

## COUNTRY CASES

### ➔ AFGHANISTAN: LOCAL CAPACITY GROWS AMIDST CONFLICT AND COLLAPSE OF CENTRAL AUTHORITY

#### **In a Nutshell**

By redirecting development assistance to local levels, capacity development can continue even amidst prolonged warfare and the collapse of a government. This was the case in Afghanistan in the 1990s, when external support could not be provided in the traditional manner through an established central authority. So UNDP began working with communities and supporting civil society organizations providing critical services.

Staying engaged instead of disassociating from a difficult country may be considered a virtue in itself. More significantly in this example, keeping essential services going – such as health care and the provision of water and sanitation – helped lay the foundations for eventual post-conflict reconstruction.

#### **The Story**

During the 1990s, UNDP progressively expanded its work in Afghanistan within zones of intermittent peace. Projects began as stand-alone efforts with diverse goals, but attempted to meet many different local needs. Overarching programmes focused on providing food security through sustainable crop production and livestock development, strengthening the self-help capacities of rural communities and disabled people, and rebuilding urban communities.

NGOs served initially as the primary vehicle for delivering humanitarian and development assistance, as well as for providing ad hoc social services, but efforts were also made to enlist beneficiaries in programme decisions affecting their communities. By the mid-1990s, community organizations had become the most vital channel for project work.

At a 1996 international forum in Ashkabad, a consensus emerged on the purposes and methodology of providing outside assistance to Afghanistan. Peace-keeping was an overall objective, supported by a long-term approach that integrated humanitarian, rehabilitation, development and human rights efforts – all vital to addressing community concerns and supporting Afghan civil society. This agreement led to the establishment of the Poverty Eradication and Community Empowerment (PEACE) Initiative in 1997. It consolidated five projects into a single programme, boosting the impact of each through close coordination and unified management. The approach was based on the assumption that there is a positive correlation between peace-building and conflict prevention on the one hand, and poverty alleviation, community empowerment and improved governance on the other.

The programme derived from the logic of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan, where social and economic structures were in ruins, and government institutions had collapsed. Action at the community level offered the best possible response to local needs and enhanced prospects for addressing some of the most difficult issues – deteriorating infrastructure and social services, poor food security, gender discrimination, environmental decline and the exploding cultivation of opium poppies. Engaging directly with communities and civil society offered them a chance to help themselves. Over the course of the PEACE Initiative, more than 2,100 community organizations, farmers' groups and cooperative associations were established or reactivated.

In recognition of the importance of capacity development, considerable effort was devoted to training community workers and the communities at large. Community mobilization demanded extensive preparation to establish the programme as well as continuous attention and follow-up. About 8,000 community members learned to work through *shura* development committees to consult stakeholders and identify community needs. In turn, the programme bolstered the committees with infrastructure and social service projects as well as credit and income generation schemes. Different credit systems supported these activities, encouraged community initiatives and assisted vulnerable groups. The creation of revolving funds became a corollary to community empowerment, reflecting the need to open investment opportunities in a cash-poor environment.

## Results and Critical Factors

Developing the institutional capacities of civil society and community organizations in Afghanistan resulted not only in improved infrastructure and service delivery, but also in the establishment of a network of viable local institutions to take the lead in post-conflict development. A number of important lessons emerged:

- When there is a collapse of delivery systems and infrastructure, decentralized service delivery is likely to work better than unified, national service delivery.
- Economic development or small-scale projects undertaken at the village level do not by themselves lead to development. Projects have to be part of a process that changes the community environment and people's lives. Such a transformation can only be achieved by steadily building up community and village institutions.
- Community intervention implies working with existing social structures and power relationships. Individual members of the community who are better off can more easily take advantage of opportunities. Initiatives do not necessarily reach the poor and most vulnerable, while NGOs – and other implementing partners – can, if not managed carefully, easily weaken links with communities, and complicate programme and staff management.

- No community can make a valid contribution to decision-making unless it also controls resources to implement those decisions. As local institutions mature – and assets grow – they tend to work more independently of the sponsoring project and act in what they perceive to be their best interest. This became evident in Afghanistan when 160 communities embarked on independent activities, and 225 approached other aid agencies for support.
- Rehabilitation activities cannot be conducted in a total political vacuum. A working rapport must be established with the de facto authorities.

**Further information**

Bernt Bernander, et al. 1999. *A Thematic Evaluation of UNDP's PEACE Initiative in Afghanistan*. A draft paper. Stockholm: Stockholm Group for Development Studies.

Bernt Bernander. 2002. *Community Empowerment in Afghanistan: A Review of the UNDP Experience in the 1990s*. New York: UNDP.

Poverty Eradication and Community Empowerment (PEACE) Initiative ([www.pcpafg.org/Organizations/undp/](http://www.pcpafg.org/Organizations/undp/)).

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC). 1997. *Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation*. Paris: OECD.

Brief summary of UNDP in Afghanistan ([www.undp.org/afghanistan/undpafghanistan.html](http://www.undp.org/afghanistan/undpafghanistan.html)).