

Communities NOT State or NGOs the answer to meaningful development and sustainable peace

While discussing progress or reversal, it is often the government or NGOs that are given credit or criticized. The role of ordinary Afghan communities in describing political, economic and social progress is rarely acknowledged. It is not because communities have not played a significant role. Rather, the main reason why one finds so little mention of them is because they are often described as ‘target groups’ or ‘beneficiaries’ in donor driven projects, and not the actual owners and leaders of these projects. It is because of the over-centralized; top-down heavy aid system which has reduced them to the status of mere recipients of charitable aid. Most public relations material and annual reports of NGOs and donors take pride in rigid and pre-determined quantitative outcomes. They speak in terms of the amount of dollars spent, number of roads, schools or bridges built or the number of beneficiaries assisted. Quality of aid and the benefits it results in is rarely discussed. Communities are simply described as passive recipients of the benefits of external intervention, with no mind or desired outcome of their own.

The current nature of the international aid system and government-driven development projects has severely disenfranchised and disempowered communities. The short term goals of most projects leave communities worse off than they had started. Examples are abound of how international military forces, NGOs and private contractors have left communities angry and distrustful of outside actors when short term projects, designed and implemented with little involvement from the communities, did not fully meet their needs or priorities or when aid had adverse effects on community life and solidarity.

Future Generations’ work in Afghanistan and other parts of the world has amply demonstrated the limitation and harmful effects of such an approach. It believes that the communities and not the outside actors must be determining their own needs and deciding their own priorities, and through partnership with outside agents, including government and NGOs implement their development projects. This approach to community-driven development is implemented using a standard process called SEED-SCALE¹. Instead of using the conventional development model, whose starting point is to do ‘needs assessment’ and focus on community weaknesses, this alternative model of development promoted by Future Generations relies on and promotes existing community success, encourages partnerships between stakeholders and uses community work plans and resources for project implementation instead of external assessment and budgets, and instead of seeking quantitative outcomes, SEED-SCALE seeks behavior change as a more sustainable outcome of partnership with communities.

¹ SEED-SCALE is an acronym for Self Evaluation for Effective Decision-making and Systems for Communities to Adapt, Learn and Expand. See www.future.org.

At a time when so much of the development work is undertaken using the top-down project approach with limited sustainability, SEED-SCALE's use in Afghanistan by Future Generations and a select group of NGOs and government entities - such as the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) to reform its existing community health program known as Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS), has helped Afghan communities to tackle problems ranging from community-based health to literacy/education to local governance and small scale infrastructure development to environmental rejuvenation. In addition to its own use, Future Generations is witnessing increasing adoption of SEED-SCALE as the preferred approach by others in community related development interventions.

There is ample evidence in Afghanistan and elsewhere to show that community driven development is a more sustainable model of promoting socio-economic change. Take the case of Deh Khudaidad - a one-time slum community that first emerged during the anti-Soviet struggle in the 1980s and located at the edge of Kabul city, and how it transformed itself using its own resources and capacities, instead of waiting for NGOs and the government to fix its problems. Deh Khudaidad is a mix ethnic community to the west of the Soviet-built Macrorayan housing complex which came up during the communist government's rule in Afghanistan. Ethnically, it is a microcosm, representing all of Afghanistan's diverse cultural and ethnic groupings. While the rest of Kabul was going up in flames in the early 1990s, with street fighting dividing one district from another and with one neighborhood turning against the other, Deh Khudaidad stayed out of the fray. It is one clear example of how a united and cohesive community can avoid a bloodbath and refuse to perpetuate the hatred that was engulfing the rest of the city.

Mahatma Gandhi had once said that *Satyagraha*, the nonviolence creed he used in his struggle against British colonial domination of the sub-continent is the weapon of the strong and not the weak. Abdul Ghaffar Khan, known as the Frontier Gandhi, effectively proved that point when he succeeded in mobilizing the most fearsome warriors, the Pashtuns of the Northwest Frontier to create a non-violent army called the Khudai Khidmatgars or Servants of God. The transformation was complete. The hot tempered and violence-prone Pashtuns changed the rules of the game and resisted British rule nonviolently. *Satyagraha*'s true potential is revealed when the strong, those capable of violence decide not to resort to violence and instead prefer their own suffering instead of inflicting it on others. This capacity for self-control is said to be the most potent human energy to achieve meaningful social transformation and transform human relationships. The people of Deh Khudaidad had done just that: refusing to kill each other in the name of a religious sect or ethnic group, while neighbors watching out for neighbors, protecting their properties when some of them migrated to neighboring countries or other provinces, and keeping their locality free of violence that had engulfed the rest of Kabul.

They showed a similar capacity for collective action to addressing their community's social and economic problems. Instead of acting for self-gratification, the Deh Khudaidad community, with assistance from Future Generations formed a local shura or council and elected their representatives who held consultations and developed work plans for community

prioritized projects. With local resources they were able to implement their smaller work plans. They then sought technical and financial resources from outside the community, including government and NGOs to implement their larger work plans. They started by addressing their chief environmental concern: the dumping of municipal waste near their homes. Working together, strengthening one another, they pressured the Kabul Municipality to end dumping waste in Deh Khudaidad.

Today, instead of receiving Kabul's rubbish, the local district municipality is collecting Deh Khudaidad's waste and taking it elsewhere for disposal. The removal of the waste dump, which was a major source of communicable diseases, dramatically improved health indicators in the community. They then worked together to approach a donor, got the necessary funds and build better latrines in order to avoid having human waste from poorly constructed latrines, known locally as Khak Andaz, from leaking into the streets and causing stench and polluting water sources. Water was needed for the modern latrines to function, but the donor which had given the initial funding to construct the latrines, refused to provide the additional cash. The Deh Khudaidad Shura, made of all the ethnic groups, did not give up because of a refusal of funding request. They approached one donor after another, until the Italian development agency provided them the money to construct a deep well and purchase a generator to pump water out.

However, the problem was not fully resolved. When the water was pumped out, it had to be piped to every home. The Italian development agency told the Shura that it did not have more money to give. Using a project approach, the donor had decided it had done enough. The community however, was not satisfied. Despite many requests, no donor came forward to help with additional funding. The community instead of feeling defeated, once again came together to discuss a resolution to the problem. They relied on their own human energy and capacity for self-help to convince every household to contribute nine thousand Afghanis per household to the Shura, which contracted a private company to construct two large reservoirs on nearby hills to which water was pumped from the deep well sitting at the base of the hills, and then pipes were constructed and laid to each household, with a meter to regulate the use of water in each home. The water which was brought to homes using donkeys cost two hundred Afghanis per barrel. The piped water using the home-based meter reduced the cost of drinking water by seventy five percent.

Today, Deh Khudaidad has clean streets, numbered homes and streets, modern latrines and clean water. This was all possible thanks to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the Deh Khudaidad community and their belief in a better future. They did not wait for the government, donors or NGOs to come and give them 'assistance'. Most donors and the government were not even interested in Deh Khudaidad. They knew that the donor-NGO approach would only help them partially, if at all. They wanted to take their own future in their own hands and to take care of their own problems by coming up with their own solutions. That, they knew was the road to dignity, self-sufficiency and a sustainable future. Deh Khudaidad offers hope at time of increasing hopelessness. Deh Khudaidad also changed the way we look at communities. They have demonstrated that it is not always the

government, donor or NGO that truly transforms community life. In fact, Deh Khudaidad showed us that it is the community's own approach of working together, relying on their own value systems, community solidarity, local knowledge and skills and household and natural resources, that is the most relevant answer to today's corrupt, ineffectual and highly centralized aid system that is creating dependency and disempowering communities.

If communities feel they are treated as mutual stakeholders and have control and ownership over the project activities based on their own prioritization, then they also are the strongest guarantors of the projects success. In today's insecure Afghanistan, it is not the armies or the police that protect aid projects. It is actually the communities, working in the front lines and negotiating space with insurgents who are essentially protecting many aid projects in rural Afghanistan. They have the greatest incentive to do so. The key to success is that the system is implemented with the people actively participating in it, rather than imposed or designed and delivered from outside. By such application, individuals are convinced, and as numbers aggregate, they grow into collective action. Participation increases through partnership, building from success, acting based on evidence. This, in Future Generations' view is the way to do community based development.