

Research project: Potentials and limitations for natural resource management in mountainous communities in Afghanistan

Author: Xenia Kirchhofer, Programme Manager, SDC, Afghanistan
(xenia.kirchhofer@eda.admin.ch)



In a remote rural district in North Eastern Afghanistan, SDC is funding a research project to better understand the socio-ecological systems in order to inform future context-sensitive natural resource management (NRM) strategies that contribute to more sustainable livelihoods.

Researchers from the University of Bern's Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) and the Bern University of Applied Sciences' School of Agricultural, Forest & Food Sciences (HAFL) conduct the study with the support of national researchers and surveyors.

Working in Afghanistan is never easy, and the research project has faced its share of challenges since its inception in May 2015. While closed borders and cancelled flights made access difficult from the beginning, the deteriorating security situation in the North East in fall 2015 required the researchers to postpone their field work, adapt their methodology and reduce the scope of the research. For security reasons, presence of Swiss researchers had to be limited, which required additional efforts in the capacity building and training of Afghan and Tajik researchers. The field work was greatly supported by SDC's project partner Terre des hommes, whose relationship with the local communities made a research project in this area possible.



In the mountainous regions of Rustaq district in Afghanistan's Takhar province, the conditions for rural communities are harsh. Local agriculture is based on livestock and mostly rain-fed crop production with wheat, chickpeas and oilseeds. Rapid population growth, degradation of natural resources, effects of climate change, physical inaccessibility and insecurity in surrounding provinces contribute to the poverty and vulnerability of the families in Rustaq. As a relatively remote and largely mountainous district, Rustaq has remained at the margins of government programs and international assistance.

In this context, Terre des hommes has been implementing the SDC-mandated "Livelihood Improvement Project Takhar". Since 2012, the project includes an NRM component in addition to the earlier rural economic development and women income generating activities. Different sustainable land management (SLM) techniques were introduced: agronomic (intercropping, contour lines), vegetative (trees, hedges), structural (terraces), and management-related (pasture rehabilitation). The initial challenge was to convince farmers to invest their limited resources into long-term interventions with uncertain outcomes. While at the beginning substantial support was necessary from the project side, spontaneous replication of some SLM practices (terracing, pasture management, nurseries) became visible after two years. NRM became the most dynamic project component and exceeded expectations.

While the research project is not an evaluation of the livelihood project, its objective is to better understand the potentials and limitations of various SLM techniques introduced by Terre des hommes, as well as the decision-making processes related to NRM at household and community level. The results of the study will eventually inform future SDC interventions and will be presented to NRM stakeholders at a national level in summer 2017.

