

LINKING RELIEF, REHABILITATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (LRRD) IN AFGHANISTAN

Lessons learnt from the transition from relief to development: changing needs and stakeholder relations

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Introduction

For many years, NGOs have been working in Afghanistan in the absence of a government framework. As the Afghan context is now progressing slowly from an emergency situation to more of a development approach, the NGO working context is also evolving in different ways. As new issues emerge and new stakeholders become involved, influencing programmes and policies, one of the main concerns is whether the true interests of the population are being taken into account.

Based on a case study of a project implemented by Solidarités (a French NGO working in Afghanistan for 25 years), this paper will address implementation issues in the new framework of cooperation between NGOs, government and other agencies.

A year ago, Solidarités commenced a three-year project funded by the EC, namely "Rural development support of Yakawlang district". Shaman plain flood control project is part of this development-oriented programme.

Land development raises a number of inter-related issues, including agrarian systems, land tenure, social organisation and natural resources management. Solidarités was interested in having an overview of the likely impacts of such a project. To what extent are farmers likely to change their cropping and production systems? Will all of them benefit from the project? Will land tenure be restructured and how? Is this process likely to generate any new conflicts? Will the communities be able to ensure the sustainability of the new system?

After a brief presentation of the plain and the project, the paper will discuss its predictable impacts based on our findings in the field. An overview of the methodology implemented by Solidarités will lead to the description of the challenges of the new power struggle.

Methodology

A systems analysis based on an overall understanding of the main dynamics and diversities was carried out and this enabled us to assess the predictable impacts of the project on the communities. To do so, research focused on agriculture, social organisation, water management and land tenure and how relevant issues were evolving over time. Findings are qualitative based on semi directives enquiries.

Project presentation

The Shaman plain (2400ha) is a wide part of the long Band e Amir valley located at an altitude of 2,450m.

The river floods the plain on a yearly basis. Almost 20% of the land is under cultivation. Most of the plain (60%) is used as meadows and the remaining part as permanent pastures. Around 30 villages, representing between ten and fifteen thousand inhabitants use the plain.



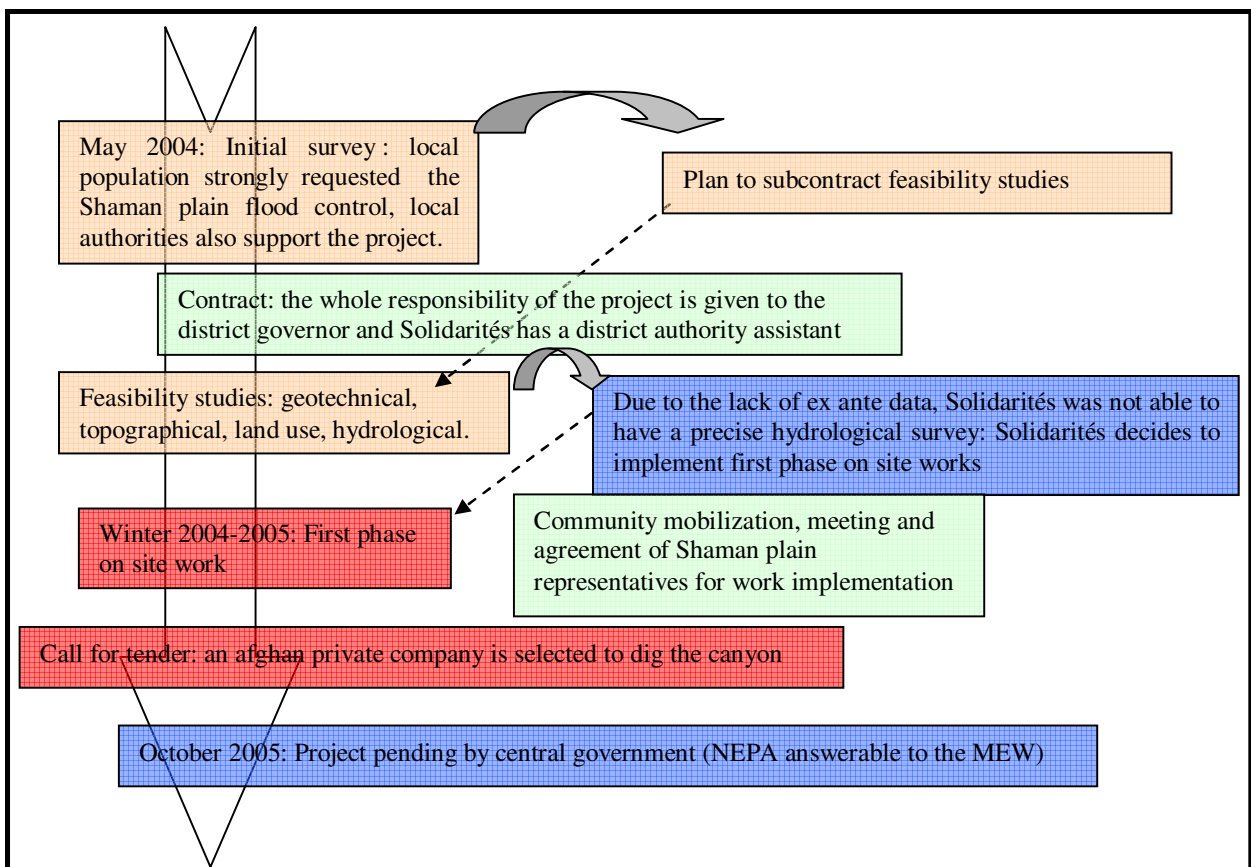
The first phase of the project involves digging out the canyon. To improve land development, Solidarités has planned to implement a second phase to dig out the river and build some drainage canals within the plain.

Shaman plain can be defined as an agro-pastoral system. The main problem is the flood pattern. During spring time, as snow melts in the surrounding mountains, the plain is flooded by the different rivers and streams. Secondly, the flood problem has also negative impacts on the health situation of the inhabitants (humidity problems in the houses located in the plain). Finally, flooding limits people's movements within the plain as the main road is flooded for many months.

The project

The Shaman plain flood control project consists in digging a rock heap which is blocking the water flow in a canyon downstream of Shaman plain. The objective is to improve 500ha of land out of the total 2,400ha.

The project review can be summarised as follows:



Predictable impacts of the project

Production system and land use

Agricultural and grazing lands are composed of irrigated lands (in the valleys and the plain), rain-fed plots (in the hills) and extensive range lands (in the high plateau) used for grazing. The main crops are cereals (barley, winter and spring wheat), fodder crops and potatoes as cash crops. Population growth has resulted in a lack of irrigated land. To cope with this problem, people have no choice but to intensify their farming systems: they increase their livestock and favour cash crops. To do so, they have to balance their cropping patterns between cereals, fodder and cash crops.

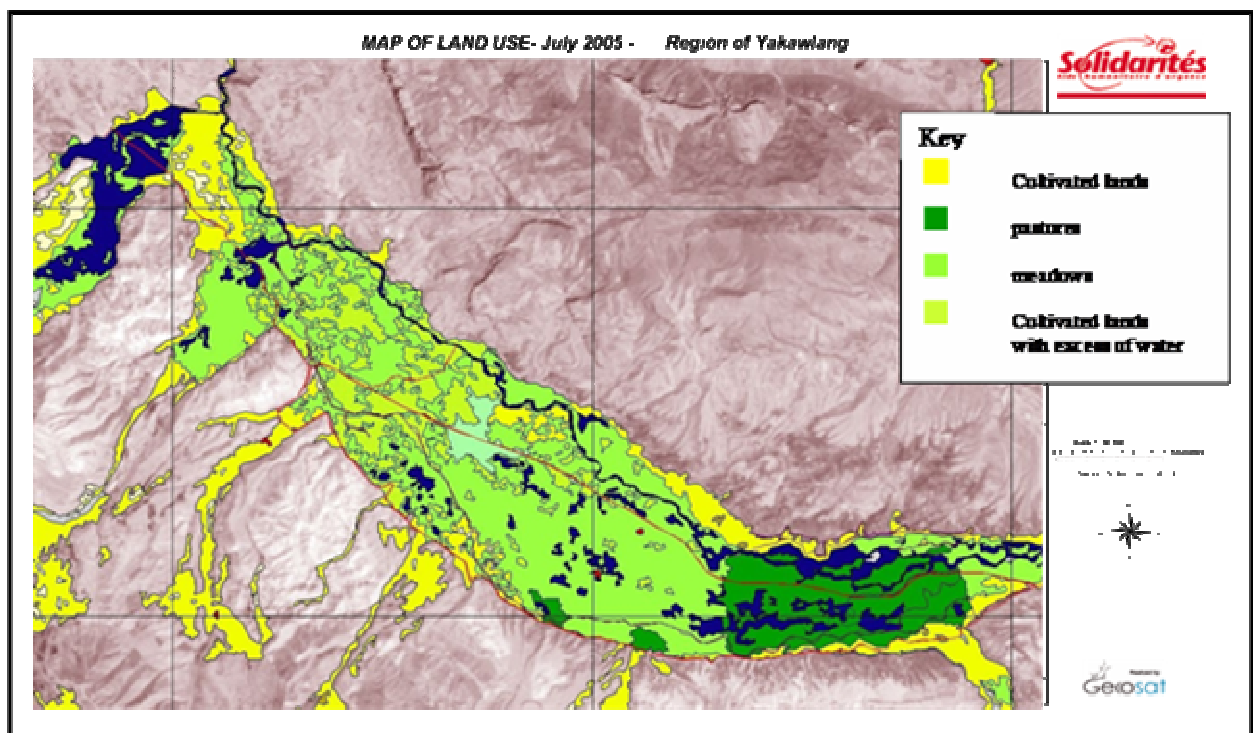
The lack of lands drives Shaman plain communities to cultivate low yield damp plots. The plain meadows provide fodder (mainly reeds) for animals despite of low productivity.

As a result, the shaman plain flood control project aims to strengthen the local dynamic of land intensification by increasing land productivity.



This land use map (below) shows the wide variety of land use in the plain, according to the degree of humidity. Indeed, the wide range of yields found in the valley is determined by the availability of water and the degree of flooding.

The project will affect land to varying degrees. It is difficult to predict the exact yield increase. However we can expect a global improvement of the agricultural potential. In accordance with the EC's and Solidarités' expectations, incomes should undergo a general increase.



As the project aims for land development, land tenure is an important factor to consider.

Land tenure

Land structure varies according to its location: in the plain, the foothills or in the valleys. For many years, Shaman plain belonged to the government but it was finally sold off in the 1930's. However, in the foothills and the valleys, land is inherited from the former *mirs* and landlords. In some villages, most of the land is the property of the same family (in this case there are many sharecroppers). In other villages, land availability is scarce and plots are divided up between several families. In the plain, land structure also varies but there is a more equitable distribution of land.

As the land structure favours small land holdings, this project should have a positive impact on a large number of families, even though just a quarter of the plain is likely to benefit the most.

Part of the plain (mainly the wettest land) remains the property of the government although it is used by some families who have retained customary rights. As most of the plain is private property, the risk of land conflict is relatively small.

Irrigation system

Historically, the plain was more extensively cultivated from the 1930's to the 1970's. Subsequently, flooding caused the canals and rivers to silt up and the agricultural potential of the plain decreased slightly. Today the irrigation network is used to irrigate meadows and the various types of crops, but there is no proper drainage network.

Crop intensification should not have a major impact on the management of irrigation schemes. Indeed, it should help improve the existing system.

Nevertheless, the main challenge is the design and construction of a drainage network in order for the project to be truly efficient.

In brief, we can predict that land structure, irrigation systems and agricultural practices will not *a priori* raise any major problems.

The Shaman project is relevant and the expected impacts are mainly positive.

How will social organisation affect the sustainability of the new system?

Water management generally involves several villages and relies on social structures.

Solidarités is interested in adopting a participative approach during the implementation of this project. Communities strongly support the project and would even like to have the whole plain under cultivation if this were possible. Community mobilisation, consultation and meetings have been organised in order to involve the communities in all aspects of the project. This is of particular importance as it is the communities themselves who are responsible for the construction of new irrigation and drainage canals.

With regards to project sustainability, it is useful to look at a historical overview of community organisation. Until the end of the 19th century, local Lords or *mirs* detained most of the power. Even when the central government became more influential in the area, this former hierarchy was often maintained within the villages. Both the *mirs* and *arbabs* ruled the villages. For instance they were responsible for deciding how community work would be shared by the different families. The "*shura* structure" is really new in Yakawlang area as traditionally only *mirs* and *arbabs* were responsible for distributing tasks. This transition from the old hierarchy to new democratic systems can result in confusion. As the former hierarchy is often superimposed on the new system, the distribution of responsibilities and roles is not always clear within the communities themselves, and this can pose problems for aid stakeholders.

The war has ended and the former hierarchy has been dismantled. The new government, supported by the international community implemented the National Solidarity Programme. Laudably *shuras* have been set up in every Afghan village to reinforce democracy and local governance. In order to implement projects, a budget is allocated to the *shuras*.

Nevertheless, it is still not clear to what extent the community is prepared to participate and ensure the sustainability of the new system. This is the biggest challenge for the second phase of the project in which communities will be responsible for building new irrigation canals themselves. Even if Solidarités commences the project using a participative

approach, the population may still have underestimated their responsibilities.

Institutional context and evolution of power struggle

As Solidarités' responsibility is limited to the implementation of the project, the other issues rely on the governor. This project was designed by Solidarités in 2004, and although district and provincial government offices were fully involved, programme planners failed to officially inform central government in Kabul.

National government is undergoing a process of reconstruction (at institutional level and policy level) and new departments have been created. As a result, new power struggles have emerged and central government is making it clear that it intends to oversee the whole process.

While communities were expecting the project to begin and land development to be underway, the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA), answerable to the Ministry of Energy and Water (MEW) put the project on standby until further studies were carried out to assess other potential impacts, such as an environmental impact assessment. However, Solidarités was unable to carry out a suitable hydrological study due to a lack of ex-ante data.

The NEPA's reasons for putting the project on standby are based on concerns over the environmental impact and the use of explosives to dig out the canyon. Even though the NEPA is understandably taking into account environment issues, this decision can be called into question. As discussed earlier, the plain ceased to be a "natural wetlands" many years ago and the project only aims to improve land potential and support local dynamics towards intensification.

Conclusion

In terms of methodology, this study shows that numerous issues have to be taken into account when implementing such a project. Even if this project mainly aims for agricultural impacts, highly important issues such as social organisation and land structure must also be taken into consideration. Indeed failing to do so may result in numerous problems.

Systems analysis is a very relevant tool or addressing this type of inter-related issue and gives a comprehensive view of the complexity, diversity and dynamics. This case study raises two main issues.

The first issue is related to context changes, the emergence of new types of problems that need to be tackled as well as the importance of consulting with relevant government bodies. The second issue is community mobilisation which is determined mainly by the type of village and how efficient village authorities are.

This case study highlights the fact that the recent set up of new institutions has generated new considerations. Today, the government naturally is seeking more consultation and is trying to exert greater controls on NGO activities. Nevertheless, many procedures remain unclear and there are few links between local and national government bodies, as well as within the various departments.

Moreover, interests differ between the various stakeholders. On the one hand, the government is seeking to strengthen its influence on how the country is developed which is in line with normal capacity building. To do so, long term vision on various issues, including environmental concerns are raised. On the other hand, due to population growth, communities are trying to respond to increasing needs in term of food production and economic growth and they need the support of NGOs. In this case who is responsible for ensuring that communities' interests prevail?

Taking into account environmental issues is highly relevant when the conservation of a natural habitat is at stake, but in the case of the Shaman flood control project, the objective of the planned intervention is not to modify the environment but to support endogenous dynamics.

Participation and mobilisation issues are the main challenges for community development. Most interlocutors agree that the widespread migration and economic upheaval in the post-war period has led to an increase in individualism. To what extent will this have an impact on project sustainability?

The traditional leaders are gradually losing their power as the *shura* system takes over, although they continue to have an impact on essential community work, such as canal maintenance. Given this tendency, it remains to be seen whether the new *shura* system will be able to mobilise the community as effectively.

In Yakawlang, and in Afghanistan in general, NSP projects are often perceived by communities as a means of gaining access to cash. In Shaman plain and in many other parts of the country, it is increasingly difficult to mobilise villagers without a financial incentive.

One important final issue is how people will organise themselves if aid decreases or ceases altogether as may be expected in the long term? Can we assume that the new village authorities, such as the *shuras*, are capable of reminding communities of their responsibilities?