Food Security and Livelihoods

Rural Community Development in Afghanistan – a case study
Mission East Afghanistan

Mission East has been active in the provinces of Badakhshan and Takhar in North-Eastern Afghanistan since 2001 and more recently in Baghlan. Its programme supports local communities and their Community Development Councils (CDCs) to develop the potential of their own under-used economic and social resources for sustainable rural development.

The key focus areas of the Mission East Afghanistan programme are:

**MEETING BASIC NEEDS**
- Emergency Relief and Response
- Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)
- Basic Food Security

**RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL)**
- Livelihoods security
- Long-term Food Security
- Natural Resource Management
- Rehabilitation of Productive Physical Infrastructure (roads and canals)

**CROSS CUTTING COMPONENTS**
- Civil Society Capacity Building
- Disaster Risk Reduction

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Mission East is one of the few international NGOs working in the remote mountain communities of North-Eastern Afghanistan. Since 2001 Mission East has worked in these regions with a continuous focus on providing basic livelihood opportunities for the people in the most marginalised and hard to reach areas.

**MEETING BASIC NEEDS**

The communities are highly vulnerable due to multiple overlapping factors. These include prolonged conflict, recurring natural disasters and scarce natural resources. Flash floods, food shortage and loss of home and property are the harsh realities of the area. Problems of such a complex nature demand both a holistic approach in order to reduce the vulnerability, as well as solutions that are easily applicable, due to the remoteness of the communities in question.

**RESPECT FOR LOCAL COMMUNITY STRUCTURES**

Mission East supports vulnerable rural communities to lift themselves out of poverty through the provision of trainings and inputs in hygiene infrastructure, sanitation, disaster risk reduction and food and livelihoods security. All interventions work to build upon already existing capacities, structures and actors in the different target communities.

**LONGER TERM POTENTIAL**

The work in Afghanistan is carried out over a period of several years in each community, starting with meeting basic needs as a precondition for further engagement and hence helping to secure long-term economic and social recovery and development. This way Mission East helps to ensure that the vulnerability of the community is reduced also for future generations.

**THE FIRST STEPS TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Dr. Kim Hartzner
Managing Director
Bringing a greenhouse revolution to rural Afghanistan

Case study of a tenant farmer, Mohammad Sharif

“This is the first time in my life I am producing vegetables, which I never thought I could grow in the long and harsh Afghan winter. Now I plan to construct more greenhouses,” says 54-year-old farmer, Mohammad Sharif.

“In a greenhouse with local technology and at small cost, I can produce vegetables all year round and earn a good income. It is easy to get water from shallow wells even in the dryer areas.

Traditional Afghan agriculture is very seasonal. Farmers begin their agricultural activity in mid- to late-spring, continue it through the summer and end in early autumn; they remain largely inactive during the long Afghan winter. Furthermore, the high start-up costs for cold storage to boost farmer incomes are not feasible for the average small to medium-scale farmer in Afghanistan.

Sarab is a hard to reach and vulnerable village in Yumgan district in Badakhshan Province, not well connected with local markets and social services and facilities. There are about 270 households in this village and more than half of them are extremely poor. The villagers are also subject to recurrent shocks and crises including flash floods, avalanches, and droughts. Mohammad Sharif is a tenant farmer living in Sarab village with an eighteen-member joint household. He owns a small plot of land of about 2,000 square metres and cultivates another 2,000 square metres of land as sharecropping. He supplements his income by occasional daily wage labour. He and one of his brothers are the only earning members of the family. Sharif and his brother have tried very hard to meet their household food requirements, but due to poor wheat production (below 350 kg) and low income, they were often unable to feed their household members satisfactorily.

They mostly ate the same kind of food every day, namely bread, shurba or tea and sometimes small quantities of peas. Half of what they produce needed to be paid to the landowner and what was left was never enough to meet their food needs and often got consumed before the winter. The winter is known as the ‘hunger period’ here and everybody is scared to face three to four months of winter in rural Afghanistan. In winter no agricultural production is possible due to the heavy snowfall. A small amount of seeds are kept for next season’s farming.

According to Sharif, “every winter he and his brother would have to take loans from neighbours or relatives at high interest rates which ultimately burdened them even more by having to pay off the loans after the spring and summer harvests.”

Opportunity first knocked on Sharif’s door in 2012 when the village of Sarab started up activities in a Mission East project funded by the FAO. The CDC nominated Sharif for selection as a project beneficiary and after review, on account of his household’s poor economic situation, he was endorsed as a greenhouse project beneficiary.

Sharif was initially not happy to be selected as a greenhouse beneficiary because he did not believe that vegetables could be grown in greenhouses during the harsh Afghan winters.

Impressed by the training, Mohammad Sharif expressed an interest in establishing a low cost greenhouse on his land. With the technical help of Mission East staff, he and his brother together constructed a low cost greenhouse, 6X3 m in size and made from used wooden beams and plastic sheets rather than used steel beams such as used in the demonstration. The total cost of 2,700 Afs (40 Euros).

Mission East facilitated several trainings in the village for targeted greenhouse beneficiaries, including Mohammad Sharif. The two-day training consisted of both theoretical classes and practical demonstrations including land preparation, the importance, types and characteristics of vegetable production in greenhouses, construction and maintenance of low cost greenhouses, harvesting the crops and marketing. During the training Mission East worked with the community to establish six demonstration greenhouses in this village, each of which cost 2,700 Afs (40 Euros).

Mr. Sharif’s children collected vegetables from the greenhouse after three months.

Photo: Mr Ahmad Khan, Mission East Agricultural Monitor.

A vegetable farmer at work in his greenhouse.

Photo: Mir Ahmad Khan, Mission East Agricultural Monitor.
this greenhouse came to only 1,100 Afs (about 16 Euro).

Mission East provided Sharif with four types of vegetable seeds: onion, coriander, pepper and watercress. He also received some gardening tools, a shovel, a machete and a watering-can. According to the training received, Sharif prepared the land and planted all the seeds in the greenhouse in early November 2012. More than 90% of the seeds planted, germinated and with daily care, the brothers were able to do a first partial harvest in early January 2013, harvesting about 3 kg of coriander and 5 kg of watercress. By March 2013 during the entire winter period they had harvested about 25 kg of onion, 10 kg of green chili pepper, 10 kg of watercress and 5 kg of coriander in total from the greenhouse. Most of the vegetables harvested were used for the family’s consumption, which helped to improve their dietary diversity and to meet their daily nutrition requirements.

Sharif was happy to be better able to address his household’s food needs in the winter and also, to distribute vegetables among some of his relatives and neighbours. He preserved some seeds from the harvested vegetables for next winter’s planting. He plans to construct more greenhouses and to sell some of the excess produce in local markets next winter to generate extra income.

Now Mohammad Sharif is confident and able to share his success with other farmers in Sarab village. He is also keen for Mission East to introduce new greenhouse technologies in the village such as by using green energy sources like compost or ‘passive solar’ processes that store heat for later use to allow the greenhouses to be heated artificially. “At least 20 households have already received the same benefits as me and more than 50 households are ready to establish greenhouses next winter. We hope there will no longer be a food gap in winter in this village” say Sharif and his brother.

Greenhouse promotion is a good example of how rural households in Afghanistan can be effectively supported to sustainably improve their diets and nutritional status and to supplement their incomes.

The training
Mission East’s 2-day long training sessions consisted of both theoretical classes and practical demonstrations. The session included training on:

- The process of land preparation
- The importance, types and characteristics of vegetable production in greenhouses
- Construction and maintenance of low cost greenhouses
- Harvesting and marketing training.

Mission East established 6 demo greenhouses in Sarab village, each of which cost 2,700 Afs.

Sharif’s low cost greenhouse
- The greenhouse build by Sharif and his brother was 6 x 3 metres in size and made from used wooden beams and white plastic sheets.
- The total cost of this greenhouse came to only 1,100 Afs.
- They started planting in early November 2012 and started harvesting in January 2013.
- After four months of cultivation the two brothers had harvested 25 kg of onion, 10 kg of pepper, 10 kg of watercress and 5 kg of coriander in total from the greenhouse.

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Mission East is a Danish international relief and development organisation, working in Eastern Europe and Asia. Our aim is to deliver relief aid, to create and support long-term development projects and to empower local aid organisations to carry on the work independently. Making no racial, religious or political distinction between those in need, we aim to assist the most vulnerable.