

ENGAGEMENT IN CONFLICT CONTEXTS COPING STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING LIVELIHOODS IN PAKISTAN

This brief shares experiences and draws some lessons from the continued engagement of SDC's Livelihoods Programme (LP) in the sensitive security context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (KPK), north-western Pakistan.

Remaining Engaged in Difficult Times

Pakistan's economic decline and increasing levels of insecurity gained momentum in 2008 and continued until today. Militancy represents a serious challenge to the Federal Government in large areas. The political leadership seems weak-willed to tackle terrorism, while security forces have been stretched to their limits in order to respond and recover some measure of control. The entire region – especially in the north-west – has experienced extremism and armed conflict over the past years, while most major cities have witnessed bombings, kidnappings, targeted killings and other forms of violence.

The Livelihoods Programme (LP) is SDC's flagship programme in Pakistan, which builds on successful experiences in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (KPK) over the last few decades.

The project, which has been running since January 2008 with a total budget of circa CHF 11 million, is being implemented by the Swiss NGO Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation (HSI), in active partnership with the provincial and district governments. During the first four years, the LP was implemented in 6 out of 25 districts of KPK, covering half of the province's territory and 20% of the population. Within these districts, the programme focused on 12 valleys with almost 1 million inhabitants; it extended its activities to over 200 villages corresponding to almost 30,000 direct beneficiaries.



The LP supported more equitable access to public and private services and opportunities. It focused on economic activities and improved market access in poverty pockets of six districts of KPK.

Such dramatic developments have had important consequences on SDC's Livelihoods Programme (LP), as many initiatives were being implemented in areas that witnessed increasing violence and insecurity. In particular, Swat and Buner districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (KPK)¹ were over-run by armed militants and military operations were launched against these groups. For SDC, the challenge was to decide whether to suspend work temporarily or remain engaged by strengthening context-sensitive measures in order to continue operations. The latter option was chosen.

1 Formerly known as "North West Frontier Province" (NWFP).

Changing Needs in a Sensitive Environment

With 180 million people, Pakistan has the 6th biggest population in the world and covers a territory almost 20 times the size of Switzerland. With over six millennia of history and tradition, it is a land of diverse geographical features – from arid deserts to towering mountains and deep glaciers – as well as socio-cultural environments – from women pilots to extreme gender segregation. Such a plurality requires context-specific approaches to development cooperation. Far-flung rural areas are often isolated from the rest of the country due to lack of infrastructure and communications; this leaves them sidelined in development assistance programmes. The marginalization of certain areas from mainstream Pakistan, combined with the lack of economic opportunities, often fosters disillusionment and conservatism, which in turn provide a breeding ground for extremism. It is such remote and deprived communities which are targeted by SDC's programmes.



From its inception, the LP integrated conflict sensitivity into Project Cycle Management, based on the assumption that inequalities (as well as lack of participation in decision making processes) largely contribute to conflicts and conservatism in local communities. Over time, more formal approaches were introduced to mitigate conflicts in project areas. In particular, the implementation of a “Human Rights Based Approach” (HRBA), and more importantly, “Conflict Sensitive Programme Management” (CSPM), proved instrumental. These approaches not only allowed SDC to continue working in sensitive areas; in the process, they also contributed to identifying vulnerable people and poverty causes, and enhanced trust between communities, implementing partners, locally influential people and government authorities.

Flexible Approaches & Adjustments

To implement CSPM, various measures allowed continuity of the LP, even in the more volatile districts of Swat and Buner. Described below are some significant measures and instruments used to adapt the programme to a rapidly changing environment:

Human Rights Based Approach: Four Principles

1. Equality & non-discrimination

All social groups, men and women, constitute village institutions. Non-formal schools focus on girls to address gender disparities in education. Field teams and communities engage in gender segregated planning.

2. Participation & empowerment

Importance is given to ensuring participation of all key stakeholders (including communities and local governments) in planning, implementation and monitoring. Marginalised groups (such as women and small land-holders) are especially empowered.

3. Accountability & rule of law

Transparency in project-related decisions (in consultation with all stakeholders) enables accountability within and between communities, as well as between communities and government agencies. Moreover, the rationale for strengthening broad-based village organizations is to support them in establishing systems (e.g. record keeping) which support accountability within the organization as well.

4. Indivisibility & universality

Focus on a wide spectrum of rights while working with communities, e.g. the rights to water, food, a decent livelihood, education, etc.

Flexibility

A flexible approach, sometimes faster, sometimes slower than planned, was applied. It allowed adjustments to an ever-changing security situation. This meant, for example, that when work was hampered at times, it was intensified when the security conditions allowed. Similarly, when livestock training for rural women was not possible due to armed violence and insecurity, training was conducted in small groups within the villages, e.g. in the house of a respected person who would take responsibility for security. While the financial cost of the adaptation was little higher, the objectives were achieved. Similarly, savings from work which could not be carried out in some areas were later ploughed back into an “Early Recovery Programme” for LP communities impacted by security incidents.

Adapted monitoring arrangements

Monitoring became intense and continuous, rather than periodic. Updates on the security situation, progress made and context changes became much more regular between SDC, HSI and their local partners. This allowed all stakeholders to get a common understanding and avoid unnecessary risks.

Gender strategy

Contrary to a stereotype, women have an active role in livelihood activities in rural Pakistan. However, in the presence of militant groups restricting their mobility, participation and public presence, the



strategy for gender-focused work had to be adapted. For example, women were provided certain flexibility during working hours; they were asked to travel during daytime exclusively so as to encourage them to continue working on the project. Since usually only women can access rural women, active women mentors were recruited from within communities to maximize gender outreach.

Political impartiality and low profile

Most attacks generally target security agencies (including Pakistan's) or NATO forces. Understanding this co-relation helped reduce risks by avoiding contacts with such actors. Moreover, in areas where an external development actor was unwelcome, a low profile was maintained. This implied using smaller vehicles instead of four-wheel drives, removing project visibility items outside offices as well as other measures that helped "blending in" to reduce risks. Security guidelines and instructions (a range of different strategies rather than one single umbrella instruction) were developed and regularly updated based on the changing environment.

Do no harm

The "do no harm" principle implies working effectively in a conflict-sensitive manner which is conducive to conflict transformation, and eventually resolution. It ensures that assistance does not fuel the conflict, while developing alternative sys-

tems to address root causes (i.e. avoid strengthening "dividers" that fuel the conflict and support "connectors"). In the case of the LP, the "do no harm" principle was considered a minimum requirement to make sure that no side-effects of the project would, un-intentionally, exacerbate tensions, and therefore hinder development results. For this reason, the project worked on girls education (a connector) and was more cautious vis-à-vis direct interventions relating to women's participation (a possible divider if not handled appropriately).

Selection of local partners and staff

Choosing reliable local partners and local staff was pivotal in order to manage work in a highly sensitive environment. Indeed, locals have the best understanding of the situation on the ground, and they are generally very sensitive to local cultural considerations. This helped the programme avoid (or mitigate) conflict situations while remaining engaged despite security restrictions.

Inclusiveness and transparency

Local networks of friends or relatives, and discussions with a wide range of stakeholders at local level (e.g. the army, local government agencies, notables, etc.) provided more realistic insights and immediate security-related "intelligence", allowing the project activities to adapt quickly and appropriately to potential threats.

"CSPM saved lives"

The use of CSPM saved our lives and assets, and ensured the project continued in dangerous times. Unlike the LP, we had to close our USAID-funded Project. The flexibility provided by SDC and HSI to adjust work and make decisions locally according to the changing security situation was paramount in making quick, life-saving decisions. If there was danger in one area, we were immediately able to inform staff to stay home. During tense times, with the miscreants roaming the streets, the LP was one of the rare projects which was not damaged, robbed or threatened, unlike almost all other development offices. This could only happen because of the credibility of the LP, its partners, its donor and the continued dialogue with local actors – including the Taliban themselves. Lasoona (the local NGO partner of the LP in Swat) has roots in the area, and hence was accepted and supported by the locals.

Anwar Ul-Haq from the NGO Lasoona

Dividends of Continued Engagement

Today, most of the troubled project areas are clear of militant and extremist elements. In the time following military operations, SDC's decision to remain engaged (and the experiences and lessons learned from applying CSPM during project design and implementation) has delivered multiple benefits. SDC's (and its partners') image as a committed and reliable partner in difficult times has been enhanced. Having experienced militancy and military operations, project staff – as well as implementing partners and communities – is now better prepared to manage the challenges of tomorrow. For SDC's continued engagement in Pakistan, the need to capacitate staff and implementing partners as regards conflict-sensitivity and preparedness must become an integral part of operations and project management. Although NGOs and donors continue to be viewed sceptically in most conservative contexts, the support provided by SDC has allowed communities to differentiate between reliable partners (which understand and communicate adequately while working in a pro poor and sustainable way) and others. The LP also sensitized communities to the advantage of being organised to manage risks together, while expe-

riencing the benefits of a participatory, process-oriented development capitalizing on mutual trust and cooperation in an increasingly volatile environment.

Water in Belga village: villagers take charge

Villagers of Belga fetched drinking water from far below the village. Women often had accidents while carrying the water. But the villagers acted to change the situation. A feasibility study was conducted, roles and responsibilities were discussed, and costs were examined and agreed upon with the community. However, work had to be halted due to military operations, and it became impossible for the LP or any other service provider to support the timely completion of the scheme. As a result, the villagers decided to take charge. When LP staff returned after receiving security clearance, they found that Belga was already enjoying drinking water. The team realized that this happened because the community was empowered on all aspects related to the scheme. They were able to continue and complete the work for they only had to readjust and take over technical responsibilities for the project, which they did marvellously!

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References and links:

SDC Pakistan: www.sdcpakistan.org

SDC: www.sdc.admin.ch

HSI Pakistan: www.intercooperation.org.pk

About this publication:

Published by Swiss Agency for
Development and Cooperation SDC
South Asia Division
Freiburgstrasse 130, CH-3003 Bern

Sources for additional information:

www.intercooperation.org.pk

www.sdcpakistan.org

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