

Dahla Bridge Rehabilitation

Rebuilding Rural Livelihoods in Afghanistan
through Public Infrastructure



June 2023
Shah Wali Kot District, Kandahar

Dahla Bridge: Vital connection of rural communities

Shah Wali Kot District is situated approximately 50 kilometres from Kandahar City in Southern Afghanistan. Here, a large majority (80%) of local residents rely on rural livelihoods – primarily fig production and livestock rearing – for their subsistence and income. The district is home to Dahla Dam, which was built on the Arghandab River in the 1950s prior to the turmoil that evolved over the following decades, including not least the Soviet Union occupation from 1979-1989 and the subsequent civil war.

Dahla is known as the second largest dam in the country. Through a network of canals, it provides access to vital irrigation water for farming communities in Kandahar City and Arghandab, Panjwayee, Dand, Daman, and Zhery districts. It also enables forests and greenery to flourish – benefitting the local population as well as the thousands of tourists who visit Dahla Park and the dam over the weekend for picnics, sightseeing, and other recreational activities.

In the past, Dahla Bridge eased transportation to the provincial city centre and other areas. This changed since it collapsed during the escalation of conflict in 2021 after sustaining damage from mine explosions, creating a significant barrier for communities to access markets and services that are essential for both their livelihoods and basic needs.



Photo 1. The collapse of Dahla Bridge, Shah Wali Kot District of Kandahar Province, September 15, 2022.

When DRC spoke to community members of Shah Wali Kot, residents voiced the importance and urgency of rehabilitating the bridge due to the lack of safe alternative routes for public transportation between the district and Kandahar City, as well as areas around the dam, Dahla Park, and adjacent villages. Mines are reportedly embedded in the surrounding highlands, making it dangerous for those who attempt to travel through alternative mountainous routes.

After the bridge collapsed, residents were unable to cross the river, transport their harvest to the market for vending, or access medical care in a timely manner. It also impacted access to basic services such as education. Dahla Park and the dam, which were historically popular attractions among residents and local tourists, saw a substantial reduction in visitors (66%) due to the lack of safe passage.

With the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Afghanistan under the framework of the Area-Based Approach for Development Emergency Initiative (ABADEI), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) temporarily employed 46 economically vulnerable community members to reconstruct the bridge.

Building back better – with local engagement and participation

The group of residents worked over a period of four months through a Cash-for-Work (CfW) scheme, under the monitoring and supervision of the DRC engineers, to reconstruct the bridge – which spans 21 metres in length and five meters in width. In a context of widespread unemployment and limited income generation opportunities, participants explained that this initiative brought their families immediate economic relief and had far-reaching benefits for their communities and the broader population. Through their employment, they became instrumental in reviving access to markets, healthcare, and other basic services and restoring local tourism in the area.

The reconstruction of the bridge, which now connects six areas of Shah Wali Kot District and Dahla Dam with Kandahar City, is also expected to pave the way for future development interventions. With most of the required construction materials sold in markets along the western part of the river, the Water Irrigation Department explained how they were unable to expand the dam to benefit additional communities. Upon the reconstruction of the bridge, they are now seeking funding to do so thanks to renewed access to the market.



Photo 2 – Left: CfW participants remove the destroyed bridge, December 11, 2022. Photo 3 – Right: Reconstructing the foundation of Dahla Bridge, January 4, 2023.

Community Accounts

Payenda Mohammad, a resident of Shah Wali Kot district, reported improved perceptions of safety and connectivity this intervention:

“If water levels were too high to cross the river, locals were forced to take long and dangerous routes to reach Kandahar city. After the bridge was destroyed, we could not get injured or sick patients to hospitals in time. Commuting was very difficult, and we wouldn't travel to the city unless we really had to. With the construction of this bridge, we can again commute comfortably to Kandahar City, which now requires a much shorter distance and time.”

Abdul Baqi, another resident of Shawali Kot District, shared a similar experience:

“We sometimes had to travel to Kandahar City via mountainous routes when the river was high. The road is so bad, making the commute to the city very difficult. I am happy that our challenges in moving and accessing the main markets and cities were heard. In the past, travelling to Kandahar City during the night was simply impossible. Now, we can go there anytime we want.”

Taj Mohammad Seerat, a resident of Kandahar City, welcomes the renewed access to Dahla Dam and acknowledges the importance of mobility, and particularly so among rural communities:

"Thousands of Kandahar residents go to Dahla Dam over the weekend for sightseeing and picnics. Before the construction of the bridge, travelling there was difficult. Residents of Shawali Kot District also had to travel for several hours from the city to their district. Now, they can reach their homes in about an hour. This is such a great facility that benefits everyone."



Photo 4. The completion ceremony of Dahla Bridge, March 15 2023.

DAHLA BRIDGE REHABILITATION PROJECT: AT A GLANCE

- **46 unemployed individuals and their family members** directly benefitted from income through Cash-for-Work.
- **1,680 community members** will indirectly benefit from the construction of the bridge in the longer-term.
- A broader **20,000-25,000 individuals** (tourists, traders, and gardeners) are expected to use the bridge.
- **The expansion of Dahla Dam**, which is currently undergoing technical assessment by the Irrigation Department, is now possible as a result of the bridge by enabling transportation of necessary equipment and materials. This initiative will provide vital irrigation water to additional communities.



Founded in 1956, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is Denmark's largest international NGO, with a specific expertise in forced displacement. DRC is present in close to 40 countries and employs 9,000 staff globally.

DRC advocates for the rights of and solutions for displacement-affected communities, and provides assistance during all stages of displacement: In acute crisis, in exile, when settling and integrating in a new place, or upon return. DRC supports displaced persons in becoming self-reliant and included into hosting societies. DRC works with civil society and responsible authorities to promote protection of rights and inclusion.

Our 7,500 volunteers in Denmark make an invaluable difference in integration activities throughout the country.

DRC's code of conduct sits at the core of our organizational mission, and DRC aims at the highest ethical and professional standards. DRC has been certified as meeting the highest quality standards according to the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability.

HRH Crown Princess Mary is DRC's patron.

To read more about what we do, see: www.drc.ngo

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