no cutting or grazing. Steep fines are levied by the community on those who break the rules. The income earned from the produce of the trees in the area—pistachio, walnuts, beans, peas, saffron, cumin and asafoetida—is yet another incentive to enforce the rules. For men like Najmuddin who can no longer farm their own land, the project also provides an income as they work as wage labourers on the watershed.

“Bread costs at least 30% less than it did when we baked it at home, and it also tastes much better”

To encourage people to stop using shrub as fuel, Helvetas also helped set up community bakeries, as baking bread in households was one of the activities that required the largest amount of shrub and wood. “Bread costs at least 30% less than it did when we baked it at home, and it also tastes much better,” says Najmuddin.

What is most remarkable, however, is the change that is already visible in the watershed area. Last year, the speed of the floodwater had already decreased, and this year there were no floods until May, in contrast to the past few years when they began as early as March or April. Najmuddin does not expect all the floods to stop right away but is prepared to wait. “Once I know they have really stopped, I will undertake the expensive task of cleaning out my land. I will need to hire tractors and labour for that, and I will not do it till I am convinced. Once that happens I can start farming again.”



Dr. Jamaluddin Sediqi



“Poverty is a major illness among our people. There are many diseases: discrimination in society, political problems, religious subgroups, tribal issues. This also has an impact on how people view NGOs”

“I am like a mixed salad,” says Dr. Jamaluddin Sediqi with a laugh to describe mixed ethnic background and how his family straddles several of Afghanistan’s geographical and ethnic lines. He wears his pluralistic identity with pride, refusing to be typecast. Professionally too, he refuses to be tied down. Though a medical doctor by profession, he has now become a development specialist, working with the development NGO Helvetas to implement projects in some of the most remote districts of Afghanistan. Like many Afghans, the conflict also threw his life into a series of tumults.

A schoolboy in Kabul during the Soviet invasion, Sediqi was caught between two worlds. “In Kabul, the government urged me to become a soldier and outside Kabul the mujahideen labelled me a communist. The only safe place was Peshawar, so I left and did not see my parents for five years.” In Peshawar, he joined thousands of Afghans trying to leave for the West with the help of people smugglers. He paid them several thousand dollars, but they just took the money and disappeared. He worked as a surgeon for over 20 years, but he was imprisoned and beaten by the Taliban for his work with the Hazara people, whom the Taliban view as apostates. This time, with no savings left, he had to sell his motorbike and give away his generator and X-ray machine to get out of prison. He started working again as a doctor only after the Taliban were ousted in 2001 and when he joined the ICRC in the Mirwais Hospital in Kandahar. It was only in 2006 that he joined Helvetas as the program manager in Kahmard district of Bamiyan, a post he held till recently, before moving to the Helvetas office in Kabul last year.

His background and experience in medicine underpin his work as a development practitioner. “Poverty is a major illness among our people. There are many diseases: discrimination in society, political problems, religious subgroups, tribal issues. This also has an impact on how people view NGOs,” he says. Years of conflict have created distrust and people often view NGOs with suspicion and fear that foreigners who fund NGOs might be attempting to change their religion and culture. It is through painstaking and long-term work that most NGOs dedicated to Afghanistan overcome that resistance.

As project manager in Kahmard, Sediqi had to move very slowly to overcome the instinctive suspicion of local people towards something new that they feared might be against their culture or against Islam. Kahmard itself had a violent history of resistance and as many as 147 schoolteachers were killed in one single village as part of the resistance against

“We insist on the contribution of the people, because without that they will not feel any sense of ownership. “This is necessary for sustainability of the projects.”

the Soviets and what they saw as their effort to destroy Islam.

Six years later, Sediqi can claim that people in the area are can tell the difference between political moves and development services. So it was the community itself that came to Helvetas requesting a project to prevent flash floods. The success of that and subsequent projects is evident in Helvetas’s ability to steadily increase the contribution made by the local inhabitants to all the projects in the area from 10% to 30% and to benefit from the public’s willingness and participation. “We insist on the contribution of the people, because without that they will not feel any sense of ownership,” says Sediqi. “This is necessary for sustainability of the projects.”

The watershed project, however, encountered challenges other than just implementation and ownership. People were used to cutting bushes and shrubs in the watershed area for cooking fuel, a need that had to be met differently if deforestation of the watershed land was to be prevented. To cut down on the consumption of brushwood, Helvetas started a community bakery, although it had to try again several times before it found the most cost-effective, low-fuel consumption model.

Equally challenging in Dr. Sediqi’s work are the social barriers to working with women. Women in the area are customarily segregated and do not come out in front of male strangers. To help ensure access to the female population, Helvetas recruited educated women from other provinces (women’s level of schooling in Kahmard is very low). To enable women employees to live and work in remote Kahmard, it set up women’s guest houses where women employees can live with their families and male relatives can continue performing their customary role as mahram, or male escorts.

When asked what he hopes for the future, Dr. Sediqi goes back to his quintessential mission of understanding and helping people. “As a doctor I keep bringing everything into the medical frame. I hope through these efforts they can reduce the disease of poverty and have good food and good nutrition,” he says.



Bibi Ayesha



“I can now regularly buy eggs and meat for our meals,” she says, and tea, soap and wheat are no longer a worry. “I used to ask my husband for everything. Now I have an independent income and can spend it as I want”

In the heart of the northern province of Takhar, 50-year-old Bibi Ayesha of Tolaki village in Rustaq district measures distances by how long it takes for her to reach places on foot or donkey. Motorised transportation is rare and roads, even in the district’s capital, look like trails with potholes that turn into slush ponds when it snows or rains.

The soft, rolling hills of the area, covered in green fuzz in early May, belie the harsh agricultural reality. Takhar, where the majority of the population makes its livelihood off the land, depends largely on rain-fed agriculture, making subsistence a challenge in the arid climate. Reaching markets is difficult in a province that is so remote that it was one of the last outposts of resistance against the Taliban even after the latter had overrun most of Afghanistan.

Landholdings are small and are getting increasingly smaller as land is sub-divided into even smaller parcels with each new generation in an area that offers almost no other avenue for employment. Access to water is scarce, and the relatively egalitarian structure of water-sharing that had prevailed in Afghanistan was undermined by years of conflict as the powerful claimed the lion’s share of this scarce commodity. Income from the land is usually not enough for most farmers’ families, and many families send at least one of their sons to Iran or Pakistan to supplement household earnings with remittances from their work as wage labourers.

Ayesha’s family has a small piece of land adjoining the house, but income from this land was never enough. The eldest son was sent to Iran, where he worked for eight years as a plasterer. As a result of Iran’s recent crackdowns against irregular migrants from Afghanistan, he was deported, leaving the family struggling to make ends meet. “It was hard to meet even the basic food needs of the family,” remembers Ayesha. “We only grew a few vegetables but not even enough wheat.” Once or twice a week, they would sell potatoes but when the local market is saturated and other markets are inaccessible, prices drop. To pay for her son’s engagement three years ago—an expensive affair in Afghanistan where the groom’s family customarily pays a high bride price—Ayesha incurred a large debt.

All that changed two years ago when she chanced upon Terres des Hommes (TDH) employees at a neighbour’s house and invited them to use her house to demonstrate their ‘value-chain’ project. Using simple techniques, TDH taught Ayesha and a group of other women how to

“My husband has always been sweet to me, but since I started contributing to the family income he has become even sweeter”

add value to their vegetable crop. Turning vegetables into paste, pickles and other preserves has increased their sale value several times over. Ayesha used to sell cabbages for 8 Afghani a kilo (50 Afghani = \$1), but now she can sell them for 40 Afghani a kilo. TDH estimates that, for every 100 Afghani of raw material that is needed, the women can earn 1200 Afghani, a twelve-fold increase in income.

This good fortune is evident in Ayesha’s house. The guest room is new and large, built from the proceeds of her cottage industry. She bought two goats to build up the family’s livestock, which had been considerably depleted after her son’s expensive engagement. “I can now regularly buy eggs and meat for our meals,” she says, and tea, soap and wheat are no longer a worry. “I used to ask my husband for everything. Now I have an independent income and can spend it as I want. My husband has always been sweet to me, but since I started contributing to the family income he has become even sweeter,” she says with a mischievous smile.

This type of entrepreneurship is feasible because it is adapted to local customs and practices. Like many rural women, Ayesha and other women in the family are not allowed to go out of their homes to earn a living. “At home we can do any kind of work. But we do not have permission to go out,” she says matter-of-factly. Making preserves at home is something she can do without stepping across the threshold of her home and breaking away from local customs and culture. Moreover, cooking is a routine and shared task within the family, which makes it easy to monitor in the midst of other daily chores. “I am growing old now, so my daughters-in-law help with the preparation,” she says with an engaging laugh. Even though it is an extension of household activity, Ayesha displays a true entrepreneur’s pride in her marketable products. When asked who buys her preserves, she reels off the names of neighbouring villages before saying with a touch of pride: “Why, someone even came all the way from Khojabahuddin the other day to ask for my pickles. And that is a one-day donkey ride away.”



City of Bamyan

About SDC

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) is Switzerland's international cooperation agency within the Swiss Federal Department for Foreign Affairs.

The SDC has been working to support the people of Afghanistan for more than 30 years. Already in the early 1970s, the SDC sent specialists to northern Afghanistan to advise farmers how to make cheese. At the same time other Swiss specialists were involved in water projects. After the invasion by Soviet troops in 1979, the SDC withdrew from Afghanistan, resuming its work in the early 1990s from its base in Pakistan. In 2002 the SDC opened a cooperation office in Kabul and concentrated its activities on meeting the enormous needs of the most vulnerable population groups, such as internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees to Afghanistan and refugees in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Since 2004 the Swiss Programme in Afghanistan has gradually evolved to become a longer-term engagement for development and reconstruction.

SDC activities in the country now focus on promoting good governance and respect for human rights as well as an improvement in the living conditions of disadvantaged segments of the population. In so doing, the SDC is contributing to the sustainable reduction of poverty and a favourable development environment.

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Imprint

Editor:

Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)
Swiss Cooperation Office Afghanistan

Text:

Aunohita Mojumdar, External Consultant

Design:

SDC (Mohammad Shaker Sayar)

Photographs:

3rd Eye Photojournalism Center, Kabul, Afghanistan

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Kabul, 2012