The Kuchi, a transhumant pastoralist population, account for approximately 75% of Afghan livestock production. But this productivity is critically diminished due to conflicts over grazing land access and migration. Several conflicts between the pastoral Kuchi herders and village communities dominated by an ethnic group known as the Hazara have ended in violence and fatalities in recent years. In an effort to reduce the social and economic risks associated with land access issues, the PEACE project, in collaboration with Sanayee Development Organization and the Afghan Government, has instituted joint training workshops involving the Kuchi and various village communities. Community elders and scholars of the Kuchi and Hazara communities were trained separately on conflict resolution and peace-building strategies, before coming together to discuss disputes and seek possible solutions. In one area where land access conflicts have been particularly violent, the joint workshop culminated with the selection of five Kuchi and five Hazara leaders to act as “Peace Ambassadors,” (PAs) to their respective communities. The combined efforts of the PAs from this particular workshop have resulted in over 250 community meetings across Wardak and Ghazni Provinces, where PAs share conflict management training, and provide a forum for the discussion and mediation of disputes. PAs have found an overwhelming readiness among villagers and herders to work together to find peaceful resolutions to conflict and have reached over 300 community leaders to date. Community members have indicated that the accomplishments of the PAs in four short months have exceeded the conflict resolution efforts by the government over the past three years. Preliminary evidence demonstrates that PEACE project PAs are a simple and direct solution to seemingly protracted and difficult issues including land access, and may be a potentially successful model for other areas experiencing violent conflicts, including additional areas within Afghanistan.

Background

In 2006, the Afghanistan Pastoral Engagement, Adaptation, and Capacity Enhancement (PEACE) project initiated activities to reduce both the social and economic risks associated with extensive livestock production through better rangeland management information. The primary extensive livestock producers in Afghanistan are the Kuchi, transhumant herders who are frequently subjected to land access conflicts along migration corridors. Land tenure issues and insecurity are major risks faced by the Kuchi. Thirty years of war have changed the social landscape of Afghanistan, and herders experience frequent issues moving their animals from traditional wintering lowlands to summer mountain grazing areas, recently due to the conversion of large tracts of rangelands to rain-fed agriculture.

Some of these areas have been sites for armed conflict and violence between the Kuchi and village communities, which are dominated by the Hazara. In 2007, PEACE began a series of widely attended conflict mitigation workshops for Kuchi leaders in an effort to reduce the social and economic risks posed by land access issues. Following these workshops and at the request of the Afghan government in 2008, PEACE expanded the Kuchi conflict resolution program to include Hazara village leaders in areas where violence arising from land access issues presents significant risks to the Kuchi. With Global Livestock CRSP support, these activities culminated in a multi-ethnic workshop attended by both Kuchi and Hazara leaders for Wardak and Ghazni Provinces, where fighting between Kuchi and Hazara villagers is especially intense and often fatal.

In collaboration with the local peace-building Non-Government Organization Sanayee Development Organization (SDO) and with the assistance of the Tribal Affairs Office to President Karzai, PEACE initiated a series of separated and joint eight-day workshops attended by 30 Kuchi and 30 Hazara leaders to produce constructive dialogue as a first step towards cooperative conflict resolution. Workshops began with participants separated into two groups by ethnicity, where they were provided with basic problem-solving and negotiation skills. The second phase, joint workshops, brought the two groups together to focus on developing a sense of trust, as Kuchi and Hazara leaders discussed issues and initiated inter-group communication. Participants were then asked to self-select 10 representatives who
would continue discussions of peace building and conflict resolution throughout their respective communities. These nominated representatives were entitled “Peace Ambassadors” a term developed by the Advisor on Tribal Affairs to the President. As a result, five Kuchi and five Hazara Peace Ambassadors (PAs) were appointed to continue the conflict resolution dialogue in community meetings across Wardak and Ghazni Provinces.

Major Findings

The most significant outcome of the conflict resolution workshops was the mutual qualitative conflict assessments disclosed by the Kuchi and Hazara, in which leaders from both groups identified several critical points of agreement. Both Kuchi and Hazara leaders described a substantial governmental role in creating problems of land tenure and use of public rangelands. Participants advocated for the Office of Tribal Affairs to the President to become more active in seeking solutions to these problems, and agreed that given 30 years of war, resolution of issues related to land access could not be achieved quickly. Both groups shared the sentiment that political leaders do not allow them to settle land access issues at the community level, instead reporting that Kuchi and Hazara government leaders have perpetuated conflicts to further political agendas. Regarding their own history of conflict, participants widely agreed that fighting has not helped to solve conflicts, and should therefore be discouraged. Despite progress made during the workshops, neither the Kuchi nor Hazara could agree on a definitive solution to their disputes. However, the selection of Peace Ambassadors was a welcomed initial step, as the PAs vowed to transport the dialogue and skills obtained during the workshops to other communities.

Over a period of four months, these PAs returned to their communities to educate community members on workshop conflict resolution and negotiation techniques and to learn about other community-level conflicts within their ethnic group, striving to mediate and achieve solutions. In total, the 10 PAs organized and participated in over 250 community meetings, with as many as 60 participants per meeting.

Following these community meetings, Kuchi PAs reported that most community members wanted to live together peacefully with the Hazara. Kuchi elders insisted that peace was possible because Kuchi and Hazara had lived together peacefully in the past. Kuchi PAs reported that younger generations, however, have been greatly influenced by political leaders advocating for armed conflict over land. Hazara PAs reported that community members recognized the presence of foreigners to help Afghanistan stabilize, and did not want to waste an important opportunity to achieve peace, advocating for immediate pursuit of resolution agreements. Hazara communities expressed concern that if conflicts could not be resolved mutually with the Kuchi, a third party could intervene, causing both groups to lose access to disputed lands. In general, Hazara community members found the meetings informative, and commented that the PAs had accomplished more in four months than the government had accomplished in the last three years.

According to accounts from each of the 10 PAs, contact with the communities was overwhelmingly positive. Unanimously, the PAs reported that members of both the Kuchi and Hazara were happy to learn of attempts to address the conflict issues existing between the groups. While some PAs did report negative sentiments regarding compromises, the PAs agreed that the majority of
community members simply wanted to work towards joint resolution. Following the community meetings, Kuchi and Hazara PAs consented that the resolution of land conflict issues on a case-by-case basis would be the most constructive path forward, with joint conflict resolution commencing through the resolution of less contentious issues for immediate impact and experience. Resolution of greater disputes could naturally follow thereafter. In terms of sustaining the peace process and progress made through the workshops, PAs discussed establishing a neutral provincial-level office where Kuchi and Hazara leaders could mediate land conflict issues, potentially within the Ministry of Agriculture Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL).

Practical Implications

To date, PEACE conflict resolution efforts focused on community workshops and the Peace Ambassadors have reached hundreds of community leaders, enhancing the Kuchi and Hazara’s capacity to resolve a broad variety of conflicts in a way that encourages sustained peace. However, the reported claim by both the Kuchi and Hazara that the Afghan government is either not helpful or directly detrimental to the peaceful settling of disputes is a significant barrier to sustaining the peace process beyond the community level. The negligent role of government in this process may be partly due to a lack of incentives for government officials to actively seek conflict resolution as opposed to using conflict for the advancement of a political agenda. To respond to this policy level obstacle, the Kuchi and Hazara must be encouraged to jointly and formally address the Office of Tribal Affairs to the President with concerns about government policies for land-use conflict resolution, while the Office of Tribal Affairs should be encouraged to create neutral offices where disputes can be heard and resolved peacefully.

The most important outcome of the conflict workshops is the nomination and training of Peace Ambassadors in achieving relatively rapid impact in the peace process. Peace Ambassadors have proven to be a simple and direct solution to seemingly protracted and difficult issues at the community level, with the interest demonstrated by members of both Kuchi and Hazara in peaceful conflict resolution suggesting that more widespread training is both possible and welcomed. Given the importance and success of the PA model, it is recommended that other willing PAs should be identified and trained to conduct conflict resolution workshops and to scale-up the program. Training of the trainer programs have been widely successful in rapidly expanding the capacity needed to address technical and social issues, and are well suited for community-level applications (Bunn, et al., Forthcoming).

It is evident, however, that further research addressing conflict between the Kuchi and other groups is needed. While village and Kuchi elders appear to be in agreement that peaceful resolution is possible, greater emphasis should be placed on educating and influencing younger members of these groups. PAs offer an excellent opportunity to reach this demographic, and it is possible that the community Peace Ambassador model could be successfully modified to include a younger set of PAs working directly with young people. In conclusion, support of monthly shuras and the PEACE Peace Ambassador as a viable community conflict mitigation tool should be expanded. The resulting achievements will further the goal of increasing confidence of Afghans in their government.

The joint workshops were the first step in bringing together the Kuchi and Hazara. The joint sessions revealed critical points of agreement as well as disputes. Elders pointed out that the two groups had lived peacefully in the past. During one session, a Kuchi and Hazara participant spoke of how their grandfathers had been very close friends and how sad it was that they were not friends like their grandfathers. The time at the workshop did not erase all the mistrust and conflicts of the past, but the Peace Ambassador program provides the opportunity to continue dialogue and strive for resolution.

Photo by Michael Jacobs.
Further Reading

Afghan PEACE project website: http://www.afghanpeace.org


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The Afghanistan PEACE Project’s goal is to reduce the social and economic risks associated with extensive livestock production through better rangeland management information and peaceful resolution of land access issues. The PEACE Project was established in 2006 and is led by Dr. Montague Demment, University of California, Davis, email: mwdemment@ucdavis.edu and Dr. Michael Jacobs, email: mjacobs@cnrit.tamu.edu.

The Global Livestock CRSP is comprised of multidisciplinary, collaborative projects focused on human nutrition, economic growth, environment and policy related to animal agriculture and linked by a global theme of risk in a changing environment. The program is active in East and West Africa, Central Asia and Latin America.

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