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Clearing canals

In Afghanistan simple projects change many lives

By Stephanie Levitz,
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ZAKAR KALAY, Afghanistan - Drew Gilmour's eyes widened as the van took a turn on the bumpy rural road and suddenly dry dusty land was replaced by soaking wet earth.

"This is just since this week?" he asked, in disbelief. Yes, the Afghan engineer replied proudly. All this, just this week.

What Gilmour was staring at was hundreds of hectares of previously dead farmland now awash in water from a series of irrigation canals finally completed in a village about 18 kilometres from Kandahar city.

Water started running through the first of them this week.

Gilmour's company, Development Works, a private company which receives funding from the Canadian government, is overseeing the clearing of about 26 kilometres of canal altogether in the village.

Eventually, more than 3,600 hectares of farmland will be opened up for use, allowing farmers to increase their harvests by as much as 50 per cent.

Though it's high-profile causes like women's rights, polio eradication or the building of schools that often capture the most attention in developing countries, in Afghanistan, it is the little things that have the potential to make the biggest difference - like canals.

"We are starting everything from scratch," said Mohammad Ehsan Zia, the minister of rural rehabilitation and development in Afghanistan.

"It is the things at the community level which are the most successful."

His ministry, which receives funding from the Canadian International Development Agency, completed more than 350 simple rebuilding projects in Kandahar province over the last year alone.

But the work in Zakar Kalay is different.

Gilmour runs Development Works, whose long-term goals in Afghanistan are to set villages on the path to economic self-sufficiency. The development projects they do are designed to give communities the infrastructure to then develop industry and business.

Development Works' approach is different from that taken by Zia's ministry or by civil-military co-operation teams because they don't just do one project in a village a time, but several at the same time.

"All of this stuff is untested and no one has the right answer," said Gilmour.

"But I think this is the right direction."

Where others might see plain patches of ground, Gilmour sees potential.

In Zakar Kalay, shovels have already hit the ground for a bakery, where 60 per cent of the profits will go to paying teacher's salaries.

Next will be a solar-powered market and then a metal shop.

Over 2,000 metres of sewer have been built and 500 metres of road.

"This place will go from a collection of huts to a real village," said Gilmour.

Development Works has received a \$4.9 million grant from CIDA through to December 2008 to carry out its work in Zakar Kalay and in other places.

Altogether in Zakar Kalay, they will spend \$300,000.

"You have picked us up off the floor and helped us stand," said the village's deputy district leader Haji Mohammad Khan.

Villagers here don't speak of what happened to them during the time of the Taliban - they weren't around to see it.

Many of them fled to Iran and to Pakistan during the Soviet invasion in the late 1970s.

Haji Ali Mohammad, the village leader, points at the hills overlooking Zakar Kalay.

"From there the Russian tanks bombed us," he said. "And then the Russian airplanes bombed us. They destroyed everything."

Now, Mohammad said, more than 800 families have come back to the village in the last six months.

"They have heard we have sewers, that there is water here now," he said. "So they are coming back to rebuild."

About 700 people from the area are being paid about 200 Afghanis a day (about C\$5) to work on the canal-clearing project and on sewer reconstruction.

Anur Gul, an elderly woman whose voice was muffled by a black veil, said the work made her so happy she volunteered to help, bringing jugs of water from the well to wet down the concrete.

"Everything will be safe, everything will be fine," she said.

One of the key socio-economic issues facing Afghanistan is a lack of jobs.

Poverty is cited as a contributing factor to why young men join the Taliban, but also why farmers choose to grow poppies for their valuable opium, making Afghanistan the world's largest producer of the narcotic in the world.

Farmer Lal Mohammad said the canal project can solve both those problems.

With the increased available of land, he said, he'll be able to harvest almost double the amount of grapes this year compared with last year.

"This will be much more profitable than growing poppy," he said.

It wasn't clear how much money the farmer could make from the grapes, though the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has said there is no legal crop in Afghanistan that can match the price paid to farmers for opium.

But, the larger harvest will also mean he'll need to hire workers, and he expects to get about 28 men to help.

"Nobody from here, from anywhere, wants to join the Taliban," said deputy leader Khan.

"Everybody just wants to do a job for themselves."