

SDC SWISS AGENCY FOR DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION – SOUTH ASIA DIVISION

Baking bread is one of the most important and hardest household activities of women in rural Afghanistan. While women prepare the dough and bake the bread at home, men are responsible for collecting shrub to fuel the oven. Although bakeries are common in cities across the country, as yet hardly any rural community has one. In October 2009, Helvetas started supporting rural communities in Afghanistan’s central highlands establish community bakeries. As a result, more than one thousand families are now benefiting from these bakeries. A successful initiative with a high potential for replication.

One bakery for all – an idea emerging from the community

So far, 13 villages in the Bamyán Province in Afghanistan’s central highlands benefit from community bakeries. These bakeries are part of the Helvetas watershed management project in Kahmard district. During the participatory planning process of this project, the communities, through their Community Development Councils (CDCs – see box 1) came up with the idea that Helvetas should support them in establishing community bakeries in order to reduce the use of shrubs. Shrubs were being heavily harvested for firewood. Almost all families in Kahmard used shrubs to fire their individual tandoors. In response to the request of the CDCs, Helvetas started the “community bakery” project with the establishment of 13 bakeries.

The CDCs informed the members of the communities that cutting shrub was being restricted and that bakeries were being built as an alternative for the families to bake their bread. They also clearly explained the reason for this restriction: excessive collection of shrub for firewood harmed the vegetation and prevented soil conservation in the watersheds, making it impossible to maintain soil cover in these areas.

The communities contributed labour provided by their own members. This contribution amounted to about 20% of spending for construction. The bakeries belong to the people and are managed and maintained by the communities. If the bakery needs repair, the CDCs take care of it.

Even before a year had elapsed, community members were acknowledging the benefit of this measure: *“The bakery brings benefits to both the male and the female groups in our village: we males are not doing the heavy work of collecting shrubs from the mountains anymore and the women are free from the heavy burden of baking bread and being exposed to heat and*

smoke”, says Khair Mohammad, a male member of Sangchel village.

The community bakeries use the dash type of oven instead of the tandoor. The dash system is energy-efficient and cost-effective. Although Kahmard is famous for its coal mines and almost all families buy coal for heating their houses during the winter, using coal for baking bread was new and a discovery, especially for women.

Bakeries in cities sell baked bread at a relatively reasonable fee. Community bakeries in rural Afghanistan, however, receive dough from their customers and bake it for them. Bakeries operate three times a day: morning, noon and evening, therefore customers can eat fresh bread at every meal. In Afghanistan, two types of bakeries are common:



1. Dash ovens as used in community bakeries (a coal-fired energy-efficient oven; a low-cost option and therefore available in the Kahmard district).



2. The tandoor is the traditional oven made of clay, fired by shrub, wood or gas and used in households.

Community Development Council (CDC):

A CDC is a group of community members elected by the community to serve as its decision-making body. The CDC is the social and development foundation at the community level, responsible for implementing and supervising development projects and acting as a liaison between the communities and government and nongovernmental organizations. A CDC can be established in a village where there are at least 25 families, whereas communities with less than 25 families are encouraged to join with others to establish a CDC.

The CDC bylaw constitutes the legal basis. It was passed by the President of Afghanistan as a decree in November 2006 and covers issues such as CDC establishment, eligibility for membership and election, responsibilities of CDC members, etc.

Source: www.nspafghanistan.org

Relief for nature and people: remarkable results in a short time

Since the establishment of community bakeries, shrub cutting has significantly declined in the villages as all families take their dough to the bakery. This has had a positive ecological impact on the watersheds and an economic impact on the families. One donkey load of shrub costs an average of 250 Afghani (about US\$5), lasting for 2-3 days, whereas each family pays from 220 to 350 Afghani monthly to the baker. As a result, for the cost of one load of shrub a family gets its bread baked for the entire month including cookies and additional bread consumed, for instance, at wedding parties. Even though the bakeries started to function only in October 2009, their impact is positive and multi-fold.

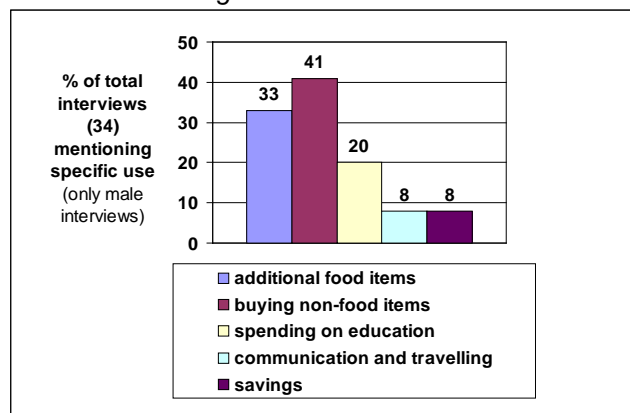


Donkeys carrying shrub to the villages

The socio-economic outcomes demonstrate that the household economy has improved considerably since then. Families are able to save money as well as time as they now purchase less shrub and get their bread baked at the bakery. Cash savings vary between 2000 to 4000 Afghani (about US\$40 to US\$80) a month per household. The cash saving and additional income from productive activities carried out during the time freed from gathering shrub enable people to spend time and money on other purposes such as buying food items like sugar, rice, oil, tea, sweets, etc., and non-food items like household products, as well as medicine. The women, in particular, are very happy that they are free from their hardest and most time-consuming chore: baking bread, which kept them busy

three to four hours every day. The considerable amount of time saved thanks to the bakery enables women to be active in other areas. The social network and family relationships have improved considerably. Bakeries have become a social hub for the communities as people have the opportunity to meet daily in the bakery.

Use of cash savings and additional income:



One of the main impacts of the bakeries is improved education for the community's children because of funds available for school supplies and books. Even more importantly, children can focus more on school because they no longer have the hard and time-consuming chore of collecting shrub in the mountains and because, as a result, their nutrition and health have improved.

With the establishment of bakeries, conflicts within families have declined substantially as people are more relaxed and have gained time for other, preferred activities. Bibi Hanifa, a female member of the Roye Sang village said, "I have six daughters-in-law. Since the bakery is functioning, we are safe. In the past our daughters would fight over the baking of the bread, it was a big problem."

A number of children and men lost their lives or sustained serious injuries while collecting shrubs in the mountains. The women will not have to worry anymore about the whereabouts of their husbands and sons, which was a major source of stress for them.

A bakery is a profitable business when there are at least 60 families who are permanent clients. Most of the villages in Kahmard have 200 families or more. The bakeries also created job opportunities in the communities: a total of 26 employments (13 bakers and 13 baker's assistants) have been created so far in Kahmard district. The average salary of a baker is 6,000 Afghani (about US\$120) and the average salary of an assistant is 2,500 Afghani (about US\$50). Compared to shrub use before the establishment of the bakeries, there has been a reduction of almost 90% in the use of shrub.

Watershed management as a key to improved livelihoods

Community bakeries are part of a holistic approach to sustainable and productive management of degraded watersheds to prevent downstream flood damage in

Kahmard district, Bamyan Province. Uncontrolled use of natural resources on less fertile land in high-altitude rangeland was not only leading to more floods in the valleys and decreasing soil fertility but also reducing income for farmers.

Helvetas realized that degradation in the watersheds is responsible for the floods which threaten houses, agricultural land and infrastructure in the villages of Kahmard district. Only improved management of the areas where runoff and erosion originate can solve the problem of floods over the long term.

In 2008, Helvetas launched a community-based watershed management project in three critical areas in the district. The goal of the project is to contribute to improved livelihoods of poor rural population by reducing flood damages and increasing long-term land productivity by introducing a mix of short- and long-term-solutions.

Kahmard district is located at 1,475 meters above sea level. In this mountainous district, the livelihood of the predominantly rural population of about 8,000 families depends on very limited irrigated land at the bottom of the valley, where mainly wheat, potatoes and fodder crops are grown. Farming is mainly subsistence based and livestock is an important source of livelihood. Orchards and fruit production, especially apricots, almonds, apples and walnuts, are lucrative activities in the district. Because of the poor state of infrastructure preventing access to markets, the farmers are unable to get high returns from their produce. Another threat is the uncontrolled use of natural resources.



View of the bare hillsides of Kahmard district

At present, there is persistent overuse of Kahmard's watershed resources: as mentioned above, shrubs are heavily harvested as firewood. Ploughing of pasture areas for rain-fed wheat production is another reason. This contributes to a higher intensity of grazing with increasing numbers of sheep and goats. This complex set of factors (increased dryland farming, cutting ephemerals, non-sustainable use of non-timber forest products) has degraded the vegetation in mountainous areas at an alarming rate and led to an avalanche of problems, including more floods and destruction of irrigated land in the valleys, reduced income for the farmers, as well as decreased soil fertility.

In May 2010, Kahmard district witnessed one of the worst floods in decades: 2 persons died, 21 were injured, and 500 houses were completely destroyed.

In the meantime, the population has become increasingly aware that the flash flood problem can only be solved by improved management of watershed areas where runoff and erosion originate. Gul Agah from Qaghor village talks about this new awareness in his own words: *"It is like a bald head in the rain – the water runs quickly off a head without hair, but with hair the rain moistens the head and it takes time before it starts dripping down the face"*.

This is one of the achievements of Helvetas' engagement in this area. There are other positive changes, for example, in two out of three watersheds, flash flood risks have declined. About 500 families received extra income by working in the watersheds through the project's cash-for-work approach. And last but not least: there has been a significant reduction in shrub collection from the watershed areas. The prohibition of shrub-cutting was a difficult undertaking, with little prospect of success until alternative solutions were put in place, such as the bakeries.

The watershed project is a combination of structural, vegetative and management measures aimed at reducing flood risks and improving fodder, fuel wood and cash crop production. The major emphasis of the project is on capacity building of CDCs to manage the watersheds in a sustainable way by integrating conservation activities and approaches to improve livelihoods through people's participation and collaboration among different institutional and social actors. Watershed Management Committees associated with existing Community Development Councils are now responsible for the implementation of the project.

Challenges: jobless shrub cutters and ongoing flash floods

Because families have their bread baked at community bakeries and because shrub use has fallen drastically, men working as shrub cutters, carriers and sellers have lost their livelihood and income because no one is buying shrub anymore. According to some people in the communities, shrub sellers offset this loss of income by finding other jobs, actually jobs with a higher status. Some of the shrub sellers have found a new source of income working as bakers, assistant bakers or dash builders. Furthermore, now that they no longer have to collect shrub, former commercial shrub cutters can work as day labourers in the villages or in "cash-for-work projects" of NGOs. This does not mitigate the fact, however, that day labour and cash-for-work projects are limited in time and the question remains how these shrub sellers will be able to make a living over the long term.

It is true that the watershed management project and its successful reduction of shrub cutting did not prevent the spring 2010 floods. Watershed management requires a holistic approach and has to be viewed with a long-term perspective. Reducing shrub cutting in watershed areas will contribute to preventing

destructive flash floods in the future, but this takes time and it is difficult to prove that there is a direct and immediate link between the two. Bakeries are part of the watershed management activities and they contribute to, at least, slower degradation of the surrounding hills and mountains.

Will the bakeries still be there once Helvetas has left?

"The women are very happy to be relieved of baking bread and the men are very happy to be rid of gathering shrubs from the mountains. The children too are no longer afraid of climbing steep slopes in the early morning before going to school, if at all. Even the donkeys are happy because they were in real danger carrying shrubs on rocky mountain paths" states Nasima Jan, a female customer of the Sangchel bakery.

Community bakeries have brought many positive changes in the lives of 1,060 families living in 13 communities in Kahmard district. In addition to a steep 90% decline in shrub cutting, which has exerted a considerable positive impact on the local ecology, families are now able to save money and spend it on other purposes such as buying food, school supplies and household items. The bakeries have reduced the daily workload of women, men and children and improved the health of all family members; at the same time, women and men are able to spend time on more productive activities, such as vegetable gardens, artisan work and others. Women now have time to attend literacy classes and skills development courses, which would not have been possible before.



Handmade embroidery for selling on the local market

Before the bakeries were built, many boys were busy collecting shrub; now without this chore, they are attending school. Many of them take the dough to the bakery in the morning, on the way to the school, and then they pick up the baked bread on the way home, or somebody else from the family picks it up.

All these positive factors have raised awareness about the benefit of the bakeries within the community and have therefore paved the way for their sustainability.

The newly established bakeries in Kahmard district are owned, run and maintained by the communities. They are in charge of their own local bakeries and they have the capacity to fulfil this responsibility because the

dash ovens are made of local materials and members of the community are trained to maintain, repair and build an oven.

Because of their evident benefits and the knowledge gained through the exchange of experiences, other communities have started to build community bakeries on their own private initiative without any external support. This proves that the project has a high potential for replication beyond its current geographical borders. In fact, there are thousands of communities in the country facing challenges similar to those of the communities in Kahmard district: after 30 years of war, food shortages and poor living conditions, especially in rural areas where 80% of the Afghan population lives, are a major threat to the country's longer-term stability and economic recovery. Over the past years, the situation has further deteriorated due to harsh weather conditions such as persistent droughts, flash floods, growing insecurity and poor infrastructure. Pragmatic and efficient solutions are of the utmost value and have a genuine chance of being adopted by people in dire need of initiatives that have the potential of bringing positive changes to their lives.

SDC – Helvetas Cooperation:

In 2005, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) selected Helvetas after a tender process among four invited Swiss NGOs. Since 2006, Helvetas has been implementing a long-term SDC-funded program "Improving Livelihoods of Rural Communities" (ILRC) in five districts of Bamyán, Baghlan and Samangan provinces.

The first phase of the ILRC (2006-2008) has been completed and externally evaluated. The second phase started in early 2009 and shall continue until 2011 with activities in education, health, governance, economic development and disaster risk reduction in the targeted districts of Samangan, Baghlan and Bamyán provinces.

Founded in 1955, Helvetas is the first private development organization in Switzerland. It has been working in Afghanistan since 2003.

The total Swiss investment for the 13 bakeries amounts to less than 51'000 CHF, benefitting 1060 families (approx. 7500 individuals).

Links:

SDC Afghanistan: <http://www.sdc.org.af/>

SDC: <http://www.sdc.admin.ch/>

Helvetas: <http://www.helvetas.org>

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