ACBAR Advocacy Series

NGO voices on water

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Introduction

The Afghanistan Pilot Participatory Poverty Assessment (APPPA) is a project that, through civil society involvement, aims to collect, document, disseminate and advocate the 'voices' of poor Afghans for inclusion in the upcoming Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), and more broadly throughout civil society. APPPA will achieve this through a research component and an advocacy component.

This paper is one of a series of advocacy papers produced in the advocacy component, the purpose of which is to improve the quality of civil society - including non-governmental organizations (NGO) engagement in sectoral debates and to provide recommendations for implementation of sectoral activities. This will be achieved through the presentation of the perspectives of the NGO community in relation to sectors identified, during the APPPA research component, as priorities by APPPA-target communities. For a more comprehensive understanding of the issues identified, further inquiry and discussion is advised.

Based upon the sectoral priorities identified by APPPA-target communities, a number of national and international NGOs working within the Water sector were approached for interviews and to participate in a subsequent round table discussion. The issues emerging from these interviews were tabled for validation in the roundtable discussion, which also allowed participants to prioritize issues and propose recommendations. The resulting draft advocacy paper was then circulated for comments to ACBAR's membership who provided feedback for integration.

It should be noted that this paper does not reflect an exhaustive investigation of the sector's technical areas, nor can it be presumed that the issues presented are held by consensus among the diverse range of NGOs consulted.

Nationally, the need for increased water provision and wells persists. Twelve Government Ministries and several more Government institutions are involved in running the water sector [1] 60-70% of the population of Kabul is estimated to live in informal settlements, with little or no access to sanitation and drinking water[2]. Much of rural Afghanistan faces the same problem. This is figurative in the high levels of water borne and hygiene related diseases found across the country.

Afghanistan has several large redundant hydro-electric plants which, if renovated, could be used to provide much needed power supplies; micro hydro-electric power is popular and if used efficiently could benefit many more rural communities. Most irrigation canals and channels are old and inefficiently used. Flood protection measures are often insufficient and /or poorly maintained.

From the research and Roundtable discussion undertaken a consensus was reached on the principle issues faced by NGOs and the Water sector in general. Hygiene promotion and education was universally acknowledged to be the top priority; the other issues raised were not prioritised.

[1] Water Sector Strategy 2008-2013 (Draft), Afghanistan National Development Strategy, Kabul, October 2007

[2] Sector Reform in Public Health, Education & Urban Services 2007 A report by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), July 20, 2007

The issues within the sector highlighted are:

- Advancing Capacity, Coordination and Communication
- The Importance of Hygiene Promotion and Water Sanitation
- Improving the Management and Maintenance of Water Supplies
- Modernising Irrigation
- Investing in Hydro-Electric Power (HEP)
- Maintaining Flood Protection

The cross-cutting themes recognised as the prime areas for improvement were:

- Education
- Information sharing and Coordination
- Environmental protection
- Gender mainstreaming

Consulted Agencies (Interview and Roundtable Participants)

Aga Khan Foundation (Afghanistan), Catholic Relief Services, Child Fund Afghanistan, Concern, Cooperation Centre for Afghanistan, DACAAR, Hope Worldwide, International Rescue Committee, Oxfam GB, Tearfund, ZOA

Advancing Capacity, Coordination and Communication

Despite improvement within the sector, the capacity of many of the Government (GoA) institutions involved still needs improvement. NGOs are often unclear as to which Ministry to coordinate with, whether they have communicated with all relevant Ministries and whether the relevant Ministries have communicated fully between themselves.

The efficiency and effectiveness of some Ministries is lacking in terms of policy implementation. Participants highlighted the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) WatSan Project as an example of effective coordination (between the Ministry and associated stakeholders) and of a ministry increasing its own ability and functionality.

Most NGOs are aware that the Supreme Council for Water Affairs Management (SCWAM) is responsible for the coordination and monitoring of the activities of these Ministries and institutions, but is not transparent in its work and findings.

"The will is there, but the direction is missing" NGO staff member

"A major priority issue is the control of land irrigation deep wells and its effect on the neighbouring safe drinking water wells"
-NGO staff member

Insufficient coordination between NGOs and other project implementers causes competition for resources and duplication of efforts. Consultation and mediation with the different water user groups is also lacking in some areas. Participants noted that comprehensive technical planning - taking into account all existing resources and needs within an entire locality - does not occur at the outset of all projects.

"A major priority issue is the control of land irrigation deep wells and its effect on the neighbouring safe drinking water wells" NGO staff member

Key Recommendations

Recommendation: SCWAM could make its function and findings more transparent by making them more easily available. Participants suggested the use of a regularly updated website, such as that produced by the National Solidarity Plan (NSP), which provides comprehensive information.

Recommendation: Civil Society Organisations (CSO) should continue to facilitate the capacity building of the various Ministries involved in the water sector with training, systems and controls implementation. Ministries should then gradually take over these systems and controls.

The Importance of Hygiene Promotion and Water Sanitation (WatSan)

The link between hygiene, water sanitation and health has long been acknowledged as of prime importance[1]. The GoA is committed to the Millennium Development Goal of reducing by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water[2]. One example of this is the Ministry of Urban Development's plan to upgrade informal housing[3].

"Arsenic contamination plus salinity affects…drinking water" NGO staff member

"Arsenic contamination plus salinity affects… drinking water" -NGO staff member

Currently there is no coordinated and centralised testing of water samples, which creates difficulties and an additional cost burden to project implementers. Where testing is not carried out there is a risk of drilling a well containing contaminated water.

Many NGOs find donors are unwilling to fund hygiene promotion and education within WatSan projects, despite evidence showing that training communities in basic sanitation methods will have the greatest effect on their ongoing health[6]. This training would help to reduce the occurrence of water borne diseases, and more importantly, those occurring due to poor sanitation habits, principally diarrhoea[7].

Recommendation: The GoA, Donors and Implementers need to ensure that Hygiene promotion and education forms part of any project involved in the provision of water.

Hygiene education is an essential component of any water project -NGO staff member

The Participatory Hygiene and Sanitation Transformation (PHAST) and Children's Hygiene and Sanitation Training (CHAST) programmes were highlighted as best practice models for hygiene education which could be translated to work within Afghanistan. Participants felt that both programmes were extremely important and could be very effective in educating entire communities through promoting hygiene and behavioural change with adult community groups and in teaching children in schools[8].

"Hygiene education is an essential component of any water project" NGO staff member

Key Recommendations

Recommendation: Women should be especially targeted for sanitation training as the principle adults involved in child rearing and managing household water supplies.

Recommendation: National discussion, with appropriate media exposure, political highlighting, education and advocacy could assist in further facilitating the behavioural change needed for the acceptance of modern hygiene techniques.

Recommendation: The GoA should provide centralised water sampling facilities and maintain an up to date database of results mapping the water quality across the country. This should be available to all implementers. Information on the water table should be kept and be available in the same way.

[3] MacDonald R, Providing the World with Clean Water, British Medical Journal (editorial), 327 (7429): 1416-1418, 20 December 2003

[4] The National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2005, Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and the Central Statistics Office, Kabul, June 2007

[5] Sector Reform in Public Health, Education & Urban Services 2007 A report by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), July 20, 2007

[6] DACAAR Annual Report 2006

[7] http://student.bmj.com/issues/03/04/education/94.php

[8] www.irc.nl/page/13216

Improving the Management and Maintenance of Water Supplies

There are limited resources and capacity, across the sector; it is not possible to satisfy the demand of all the communities in need countrywide instantly. Many existing wells do not function due to simple and rectifiable problems.

In order to utilise resources optimally it is important, where possible, to rehabilitate existing dry or non-functioning wells, allowing more resources to be spent on new wells for communities without. Many donors and implementers do not favour this approach.

"One of the biggest problems in the villages is the maintenance of the wells and hand-pumps" NGO staff member

Currently there are no minimum standards of quality for parts and materials. This results in inferior goods which accelerate the attrition of WatSan systems.

"One of the biggest problems in the villages is the maintenance of the wells and hand-pumps"
-NGO Staff Member

The ongoing maintenance of WatSan systems, for instance hand pumps, wells and latrines, has two major obstacles. Firstly the provision of funding for sub-contracted ongoing maintenance and secondly the competence of local workers/ engineers to perform this function. Without adequate training or funding these systems are at risk of degrading over time and falling out of use.

Roundtable participants commented that institutional latrines are sometimes constructed and located inappropriately, and in too small a concentration. Evidence of this included latrines in newly constructed mixed schools, which meant that girls were unable to use the latrines, causing a negative impact on their attendance.

Key Recommendations

Recommendation: More consideration needs to be given when planning institutional latrines, ensuring they are more "girl friendly" in terms of placement and privacy; they further need regular maintenance to ensure that they do not fall into disrepair and out of use.

Recommendation: The GoA and donors should focus funds in this area onto rehabilitation and support programmes, as it is cheaper and quicker in most cases to rehabilitate an old well than to dig a new one.

Recommendation: Implementers should prioritise rehabilitation of existing WatSan systems over building new ones where practical. GoA and donors should ensure that new latrines and wells are not constructed unless implementers have properly confirmed there is no existing system servicing the target community that could be rehabilitated.

Recommendation: Operation and management (O&M) is critical for the sustainability of all WatSan and irrigation systems, indeed the simple maintenance for hand-pumps can extend the life of a well from five to fifteen years. O&M should involve work to build the beneficiary community's understanding of the need and value for O&M, training of selected local representatives for basic technical maintenance and also ensuring commercial supply chains for simple parts (e.g. rubber washers to the village shop).

Recommendation: All donors, international organisations and the GoA should ensure that all water points they fund incorporate an effective O&M component as standard; implementers should incorporate O&M into all water point proposals. The GoA should consider establishing a specific O&M team or unit to focus on ensuring effective O&M implementation across the country.

Modernising Irrigation

Management of agricultural water supplies is of major importance. The effects of the recent drought are still felt in some areas, and evidence suggests droughts may become more frequent[9]. The use of snowmelt, karezes and river water provides most of the water for irrigating crops; on land not benefiting from these supplies, rain water is relied upon by farmers for their crops. Many of these latter communities do not have the knowledge to harvest rainwater effectively and keep stores clean.

"Irrigation schemes seem to be antiquated and systems are significantly deteriorated" NGO Staff Member

Much of the irrigation infrastructure is antiquated in comparison to modern systems. Over-watering of land is a common problem, which in turn leads to water shortages further down the system. Despite the traditional water sharing systems, ownership of water supply is a major issue in the efficient distribution of water.

"Irrigation schemes seem to be antiquated and systems are significantly deteriorated" NGO staff member

Key Recommendations

Recommendation: Planning of irrigation projects needs to be thoroughly researched in coordination with communities. Negotiations between community members need to be facilitated in order to ensure that agricultural water is distributed to all those that need it where possible. Education surrounding infrastructure planning needs to be thoroughly discussed with interested parties to ensure long term cooperation.

Recommendation: The efficiency of canals and channels needs to be increased and farmers need to be trained in the efficient use and maintenance of irrigation systems, including education covering over-irrigation of land. When combined this should lead to a more efficient use of water in the long term, with more farmers being able to utilise and benefit from a water source.

Recommendation: Further community education and resources should be dedicated to increasing the appropriate harvesting, and storing, of rainwater.

[9] Christoplos, I, Out of Step? Agricultural Policy and Afghan Livelihoods, Issue Paper Series: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, May 2004

Investing in Hydro-Electric Power (HEP)

HEP is an under utilised energy resource in terms of national power, many existing plants are in a state of disrepair, aggravating the sporadic national power supply in urban areas.

Micro-HEP is highly sought after by rural communities, despite the high initial costs communities are willing to pay for these projects, and in some cases communities have rated micro-HEP above that of a clean water supply within their community NSP.

Micro-HEP units have a very limited capacity, allowing communities and families to furnish only the most basic of power needs.

"These [units] work well and provide enough power for basic needs, but not heaters" NGO staff member

"These (units) work well and provide enough power for basic needs, but not heaters."
-NGO Staff Member

Key Recommendations

Recommendation: Roundtable participants felt existing HEP dams should be repaired and re-established before seeking new projects. To achieve this up to date training to existing and new HEP engineers in the use and maintenance of HEP plants needs to take place.

Recommendation: If a sustainable Afghan micro-HEP industry producing units and parts for repair is created the cost of micro-HEP would be reduced and Afghans would develop a better knowledge and understanding of this technology, ultimately improving HEP available in Afghanistan.

Recommendation: The utilisation of energy efficient light bulbs will increase the available output of micro-HEP units. Their use should be promoted, they are widely available in urban areas, shopkeepers in rural areas should be encouraged to stock them.

Recommendation: NGOs need to ensure that adequate water flow is present before providing Micro-HEP units to communities. Discussion should take place to ensure communities understand when micro-HEP is unsuitable and that they will get only a small benefit from their investment.

Maintaining Flood Protection

Despite drought being the most common natural hazard within Afghanistan, localised flooding is acknowledged as another common natural hazard[10]. Despite this, participants noted that it is often difficult to gain funding for flood protection measures from donors.

"It is hard to get funds for them [flood protection walls] - especially in areas where… the wall is built and is subsequently washed away". NGO staff member

The planning and maintenance of flood protection walls and measures is often poor. A particular problem as good arable land is scarce.

Flooding has many knock on effects, in addition to water damage to land and buildings; it can pollute clean water supplies which lead in turn leads to health implications for both humans and their livestock.

Deforestation aggravates the risk of flooding and associated landslide, when root structures are removed soil is destabilised and is easily eroded by severe rain and floods.

Key Recommendations

Recommendation: The lack of water shed management is a contributing factor to the annual flood problem. Flood protection activities should be better planned and focused on the upper end of catchment areas.

Recommendation: The design of the flood protection walls should be reviewed to ensure that they are big enough and solid enough to withstand the violent floods. The quality of engineering and workmanship should be reviewed to ensure that appropriate dams and flood walls are being created. Controls should be put in place and monitored to ensure the ongoing standard of workmanship thereafter.

Recommendation: The rate of deforestation and reforestation should be reviewed. Despite large amounts of timber being felled there is an insufficient volume of saplings and young trees being replaced.

[10] Christoplos, I, Out of Step? Agricultural Policy and Afghan Livelihoods, Issue Paper Series: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, May 2004

Key Recommendations and Conclusions

Participants find the sheer number of GoA institutions involved within this sector and their roles both confusing and time consuming. SCHWAM could utilise a clear and updated website to ease this, enabling stakeholders to locate current information quickly. CSOs should continue to assist Ministries in the building of capacity, to enable them to devise and implement sound policies within this arena. Ministries, CSO and other stakeholders should coordinate in both the planning and implementation of projects.

Hygiene promotion and education is the single most important issue raised in this process. Simply there needs to be more, to enable this donors need to provide more funding. This must target whole communities, with special focus attached to children and women. A media campaign would further assist in gaining the behavioural change needed for these concepts to be adopted. The use of PHAST and CHAST is highly recommended, once translated to work within Afghanistan.

O&M is of great importance and should be a factor of all projects; simple maintenance of systems greatly extends their life. To carry this out the training and recruitment of a local person to undertake this vital role, communities must take ownership of project outcomes, including local shop keepers to stock repair goods. Within the wider WatSan remit the planning of latrines needs to be looked at in a more gender sensitive manner.

Planning of irrigation projects and coordination between stakeholders needs to be improved as do many of the old and often broken channels and canals. Further, farmers need to be educated in efficient water use, in order that more people benefit from irrigation water. Finally, training needs to be given to communities in order that they may harvest, store and use rainwater effectively.

The main HEP dams in the country should be surveyed and where possible repaired in order that sufficient quantities of sustainable and renewable power can again be produced within Afghanistan. This will entail the in-depth training of engineers to allow them in the future to maintain these plants. Micro-HEP units are sort after and methods of increasing their efficiency should be investigated, both in term of the individual units and the utilities they power, for instance using energy efficient light bulbs rather than traditional tungsten. It is hoped that over time a sustainable home-grown production and maintenance industry could evolve.

Localised seasonal flooding is a major issue in Afghanistan. More funding, better planning and improved construction of flood protection measures needs to take place. Legislation or Controls need to be formulated and implemented to ensure that these walls and dams are adequately maintained over time. The rate of deforestation and re-forestation needs to be further investigated and appropriate measures taken to reverse the damage already done to soil and earth banks.

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