

## VI. HELMAND VALLEY PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL

Helmand Valley Project is a large desert irrigation project in the region. Started in 1946 as the first agricultural project in the country, developed by modern heavy equipment, it has experienced many ups and downs. Sometimes the project was considered to be a failure and sometimes more hopeful views prevailed. Though the project has passed its critical days and is now considered successful, it is a good time to review the criticisms of it. Those who considered the project a failure argued as follows:-

1. Those areas which were developed in the Helmand Valley had soils which were not good from the agricultural point of view. Therefore, the investment made in the project gave no proper result.
2. The project swallowed up a lot of money which could have given much better results if spent in another part of the country.
3. Many new settlers abandoned the project because of their poor living conditions and unproductive land there;
4. Administration of the project was not efficient. Thus, the project's technical and financial resources were misused.

Though the Helmand valley project has had difficulties, it doesn't mean that it should be considered a failure. I would like to comment on the views of the project's opponents briefly:

- A) I partially agree that some areas in the Helmand Valley Project were developed where soils were not good, But, first a small portion of the project comes under this judgement which does not mean that the whole project can be condemned. Second, there was also a political reason behind the development of the whole project including those areas whose soils were not good. The reason was to take water from the Helmand River. Why more water? Because Afghanistan had a long standing dispute with Iran on the Helmand



River water distribution. The Helmand River originates from a west extension of the Hindu Kush mountain range near Paghman, 40 km west of Kabul, the capital of the country, and runs southwest for about 966 km till it reaches the Afghanistan-Iranian border. The Helmand River doesn't go further and is observed in the marshes and inland basin known as Helmand lake which is situated on the common border.

Iran uses the Helmand water in the Siestan area. Since there was no agreement between Afghanistan and Iran about the Helmand River water distribution at that time, therefore, Iran was trying hard to expand the irrigation system in Siestan area in order to use more Helmand water. Afghanistan was worried about this Iranian intention and was thinking that the more time passes the more complicated would be the water sharing problem. Iran was getting into a better economic position day by day due to its oil revenue and was able and willing to develop as much area in Siestan as it could. Iran was doing this because, first, it wanted to develop Siestan using disputed water and, second, if there was any negotiation about the Helmand water between Afghanistan and Iran, Iran would have a strong hand.

This attitude of Iranians forced the Afghan Government authorities of the time to develop irrigation projects in Helmand and Nimroz in opposition to what the Iranians were doing in other side of the border. Thus, the Afghan government wanted the Boghra canal and other irrigation works to be enlarged substantially in order to take more water from the Helmand River. This attitude of the Afghan government made the Iranians think about the matter seriously and paved the road to an agreement signed by both sides on March 13, 1973 on the Helmand River water distribution.

Thus, a part of the economic resource was sacrificed to political ambition in the Helmand valley in order to help to settle a long standing dispute with Iran.



- B) I agree that much money has been spent in the Helmand but much money compared to which other project in the country? was such a large work with such modern equipment possible without such investment? If we compare of irrigated land in 1950. While today the valley has 103,770 hectares of irrigated land (according to planning and statistics department of the valley in 1977). One also can see the list of infrastructures and basic investments in the project which could not be done without money and foreign help.
- C) I agree that some, not many, new settlers abandoned their lots. But land was not the only reason for their abandonment. They were all nomads who had no farming experience before. Since the project was new the management had no prior experience in settling nomads, who were not given proper agricultural education or adequate technical and financial assistance. The nomads could not work on their lots properly and so they fled, abandoning their lands. When the project authorities became experienced the same abandoned land became good productive land with prosperous new settlers on it. By 1977 the project had 10,083 settlers families with a total population of over 80000 persons. They are quite happy and are making a much better living than before. YES
- D) I do not agree that the administration of the Helmand Valley Project was inefficient. Of ~~course~~ course, there were and still are difficulties as in every project, especially, when the project was in its initial stages. But I think the Helmand Valley Authority (HVA) is a suitable administrative unit if compared with similar projects in the country. HVA has trained valuable personnel in different fields which are the backbones of every irrigation project in Afghanistan undertaken within the last fifteen years.

Since the Helmand Valley Project also had a political ambition, therefore, the political opponents of the government and the American presence in the area made efforts to show the project as a failure. They were exaggerating the problems and difficulties which were arising from the



work itself. Four groups of people were opponents of the Helmand project.

1. Pro-Russian and anti-West elements. Since the Helmand Valley Project was the first project developed in Afghanistan with the technical help of the United States of America, the Soviet Union, a powerful neighbour of Afghanistan, was not pleased with it and tried hard to show the project as a failure. Soviet agents and supporters who were working in the government machinery were making false propaganda against the Helmand Valley. I, myself, well remember Babrak Karmal the present Russian-installed ruler in Kabul who was a member of the Parliament during 1964-73, said once (1965) that the Helmand Valley project was a bastion of American imperialism in Afghanistan and swallowed up over US \$ 200 million plus several thousand million Afghani. While, by the end of 1964, total expenditure in the Helmand Valley was US \$ 65,333 million, PRs. 30,779 for transport of equipments through Pakistan and custom taxes in Karachi, and Af's. 2206,565 millions for local expenditures construction and salaries. If all are converted to US dollars, it becomes US\$ 108.290 in 1964.

From the above information, one can understand how the Soviet agents were trying to mislead public opinion about the Helmand valley project. The Soviet Union was contained by NATO in Europe and by Baghdad Pact (later known as CENTO after Baghdad went out in 1957) in Asia. Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan were in a defence treaty along with Great Britain and the United States. The Soviet Union did not want to see Americans in Afghanistan and were trying to bring Afghanistan into her sphere of influence.

2. Pro-Iranians and those who didn't like to see such a huge project in an area where Pashtoons are dominant. Iran, another neighbour of Afghanistan, was also not happy with the Helmand Valley Project. Iranians believed that any irrigation development in the Helmand Valley would ultimately decrease the water-flow of the Helmand River into Iran. Iran was, displeased with



any development along the Helmand River. Thus, Iran was also trying to decry the project through its agents and anti-Pashtoon elements in the country. They were trying to give the project a bad reputation and thus to make the government abandon it.

3. Those who were affected by the propaganda of the above two categories of people. Common people everywhere can be misled. They very seldom understand the political side of a national problem, especially if it becomes very complicated when underground work from outside is involved in it. Their judgement has many shortcomings. In such cases the majority stay indifferent while some become victims of false propaganda. This is what happened with the Helmand valley project. The majority of Afghan's didn't know what was going on in the project while the opponents of the project were active in attacking it.

4. Those who could see the weaknesses of the project but did not realize the roots of those problems. For example, some nomads abandoned their lots and claimed that the soils of their lands were not productive. Their abandonment was seen but who could realize how difficult it is practically to settle a nomad; to keep him from wandering and to convince him that his new style and course of life is much better than before. Is it easy to expect a nomad who has never hold a spade in his hand to work on the land so effective as a well experienced farmer?. All these are practical difficulties that every body can't see. But the population could easily see the abandonment of the lots by nomads in the Helmand Valley.

The Helmand Valley Project was the first project in the country that applied modern heavy equipment with no previous experience in the field by the authorities. Americans were new to Afghanistan and were not familiar with the area, complete records of the climate, precipitation, floods agriculture, population, ethnic groups and socio-economic information were not available. Therefore, some problems were inevitable during the work but which were solved later.



There were two mistakes that the Helmand valley Authority (HVA) and the Americans could have avoided. First when the Afghan government decided to take more water from the Helmand River, HVA could have taken the water to the areas whose soils were better than Nad-i-Ali area, which has an impermeable layer of conglomerate lying about 2 meters or less below the surface. Though the problem is to some extent solved today due to the introduction of a drainage system, it required much work and money and still further work should be done. Second, it would have been wiser if the authorities had settled those farmers on new lands who had previous farming experience instead of nomads who had no farming experience at all. Nomads could have been settled later when the project gained in experience. HVA could learn from the experience of other countries in this field. Now, this problem is also solved but after unnecessary strains. In both cases the Americans as technical advisory staff and then HVA are responsible.

There are no records of farm production in the Valley before 1946, therefore, it is difficult to compare today's project with yesterday item by item. But one can clearly see that the total amount of land under irrigation in the valley in 1950 was about 35,900 hectares, of which 30,600 hectares were occupied each year, while now the valley has about 150,000 hectares of irrigated ~~and~~ land of which 103,770 hectares are under cultivation every year. A survey conducted in the early 1950's (Tudor P.54) shows that a farmer could obtain a yield of about six bushels of wheat to the acre. Today an average of 945 kilogrammes wheat per acre is obtained. No cotton production is reported prior to the project, while today the valley produces about 35,000 metric tons of raw cotton each year which constitutes 19 percent of total national production. The valley was not familiar with double cropping before, which in 1975 the project had 23 percent of its cropland occupied with double cropping each year.

About 1000 tractors were active in the valley in 1975 which shows the transformation of subsistence agriculture to a mechanized and market-oriented one. By almost every major indicator, agricultural production for the



market, as opposed to production for home consumption, has increased dramatically. For example, the percentage of land double cropped increased from almost nil prior to the project and nine percent in 1970 to more than 23 percent in 1975. In the earlier period, wheat and corn were the major crops, today the major crops are wheat and cotton.

Another indication of the move from subsistence to market orientation is the rapid expansion of high yield variety of wheat. About 44 percent of the cropland was under new varieties in 1975. More than seventy five percent of the farmers now use high yielding variety of wheat, while, even in 1970 this figure was less than 20 percent. This transformation from subsistence to market economy has also had an important impact upon the national economy. In addition, the Helmand is a net exporter of wheat, contributing importantly to the Herat, Kandahar and Kabul grain markets.

Farmer incomes in the Helmand Valley has been increasing at a fairly rapid rate. Net farm income in 1975 averaged about US \$ 823.00 or about \$ 89.00 per capita while this figures were formerly \$ 306.0 and \$ 32.0 in 1970. No record prior to the project is available for grain production but one can see from six bushels of wheat per year from an acre that high production has been achieved.

The project had a very limited traditional irrigation system before 1946 which is difficult to compare with the infrastructures available in the Valley today( see the existing infrastructure part of this research)

A brief Cost return analysis is offered here to see whether the project is economic and successful. The total investment made in Helmand valley project from 1946 till 1975 is about US \$ 80.836 million of foreign aid and about Afs. 3,563.133 million Afghan government expenditure. If we convert this all to US dollars, then it will become US \$ 163 million(dollar's rate was Afs. 45.3 = US \$ 1.00 in 1975)

To see the revenue and return, one must go to the production, costs and income(chapter). The Helmand Valley



produced 116,079 metric tons of wheat and about 31,313 metric tons of cotton in 1975. Other crops were cron, mungbeans, barley and clovers. Vegetables and fruits also had good place in crop production there. Animal production and livestock were getting in good shape. The average farm income in the valley was Afs. 74580 in gross(US \$ 1647) in 1975. Farmers were getting on average \$ 1226 from crops, \$ 215 from livestock, \$ 147 from fruits and \$ 57 from vegetables. The total gross farm income of the project was about US \$ 18.076 million in the same year. An average of US \$ 104.0 off farm income of the farmers in the valley was US \$ 2.257 million. Thus, the total gross income of the project was US \$ 37.997 million in 1975. One can see that the project is running now on cost-efficient basis and had paid back its investments made in it so far.



The total cost of the project from its start (1946) to the time of this research (1975) is shown as follows:\*

Year	US expenditure \$ -000	Pakistani Rupees Rs-000	Afghani expenditure Af-000
1946	4195	3242	37826
1947	4195	3242	37825
1948	4195	3242	37825
1949	4195	3242	37825
1950	6324	319	83749
1951	7800	3476	113027
1952	4564	4039	192600
1953	3510	962	162200
1954	3681	3568	201100
1955	4328	5447	207400
1956	2400	-	80000
1957	2400	-	80000
1958	2400	-	80000
1959	2400	-	80000
1960	2400	-	80000
1961	2223	-	123502
1962	1780	-	151977
1963	2177	-	231325
1964	2166	-	188385
1965	1920	-	190205
1966	1786	-	217962
1967	2305	-	37090
1968	1308	-	194741
1969	1752	-	96404
1970	1252	-	87241
1971	600	-	83038
1972	400	-	120619
1973	500	-	198269
1974	1000	-	110687
1975	600	-	120316
Total	80,836	30,779	3,682,460

\* The above expenditures includes some work done by the project authorities out of the Helmand Valley. For many years Arghandab was a part of the project administration and was called some time Helmand-Arghandab Valley Authority. So, the construction of Arghandab Dam (cost US \$ 9 million) arghandab canal hand development in Tarnak and some out project roads and construction are part of this expenditure Thus, the money spent only on the Helmand Valley which is the scope of this study will be roughly about US \$ 65 million and Afs. 2900 million.