

## REVIEW:

# Towards community empowerment for poverty reduction in rural Afghanistan

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### Abstract

This paper describes community empowerment as a new initiative in Afghanistan. The context of this paper is based on a review of policy papers and other literature, plus field observation in Afghanistan where poverty is a major problem across the country. The majority of poor people lives in rural areas, mainly as small farmers, farm workers and associated worker groups. Being mainly involved in livestock and agricultural activities, they face many challenges, including a lack of access to the market, inadequate skills, illiteracy, droughts, and financial problems. The main way to support them has been through poverty reduction programs and projects in rural Afghanistan. In the past 12 years, community empowerment has also entered into the focus of the government and international organizations for development of rural areas in Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Community empowerment, Poverty, Poverty reduction, Rural development.

### Introduction

People of Afghanistan suffer from a long time war and instability but are ambitious and hopeful for having a better life in the future. Afghanistan is sometimes called a post-conflict country which in reality is not true because war and conflict still continue and take human lives day by day across the county. Afghanistan's economy has mainly relied on agriculture though it was damaged during the civil war. About 80% of villagers are surviving directly or indirectly through agriculture. Agriculture can serve as a tool for economic development by providing export revenues. Fresh and dry fruits, carpets and precious stones are the main exports items from Afghanistan. However, agricultural production levels fluctuate year by year. The infrastructures such as roads, irrigation system, research institutions, and promotion places have been destroyed as a result of the wars.

The hardships of rural people have caused them to migrate to urban areas and other countries. Depopulation in rural areas and immigration to urban areas and other countries have negatively impacted on agricultural production, and the decline of agricultural products has had a negative influence on the economy. Fluctuations of agricultural production are the result of three decades of civil war, massive migration of farmers to the neighboring countries, fluctuations in annual rainfall and frequent droughts, destruction of irrigation systems, and lack of access to agricultural services such as improved seeds, fertilizers, agricultural equipment and training of farmers. A gradual decline in agricultural production has caused food shortages and deepened the country's dependence on imports of food and other consumer goods and has negatively impacted on the balance of trade.

Although Afghanistan has a suitable climate and adequate resources for the production of crops and livestock, it has not yet achieved food security and self-sufficiency. A high percentage of the population suffers from poverty and lack of access to basic services. To end the war and alleviate the poverty, important actions need to be taken, such as designing development policies, and paying attention to

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economic and security cooperation with other countries in the region. The cooperation of international organizations such as World Bank has also been important for poverty alleviation in Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, solving socio-economic and political problems in Afghanistan is not possible without the involvement of local communities or their representatives in decision making. For instance, the participation of local communities in identifying their needs and designing development projects is important. Local communities need to be empowered in terms of clarifying their priorities and needs. Empowering local communities can lead them to play a key role in decision-making along with other stakeholders such as government agencies, donors, and so forth. The past experience and current realities show that a revision of approaches and strategies for rural development, with a new tendency to serve purposively through participation and empowerment of the poor may be more effective in meeting the needs of rural areas.

In rural Bangladesh, government investment in physical infrastructure like roads, bridges, electricity, embankments and irrigation facilities has been more effective as it creates both instant employment and further opportunities for future employment, as well as self-employment (Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development 2011: 8).

The government of Afghanistan and its international partners have invested significantly in strengthening sub-national governance structures that fit Afghanistan's political and social context, such as the provincial and district governors' offices and provincial councils, as well as official or semi-official bodies such as Community Development Councils (CDCs) at the local level, District Development Assemblies (DDAs) at the district level, Provincial Development Committees at the province level, District Coordination Committees (DCC) and Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP) Councils. These committees and councils are meant to temporarily fill the lack of governance capacity at local levels in delivering the necessary public services (Hate & Zadran 2013: p. 13).

## **Methodology**

The main purpose of this paper is to describe community empowerment as a new initiative in Afghanistan. Qualitative data has been gathered for description of this paper. Both primary and secondary data are used purposively in order to answer the question of "How important is community empowerment in rural Afghanistan?"

Primary data was gathered through observation of the activities of Community Development Councils (CDCs) and District Development Assemblies (DDAs) as the local institutions and community representative bodies at the village and district levels, respectively. The field observation was launched during the August 2014 in Herat, Afghanistan. In addition, secondary data was gathered through the review of existing literature, policy papers, and other published governmental documents. A descriptive research method was used to explain the activities of the Government of Afghanistan in supporting community empowerment and the key role played by the local communities for rural development.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Empowerment has been defined as access to basic services including safe drinking water, education, healthcare and basic infrastructure, is very important for the lives of poor people. The provision of basic services must therefore be formulated in the plans of the government and development institutions. In

addition, local communities must take part in clarifying their priorities and be empowered through participation with responsive and accountable institutions who affect their lives. Narayan (2002: 13) points out that:

*“The term empowerment has different meanings in different socio-cultural and political contexts, and does not translate easily into all languages... [The] terms include self-strength, control, self-power, self-reliance, own choice, life of dignity in accordance with one’s values, capacity to fight for one’s rights, independence, own decision making, being free, awakening, and capability – to mention only a few. These definitions are embedded in local value and belief systems.”*

Rappaport (1981), and Zimmerman & Warschausky (1998) have also argued about the definition of this term: *“Empowerment is both a value orientation for working in the community and a theoretical model for understanding the process and consequence of efforts to exert control and influence over decisions that affect one’s life, organizational functioning, and the quality of community life”* (Zimmerman 2000: 43). Moreover, Cornell Empowerment Group (1989) writes that *“Empowerment is an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources”* (Zimmerman 2000: 43).

Perkins & Zimmerman (1995: 570) in explaining their definition of empowerment, distinguish between processes vs. outcomes and the individual, the organizational level and the community level:

*“Empowering processes for individuals might include participation in community organizations. At the organizational level, empowering processes might include collective decision making and shared leadership. Empowering processes at the community level might include collective action to access government and other community resources (e.g., media) ... Empowered outcomes for individuals might include situation-specific perceived control and resource mobilization skills... Community-level empowerment outcomes might include evidence of pluralism and existence of organizational coalitions, and accessible community resources”.*

**Empowerment Elements:** There are many examples of empowering approaches which are initiated by poor people, a civil society, the private sector, and the government. Empowering poor people increase their freedom of choice in different contexts. Narayan (2002: 18) has described four elements of empowerment including access to information, inclusion and participation, accountability, and local organizational capacity. It is very important for poor people to participate in activities and take action in programs and projects offered to them. For access to information and involvement in decision making, they need to be connected to local governments and other organizations. Governments and citizens are interconnected; the government needs to get information from citizens and vice versa in order for people to exercise their rights, have access to services, and for the two to negotiate effectively and take action jointly. Without information, it is impossible for poor people to understand the forms of relations and to take effective actions when needed. The Government’s investment in rural development requires access to all information at the local and national levels. The dissemination of information helps the government as well as the citizens to focus on priority areas. The government needs to collect the information about poor communities’ priorities and needs. This can help the poor communities to realize that the government is working with them and is trying to solve their problems.

The term inclusion refers to the involvement of poor people in decision making in designing the development programs and projects. Participation refers to the inclusion of poor people in making decisions and identifying their priorities and needs. The participation of poor people in development activities helps with utilization of local resources, facilitation, service delivery, and capacity building. In addition, participation of poor people in government's development activities helps establish a decentralized decision making process for public services.

Participatory decision making helps the stakeholders to clarify the needs of poor people in rural areas so that they can focus on their most relevant needs. Participatory decision making may not be always harmonious; therefore, mechanisms for conflict resolution must exist for managing disagreements. Participation can be allowed directly through inclusion of communities' members and indirectly through selecting of representatives among the communities based on election mechanisms. In projects of the World Bank, participation has been the most important element among the four elements of empowerment, and has helped to open up new opportunities to institutionalization, and national priority setting and policymaking.

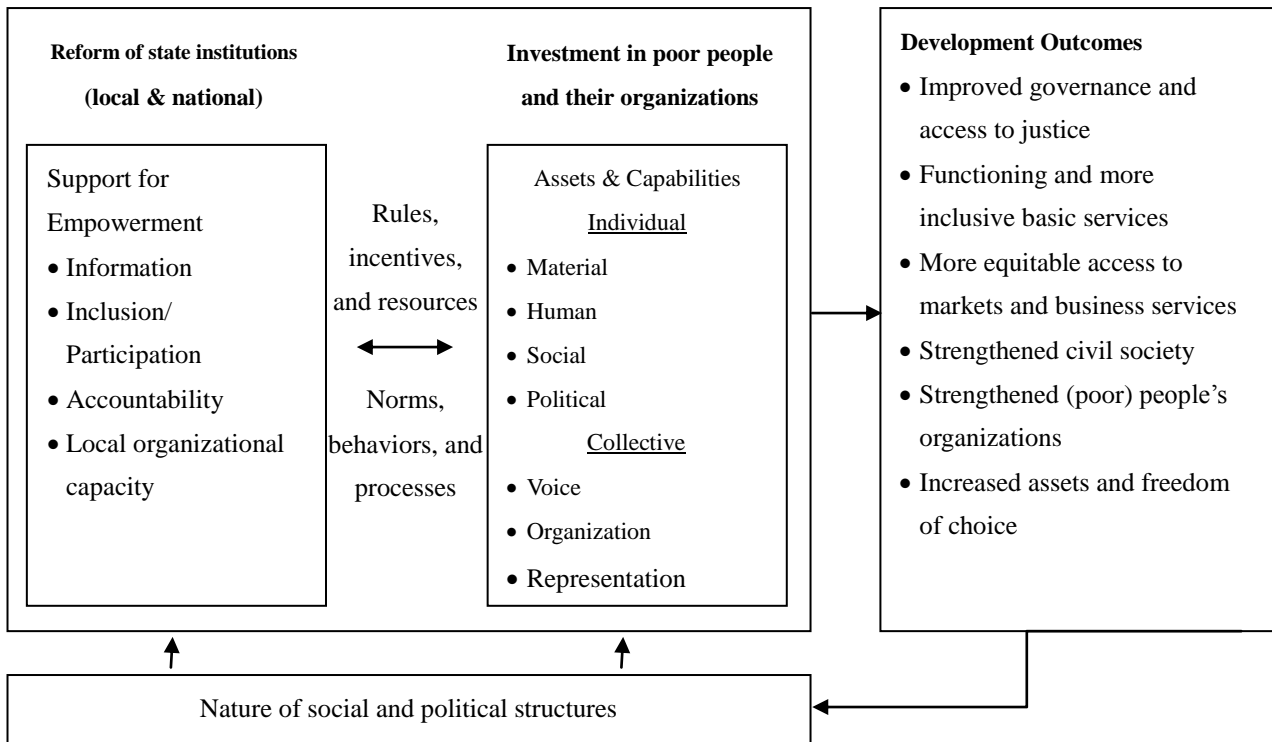
Accountability is also important to all key stakeholders of the development programs and projects; it relates to the ability of the public officials, service providers, and local communities to be responsible for the use of funds, their actions, and policies. For instance, a big problem in Afghanistan is corruption in development activities. Accountability can be formed by different mechanisms including political, administrative and public. Political accountability can be addressed through elections. For government agencies, administrative accountability through internal mechanisms such as horizontal and vertical relations within and between agencies is essential. Local residences expect government agencies to be accountable in delivering services.

Poor people in local communities need to be organized to take care of themselves. Therefore, capacity building through local organization enables people to work together, mobilize their resources, and organize themselves to help solve their problems. Poor people in rural areas can make formal and informal groups in order to support and provide strength to each other. The capacity building in community ensures that poor people can make decisions, solve problems, and manage the funds.

An organized local community is the key for development activities and its effectiveness. Bridging and linking of organized communities provide them with more resources and technical knowledge as well as networks and associations that can influence government decision making. They may be empowered enough to bargain with service providers, employers, and other agencies.

Figure 1 demonstrates the empowerment framework which describes the interrelationship between the state institutions, poor people and their organizations, as well as the development outcomes. Mobilization of poor people and local assets require investment in them and their organizations. Therefore, investment in poor people provides capabilities for both individual and collective activities. Individual capacities and the collective capacity enable poor people to participate in the society and collaborate with the government. Reform of the state must focus on incentives, rules, norms, mechanisms, and behaviors. The development outcomes include improved governance, better-functioning and more inclusive services, more equitable access to markets, strengthened civil society and poor people's organizations, and increased assets and freedom of choice by poor people (Narayan 2002: 23).

Mechanisms are needed to provide for accountability and capacity building for local organizations to help solve the poor people's problems. In some cases, direct participation of poor people or their representatives can play an important role in decision making.



**Figure 1.** The empowerment framework (source: Narayan 2002: 23)

The existence of a civil society with research institutions and facilitators may play an important role in carrying the voices of poor people to decision makers at local and national levels. In Afghanistan, the poor and most vulnerable people live in rural areas; therefore, local communities and farmers living in rural areas need to be supported in meeting their basic needs and helping them grow out of poverty. In the past 12 years, poverty reduction has been the main focus of the Government of Afghanistan aiming to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). To reduce poverty, economic growth and development are needed. Economic growth and development reduce poverty both at the national and local level. Economic growth provides income generation for people and impacts on household expenditures. A higher income allows people to spend more money on services such as healthcare, schooling, and so forth.

Since 2002, community empowerment has been a new initiative in Afghanistan. Empowering local communities was originally a component of the Project on Emergency Community Empowerment and Public Works of the World Bank/ International Development Association (WB/IDA). It was a massive endeavor of the Government of Afghanistan and many international partners to address the needs of rural communities by using participatory involvement across the country. Community empowerment in Afghanistan was drawn based on the experiences of IDA on designing successful Community-Driven Development (CDD) projects elsewhere such as in Indonesia. CDD projects are mainly focused on social mobilization, empowering people including women, strengthening democratic culture at the community level, and promoting conflict resolution.

Economic growth, stabilization, and poverty reduction in rural Afghanistan were targeted in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS), the Afghan Rural Development Sector Strategy (ARDSS), the Afghanistan Compact, as well as in United National

Development Program (UNDP) and Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) strategies. Additionally, the global strategic plan (2008-2011) of the UNDP and the Country Program Action Plan (CPAP) of the UNDP Afghanistan have concentrated their efforts on rural sustainable development and well-being of the poor people through widening economic opportunities, and utilizing the natural resources.

At the beginning, the National Solidarity Program (NSP) as the largest program of MRRD was launched in 2002 to provide for the local needs and development priorities, and the use of resources and grants. The first action was mobilizing communities and helping them to be involved in development activities. Through elected representatives called the Community Development Councils (CDCs), the rural communities were motivated to play a key role in developing their society in areas such as infrastructure, education, irrigation, healthcare, access to clean water and so forth.

In 2003, the Government of Afghanistan and international communities were formulated national programs and strategies to reconstruct the country. One of the programs was 'Assisting the Poor and Vulnerable'. The Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) was formulated in 2006 as a five years development program with alleviation of poverty being a key objective. Different ministries including the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women's Affairs, Ministry of Housing, and Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) were in charge of poverty reduction. MRRD played an important role for poverty alleviation and rural development across the country. MRRD has formulated many national programs to empower local communities contributing to poverty reduction.

MRRD is working for social and economic growth in rural Afghanistan, thereby reducing poverty and promoting socio-economic development. It has presence in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, and with support from international development partners delivers six main programs in keeping with the needs of the local populations. These programs are:

***National Solidarity Program (NSP)*** was created by the Government of Afghanistan to develop the capability of local communities in identifying, planning, managing, and monitoring development projects in rural Afghanistan. NSP focuses on empowerment of local communities to be involved in decision making on development activities affecting their livelihoods. NSP is funded by many international and bilateral donors, the major donor being the World Bank.

***National Area-Based Development Program (NABDP)*** began in 2002 with the support of UNDP, aiming to reduce poverty and improve the livelihoods in rural areas across the country. It focuses on designing and delivering locally sustainable programs for livelihood development, and developing and institutionalizing District Development Assemblies (DDAs) to enable rural communities to organize and participate in the development process.

***National Rural Access Program (NRAP)*** is set to enhance the livelihood of rural communities and their access to basic services, goods, and facilities. It also helps the households and individuals in managing risk by providing employment. It provides for rural development enabling them access to the needed infrastructure as well as temporary jobs for rural people.

***Rural Water Supply, Sanitation, and Irrigation Program (Ru Wat-SIP)*** focuses on basic services such as water and sanitation in rural Afghanistan. Rural communities face many health problems due to a lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Provision of drinking water and sanitary services helps prevent from disease and reduce child mortality.



*Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Program (AREDP)* was established for the purpose of job creation and income generation, aimed at promoting local governance and building rural infrastructure. It is also funded by the World Bank and bilateral donors.

*Comprehensive Agriculture and Rural Development–Facility (CARD-F)* is a joint entity established under the auspices of the Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) Cluster. It is administered by MAIL, MRRD, MoCN, and the MoF, managed by an Inter-Ministerial Committee chaired by MoCN, and led by an Executive Director who reports to the Committee (Rao, 2014, p. 24).

These improvements reflect efforts by the Government of Afghanistan, with significant technical and financial support from the international donor community and other development stakeholders. The MRRD and the Independence Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) have taken a leadership role in overseeing these initiatives. Donor-supported efforts have included UNDP's Afghanistan Sub-National Governance Program (ASGP), NABDP, Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP), and Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP), USAID's Regional Afghanistan Municipalities Program for Urban Populations (RAMP-UP), DfID's Strengthening Municipalities Program (in partnership with UN-Habitat), and the World Bank's National Solidarity Program (NSP) (Hate & Zadran 2013: 13).

The emphasis on the development of talents and abilities to empower the communities in remote and marginal areas and the use of these abilities in development projects has been constructive. The new approach (empowerment) refers to a bottom-up management. The bottom-up management approach lies on participation of disadvantaged and marginalized groups of society in planning and involvement in decision-making. Many vulnerable and impoverished communities are receiving subsistence assistance and livelihood training. School enrollment rates of both boys and girls demonstrate an encouraging upward trend every year, and more teachers, including female instructors, are being enrolled in and successfully graduating from training institutes. Energy and water distribution mechanisms are also gradually beginning to reach more communities, although reliable coverage remains a continuing challenge in the north and in remote areas farther away from provincial centers. In general, public awareness about the need for good governance has improved, and public expectation of better performance by government institutions at the central and local levels is rising (Hate & Zadran 2013: 13).

Participation of local people can help provides information about what they need and how to take action for undertaking of development projects. Equal participation of men and women and other different groups including the disabled and small ethnic groups has an effective impact on decision making and planning. Participation of men and women in decision making increases their power and influence in policy making. Having democratic governance is important in protecting people from social and economic problems as well as natural disasters, food shortages, old age, sickness, and unemployment.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) office in Afghanistan recently prepared a Sub-National Governance and Development Strategy (SNGDS) to provide a strategic framework for future policy and programming support to Afghanistan in this crucial area. The strategy has two broad areas of focus; one is on building capable and accountable sub-national government institutions for service delivery. This pillar aims to promote the capabilities of sub-national executive institutions at Provincial, District and Municipal levels to provide services in an accountable, inclusive, responsive manner, while ensuring more involvement of women. It may be viewed as promoting the supply of good, conflict-sensitive local governance and accountable service delivery.

The other main pillar is empowering the population, civil society, and sub-national elected bodies to hold sub-national governments' accountable, ensuring stabilization, peace-building, and inclusion. This pillar aims to ensure that the population, representative bodies, and civil society organizations have the ability to engage with, influence, and hold sub-national government institutions accountable for effective and equitable public service delivery. This pillar will seek to ensure that marginalized and vulnerable groups take part in prioritizing and monitoring service delivery. It may also promote the demand for good local governance and accountable service delivery (Hate & Zadran 2013: 6).

Empowerment allows local communities to participate in implementation of development projects and also provides a context for decentralization. Decentralization refers to the transfer or assignment of powers of planning, decision making, management of central government or its agents to the subordinate units of government, semi-autonomous public agencies, and local authorities in rural areas. The government tries to involve local communities in policy-making, planning and implementation of their plans, especially poverty reduction. The implementation of regional and rural development programs can only be successful when it is planned based on the experience and available knowledge at local and national levels.

Empowerment lies at the center of participatory development. The development of local areas depends on the talents and capabilities of local communities, the use of natural resources, and available technology with special attention to the development of self-esteem, confidence and prosperity. Empowering local communities is the essential precondition for sustainable development. Government alone cannot implement development programs and rural development projects, but it can facilitate conditions for the implementation of these plans. Empowerment should be used to reduce poverty and bridging the gap between the rich and the poor.

In Afghanistan, holding elections for local councils, for the purpose of involving them in development activities has been remarkable. However, the potential of rural women has not been considered in the various stages of development and hinders their employment, income, health, education, and social status.

Transferring some of government's jobs to people (participation) helps with the implementation of local governance. This approach creates a strong trust between the government and the people. It is quite obvious that the central government, in many cases, has not allowed citizen participation in economic and social activities, therefore, people are being pushed back.

Formation of community development councils is an achievement of NSP in creating unity between the people and their participation in decision-making which is popular in the social field. The establishment of community development councils and capacity building of development councils have empowered local people to gather and identify their development needs.

NABDP is another successful program which has created a social network across the county. NABDP works to gain progress toward the achievement of the MDGs by reducing disparities in Afghanistan's rural population. They have projects in economic development, infrastructure, and improved local governance. Since 2002, NABDP has worked in Afghanistan's most rural areas, to help develop the country's poorest communities. Being present in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, and reaching 388 of the 402 districts, NABDP has completed thousands of projects country wide, benefiting millions of rural people.

As a whole, local governance has improved since 2001 in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has experienced marked progress, since the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001, in providing necessary public services across a widening geographic area, extending increasingly beyond the political center in Kabul. These have included the creation of a basic but functional healthcare system that did not exist during the Taliban period,



a significant increase in physical infrastructure to link rural and urban areas, and improved domestic airports that are better connecting major regional hubs across the county with one another and with the rest of the world. In addition, even remote and insecure parts of the county are now increasingly likely to have access to public communication channels via radios, televisions, and mobile phones.

## Conclusion

Poverty in Afghanistan was considered in different dimensions such as dependence of rural population on agricultural activities and livestock as the main sources of income, lack of irrigation infrastructure, and lack of access to clean water, healthcare, and electricity. Many rural households have remained poor. Poverty and lack of resources are the major problems in Afghanistan. The rural areas have been most vulnerable because most of the development activities have been concentrated in large cities.

This paper has discussed the importance of community empowerment for rural development in Afghanistan. Community empowerment is a useful approach for all countries, developed and undeveloped. Empowering local communities and focusing on agriculture development can help with rural development and ensure that local people can meet their basic needs. It depends on encouraging people to participate actively in the design and implementation of agricultural development programs, creating favorable conditions for investment and private sector activities in the agricultural sector, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust between the people and the government, creating an effective system of credit, development of markets for agricultural products, and enhancing access of farmers to improved seeds, fertilizers, and medicine for livestock.

The most vulnerable people during the years of war have endured more hardship while few of them have been able to cooperate in addressing their needs and requirements. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the establishment of democracy, and huge amounts of international aid, social development and serving of the people by the people are expected. Many national programs have been launched to support the empowerment of local communities in order to solve their problems and provide them with the needed livelihood.

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