

Afghanistan's Transition in the Making? Natural Resources, Conflict and Development

Interview

Khwaga Kakar (Advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan and Researcher on Water Issues, Kabul)

Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: Khwaga, you are an advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Afghanistan, but you are also a researcher on water issues and have a lot of experience in the water sector. Could you please explain if Afghanistan is actually a water rich or water poor country?

Khwaga Kakar: Yes, that's correct. I've worked at the Center for Policy and Human Development at Kabul University and we looked at the link between water and poverty for the [third national human development report](#), which is available online.

The issue of whether Afghanistan is a rich or poor water country is an interesting one. The perception is that Afghanistan is rich in water resources and if you look at the figures at the national level, this is true. Afghanistan has sufficient water to meet its citizens' needs, whether it's for domestic use, agriculture, industry, energy or environmental sustainability. But when you look at the figures at the five hydrological rivers, a different picture emerges. In our report, we examine the per capita water availability for the citizens of these five river basins and we have found that the Northern River Basin is already going under absolute water scarcity, and that the Harirod is close to water stress. We used a Falken mark indicator, which is a method to figure out whether a country has sufficient water or not. That's the current standing, but if we also look at Afghan population growth and at the increasing standards of living, the situation will become even worse.

Another phenomenon that Afghanistan is challenged by is the impact of climate change. Right now there are some organizations that are involved in studying climate change impact, but we still have very little information. We do know, however, that it will impact the availability of water for the agricultural sector in terms of whether we will have sufficient water or not during the growth cycle. In that regards, we can say that Afghanistan is dealing with water challenges and we actually refer to it as a water crisis.

Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: What vulnerabilities do Afghans actually face?

Khwaga Kakar: The vulnerabilities vary from location to location. The impact is felt more by the poor families who do not have strong assets. Because Afghanistan is a semi-arid country, it faces periods of droughts and floods. One of the impacts of climate change is that the periods of drought are becoming stronger and flooding is becoming more intense. The vulnerabilities will be in the form of loss of livelihood for rural Afghans, resulting in damages and debt. Unfortunately, despite interventions, we do not have a reliable, central data system to monitor the impact of these vulnerabilities. However, there are lots of examples from many Afghans who have felt the impact of flooding or drought. I can give you a few examples that we came across during our research. During the drought of 2008, there was a 40-50% decline in cereal production in irrigated areas, where infrastructure for watering the land is available. The situation was much worse in rain-fed areas, where they don't have reliable access to water, and the impact in those areas was close to 80%. Now imagine Afghan villages that have limited access to markets during these times. The issue becomes extremely severe because then it's an issue of food insecurity. Another indicator, if we look at the impact of drought on the livelihood of Afghans, is the impact on the livestock. On average, close to 70% of all Afghan households lose their livestock during a typical drought period. While rich families are able to

cope using different strategies, such as relying on water pumps, digging deeper wells to get access to water for their land, or buying more expensive grain from the market to feed their families and their livestock, the poor families are the ones that end up losing their sources of livelihood, such as their assets and their lands. A lot of times this results in out-migration to cities and to neighboring countries like Iran, which has its own risks as well.

I should mention Afghanistan has a very rich community-based water management system that goes back many generations. It is a traditional system that focuses on management practices as well as infrastructure. Furthermore, at the national level in 2010, a new water law was passed that promotes the idea of integrated water resources management (IWRM). As part of the IWRM reform, new structures have been envisioned to take responsibility for managing water systems based on hydrological areas, not geographical divisions. That is where the idea of the five river basins came along. Within these five river basins, different structures such as water councils and water user associations at the central, district and village levels have been envisioned to take charge of the management of water resources. Parallel to that, we still have the community-based water management system that I mentioned. This is the *marob* system, which has continued to function even during periods of war and conflict in Afghanistan. In some areas, especially in the North, water user organizations have been established and they do include the *marobs*, but in some other areas, they have not been included. That's the governance situation in terms of management, maintenance and water sharing issues at the national level. At the international level, Afghanistan is a country where the water flows to neighboring countries, so we have shared water with all of our neighbors, but we only have one treaty, and that is with Iran.

Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: Where do these rivers flow to?

Khwaga Kakar: Two of our rivers, Helmand and Harirud flow to Iran. The Harirud River Basin flows to Iran and then to Turkmenistan, and in the North, it flows to Tajikistan and in the eastern part, the Kabul River Basin flows to Pakistan.

Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: Now I just want to take a step back to the local, already existing water management systems. Why was this changed if you say it was actually working quite well during all this time?

Khwaga Kakar: Well, I wouldn't say that it was working quite well because the social dynamic at the community level has changed and the system has deteriorated during periods of conflict. It's a system where the communities themselves come together to elect one person, a so-called *marob*, who is responsible for allocating water to different plots. It's a structure basically at the plot level. And it's a system where a father is a *marob*, then the son becomes a *marob* and the knowledge is passed on throughout these different generations. In the past, in the 70s before the war, the government was more involved in helping and giving a hand to this community-based system. They did so with planning water infrastructure, such as dams, small ones, not large ones and with the enforcement of those water rights that were decided upon by the communities themselves. But now the situation has changed. The system is still there, but in some situations, there has been some manipulation by the power holders in the communities. There is definitely room for improving the system. Another aspect is the destruction that was caused by these wars to the basic infrastructure, the canals. This means we need to address both the infrastructure as well as the management to enhance the performance of the structure, and that is when the idea of IWRM came along, which was initially promoted or actually developed in Europe, in France, I believe.

Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: You said that the poor communities face the most severe impacts of water scarcity and other issues related to water management. Are there any mechanisms to address their complaints or raise their interests in this regard?

Khwaga Kakar: I was talking more about the vulnerabilities. When it comes to water sharing, especially for agriculture and irrigation, it's not always the poor that suffers because in Af-

ghanistan, location matters. If you're at an upstream location, with closer access to resources, you'll have better resources. You could be a poor farmer, but be in a better location with more access to water for your land, so your productivity will increase. But someone could be a rich farmer, meaning that they will own a large amount of land and have other assets, but if they are in a downstream community, with less water, then their productivity will suffer. So that division between the rich and poor is not so clear in the irrigation sector. The division is seen more in the vulnerabilities and the coping mechanisms available to the families during periods of droughts and floods.

Coming to your question about mechanisms in Afghanistan, we do have *shiras* and *jirgas* at the community level. The *marobs* themselves are also one of the players that respond to conflict. In most cases, if the conflict is at the plot level, they usually solve it amongst each other, with the involvement of the elders and the *marob*, because the system is in place where the individuals know their rights. They know that for certain periods of time, they should be receiving water for two hours a day, for example during the summer time if that's a period that they should be receiving a lot of water. But in situations where the conflict actually involves two provinces, then the communities take the dispute to the state and district levels. In some situations, they've actually brought their concerns to Kabul, dealing with the Ministry of Energy and Water and other state authorities. In terms of structure, we have water user associations at the village level and river basin councils at the provincial level. At the national level, we have a structure called the Supreme Council of Water that is supposed to look at planning and conflict management over water resources.

Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: And how does the legal framework look like?

Khwaga Kakar: The legal framework, as I mentioned earlier, is the water law, which was passed by the parliament in 2010. The water law deals with water rights issues as well as the roles and responsibilities of different government agencies involved in the water sector.

Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: What do you think the international community could do to address these issues?

Khwaga Kakar: We do have a law in place. There have been regulations established to further support the implementation of IWRM concepts in Afghanistan. One of the challenges we identified in our report was in terms of funding for the water sector. When we examined the funding committed to the water sector between the period from 2001-2009, we found that 5% of the ODA (overseas development assistance) was targeted at the water sector, which is in line with the commitment made in other countries. But the problem is that Afghanistan is a country with poor water infrastructure, and as a result, in terms of water capacity per capita, we're one of the lowest in the world, or at least in the region. The lack of water storage infrastructure makes people more vulnerable to droughts and floods. We're an upstream country. During the winter time, it snows, and in the spring time, the snow melts, forming rivers. But due to the management, lack of infrastructure, and low irrigation efficiency, the farmers are not able to use all of this water. Then there are periods of drought when people do not have access to water. If we had better storage capacity, we would be able to reduce those vulnerabilities during periods of droughts and floods and improve efficiency in the agricultural sector.

We did an analysis of the per capita investment in the water sector, Afghanistan was not doing well. For example, \$26 was spent in the water sector in Iraq. For the same year, it was only \$3 spent on Afghanistan, where the infrastructure had deteriorated tremendously compared to Iraq. And secondly, we need to improve the effectiveness of the way these funds are used and increase the government's capacity to execute these funds. Often the government lacks the capacity to spend the money once it has been committed.

Then there is the challenge of trans-boundary water issues. One of the reasons why the international community and major donors such as the World Bank, the Asia Development Bank and USAID are reluctant to invest in the water sector and infrastructure has to do with

the concerns over trans-boundary water issues. In this regard, we need to be more creative. For instance, we need to be thinking about constructing smaller dams, which will enhance the communities' access to water resources, but will also limit the trans-boundary water implications. We have an agreement with Iran in the Helmand River Basin and we need to support the implementation of this treaty while also supporting Afghanistan's effort at building infrastructure in that river basin.

Another area that donors could focus on, perhaps through multi-lateral funding mechanisms, are large infrastructure projects that not only help with Afghanistan's water insecurity, but that also address the neighboring countries' energy deficiency. Right now there are some discussions about a joint dam on the Kamal River Basin. Expectations are that after the dam has been constructed, the energy could be exported to Pakistan and help their economy. So you know there could be these mechanisms that require funding from the international community as well as their political engagement with both countries to pursue projects that could enhance the benefits of water sharing for both countries.

Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: Do you see any role of Afghan civil society to support this process through lobbying and other activities?

Khwaga Kakar: Yes, definitely. There has been some research done. I feel that civil society could independently provide analysis and information to the policy makers, whether they are in the government or the international community. I feel that both the government and the donor community would benefit from their independent analysis. One area where they could make a valuable contribution would be how to promote the idea of benefit sharing in river basins where we do not have an agreement with the neighboring country. And since civil society has closer ties to the Afghan population, they could also help reduce the disparity between what the Afghans perceive is being done in the water sector and what the government and the donor are actually doing. Civil society could play a role in lobbying on behalf of the people to the government, as well as the donors.

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Expert Talk, Monday, October 28th 2013, 10–12 a.m.

Renard Sexton (International Expert on Resources and international Development, New York University, USA)

Jawed Noorani (Socio-research specialist in Mining Sector and Scientific Coordinator, Integrity Watch Afghanistan, Kabul)

Khwaga Kakar (Advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan and Researcher on Water Issues, Kabul)