



AFGHANISTAN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2011

Case Study

Water and Conflict in Ali Abad, Kundoz

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of CPHD.

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The views expressed in the papers are the sole responsibility of CPAU and the authors and are not necessarily held by Center for Policy and Human Development and or Kabul University.

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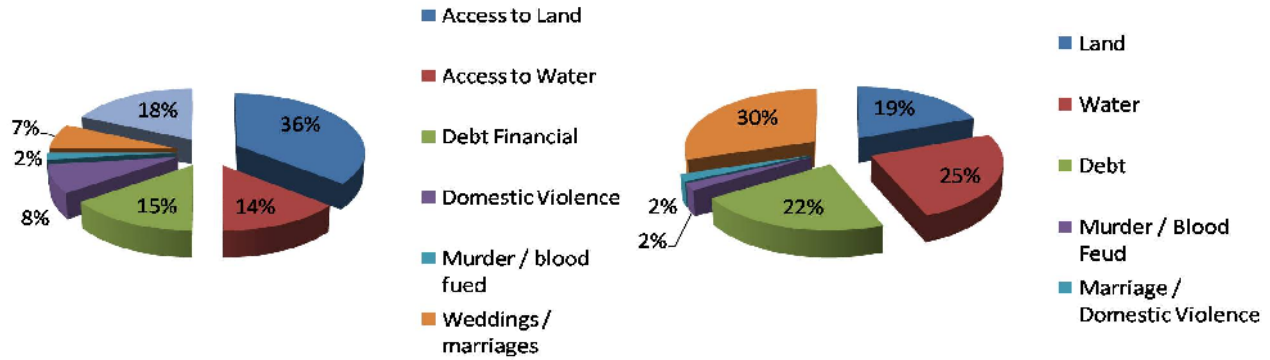
Water and Conflict

“Water is a trigger for conflict, but a reason for fostering peace” (Starr, 1991, p. 227)

Water is a basic human right and necessity; water scarcity can also be a potential source of conflict. Scarcity often means that there is increased competition for resources with increased economic value. Competition can potentially lead to conflict among countries and within countries especially when it faces the upstream downstream dilemma¹. Water as a source of conflict is becoming an increasingly common reality; there is conflict over water in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories², China and Tibet, Ethiopia and Kenya and many more³. At a regional level there is potential for conflict over water between the Central Asian countries⁴, there is potential for conflict between Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbors over the Amu Darya and there is potential for conflict between Afghanistan and Iran⁵.

In Afghanistan agriculture and livestock are the primary livelihood strategies among a majority of Afghans and water is a key resource in these livelihood strategies. Decades of war and destruction has had a devastating effect on the irrigation and water supply infrastructure in the country⁶. According to the NRVA among male shuras the rehabilitation of irrigation systems is seen as the primary development need of the country followed by improved access to safe drinking water⁷. Among the female shuras the primary development need of the country was also identified as improved access to drinking water⁸.

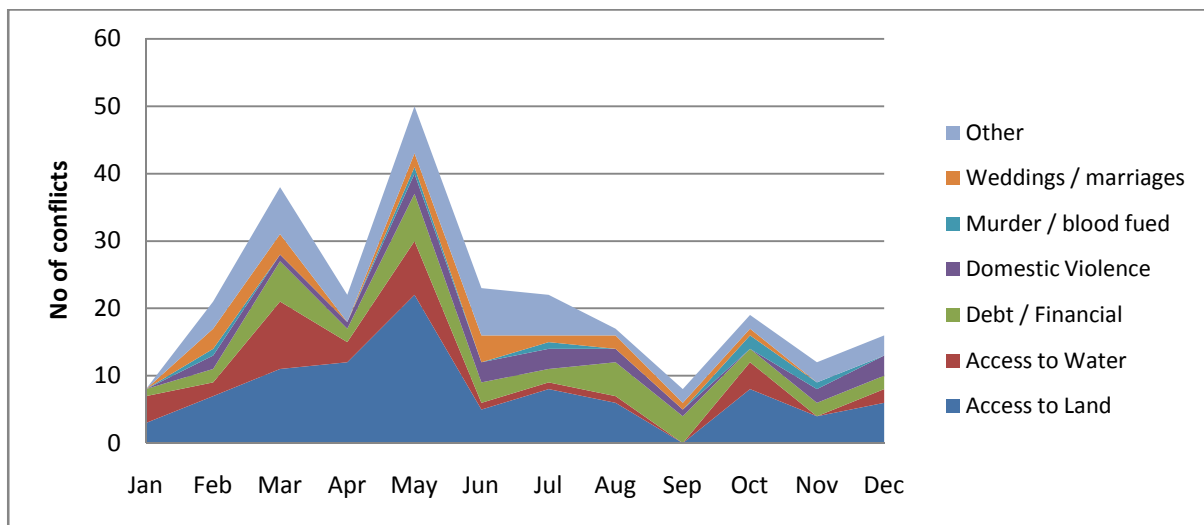
Afghanistan is facing a scarcity in its access to water⁹; this combined with the importance of water for local Afghans, makes it a source of local conflict. According to the conflict monitoring conducted by Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU), 14% of the local conflict is over access to water¹⁰. It also shows that 8% of the conflicts within and between families are over water and 25% of the communal conflict is over water¹¹.



Conflicts by cause

Communal conflicts by cause Source: (Dennys & Zaman, 2009)

Conflict over water, like most local conflicts, are largely driven by the seasonal cycle and peaks in March and May, with smaller spikes in January and October. The March to May period coincides with the period of highest water levels and the highest water related conflict levels. During this period a significant amount of time is needed for repairing and maintaining water systems¹², thus labor needs must be coordinated and fairly distributed among the various communities. The March to May period is also a planting season which requires additional irrigation; the October spike is also related to additional irrigation required at planting for winter crops.



Causes of conflicts by month 2005-8

Source: (Dennys & Zaman, 2009)

Water Management in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan 40% of the population has access to irrigated land¹³ as opposed to 12% who have access to rain fed land. Thus the majority of the population engaged in agricultural activities do so, on irrigated land¹. Afghanistan has a long history of irrigation and water management, some irrigation and/or water management infrastructures have been around for hundreds of years¹⁴. These irrigation systems however can be highly complex and have a variety of factors and issues that require management. The distribution of water must be effectively organized, water rights and enforcement of these rights must be managed, arising disputes resolved, and the cleaning and maintenance of the irrigation system must be organized¹⁵.

The nature of the irrigation system combined with the general regard towards surface water as a common property¹⁶, and the tradition among the communities of viewing the selves as “*fundamentally autonomous in matters of water management*”¹⁷, has required the development of a community based social water management system. The Mirab^{II} system is the response among Afghan communities to the need for a social water management system. The structure of the Mirab system varies by region but there are some commonalities among all of them¹⁸:

- A Mirab is usually an individual appointed among the landowners by the landowners.
- They are usually elected in Shura gatherings
- They live in the area they manage
- They are usually from the tail end villages
- They are usually paid by the landowners in their management area

A part of the argument for the Mirab system is that it is a community based system and that the Mirabs are rooted in the communities they serve (Roe, 2008). They have knowledge about local water rights and they have the capacity to enforce these rights with the social pressures they command. Most importantly they can be and are held accountable to the people they serve.

“Enforcement is based on a symbiotic relationship between water-master and water users, with the real power lying with the ‘electoral college’ of water user stakeholders”. (Lee, 2007, p. 43)

¹ This is also the case in the field case sites (Field Trip, Interviews and Focus Groups, Ali Abad, Kunduz Feb 2010)

^{II} The word *Mir* can mean leader/lord/master and the word *ab* means water, thus the word Mirab means leader/lord/master of water

The changing Mirab System

All governance systems in Afghanistan have been affected by the social, political and economic impact of the conflicts over the last 30 years. Specifically for water management systems there have been changes in those who have taken power as the Mirab, the quality of management and ability to maintain well functioning irrigation systems has degraded, and for more complex irrigations systems that

were run by government officials local communities have often taken control¹⁹. Thus you find cases where Mirabs are obtaining and maintaining their position via political, economic and intimidation channels²⁰. The Mirab system is becoming increasingly vulnerable to corruption; there is evidence of developing procedures of “*bribes for water*”²¹. In the case study area the function of the Mirab system as a community based social water management system is undermined by the lack of support it receives from all the various communities. Thus in the case study area the local community based nature of the Mirab system is its own weakness; without the support of the government, the Mirab has no real capacity to enforce any decisions.

The usage of wells and the canal

“In the past the canal served as a source of drinking water, the people were therefore more careful with keeping the water clean. Since the increased usage of wells for drinking water the canal has been filled with garbage, resulting in a decrease in the quality of water and causing blockages” Engineer Zabi U-llah

The behavioural change during wartime is an important factor in the degradation of the Mirab system. The behavioural changes destroyed societal norms and institutions, war led to the breakdown of traditional mechanisms of resource allocation and enabled individuals and groups to seize resources in antagonistic ways²². New legal systems need to be based upon traditional institutions²³. They also need to restore and strengthen these traditional institutions, for the restoration of peace and conflict prevention at the local level in Afghanistan²⁴.

Ali Abad Case Study

The Ali Abad Canal is located in Ali Abad which is located south of Kunduz city. The canal is about 26 kilometers long with a width of about 4 meters; it brings irrigation water to about 12,500 jeribs of land and was constructed during the reign of Zahir Shah²⁵. According to the local respondents this canal has historically not been a source of conflict until 2001 due to the breakdown of the Taliban rule and the installation of the Karzai government²⁶.

Today the Ali Abad canal is a source of seasonal water conflict between the upstream and downstream communities. This area is heterogeneous and inhabited by Pashtuns, Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Aimaqs though according to the communities own accounts the conflict does not have an ethnic dimension, neither does it have a religious one²⁷. The conflict is essentially over the scarcity of water which occurs during planting season and thus its seasonal nature. According to the local respondents the scarcity of water is not a result of actual lack of water but rather a result of the breakdown of traditional rules and water management systems²⁸.

This is a complex situation and it has different effects on the upstream and downstream communities. The breakdown of traditional rules and water management systems has enabled farmers from the upstream communities to consume more water. Their over consumption of water has created social and political conflicts with the downstream communities over how to manage the water more fairly and who should manage it. The downstream communities are

facing a shortage of water which creates the same kind of social and political conflicts with their upstream neighbors. In addition the downstream communities are also facing economic hardship due to the water shortage and there is evidence of within community conflict over water²⁹.

The different experiences in the upstream and downstream communities have created different understandings of the roots of the water related problems. Among the upstream communities, the poor condition of the canal is seen as the primary cause of the water shortage faced by the downstream communities. This however is only identified as a primary cause by the upstream respondents while the downstream respondents see it as a secondary cause³⁰. The downstream communities see the cultivation of rice, the use of water mills, deep wells and the breakdown of the Mirab system as the primary cause of their water shortage.

The Breakdown of Traditional Rules

“It is our land we can grow whatever we want, if we do not grow rice we have to grow poppy” Abdul Nazer, Kokbashi
Upstream Ali Abad, Jan 2010

The cultivation of rice in upstream communities are a source of conflict because they consume a lot of water, in the past rice cultivation has been prohibited in upstream areas³¹. Along the Ali Abad canal the cultivation of rice in upstream communities was prohibited since the time of Zahir Shah. The primary agricultural product grown in the upstream communities prior to 2001 was cotton, melons and water melons; after 2001 this was replaced by the cultivation of rice. In the past the Mirab had the power and the capacity to fine farmers who grew rice in upstream communities, thus deterring the practice.

Along the upstream area of the Ali Abad canal there are 13 water mills used for processing wheat into flour. The water is diverted from the canal to the water mills and then back into the river. In the past the operation of the mills was managed by the Mirab in accordance with the needs of the farmers³². During times of high demand for water by the farmers the operation of the mills was limited by the Mirab; they were not all allowed to operate while farmers had higher demand for the water. Currently the Mirab does not have the capacity to limit the operation of the mills during times of high water demand. The mills are operating continually around the year. According to some respondents in the downstream communities the proper management of the mills could free up enough water to meet the needs of the downstream communities while still allowing upstream communities to grow rice³³.

The use of deep wells along the canal is also seen as a cause of the water shortage³⁴. The wells have been around since the time of Zahir Shah, in the past

Qais Malian (downstream) village late 2009
A conflict over the water allocation (also known as the water turn) was created between two neighboring farmers who are related to each other. The conflict escalated into violence and resulted in the death of one of the famers, who was hit on the head with a shovel. The other farmer fled to Iran but a family blood feud was prevented by the community elders.

however the wells were only used during times when the farmers did not need water for irrigation. People using wells during irrigation seasons would get fined by the Mirab and the wells could be temporarily blocked. At the present time there are no such control mechanisms in place.

The Breakdown of Traditional Management System

“The canal is not new and the issues over the canal have been here for decades but due to strict government measures and cooperation from farmers there were never any problems and conflicts such as these” Sayed Ali, a 75 year old farmer in Nasir Village, Downstream Ali Abad

The Mirab system had been a well functioning water management system in the past, from the time of Zahir Shah until the fall of the Taliban³⁵. There are two reasons identified by the local inhabitants as to why it functioned well: firstly the Mirabs of that time were seen as virtuous men, and secondly in the past the Mirab had enforcement capacity.

The enforcement capacity of the Mirab along the Ali Abad canal was never really community based; it has usually been outside forces providing this capacity. During the time of Zahir Shah until the fall of the Najibullah regime, the Mirab had the full support of the government. This meant a close relationship between the Mirab and the police which enabled the Mirab to enforce his decisions. During this time the Mirab could credibly threaten farmers with fines as a means of deterring deviations from the law³⁶. During the Rabbani regime, mutual fear between the upstream and downstream communities further served as the basis for the enforcement capacity of the Mirab. According to a local respondent, during this time everyone had access to weapons and there was a fear of potential conflict over water due to the high costs such a conflict could incur in such a volatile environment³⁷. Thus this fear of a bloody conflict over water issues enabled the Mirab to enforce his rule. During the Taliban era a combination of the two above mentioned reasons, government support and fear of violent conflict, served as the basis of the enforcement capacity of the Mirab.

Currently the Mirab does not enjoy such support from the government in practice and the same degree of fear of a bloody conflict does not exist³⁸. This has resulted in a scenario where the farmers do not take the Mirab seriously, and there is nothing the Mirab can do to change their minds. Thus a situation of resource competition has arisen along the Ali Abad canal filling the void left after the breakdown of the traditional Mirab system.

The Fragile Nature of the Situation

This conflict over water has not yet resulted in violence among different communities^{III} but there are signs of escalation. Following the drought years, in 2008 there was an escalation in the conflict over the management of the canal. Traditionally the Mirab has always been elected from the downstream communities by landlords from both the upstream and downstream communities. This time around the upstream community did not accept the Mirab from the downstream community and elected their own Mirab from the upstream community. The downstream community did not accept the Mirab from the upstream community and elected their own Mirab. The upstream Mirab was a former commander by the name of Mahmood Usman and the downstream Mirab was also a former commander by the name of Abdul Hamid Rahjab.

Mohammad Amin, a farmer from Angoor Bagh a downstream village

10 years ago he used to cultivate watermelons on his entry property about 10 jeribs of land; he was very happy and made a good income out of it. 8 years back the amount of water available shrunk and he could only cultivate watermelons on 5 jeribs of his land. Last year the amount of water was reduced further and he could only cultivate on 3 jeribs of land, producing only enough to meet his own household consumption needs.

The local elders tried to resolve this dispute by attempting to hold common elections, but the commanders created an issue of where this election should have taken place³⁹. The upstream Mirab did not allow elections to be held in the downstream area arguing that this would unfairly favor the downstream commander, while the downstream did not allow the elections to be held in the upstream area for the same reason. The dispute was temporarily resolved by the local government department by recognizing Abdul Hamid Rahjab as the Mirab and Mahmud Usman as the assistant Mirab. Evidence indicates that the commanders have manipulated the situation for personal gain. For example, when Abdul Hamid Rahjab was recognized as the Mirab, he used his position to improve his own situation; his lands were green and had plenty of water while neighboring lands were almost dried out⁴⁰.

^{III} The only evidence of violence related to water found, was the killing of a farmer in Qais Malian village.

This unstable situation almost escalated into a violent conflict. By the end of October a mob of farmers from the downstream communities had armed themselves with knives and shovels and were planning to attack the upstream communities. This potentially bloody conflict was diverted by local elders, who intervened and prevented the mob from going up to the upstream communities. The local elders were also forced to solve the conflict over the Mirab position. In early December 2009 a traditional jirga was held between elders from both upstream and downstream communities, which produced an agreement over new procedures of electing a Mirab.

According to the new procedures the new Mirab is elected by either the downstream or upstream communities and he has to be from the opposite community (Focus Group, Ali Abad Jan 2010). The newly elected Mirab, Commander Gulam Sadig is from the upstream communities and was elected by the downstream communities.

Conclusion

Water is a basic human necessity and it is a key resource in most forms of livelihood strategies especially in Afghanistan. The scarcity of water and the competition created as a result can naturally lead to conflict and violence. There continue to be conflicts over water between states internationally, between countries regionally, between communities within a country and between and within families. The scarcity of water is without doubt a source of conflict. The social conflict in Ali Abad is potentially violent. The conflict is a consequence of the devastating effects of three decades of war in the country. The wars have destroyed the water infrastructure which has had a negative effect on the ability of the people to access water. The wars have also caused behavioural changes which have destroyed societal norms and institutions; the Mirab system in Ali Abad is an example of such societal norms and institutions which have been destroyed.

The traditional water management systems and control mechanisms have been unmade without any real replacements. This has resulted in a scenario of disarray and an inefficient water management system. This disintegration of the management systems has enabled the breakdown of traditional rules such as not being allowed to grow rice in upstream areas. The combination of these factors have created a man made water shortage for the inhabitants of the downstream area of the Ali Abad canal. The key source for this breakdown is the undermining of the capacity of the Mirab to enforce the rule of law. Thus the restoration of the management system hinges upon empowerment of the Mirab. The restoration of the management system is vital for the restoration of the traditional rules. It is also the first and most important step towards unmaking this man made water shortage and therein preventing future escalation of conflict based on water scarcity.

The conflict situation along the Ali Abad canal has been made possible due to the breakdown of traditional management systems, which has caused the water shortage. It has also been prevented from becoming a violent conflict situation by other traditional management systems still in place. These structures should be approached and involved in the attempts of restoring the Mirab system.

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End Notes

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- ¹ (Ohlsson, 1999)
 - ² (Amnesty International, 2009)
 - ³ (Gleick, 2008)
 - ⁴ (Abdullaev, Manthrithilake, & Kazbekov, 2006)
 - ⁵ (Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, 2008)
 - ⁶ (Jackson, 2009)
 - ⁷ (NRVA, 2007/08)
 - ⁸ Ibid
 - ⁹ (Swanström & Cornell, 2005)
 - ¹⁰ (Dennys & Zaman, 2009)
 - ¹¹ Ibid
 - ¹² Ibid
 - ¹³ (NRVA, 2007/08)
 - ¹⁴ (Roe, 2008)

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- 15 Ibid
- 16 Ibid
- 17 (Lee, 2007, p. 30)
- 18 (Lee, 2007; Roe, 2008)
- 19 (Roe, 2008)
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- 21 (Vincent & Mujeeb, 2009, p. 50)
- 22 (Swanström & Cornell, 2005)
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- 40 (Focus Group, Ali Abad Jan 2010)