10 stories -
10 years of SDC engagement in Afghanistan
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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 Afghan 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), refugees to Afghanistan and refugees in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan.

Since 2004 the Swiss programme has gradually become a long-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

Rustaq district, Takhar
Summary

When aid organisations returned to Afghanistan after the U.S.-led invasion of 2001, 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 figures, who is now project manager with the SDC partner organisation Helvetas. In Bamiyan’s Kahmard district, this organisation Helvetas. In Bamiyan’s Kahmard district, this

Shiber district, Bamiyan

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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 seven ties, 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. 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. My daughter, who was denied schooling under the Taliban, now works with the foremost telecommunication company and Qasim is amused 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."

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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.'"

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Shah Mohammad

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. After the Soviet invasion, fighting began almost immediately in Mohammad’s area, 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, work 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.

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 lives.”

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H.E. Habibullah Ghalib

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, 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, re-establishing the sense of right and wrong in a traumatised population is as difficult as establishing jurisprudence and institutions of justice. It also requires the State to bend or even violate the law. This is the legacy 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 rule and regulation of law. It also paves the way for influential people 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 rule and regulation of law.”

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—well-meaning gestures 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 Afghans does not renge 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 clamping down on customary practices that violate universal principles of human rights.

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“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,” Sobhrang asserts with a smile that belies the gravity of her situation.

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

Dr. Soraya Sobhrang

When Soraya Sobhrang was living in exile, after having fled from Afghanistan’s escalating conflict, she dressed 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’ progress. She remembers the attitude towards women, but political intolerance took its toll. “You had to join them (the Soviet-supported regime) or else they treated you as if you were against them,” she recalls. Polarisation with us for a long, long time. “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 there for a long, long time.”

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

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“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 Ahmad Joyenda

Mr. 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 Afghanistan knows 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 mainstream 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 intellectual 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 it is therefore a critical body for achieving peace in Afghanistan. “I was happy to be part of the first parliament in Afghanistan after Talibanization 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 off 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 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. Areu’s research is recognized as ground-breaking 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 international community. Filling the gap is very important. AREU can play a critical 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. 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 need a strong voice.”

However, he feels he and others played a critical role in raising voices of dissent, an important component of the democratic process. Equally important, feel 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 need a strong voice.”

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 of the democratic process. Equally important, feel 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 need a strong voice.”

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Jamila Afghani

Jamila Afghani is not her real name. ‘Afghani’ is the name that this family woman adopted a decade ago when she got involved in social activism and decided that she should be identified only as an Afghan rather than linked to any specific ethnic group or tribe (Afghan sur- names usually reflect a person’s tribe and ethnicity). At first, her fa- ther 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 disabil- ity, Jamila was made aware of her handicapped at an early age when family members openly speculated whether anyone would ever marry her. She decided then that she would never be a burden and would look after her 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 col- lected 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: educa- tion. “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, includ- ing education for women. Besides, they feared that women could be used po- tentially as a tool by the enemy.” At first, Jamila’s approach was 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. “I believe that beliefs 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.

To overcome this resistance, Jamila began with the least controver- sial aspect: Quranic education. “This gave us a point of entry into the world of religion, Jamila has many critics. Conservative elements feel she is violating re- ligious 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 ‘Ja- mila is very Islamist.’”

“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 pro- mote women’s rights and human rights may often be seen as ‘for- eign’ 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.” Sometimes I feel very lonely. The conservative elements say: “Jamila is introducing a new Islam” and civil society says “Jamilas is very Islamist.” But some of her greatest rewards have come from the change she’s wit- nessed 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 and daughters were daughters because I see how much my daughter is benefiting from your class’.”

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.

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“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 pro- mote women’s rights and human rights may often be seen as ‘for- eign’ 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.” Sometimes I feel very lonely. The conservative elements say: “Jamila is introducing a new Islam” and civil society says “Jamilas is very Islamist.” But some of her greatest rewards have come from the change she’s wit- nessed 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 and daughters were daughters because I see how much my daughter is benefiting from your class’.”

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 “Jamilas is very Islamist.” But some of her greatest rewards have come from the change she’s wit- nessed 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 and daughters were daughters because I see how much my daughter is benefiting from your class’.”

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Dr. Habiba Sarabi

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 much tension 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.”

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 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.”

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 enroled 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.

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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 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 hide her nose. Instead she started schools for the refugee families living there. Though the Taliban are gone, conservatism still prevails, 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.”

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As the village Allbud, or headwater, of Roy Sang village in Kahr- mard district of Bamyan, 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 commu- nity. So when flash floods began to repeatedly destroy the farm- land in the village, villagers looked to him for a solution.

Located like a small oasis in the middle of a rocky barren land- scape, 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 syrian orchards of villages cradled in the mountains. But nowadays darkening skies are enough to make the villagers fearful and watchful. Floodwaters rush in with- out warning, washing away the fertile top soil and leaving be- hind 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% de- pends on farming for a livelihood. Living on subsistence-level farm production, the farmers have no strategies to cope with such dis- asters, and government help is inadequate. These disasters can lead to forced migration or the sale of farming or household as- sets to meet financial emergencies, leaving families even more vulnerable to such shocks in subsequent farming seasons.

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During the war years, irrigation channels were degraded and community initiatives, such as the protection of forests in up- per catchment areas, have withered away as a result of eco- nomic 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, dur- ing 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 moun- tain, allowing cattle to graze there, eroding the land.”

Seven years ago, half of Najmuddin’s land was destroyed. Two years ago, it was destroyed. “Nearly all the 50-60 families in my vil- lage 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 50 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.” Naj- muddin, 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 lo- cals 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 20% of the project. Some of this is in the form of labour and some of it is in cash. Each person donated 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—pistachios, walnuts, beans, peas, saffron, cumin and mustard—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 ob- servable 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 not do it till I am convinced. Once that happens I can start farming again.”
“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 problems, religious subgroups, tribal issues. This also has an impact 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.
In the heart of the northern province of Takhar, 50-year-old Bibi Ayesha of Takhi village in Rustaq district measures disdainfully how long it takes for her to reach places on foot or donkey. Motorised transportation is rare and costly, 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 is sub-divided into even smaller parcels with each new generation. 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.

Landholdings are small and are growing 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, Ayesha is one of the last outposts of resistance against the Taliban even after the latter had overrun most of Afghanistan.

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To pay for her son's expensive engagement three years ago—an expense 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."
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.

For further information, please visit www.sdc.org.af.

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