In Afghanistan, paving the way for a decent future

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Bas Athmer, a soft-spoken, slim Dutchman with visionary plans and good memory for details, does not disguise easily among the streets of Kabul. In spite of his low public profile, Bas – as everyone calls him – is one of the most after sought expatriates involved in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. And this does not come as a surprise when considering that he manages on behalf of the ILO the largest national reconstruction programme active in Afghanistan. He moves constantly among public offices coordinating the activities of the “National Emergency Employment Programme” (NEEP) which is now worth over 200 million US dollars.

Bas, altogether with other ILO experts in charge of crisis response and reconstruction, in a few months of negotiations managed to persuade officials from the World Bank, the European Union and several bilateral donors that the new Afghan infrastructure needs to be planned according to strategies leading towards employment creation. Building infrastructures such as roads, channel, bridges or aqueducts is an essential phase of redevelopment for a country which has been at war and isolated for 25 years.

The Government of Afghanistan has chosen, already from the immediate post-conflict rehabilitation phase, to go along the recommend path indicated by the ILO. Labour-based programmes were therefore been given priority and it was decided that investment policies and strategies needed to be adopted in order to amalgamate the interventions of twelve different ministries, all concerned with development and public works.

After the success of the start-up emergency employment phase, funded by the crisis response programme of ILO, Bas found himself in the unique position of a special advisor to the leading Afghan ministries involved in the reconstruction process. He will now have about two years to invest 1.7 million US dollars to set up a managerial apparatus allowing for
effective planning and monitoring of the development of the country’s rural public and productive infrastructure. The ILO chief technical advisor and his team will also establish norms, construction and employment standards which will regulate public works assuring that they will correspond to adequate criteria. As Bas remarks: “It is relatively easy to rebuild a road putting people off the streets and giving them shovels and hammers. The difficult part comes if you expect that the same road will be passable in a six months time”. Therefore it will be essential to put in place a quality control system and viable method to contract and sub-contract public works.

The quality of the road is important, but job quality is of possibly greater concern to Bas. Decent work, through respect of labour standards, is a prerequisite for a long term job creation and positive impact on people’s life. Whilst the NEEP is an emergency programme, it is intended to be the start of a development process applying technology and solutions to employment creation which have lasting effects. Also social protection will be taken into proper account and special attention will be given to vulnerable and deprived people with the provision of employment opportunities. The development of monitoring and evaluation systems with a focus on employment and poverty alleviation will be essential tools in this approach to be enhanced in the future.

Women will also be offered a chance to work in reconstructing the public infrastructure. This is not an easy task, as Bas points out, but practical solutions can be found to overcome cultural sensitivities. “For instance- Bas argues - when necessary we will make it possible for women to work in separate compounds and the materials and tools will be brought to them. It is very important, especially for the many widows of this country to sustain themselves and equal opportunities must be given”.

Economic opportunities will be offered to the poorest among the Afghan population and access to work will be provided through employment schemes to be adopted at district level. A particular challenge will be the development of the technical and managerial capability of a new Afghan generation which suffered from isolation and foreign dependency. Through the NEEP, the basis for a new class of managers and information technology experts will be founded.

The greatest advantage of using the labour-based methods proposed by the ILO will be the creation of regular jobs especially for unskilled workers. But also the empowerment of individuals and communities will be a beneficial side-effect contributing to build peace and fostering social cohesion. Another indirect consequence of the public works promoted under the regulations and methods proposed by the ILO will be the reactivation of local economies. Following the infrastructure development, new markets will be opened and ancillary activities will also flourish.

Among the realizations which Bas points out as first priority of the NEEP, there will be the provision of drinking water, besides the construction of clinics and schools in each district. The ILO assistance to planning and development of guidelines will also help in coordinating the activities of the many international organizations working in the field, in order to avoid dispersion of resources and duplication of efforts.

Over the past 25 years, it has been proven that, given the same amount of financial investment, labour-based methods generate two to four times the number of jobs of capital intensive, equipment-based methods. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that it is essential
to recuperate the traditional construction methods which also assure an easier and less expensive maintenance. “For instance – Bas says- ILO is proposing to use cobble stones for repaving the streets in Kabul. Stones are in fact easy to find in Afghanistan and are more durable than graveling or even asphalt. The same principle applies for walls which need to be erected to stabilize roads or embankments; there is no need to build concrete walls, when the same result can be obtained with simple stones”.

The cheaper technology tested in many countries around the world by the ILO is making a breakthrough in Afghanistan. A major challenge is now to bring appropriate technology and local participation into being in Afghanistan where international competition for major rebuilding contracts using foreign technology and expertise is rather the rule of the game. Bas and the other ILO experts have proven that the high-tech approach does not pay off when people need a job to live decently. Paving the way for a brighter future depends once more on the human factor.

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