Hidden benefits: linking relief and development in Kabul

by Roberta Kessler

The sucess of a sanitation-engineering programme is usually judged in numbers of latrines built and drainage canals dug. Can capacity-building for future development take place simultaneously with meeting immediate needs?

TWENTY YEARS AGO, Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, was considered to be one of the most progressive cities in Central Asia. Today, however, after years of Russian occupation and ensuing civil wars, virtually every trace of that progress has been wiped out: utilities and roads are destroyed and large parts of the city laid waste. Sanitation, water and drainage systems have been undermined, and people's opportunities to earn money greatly decreased. Understandably, disease levels are high.

The current government, that of the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban movement, is still solidifying its hold on the city and the rest of Afghanistan against various ethnic factions. With military matters taking up so much of government resources, little is available for the restoration of what has been destroyed.

The picture we see now is of a city — and population — with an immediate need for relief aid in order to survive in the short-term; hence, since early 1997, TEAR Fund's Disaster-Response Unit has been running a relief-orientated programme with a local partner, in which sanitation-engineering measures are being implemented — along with income generation and community health-education components. The programme has already produced several unexpected, but enouraging, benefits; and, at the same time, the synergism created by the components has enabled what is, essentially, a relief-orientated programme to lay down valuable building-blocks along the way to much-needed development in the city.

Obviously, after so many years of destruction, the city is also in need of long-term development thinking, if it is to move on. Currently, several factors act as deterrents to development planning in Kabul: continuing political and military instability; government restrictions on the role of women; high numbers of internally displaced people; as well as conflict between short-term relief programmes, which are usually top-down; and long-term, bottom-up development programmes.

But even in this environment, the emergency programme does manage to integrate important development principles into its work, so that capacity building for future development is being implemented at the same time that immediate needs are being met.

Quantitative factors

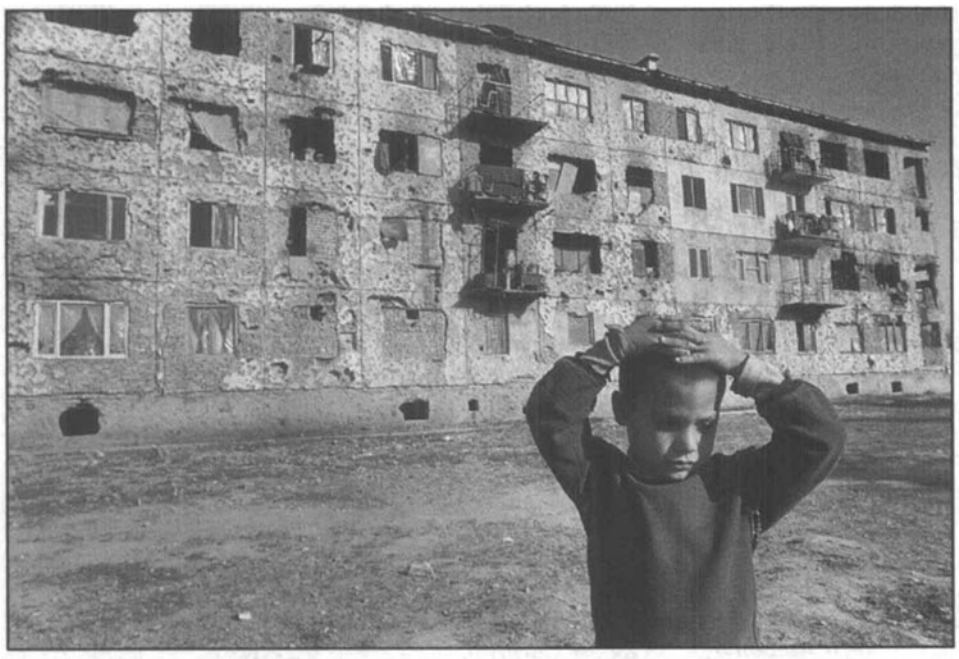
The programme's official name is the Emergency Integrated Communicable-Disease Control Programme. As the title implies, this a multi-faceted programme that incorporates diverse components in the approach to disease control: sanitation engineering, income generation, and health education — all linked to food security.

● *Sanitation engineering*

Working in two districts of Kabul that had been particularly affected by war, the relief team focused on aspects of sanitation engineering that were considered the most essential to controlling communicable diseases. As another NGO had undertaken a programme to supply clean drinking-water, TEAR Fund's programme specifically targeted pit-latrine reconstruction, and drainage and street clearance.

Though latrines already existed in most compounds in the targeted districts, many had been damaged in the fighting. Perhaps even more important, most of these old latrines already had in-built flaws that actually contributed to the spread of disease: they were usually close to wells, either in their own compound or in the neighbouring compound, and they were submerged, unprotected, in ground with a surprisingly high water-table. In addition, open access-holes for night-soil collection meant that solid waste spilled directly onto walkways and into surface-water drainage.

The programme workers installed a vented pit-latrine design: the latrine itself is elevated above the ground, and a cement-lined vault receives the deposits of waste. Additionally, access-holes are now blocked up with materials (usually clay and bricks) which can be removed to facilitate regular solid-waste collection. This new design rectifies the original flaws, and protects wells, public ways, and surface



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The formerly prosperous Mikro Rayon district of Kabul, largely destroyed by fighting.

drainage from pollution.

As a result of years of rocket attacks and street-fighting, drainage channels had become blocked with dirt and rubble, which prevented proper drainage and created large areas of standing water where vectors could breed. To resolve these problems, the programme staff began to clear existing drainage channels in the two districts, repair any damaged cement-drains, and remake soil ditches and soakaways.

Additional sanitation-engineering measures involved the management of household solid waste by encouraging people to dispose of their bio-degradable waste in latrines; constructing collection-points for non-degradable waste, and moving that waste to landfill sites outside the city. Also, the programme reinstated the traditional practice of removing night-soil, which is treated and used to fertilize nearby fields.

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Drainage problems in the city provide ideal breeding-grounds for disease-carrying vectors.

●*Income generation*

Current government rules limit women's employment to work that can be done at home (the only exception being a job in health care). This limitation is particularly difficult for Kabul families as, after years of armed conflict, many rely solely on the woman's wages; they need desperately to earn money.

The component of the Integrated Programme-designated 'Home-Based Industries' (HBI) was able to integrate the immediate financial needs of many of these women with the programme's overall aim to control communicable diseases. Groups of some of the most vulnerable women were shown how to make various health-related items (such as bed-quilts and mosquito nets) at home. For two weeks at a time each woman made up these items; she was then 'paid' with food, and allowed to keep a proportion of the goods.[1]

●*Community health education*

Since the end of the Water and Sanitation Decade, it has been widely recognized that participatory community health education (CHE) can be decisive in maximizing the health benefits of sanitation interventions. As people gain greater understanding of simple sanitation-related messages and of their ability to influence their own health, they are more inclined and better able to maintain whatever sanitation interventions are being put in place — and to gain the full benefits in the long run.

So, staff made sure that participatory CHE teaching was closely connected with the sanitation interventions in the integrated programme. Focusing on basic principles of disease prevention and healthy living, programme staff taught small groups at homes with new or reconstructed latrines; the labourers clearing drainage canals; and residents of neighbourhoods whose canals had been cleared.

In addition, since the effectiveness of CHE is not limited solely to linkages with sanitation interventions; and some diseases, such as malaria, diarrhoea or leishmaniasis, can only be excluded from the community when *everyone* practises basic health principles, instruction was given in places not specifically related to 'hardware' improvements. For example, the women taking part in HBI benefited from CHE instruction, as did school pupils and groups meeting in mosques.

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New latrines are constructed several feet above grond in areas with a high groundwater-table.

● *Food security*

In Kabul where, for men too, earning opportunities are limited, food security is a constant, pressing issue; this is reflected in each of the programme's components. Every two weeks, several hundred of the poorest adults in the area are selected: the men working as labourers in the various sanitation engineering projects, and the women become involved in HBI production. These workers, together with semi-permanent supervisors and health educators, receive payment in the form of food-for-work, as outlined above — a mode of payment that is gaining increased respect for alleviating hunger and enhancing food security in relief situations.[2]

Spin-offs

The direct, quantifiable aims of programme interventions are beginning to be evident, such as a decrease in diarrhoeal disease in those compounds where latrine construction and health education have been implemented. But, in addition, several indirect, non-quantifiable — and sometimes unanticipated — benefits can be seen; and these can be recognized as early components of the much-needed development process in Kabul.

One of the most interesting of these could be called 'the greening of District 5' (the area where the programme began). The clearing of drainage canals

in the district has not only accomplished its original aim — to reduce vector-breeding places — but it has also attracted new residents to what was an under-populated district, and brought cultivation to the area, on ground that is now properly drained and suitable for growing vegetables. As a result, then, this previously marginal district of the city is now becoming populated and fruitful, and its inhabitants are better nourished.

Other indirect benefits are related to the food-for-work strategy. As Herbinger noted, in 1994, in addition to alleviating immediate hunger, paying for services with food also contributes in the long term, as it has a positivie impact on both the infrastructure and the economy, as well as strengthening people's ability to help themselves.[3]

Yet another unanticipated and certainly non-quantifiable benefit that will help the development process is the improved sleep for many who use the HBI-manufactured bed-nets! Now protected from the nuisance of flying insects, people sleep more soundly, their general health is better, and their sense of well-being increased. Thus, the 'human capital' that is a foundation-stone of development is enhanced.

The concept of enhancing human capital, coupled with capacity building and changes in people's attitudes may, in fact, be the most important of the programme's non-quantifiable spin-offs, as it lays foundations essential to development. Elements of this concept are well integrated into the programme components:

● *Training*: HBI-involved women are trained in transferable skills; the CHE teachers themselves are trained, and then pass that knowledge on to the community.

● *Co-operation across ethnic lines*: workers in all components are selected irrespective of background.

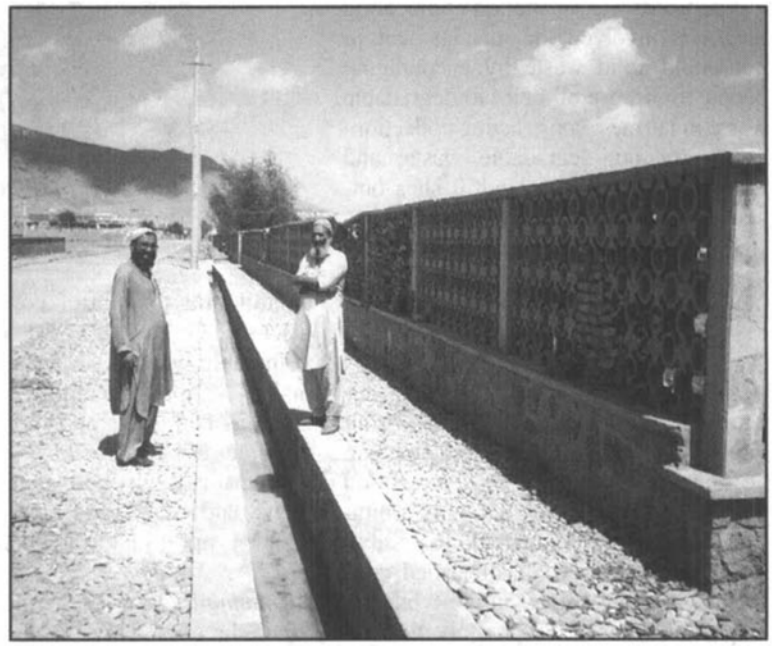
● *Promoting a sense of community:* people who were previously strangers are drawn together in various HBI and CHE activities.

● *Respect for traditional techniques* is encouraged: for example, using latrine matter as fertilizer.

● *Human-resource development:* staff development and delegating responsibilities are integral to the progamme philosophy.

● *Encouragement of self-help and self-respect.*

All these elements contribute to people's empowerment, participation and a sense of dignity. As these ideas continue to gain prominence in development thinking, these spin-off elements that build capacity and bring attitudinal change constitute foundational building-blocks for future development. In the long run, then, these non-quantifiable benefits of Tear Fund's Programme may well prove to be as crucial for the city's future as the quantifiable outcomes of each of the programme components.



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Just arrived: the essential component of the food-for-work strategy.

Notes and references

1. The food was provided by the Canadian Food Grain Board.
2. Buchanan-Smith, M. and Maxwell, S. (1994). 'Linking relief and development: An introduction and overview', *IDS Bulletin*, University of Sussex, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp 2-160.
3. Herbinger, W. (1994). 'The World Food Programme's response to the challenge of linking relief and development', *IDS Bulletin*, University of Sussex, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp 96-100.
4. Chambers, R. (1997). *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the Last First*, IT Publications, London.
5. Oxfam (1995). *The Oxfam Handbook of Development and Relief*, Vols. I and II, Oxfam, Oxford.

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