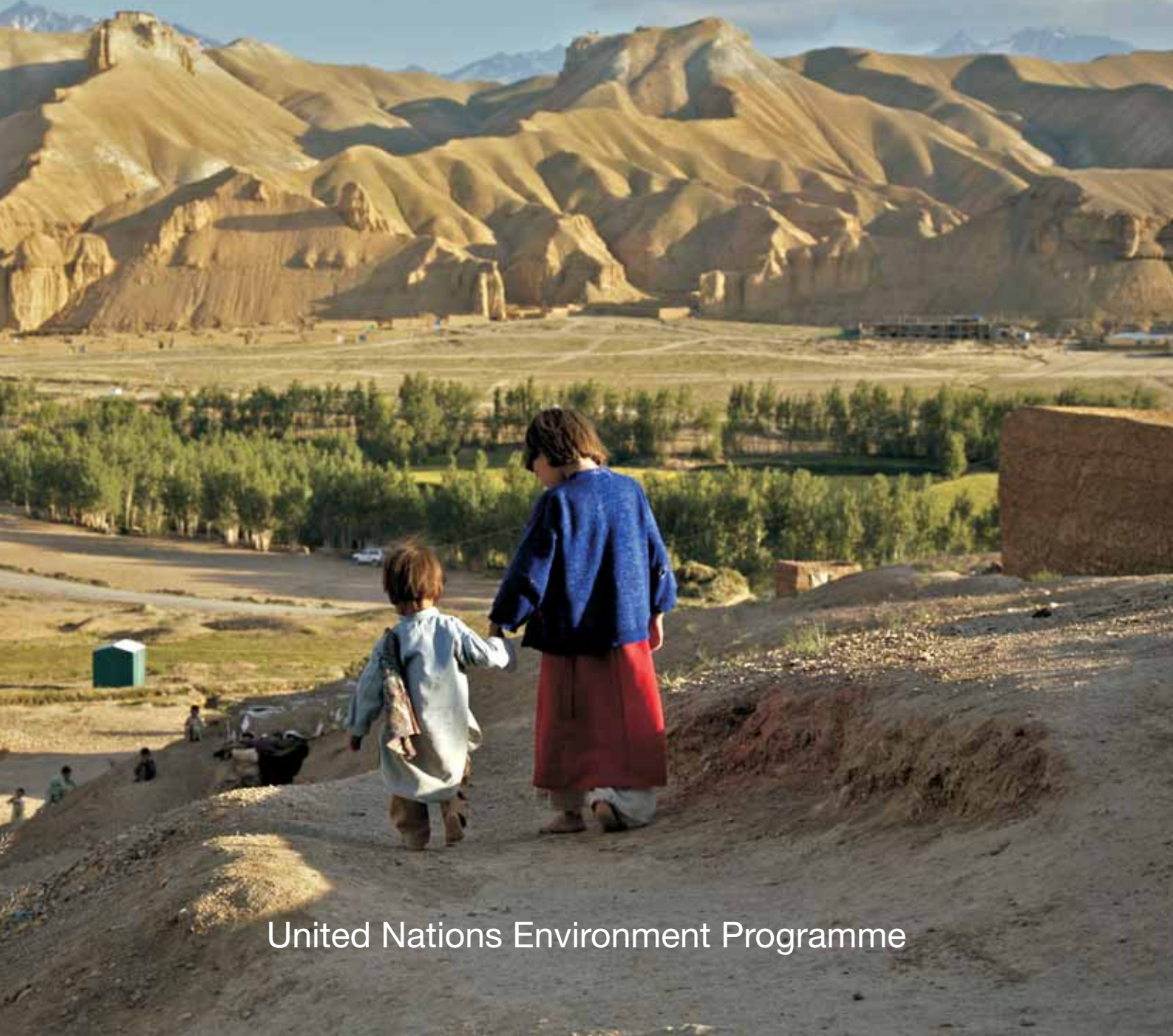




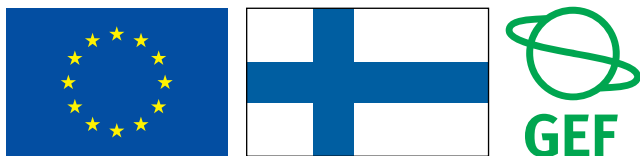
# UNEP in Afghanistan

**Laying the foundations for sustainable development**



United Nations Environment Programme

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Cover image: Afghan children in the village of Ragshad, central Bamiyan Province. © Shehzad Noorani/Majority World/Still Pictures  
Title page image: First harvest of apricots from UNEP's community-based natural resource management programme. © UNEP/Asif Zaidi  
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# UNEP in Afghanistan

Laying the foundations for sustainable development



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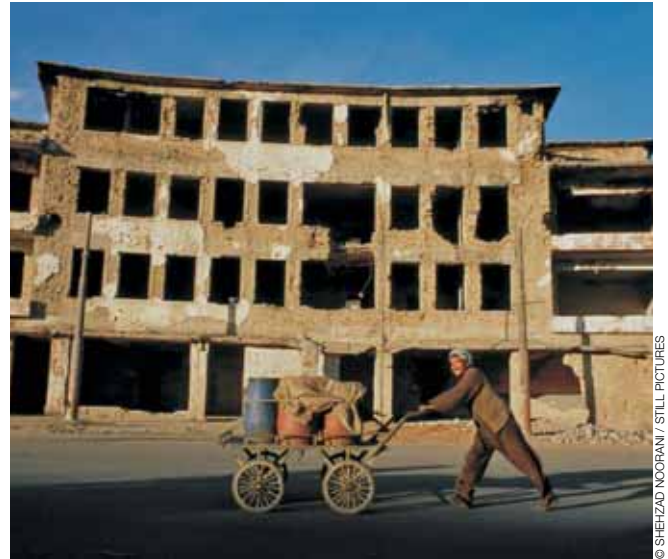
United Nations Environment Programme



## A land of beauty and conflict

Afghanistan has been inhabited for many thousands of years. Known today for its exports of carpets and dried fruit, the country has served humanity as a vibrant continental crossroads and a hub of culture and trade. Its environment has been a source of great natural wealth – from precious minerals to life-sustaining agricultural and forest products, representing a wide variety of traditional livelihood opportunities for its people.

These opportunities, however, were shattered by nearly thirty years of civil war, international conflict and occupation. The resulting instability has brought widespread insecurity, displacement, poverty, and environmental devastation. It has eroded the rule of law and undermined structures of governance.



© SHEHZAD NOORANI / STILL PICTURES

Much of Kabul's urban infrastructure was destroyed during the decades of conflict that have plagued Afghanistan in recent times.



© UNEP/MARTYN MURRAY

Afghanistan's beauty belies its troubled history.

## Rebirth

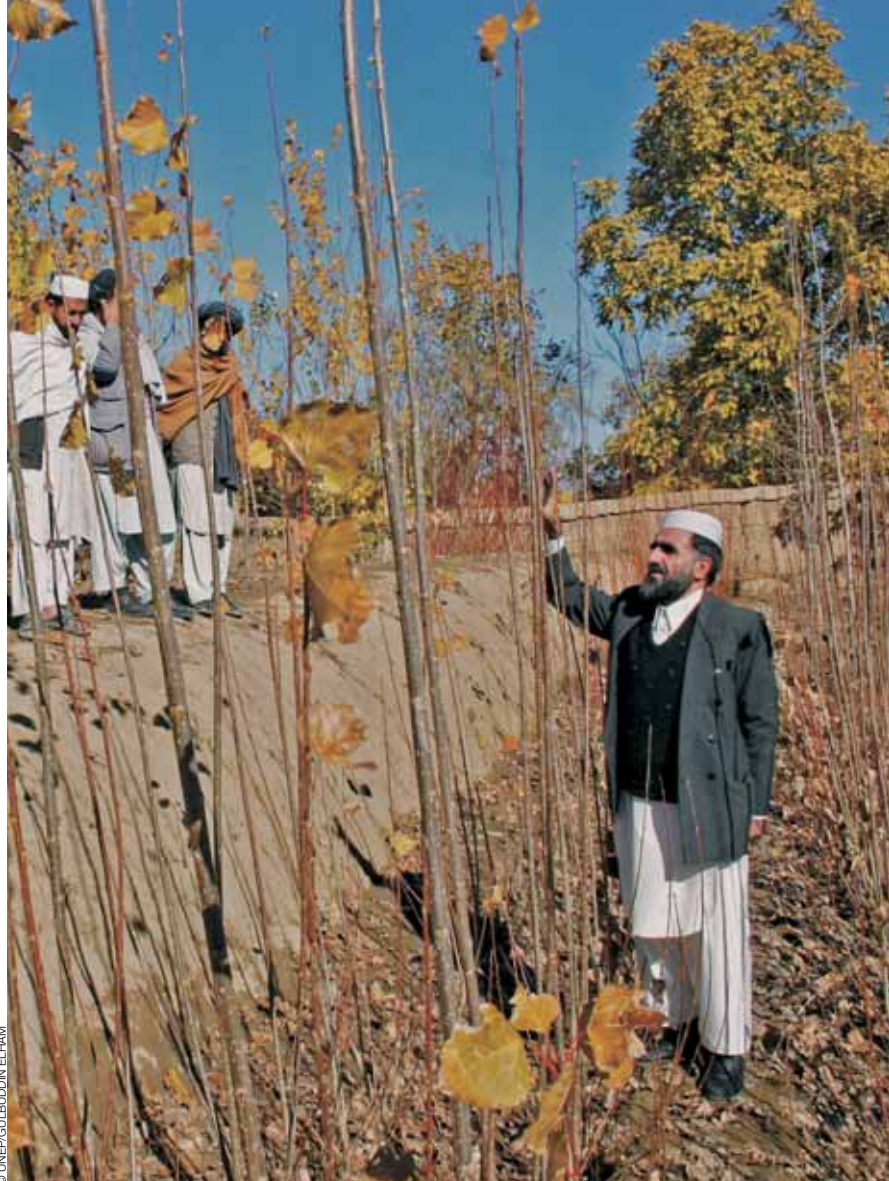
Hope was rekindled in late 2001 with the signing of the Bonn Agreement. The interim and transitional governments led by President Hamid Karzai immediately launched a process of reconciliation, rebuilding and renewal, and requested assistance from the United Nations to achieve this. When it convened in 2002, Afghanistan's Loya Jirga (Grand Council) decided that addressing the environmental crisis should be a priority of the new government.

The United Nations Environment Programme took on the task of assessing the environmental impacts of the war on people's lives, livelihoods and security, and recommended ways to address these issues during the reconstruction process.

In 2002, UNEP's Post-Conflict and Disaster Management Branch (PCDMB), working closely with the Afghanistan Transitional Government, mobilized 20 Afghan and international experts organized into five teams. Their findings and recommendations were published in 2003 as The Afghanistan Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment Report.

The report addresses urban environmental issues such as waste management, sanitation, and air quality; the status and management of natural resources such as woodlands and forests, water, rangelands and wildlife; protected areas conservation; and environmental governance.

The environmental data collected during the 2002 assessment was updated in the State of the Environment Report for Afghanistan that was produced in 2008 by the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA), with the assistance of UNEP.



© UNEP/GULBUDIN ELHAM

Healthy saplings are a symbol of renewed hope for the future.

### Facts and figures

Afghanistan has an area of 652,000 square kilometres.

Up to 80% of Afghans are directly dependent on natural resources for income and sustenance.

Agriculture provides livelihoods for more than 60% of the population.

Since 1998, more than 6.7 million Afghans have been affected by the impacts of disasters and extreme weather events such as drought, earthquakes, disease epidemics, sandstorms, and harsh winters.



## Assessing the damage

In spite of many months spent preparing for their mission, the UNEP teams were shaken by what they found.

In 2002 the country was in turmoil. A million people had died, five million had fled their homes, and those who remained were prevented from living normal, productive lives. The destruction of 60 percent of Afghanistan's infrastructure had devastated the country's capacity for governance and sound resource management.

The mission, however, also provided some positive surprises.



A UNEP assessment team with Afghan guides investigates pistachio forests in northern Afghanistan.

© UNEP/DAVID JENSEN



© UNEP/FARUDDULLAH MASSI

Decades of conflict left Afghanistan's institutions too weak to effectively manage natural resources.

The beauty of the landscape was still stunning, and many of the valleys seemed green and productive. The Afghan people showed their resilience, and Kabul was a bustling, thriving city full of culture and life.

Altogether, the teams examined 38 urban sites in four cities, and visited 35 rural locations. Despite the positive elements in the picture, what they found was disturbing. Afghanistan's natural resources – forests, waters, soil, or wildlife – were clearly in decline or on the brink of irreparable damage, and the resulting environmental degradation was endangering human health and compounding poverty.

The main cause of this deterioration was the mismanagement of natural resources that followed the collapse of national and local institutions. This in turn led to the erosion of the rule of law, collapse of traditional governance systems and processes, reduced human capacity to meet challenges and manage resources, weakened institutions, and unequal access to resources.

## Water and wetlands

Afghanistan is naturally arid, dominated by desert or semi-desert. Virtually the entire supply of water for irrigation, drinking, and maintenance of wetland ecosystems is carried by rivers. Most of these are fed by rainfall and the seasonal melting of snow and permanent ice-fields in Afghanistan's 'water towers', the Hindu Kush mountains.

The supply is intermittent, however, leaving Afghans in a perpetual state of water insecurity. A series of recent droughts have lowered water tables and dried up rivers and wetlands. Poor water management has threatened supplies for households, for agriculture and for maintaining populations of wild plants and animals.

Poor sanitation and waste management also threaten Afghanistan's water supplies. Kabul's dumpsite is poorly isolated from groundwater, which poses significant risks for contamination of vital aquifers. The dumpsites of several large urban centres – such as Kandahar and Herat – are located in areas prone to natural disasters, places where rainfall or flash flooding could easily wash out the contents of urban waste into the open environment and pollute rivers.

### Facts and figures

Approximately 75% of Afghanistan is vulnerable to desertification.

Some 85-90% of the country's water is taken from surface sources, and 10-15% from below the ground.

It is estimated that current groundwater resources feeding the Kabul water supply can only cope with increased demand until 2012.

Only some 31% of households currently have access to safe drinking water.

More than 2.5 million people in Afghanistan are affected by drought or water shortages.



© UNEP/ANTHONY FITZHERBERT

More than 80% of Afghanistan's water resources originate in the Hindu Kush mountains at altitudes above 2,000 metres. In the past 50 years, drought and rising air temperatures have shrunk the larger glaciers in the Pamir and Hindu Kush by 30%, while some smaller ones have vanished altogether.





© UNEP/MARTYN MURRAY

Afghanistan's once-productive pistachio forests almost disappeared in just three decades.

## Forests

For most of the region's history, deciduous and evergreen forests covered five percent of Afghanistan's current land area, including one million hectares of oak and two million hectares of pine and cedar growing mostly in the eastern part of the country. Open woodland dominated by pistachios, almonds and junipers occupied a full third of the country.

Today most of the original forests have disappeared, destroyed during the decades of conflict. Forests now occupy less than 1.0-1.3 million hectares, or just two percent of the country's area, adding to the burden on the large portion of the Afghan population that depends on timber for construction and fuel for cooking and heating, and on the general economy which has lost a potential resource.

For example, in the 1970s, the Badghis and Takhar provinces of northern Afghanistan were covered with productive pistachio forests and earned substantial revenue from the sale of nuts. These forests were almost completely lost in just three decades, owing to the breakdown of the community forest warden scheme, stockpiling of fuelwood during uncertain political conditions, and the conflict itself. Many trees were uprooted or depleted by Soviet military forces during the 1980s, and intense fighting led to an increase in the risk of forest fires.

In addition to providing for basic cooking, heating and construction needs, forests today are depleted by illegal logging. As many as 200 timber trucks a day – representing the loss of up to 200 hectares of forest – have been observed on the main road in Kunar. Much of this is illegally exported to neighbouring countries. Local communities have lost control of their resources



in these eastern provinces, where warlords, 'timber barons' and foreign traders control illegal and highly lucrative logging operations. Poor forest management, lack of incentives for reforestation, lack of community involvement and awareness, and agricultural and urban encroachments on forest land also contribute to the severe decline of forest cover in Afghanistan.

If deforestation continues at its present rate, all forest will have disappeared in another three decades.

### Facts and figures

Conifer forests in the provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar and Nuristan were reduced by over a half between 1978 and 2002.

It is estimated that 50% of the juniper cover in the Subzac pass has been lost in the last 30 years.



Remaining juniper forest at Subzac Pass.



The rate of deforestation now appears to be declining in areas of government control, despite the high economic value of timber.

## Rangelands

The rangelands of Afghanistan provide habitat and forage for nearly 35 million livestock as well as wild animals, contributing to the economy through the production of livestock products such as meat, carpets, wool, and medicinal plants.

Over the last few decades, significant changes in vegetation cover and productivity have occurred, matching recent changes in climatic patterns and the length of the vegetative season. This has forced farmers to shift grazing from traditional to higher ranges, increasing pressure on alpine ecosystems.

With farmers competing for the use of the most productive areas, vast expanses of Afghanistan's once highly productive grasslands have been converted into grazing-resistant cushion shrublands. Soil erosion has increased, degraded ecosystems have multiplied, and forest regeneration has been slowed or prevented altogether.



Many of Afghanistan's settled populations derive their income from rearing animals and employment in the livestock industry.



Living from the land: a traditional yurt and herders in the Ishtemich valley.

### Facts and figures

The rangelands of Afghanistan occupy about 30 million hectares, representing roughly 45% of the country's territory.

The total grazeable area (including marginal lands) is estimated at 70-85% of the total land area, providing habitat and forage for nearly 35 million livestock as well as numerous wild animals.

Over the last 30 years, populations of sheep and goats in Afghanistan have fluctuated from more than 30 million to approximately 16 million.

Rangelands are essential for Kuchi pastoralists, estimated to comprise 20% of the rural population.



## Agriculture

In the mid-1970s, Afghanistan was almost self-sufficient in its food supply. At that time, nearly 3.3 million hectares were cultivated using various methods of irrigation, representing approximately 85 percent of the country's total crop production. The cultivated area dropped to approximately two million hectares, due to conflict, drought, floods, and decrepit irrigation systems.

The total area under irrigation is increasing again, but remains vulnerable to water shortages. Nevertheless, agriculture still accounts for over half of the country's GDP, with more than 80 percent of the population engaged in this sector, including livestock-raising. According to the International Monetary Fund, however, the 'informal' agricultural sector – devoted to opium production – earns about 40-50 percent of GDP, although as an illegal activity it does not register in official economic calculations.



© LINEP/ANTHONY FITZHERBERT

Experts believe that Afghanistan harbours more native varieties of wheat than anywhere else in the world. Many cultivated varieties were lost during the period of conflict and the seed collections of many wild ancestors were destroyed.

### Facts and figures

Three million hectares of farmland are irrigated. An addition 3.5 million hectares are dependent on rainfall.

More than half a million farmers are involved in horticultural production with a total export value of USD 127 million.



© LINEP/BEINDA BOWLING

Band-e Amir, with its six lakes of crystal-clear water, is one of Afghanistan's most beautiful natural landscapes, and is soon to become its first national park.

## Protected areas

Several areas in the east-centre of Afghanistan have great potential as protected areas, offering habitat for wildlife and sanctuaries for migratory and breeding birds. They could also provide future tourist revenue, although security concerns and the sheer isolation of the sites have delayed their formal recognition.

## Wildlife

Afghanistan's wildlife heritage is under threat. Habitats for animals and plants are disappearing, and hunting pressure – though reduced – still takes a toll. Flamingos are no longer breeding successfully, and Siberian cranes have not been seen for twenty years. The Caspian tiger is considered extinct, and cheetah have not been seen here for decades. Other mammals such as the goat-like markhor are considered endemic and live only in Afghanistan and adjacent west Himalayan territories.



© UNEP/PETER ZÄHLER

UN expert holds up a golden eagle shot illegally in Bamiyan province.



© UNEP/CHRIS SHANK

Snow leopard skin in a Kabul fur shop.



BRENT HUFFMAN/ULTIMATEUNGLIATE

The markhor (*Capra falconeri*) lives only in Afghanistan and neighbouring territories, and is considered globally threatened.

### Finding refuge

The prospects for the wildlife of the remote Wakhan Corridor are more encouraging. The area escaped much of the recent conflict and is free of land mines. It is grazed by the yurt-dwelling Kyrgyz and Wakhi herders, and the local Wakhi have responded positively to recent calls by the Afghan Government to hand in arms and stop hunting. Moreover, the area borders Tajikistan, Pakistan and China, giving additional opportunity to migrate and find refuge to the region's snow leopards, Marco Polo sheep, wolves, brown bear and Asian ibex.



## Urban wastelands

In 2002, the quality of life in urban centres was on a downward spiral. War – and the poverty and displacement it caused – drove many people from the countryside into the cities. Others who had left the country as refugees began returning. This explosive growth of urban populations strained the already inadequate solid waste disposal facilities, while unregulated vehicle traffic and industrial development increased pollution of both water and air in cities. Medical wastes from hospitals was another serious health threat. In some cases, even human organs and syringes were discarded in accessible places, risking the spread of viral and bacterial diseases.

Today there are still no proper landfills in many cities, and none of the dumpsites are designed to prevent groundwater contamination or toxic air pollution from burning waste. Many dumpsites are located upstream of the cities, where heavy rains could wash the wastes back into populated areas. One such dumpsite is close to a well field used to draw drinking water for Kabul.

### Industrial poisons

There was virtually no management of hazardous chemicals in Afghanistan following the conflict. Nor was there any monitoring of pesticide residues in humans or in the environment.

Today water resources are still being polluted due to poor storage of these chemicals as well as indiscriminate disposal of untreated industrial effluents. In some aquifers the concentration of hazardous chemicals exceeds hygienic standards, and in parts of Kabul city pollutants make the water unsafe for consumption.

Pesticides such as DDT and benzene hexachloride were used intensively for locust control in the northern agricultural regions of the country for several decades. Lack of proper management of these persistent organic chemicals represents a potential threat to the health of humans and wildlife in these regions.



© UNEP/IMAL HASHIMI

Unregulated waste dumps contaminate groundwater and release toxic chemicals into the air.



© UNEP/SOREN HVLISHOLJ

The post-conflict assessment team discovered children exposed to toxic chemicals and heavy metals as they worked unprotected in Kabul factories.



# Meeting the challenges

The UNEP post-conflict environmental assessment revealed the severity of Afghanistan's environmental degradation, and warned of a future without water, forests, wildlife or clean air if these issues were not addressed in reconstruction efforts.

The assessment report contained 163 recommendations covering environmental legislation and enforcement, capacity-building, job creation, planning, environmental impact assessment

procedures, industry and trade, public participation and education, and participation in international environmental agreements.

The report also offered recommendations in relation to water supply, waste, hazardous wastes and chemicals, woodlands and forests, energy, air quality, wildlife and protected areas, desertification, and food and agricultural resources. It also identified concrete actions to rehabilitate specific urban and rural sites.



Environmental degradation must be reversed to ensure a future for Afghanistan's children.



## Three steps to recovery

In 2002, Three essential elements for environmental recovery were altogether lacking: structure, laws and capacity.

### Structure

First, Afghanistan had no governmental structure or institution dedicated to environmental concerns. The new government filled this void by creating a specific department to oversee the conservation of the environment and the sustainable development of Afghanistan's natural resources.

UNEP agreed to help train new staff and build the new institution from the ground up. The European Union and the Government of Finland offered to fund this ambitious project. UNEP thus helped mould and develop what was to become the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA).

### Law

Second, Afghanistan almost entirely lacked a modern environmental regulatory framework. There were no modern policies and laws on which to build a solid environmental management system.

UNEP set about filling this gap by assisting the government to develop the basic legal instruments for environmental management. The cornerstone is the Environment Law, which was developed with input from IUCN and was promulgated in its final parliament-approved form in early 2007. It provides a foundation on which other laws can be built, and is one of the UNEP programme's most visible and lasting legacies.

### Capacity

Afghanistan was left with very little human capacity to create a solid foundation for environmental management. UNEP and NEPA had to start from the beginning to develop the technical capacity needed.



© UNEP/BELINDA BOWLING

The Chair of the National Assembly's Environment Commission, Faizullah Zaki, addresses the members of the Commission during a UNEP workshop.

UNEP addressed this challenge in two ways: through specific capacity-building activities, and through a programme of mentoring counterpart staff.

Capacity-building soon became the centrepiece of UNEP's work in Afghanistan, underpinning and permeating all the others. It would allow NEPA to become a stand-alone and self-sufficient environmental administration, staffed with individuals capable of developing and implementing the new environmental laws and policies.

The UNEP Capacity-Building and Institutional Development for Environmental Management programme in Afghanistan, which has been running since 2003, consists of five main pillars:

- (1) environmental institutions and coordination;
- (2) environmental law and policy;
- (3) environmental impact assessment;
- (4) environmental information and education; and
- (5) community-based natural resources management.

## Environmental institutions and coordination

### Laying the groundwork

Environmental recovery and management require dedicated institutions to represent and advocate for the environment within political and governmental realms, and within society. This is a particular challenge for Afghanistan, where the development agenda is already overwhelmed by political and security considerations.

Given this context, the first step for UNEP and its Afghan partners was to build the basic environmental structures from the ground up, equip them with capacity and tools, give them regulatory teeth, and secure their seat at policy and coordination tables.

#### Building a structure

UNEP played a major role in guiding the creation of Afghanistan's institutional infrastructure for the environment – in particular the strengthening of the Department of Environment within the Ministry of Irrigation, Water Resources and Environment – and its eventual establishment as an independent National Environment Protection Agency (NEPA) through the civil service reform related Priority Reform and Restructuring



Dr Asif Zaidi of UNEP distributes kits for the measurement of ozone-depleting substances to Afghan trainees.



(PRR) processes. Today, UNEP operates principally with and through NEPA as Afghanistan's premier environmental policy-making and regulatory institution.

#### Setting the stage

Before starting its work, UNEP had to set up a functioning programme office, recruit and train staff, plan its programme, define administrative procedures, and procure equipment. Given the security conditions in Kabul, it also had to make special arrangements for staff security and transportation.

UNEP offered similar facilities to NEPA, setting up 14 offices, a conference room, an environmental library and a computer centre in the building they shared.

#### Recruiting the actors

UNEP's next step was to recruit a wide range of actors to the environmental cause, both within the Afghan government and among the international agencies already active in the country.

UNEP assisted NEPA in creating the National Environmental Advisory Council, a body of some 300 members that includes provincial and local authorities, religious leaders and others. UNEP has also assisted in the establishment of the inter-ministerial Committee for Environmental Coordination (CEC), as well as in the development of the National Environmental Strategy of Afghanistan, and ensured the integration of environmental considerations into the development process of Afghanistan's National Development Strategy (ANDS).

Whilst NEPA was the primary beneficiary institution during the early years, UNEP also worked closely with the Natural Resources Division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, which has



the primary mandate for the management of forests, rangelands, protected areas and wildlife, particularly in regard to law and policy, MEAs and community-based natural resource management.

## Learning by doing

At NEPA's request and under its guidance, UNEP experts have trained and mentored counterpart staff, provided technical assistance and advice on an as-needed basis, and supplied basic office and field equipment.

Rather than providing top-down advice, UNEP has adopted a 'learn-by-doing' approach to counterpart staff within NEPA, and empowered them to propose and implement Afghan solutions to the problems faced.

For example, 18 NEPA staff were selected to receive training in the fields of environmental law, environmental impact assessment (EIA) and multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), English, and computer science. Ten staff members also received generic environmental, library and Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

### National Ozone Unit

UNEP supported the creation of the Afghan National Ozone Unit within NEPA in 2004. The Unit has overall responsibility for implementing the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, through projects on institutional strengthening, a national phase-out plan, training in good refrigeration practices and training for customs officials.

In 2006 the Ozone Depleting Substances Trade Regulations came into force, the Ozone Programme submitted its annual consumption data of ozone depleting substances, and the Afghanistan Ozone Officer was awarded the "Best Implementer Award" by the Ozone Secretariat during the 20th anniversary celebrations and 19th Meeting of the Parties (MOP) of the Montreal Protocol in September 2007.

The Unit is currently developing its Phase-out Management Plan for hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs).



Female MPs attend a UNEP workshop. The National Assembly is one of the few Afghan institutions with relatively strong female representation.

training at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in the course of 2005.

Now that the institutional structures are in place and functioning, capacity-building is focused on assisting specific departments to implement their mandates, rather than on generic technical training. In 2008, for example, UNEP spent six months mentoring the International Affairs Division of NEPA through weekly half-day, interactive training sessions. Later in the year, the same training programme was implemented in respect of the Division of Implementation and Enforcement.

## Ensuring fairness and opportunity

UNEP has also felt the responsibility to create a good working environment within its offices in Kabul. Staff have been recruited according to UN principles of fairness and equality, given the training they needed and been offered opportunities for advancement. To encourage the participation of women in its work, and ensure that they are treated equally, UNEP organized initial sensitization training on gender issues for NEPA and UNEP staff. Each course was delivered in local languages by three trainers from the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) and had 20 participants (12 from NEPA and eight from UNEP).

## NEPA in the driver's seat

In the short time since it was established, NEPA has helped lay the groundwork for sustainable development in Afghanistan. Its approach has been to sow the seeds of a continuing effort through capacity-building, public awareness, education, and close cooperation among all those involved – NEPA staff, other government agencies, international partners, donor agencies, and other countries of the region and the world that share the same environmental challenges.

NEPA has:

- set up a body to coordinate the environmental work of various government ministries;
- reformed its structure to improve efficiency;
- helped develop the country's first environmental framework law;
- begun to fulfill its commitments with respect to multi-lateral environmental agreements;
- conducted outreach workshops on environmental law and policy;
- installed an EIA screening procedure for major industrial works and an approvals system for polluting industries;
- organized public information events throughout the country; and
- worked to create a national park system.



NEPA often sponsors events for World Environment Day.



Physical security is a concern for all Afghans.

## Security then and now

While environmental insecurity threatens the long-term health, well-being and livelihoods of Afghans, the more immediate lack of physical security greatly inhibits their daily activities, impeding social and economic development.

Security issues also compromise the effectiveness of UNEP's work, interfering with staff movements to and from the office and counterpart institutions, travel to the countryside, visits to protected areas, and contacts with local people. Health care facilities are strained, the safety of drinking water is questionable, food supply is limited in some areas, and nearly everyone suffers from psychological stress.

Although the situation has improved since the first UNEP assessment in 2002, it is not free of setbacks. The country continues to be plagued by improvised explosive devices (IEDs), rocket attacks, suicide bombings and abductions. More than 542 attacks were reported in Kabul in 2008, with an additional 4,400 nationwide during the same timeframe. Foreigners throughout the country continue to be targeted for violent attacks and kidnappings. National staff are subjected to intimidation, harassment and kidnapping for ransom. Carjackings, robberies, and violent crime also remain a problem.



# The many faces of insecurity

conflict



pollution



toxic wastes



water supply



unemployment



overcrowding



lawlessness



food scarcity



landmines



drug trade

weapons



# Back from the brink

Interview with Dr Asif Ali Zaidi

## What did you find when you arrived in Afghanistan?

The most striking feature was the destruction of institutions across Afghanistan. Whether community, state, or civil society institutions, they had either disappeared, changed their character or were weakened to the extreme. I was also alarmed at the dearth of adequately educated and trained people in Afghanistan, which was due to the massive emigration of the Afghan population and the poor state of the educational institutions they left behind.

The physical destruction of both the infrastructure and the natural landscape was staggering. We knew it would require a massive effort by the international community to support the nascent Government of Afghanistan as it simultaneously confronted immense challenges on a number of fronts – democratization, reconstruction, development and state-building. UNEP, as a member of the UN family, undertook to support the creation and strengthening of a new environmental administration, along with a policy and legislative framework to sustain it.

## What has UNEP done to help?

A great deal has been accomplished in the environmental sector over the last five years, thanks

largely to the support and guidance offered by UNEP. State institutions have emerged, including an active National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) and an active Natural Resources Division at the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock. A policy and legislative framework for environmental management have been created, including an umbrella Afghanistan Environment Law duly approved by the Parliament, approved policies on forestry and rangelands, environmental impact assessment, pollution control and other issues.

Perhaps most significantly, awareness of environmental issues has been raised, particularly among the younger generation, along with the realization of the nexus between natural resources and livelihoods.

## What was your greatest challenge as Programme Manager in Kabul?

The greatest professional challenge was to keep hope alive among the international and national staff of UNEP, despite the rapidly deteriorating security situation across Afghanistan. I was always telling the team, ‘remember where we were when we started in 2002, look where we are now, and imagine where we would be if we allowed defeatism to permeate our spirits’.



Born in Quetta, Pakistan, Dr Asif Ali Zaidi has been the Operations Manager of UNEP's Post-Conflict and Disaster Management Branch since September 2008. For more than four years prior to this, he was UNEP's Afghanistan Programme Manager. He is qualified as a medical doctor, and holds a Master's degree in Public Health from Leeds University, UK. He also studied at Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (USA), and Cranfield University School of Management (UK). Asif has more than two decades of experience in international development and environmental management in Iran, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and has held posts with the Government of Iran, the Aga Khan Development Network and IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature).



## What was your greatest personal challenge?

The challenge of working in Afghanistan is more psychological than physical. Worst of all is being away from our families while working in a war zone. We have to remain sane and focused on our work in spite of all the destruction and loss of human life around us. Our social life is extremely restricted, and we can't even hope for something as simple and pleasurable as a good walk. This takes an enormous toll.

## What were your first tasks when you arrived at the office?

The first task was to recruit new international and national staff and build a full team that could start implementing a three-year programme. We were looking for people with diverse backgrounds and skills. It wasn't easy as international agencies were competing very hard for the few competent national professionals left in the country.

## How has the staff situation evolved?

Amazingly, the international and national staff developed into a well-integrated and results-oriented team, ready to accept enormous challenges. Perhaps this was because every member of the team was hand-picked, and able to work within a non-hierarchical structure. The Programme Manager was only the 'first among equals', with no difference in status among the national and international staff. The working environment within the office, which was more Afghan than international – a blend of traditional values and modern work ethics – was also important.

## What do the Afghan people think of UNEP?

The nature of UNEP's work in Afghanistan allows only limited access to local people, generally through its Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) pilot projects. In these projects, UNEP is well-respected for its contribution to natural resource management and livelihoods at the local level. Among



UNEP awarded its team in Kabul the 2008 Baobab Team Award.

the international community in Afghanistan, UNEP is known for its results and high-quality outputs.

## What is UNEP's relationship with the government?

UNEP has always emphasized that the sole purpose of its presence in Afghanistan is to support the Government of Afghanistan to better protect the environment and natural resources. This approach is fully appreciated by the government. As a result, no initiative has been undertaken by UNEP without prior consultation and participation of the government.

## What has been your greatest personal satisfaction?

The greatest single moment was when the team received the Baobab Team Award for the successful institution-building and capacity-building programme in Afghanistan. I was also proud to have been a finalist for an individual Baobab award in the Best Manager category.

Another source of great joy has come from watching the personal and professional growth of our staff, particularly national staff. One of our former drivers is now our finance officer, thanks to a business management diploma he obtained with the help of UNEP through flexible working hours and partial tuition. Another driver was promoted to the position of office assistant. All of these people now have a much better chance at 'life-after-UNEP'.

## Environmental law and policy

### Establishing principles

Perhaps UNEP's most significant and lasting contribution to Afghanistan's long-term stability and development has been its work in environmental policy and law.

With help from IUCN, UNEP staff oversaw the drafting of the central framework legislation, the Environment Law, ratified by the Parliament in early 2007. Building on this foundation, UNEP has been assisting with the drafting, consultation and legislative processing of a community-based forest law; a groundbreaking law on rangeland management; laws on water, hunting and wildlife management, and medicinal plants; and environmental regulations governing ozone, environmental impact assessment, and protected areas.

In cooperation with NEPA, UNEP has organized regional environmental law and policy workshops in all regions of the country in which the UN can safely operate. Their purpose has been to provide relevant stakeholders – government officials, local NGOs, community leaders, and others – with an introduction to environmental law, what it seeks to achieve, and what laws are in the pipeline.

UNEP is also providing technical support to the Natural Resources Division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL), in regard to environmental law and policy, to help MAIL to:

- increase capacity to manage protected areas and enforce natural resource legislation;
- develop natural resource laws, regulations and policies;
- aid the establishment and effective functioning of the Protected Areas Central Management Authority under the Environment Law; and
- develop community-based natural resource legislation for the forestry and rangeland sectors.



Cedar beam in Jalalabad timber market: UNEP is providing technical support to develop natural resource laws, regulations and policies, and building the capacity to enforce them.

Afghanistan now has many of the basic structures, policies and laws on which to build a solid environmental management programme, and is fast developing the capacity to maintain and enforce them.

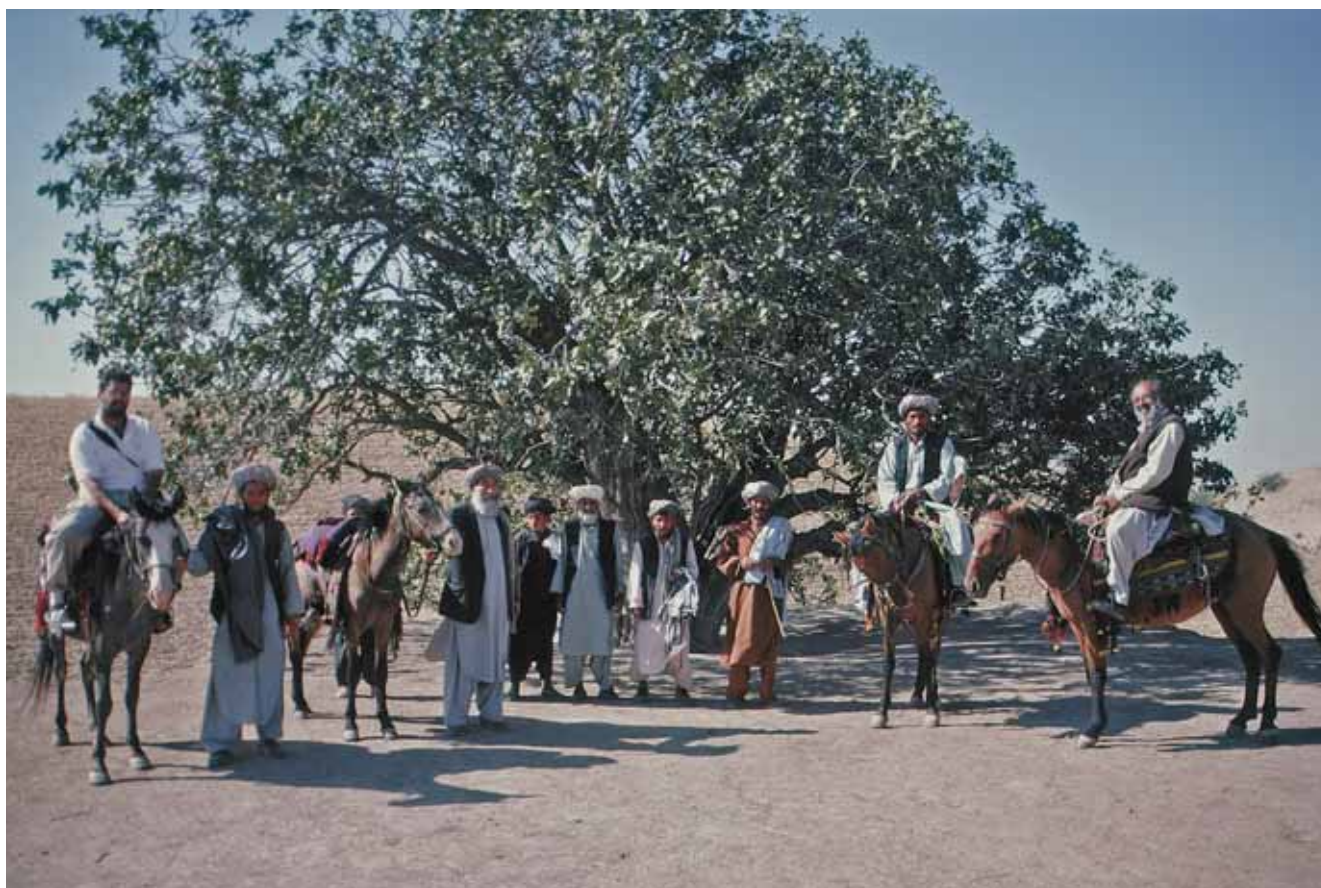
### Signing on to the MEAs

UNEP has also helped the government accede to key multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). Focusing initially on selected biodiversity-related conventions, UNEP set up a Steering Committee and a Working Group for each, and worked side by side with them to identify priorities, develop methodologies, design pilot projects, produce reports and generally prepare them to take full responsibility as soon as possible.



UNEP has provided specific assistance related to:

- training and technical support to NEPA and the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock in project development, legal harmonization, and reporting related to the implementation of the conventions;
  - fulfilling the administrative obligations of each convention in order to become eligible to receive technical and financial assistance;
  - setting up the appropriate MEA institutional structure within NEPA;
  - preparing a National Capacity Needs Self-Assessment for Global Environmental Management
- and a National Adaptation Programme of Action for Climate Change related to the MEAs;
  - procedures for accession to additional multilateral environmental agreements, including Ramsar and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS);
  - developing GEF (Global Environment Facility) projects, including enabling activities under Rio Conventions;
  - ensuring the participation of Afghan officials in various conferences and technical meetings of the conventions; and
  - workshops and training sessions for counterpart staff on specific MEAs.



UNEP is committed to consulting all stakeholders, including community leaders, when assisting with the drafting of environmental legislation. Pictured: a UNEP team and local experts collect at the foot of a sacred pistachio tree protected by local communities.

## Environmental impact assessment

### Getting the picture

Polluted air, solid waste dumps, contaminated drinking water and exposure to industrial chemicals were among the many environmental threats identified by UNEP's post-conflict assessment published in 2003.

Environmental impact assessment (EIA) procedures are being used to integrate environmental considerations into Afghanistan's infrastructure projects, from transportation and energy to sanitation and water. EIA can also be applied to protected area management and ecotourism development, and can help identify environmentally sensitive areas threatened by expanding settlements and population growth.

UNEP has been helping NEPA to integrate EIA within its pollution control and management efforts. A first step was to develop guidelines for screening of projects and an approvals system for dealing with polluting industries. UNEP has provided training and technical support to



Portable equipment is useful for monitoring water samples throughout the country.



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Toxic air pollution is a growing problem as Afghanistan urbanizes, making regular monitoring a necessity.

NEPA counterpart staff, in both theoretical concepts and knowledge and practical 'hands on' approaches to project implementation. NEPA is now helping other ministries and departments to carry out EIAs for themselves – a prime example of 'learning by doing'.

So far, an EIA Policy has been approved by the Government of Afghanistan, and EIA administrative guidelines and regulations are in place. A pollution control policy paper is nearing completion, and work has started on a waste management policy and on environmental quality standards for air, water and





An assessment team identifies waterfowl from the dry surface of the Ab-e Estada National Waterfowl and Flamingo Sanctuary.

pollution control. Finally, a survey was completed to identify the types of industrial chemicals currently in use in the country.

### Trustworthy data

Sound environment policy must be based on scientific data collected from reliable environmental monitoring systems. In post-conflict Afghanistan, the lack of technical capacity in the area of data collection and analysis was a major stumbling block for environmental recovery.

The UNEP Regional Resource Centre for Asia and the Pacific (RRC.AP) and the Asian Institute of Technology have taken on the task of raising the level of environmental reporting in Afghanistan, offering training for potential NEPA counterpart staff in environmental

monitoring, information management, analysis and reporting.

The programme has also produced:

- guidelines and a training manual on drafting a National Environmental Policy;
- training and guidelines for the State of Environment report process;
- training and guidelines on data collection for the Environmental Database Framework;
- intensive English language training;
- library training and a fully furnished environmental library; and
- GIS training and a fully equipped GIS laboratory in NEPA.

## Environmental information and education

### Spreading the word

When UNEP completed its post-conflict environmental assessment in 2002, environmental education and awareness were essentially non-existent. Educational opportunities of any kind were scarce, and there were no professional environmental training facilities. Additionally, public awareness campaigns on environmental issues were very rare.

NEPA and UNEP realized that if Afghanistan was to develop the capacity required to meet its environmental challenges, new opportunities at all levels of society were needed for people to acquire environmental knowledge, skills, and understanding, and apply them to all aspects of their professional and personal lives.

The ultimate goal was to produce environmentally aware and active citizens, whether government officials, managers, business people, teachers, farmers, or parents.

Over the years, such efforts have included:

- a State of the Environment Report for Afghanistan;
- a UNEP environmental awareness-raising strategy for Afghanistan;
- attendance of NEPA staff at international conferences;
- technical assistance to NEPA staff responsible for communications, outreach and education;
- a six-week environmental journalism training course for professional journalists, photojournalists and subsequent trainers, with additional training workshops on environmental reporting;
- a handbook for Afghan journalists on environmental reporting;
- an environmental education needs assessment for Afghanistan;



In 2008 UNEP and NEPA published an updated assessment on the state of Afghanistan's environment.

- a report on best international practice related to raising public awareness on environmental issues through formal and informal means;
- awareness-raising events, including observance of World Environment Day, Ozone Day, Day to Combat Desertification and other international environmental observances;
- information materials for schools and the wider public, including posters, brochures, information leaflets on wildlife, rangelands, wastewater and solid waste; and
- support for the organization of two 'Environment Friendly Mountaineering Courses' implemented by Mountain Wilderness International (MWI).

Today the demand for environmental information continues to grow, with requests received from all segments of society – from government officials to the public. UNEP and NEPA are embracing this opportunity, and will continue to work with local partners to develop the capacity of Afghans to meet this demand themselves.





Over the last six years, UNEP has worked to help Afghans become more environmentally aware and active citizens.

## Community-based natural resource management

### Bridging the gap

With a new infrastructure in place, laws and guidelines written, information campaigns launched and reports published, the time has come to bring concrete improvements to people's lives. This is being accomplished in Afghanistan through community-based natural resource management (CBNRM). The programme consists of pilot projects which show how to improve local lives and livelihoods through such activities as installing solar panels, planting trees and managing water and rangelands.

This work is just beginning in Afghanistan, but is set to become a major part of the programme. NEPA is committed to the process, and UNEP and other international partners are helping to identify best practices and pilot projects across the country.

Some progress has already been made:

- Six pilot CBNRM projects have been completed: on water resource rehabilitation, disaster mitigation, irrigation canal reparations, water conservation and fruit and nut-tree development in two districts of Herat province;

- Two solar household electrification projects have been carried out in remote rural households in villages in Badakhshan and Bamiyan provinces;
- The Department of Forestry is considering how to incorporate CBNRM in its natural resource laws and policies, such as the Forest Law, Rangeland Law and Protected Areas Regulations;
- UNEP is working with the Natural Resources Division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Live-stock (MAIL) to incorporate the lessons learned in its field-level CBNRM projects into law and policy at the national level; and
- UNEP and MAIL have conducted a mission with officials from the Ministry of Agriculture to Bamiyan Province to discuss the new Rangeland Law with local communities.

Approaching communities can be a delicate matter. Project managers must thoroughly understand the historical, social, cultural, political and ecological context, and see that outstanding conflicts between resource users are resolved. By bringing community





members together to work on issues of common need and interest, however, CBNRM has proven to be an effective post-conflict reconstruction tool that can restore trust and cultural cohesion.

### Protecting Afghanistan's natural wealth

UNEP is providing support to the Government of Afghanistan to set up a network of protected areas within Afghanistan. So far, draft protected areas regulations have proceeded through stakeholder consultation and submission to the Ministry of Justice for review. A biodiversity profile of Afghanistan has also been produced, which identifies Afghanistan's ecological hotspots and conservation potential, and recommends steps to strengthen the network of protected areas and support community-based natural resource management. Draft management plans for Dasht-e Nawar Flamingo and Waterfowl Sanctuary, Kole Hashmat Khan Wetlands, Band-e Amir National Park and Ajar Valley have already been developed.



Community reforestation project near Bamiyan, Afghanistan.

UNEP has also worked with the government, local communities and international partners towards the declaration of Afghanistan's first national park, namely the Band-e Amir National Park. This should occur in early 2009. The lessons learnt from this project, which is the first significant protected area to be established in Afghanistan, will feed into the protected areas component of UNEP's programme in 2009 and 2010.



© UNEP/LEFT TO RIGHT: NAJIB AMIRI, ERIN HANNAN, KABEER HAQMAL, MOHAMMED SHAFIQ POPAL, ERIN HANNAN, KOEN TOONEN, WAKIL KAHSAR, MOHAMMED SHAFIQ POPAL

# A place at the table

Interview with Mark Halle

## What is your overall evaluation of UNEP's work in Afghanistan?

With some minor qualifications, I'd say that the programme has succeeded beyond all expectations. The UNEP team in Kabul has achieved a great deal under particularly difficult circumstances and as a result, is held in high regard by every segment of the community I dealt with.

## What were the keys to that success?

In my view, there are four main factors of success:

First, UNEP had a coherent strategy. It made a point of ensuring that environment was built into every level of Afghanistan's development planning processes, from the Constitution to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, and the various UN-wide and agency programmes in Afghanistan.

Second, UNEP made a series of important tactical choices, including making sure that capacity-building was a central element in all its work. The team chose to focus on building a solid framework of policies, laws and regulations on the environment, and to match those both with the creation or strengthening of institutions to ensure that they would not remain on paper, and with human capacity to ensure that they could be implemented by Afghan experts and professionals.

Third, the programme was flexible enough to respond to changing needs and circumstances. UNEP works



UNEP and NEPA organized a debate competition for World Environment Day 2007, a contribution to awareness-raising and capacity building efforts.

beyond Kabul as well, and is able to move into a region when circumstances permit, but also to withdraw when they do not, supporting local organizations to the maximum extent from the capital.

Finally – and critically – UNEP was present, consistently, positively, reliably and at just the right time. The classical approach of consultant missions and training jaunts for Afghans abroad would not have worked. Instead, UNEP is there, on the ground, literally next door to its principal counterpart, NEPA.

## What was the purpose of your review?

Besides reviewing the capacity-building programme, I was asked to identify the lessons learned that might be applied to UNEP's work in other post-conflict situations.

Mark Halle is Executive Director of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)-Europe and IISD's Global Director for Trade and Investment. Prior to joining IISD, he worked as Policy Director for IUCN, and was the founder and first Chairman of the Board of the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD). In early 2008, he was asked by UNEP to review the Capacity-Building and Institutional Development for Environmental Management Programme in Afghanistan.





After all, UNEP is not an organization with a long history of on-the-ground operational activities. Yet the requirements of post-conflict environmental rebuilding mean that it is in increasing demand to ensure that environmental values can be preserved in the sometimes anarchical post-conflict situation, and that it becomes a source of positive action as the country begins to rebuild.

### **Why was timing so important?**

UNEP sent in its assessment team just as Afghanistan emerged from a brutal civil war followed by a period of Taliban dominance. In doing so, it was able to introduce environment as one of the essential building blocks of peace. The team laid the groundwork for setting post-conflict environmental priorities.

UNEP also managed to get an environmental foot in the door at a time of exceptionally high donor interest.

### **What were some of the major constraints?**

UNEP's role in Afghanistan is centred on development and, more precisely, on ensuring that the environment is able to sustain the country's development for the foreseeable future.

Unfortunately there are powerful competing agendas in Afghanistan, most notably the political and security agendas. These overlapping agendas greatly complicate everything UNEP tries to do. The acceptance of UNEP in Afghanistan and the widespread admiration for its work stem in significant measure from the skill with which it has avoided becoming entrapped by either the political or security agendas.

Another problem was lack of reliable support from UNEP itself. Since long-term, on-the-ground operations represent a new departure for UNEP, it is critical that its human resources, administrative and financial systems be adapted to provide timely and appropriate support to those countries – like Afghanistan – in which it is engaged at the ground level.



Gateway to the future: UNEP's role is to ensure that Afghanistan's development can be sustained.

### **Are the lessons learned in Afghanistan applicable to other post-conflict situations?**

Many of them are. We have seen how important it was to underpin every aspect of UNEP's work with some form of capacity-building. Similarly, the early focus on developing environmental policy and law will pay off handsomely in the medium and long term.

Helping the country develop a strong central environmental administration was also a good decision, as it offered UNEP a strong base from which to influence policy and action across the whole spectrum of government and donor activity.

Another strategy that paid off was to mainstream the environment at all policy levels at once. As a result, the environment is now an integral part of the new constitution, the national budget, the national development strategy, and of development planning and programming at all levels of the international community.

Thanks to these key decisions, UNEP has a place at the table whenever development policy and practice is discussed, and the environment is always on the radar screen.

## Conclusions

# Building on our achievements

UNEP's objective in Afghanistan is long-term: to create a truly lasting foundation for environmental management and sustainable development. In its first six years the programme has surprised many observers by its record of success and lasting commitment in the most difficult of circumstances.

**Phase 1 (2002-2003)** produced an assessment of the post-conflict environmental situation in Afghanistan, and developed an action plan for addressing the key issues.

**Phase 2 (2003-2007)** focused on building the basic infrastructure and capacity required for effective environmental management at the national level. It produced an institutional structure for NEPA, an Environment Law and associated regulations, policy papers on EIA and pollution control, government-level environmental coordination groups, community-based resource management projects, awareness-raising of environmental issues through the training of journalists and the development of educational materials, and progress in the implementation of several multilateral environmental agreements.

**Phase 3 (2008-2010):** At the request of NEPA and with funding from the European Commission, the UNEP Programme for Afghanistan has been extended to a third phase.

The programme will continue to assist national environmental authorities in implementing their plans and projects nation-wide. While the first two phases focused primarily on the central government, the third will reach out to the provincial and local levels to further the processes of environmental restoration and community-based management.

In addition, UNEP will support the Natural Resources Division (NRD) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation

and Livestock to further build its capacity related to environmental law and policy. Plans include the establishment and mentoring of a Protected Areas Central Management Authority under regulations of the Environment Law, as well as improving the NRD's capacity to develop community-based natural resource management at the field level, and breathe life into the new community-based laws and policies.

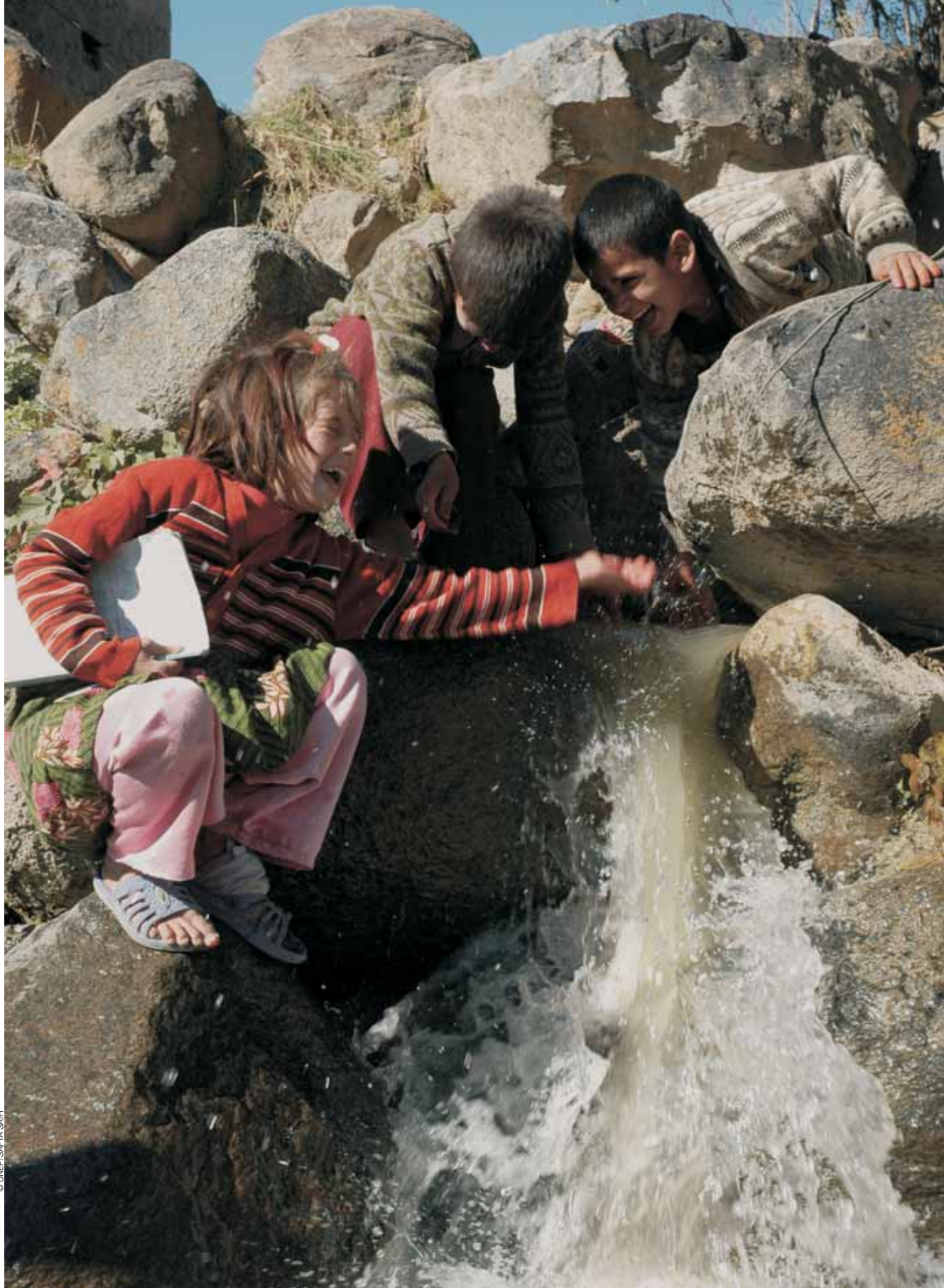
UNEP will also continue to work with and through NEPA to accomplish the agency's five-year goals. NEPA plans to put in place new regulations and management services for the protection of air and water quality, waste management, pollution control, and natural resource management. It will further strengthen its technical capacity, expand its environmental awareness campaigns, and ensure that environmental issues are thoroughly integrated into governmental programmes and policies. Enforcement of the regulatory framework, especially at the provincial level, is another key goal.

## As long as it takes

UNEP will stay in Afghanistan as long as it is needed – a commitment unprecedented in its history. UNEP will take the programme forward to a point where it can be turned over to others who will perpetuate it, both within the Afghan community and among its international partners.

Given that peace is still fragile, and the country's new institutions are continually challenged, the duration of this commitment is as yet unclear. But UNEP is gaining as much as it is giving, and learning invaluable lessons for its work in conflict and disaster management worldwide.





## Acknowledgements

### Strong partnerships

UNEP's work in Afghanistan is only possible thanks to the strong support and cooperation of a wide range of donor governments and partner institutions.

Since the start of its activities in Afghanistan in 2002, UNEP has benefited from the generous financial support of the European Commission, which is also a major direct contributor to the capacity-building programme, as well as the governments of Canada, Finland, Luxembourg and Switzerland and the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

Foremost among UNEP's partners have been the environment-related agencies of the Government of Afghanistan – primarily NEPA and the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

UNEP operates within the UNDAF, the development assistance framework which guides all the agencies of the UN family in their work in Afghanistan. In addition, UNEP is one of the six UN partners in the Joint Programme on Green Afghanistan Initiative (GAIN), which include the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

UNEP also co-chairs the Biodiversity Coordination Group (which includes all of the above-mentioned agencies), and chairs the Rangeland Coordination Working Group.

Other international partnerships include:

- cooperation with the UNOPS/Afghan Conservation Corps (ACC) on environmental education and awareness activities (such as World Environment Day), and provincial outreach;
- work with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on the Afghanistan National Development Strategy

(ANDS), the National Capacity Needs Self-Assessment for Global Environmental Management (NCSA) and National Adaptation Plan of Action (NAPA) projects, and on development of projects for GEF funding related to sustainable land management and the Sistan Basin wetlands;

- collaboration with FAO on the drafting of forest law and rangeland law, in particular FAO's SALEH (Sustainable Agricultural Livelihoods in Eastern Hazarajat) project on rangelands in the central highlands; and
- work with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) on parks and protected areas, including Band-e Amir National Park, and on the development of biodiversity-related legislation, community consultations and capacity-building of Afghan institutions for the enforcement of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

UNEP is also a participating organization with an advisory role in a joint programme entitled Strengthened Approach for the Integration of Sustainable Environmental Management in Afghanistan, which is being implemented by UNDP and FAO and is funded by the global Spanish MDG (Millennium Development Goals) Fund. The project is designed to promote a strengthened approach for the integration of sustainable environmental management into national sectoral strategies and their implementation, capacity- and institution-building of relevant government counterparts in order to operationalize the environmental concerns reflected in the national strategies and contribute directly to the environmentally sustainable development of Afghanistan.

UNEP also works with several international NGOs active in Afghanistan, including the Wildlife Conservation Society, Norwegian Church Aid, Solidarités and GERES – Renewable Energy and Solidarity Group, as well as a range of national and local Afghan NGOs.



## About UNEP's Disasters and Conflicts Programme

From Kosovo to Afghanistan, Lebanon, Sudan or China, UNEP has responded to crisis situations in more than 25 countries since 1999. As the international community has shifted its focus from post-crisis intervention to crisis prevention, UNEP has expanded its operational range, adding disaster risk reduction and environmental cooperation to its core services of environmental assessment and recovery.

UNEP's Medium Term Strategy (MTS) for 2010-2013 designates "Disasters and Conflicts" as one of the organization's six priority areas of work. This theme will accordingly become fully integrated across the different divisional and regional offices of the organization by 2010, with a transition phase in 2009. The new UNEP Disasters and Conflicts sub-programme is comprised of three operational pillars: post-crisis environmental assessment, post-crisis environmental recovery, and risk reduction. The Post-Conflict and Disaster Management Branch is tasked with coordinating the theme across UNEP.

*UNEP's objective in Afghanistan is long-term: to create a truly lasting foundation for environmental management and sustainable development. In its first six years the programme has surprised many observers by its record of success and lasting commitment in the most difficult of circumstances.*

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