

JDA collaborates with Afghans on health, ag projects and more

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Joint Development Associates International/Special to the Daily Sentinel
The Joint Development International has built or sealed wells in a number of Afghan provinces to help make the water safer. These two Afghan girls carry water buckets.

Change came slowly.

The farmers, at first, were suspicious of the two-wheeled Chinese tractors that supposedly could take the place of oxen. It took almost five years to convince them that this machine, with its four attachments, could till and seed one hectare of land in a tenth of the time it took oxen.

Change came slowly, but it came. And that was just one. There were the strawberries and the wells, the repair shops and the hand-washing stations, the university-level composting classes and the bio-sand water filters.

Change came and it continues, a partnership between the people of central Asia and Joint Development Associates International. The Grand Junction-based nonprofit organization began in Uzbekistan and currently works in

Afghanistan, collaborating with the Afghan people on education, agriculture, health, development and humanitarian projects.

The work focuses there, said Bob Hedlund, JDA founder, because the need is there. And since entering Afghanistan in 2001, JDA has become one of the most respected non-governmental organizations in the country, partnering with Afghanistan's Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Health.

Hedlund, who grew up in Telluride and graduated from Colorado School of Mines, founded JDA because he fell in love with central Asia. Prior to traveling there, he spent more than 20 years in mining throughout the West, but eventually wishing for new horizons.

"I'm the type of individual who loves a challenge," he explained.

In 1992, the company for which he was working sent him to Uzbekistan, which had won independence from the Soviet Union only the previous year. It was there that he fell in love with the people and cultures of central Asia. That same year, he and his wife, Cathy, and their two children moved to Uzbekistan.

Initially, they established English programs in eight universities. Because of his background in mining, the government officials he met began taking him into more remote areas of the country, where he not only observed the environmental devastation wrought by the Soviets, but "I really saw poverty for the first time," he said. "Being an American, you never really see poverty like you see there."

Compelled by what he saw in those extremely rural areas, Hedlund founded JDA and registered — via fax — for nonprofit status. He called on friends and colleagues from the Colorado School of Mines to sit on its board, and set to work.

First, as with all JDA projects, he consulted with village elders about what the pressing needs were. So, JDA's first project in Uzbekistan was leprosy eradication.

"It's a socio-economic disease with roots in poverty," Hedlund explained. "They were very afraid of it and put people who got it in quarantined villages. Uzbekistan was so isolated for so long, and the Soviets wouldn't let medicine in, so leprosy went rampant."

JDA partnered with British and Indian leprosy missions to train more than 500 Uzbek doctors in treating the disease. Within seven years, the Uzbekistan Ministry of Health had appointed a chief leprologist and the country's laws were changed so that people could stay in their homes if they contracted the disease.

Hedlund's work took him into ever more remote areas, where he saw the need for economic stimulus. Following the Grameen Bank model, JDA began offering microcredit loans, ultimately giving out about 3,000 — 75 percent of which were to women — with a more than 95 percent repayment rate.

JDA also began water and agriculture projects, including a poultry program in which families bought between 70 to 100 chicks, received training in how to raise them and, after 45 days, sold them and repaid JDA for the cost of the birds.

"They got a two or three times return on their investment, and they also had education and a skill," Hedlund said. "It's always been important to (JDA) that we don't give anything away, that people feel like partners and that they're earning their success."

Ultimately, JDA had 150 Uzbek staff and 70 Westerners working on its various projects, but was forced out of the country by the Uzbek government in 2006.

In 2001, when a bridge over the Amu Darya River between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan reopened, JDA began working in Afghanistan. The organization followed the same pattern as it had in Uzbekistan: make contacts in villages and ask the elders what was needed.

"The first thing they asked us was to build schools," Hedlund said. "They wanted schools, especially to educate the girls."

By that time, the Northern Alliance had essentially routed the Taliban from northern Afghanistan, so though the area was devastated, Hedlund said he never felt in danger there.



Joint Development Associates International/Special to the Daily Sentinel
It took nearly five years for Joint Development Associates International to convince Afghan farmers that this two-wheeled Chinese tractor could till and seed 1 hectare in a tenth of the time it took oxen. Now farmers use the tractors as makeshift taxis when not in the field.

JDA began building schools, including one in Fayzabad to which families from 20 villages send about 2,000 children.

Establishing a headquarters in Mazar-e Sharif, JDA began working in five Afghan provinces building or sealing wells to make the water safer, teaching farming methods and helping establish more drought-resilient crops, including mung beans, safflower and new varieties of rice and wheat.

Agriculture programs are currently funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, a government entity, and private individuals, civic groups and foundations for all other program activity and administrative overhead. JDA bought 5 acres outside Mazar-e Sharif and established a training center. Among the innovations was bringing strawberries from the University of California-Davis and establishing them as a cash crop. They'd never before been grown in that region, Hedlund said, and have become popular.

Changes in agriculture have reduced the amount of opium poppies grown in the north by 90 percent, he said.

The Chinese tractors, such a source of suspicion at first, are another tremendous innovation. JDA imports them from China and sells them on credit for \$4,000, which includes four attachments. The farmers repay JDA as their yield increases, or as they use the tractor for a makeshift taxi in the off-season, Hedlund said. JDA also trained mechanics and established 35 mechanic shops in the five provinces to service the tractors.

Hedlund said that of all JDA's projects in Afghanistan, he's most excited about the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WaSH) education program and the Birth Life Saving Skills (BLISS) program.

Afghanistan has the second-highest infant mortality rate in the world, he said. Just 23 percent of the country's people have access to safe water and 12 percent have access to adequate sanitation. Also, 54 percent of girls under 18 are married, and 90 percent of all births happen at home.

So, the WaSH and BLISS programs teach hygiene and first-aid skills, often through pictures because 90 percent of Afghan women are illiterate.

Through the programs, JDA along with local partners in each village has established hand-washing stations outside latrines, created hygiene education programs in schools and established a program to bring bio-sand water filters to villages. The filters cost \$22, but if people attend a 10-week hygiene and sanitation course, the price drops to \$14.

The goal, Hedlund said, is to reach more and more people. JDA's 70 Afghan staff continue creating relationships village by village, he said, slowly expanding, daily bringing change.