

Mid-Term-Evaluation of the project Natural Resource Management and Promotion of Sustainable Agrarian Livelihoods (Northern Afghanistan)



Photo 1: Route between Aybak and Mazar. Photo by Jawad Hamdard

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Summary

1. Brief description of the project and framework conditions

1.1. Project objective

The objective of the project is to improve the livelihoods of 75 rural communities through effective resource management and the creation of sustainable livelihoods.

Main instruments for the achievement of the objective are: 1) the promotion of resourceconserving agriculture, 2) the construction and rehabilitation of preventive measures as well as the introduction of resource-conserving techniques at household level, 3) the establishment of an effective resource management system through the development of capacities in institutions and administrative structures at local and provincial level, as well as 4) the establishment of different forums for regular exchange and the establishment of a coordination mechanism for the sustainable networking of all stakeholders.

Through the project, the self-sufficiency basis will be expanded, but the opportunity will also be created to generate income through the sale of agricultural and agro-forestry products, which leads to an improvement in the economic situation of households in the project regions. Households and communities are facilitated to gradually make their own contributions to the effective and diversified security of their natural livelihoods.

1.2. Evaluation objectives

The goal of the evaluation is to assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of the project. The previous based on the outputs and expected results outlined in the Terms of Reference of the present evaluation (See Annex 1: Welthungerhilfe on February 18, 2018).

The evaluation aimed:

1. To analyse the design of the project; and evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the project implementation by WHH and partners (PIN & CHA) within the agreed contractual conditions, time-frame, work-plan, log frame, and budget.
2. To analyse the level of coordination and cooperation between WHH, and its partners (CHA & PIN) and find out the gaps, shortcoming, weaknesses and strength points.
3. To analyze that how the intervention improved natural resource management, livelihood & food security of target groups in the targeted area so far.
4. To identify and record lesson learned, best practices, strengths and provide recommendations for improvement.

1.3. Project Framework Conditions

At the inception of the project, stated core problems in the 4 selected agricultural project districts were framed as following: damage of natural resources, low agricultural productivity, and lastly low capacities of the communities linked with lack of support by the government.

The project was implemented in the areas were the water and soil resources were being overutilised. Being semi-arid districts, agriculture was predominantly rain-fed here, crop-rotation not practiced and the varieties cultivated were mostly only low-yield varieties. Additionally, lack of water

retention capacity of the soils by the local communities, would often lead to low agricultural yields and in some years to total harvest failures. Additionally, as the evaluation observed it too, dry periods are being recorded.

Also, when due to war and poverty, traditional organisation and management structures are disintegrated, and when CDCs established in 2003 are still weak and lack resources, the project had to work on strengthening low capacities of the communities and on increasing the government support.

And lastly, selected region of Samangan is a place where international migration reaches 70%¹. Degradation of existing pasture land, is one of the reasons forcing households to look for income possibilities outside of agricultural production and outside their region or country.

2. Relevance

Among the multiple and dynamic problem affecting the Samangan Region, including deforestation, improper management of natural resources, low income, disaster risk, the on-going drought and the lack of infrastructure to provide irrigation relates strongly with what the target groups of the project identified as their main problem: Difficulties for cultivation on rain-fed lands. Given the relevance of this problem, the evaluated participants found the project highly relevant as it taught them how to cultivate rain-fed land with methods that are beyond the traditional ones. While previously the land-productivity was only the privilege of those having access to water, irrigation systems, training and inputs received through the project helped farmers to have equal opportunities for increasing harvests. The relevance of the project to core problems of the target group is also attested by the answers collected with the evaluation survey, according to which 92% of the farmers believe the project was beneficial to them.

Through the interviews with the representative from the project partner organization, the evaluation found that the project was also in line with the objectives of all three implementing organizations, WHH, PIN and CHA, as they work on the issues of sustainable food and nutrition security, on restoring and maintaining natural resources, as well as on establishing alternative livelihoods, agriculture and livestock development.

The evaluation also proved the project being relevant to the partner country, as many of the officials report that the Afghan provincial government has reduced capacity to invest in agriculture development, and constantly has to prioritize eradicating violent conflicts before any other policy.

3. Effectiveness

By the given evaluation, the project adequately achieved its Result 1 related to developing local centers (Farmer Field Schools), establishing demonstration facilities, and providing theoretical training courses about careful agricultural use and agro forestry. The objective 2 has been partially achieved, having to implement remaining activities related to introducing resourceconserving methods at household levels. The project has also adequately achieved its objective 3 and 4 but there are targets remaining to be achieved in the remaining project period.

Result 1: The mid-term evaluation found that that the project has fully completed many activities related to the Result 1. Nonetheless, the project still has to complete around 35% of Agriculture Days. There is also around 40% of the project outputs remaining to be delivered as “conditional additional support” to farmers (Activity 1.5.) in CHA targeted districts. Despite almost reaching its

targets with respect to training provision, some of the monitoring documents suggest that farmers are complaining of the lack of trainings or the trainings being only theoretical with less practical components.

All in all, the farmers reported having increased knowledge of and utilization of careful agricultural use and agro forestry. According to the evaluation survey, 80% of the participants record learning “land preparation techniques”, 73% “improved seed re-organization”, 70% “crop rotation” and another 69% “improved seed organization”. When asked if they had applied gained knowledge on their own land, 100% of the survey participants said they had (Table 15).

A total of 74% of the farmers believe that their yields grew 20% or more (Figure 2). Despite the progress the evaluation also found that the farmers with rain-fed land are still having more problems in increasing their yields than those who have irrigated lands.

As of the use of improved seeds and fertilizers, 90% of survey participants responded positively (N=184), but despite such indication that improved seeds are majorly in use, the monitoring documents, the interviews and field work observations showed that some seeds distributed through the projects have been past due date or had low performance due to poor quality.

Result2: The mid-term evaluation found that the project has achieved 100% of its goals with respect to majority of its Result 2 activities, such as with respect to establishing orchards and nurseries and conducting NRM trainings. The project has fully achieved its targets of establishing a total of 6 nurseries in 4 districts, and exceeded its goals by establishing and supporting 27 orchards in total. The field visits recorded different progress levels at different orchards, nearness waters has benefitted to some of them, while others did not have the same water provision. Additionally, some of the orchards now use new agriculture techniques, whilst others still don't. Also, establishment of nurseries and orchards are not yet seen to be successful too, by the local farmers, as much as they haven't seen yields there yet.

The mid-term evaluation found that a selection of block grants demonstrated the use of soilconserving methods such as mulching, and irrigation techniques such as terracing and trenches. Also, the planting of almond and pistachio trees for reforestation could be found there as well as the planting of weeds to increase the pasture land. 27% of the block grants remain to be distributed before the end of the project.

Lastly, the energy-efficient technologies were successfully installed by the project in different households. Only in the case of bio-gas technologies, some deemed them as inefficient due to them requiring water at the installation stage. Lastly, solar panels were installed only for a marginal number of households (4%) interviewed throughout the evaluation. Out of the recipients of the energy-efficient technologies surveyed during the evaluation, 98% of the respondents said they had decreased the use of firewood by 20% or more (see Figure 4). Respondents using new technologies mentioned that they had reduced the expenses with especially the cooking stoves which are successfully being used by its recipients. Despite all, cooking stoves were deemed inefficient by some households due to its requirement of (high cost) fuel. Additionally, despite the risk of cutting bushes for firewood, people still continue these practices.

Result3: The structural anchoring goal of the Result 3 of the project was successful as much as there were 25 clusters established in which CRMC and NRMC members report to be organizing work meetings on monthly basis, other times, every two week or sooner, in cases of emergencies and requests from the communities and to keep track of the potential natural resource risks in their communities.

The evaluation found that the coordination meetings are efficient at connecting the communities to the government. Many members of the CRMC and NRMCM have said that they are now able to advocate for their problems and issues, and they will continue to do so in the future as well. They now have a platform and defined ways to convey this to government through their village heads. Additionally, the government has knowledge of the four year plans that village clusters have collected, but they are still in the process of formally registering the plans.

Furthermore, NRMCM/CRMCs have spearheaded the implementation of four-year plans created together with their communities. Amongst these were for example reforestation projects to decrease soil erosion and simultaneously improve the economic status of farmers. They were also involved in awareness raising activities, spreading knowledge about risks to natural resources and how to overcome them. According to the members they represented the voices of target communities. As a result, people are now more aware about the value of reforestation in for example preventing floods and/or landslides.

Key informants spoke of insecurities coming from the lack of government support though, or of the “powerful groups” and “bullies” limiting the capacities of the CRMCs.

As of the success of establishing the Community Resource Persons, the evaluation showed that many of the CRPs could not be maintained in the project as the position was requiring voluntary contribution of time and labor which the participants became unwilling to provide after some period of time.

Result 4: 36% of the coordination meetings with the government representatives at provincial level is remaining to be conducted, while 56% of the meetings are remaining to be conducted on district level. To date 2 out of 3 annual project consultation workshops have been organized.

The evaluation participants, CRMC/NRMCM as well government representatives acknowledge that coordination meetings are efficient at connecting the communities to the government. But it has been mentioned during interviews with the partner organizations that the government officials often sends less qualified and less authorized staff to the coordination meetings, which hinders the cooperation process.

196 government officials have attended training sessions throughout the project. Until the project end around 50% still need to be conducted. Through interviews government officials mentioned that their capacity was increased.

4. Efficiency

The evaluation team has created an overview of the budget expenditure based on the last reporting season and the documents submitted in July, 2018. As of July 2018 42% of the total budget (€3.340.168) is remaining to be executed. Areas with particularly high remaining budgets (more than 30%) have been identified as following:

- Development of the demo plots
- Additional, conditioned support for FFS members (plus 10% own contribution of target group)
- Promotion of energy-efficient technologies
- Community projects in resources protection
- Production of information, training and communication material
- Security measures
- Training and workshops (target group)
- Ongoing costs project offices
- Ongoing costs project vehicles
- Personnel

Given the careful use of budget but the contrasting high achievement of project goals it can be said that resources have been used efficiently.

5. Outcomes and impacts

The evaluation found that (according to the assessment of the CRMC/NRMC members, as well as the project partner organizations), the project is small, both in terms of geographic coverage and time-line, to bring significant changes in Samangan within the project implementation period.

Additionally, informants from one of the partner organization mentioned that it is hard to see the project goal achievement due to the scale of the problem, which requires long terms intervention at the provincial level, and structural changes (policies, regulations, governance) at the national level.

Despite all, it is also believed that the project is managing to motivate and inspire many people who are not directly involved in the project, that way achieving to impact other communities.

The project was received with openness in local communities, and the locals were receptive to the social and cultural impact that learning the new agriculture techniques bring. They also admit having banished different international development projects in the past due to religious differences with the project organizers, but they denied implementation of these actions for the current project.

The establishment of local administrative bodies helped communities to be more organized than in the past, and to address local issues in a democratic way with the help of the new deliberation spaces. Created committees have facilitated talks on political issues, one example being emergence of a dialogue between the “bullying people” and the government.

Talking about the long-term environmental outcomes, project participants believe the project increased “the sense of appreciation for national interests and the protection of public property; People are now conscious of the importance and value of natural resources” (Group interview 6 in Qzelbash, Dare Suf Bala with 10 CRMC and NRMC members on August 14, 2018). The members of CRMC and NRMC from different regions also spoke about increased awareness, improved knowledge and capacities in natural resource management

6. Sustainability

Project participants believe, that key to sustainability is prolonging the project so that beneficiaries witness the impact of the project and stay motivated to commit. For example, the sustainability and impact of the project will highly be affected with the amounts of harvests received in demonstration areas, orchards and nurseries by the beginning of 2019.

Additionally, the work done for increasing the ownership and participation from the side of the farmers won't be enough for project sustainability, unless stronger organization and support is ensured from the side of the government and other major stakeholders, such as the partner organizations.

7. Most important Recommendations

Project design

- The evaluation found that the project design would improve if it had a graphical results chain, which would allow a concise visualization of the information about the inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes by each project partner.

- Based on the fact that it is different organizations implementing the project, the project design can also be improved by avoiding inconsistencies if it develops a single and consensual mechanism among the project partners for monitoring the finances.

Project implementation and results

- The evaluation found the necessity for the project to focus its efforts on farmers with rainfed agriculture lands more within the remaining project period, than on farmers with irrigated land.
- The evaluation also recommends to increase the practical aspects of trainings for its future participants within the frames of Agriculture Days, and to provide more trainings in marketing agriculture goods.
- The evaluation recommends to review the use of various seeds that are distributed within the project as the crop failures could be related to the poor quality of some seeds distributed among the farmers.
- The evaluation also recommends to revise EE technologies to minimize concerns related to inadequate fuel expense or water necessities upon installation.
- Considering that the amount of block grants was capped, the evaluation found that to raise the amount of the of each block grant would improve impacts of the given activity. The evaluation also found that some farmers request the replacement of the 10% monetary contributions with in-kind contributions by own labor.

8. General Conclusions and Lessons Learned

Farmers in the target region register higher and more diversified agricultural yields through application of resource-conserving methods. A total of 74% of participants in the FFS believe that their yield have grown 20% or more. Nonetheless, the project achievements are still being challenged by different problems. Samangan province is facing a long-lasting drought. Additionally, the high unemployment rates in the region pose severe economic stress to the population of Samangan, while different power holding groups also interfere in the village, unlawfully seize natural resource.

Yet, the trainings on resource conservation and management is recognized to be improving economic outcomes of the beneficiaries. The project has also improved the livelihoods, natural resource protection and economic situation of households through provisioning of agricultural inputs and execution of community projects.

The project has fully achieved its targets of establishing a total of 6 nurseries in 4 districts, and exceeded its targets by establishing and supporting 27 orchards in total. Nonetheless establishment of nurseries and orchards are not yet seen as successful by the local population, as much as they haven't seen yields there. Despite that, business plans for orchards and nurseries are created and there were precedents of nurseries selling some saplings too. The evaluation also found that mostly it was the CRMCs that took the responsibility for operating the block grants whilst the farmers have requested to replace the 10% monetary contributions requirement with in-kind contributions by own labor.

The evaluation also found that the local administrative structures such as CRMC and NRMC were efficient creations of the project, achieving to connect the communities to the government. CRMC and NRMC are now a platform to communicate to government through village heads. Additionally, the government has knowledge of the four year plans that village clusters have collected, but they are still in the process of formally registering the plans.