

Syria: Cultivating hope in Syria

Syria is a Mediterranean country of approximately 185,000 sq. km, with predominantly arid and semi-arid land. 58% of the country is desert, 3% forests woodland and only 4% is permanent crop-land. Syria's neighbours are Turkey to the north, Jordan and Palestine to the south, Lebanon to the east and Iraq to the west. Its population is 22.331 million.

Climate effects:

Since 2006, local communities in the north-east of the country have been facing severe drought, due to high temperatures and low rainfall. The drought has led to desertification, as the dry conditions and sandstorms have swallowed up arable land and vegetation. This drought has been compounded by decreasing annual average rainfall in Syria since the 1980's.

As with the farmers, the drought has had a particular effect on Bedouin communities, who live outside the cities in the semi-desert-Badia area. Although some have settled in villages, many groups are still nomadic, living in handmade tents and following grazing and water to keep their sheep, which are their main income generation activity.



Local community participation is an essential in all project phases (assessment – planning – implementation – monitoring & following up)

An estimated 60,000 families are thought to have abandoned the area altogether, in the hope of finding work in the city. Of these, approximately 36,000 families come from one region – the Al Hasakeh governorate, in the northeast.

Gender balance is one of the project success factors



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In November 2009 the Syrian Arab Red Crescent carried out vulnerability and capacity assessments in two of the most affected communities – Al Hasakeh and the city of Deir Elzour (in the east), focusing on sites in remote areas. The participatory assessments (which was carried out in cooperation with local community and authority) identified tree planting as a key activity that would help mitigate the effects of the drought.

What was the project?

The main objective of the tree-planting project was to reduce the long-term effects of drought on local communities, mainly in Al Hasakeh and Deir Elzour governorates, which were the most affected by drought. In the long term, it would also improve the income of the communities by providing grazing and firewood, hence improving livelihoods. Also effecting the environment positively.

Since the local communities were almost exclusively dependent on sheep and cattle for income, the project would benefit all members of the community.



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The main phases of activity were:

- The preparation phase. This first phase involved conducting the vulnerability and capacity assessment (mentioned above) and working with affected local communities. During this phase tree-planting was identified as the preferred mitigation measure.
- The implementation phase. The second phase, in late December 2009, involved planting the trees.
- Follow-up. Finally, the Syrian General Commission for Badia Management and Development (GCB) returned to the sites in early May 2010, to water the trees for a second time.

How was the project funded?

The project was funded through the drought appeal launched by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent in August 2009. The GCB contributed technically, through engineers, and also provided the trees and water tanks.

How did the project work?

During the implementation phase the team mobilised 400 Red Crescent volunteers from the two Syrian Arab Red Crescent branches (Al-Hasakeh & Deir Elzour), members of local communities, GCB staff and other partners, to plant 37,500 trees in 100 hectares across the two locations. The GCB is active in both locations, so it was able to send specialist engineers to provide direct technical support.

The project selected two tree varieties that can survive drought conditions – *Atriplex halimus* (commonly known as Mediterranean

saltbush) and *Salsola vermiculata* (known also as shrubby Russian thistle). These varieties need to be watered only twice in their 20-year lifetime – when they are first planted, and again after six months. They also produce rapid re-growth, so that just one year after planting the area can be grazed by sheep without the trees being irreparably damaged. Even after one year, the trees will reduce the risk to sandstorms by acting as windbreaks and stabilising the top soil.



Al-Shawla village is one of the implemented areas through the CBRR program.

The planting process was very simple, enabling the volunteers to cover a wide area relatively quickly. The GCB was responsible for the two watering phases, at the time of planting and six months later. To prevent the cattle from grazing on the trees during the first year, the GCB built banks 2–3m high around the plantation, to be removed after one year.

The project considered gender balance. The project targeted women throughout involving them in focus-group discussions in the VCA process, and encouraging them to take part in the implementation phase. Many were able to take part in the tree planting, as the initiative was huge, and it was clear that so much help was needed.



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The Syrian Arab Red Crescent co-ordinated the project and managed the logistics, working alongside (volunteers & staff) the main partners, which included GCB, governorate councils and mayors, city councils, youth unions, child parliaments and the Syrian Family Association, as well as local communities.



Daily, the local community and SARC volunteers planted around 10,000 trees.

The project faced a number of challenges:

- Lack of human and financial resources.
- mobilising local communities. This was time consuming and required training personnel .
- managing the long distances between sites. Transporting people, water and trees out to sites raised logistical challenges, and for security reasons, staff and volunteers had to be brought back to town every day.
- coordination at the national level to ensure long-term sustainability over the coming years.

To overcome these challenges, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent recognized the need to promote its work to increase its support

(both organizational and financial). Meanwhile, the organisation plans to map agencies running similar projects (such as GCB) and to develop long-term strategic partnerships. Finally it recognized the need to develop media awareness of the need for climate-change adaptation and disaster mitigation and to increase support for future work.

What did the project achieve?

The tree-planting project reached a total of 10,000 people in the target communities. The project saw positive levels of active community participation, government support, motivation and commitment among the volunteers.

The project demonstrated an integrated approach to programming, by combining tree planting with community mobilisation, ensuring that there was a community perspective in all phases of the process – from the VCA through to planning and implementation. Those communities involved developed a strong sense of ownership of the project, because they saw it as a good opportunity to improve their livelihood conditions by helping generate income and improving the environmental situation. This ownership is a vital in



Volunteers play important role in adapting to climate change through implementing & advocating the activities of climate change impact reduction



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Ensuring the sustainability of the project.

The project succeeded in integrating between disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation, by not only reducing the risk of the immediate hazard of drought but – through planting trees –contributing to long-term efforts for adapting to a drying climate .

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that for the Middle East region, climate change ‘is likely to cause severe water stress in the 21st Century’ .

Lessons learned

- By choosing tree varieties that needed little watering, it is possible to develop an area that will be sustainable for at least 20 years.
- From the moment the trees are planted they help to stabilise the soil, decreasing the risk of sandstorm and desertification.
- Shoring up new plantations with simple banks of soil can prevent grazing damage in the first year, and can be simply removed after that period.
- Choosing varieties that can withstand grazing even as young plants means that within a year they can provide food for herds, improving livelihoods.
- Choosing a planting technique that takes only three minutes per tree enables a project to plant over a wide area in a comparatively short period of time.
- The project proved the ability to involve women in long term project.
- It is important to have sufficient trained staff and volunteers , planning, coordination and mobilising of the local communities.
- The team needs to co-ordinate at the national and local level with a range of partners, including government, non-governmental organisations and community groups, to share resources and expertise, and to ensure the or

ganisational and financial support needed.

- Media awareness can help with fundraising and with raising wider awareness of the benefits of the project and of how these approaches can be used to benefit other communities.



Drought effected areas are more than 60 % of Syria.

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