

Cash-for-Work in drought-stricken communities in Afghanistan

Background



In 2008, after an unusually cold and snowy winter, the spring rains failed across northern Afghanistan. Local farmers in the desert province of Jawzjan described the drought as the worst in 40 years. The modest snowmelt water that came down out of the mountains into the provincial irrigation network was quickly used up by upstream farms. Vulnerable villages lower down the canals received almost no water, and lost 90-100% of their wheat crop. Tearfund's food security assessment team found some farmers sawing off stunted heads of grain with a sharp knife to salvage what little they could from the disaster. Even drought-tolerant summer cash crops such as sesame and melon performed poorly.

Many poor families in Jawzjan also experienced severe livestock losses, due to the combination of harsh cold winter conditions and lack of fodder during the spring drought. As households tried to sell their starving animals, market prices for livestock dropped by up to 50%. At the same time, grain prices in local markets almost doubled (due to local shortages and soaring prices on global markets).

Meanwhile, the harvest failures led to a drop in provincial demand for labour; daily wages fell to 50-80% of the normal levels for that region. Many landless heads of household had to migrate to other provinces or countries in search of work opportunities.

The 2008 drought had a particularly devastating effect on farmers' assets. Because there had been abundant snowfall that winter, the farmers of Jawzjan had expected favourable spring weather conditions and invested heavily in cultivation. Some had sold their wives' jewellery or other assets to invest in what was expected to be a very good cropping season. With near-total crop failure, a growing proportion of these households had nothing to fall back on but sale of major productive assets, such as land and all their livestock. Many went deep into debt.

Tearfund's Disaster Management Team (DMT) was carrying out a food security project in Jawzjan, but the drought made many of the planned activities impossible in 2008. Instead, to meet the emergency "hunger gap" of the population and prevent further asset sales, Tearfund organized an emergency cash-for-work project in 18 villages at the tail end of the canal system.

Key questions for the project to be effective

Who will receive food assistance?

The donor provided enough budget to pay 1,200 people, of whom up to 300 could be non-workers (e.g. households without able-bodied labour) who would get an unconditional cash transfer. Tearfund worked with the 18 villages' community development councils to identify the 1,200 most vulnerable families, including widow- or disabled-headed households, landless families, and those owning less than 3 jeribs (0.6 ha) of land. The beneficiary list was discussed in community men's and women's meetings and posted in the mosque, to allow challenges and changes to the selection of most vulnerable households.

How much cash is needed per household?

To measure the local "hunger gap," Tearfund used a World Food Programme estimate of basic foods (wheat, pulses, oil, sugar, and salt) required per person. Tearfund measured the cost of this food basket and then set the cash payments slightly higher, to allow for some food inflation and rebuilding of depleted assets. Tearfund also paid the working beneficiaries 110% of the non-working beneficiary rate, to fend off any complaints from working beneficiaries.

What kind of works were appropriate?

The donor required the majority of the emergency assistance to be delivered through CFW rather than a cash transfer. This required identifying useful activities that could occupy 900 manual labourers for 48 days. In choosing activities, Tearfund took into account:

1. *Doing no harm.* The community initially suggested Tearfund pay them to de-silt their canals. However, the Jawzjan canal system depends on regular voluntary maintenance by all villages through a traditional obligation known as hashar. If Tearfund had paid the community to do canal maintenance, this would have undermined a vital social institution, and reduced the long-term viability of the irrigation system. Tearfund instead looked for activities that the community would not normally do by voluntary labour.

2. *Lasting impact.* It is often difficult to produce long-lasting infrastructure with manual labour; however, if the activity produces very short-term benefits, it could hurt Tearfund's reputation. In the dusty deserts of Jawzjan, road repairs by cash-for-work were fruitless – without mechanical compaction or gravelling, any leveling work would be totally undone in the next rainfall or snow.

The yearly voluntary cleaning of the canals produces high earth mounds on either side, which then erode down into the canal during the rest of the year. Tearfund eventually agreed with the communities to move the mounds 1-2 meters back from the canal bank. This activity did not duplicate any traditional voluntary labour, and could be expected to reduce canal erosion for some years.

How to pay the wages?

Tearfund paid workers once a month in a public, transparent process in the villages. Initially, Tearfund worked with local elders to move cash to the villages, where Tearfund staff members and government officials oversaw the distribution of the money to the beneficiaries. Later, at the request of the beneficiaries, Tearfund began giving them vouchers which they could redeem at the bank in the nearest market town, where they spent the majority of their money. This exposed them to less risk from carrying cash.

How do we monitor the impact?

Tearfund was concerned not to cause inflation in the project area. When food prices increased sharply during the project period, Tearfund compared the increases with those in other areas of the province. This survey confirmed that the increases were part of a regional (and global) trend, and not caused by Tearfund's injection of cash onto local markets.

Tearfund also surveyed the beneficiaries to see how they spent their money. On average, beneficiaries ended up spending 75% of their cash on food, and the rest mostly on repaying debts, fuel costs, or materials for carpet weaving (a major local livelihood). A final evaluation by an independent consultant confirmed that the project had stemmed some migration from the area.

"Before there was nothing in our house to eat but after Tearfund implemented the cash-for-work project we were able to buy groceries for our family, and to re-pay our loans. This really helped us. We are so happy for the work that Tearfund has done with our family through implementing this project"

Momin and Awaz Murad, Qorchangho Village, Jawzjan Province