

First Steps in Addressing Land Degradation in Afghanistan

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Abstract: Farming and livestock production are the main economic livelihoods in Afghanistan and each depends on access to the country's vast network of rangelands. Since the Soviet invasion in 1980, many of the rangeland areas have come under pressure in the form of woody plant removal and their conversion to rain-fed agriculture. The result has been fewer options for extensive livestock grazing and rangeland degradation and a loss of biodiversity in more extreme situations. The Afghanistan PEACE Project was initiated in 2006 with the aim of helping to improve livestock production and management of Afghanistan's rangeland areas. One component of the PEACE Project addressing both goals involved the development of a conflict resolution program. The purpose of this program was to help solve land-use conflicts between farmers and herders using non-traditional methods and it is based on the premise that until these issues are resolved on the ground using skilled facilitators, there will be few opportunities for improvement of Afghanistan's livestock industry or its rangelands. The PEACE conflict resolution program involved training leaders from both sides of the issue, in communication, facilitation, conflict resolution and peace building techniques and supporting them while they worked to facilitate the resolution of the more important land-use conflicts. The training was accomplished in partnership with an Afghan non-governmental organization and the Government of Afghanistan. Since May 2010, 52 peace ambassadors have been working together in 6 regions of the country. To date, these ambassadors have successfully solved 244 land-use and 234 social conflicts.

Key words: Afghanistan, Biodiversity, Conflict resolution, Degradation, Rangelands

1. Introduction

Currently, 80% of Afghanistan's population resides in rural areas and of these, 5% are considered to be transhumant pastoralists (NRVA, 2005). The estimated percentage of livestock owned by Afghanistan's pastoralists, ranges from 50% to 75%. Key to the resilience of Afghanistan's pastoralists during times of conflict and peace is their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances as well as living a relatively mobile lifestyle to meet the dietary needs of their stock. With 70-85% of Afghanistan qualifying as rangeland, this use of the landscape and lifestyle easily makes sense. Livestock production in Afghanistan involves both intensive and extensive production strategies. Intensive production involves supplemental feeding of crop residues and grazing of both stubble fields and rangeland areas, with either type of grazing opportunity occurring primarily adjacent to a village or residence. This strategy is primarily observed in settled communities and its purpose is to supply the dietary needs of a household first. Extensive production, in contrast, involves moving ones stock from one rangeland area to another in order to meet the dietary needs of the stock. If there is supplemental feeding, it involves the collection and stockpiling of naturally cured native plants for supplemental feeding during Afghanistan's long and often harsh winters.

Afghanistan's transhumant pastoralists, the Kuchi, rely on this method almost exclusively and for the majority, extensive livestock production is their primary economic livelihood. Extensive livestock production is also of import to Afghanistan's national economy. In a survey conducted by Texas A&M University in 2010, it was observed that the Kuchi were responsible for supplying approximately 75% of the small stock sold in Afghanistan's livestock markets (Schloeder and Jacobs, 2010). The Kuchi are also the principal suppliers to the wool and hide industries in Afghanistan as well as Pakistan.

The Kuchi's herding strategy is to move with their animals in the spring from the lowland areas, where they winter, to the mountainous high elevation areas where grazing opportunities are best during the summer months. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980, many of the rangeland areas that the Kuchi have relied on for grazing have come under increasing pressure as the search for fuel and tillable land continues to intensify in response to the continued lack of development. When the conversion to rain-fed agriculture occurs in areas where rainfall is insufficient to support crop production, low rainfall becomes an indirect contributing factor to land degradation. Historically positive relationships, between the Kuchi and villagers, have deteriorated over the last 30 years in response to the various conflicts, to the extent that areas adjacent to many villages no longer offer the safe haven

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they once did for the Kuchi leaving them vulnerable to criminals, insurgents and unscrupulous local leaders. An increase in insecurity in the last 10 years is also impacting the livelihood of the Kuchi (Desta and Schloeder, 2010). Movement from lowland wintering areas to high elevation summer pastures is now riskier as a result of a steady increase in crime and local insurgencies. The result is that the Kuchi are finding it increasingly difficult to find land for grazing for their livestock and the competition for what remains is not just high but on the increase from year to year due to competition among the Kuchi for a diminishing resource, and between the Kuchi and villagers as local farmers attempt to economically diversify by branching out into livestock production. If this situation is to continue, it is likely that many of the Kuchi will lose their herds thereby placing Afghanistan's entire livestock, wool, hide and carpet industry in jeopardy as well. Numerous jobs will also be lost for those indirectly involved in this industry (e.g. truck drivers, fuel stations, restaurants, etc.).

The Afghanistan Pastoral Engagement Adaptation and Capacity Enhancement (PEACE) Project, led by Texas A&M University (TAMU), was initiated in 2006 at the request of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), to address issues negatively affecting Afghanistan's livestock industry (www.afghanpeace.org). Since its inception, the PEACE Project has been working with the GIROA Advisor on Tribal Affairs, Eng. Wahidullah Sabawoon, in an effort to restore the Kuchi's ability to move their livestock from one seasonal grazing area to another. Primary to this effort has been the belief that land degradation issues in Afghanistan cannot be addressed by the GIROA until there is peace among its people (Jacobs *et al.*, 2009). It was also felt that many land-use issues could only be resolved at the community level using non-traditional techniques, due to the level of distrust of the existing methods for solving disputes. Aside from reestablishing positive relationships between the Kuchi and Afghanistan's settled communities, it was also believed that communities engaged in resolving their own conflicts would be motivated to resolve issues well beyond the intent of the PEACE Project.

2. Methods

In Afghanistan, the traditional way to resolve a conflict between two parties involves the selection of individuals to represent each party in the dispute, discussion among the representatives as to the best solution and the eventual rendering of a decision to resolve the dispute, which both parties have already agreed to abide by at the onset of the meeting. This method of resolving conflicts can work to end a dispute between two parties but in many instances, it has

been reported that it doesn't work for reasons including politics, economics and favoritism. It has also been reported, when the dispute involves two different ethnic groups, that more often than not the decision will favor the local group. The result in both situations is that the hostility will persist between the two sides until such time as an opportunity presents itself to engage in conflict once again.

The first step in the development of the conflict resolution program involved the identification of specific areas with conflicts considered to be of extreme concern, such as some of the recent armed conflicts between farmers and herders (IRIN 2008). The next involved the identification of leaders, from the chosen areas, with demonstrated skills in communication and a commitment to a fair and equitable resolution, and known and respected by the community they were associated with. This part of the project was the sole responsibility of Eng. Wahidullah Sabawoon, Afghanistan's Advisor on Tribal Affairs, Eng. Sabawoon's choices were based on discussions with Provincial and District-level government leaders in addition to his having the most knowledge of Afghanistan's tribal affairs. Leaders selected in this manner were then brought to Kabul for a series of trainings in communication, conflict resolution, facilitation and peace building techniques specific to resolving conflicts in a fair and equitable manner. We employed a local Afghan non-government organization, the Sanayee Development Organization (SDO) to deliver the trainings in both Dari and Pashto.

SDO, and a representative from Eng. Sabawoon's office and the PEACE Project were then responsible for the final selection, from the pool of trainees, of those leaders who would serve in the capacity of "Peace Ambassador" (PA's). Those selected included individuals demonstrating patience, an excellent grasp of and commitment to the conflict resolution and peace-building process and quality communication skills. The newly trained PA's then returned to their communities to work either individually or collaboratively to facilitate and guide the process of resolution of conflicts related to land-use. In addition to working with communities to resolve important land-use conflicts, the PA's also had the responsibility of reporting on their efforts and successes and failures. To evaluate whether or not they were doing what they said they were doing, the PEACE Project conducted independent evaluations in Provinces where they were working. The evaluations consisted of gathering community members from both sides of the issue and asking the respondents questions about the PA's activities, techniques and successes. Following, the evaluation team assigned one of three rankings to each PA, with the assigned ranking indicating whether they were considered highly effective, moderately effective, or just somewhat effective.

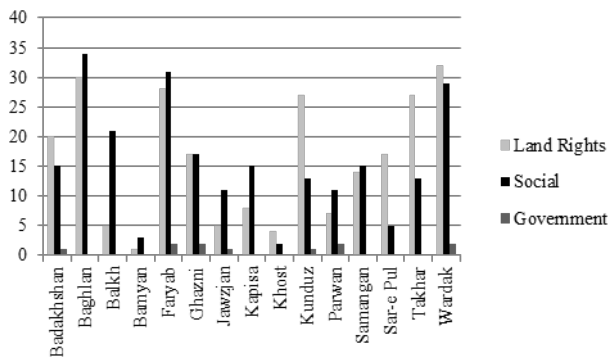


Fig. 1. The number of conflicts solved among 15 Provinces in Afghanistan. Conflicts resolved were categorized into 3 types; Land-use, Social, or conflicts with the Government.

3. Results

As of February, 2011, there have been approximately 1900 meetings and 488 conflicts solved with the support of the PA's. Of the 488 conflicts solved, 50% involved conflicts over land-use issues (**Fig. 1**). The remaining 50% involved a variety of social and government-related issues.

Reports have also been received regarding the ending of several critical conflicts in Wardak Province where armed conflicts have been the norm in recent years.

The facilitation of conflicts unrelated to land-use issues came about at the specific requests of certain individuals and communities. This response reinforced our presumption that developing a skill-set and opportunities for community-based land-use conflict resolution, using respected and trusted community leaders, will translate to solving conflicts well beyond the intent of the PEACE Project. It also serves as an indication of how often communities needed help in resolving their conflicts.

In total, 52% of the PAs were considered highly effective while 29% and 17% were considered moderately to somewhat effective, respectively. Following this effort, all PA's receiving a somewhat effective rating were replaced by new trained PA's in an effort to maintain the trust and respect of the communities involved in this effort.

During the evaluations, respondents were also asked if they had any recommendations to improve the conflict resolution program. Their responses are summarized below, in order of importance:

- Communities overwhelmingly supported and encouraged the continuance of the PA program
- There was a request for more PA's - everyone seemed to mention this point (e.g. Governors, communities, and PA's)
- PA training for community elders, government officials, and younger representatives
- The PA program should be supported for many years to come rather than on a year-to-year basis

- Neutrality was critical to the success of the program – it was felt that the GIRoA Peace Commission had to continue to act in a neutral manner
- New PA's should be known to communities on both sides of the conflict

4. Conclusions

Technical solutions to reverse or mitigate the impacts of degradation are important for improving rangeland conditions around the world. It is equally important, however, to identify and facilitate the resolution of land-use conflicts at the same time and even possibly, in advance of the technical solutions. Whether in advance or in combination, there is a far better chance of producing meaningful and sustainable results in combating degradation, losses of biodiversity, and declines in environmental quality if there is peace. The PEACE Project has found a means of solving conflicts by training and empowering local leaders and communities to solve their own conflicts.

This effort will continue for an additional 18 months. The partnership between Wahidullah Sabawoon's Commission, Sanayee Development Organization and the PEACE Project has initiated a solid program that builds grass-roots, conflict resolution skills within respected community members. With time this program will resolve many land-use issues between Afghans.

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