



The Role of Culture, Islam and Tradition in Community Driven Reconstruction:

The International Rescue Committee's Approach to
Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2003, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) began working with Afghanistan's Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) to implement an ambitious community driven reconstruction (CDR) program in Afghanistan's southeast region, one of the more politicized and conservative areas of the country. The MRRD's National Solidarity Program (NSP) aims to address some of the most urgent rural needs by giving decision-making about resources and priorities directly to the villages while it lays a foundation for local governance. NSP provides funds to each community to implement projects prioritized by its members through a community-wide planning process. Communities elect decision-making bodies, Community Development Councils (CDCs), to design and execute the projects. Facilitating Partners (FP) support communities through the entire process by providing training, mentoring, facilitation and oversight. This study examines IRC's unique approach to the NSP among 24 FPs and the implications of its methodology on conditions and relationships in the two southeast provinces in which it worked.

As the "gateway to the south" and an area particularly politicized from decades of militarization, the southeast region presented challenges to the NSP's aim of promoting national solidarity. Its border with Pakistan and continued relationships with Pashtuns on both sides made it especially susceptible to incursions from the Taliban and more impervious to the central government's authority. The region's general conservatism and social restrictions confronted the NSP philosophy of broad participation as an alternative to current leadership structures.

IRC took a very forward stance in its approach to the NSP. Amidst threats against both foreign organizations and central government in the southeast region, it situated its methodology within the prevailing culture and norms and invited local leaders to feature prominently in the provinces' reconstruction process through the NSP. IRC's approach was based on several intrinsic principles, including:

- Primacy of local cultural and social structures;
- Consultative basis for engaging local society;
- Promoting government assumption of the NSP;
- Modeling NSP values in the design and implementation process;
- Rooting change in the grassroots to influence national dynamics.

Based on these principles, IRC's design often differed from other FPs in the following ways:

- **Contextual review.** IRC used the results of an informal analysis at the inception of the program on cultural, political, social and religious dynamics in both provinces to guide its overall strategy toward the NSP. The analysis identified key influential groups and led to three strategic design decisions: to hire all staff from within the provinces, to engage the key stakeholders in all critical decisions and to base the village selection process on the suggestions of local power holders.

- **Consultative workshops.** IRC conducted seminars with influential local leaders in each province to introduce the NSP program, gain local support and seek advice in implementation.
- **Advisory Boards.** In each province, IRC established volunteer committees of social and political leaders to ensure decision-making resided in local entities. The Boards offered guidance to IRC on culture, religion and social issues; facilitated public support for promotion of women's involvement; monitored projects; and helped select new districts when NSP expanded within the provinces.
- **Village selection process.** IRC engaged local leaders in a formal identification and prioritization process of villages within their districts to participate in the NSP.
- **Advisory Councils.** As IRC expanded to new districts, it established temporary Advisory Councils to prioritize the order of communities implementing the NSP and to problem solve in the inception phases.
- **Special Action Committees for Religious Affairs.** Early in the program, IRC established Special Action Committees for Religious Affairs (SACRAs) to involve religious scholars. SACRA members endorsed the NSP and its methodologies by speaking directly to the public about the role of Islam and women's participation in development.
- **IRC staff recruitment process.** IRC solicited broad participation in the selection of its staff and hired all staff from within the provinces to reflect the general population of the region, ethnically, politically, geographically and in terms of education and livelihoods.
- **Community solidarity agreement.** IRC initiated a contractual obligation between it and the community that specified obligations and conditions for participating in the NSP for both IRC and the village.

In addition to these aspects of its programmatic approach, IRC introduced initiatives outside of, but related to, the established NSP activities:

- **University Field Study.** IRC organized a training and practicum program with several universities' engineering departments to increase the number of prospective engineers familiar with NSP methodology.
- **Economic Development Initiative.** IRC initiated a study to examine the contribution of NSP activities to the local economy.
- **CDC Exchange and Solidarity Initiative.** IRC led a process of CDC and FP staff exchanges that mushroomed into regional gatherings and culminated in a national conference publicly declaring solidarity between all Afghans and seeking legal status for Community Development Committees.

- **Religious Scholar Exchange.** IRC held a meeting among Afghan religious scholars on the relationship between Islam and international human rights instruments.

The implications of the NSP IRC's approach on conditions in the two southeast provinces included:

Ownership of the Development Process

1. **Respecting local culture affected acceptance.** IRC's integration of religious and cultural norms into the program countered the antagonism against both foreign organizations and central government. The fact that IRC staff originated from the region and mirrored the make-up of local society further ingratiated both IRC and the NSP process to the population.
2. **Engaging traditional leadership shifted attitudes from conflict to development.** Local leaders previously engaged in tribal factionalism, divisive politics or combat appear to have shifted much of their attention to development issues. The study suggests this may be partially attributable to IRC's involvement of a large spectrum of such leaders through Advisory Boards, SACRAs and its own employment.
3. **Participation may be fostering emergence of new voices.** The intention behind the NSP's community driven approach was to give voice to the common villager. To this end, the CDC Exchange and Solidarity Initiative put grassroots perspectives on the national agenda for the first time. Time will tell whether IRC's strong embrace of traditional leadership strengthened the common citizen's voice or hindered the development of a more "modern society" and prevented less imposing voices from being heard.
4. **Local involvement may boost long-term ownership and sustainability.** By hiring staff only from within the provinces, IRC injected rural areas with lasting new capacity. The University Field Study initiative similarly increased the pool of local resources capable of supporting future development.

Changes in Relationships

5. **Intra-staff and intra-Advisory Board.** The assemblage of staff from all walks of provincial life and of Advisory Board members from the spectrum of provincial leaders offered opportunity for interaction among historically disputing tribes, political rivals and to a lesser extent ethnic and language groups and religions within the region. The collection of different forces in one organization prevented any single power structure from dominating and increased general cohesion among members.
6. **General public – local leaders.** The new role of conventional power holders in local development may have begun to shift community members' perceptions of their leadership and the leaders' own sense of responsibility to the public in a positive direction.

7. **Tribes, political factions, ethno-linguistic groups.** Anecdotal evidence suggests IRC's representative and consultative practices had positive impact on larger inter-group relations within the provinces.
8. **Inter-regional.** The CDC Exchange and Solidarity Initiative, which purposefully challenged historically adverse relationships, tangibly strengthened linkages among CDC members and FP staff from all corners of the country. In contrast, IRC's in-province hiring practice limited staff's exposure to others within the area.
9. **Community – central government.** Through the involvement of many elements of the local population in the NSP—a line ministry program—and by extension its local acceptance, IRC reportedly improved the trust and reputation of the central government.

Impact on Collective Action

10. **Broad exposure increased skills development.** Through its training of Advisory Board members, Advisory Council members, SACRA members, engineering students and government officials, IRC exposed a significant number and range of people to governance, project design, contracting, community development and others skills.
11. **Staff development had ripple effect.** IRC's hiring of local citizens largely unskilled in community development added to the general resident capacity within the provinces. The staff's lineage from the area implies these skills will reside with a broad base of individuals capable of organizing and supporting collective action beyond the life of the NSP.
12. **Inexperience limited initial potential.** The lack of background and education in community development reduced IRC staff's ability to transfer NSP concepts easily and to support collective action early in the program.
13. **Engineering capacity improved slightly.** The University Field Study added somewhat to the pool of engineers familiar with development infrastructure design needs.

Influence on Rules of Behavior

14. **Security.** IRC's methodology may have added to NSP's overall calming effect by engaging erstwhile combatants in community development processes. The face of NSP as "the body of the community" in the two IRC provinces also reduced the staff's vulnerability while the economic boon resulting from the local hiring practice created disincentives for disrupting the program.
15. **Transparency.** IRC's local hiring practice and integration of leaders into its methodology in a culture of intensive family and cultural obligations could risk inviting corruption. In direct response, IRC's openness to public scrutiny provided an alternative to Afghanistan's relationship-based allegiances and served as a model for transparency in government and business interactions. Reinforcement through the SACRAs of the Islamic value of

transparency and the aversion of staff to be labeled thieves in their own communities may also have helped reduce the tendency for corruption.

16. **Gender roles.** The SACRAs' influence on public opinion about women's role in development as seen through the Quran was instrumental in IRC's ability to hire more female staff than most FPs. Linking women's participation with Islam (amplified by IRC's Gender Development Officers), also appeared to improve women's vocal contribution to community planning discussions and their electability to membership on CDCs.

Implications for Governance

17. **Pluralistic decision-making bodies.** The buy-in generated through extensive initial consultation and leaders' involvement sent clear signals of the program's value and resulted in comparatively little resistance from conventional authorities to the NSP. IRC's integration of all competing factions and powers within its processes had the impact of preventing any single entity from dominating. The longer-term consequence of involving erstwhile leaders in the functioning of the NSP on their control over decisions is still unknown.
18. **Links between communities and local government.** IRC's tactics of involving local officials in training, Advisory Boards, monitoring missions and village selection processes may have improved local administrations' quality and quantity of contact with communities. The IRC-led exchange process and nationwide public consultation survey had a more direct positive impact on attitudes towards local governance and its role in communities.
19. **Principles of good governance.** IRC's emphasis on transparency, accountability and participation throughout its NSP operations translated directly to staff and CDC understanding of acceptable and unacceptable practices. This mirrored that of several other FPs.

ACRONYMS AND AFGHAN TERMS

Acronyms

AKDN	Aga Khan Development Network
ANDS	Afghanistan National Development Strategy
ANSO	Afghanistan Non-Governmental Organizations Security Office
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
CDC	Community Development Council
CDD	Community Driven Development
CDP	Community Development Plan
CDR	Community Driven Reconstruction (or Recovery)
CET	Community Election Team
FP	Facilitating Partner
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
NABDP	National Area Based Development Program
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSP	National Solidarity Program
OC	Oversight Consultant
SACRA	Special Action Committees for Religious Affairs
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

Glossary of Afghan Terms

<i>Alaqadar</i>	Sub-district (<i>alaqadari</i>) level leader.
<i>Arbob</i>	Traditional community representative. See <i>malik</i> .
<i>Jihad</i>	Holy war. Common use: war against the communist regime and Soviet occupation.
<i>Jirga</i>	Council or assembly of tribal elders for purpose of consensus decision-making and resolving a conflict. <i>Loya</i> , or 'grand' <i>Jirga</i> is a national-level meeting comprising tribal representatives, regional leaders, political, military and religious figures, royalty, government officials and others (primarily male) from throughout Afghan society.
<i>Hashar</i>	Tradition of voluntary service usually associated with short-term events such as improving community infrastructure, constructing a mosque, organizing funerals or providing assistance to someone in need.

<i>Houzah</i>	Collection of villages or communities defined by having a Juma mosque for Friday prayers; neighborhood at sub-district level.
<i>Imam</i>	Religious scholars who lead prayers in a mosque.
<i>Malik</i>	Traditional community representative or interlocutor for government and external relations; traditional leader. Usually handed down through male family lineage.
<i>Mujahidin</i>	Holy warriors fighting in <i>jihad</i> . Common use: elements of Afghan society aligned against the communist regime and Soviet occupation.
<i>Mullah</i>	Religious scholar or Islamic leader containing various ranks.
<i>Pashtunwali</i>	Code of conduct of Pashtun tribes consisting of four elements: 1) <i>Melmastia</i> (hospitality): to show hospitality to all visitors without hope of remuneration or favor, regardless of who they are, their ethnic, religious or national background; 2) <i>Badal</i> (justice/revenge): to seek justice over time or over space to avenge a wrong. This applies to injustices committed yesterday or 1000 years ago if the wrongdoer or their offspring is still living; 3) <i>Nanawatay</i> (settlement): the requirement that the vanquished party asks forgiveness from and submits fully to the victor; 4) <i>Nang</i> or <i>panah warkawal</i> (honor): upholding the independence and human dignity of oneself and one's family. ¹
<i>Qaum</i>	Kinspeople; tribal relations.
<i>Shura</i>	Arabic word for consultation popularized in Afghanistan during the <i>mujahideen</i> period. At the local level, refers to meeting of male representatives from several communities primarily for the purpose of conflict resolution. National parliament is called the <i>Shura-e-Milli</i> . Translation in Dari and Pashto of CDC is <i>shura</i> .
<i>Taliban</i>	Islamic religious students (singular <i>Talib</i>); name of ultra conservative movement that took power in Afghanistan in October 1996.
<i>Ulama</i>	All religious scholars (<i>alem</i> in singular), e.g., individuals who have knowledge of Islamic rules and regulations and whom have memorized the Quran by heart.

¹ Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pashtunwali#The_Code_of_Pashtunwali> (12 April 2006).

I. INTRODUCTION

Background

In 2003, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) launched an ambitious community driven reconstruction (CDR) program in Khost and Logar Provinces in southeast Afghanistan. Executed by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), the National Solidarity Program (NSP) is designed and funded by the World Bank and supported by the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and other bilateral donors. The NSP is based on a community driven development (CDD) approach, which entrusts the local population with resources and power to make decisions about their own development needs.² It aims to address some of the most urgent rural concerns in a country beleaguered by severe poverty, drought, weak infrastructure, inexperience in governance and a massive influx of returning refugees after over two decades of war. With a budget of possibly \$950 million over six years, the NSP will have allocated \$200 per family in every rural community throughout Afghanistan by program's end. This gives it tremendous potential to affect not only local physical, economic and social conditions, but also to strengthen social capital and establish a local framework and standards for good governance. As of late 2006, IRC and 23 other agencies (local and international) had implemented the program in roughly half of all communities in every province in the country.

IRC considers community driven reconstruction a cornerstone of its conflict recovery programming. To date, it has implemented CDR programs in Indonesia, Azerbaijan, Kosovo, Liberia, North Sudan, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. CDR presents an alternative and/or complement to other forms of assistance in its emphasis on multi-sectoral, locally driven initiatives. It is based on the premise that collective action through shared decision-making develops the capacities and relationships to sustain continued transition from conflict to development. In addition to improved local conditions resulting from the projects themselves, community driven approaches promote participation, introduce accountability and encourage social inclusion. Current fragile state paradigms assume these attributes hold significant potential to support sustainable progression from civil war to long-term peace to avoid the high probability of degeneration to violence.

NSP, as a program based on this philosophy, provides funds directly to communities to implement development projects prioritized through a community-wide planning process. Communities elect Community Development Councils (CDCs) that design and implement the

² CDD serves as the conceptual underpinnings for CDR, which modifies the approach to correspond with the needs and conditions of conflict-laden environments. The conflict context presents both greater opportunities and constraints as compared to the traditional development setting for capitalizing on the potential for demand driven methodologies. Nevertheless, both CDD and CDR programs operate on similar principles consisting of "local empowerment, participatory governance, demand-responsiveness, administrative autonomy, greater downward accountability and enhanced local capacity," as described by the World Bank's CDD Group. For more on the Bank's approach to community driven development, see "Community Driven Development," <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/EXTCDD/0,,menuPK:430167~pagePK:149018~piPK:149093~theSitePK:430161,00.html> (February 2007).

projects. Twenty-four Facilitating Partners (FP) such as IRC support communities through the process in each of their assigned geographic areas by providing training, facilitation and oversight. Each FP adheres to the NSP Operational Manual with allowances for innovations and modifications. Variations in methodology, along with regional, cultural and topographical distinctions have made notable differences in FPs' operations. "The approach and methodology of the FPs play a key role in the implementation of the NSP," said Inger Boesen of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), a Kabul-based research institute dedicated to understanding Afghanistan's transitional issues.³ Given these distinctions, IRC's long presence in Afghanistan,⁴ the size and scale of the NSP and the relationship between CDR and IRC's Program Framework,⁵ IRC sought to examine its approach to the NSP, a flagship program for the agency. Consequently, in 2006, IRC's Research, Evaluation and Learning Unit and its Post Conflict Development Initiative retained an independent consultant to examine its approach in two provinces in a highly politicized and conservative region of Afghanistan.

The Study Design

IRC sought to document and learn from its Afghanistan program by extracting practices and lessons to share and apply in other conflict-affected countries. The study presents four sections described briefly below:

- 1) An examination of the operational context presented by the specific conditions in the southeast region of the country;
- 2) A description of IRC's approach to the NSP, including underlying principles, key design aspects and initiatives;
- 3) A discussion of the implications and outcomes of IRC's approach;
- 4) Suggested lessons and implications for the larger Afghanistan context.

The study methodology entailed:

- 1) A literature review of IRC program documents; evaluations of the NSP conducted by the World Bank and external entities; and research on the NSP, other FPs' programs and related topics conducted by academics and other institutions.
- 2) Interviews and focus groups comprised of individuals in six categories:
 - a) The institutional administrative level of the NSP, which included MRRD, the Oversight Consultant and World Bank staff;
 - b) The upper management level of the NSP such as senior IRC staff⁶ and the top staff of other FPs;

³ Inger Boesen, "From Subjects to Citizens: Local Participation in the National Solidarity Programme," (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, August 2004), 59.

⁴ IRC has worked with Afghan refugees in Pakistan since 1980 and in Afghanistan itself since 1988.

⁵ IRC's Program Framework outlines the agency's overall approach to programming to support long-term conflict recovery. Both CDR and the Program Framework emphasize building local institutions and local social cohesion as a means to help conflict-affected communities recover.

⁶ IRC staff interviewed included senior expatriate and national Director, Coordinators and Managers; Province Managers; Senior Community Facilitators and Senior Managers; Gender Development Officers; Senior Community Facilitators; Community Facilitators and Social Organizers.

- c) Provincial level actors, including Advisory Board members, IRC and other FP province level staff, Loya Jirga members, Ministry of Reconstruction and Rural Development representatives (MRRD), Oversight Consultant (OC) staff, Provincial Council members, Provincial Governors, Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Special Action Committees for Religious Affairs (SACRA) members and other religious scholars;
 - d) District level actors, including Advisory Council members, District Administrators, IRC and other FP district level staff and military and tribal leaders;
 - e) Community level stakeholders, such as CDC members, community members, *maliks*, elders and other local leaders;
 - f) Other interested parties including donors, Afghan scholars, AREU researchers, Afghanistan NGO Security Office (ANSO), United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and other aid agencies.
- 3) Visits to NSP project sites in Logar, Paktia (CARE's NSP program) and Herat Provinces (UN-HABITAT's NSP program).⁷
 - 4) Field survey of many elements in *b* above in Khost and Logar.⁸

About the study. Five factors define the margins of this study. First, this research is limited to an examination of IRC's approach to what is a relatively prescriptive implementation process. It looks at IRC's innovations within parameters laid out in the official NSP Operations Manual, which are in turn influenced by donor requirements (particularly World Bank). Second, the review does not attempt to compare IRC against all NSP Facilitating Partners; rather, it uses generalized and comparative literature, includes interviews with and about other FPs and explores in a bit more detail the approaches of two representative FPs as a broad basis for comparison with IRC's program features. Third, time and security limitations did not allow the consultant to visit the most challenging areas or to compare areas yet to receive NSP program funds. Fourth, the usual question of attribution to IRC, to the NSP in general or to other factors for some of the perceived changes is difficult in this environment. Finally and importantly, while the study makes projections on several long-term implications, it also recognizes that measuring real change of this order would require both more time and a more rigorous methodology.

⁷ To contrast IRC's approach with other methodologies, the consultant interviewed other FPs and observed CARE's program in Paktia (for comparison to another strong FP situated in the southeast region) and UN-HABITAT's program in Herat (for its leadership in the design of the NSP).

⁸ While the consultant was unable to visit Khost Province for security reasons, she did meet with Khost Advisory Board and SACRA members as well as Khost senior staff in Logar. To get further information, she distributed a field survey through IRC staff directed individually at commanders, tribal leaders, religious scholars, IRC staff, CDC members and community members at large.

II. OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

The operational context in which IRC is implementing the NSP is defined by three factors: the NSP and its programmatic parameters, the socio-political environment in Afghanistan and the specific conditions in the southeast region. This section describes each of the three elements.

The National Solidarity Program

The National Solidarity Program⁹ began in 2003, remarkably early in the reconstruction period and equally ambitious in size and scope. The World Bank designed the program drawing on experiences from similar social funds and community driven development (CDD) models in other countries and the Community Fora program conducted in Mazar-e-Sharif in Northern Afghanistan in the mid 1990s.¹⁰ The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) executes the NSP with funding from the Bank, the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and other donors. The NSP immediately earned “flagship” status from the international community and consequently attracted funding and visibility.

Using a CDD approach and providing funds directly to the population, NSP counters the broad perception that international organizations consume significant percentages of the money intended for Afghans. As opposed to supply-driven methodologies, in community driven programs, community members select the development projects themselves, presumably addressing their most urgent needs.¹¹ They elect Community Development Councils (CDCs) to oversee the implementation of the projects and they contribute labor, funding and/or materials to the projects. The latter often increases cost effectiveness and encourages greater project ownership, resulting in better infrastructure maintenance and sustainability. The inherent community skills building, local decision-making bodies and community-government interaction lend themselves toward greater long-term self-reliance.¹² As a community driven instrument, the NSP is thus both a governance and a development initiative. It seeks to balance social, political and economic interests by providing an alternative to the negative influences and poverty that

⁹ See the NSP website, <http://www.nspafghanistan.org/content/index_eng.html> (April 2006), for more on its construct, donors, partners and accomplishments.

¹⁰ For more on the design of the Community Fora program and its influence on NSP, see Sarah Lister, “The Community Fora Process in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan: A Case Study,” in “Making Aid Work in Fragile States’ A Series of Studies Commissioned by the World Bank,” (Washington: World Bank), December 2004, <<https://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/31/63/34252765.pdf>> (November 2006).

¹¹ The term “community” is somewhat nebulous in Afghanistan in that in Dari and Pashtun it translates to “village” but which implies a much smaller grouping of families than the NSP uses. The NSP has arbitrarily defined “a community” as more than 25 and less than 300 families to facilitate NSP implementation. Such communities include a Juma mosque (where Friday prayers are held). While there are between 37,000 and 42,000 “rural settlements” in Afghanistan, under this definition, there are approximately 24,000 villages.

¹² For more on the benefits of using a community driven approach in conflict-affected environments, see Kimberly A. Maynard, “From Conflict to Conciliation: The Perils and Practices of Applying Community Driven Approaches in War-Torn Countries,” 2005, copy and Social Development Department, “Community Driven Development in the Context of Conflict-Affected Countries: Challenges and Opportunities,” (Washington: World Bank, no. 36425 GLB, 20 June 2006).

have dominated Afghanistan over the past two decades. Originally intended to last only three years, the NSP has grown to a possible \$950 million by program's end and been expanded to a second three-year phase beginning in early 2007 to meet its countrywide target, allocating \$200 per family in every community in Afghanistan. By the end of 2006, approximately half of the communities had taken part in the first phase.

The 24 Facilitating Partners (FPs) play the pivotal role of interlocutor between the program objectives and their community application. An Oversight Consultant (OC) served as operational administrator for the FPs and supported the capacity building of MRRD during the first phase of the NSP (MRRD intends to carry the program on its own for the second phase). In collaboration with the MRRD, it helped oversee the FPs implementation of the NSP according to the guidelines outlined in the NSP Operations Manual in each of their assigned geographic areas.

The Operations Manual delineates specific procedures based on four core elements: 1) *community mobilization*, which entails facilitating elections to establish Community Development Councils and helping communities articulate a Community Development Plan (CDP) with specific development priorities and identified projects to be funded under the block grant; 2) *CDC capacity building* that includes training on all the elements required for project cycle implementation such as participation, consensus building, accounting, procurement and contract management, project operations and maintenance, and monitoring; 3) *transference of block grants* to communities to fund identified projects and 4) *linking CDCs to external resources* such as other government ministries, donors and NGOs for continued funding of development needs and services. While these are the minimal operational components of the NSP, many FPs augment this process with additional activities, initiatives and training. This considerable flexibility, individual interpretation of the evolving Manual and regional nuances as discussed below resulted in often substantively different approaches.

Afghanistan's Socio-Political Environment

The Facilitating Partners undertook the NSP in a country in the throes of a rapidly evolving state of institutional development. In the first four years after the overthrow of the Taliban, Afghanistan had elected a president, written and approved a constitution and elected members of parliament and provincial councils. The result "is an odd mixture of Muslim fundamentalists, former Taliban commanders, ex-Communist politicians, Western-educated women and even a former United Airlines pilot" comprising the assembly.¹³ Afghanistan's quickly changing government has held the attention of citizens as well as the media, political observers and influential powers around the world. Despite the fact the government offices are populated with advisors, both foreign and national, the still embryonic ministries struggle with lack of familiarity with international standards of governance, corruption and the complexities involved in trying to create an effective administration.¹⁴ Patience at this stage is most needed and least

¹³ Geoffrey York, "Afghanistan's Parliament, Like a Newborn, Struggling to Understand the Basics," *The Globe and Mail*, 2 May 2006.

¹⁴ The "failed states index" maintained by the Fund for Peace recently ranked Afghanistan the tenth most vulnerable state among 148 surveyed. A failed state is one that has ineffective physical control of its territory, lacks a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, does not provide basic public services or domestic security, has questionable

available as both foreign and local pressures compel government officials to act quickly, often before they have adequate direction or capacity.

The influence of foreign interest cannot be underestimated. Extensive but less observable political pressures operate alongside the visible role of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), coalition forces and international aid organizations. Afghanistan's natural resources, its strategic geographic position in a rapidly evolving South Asia and its history with terrorism attracts tremendous resources and attention from Asian, Middle Eastern, Western and other actors. Many of the government officials currently sitting in ministries represent these external interests either directly or indirectly.

A key factor in Afghanistan's recovery is the establishment of local institutions capable of effectively planning and instigating reconstruction and development initiatives. The September 2005 election of provincial councils was the first formal step in this direction. Nevertheless, Afghanistan's history and predilection for centralized government leave it without experience in establishing and administering local institutions. It must also overcome the general "deep-rooted suspicion and distrust of central authority" among rural communities, says Boesen of AREU.¹⁵ Nascent provincial authorities have an interest in demonstrating that the newfound institutions provide a mechanism for solving local problems, while the central government is keen to prove it is taking action to stabilize the countryside; neither has the experience or a decentralization mandate to support its efforts and corruption erodes much of the efforts.

The district level is the weakest element of local government in Afghanistan. Since the district elections were canceled in 2005, the 365 districts are headed by appointed District Administrators who lack resources, incentive and capacity to support development initiatives. The sub-district or *hauzah* level has similar limitations. At the village level, however, the growing number of NSP-initiated Community Development Councils (CDCs) provide a strengthening network of grassroots institutions. The weak district level government leaves them unable to communicate effectively with local authorities and through them with central government. This break in vertical interaction similarly leaves Kabul without means of communication with the population, a factor attributed to the growing distrust of the administration.¹⁶

A number of initiatives are underway to address this gap by supporting local institution building including notably UNDP's National Area Based Development Program that intends to enhance development planning from the CDC to the district and up to the provincial level. Decisions about local governance are also an important part of the discussion on the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS).¹⁷ Bolstered by the January 2006 Afghanistan Compact pledging billions more dollars in assistance from international donors, ANDS will provide a long-term

legitimate authority in the eyes of a significant portion of its population and is unable to interact with other states as a member of the international community. See Fund for Peace, "The Twelve Indicators of CAST," <<http://www.fundforpeace.org/programs/fsi/fsindicators.php>> (12 September 2006) for some criteria of state failure.

¹⁵ Boesen, "From Subjects to Citizens," 6.

¹⁶ David Rhode and J. Risen, "CIA Review Highlights Afghan Leader's Woes," *The New York Times*, 5 November 2006.

¹⁷ See Afghanistan National Development Strategy website for more on the consultative process, <<http://www.and.s.gov.af/main.asp>> (3 November 2006).

framework for Afghanistan's recovery process including a foundation for all reconstruction and development assistance, governance, institution building, private investment and civil society strengthening initiatives. The government established a broad-based national dialogue to inform the Interim Strategy with the aim of finalizing it by the end of 2006.

Principal social and political actors

In the vacuum of rural governing bodies, tribal, religious and military authorities have long made decisions about and for rural populations.¹⁸ Many of these power holders retain significant influence over rural Afghan society. As Jeffrey Simpson writes, Afghanistan "remains a tribal-based society, with warlords and regional barons, who in their fiefdoms are much more powerful than the government in Kabul."¹⁹

Five principal players dominate rural politics, presenting both opportunities for and obstacles to local development. These include the broad categories of political parties, commanders, religious scholars, tribal elders and *maliks/arbobs* or traditional leaders.

Political parties. Political parties were first formed in the late 1960s but did not gain their current status as pivotal components of Afghan society for nearly 20 years. After the Soviet invasion when large numbers of Afghans migrated to Pakistan, the lead party, Muslim Youth, first divided into two parties Hezb-e-Islami and Jamiat-e-Islami and then into seven factions, each with its own ideological and financial support, largely from Pakistan underwritten by the West. Other parties formed backed by China, the Soviet Union and Iran (backing the Shia population). As history has shown, fighting between them during the *jihadi* period was often as fierce as that between the *mujahideen* and the Soviets. When the so-called alliance of *mujahideen* came to power in 1992, the infighting demolished any pretense of unity and plummeted the country into civil war. This externally backed factionalism continues to have substantial influence on Afghan life, perhaps most visibly in the provinces bordering Pakistan.

Commanders. The term "commander" is commonly used to describe combatants from small and former commanders with as few as ten (10) soldiers under their authority to large, powerful super commanders or "warlords,"²⁰ currently controlling extensive parts of Afghanistan. While some gained status during the Taliban reign, most stem from the *mujahideen* period and thus continue to attract an element of respect for having led the fight in the *jihad* against the Soviet occupation and communism.

"Commander" and "warlord" have both negative and positive connotations. On the one hand, they are often associated with the illegal and coercive use of armed force, crime, insurgencies, poppy cultivation and the drug trade, excessive taxation of citizens within their territories and

¹⁸ For a description of traditional local power holders, see Palwasha Kakar, "Fine-Tuning the NSP: Discussions of Problems and Solutions with Facilitating Partners," (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, November 2005).

¹⁹ Jeffrey Simpson, "Afghanistan's Fine Balance: Narco-economy or Narco-state?" *The Globe and Mail*, 11 April 2006.

²⁰ The term "warlord" (probably imported by the international community from other countries, most notably Somalia) implies control over large territory and populations where political authority has collapsed.

other abusive uses of power.²¹ However, in the vacuum of rule of law, government and basic services, they provide protection, leadership and physical and material support. At their roots, commanders have personal entrenched interests and have historically been disinterested in formal governance, provision of basic services or development issues writ large. It remains to be seen if this will change as commanders are appointed or elected to government posts. The opinion of several key informants indicated that their roles might have been on the verge of such a shift by the end of the spring of 2006 as they read the writing on the wall suggesting permanence in the new political dynamics. However, they may have also been lying low and simply waiting out the prevailing influences to join the upsurge in opposition forces that subsequently proliferated in much of the south.

Religious scholars. All Muslims who have knowledge of Islam and memorized the Quran are technically religious scholars (*mullahs* or *ulamas*) differentiated by ranks with *mawlawi* at the highest level; those who lead prayers in mosques are *imams*. Although clerics have always held an important place in Afghan society as guides and interpreters of social and religious conduct, the *mujahideen* period and its pervasive Islamic overtones significantly raised their visibility and numbers. At the same time, the increasing power of factional leaders made them vulnerable to manipulation by commanders and the political forces dividing the country. They were often used to justify military or political actions and to persuade populations to comply.

Interviews with various observers suggest religious scholars may be separating into three broad categories: those strongly and militantly opposed to the current government, buoyed by the Islamic underpinnings of the Taliban and similar related forces; the growing silent majority who question or oppose the government but are not openly defiant; and those basically supportive of the government. The August 2006 appointment of 500 new posts for religious scholars within the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Endowments suggests the government is reaching out to the latter in an effort to exert greater control over a relatively independent, yet powerful segment of society. According to IRC Logar staff, this is overdue since the perception of inadequate prominence of Islam in central government is one of the major factors fueling the opposition in the first category.

Tribal elders. Each tribe has various levels of elders who command authority, make decisions, solve problems and are members of *jirgas* (*shuras*), meetings of elders convened from multiple communities for the purpose of conflict resolution. Their primacy as local leaders gave way to political alliances and military commanders during the *mujahideen* era and the ensuing civil war of the early 90s. The Taliban undermined it further by disallowing leadership of social groupings other than those that furthered its own interests. Despite this, tribal authorities still command respect as recognized leaders and decision-making members of traditional *jirgas* of the community.

Maliks or Arbobs. Each village in Afghanistan has a *malik* (*arbob* in some areas), the traditional leader who represents the community to outside entities, including government, visitors, religious leaders and foreigners. The position is held by a male community member and is traditionally passed on through the family, although changes in leadership are not uncommon. The *malik* presents community issues and needs to external parties and receives incoming

²¹ Kakar, "Fine-Tuning," 11.

interests, assistance and opportunities. As such, he develops relationships with regional power holders and has a certain amount of control over resources available to the community. In today's Afghanistan, "the survival of a certain *malik/arbob* over the regime changes depended on whether the individual was able to get along with the various powers—commanders and governments—that took over their region."²²

The north – south divide

Afghanistan's 34 provinces and seven regions have substantively different ethnic, religious, language, social, geographic and economic contexts that have understandable implications on operational conditions. The Hindu Kush divides the country geographically along a northeast-southwest line. The largest socio-political division is between the north and the south along a horizontal axis that runs south of Kabul to the western province of Herat. The north, while dominated by ethnic Dari-speaking Tajik, also encompasses Uzbeks, Hezaras (Hezaras dominate the central portion of the country), some Pashtuns and both Sunni and Shia Muslims. Though northern factions battled as much among themselves as they did with the south in the 1990s, they later united to form the Northern Alliance, which fought with coalition forces to oust the Taliban. Thus far, the north has been more stable than the south necessitating only general cautionary advisories for organizations working in the region.²³ Although security is by no means certain and conditions change rapidly, one of the largest challenges for organizations working in parts of the north is the mountainous terrain that often prevents travel for six months of the year.

The south, by contrast, is populated chiefly by ethnic Pashtuns who speak Pashtu, follow Sunnism and share common norms and culture. Its more homogenous composition lends itself to greater social and political cohesion. *Pashtunwali*, the Pashtun moral code of conduct, is an everyday part of social interaction in the south. It consists of *melmastia*, showing hospitality to all visitors; *badal*, revenging all injustices; *nanwatay*, surrendering in all respects to the victor and begging forgiveness; and *nang* or *panah warkawal*, upholding honor for oneself and one's family (especially with regard to women). The south's conservative socially conformist culture tends to discourage if not forbid women's engagement in activities outside the home, particularly in the more rural areas. Schools and girls' facilities specifically are contested and increasingly destroyed as conservative elements take stronger hold in certain areas.

The south was notably the home of the Taliban during its reign and continues to be a stronghold and contains the largest poppy cultivation area. Incursions by Taliban and other forces from the Pashtun tribal areas of Pakistan continue to undermine security and disrupt reconstruction and development programs. Organizations working in the south are advised to use extreme caution; many have abandoned their programs altogether. Perhaps both a cause and result of the higher insecurity, the south in general has received fewer reconstruction dollars and suffers from higher poverty and unemployment. Many observers have pointed to this lack of investment as a key reason for Afghanistan's deterioration since the spring of 2006.²⁴

²² Kakar, "Fine-Tuning," 9.

²³ Afghanistan NGO Security Office, "Afghanistan Non-Governmental Organization Safety Office Report of April 12, 2006."

²⁴ David Isby, "Afghanistan, Five Years and Counting," *The National Interest*, 2 November 2006, <<http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=12784>> (4 November 2006); Rhode and Risen, "CIA Review;"

Operational Context in the Southeast Region

IRC is the NSP's Facilitating Partner in Khost and Logar, two of the southeast region's five provinces: Logar, Ghazni, Paktia, Khost and Paktika. All five share experience with severe drought and a history of migration to and from Pakistan.

The exodus of Afghans after the Soviet invasion to their ethnic Pashtun brethren in Pakistan was comprised appreciably of those from the southeast provinces. According to interviews with local residents and refugees still in camps, perhaps as much as 50 percent of the region's population fled the fighting and communist government to seek refuge in neighboring Peshawar and the surrounding western provinces. Many simply aligned with the *mujahideen* faction and its Pakistani benefactor who supported the camp in which they lived. These allegiances continue for the most part today. Large numbers of refugees trained in Pakistani camps and fought with the *mujahideen*, crossing back and forth through the porous border. Others started businesses, learned skills, went to school and otherwise established themselves in the border regions of Pakistan.

After two decades, an estimated two million refugees remain, maintaining strong familial, economic and political relationships on both sides of the border. Contributing to the cross-border transactions, a new road is being constructed linking western Pakistan with Kabul through Khost, Paktia and Logar. Residents interviewed along the route are pleased with the prospects of increasing local commerce and employment, though a few also recognize the potential increased illicit traffic such a major road could bring. A smaller undeveloped pass through the mountains between Nangahar and Paktia provinces is still the preferred local route for many illegal and insurgent activities.

Throughout all five provinces in the southeast, as in most of Afghanistan, strong differences exist between rural and semi-urban environments. Isolation, illiteracy, years of drought and general poverty have had a marked impact on socio-cultural dynamics. The general conservatism of the south is magnified in this environment, evident in the reduction in or prevention of women's participation in educational or official activities, increased influence of *pashtunwali* and heightened distrust of the central government. The absence of visible development and security contribute to popular disillusionment with the government and continue to fuel anti-government actors such as the Taliban, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Tribal, political and religious composition

The southeast region is the "gateway to the south" and the beginning of Pashtun territory. While the southeast, like the south, is relatively homogeneous with the vast majority Pashtun and Sunni, it has a smattering of Tajiks, Hezaras and Shia, particularly in Logar and Ghazni provinces. Still, *pashtunwali* and Pashtun custom in general, strongly influence socio-cultural

dynamics. Most of the population is from just one of the two Pashtun tribes, Gheljai, which is divided into many, historically competing sub tribes. Tribal identity remains a powerful force in the region, say a majority of citizens interviewed.²⁵ Tribal *jirgas* tend to be stronger and tribal affiliation plays a larger protection role than in some other parts of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's ideological and political leadership have had strong links to the southeast region of the country since the Soviet invasion. The massive outpouring of people from the area into western Pakistan linked the ensuing factionalization of the *mujahideen*—and therefore much of the political dynamics of the last twenty years—to the southeast region. The subsequent return of refugees to the area brought the political focus and its southeastern leadership back into Afghanistan, according to several key informants. Between 1990 and the collapse of the Taliban, the military and government were both dominated by individuals from the southeast. Four of the most significant *mujahideen* party heads (and the most fundamentalist) in the past few years reportedly come from Paktia, Logar and Khost. Paktia, in particular, is the home of many of the most conservative leaders, including the majority of ministers during the Taliban era, said IRC staff.²⁶

The strong affiliation in the southeast with the *jihad* and associated political parties likely inflates the status and possibly the number of returned commanders or former commanders in the southeast. Their apparent esteem among regional residents interviewed translates to basic physical and financial support. However, their role may be changing, despite interviewees' contention that commanders are still the most powerful local stakeholders. Until recently conflicting factional dynamics with its military leadership may have been gradually succumbing to the changing political dynamics and foreign and central government influence. The deployment of the Afghanistan National Army, according to local officials and NGO workers, for example, had been having a gradual calming effect in many areas before the rise of insurgencies in 2006, suggesting a reduction in the need for unofficial forms of protection. Formal recognition of the commanders' actual authority in southeast society seems to be inconsistent. In Paktia, for example, local authorities interviewed refused to recognize any strong role of commanders in the province. This may be for any number of politically- or security-motivated reasons but possibly because former *jihadi* combatants are currently seen simply as influential individuals and not as militants or possibly to avoid undermining their own authority.

Like commanders, the role and number of religious scholars in the southeast may also be higher than in other parts of Afghanistan. An unofficial estimate by a local informant claimed that several *hauzahs* in the southeast host significant numbers of religious scholars among their male populations. Again, this may be due to the region's close association with the *mujahideen* and the dramatic rise in the influence of Islam during the *jihadi* period. Madrassas and clerics multiplied in all southeast provinces and in the refugee camps where southeastern Afghans lived, owing potentially to the high number of scholars today. Later, when the Taliban movement began to take root in the south in 1995 and quickly captured the southeast, the authority of the now elevated number of clerics escalated even further. Their free rein, however, was limited to

²⁵ Interestingly, the tribes have not taken sides in the current opposition insurgency, according to one noteworthy political observer; rather, all tribal segments represent the four Taliban factions.

²⁶ At one point, the Taliban regime reportedly had 11 ministers from Paktia and Khost (interview with IRC staff).

benefit the Taliban who used them extensively to influence and control the population, said those interviewed.

Despite their history of being used by tribal and political interests and of manipulating the population, the central role of Islam in southeastern society and indeed Afghanistan in general ensures religious scholars are still seen as trusted guides. They face a new challenge: the growing tension between traditional culture that embraces conservatism and the modern influences gradually being introduced in the southeast. The tension plays itself out visibly both in the current insurgency and with respect to the role of women in society. Those clerics who consider themselves freed from the bonds of the Taliban are essentially caught in the middle of an evolving culture. On the one hand, for example, the Quran supports girls' education and the right of women to marry whomever they want. Traditional culture reinforced through members of the insurgency on the other hand, restricts such options leading to the closing or destruction of schools and intimidation of girls and their families. Evidence suggests that the two extreme external influences prevalent in the southeast today will continue to impact religious, political and cultural dynamics and force religious scholars to choose between an evolving Islamic society and the more conservative culture of the past.

Differences between Logar and the four other southeastern provinces

The line between Logar and neighboring Kabul province serves as the boundary between the north and the south. During the fighting, Logar became a battlefield as incursions came and went across the line, earning it the name *Bobul Jihad*, or the Gate of Jihad. Given its border with the central and eastern regions, Logar has a weaker tribal structure and greater diversity than the other southeastern provinces, encompassing a larger number of Shias, political factions and ethno-linguistic groups within its borders. The Kuchi (nomads) who live in Logar are semi-settled, unlike the migrating Kuchi of Khost, Paktia and Paktika. This general diversity creates challenges but also exposes residents to other ways of living. Several interviewed said that the new Governor of Logar is addressing these challenges and those of economic recovery remarkably well, earning him a reputation as a concerned, active leader.

Perhaps most significant is Logar's proximity to the national capital and to the accompanying cosmopolitan influences that it brings. Education in Logar is notably higher than in other parts of the southeast region, given its access to universities and technical schools in Kabul. While reliable figures are difficult to obtain, literacy in Logar may be about 60 percent for men and 25 - 30 percent for women, as compared to 51 and 21 percent respectively in the rest of the country.²⁷ Numerous Logar residents readily access employment, markets and other economic opportunities that abound in Kabul, in recent years creating something of a commuter community, particularly in the north of the province. Once mostly agriculturalists, many from Logar now work in government or with international organizations or have businesses in the capital and maintain a residence in both locations.

²⁷ Figures for Logar are based on estimates by IRC provincial staff (no statistics are available); countrywide figures come from UNICEF's 2000 survey (UNICEF, "At a Glance: Afghanistan," <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan_statistics.html> 4 November 2006.)

Populations in Ghazni, Khost, Paktia and Paktika, in contrast, have a reputation for being more conservative, questioning of government and resistant to foreigners. They are also generally poorer, although the remittances arriving from the significant number of Khost citizens living in the Middle East elevate Khost's per capita income considerably, said a local official. These four provinces are geographically more isolated, both from the urban encroachment of Kabul and due to their more mountainous terrain. The most prominent influence on Khost, Paktia and Paktika, however, is their border with Pakistan.

The love-hate relationship between the two countries plays out in the border regions between the unregulated tribal areas of western Pakistan and the south and southeast area of Afghanistan across the still disputed 1893 Durand boundary line dividing "Pashtunistan". The growing political turmoil in Pakistan's Waziristan and increasing activity of Islamic fundamentalist groups in the Northwest Frontier Province directly influence security in the three provinces. Last year's increase in insurgencies is presumably related to both the historic ties between Pashtuns on both sides and the political alliances and relationships formed over the years of living in proximity. "Waziristan, with its inhospitable terrain and warlike conservative tribes, the Waziris and Mahsuds, was the ideal launching pad in the *jihad* against the Soviets in the Paktia and Khost provinces across the border"²⁸ and is being used again today. Support from al Qaida, Taliban, Hezb-e-Islami and other political forces has fostered training and equipping of thousands of new insurgents launching across the border to destroy Western influences in Afghanistan. At the same time, criminal entities may be encouraged by the lawlessness of the border region and the opportunity for profiting from the drug trade, child trafficking and other illicit exchange businesses. Prospects for improving security in the region appear extremely slim for the immediate future, as the upsurge in violence in 2006 reached an all time high and threatens to grow still stronger in 2007.²⁹

Operational challenges

Three factors distinguish the operational conditions in the southeast from other regions: the particularly high politicization of the region; the massive exodus of residents to the Peshawar area during the past twenty years and continued close relationships with Pakistan; and the southeast's geographic position as the "gateway to the south" and border with Pakistan. All three factors have implications on the surge in anti-government violence in the south and southeast.

These factors combined with other, more ubiquitous conditions presented only a moderately more difficult programmatic environment for IRC than for NSP FPs working in other parts of Afghanistan. In comparison, some regions, especially along the Hindu Kush, have had exceptional difficulties due to steep terrain and complete inaccessibility in the winter months; the southeast has such accessibility problems in only some of the higher elevation areas. The southeast provinces' relative conservatism, which would seem to challenge the NSP's participatory approach, was similarly, if not more, perceived in other southern portions of the country. Periodic insecurity has affected other regions as well, including a recent renewal of fighting between northern factions. Moreover, some southern and northeastern provinces have

²⁸ Vikram Sood, "Allied to the Problem," *Hindustan Times*, 11 April 2006.

²⁹ Over 2,000 deaths had been reported in the first seven months of 2006 (Nick Grono and Joanna Nathan, "Afghanistan: Keep up the War on Terror at its Source," *The Australian*, 8 August 2006).

had the added complication of extensive poppy cultivation. These obstacles in other regions notwithstanding, the 2006 upsurge in militant opposition in the south and southeast set entirely new and more problematic operational parameters for the NSP FPs implementing in these areas.

The challenges IRC has faced in Afghanistan's two southeastern provinces have evolved with these changing conditions. The region displayed a great deal of cynicism about both the central administration's intentions and its ability to follow through on promises. It also was extremely skeptical about international organizations and facile assurances of aid during frequent field assessments. This combined with an escalation of violence against aid agencies (particularly in the south, southeast and east) as IRC was launching its implementation, created a climate of distrust, insecurity and skepticism. In June 2003, just as IRC was assigned Khost and Logar provinces for implementing the NSP, Mullah Omar, the titular head of the Taliban, announced the formation of a 10-man Taliban leadership council that included a prominent *jihadi* commander from Khost. The martial character of the council, its dual thrust against the government and coalition forces and the presence of a widely respected regional leader put IRC in a precarious position during the design phase of the NSP.

Another operational obstacle in the beginning was the southeast's general conservatism and social restrictions that confined IRC's ability to engage all elements of the population fully. Most obvious was the difficulty of gaining the acceptance for female community members to participate in Community Development Councils and elections. It was equally challenging to find female staff who had both the concurrence of their families and the interest and capacity to work. Khost has been the more difficult of IRC's two provinces in this respect, especially in rural areas and along the border with Waziristan, though the populations in it as well as in Logar have become more accepting over time.

Insecurity has been an operational issue all along, though the implications have obviously increased with the magnitude of the violence since the spring of 2006. The repercussions are several-fold. First, international staff have often been restricted from visiting NSP communities (depending on districts' prevailing security conditions), thus limiting the foreign-led oversight and acuity of the IRC program particularities. Between 2002 and 2005, for example, expatriate IRC NSP staff made but a couple visits to Khost and none since then. Second, the NSP program has been forced to stop or postpone operations occasionally due to security incidents.³⁰ In late July 2006, IRC suspended operations in Kharwar District of Logar due to overall insecurity related to the presence of numerous Taliban and opposition forces.

Provincial staff have also been the subject of direct intimidation from an array of state and non-state, national and international actors. Several have been arrested and fined and others have

³⁰ In March 2004, a bomb exploded outside the IRC office in the Baraki Barak district in Logar Province, injuring three staff members. (This incident may have been related to a disagreement between local authorities about the office building.) Later in 2004, the Mohammad Agha office, also in Logar, was targeted with an improvised explosive device during the night, damaging the office. In 2005, students entered the same office and destroyed files and a chair during the riots over desecration of the Quran by American soldiers. The same year in the Spera District in Khost Province, coalition forces broke into the office over the weekend and searched the vicinity. Coalition forces were also involved in another incident in the Spera District, confiscating one community's NSP funds. No direct security incidents have occurred since then.

received “night letters”³¹ threatening them and their family with harm to their property if they do not refrain from working with IRC. Intimidation had nearly ceased over the previous year, but resurfaced somewhat with the new insurgency.

³¹ Night letters are mass-produced, generic notices posted outside family homes during the night stating violations of behavior for religious and other reasons and threatening residents with destructive action (usually house burning) if activities did not cease.

III. IRC'S APPROACH TOWARDS THE NSP

Within this operational context and the parameters of the NSP, IRC added some relatively unique features to its programmatic methodology. Its approach to the NSP was distinguished by several factors. First, underlying principles intuitively drove the method and function of the program and related initiatives. Second, IRC incorporated several distinctive design aspects that greatly influenced its entire operations. Finally, IRC instigated a number of key initiatives related to, but outside the NSP.

Founding Principles

Five principles appeared to drive IRC's approach toward the NSP. These were not manifest upfront but appear as intrinsic threads throughout IRC's work.

Primacy of cultural and social structures. Perhaps most fundamental to IRC's methodology was its grounding in existing cultural, religious and traditional institutions as the necessary and legitimate foundation for conducting a participatory process. Many observers believed these structures presented potential obstacles to Afghanistan's recovery and development given the number of ties to suspect influences in the past.

Consultative basis for engaging local society. IRC used consultations as its founding format for interaction with and participation of all constituents in the provinces on key aspects of the design and implementation process.

Promoting government assumption of the NSP. IRC encouraged government institutions' eventual takeover of community development responsibilities at all levels, including the NSP and its related elements.

Modeling NSP values in the design and implementation process. IRC sought to exemplify the NSP's stated values of participatory and inclusive decision-making, gender equity, transparency, accountability and sustainability in all aspects of its program.

Rooting change in the grassroots to influence national dynamics. IRC facilitated change on countrywide concerns by fostering influence at the community-level.

These principles play out repeatedly in IRC's approach to the NSP, both in its methodologies of implementing the program and in the supplementary initiatives it undertook.

Process of Implementation

IRC's approach to the NSP incorporated several distinctive elements.

Contextual review. At the inception of IRC's contract with the MRRD, IRC senior staff conducted a brief informal analysis of the cultural, political, social and religious dynamics in Logar and Khost provinces, which subsequently informed its overall strategy toward the NSP. This was not a formal conflict, stakeholder or social analysis. The review consisted of discussion with Afghans about social and cultural values of southeastern society and the potential spoilers and supporters of the NSP process. The most common and passionately held response was that the NSP process must respect Afghanistan's culture and religion.³² The analysis resulted in a) the identification of several influential groups including religious scholars, tribal elders and former military commanders and b) three strategic design decisions: to hire all staff from within the provinces; to engage the key stakeholders in all critical decisions and integrate them into activities; and to base the village selection process on the priorities of local power holders.

Consultative workshops. The contextual review revealed the consultative nature of Afghan culture and prompted IRC to design a workshop in each province to confer with principal actors from all factions and interests.³³ IRC reasoned that convincing key social and political leaders would greatly enhance the acceptance of the NSP throughout the region. In addition to the attractive monetary implications, they discussed the principles behind the NSP—including that of women's participation—and their relationship to local cultural and religious ideals. The workshops affirmed IRC's willingness to engage on Afghan terms and drew out potential adversaries early in the process. Involving principal leaders in NSP decision-making processes such as village selection, shifted ownership over the program from external entities to organic structures. This reduced the potential for powerful elements to sabotage the program and the prospect they could engage in vocal opposition without losing face. Gaining the agreement of all forms of local leadership is believed to also have ostensibly increased the security of IRC staff.

The reaction to the two provincial workshops was quite positive, despite some tension between government and tribal leaders. Although several leaders initially resisted the NSP's condition for women's participation, after extensive discussion they agreed. Many expressed cynicism about actually seeing the financial benefits of the NSP given their distrust in the government and experience with empty NGO promises. Nevertheless, they consented to be involved in the program under certain conditions: IRC must respect the local culture and the religion and it must not proselytize. IRC accepted the conditions.

Advisory Boards. IRC recognized the need to create a permanent, locally based authority to inform and guide NSP decision-making and to temper the view that IRC, an international NGO, dominated the NSP process. It established a volunteer Advisory Board in each province (25 members in Logar and 26 in Khost) made up of key stakeholders largely derived from the

³² Those involved in the review were clearer about what violated that respect than about how it should be exhibited.

³³ These included tribal council members, government ministry representatives, religious scholars, former commanders, Kuchi, women and Emergency *Loya Jirga* members.

workshops.³⁴ It was important that some Advisory Board members represented anti-government factions to provide visibility and transparency on all IRC's activities. IRC crosschecked the final membership of the Boards among peers and individuals familiar with the local power structures in Khost and Logar to ensure it represented all factions and interests in the province. All Board members received training in basic NSP operations. Government officials such as MRRD at the provincial level, line ministry representatives, District Administrators and others also routinely attended IRC workshops such as NSP orientation, good governance and human rights.

Much like the consultative workshops, the intention behind establishing Advisory Boards was to broaden the locus of decision-making from external to local entities. This not only aimed to enhance the appeal of the program but also to increase local understanding of and support for the principles behind community driven development. Over time, the hope was that such a broad foundation among multiple stakeholders would increase the prospects for integrating community-based planning into all forms of development and local decision-making.³⁵

Advisory Boards performed several functions:

- Importantly, they provided IRC with guidance on culture, religion and social issues. This ensured that IRC's approach was contextually appropriate and facilitated its acceptance at the community level. It also shifted emphasis away from the NSP as an NGO-implemented program and towards a locally directed program.
- At the same time, Board members disseminated information on NSP to their constituents to prepare the public and help dispel rumors. They made public statements of support for NSP including warning against any violent actions against IRC staff. This was very important in the climate of unknown security that prevailed in the region. Advisory Board members publicly supported women's participation in the NSP, helping to boost acceptance of their involvement in elections, CDCs and project implementation.
- Board members were key participants on monitoring missions with IRC engineers, monitoring and evaluation staff, exchange officers, senior managers, MRRD and provincial level line ministry staff, District Administrators and tribal leaders to examine NSP projects in the communities. This gave them the opportunity to talk with CDC and community members about the NSP process and to evaluate problems and therefore to increase the transparency of the program.
- As the NSP expanded into new areas, an important task of the Board was to choose new districts based on NSP district selection criteria. The district selection process became part of the first annual strategic planning workshop initiated in 2005 to define issues, problem-solve, analyze security conditions, suggest preventive measures and identify activities within the context of the NSP for the upcoming year. The strategic planning session also informed Board members of changes in the NSP's plans and procedures and,

³⁴ The Logar members included the provincial Governor (chair), District Administrators, former military commanders, Kuchi leaders, religious scholars, tribal elders, government officials from the Ministries of Agriculture, Education, Health, Irrigation, Public Services, Refugees and Returnees, Rural Rehabilitation and Development and Women's Affairs, and in Khost only the Chamber of Commerce, the Khost University President and the Minister of Planning and Tribal and Border Affairs.

³⁵ The Logar Board dissolved after several months with the promotion of the IRC Provincial Manager to Kabul and the difficulty replacing him with the requisite leadership to continue to convene the Board. Since then, the Logar Board has met only once, though intentions are to reassemble it. In contrast, the Khost Board remains a formidable body with 100 percent attendance throughout its three-year history.

through the process of informal networking, disseminated this information to the population. On their own initiative, both Advisory Boards successfully lobbied MRRD to include Logar and Khost in the provinces receiving NSP funding for new districts (much to the dismay of the MRRD).

To develop the necessary understanding of the NSP and generate the requisite support, Khost Advisory Board members (and Logar members for the first several months) met monthly with senior IRC provincial staff to obtain updates and address upcoming issues. Each new subject required extensive discussion and awareness raising among the members. Such issues as the role of returning refugees and unsettled Kuchi in the NSP process, the nature and function of civil society in helping realize Community Development Plans and, perhaps most notably, women's participation in the NSP entailed long conversations allowing full airing of the various perspectives. The result was IRC's broader understanding of the complexity of local social issues as well as the Board members' acceptance of the compatibility of the NSP's underlying principles with their local culture and religion, such as women taking an active role in community life. The Advisory Boards were the first provincial level structure to engage government officials, religious scholars, tribal leaders and former commanders collectively in discussions about development issues. Despite the diversity of membership, the Boards consistently reached consensus and then fully supported the decisions over time.

Village selection process. As mentioned, one of the outcomes of the contextual review was the decision to engage all principle stakeholders in critical decisions. An important and potentially contentious or manipulated decision was always which villages in the selected districts would receive the NSP first, second and third. To expose the process to the public and leaders to a new form of conducting business, IRC conducted an open selection process. Leaders in the initial consultative workshop made the first determinations through long discussions on the NSP selection criteria (to which they added a number of their own criteria) and then deliberated on the most eligible communities. However, their province-level perspective was not detailed enough to facilitate accurate community assessment. Therefore, IRC established a district-level village selection process as the NSP expanded into new districts.

Much like the provincial consultative workshops, IRC met with key stakeholders in the newly selected districts. These stakeholders were derived from the top common candidates on the lists of five distinguished leaders and generally included business leaders, commanders, district level government officials, district *shura* members, *imams* and *mullahs*, *maliks* and tribal leaders. At the meetings IRC introduced the participants to the NSP and its objectives and requirements, the core values of the NSP and IRC methodology in community and staff selection. Then it opened dialogue on considerations for NSP village participation. The meetings included a discussion on gender as well as a security commitment for IRC staff working in each area chosen. Returning to their districts and tribes, meeting attendees consulted with their sub-districts and then returned to IRC with a list of the requisite number of villages for each of the three rounds.

The resulting list of communities thus stemmed from a widely publicized process involving participation at multiple levels. The engagement of key actors within the social and political infrastructure aimed to avert controversy over favoritism and disagreement among tribal, ethnic, language, party and religious factions. It also provided IRC with more information and often a

different perspective on local vulnerability, security, war impact, displacement and other bases for eligibility.

At the conclusion of the selection process, IRC collectively met with one *malik* and one *mullah* from each chosen community, discussed the NSP in detail and presented them with the solidarity agreement (see below). These individuals then returned to their communities and discussed the proposition. During the first two years, *mullahs* on the SACRA also visited the selected communities at this time to talk about the NSP's relationship to Islam. IRC then met with all members of the interested communities at a meeting called by traditional leadership, after which the community either decided to participate and signed the solidarity agreement or declined.

Advisory Councils. For the first year of implementation, IRC established Advisory Councils in each district. Membership stemmed from a similar nomination process evolving from the village selection meetings of key district stakeholders and included district *shura* members (one representative from each *houzah*). Their role was to select the ordering of NSP communities that would engage in the program, to oversee progress, to participate in decision-making and to solve problems. They also were crucial in obtaining nominations for new district level staff members needed as IRC expanded into new communities. While designed as temporary structures to lend greater local acuity, IRC reinstated them in 2006 to provide advice on the insurgency and related issues and insight into the population's view of the NSP, especially in areas plagued with violence such as Khawar District in Logar.

Special Action Committees for Religious Affairs (SACRAs). To complement the Advisory Board, IRC established province level Special Action Committees for Religious Affairs (SACRAs) to engage religious scholars in the NSP early in the program.³⁶ The SACRA members' primary role was to ensure IRC NSP practices respected religious values and to raise awareness about the NSP and its principles and methodologies by speaking directly with the population in mosques, madrassas and communities throughout Khost and Logar.³⁷ Their support built on early discussions between IRC staff and *mullahs* on the role of Islam in development, passages in the Quran on community members' responsibility for improving their own lives and specifically on its inherent endorsement of women's participation in development activities and high-level consultations. According to various interviewees, a number of religious scholars initially sided with others who rejected the NSP and anything associated with the new central government or international organizations, especially unknown entities. (Several *maliks* also resisted the NSP, believing it was a plot designed to undermine their authority in the community.) However, as they became involved and learned more about the NSP, support for the program grew and ultimately helped broaden public understanding.

IRC engaged SACRA members as individuals not as a group, training them in the principles behind the NSP and paying them each a stipend for their work. While IRC gave them the option, most chose to associate themselves with IRC, despite its international NGO identification; several volunteered to serve on Advisory Boards. Members trained together but otherwise had only a loose connection with each other through a titular leader. They did not hold regular

³⁶ This changed to district level SACRAs in 2005 to involve religious scholars more directly in program activities.

³⁷ Between 6 October 2004 and 5 April 2005 SACRA members spoke with nearly 7,500 community members about the NSP (IRC, "NSP 5th and 6th Quarter Progress Report," 5 June 2005, 12).

meetings and had no work plan or monitoring process other than the time sheets they submitted. However, they did have specific activities they agreed to undertake including the number of community discussions held, madrassas and mosques visited, etc.

IRC's tactic was to put religion up front as part of its implementation of the NSP. Following the regular prayer, it opened all meetings with a discussion about the relationship between Islam and development. In addition to the SACRAs, it also hired a Special Advisor for Religious Affairs on IRC staff. While the Advisor also regularly spoke in mosques and madrassas about the NSP, his primary function was to help ground the NSP in the teachings of the Quran by opening trainings, talking at special NSP events and maintaining an ongoing discussion with other religious scholars in the region.

IRC staff recruitment process. One of the conclusions of the contextual review was the unique decision to hire all staff from within the provinces. This had several potential benefits. For one, IRC appreciated the visibility and economic significance of employing hundreds of individuals to work in an area where jobs were in high demand. Salaries would provide immediate economic benefit to the districts before NSP grant money reached the communities. It also recognized the inherent message of local ownership attached to having staff who were born and lived within the province and “looked like” the local population. Further, IRC theorized that by rendering the hiring process visible to all, the potential for corruption would decrease. It also posited that the pressure to employ friends and relatives within Afghanistan's highly relational culture would diminish if all stakeholders agreed to a standardized and observable process. Finally, by hiring individuals representing all factions and groups, no single entity could dominate.

Thus, to optimize transparency, IRC solicited broad participation in the selection of its staff based on criteria developed through the initial consultative workshops in each province. IRC requested staff nominations from the local leaders in attendance who then consulted other stakeholders and provided IRC with a list of potential candidates. IRC also advertised widely throughout each province. Resulting applicants who met the criteria were screened first through an oral test (to provide equal opportunity to illiterate candidates in a country plagued with low literacy rates) and then through panel interviews following a list of standard questions. IRC short-listed top candidates and then hired based on best qualifications.

The immediate outcome of this recruitment process was twofold and unique to NSP Facilitating Partners: nearly 100 percent of IRC's staff—which was over 300 by May 2006—were citizens of the province (and most citizens of the district) in which they worked. Second, IRC staff roughly reflected local society, including the political, demographic and social structure of each province, with the exception of full gender representation.³⁸ The result was that much of the provincial ethnic, language and tribal affiliations were represented and included Dari and Pashtu speakers, communists and *mujahideen* as well as former commanders, *mullahs*, tribal elders, widows, disabled and illiterate individuals. Table 1 shows staff profiles.

³⁸ Lack of demographic data prevented directly correlating staff make-up against local population; the assessment reflected the general perception derived from interviews with local government officials, IRC staff and OC and MRRD officials.

Table 1: Gender, Social Category, Profession, Ethnicity of IRC Management Staff

		Khost		Logar		Total	%
Gender	M	109	78%	115	72%	224	75%
	F	30	22%	45	28%	75	25%
Social Category	Former Commander	11	8%	18	11%	29	10%
	Religious Scholar	8	6%	15	9%	23	8%
	Farmer	13	9%	11	7%	24	8%
	Disabled	1	1%	4	3%	0	2%
	Widow	0	0%	2	1%	2	1%
	Tribal Leader	13	9%	10	6%	23	8%
	Other*	93	67%	100	63%	193	64%
Profession	Doctor	0	0%	1	1%	1	1%
	Engineer	16	12%	21	13%	37	12%
	Teacher	0	0%	36	23%	36	12%
	Other**	123	88%	102	64%	225	75%
Ethnicity	Pashtun	138	99%	88	55%	226	76%
	Tajik	1	1%	67	42%	68	23%
	Hazara	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Uzbek	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Other	0	0%	5	3%	5	2%

Total Khost staff = 139; Total Logar staff = 160

* Includes landlords and citizens with no particular occupation

** Includes teachers, unemployed, former civil servants and new high school graduates, masons, tailors.

IRC project database March 2006

While community facilitators and social organizers mobilized and trained communities primarily in their native district, IRC stipulated that they could not work directly with their own community to prevent conflicts of interest. IRC also disqualified villages of the newly hired staff from receiving first round NSP funds. This aimed to prevent the appearance of, and potential for, unscrupulous conduct as well as raise the awareness of the NSP within areas not yet engaged in the program through staff's transference of information in their home communities.

As mentioned, an obvious exception to the representative nature of IRC's workforce was its lack of gender parity. Throughout the NSP, female facilitators, trainers and social organizers were pivotal to increasing the participation of women in the communities. Finding qualified women willing and permitted to work outside the home was difficult throughout Afghanistan, though presumably more so in the conservative south. Interviews with those intimately involved in NSP's design and management suggest several factors influencing this: 1) high female illiteracy rates; 2) difficulty obtaining the necessary concurrence from husbands, fathers or brothers to pursue employment; 3) limited aspiration among many women to pursue work outside the home; 4) a perception that Islam forbids women from working and 5) lack—or a perceived lack—of physical security in some areas. While IRC has a higher percentage of female staff than many FPs, it still falls far short of parity. Khost figures are particularly low (in Spera District near the Waziristan border IRC has no women staff members). To rectify this, IRC hired a Gender Development Officer for each district and a Deputy Provincial Manager with responsibility for gender issues for each province. The intention was to provide a locus for improving recruitment efforts and for female staff to discuss issues as well as to increase the overall attention to gender concerns in IRC's NSP implementation.

A significant factor in attracting female staff was the support of religious scholars in speaking to the public on principles within Islam and passages in the Quran that encourage women's participation, consultation and working outside the home. This ran counter to many previous messages and understandings disseminated especially during the Taliban era that prevented women's activism at any level. Hiring women was also an issue for male staff members who were sensitive to the external perception that was suspicious of their motives. The religious validation of the appropriateness of women working helped them gain a reputation for upholding Islam rather than being devious in their intentions.

Community solidarity agreement. At the initial consultative workshop, IRC presented the concept of a community agreement between IRC and the new community entering into the NSP process and offered a draft "solidarity agreement" for discussion. The workshop participants produced a document that specified obligations and conditions for participating in the NSP for both IRC and the village. It outlined the core values of the NSP, IRC and the community; the roles and responsibilities of each; the function of the SACRAs; the gender commitment; and meeting guidelines. IRC initiated the contractual obligation as a way of ensuring community understanding of, and full concurrence with its methodology, the requirements for participation (most controversially, perhaps, the compulsory women's involvement), holding the community accountable for its participation, and its relationship with IRC.

Key Initiatives

IRC's founding principles not only drove its methodological approach to the NSP, but also inspired its initiation of several activities outside of, yet related to, the National Solidarity Program. The following are IRC's major undertakings.

University Field Study. The NSP coincided with many other massive reconstruction programs throughout Afghanistan attempting to rebuild the country after over twenty years of war. The demand for engineers to design and oversee infrastructure projects was significantly greater than the available pool within Afghanistan. NSP alone would eventually have small, mostly infrastructure projects in every community in the country requiring the oversight of qualified professionals. Even at its inception it was difficult for Facilitating Partners to find adequate engineering capacity to implement the program. IRC recognized the potential resource in university engineering departments to support some of this immediate and longer-term need and thus established the University Field Study program in 2004.

The objectives behind the initiative were several fold: 1) to provide a platform for engineering students to engage in NSP, recognizing the vast opportunities the program presented; 2) to provide the NSP with greater technical capacity; 3) to expose students to donor-funded programs and accompanying international standards; 4) to prepare students for private business; 5) to provide universities with ready-made site locations for practicum; 6) to build direct relationships between communities and indigenous engineering capacity, avoiding third party and/or international interface and 7) to provide students with an opportunity to get involved in the grassroots reconstruction of their country.

IRC began with seven universities scattered throughout Afghanistan but dropped to four (Alberoni University, Kabul University, Kabul Polytechnic University and Khost University) after a statement by an MRRD official put off several participants. Following a two-day introductory workshop for university presidents, the deans of the engineering departments, the engineering faculty and students attended a 40-hour session on the design and objectives of the NSP, the central engineering component, the procurement process, proposal writing, design of typical projects and monitoring of construction projects. Students and professors then visited numerous projects in varying stages of design and completion: Alberoni University students visited UN-HABITAT programs in Parwan, Kapisa and Panjshir Provinces; Kabul University and Polytechnic University visited IRC's Logar projects; and Khost University visited IRC's Khost projects. IRC and UN-HABITAT both continue to contract program graduates as site supervisors or CDC supervisors on projects.

CDC Exchange and Solidarity Initiative. The number of communities involved in community driven reconstruction across Afghanistan presented a ripe opportunity to exchange experiences and to create greater linkages and cohesion across social lines. Several other FPs also recognized this potential and each launched platforms for cross-community visits between CDCs in their districts. In Logar and Khost IRC frequently brought CDCs that had undergone at least one cycle of project implementation to share their experience with new CDCs, help solve problems and mentor inexperienced communities through the initial stages, especially the election process. Several joint projects emerged from this interaction within districts. IRC also created similar sharing opportunities between CDCs in Khost and those in Logar.

As these exchanges bore fruit, IRC recognized the significant learning and peacebuilding potential and launched a nation-wide initiative linking communities across provinces, regions and ultimately the nation. The "national" and the "solidarity" aspects of the National Solidarity Program became the driving force behind the effort as both communities and FPs shared experiences across previous political, social, ethnic, language and religious lines in progressively larger gatherings in different parts of the country. The first inter-FP exchange occurred in April 2004 between CDCs in 10 districts in Khost and Logar within IRC's implementation area and those in Parwan in UN-HABITAT's area, crossing the north – south divide. IRC hired an Exchange Officer (and subsequently another one for each province) responsible for ensuring continuation of exchanges. The two organizations formed a committee, met with the Parwan Governor and arranged logistics. The premise behind the several day meeting was to share experiences in implementing the NSP, which provided common ground for dialogue. Participants had opportunities to visit projects and discuss methodology. However, the evolving message behind the exchange was to increase linkages in geographically and demographically diverse areas of the country. The subsequent four exchanges followed the same theme growing progressively larger and introducing more social diversity (including women in the third exchange) in an effort to build on the message of unity.

By the fifth meeting held in Balkh Province in January 2005, the previously unnoticed process had gathered momentum and sudden recognition within MRRD, OC and the FPs' headquarters and thus prompted a visit by the Minister's deputy. The Balkh exchange became a turning point

in the process in that it reached a critical mass and set the stage for a national meeting in the western province of Herat in May, prompting a visit by the Minister himself.³⁹

To date, the focus of each meeting was sharing NSP experiences and unity between Afghans. At the end of each exchange, participants produced a declaration to this effect. The Herat exchange took something of a different approach, centering on the status of CDCs themselves. Over time, the legitimacy of CDCs as a community governing body, their future legal standing and their official authority in decision-making on local development issues continued to surface. At the time, Facilitating Partners were in the throes of writing by-laws for CDCs in response to a request from the Oversight Consultant. The emerging Afghanistan National Development Strategy and its linkages to the grassroots was a focal point of discussion among development actors. The Herat exchange provided an opportunity for the CDCs themselves to address their future and take part in a debate, which until then had ironically omitted their voices.

Consequently, at the Balkh exchange, IRC proposed the topic of the CDCs' future role in development as the focus of what was to be billed as the National Solidarity Exchange in Herat. CDCs elected 20 representatives to serve as the design committee. Led by IRC, they collectively developed a 10-question "public consultation" survey that queried communities on the most desirable and appropriate role for CDCs within Afghanistan society. Twelve FPs piloted the survey in their areas and brought the results to Herat where the 10 questions became the focus of the meeting. After three days of late-into-the night discussions, the nearly 350 participants from every province and FP in Afghanistan produced a declaration stating that CDCs should become an official part of development planning and local decision-making by formalizing them as councils legalized within the constitution.

The three-day bus trip back to Kabul for the many that came from the eastern part of the country was spirited and filled with a strong sense of accomplishment and unity. People lined the streets to meet the buses as they arrived in Kandahar en route to Kabul. The evening and following day in Kandahar included a number of events and speeches by the Governor, distinguished religious scholars and other notable individuals.⁴⁰ Spontaneously, the multitude of tribal leaders represented in Kandahar created their own statement saying that Afghan tribes would not be divided again.

The FPs continued the public consultation survey upon their return in 150 more districts. They then combined and fed the results into the discussion establishing by-laws for CDCs. Perhaps more important, however, was the acknowledgement by the Minister of MRRD of the necessity for a consultative process involving the local governing bodies of his own Ministry's making. He subsequently called a national *jirga* in August 2005 in Kabul to bring CDCs to the awareness of other cabinet members (many of whom had disagreements with MRRD) and to discuss the legitimization of local level councils as a permanent function of local government. The three-day

³⁹ The participation of 75 women in Herat was a noteworthy achievement, given the several days' travel and separate housing and eating quarters required (IRC, "NSP 5th and 6th Quarter," 6).

⁴⁰ The arrival of the CDC members coincided with a meeting of religious scholars from around the country who shared the declaration resulting from their own gathering. One of the CDC members who was also a religious scholar responded that such a lofty statement required discussion and agreement at the lowest levels; the discussion ensued and consensus was reached.

jirga, organized by the working group of FPs, evolved into a national consultation on development and included President Karzai and the Ministers of Agriculture, Economy, Interior and MRRD. A paper on institutionalizing CDCs noted, "President Karzai expressed his determination to see the CDCs acknowledged as constitutional Village Councils."⁴¹ Cabinet members were impressed with the breadth and effect the NSP had on the Afghan population thus far and essentially consented to further discussion on the prospect of creating legal status for CDCs. The draft by-laws were completed in 2006 and will be presented for vote in parliament as the structure for local development planning.⁴²

Religious Scholar Exchange. On the same principle as the CDC exchange process, IRC sponsored a meeting just for religious scholars in March 2005. IRC's Special Advisor for Religious Affairs invited FPs to send five scholars from each province to Logar for three days to discuss human rights and their relationship to Islam. Forty-five *mullahs* (all but one Sunni) from nine provinces attended the meeting.

The objectives were to increase common understanding of human rights instruments and to relate Islamic principles to the primary international agreements. A chief aim was to begin the shift of authority and responsibility for this type of discussion to the Afghans themselves. Participants looked at several key international instruments article by article and discussed the intersections and divergences between them and Islam. They concluded that only three articles countered Islamic beliefs (relating to right of religious choice, gender equity and the right of women to marry outside of Islam). The Religious Scholar Exchange led to the observance of Human Rights Day in December wherein clerics spoke about this interrelationship.

Economic Development Initiative. Outside all other reconstruction efforts, the NSP alone will result in close to a billion dollars invested in Afghanistan, from Kabul to the provincial capitals to the districts, with the majority going directly to the impoverished countryside. In an effort to measure and leverage the significant potential impact of such sizeable resources, IRC launched the Economic Development Initiative to study the actual contribution of NSP activities to the local economy. This included the primary funds allocated to project materials and labor, trickle down resources spent on transport and food, the economic rate of return comparing reduction of villagers' expenses and increase in income two months after project completion and the effect of staff salaries, housing and office facilities and associated services. To this end, IRC staff worked with a consultant to analyze the actual expenditure of NSP monies in Logar and Khost and its economic effect on local economies. IRC eventually handed the data over to the World Bank and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, who used it as the foundation for an eye-opening economic evaluation on the cost effectiveness of the NSP on a larger scale.⁴³

⁴¹ CDC Working Group, "Consolidating Village Democracy in Afghanistan: A Background Note on Institutionalizing Community Development Councils," 5 November 2005, 6, copy.

⁴² The Afghanistan constitution supports the legitimization of local councils in that it specifically dictates that local government will elect representatives at the village, district and provincial levels. Passing such by-laws would institutionalize CDCs as the community interlocutor with other ministries, international entities and any other form of official contact, opening them up to more resources and interaction with external actors.

⁴³ See Juan Morelli, "Afghanistan: National Effectiveness and Cost Efficiency Assessment of the National Solidarity Project," World Bank/UN Food and Agriculture Organization, November 2005.

IV. IMPLICATIONS AND OUTCOMES OF IRC'S APPROACH

This section examines the implications of IRC's approach to the National Solidarity Program on Afghanistan's recovery from conflict and specifically on the southeastern region. Needless to say, it is challenging to discern whether the effect is attributable to IRC's particular efforts, those of the NSP itself, the work of other organizations or the concurrent and significant changes occurring in Afghan society. Sustainability is also difficult to assess after only three years of program operation. As a result, the following are suggested outcomes of IRC's approach rather than definitive measurable effects. They include: consequences for ownership of the development process, changes in relationships, impact on collective action, influences on rules of behavior and implications for governance.

Ownership of the Development Process

Community driven reconstruction initiatives, such as the NSP in Afghanistan, attempt to promote local entities' full engagement in their own recovery process. IRC's approach appeared to have several specific repercussions on this aspect of local ownership.

Respecting local culture affected acceptance. Fears and accusations of the NSP being an anti-Islamic initiative aimed at religious conversion and destruction of traditional Afghan values echoed throughout the country in the early days of the NSP. Many FPs, most notably those in the Pashtun-dominated provinces, experienced strong opposition and negative attitudes towards the central government and foreign organizations. According to Boesen's AREU study, several FPs such as CARE faced "outright hostility" at times.⁴⁴ Mirroring sentiments throughout the country, several key regional leaders publicly stated their disbelief in the government's ability to deliver on the NSP promises. Others questioned the concept of empowering local councils to make decisions or the appropriateness of women's participation.

Applying its principle of the primacy of indigenous social structures, IRC directly confronted this potential opposition by rooting the NSP in the very foundation of local beliefs. Nearly all observers of, or participants in IRC's approach said this curbed antagonism and elicited a high degree of respect and acceptance both for NSP as a government program and for IRC as an international NGO. Operational features such as the Advisory Boards, the SACRAs and the staff recruitment methodology earned IRC the distinct reputation in its provinces and within the NSP writ large for consulting and respecting local cultural institutions. The SACRAs were particularly effective at countering statements made in night letters about the NSP as a vehicle for Christian proselytizing. "Afghans always think about their culture. IRC is implementing the program based on that culture and religion," said one staff member.

An element of this localization of the NSP was using native voices in the form of indigenous staff and religious scholars to communicate with the population about the program. This also increased the acceptance of the message. AREU research concluded, "As a result [of its hiring

⁴⁴ Boesen, "From Subjects to Citizens," 20.

practices] IRC had credible, reputable people represent the NSP to the community in an authoritative manner that the people could trust.”⁴⁵ Commanders and mullahs “talked to people with their own words,” as one official put it, and convinced those with reservations that the NSP supported much needed development and encouraged acceptance of women’s participation. In rural areas where both tradition and skepticism were exceptionally strong, staff said the fact they were local inhabitants and understood the importance of culture resonated particularly well. Interviewees used phrases such as, “we are them” and the staff “feels the pain of the community” to describe their view. In contrast, where NSP interlocutors were not local, AREU found a higher degree of cynicism. “It was generally an additional barrier to the understanding of and interest in the programme if the ‘message’ of the NSP was communicated by persons who were strangers in the communities, persons with whom the community members, especially the women, were not sufficiently familiar, or whom they did not trust.”⁴⁶

The level of visibility of the staff within their own communities also influenced the NSP and IRC’s acceptance. The daily connections among local citizens where, as one staff member said, “they know our fathers,” created a strong sense of responsibility among staff and a greater burden to perform, as their personal as well as organizational reputations were at stake. As a result, local populations repeatedly commended IRC for being hardworking and World Bank staff, AREU scholars studying the NSP, OC representatives and citizens all noted that IRC “walked the talk” of modeling good principles and following through on its commitments. However, the local nature of the staff also meant they bore the brunt of dissatisfactions with IRC’s actions, the function of the NSP and to a lesser degree, with the government at large. In fact, because they *were* local, the community, CDC, Advisory Board and SACRA members frequently visited employees in their homes to discuss problems related to the NSP. In the Afghan culture, they were obliged to engage, which may have created tension between remaining neutral with respect to their work and their social obligations.

Local residents in Paktia—where CARE, which recruits nationally, is the NSP FP—were acutely aware of these tensions and voiced fears of corruption were CARE to hire locally. One community member said, “We don’t trust our own people so we don’t want to hire from around here. They would not be more honest, but more corrupt.” Although no data documenting levels of misappropriation within any FP were available, there was also little evidence to suggest that the populations of Khost, Logar and Paktia, all in the southeast, had wholly different standards of honesty or that the two organizations suffered from dramatically different levels of corruption as a result of their hiring practices. Further research is necessary to help clarify whether local residency creates social pressure on staff to serve their community well, to be held accountable and to appear honest or whether it is an invitation to corruption that is difficult to avoid given the cultural and social norms.

Engaging traditional leadership shifted attention from conflict to development. By mid 2006 in Logar, Khost, Paktia and Herat, the extent of control former power holders such as commander, mullahs, *maliks* and tribal leaders had over community life may have been waning to some degree, according to several interviewees from each province. In Paktia, for example, CARE staff observed a general decline in *maliks’* previous authority on day-to-day issues to a point of

⁴⁵ Kakar, “Fine-Tuning,” 18.

⁴⁶ Boesen, “From Subjects to Citizens,” 20.

now merely sitting on ad hoc *shuras*. AREU's ongoing research shows local power holders interfere less in CDC affairs over time.⁴⁷

Such change may be due to shifts in the political atmosphere of the country, the impact of the NSP writ large, or as mentioned, AREU's finding that many individual *maliks* simply did not survive the regime changes.⁴⁸ The difference between IRC and other FPs is that IRC has harnessed the influence of such authorities to support the NSP process, whereas most FPs have purposefully avoided engaging them. As a result, in Logar and Khost many of those previously wedded to war have transferred some of their attention from conflict to development. For the first time, mullahs and ex-combatants on IRC staff, the Advisory Boards or SACRAs are involved in irrigation projects and democratic elections. This has precipitated a perceptible shift in attitude towards development and even towards central government among most of them. As one OC representative said of the change in Logar, "Commanders used to fight and command people, now they advise and help people... instead of causing problems, now they communicate, consult, discuss and solve problems." Given 400 staff and another 50 active non-staff participants, this shift could have a compounding local effect.

The discussion about traditional roles has transcended dialogue on the NSP into broader circles of interest. IRC's intimate embrace of religion as a function of local society and its resultant Religious Scholar Exchange, for example, have engaged a more expansive debate on the relationship between Islam, development and human rights. In yet larger Afghan and regional spheres, conferences and studies are examining the relationship between traditional societal structures and the changing Afghan environment, frequently inviting IRC staff and SACRA members to attend or speak.

Repeatedly IRC staff, Advisory Board members and SACRA members said they want to be recognized as helping communities and are seeing more opportunities arising out of their experience with IRC, such as running for office or working for local government. A former *mujahideen* and Taliban commander, current *mawлана* religious scholar and IRC staff member was animated about the change the opportunity to contribute to local development had made in his life, saying the past three years have significantly shifted his attitude. IRC has given him a chance to participate and become a part of the solution, he said. "If I were not engaged in the NSP," he claimed, "I would have some distant ideas about development but now I have an intimate, personal experience that has been convincing."

In contrast to IRC, most other NSP FPs avoided direct involvement or purposely sidelined erstwhile leaders for fear of their negative influence. In CARE's program, for example, *mullahs* were seen as collaborating with militancy and therefore not an ally in the NSP program. Without participation as an option, erstwhile power holders seek opportunities outside the development process. Commanders without skills in Paktia, for example, work as masons or small business owners, according to a local NSP official. "There is no more space for them," he said. While both approaches contain strong arguments, it is impossible to anticipate at this point the long-term effect of either without a larger study of both activities and attitudes.

⁴⁷ Shawna Wakefield and Brandy Bauer, "A Place at the Table: Afghan Women, Men and Decision-making Authority," (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, August 2005), 5.

⁴⁸ Kakar, "Fine-Tuning," 9.

Participation may be fostering emergence of new voices. Through the creation of CDCs, the NSP community driven methodology offers an alternative to the inheritance- and command-based authority that dominated Afghan society during years of manipulation and subjugation. In its essence, it provides an opportunity for the emergence of new leadership. According to AREU, “the NSP can be seen as a re-structuring and re-alignment of meaningful traditional power structures that already exist in Afghan communities that can re-establish the ‘fragile equilibrium’ of a sustainable Afghan state.”⁴⁹ The CDC Exchange and Solidarity Initiative gave strength to this budding groundswell and put the common villager on the national agenda for the first time.

Several interviewees questioned whether IRC's embrace of existing institutions and allowing power holders a say in the process have prevented or slowed the growth of such emerging voices. In particular, senior OC officials noted that the incorporation of conservative religious elements might be hindering the development of a more “modern society” (taken to mean exposure to a broad spectrum of influences and access to information and resources). One might similarly ask whether by involving former combatants, IRC is preventing less imposing voices from rising up. This could be particularly relevant to youth and the more educated such as teachers who are caught in the throes of the quickly evolving Afghan culture. Several officials echoed AREU research predictions of future clashes between the emerging forms of leadership—those in the “new Afghanistan” and the traditional structures supported through IRC's approach.⁵⁰

The evidence from interviews suggests, however, that communities are beginning to come out from under the power of these previous structures. The AREU study goes on to say that IRC's approach is a way to prevent this clash of leadership through integrating power holders into community development processes: “IRC has found that when you invite key stakeholders and ask for their advice on a project, in this case the NSP, they take on ownership of that project.”⁵¹ Again, this is an issue that merits watching over time to see whether common citizens' voices strengthen or whether social leaders dominate ownership when power holders are intimately involved in programming.

Local involvement may boost long-term ownership and sustainability. It is too early to determine the long-term repercussions of IRC's program on the future of the development process. However, the methodology raises several interesting points. IRC's general approach towards the NSP and one of its fundamental principles has been to encourage nationalization of its processes by “assisting line ministries and institutions to understand NSP and develop capacity to manage key elements of the initiative.”⁵² A senior OC official said, “IRC put Afghans taking over on the FP agenda” through ongoing efforts to embed processes within government jurisdiction, build local capacity, reformat NSP language and assumptions from project-driven to policy-driven and encourage NSP policies that redirect ownership away from donors and FPs and towards local institutions. Much of this took place in FP coordination meetings and NSP meetings with MRRD and OC design working groups. Perhaps partially due

⁴⁹ Kakar, “Fine-Tuning,” 12.

⁵⁰ Kakar, “Fine-Tuning,” 16.

⁵¹ Kakar, “Fine-Tuning,” 17.

⁵² IRC, “NSP 5th and 6th Quarter,” 3.

to IRC's efforts, the next phase of the NSP is incorporating many elements that move it towards multi-ministry and broad-based ownership.

On another front, the fact that NSP staff in Logar and Khost live in the same district in which they work implies the skills in community development gained through training and experience will remain in the area. In essence, IRC has injected rural areas with lasting new capacity rather than drawing on the capital and other urban centers for a temporary supply of skills and education. IRC's now 300-strong employment base translates to a significant boost in local understanding of community mobilization and project cycles (not to mention income and savings). The ability to continue to apply these skills over time in an ongoing cycle of development rests on a number of factors, including self-motivation, incentive, funding, the state of local governance and the future of the NSP, among others. In the medium term, however, IRC's approach would appear to support project sustainability. An MRRD official reflected this point saying, in IRC's program "people are caring for maintenance of projects more than with other NGOs." IRC's University Field Study Initiative has also had potential effect on sustainability by increasing the pool of local engineers.

Changes in Relationships

The National Solidarity Program is becoming an integral part of communities throughout a country that had lived under fear and violence for two decades. In some of its work with local officials, multi-community projects and divided communities, the program has encountered the distrust and animosity long-held between sectors of society. A fundamental assumption of the community driven approach is that it positively influences such relationships by building both horizontal and vertical social capital. Horizontal social capital links individuals laterally within the community power structure by fostering relationships through activities and verbal interaction; vertical social capital ties citizens to institutional structures, leaders and decision-makers to affect government policy and laws. This research suggests that IRC's approach to the NSP has influenced five types of these relationships.

Intra-staff and intra-Advisory Board. IRC's staff was a microcosm of provincial society due to its hiring practices. Its Advisory Board similarly was an amalgamation of representatives from the different political and ethnic groups. This offered tremendous opportunity for interaction among historically disputing tribes, political rivals and, to a lesser extent, ethnic and language groups and religions which play an important role in Afghanistan's insecurity. The often-touted sentiment among IRC staff and Board members was their common commitment to development and their new rapport with erstwhile enemies-turned-colleagues. "IRC has united different parties under one program," said a Khost Advisory Board member. Senior field managers explained that the daily interface between Shias, Sunnis, Tajiks, Pashtuns, communists and *mujahideen* was a model for national solidarity and the beginning of social cohesion throughout Afghan society. Similarly, the Khost Advisory Board's immaculate attendance record and consensus decision-making were remarkable in light of its diverse representation of previously opposing social and political elements. This collection of different forces in one organization served to prevent any single power structure from dominating. IRC field offices and Advisory Boards have experienced few if any clashes between individuals from different groups. To the

contrary, staff were quite proud of their organization. When exposed to alternative methodologies among other FPs through the CDC exchanges, they felt good about IRC's diverse hiring practices. According to both male and female staff, IRC's Gender Officer position also exposed all personnel to gender issues and increased cross-gender collegial interaction.

At the same time, limiting IRC's recruitment to within the province prevented the hiring of staff from other regions with different social and demographic composition. Thus, as much as the workforce represented the province, it remained separated from the rest of the country. In contrast, other FPs generally advertised senior positions countrywide and hired "the best candidate" regardless of background or regional origin. Although no FP reportedly targeted diversity actively or created a nationally representative staff force, the fact that some recruits emanated from other locations naturally brought cultural, ethnic and political values from around the country to the workplace. This was absent in Khost and Logar.

General public – local leaders. Another potential repercussion of IRC's approach is an emerging new relationship between common citizens of Khost and Logar and conventional leadership. While too early to measure and difficult to attribute solely to the NSP, the study found a budding shift in perceptions of religious scholars, commanders, tribal leaders and community elders among community members. Multiple former party leaders, commanders and religious scholars interviewed said they recognize the destruction they had caused, in part as pawns to larger political forces. Now, they said, they want to disengage from party politics, contribute to Afghanistan's reconstruction and find a legitimate means of earning an income. In fact, the population may be better able to hold them to this new role and to their loftier ambitions by watching them through the lens of the NSP. Certainly, paying commanders reduces their need to manipulate citizens for revenue. However, one can also view NSP salaries simply as a different form of compensation in the long history of southeastern commanders, traditional leaders and *mullahs* receiving rewards for espousing doctrine. The question is in part whether the population is better able to resist manipulation and to establish alternatives to poor leadership through its exposure to the NSP and to develop new behavior and roles for traditional leaders through IRC's approach in particular. There again, future study of post-NSP implications of IRC's approach could be illuminating.

Tribes, political factions, ethno-linguistic groups. Less directly, anecdotal evidence suggests IRC's representative and consultative practices may well have influenced larger inter-group relations within the provinces. The fact that IRC elicited input from traditional tribal networks, for example, obligated them to discuss collaboratively and to come to consensus. At a meeting of Khost Advisory Board and SACRA members, the group concluded that IRC's approach had such a positive impact on the many differences between local tribes and factions exacerbated over years of fighting to the point they are "now joined together." Although tensions are still a tangible reality, especially as the number of insurgents playing their political and ethnic cards in the southeast mount, the unifying influence of IRC's work may offer a legitimate counter. On an individual level, for example, the Kuchi and the Ministry of Border and Tribal Affairs in Khost have begun to settle a long-standing conflict through interaction on IRC's Advisory Board. CDCs in Khost are proud of the fact they have elected Hindu as well as Muslim members. An OC official in Logar observed a similar change in relationships within the province. Sunni and Shia religious scholars used to make false accusations, he said, but through the voice provided by

the SACRAs and other inter-religious networks, they now discuss the issues openly. “There is less fighting between Tajik and Pashtun and Shia and Sunni because they are forced to interact,” he said. “Three years ago there was more tension. Now people talk about development, not about fighting or right and wrong. This really is the best step to solving problems.”

Inter-regional. The CDC Exchange and Solidarity Initiative had tangible implications for relationships between Afghanistan's seven regions. Unanimous opinion maintained that linkages among people throughout the country strengthened significantly from sharing NSP experiences. This held true for FP staff and CDC members participating in the exchanges. The gradual expansion of the Initiative from a simple north-south interface to a regional interaction to a national platform purposefully challenged historically adverse relationships. Considerable trepidation accompanied a number of exchanges; several wary CDC participants in Paktia said they thought the meetings were propaganda luring them into a plot to kill them. Each time, however, the reverse occurred concluding with a declaration committing participants to brotherhood and solidarity.

Outside of the Solidarity Exchange Initiative, however, both IRC staff and NSP communities in Khost and Logar were limited to interaction with others from the region due to IRC's province-only recruitment policy. In comparison, CARE's senior managers in Paktia said discussions among staff from different regions on personal differences were often lively and productive, sharing information and creating bonds through daily interaction. CDC community members from several villages in Paktia and Herat provinces said, “It doesn't matter where staff originate, except that they must be Afghan,” contradicting comments from CDC and community members in Logar and Khost. The experience of the Afghanistan National Army may corroborate CARE's experience wherein the integration of Afghans from throughout the country has a potential unifying affect:

Culturally, Afghanistan is a notoriously fractured society, with dozens of competing tribes and ethnic groups. But from its inception, the A.N.A. has been fully integrated and has largely avoided internal conflicts. In Paktika, Afghan Commander Roidar Hussain directs hundreds of soldiers in one of the most dangerous parts of the country. He says his company includes troops from almost every one of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. He says the bottom line is, the A.N.A. represents the entire country. By working together, he says, his troops are able to show even these remote communities that everyone has a stake in Afghanistan's future.⁵³

As the southeast tests its ability to remain peaceful and pluralistic despite the strong cross-border insurgency, cultivating a sense of national unity becomes even more important.

Community – central government. Interviews indicated that the close relationships IRC staff had with the communities changed local perspectives on central government to some extent. The southeast region's factionalization during the *mujahideen* period and its links to external influences with its historical resistance to Afghan government has made government relations particularly difficult. The face of IRC not only as the local population but also inclusive of local elders, former commanders and religious scholars—that is, those who have led them in the past—helped convince many skeptics of its potential value. This tentative trust really became manifest when the first tranche of money from the ministry arrived, senior IRC staff recounted.

⁵³ Rachel Morarjee, “Security Slipping Around Kandahar,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 May 2006.

IRC's follow-through on commitments instilled hope in creating greater vertical social capital between communities through their CDCs to multiple government institutions, they said. According to senior OC officials, this growing relationship echoed throughout communities involved in the NSP nationally and contributed to the broad desire among CDCs to become a legitimate body recognized within government, as emerged in the IRC-led Solidarity Initiative.

Collective Action

While the NSP through its community driven methodology and four core elements aimed to increase the ability of communities to affect their development needs, IRC's particular approach seemed to further influence the capacity for collective action.

Broad exposure increased skills development. IRC's approach exposed a broad spectrum of society to training opportunities. The result of IRC's inclusion of religious scholars, social and political leaders and government officials in its staff training and the training conducted for the Advisory Boards and Councils in the course of district and community selection was an increase in the number and type of people exposed to skills development. Many provincial citizens and leaders learned about such processes as international standard procurement procedures and secret ballot elections that otherwise would not have under the standard NSP staff and community training. While not specifically measured, this potentially broadened the capacity for collective action within the provinces. Several interviewees from the region mentioned incidents of citing good governance standards in everyday interactions such as business dealings and tribal meetings.

Staff development had ripple effect. In Logar and Khost, IRC's hiring of local citizens largely unskilled in community development sharpened the learning curve inherent in the NSP training and capacity building. This built the resident capacity within the provinces in a broad base of individuals capable of organizing and supporting collective action beyond the life of the NSP.

Inexperience limited initial potential. The initial inexperience of IRC personnel also diminished their capacity for more significant collective action during the start-up period. While IRC's expatriate staff were familiar with community driven methodology unlike many FPs, its local staff's inexperience in community development was more than most. "We started from scratch," said IRC's senior manager. Several representatives of the OC and other FPs questioned the ability of former commanders, *mullahs* and illiterate employees to implement a multifaceted program such as the NSP. In comparison, senior UN-HABITAT and CARE staff had between five and seven years of work in community development; even UN-HABITAT's Social Organizers were required to have at least two years prior experience. IRC staff's nearly complete lack of development experience or education combined with the program's complexity and the pressure to produce results quickly reduced IRC's ability to transfer NSP concepts easily and to support collective action early in the program, said IRC's senior managers.

Engineering capacity improved slightly. Collective community mobilization to address infrastructure needs requires some capacity to marshal engineering skills. The University Field

Study's aim to generate engineers familiar with NSP requirements and CDCs appeared to do so within its small contingent of participants. Its other aim of encouraging private enterprises to meet some of the technical needs inherent in Afghanistan's enormous reconstruction effort was more limited. The success of these intentions and thus the program's contribution to collective action was constrained only by the small number of participants in the University Field Study program.

Influence on Rules of Behavior

The NSP in general and IRC's approach in particular seem to have had some effect on individual and group social mores. At first glance, IRC's embrace of traditional custom would appear to support conventional social trends. While long-term change is not measurable at this point, evidence is beginning to suggest IRC's program influenced such behavioral patterns in three areas: security, transparency and gender.

Security. The risk to NSP staff around the country has been real. Several FPs have had numerous security incidents and received repeated threats; night letters to staff are relatively common in some areas. The 2006 upsurge in violence precipitated 11 FPs to suspend their programs in 42 districts between March and August.⁵⁴ While IRC has not been immune and its program in Kharwar District was one of the FP program suspensions, its security problems seem to be less than many FPs. In a focus group with Logar staff in August 2006, all members dismissed concerns about increased insecurity and thoroughly trusted the communities to protect them should the situation deteriorate. The sense that the NSP in Khost and Logar represents "the body of the community," as one interviewee put it, has reduced the staff's vulnerability in their eyes.⁵⁵ In addition, many thought that the threat of revenge by staff family members who live in the communities prevented IRC employees from being attacked. "We would recognize the threat and be protected by the rest of the community and they know they would not get away with it," said one provincial staff member. Interviewees also cited the economic boon to the extended families and provinces writ large through staff salaries as a reason for defending the program and its workers. As a provincial ministry official said, "The increase in local jobs has led to an increase in security."

Transparency. IRC's approach raises the important question of whether intimately involving leaders and citizens from the area increases the social pressure to divert resources to benefit local constituents. As CARE staff pointed out, especially with the current high unemployment and post-war poverty, the local incentives to cheat are strong. Many interviewees mentioned the intensive family and cultural obligations to provide for their own, to support leaders in the hope of receiving protection and favor later on, and to pay back debts accumulated during the war.

IRC attempted to address this question by making all of its activities and decisions visible to the public and by ensuring all parties were at the table by publicizing its policies and conclusions

⁵⁴ Oversight Consultant, "FP Program Suspensions," NSP program database, 10 August 2006.

⁵⁵ IRC former Taliban staff members met with Taliban involved in the Kharwar insurgency and tried with moderate success to dissuade them from disrupting the NSP in Logar.

and inviting interested actors to participate. This enabled stakeholders to know first hand what decisions and actions IRC undertook. IRC reasoned that in the complex political and tribal relationships in the southeast, exposing everything to scrutiny was its only way to avoid problems. The Advisory Board, SACRAs and the fact IRC staff were local citizens helped spread the information through social and local networks. Being transparent in its own dealings also presented a model for the community activities it promoted. To do this, IRC had to ensure that decision-making processes such as which individuals were invited to sit on the village selection council, the selection process itself, staff hiring, community project priority setting and the workings of the Advisory Board were widely available.

One way IRC promoted transparency was through the joint monitoring process inviting government as well as Advisory Board members to review the NSP operations first hand, which gave representatives from all power structures equal access to scrutinize the process. "This way the power holders who were left out of the NSP election system were given an opportunity to take part and be integrated and encouraged into peace-time leadership roles," said AREU.⁵⁶

IRC's almost dogmatic adherence to rules and systems to counter the Afghan relationship-based allegiance was no doubt hard on the staff who were caught between their work and their culture. Staff found, however that they could also use the rules as an excuse, when, for example, friends and neighbors asked them for help obtaining employment with IRC. Several said their standard reply was, "submit your application and if you are qualified you will be invited for an interview." While challenging at times, being a known community member may have reduced the tendency for corruption since, as one staff member put it, "if you are labeled a thief you can't hold your head up in your village." This is important in a culture where respect is paramount.

The notion of transparency grew over time. SACRA religious scholars reinforced it by pointing to the importance of integrity in the Quran. The favorable reception reportedly surprised several community and staff members. One Logar Community Facilitator said he really believed it when the tendering process resulted in an Indian company winning a bid over an Afghan company. Khost Advisory Board members thought this application of the principle was gradually transferring outward from IRC. They referred to former IRC staff and Board members who had taken up government posts and had brought the experience of implementing transparent processes with them. On the other end, they also said, "Transparency is not only in work but is becoming the common rule within families all the way to CDCs."

Gender roles. IRC's experience of the NSP-wide challenge of both contracting well-qualified female staff and engaging women in the NSP process increased in the more conservative areas. Nevertheless, IRC ranked among the top four FPs in number of female staff: 22% in Khost and 28% in Logar as compared to a 17% average among FPs.⁵⁷ In contrast, it averaged only 26% women members on CDCs, notably lower than the 35% average among all FPs.⁵⁸ This

⁵⁶ Kakar, "Fine-Tuning," 19.

⁵⁷ IRC, "IRC NSP Staff Information Khost and Logar," IRC program database, 15 March 2006; Oversight Consultant, "Number of Female Staff Deployed by FPs2," NSP program database, email 4 June 2006.

⁵⁸ Provincial breakdown of IRC figures: 19% women CDC members in Khost and 33% in Logar (IRC, "CDC Member Khost Logar," IRC program database, 4 June 2006; Oversight Consultant, "Females in NSP," NSP program data, email 11 June 2006).

conflicted with AREU's contention that women's participation in the NSP was closely linked to the strength and number of the FP's female staff.⁵⁹

As Wakefield and Bauer warn, however, superficial representation does not change rules of behavior⁶⁰ and IRC's approach appeared to affect positively several aspects of women's societal roles. Female community members in Logar emphasized the importance of staff being local. "If female staff came from other areas they would not be as effective. We trust women from our area and believe what they say," said a female CDC member. Staff added that women's roles improved with the visibility of local leaders supporting the NSP. "Because commanders and religious scholars are part of the program, the people see women's participation as positive," said one Social Organizer. The creation of the Gender Development Officer position in each province at the request of IRC female staff also influenced women's participation by bringing to light gender-related issues having a bearing on women's involvement in IRC staff discussions as well as strengthening the number and capacity of the women IRC employees. (UN-HABITAT had a female staff member who also served as Gender Advisor that played a similar role.) Women staff said the (male) Gender Officers provided some support and an outlet to voice concerns.

Perhaps the factor that had the greatest impact on gender roles, however, was the use of religious scholars throughout both provinces to discuss the role of women in development as seen through the eyes of Islam. The SACRA members' efforts "to raise community awareness and acceptance of women's participation have dramatically improved gender equity in key NSP processes in just six months," IRC reported.⁶¹ Women were encouraged to work, to become members and even Chairpersons on CDCs and to participate vocally in community planning discussions. In a meeting of female CDC members, one woman said, "The religious scholars made a big difference in women's participation."

By all accounts, traditional social standards towards women's roles in society in Khost and Logar have shifted. Interviewees throughout the two provinces said they saw evidence that the new approval and even encouragement of their active role in communal discussions was beginning to erode the dominance of men in matters relating to governance and socio-political issues. "Initially village women would hide their faces from us but now they welcome us and even sit with us," said a Logar Community Facilitator. A provincial MRRD official said of conditions in Logar, "The attitude of people has changed now. People are agreeing to work on women's projects." IRC's female staff members estimate that only 30 - 40% of the local population currently thinks that women working will cause problems in the family or community, as compared to nearly 100% before the program started. This shift in attitude has not been unique to IRC: both CARE and UN-HABITAT reported a similar increase in acceptance of women as players and even leaders in society. These may be attributable to larger institutional, legal and educational inroads or to the NSP itself.

⁵⁹ Boesen, "The AREU Case-Study."

⁶⁰ Wakefield and Bauer, "A Place at the Table," 1.

⁶¹ IRC, "NSP 5th and 6th Quarter," 13.

Implications for Governance

An important aim of the NSP is to improve local governance: establishing pluralistic decision-making bodies at the community level (CDCs), strengthening links between communities and lower level administrative institutions and exposing the populations to principles of good governance. IRC's approach to the NSP seemed to affect several of these elements of local governance.

Pluralistic decision-making bodies. One question that arises about IRC's approach is whether the integration of local cultural and traditional structures influenced the acceptance of CDCs as legitimate decision-making bodies. Opposition to the NSP's new form of governance was strong in many areas. CARE, for example encountered resistance from tribal *shura* members who were afraid the CDCs would assume some of their responsibilities, such as registering births. This concern increased with the development of by-laws and the prospective legitimization of the CDCs as legal entities. CARE had little problems with commanders and *maliks*, however, whereas UN-HABITAT in Herat encountered initial resistance from both elements who saw the NSP as replacing their authority. UN-HABITAT was among other FPs that consistently encountered resistance from *maliks* who felt the NSP should work through them.⁶²

In contrast, in Logar and Khost, IRC encountered comparatively little resistance from local authorities, other than the initial general resistance to government and international organizations. This may have been a result of the buy-in generated through leaders' involvement, which sent clear signals of the program's value, according to many community members. It may also have been from increased access to information about the program through the extensive initial consultations and involvement including the SACRA members' community discussions on the NSP's alignment with Islam. At the same time, IRC's village meetings on the solidarity agreement engaged whole communities in dialogue about the NSP's risks, obligations and potential benefits and requested concurrence with the principles and responsibilities before IRC would begin. This increased acceptance of the CDC concept as a local decision-making body.

A second question is whether integrating erstwhile leaders in the functioning of the NSP influenced their control over decisions (the question of elite capture). History has shown that communities recovering from conflict are particularly susceptible to manipulation by factions to the conflict and special interest groups. Given free reign, they have the ability to "quiet the collective voice" and divert community concerns raised in the shared planning and decision-making process towards their own interests.⁶³ This has been a serious concern throughout the NSP given the power held by "warlords" and political parties over the past two decades, and an obvious consideration in IRC's approach. The question becomes whether AREU's finding that interference by local power holders in the functioning of most CDCs has declined over time also holds true for those in Logar and Khost.

⁶² Kakar, "Fine-Tuning," 13, 14.

⁶³ Maynard, "From Conflict to Conciliation," 59.

The actual weight tribal leaders, former commanders, religious scholars and the like projected on CDCs through their roles in the Advisory Board, village selection committees, SACRAs or staff is difficult to determine, especially in a region of strong cultural tradition. As indicated in Table 2, IRC's CDC profiles for Khost and Logar Provinces show that 3% and 1% respectively of CDC members were previously commanders, 1% and 5% were (and still are) religious scholars and less than 1% are currently traditional leaders in each province.

Table 2: Occupation of Khost and Logar CDC Members

	KHOST				LOGAR			
	Current Job		Previous Job		Current Job		Previous Job	
Businessperson	34	2%	40	2%	55	2%	34	1%
Commander	0	0%	49	3%	18	0%	38	1%
Doctor	22	1%	22	1%	38	1%	18	1%
Driver	191	10%	239	12%	82	3%	103	4%
Elder	128	7%	120	6%	6	0%	6	0%
Traditional leader	0	0%	8	0%	18	1%	18	0%
Engineer	11	1%	11	1%	8	0%	5	0%
Farmer	568	30%	430	22%	547	20%	457	17%
Government	34	2%	34	2%	182	7%	230	8%
Homemaker	172	9%	223	12%	392	14%	409	15%
Religious scholar	16	1%	28	1%	135	5%	129	5%
Labor (unskilled)	358	19%	338	18%	303	11%	403	15%
Technician	0	0%	0	0%	24	1%	17	0%
NGO worker	7	0%	7	0%	24	1%	23	1%
Shopkeeper	71	4%	61	3%	160	6%	128	5%
Student	42	2%	42	2%	44	2%	37	1%
Tailor	4	0%	20	1%	37	1%	16	0%
Teacher	126	7%	122	6%	170	6%	167	6%
Worker (skilled)	97	5%	89	5%	450	16%	465	17%
Other	44	2%	42	2%	66	2%	56	2%
Total	1925	102%	1925	99%	2759	99%	2759	99%

IRC project database June 4, 2006

While not reliable indicators of influence, these figures imply that the individuals elected by secret ballot to membership on Khost and Logar Community Development Committees were not the former societal leaders. According to these statistics, the most common representatives are farmers, skilled and unskilled workers and homemakers or common citizens. In contrast, senior CARE staff estimated it had as much as 50 – 70 % local elites in CDCs in its jurisdictions. UN-HABITAT in Herat was closer to IRC's estimation that 5% male CDC members were commanders, *mullahs* or landlords.⁶⁴ AREU found that power holders generally expected to be elected and that they frequently caused problems if they were not.⁶⁵ Indeed, research indicates that failure to involve power holders in some way outside of the election process can lead to setbacks including efforts to undermine the program.⁶⁶ This was a critical finding in the predecessor to the NSP, the Community Fora program implemented by UN-HABITAT in Mazar-e-Sharif Province in the 1990s. According to a comparison of the two programs conducted by Sarah Lister, the NSP did not acknowledge this lesson by creating a separate niche

⁶⁴ Boesen, "From Subjects to Citizens," 46.

⁶⁵ Kakar, "Fine-Tuning," 15; Boesen, "From Subjects to Citizens," 46.

⁶⁶ Maynard, "From Conflict to Conciliation," 59.

for the elite in its operational design that included them in the process but disallowed their participation as active CDC members. The result was weaker ownership and resentment.⁶⁷

A factor that appeared to mitigate the influence of any particular elite was IRC's integration of *all* competing factions and powers within its processes. This had the effect of preventing any single entity from dominating. Kakar's research found that "because the employment pool was connected to different factions of power holders, they acted in balancing each other so that no one power holder could capture a project to their benefit."⁶⁸

Despite the seemingly positive results, the question of ultimate influence looms large. IRC's simple recognition of former commanders as valid leaders, let alone their elevation of status to advisors, for example, implies continued acceptance of military force as a legitimate form of power.⁶⁹ In other cultures, this has had tangible negative impact on efforts to reduce the use of force. Providing visible leadership roles to such entities imparts a level of credibility in a country undergoing massive change, and most notably perhaps, an attempt to transition from coercive to consent-based authority and to non-violent methods of resolving conflict.

Links between communities and local government. Improved relationships between communities and their government representatives at the lower levels is a desired outcome of the community driven approach. This develops essentially through strengthened capacity, increased contact, better understanding of respective roles and joint planning. Because basic services are the language of this relationship, it relies on enhanced capacity among government institutions to interact with and provide services to villages. IRC's fundamental goal of strengthening this relationship included involvement of local officials in training, Advisory Boards, monitoring missions and village selection processes aimed at improving both the government's capacities (local line ministries as well as district and provincial administrators) and its relationships with communities. As mentioned, in its own advocacy within the NSP, IRC strongly encourages gradual government takeover of some FP and OC responsibilities in an effort to build its local legitimacy and capacity. The IRC-led nationwide public consultation survey also elicited public opinion on the future of local government by articulating support for CDC legitimization as representatives of local government.

These efforts appeared to have results. "CDCs and local administrations within IRC's coverage area are increasingly consulting each other during planning and project development states," IRC reported.⁷⁰ According to local interviewees, the Governor of Logar saw the importance of the community link and asked IRC to help further develop provincial line ministries' ability to work with villages. As a result, a Logar District Administrator said relationships with the communities had improved markedly. In contrast to norms prior to the NSP, CDC members bring their issues directly to the Administrator who serves as a focal point for interaction. The Khost Advisory Board echoed this, stating that communication between people and government is stronger than it had been in the past. "They are now seeking each other out," said one member. Although this

⁶⁷ Lister, "The Community Fora Process," 93.

⁶⁸ Kakar, "Fine-Tuning," 18.

⁶⁹ This de facto supports what AREU says is commanders' need for the state as a legitimizing factor and decreases to some degree the ability of the government to "bypass commander structures at the local level" by dealing directly with CDCs (Kakar, "Fine-Tuning," 12).

⁷⁰ IRC, "NSP 5th and 6th Quarter," 13.

is no doubt partly the face of MRRD itself through the NSP program, this level of interaction could be seen as noteworthy, given the historical antipathy between government and the population in the southeast. This was the conclusion of the AREU in its review of traditional power structures in the NSP: "One thing is for sure, local governance structures and even a stable, sustainable, 'legitimate and functioning' Afghan state will not succeed if existing traditions of meaningful power structures are not incorporated."⁷¹

Principles of good governance. Part of IRC's felt role was the public education on universal standards of good governance, including accountability, transparency and inclusion and it used the NSP platform to introduce these standards to the general public. In the basic community process of planning and budgeting, procurement, implementation and monitoring, the NSP operational manual incorporated accepted international practices such as requiring three bids, receipts for all monetary transactions, transparent and open accounting systems, documenting actions taken, etc. However, the challenge was in operationalizing this in a country, and indeed a region, where political and tribal favoritism were rife and where relationships, not systems, were the *modus operandi*.

IRC began by modeling values of good governance in its own operations and establishing transparent systems in all its dealings. "The staff became the first conduit for translating good governance to Afghan development," said a senior NSP manager. Discussions on good governance were central themes in all training (of IRC staff, CDC, Advisory Board, SACRAs) as well as village selection and community sensitization and mobilization meetings.⁷² In its meetings and trainings and through the SACRAs' community interaction, IRC also integrated common Islamic principles into discussions on the rights, responsibilities and roles of both citizens and governing bodies. The intention was to link these principles to district, province and central levels of government. While the IRC staff interviewed had incorporated the appropriate language, so did that of CARE and UN-HABITAT. CDCs in all provinces also seemed to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable practices. If there was a difference, perhaps it was in the fact that former leaders-turned-IRC-staff from all quadrants of southeastern society also understood the principles and were visibly educating communities on good governance practices.

⁷¹ Kakar, "Fine-Tuning," 19.

⁷² IRC used the term "community governance and rights" in place of "community mobilization" to emphasize good governance principles.

V. CONCLUSION

Afghanistan hangs in the balance between the resurgence of the Taliban's authoritarianism and a struggling western-style democracy. The insurgents' notable inroads over the course of the year have wreaked havoc on the tentative security and nascent government and undermined reconstruction efforts. At the same time, at its best, the past five years have seen national elections, the creation of multi-ethnic security forces, education opportunities increase, infant mortality decline, access to water improve and infrastructure projects underway.⁷³ While US Government statistics show impressive improvements along these lines, many positive trends claimed have recently reversed.⁷⁴ The country's future, ironically, will be decided by popular appeal—not through ballot boxes, but through political conviction measured by social consent.

In the southeast corner of the country, the National Solidarity Program portrays a microcosm of these national tensions. The conservative socio-political tradition challenges several aspects of the participatory premise behind the NSP's community driven reconstruction approach. By most accounts, the NSP with its grassroots appeal has been a prime success in establishing a baseline for local participation, just as the federal elections have at the national level. The Program's deference to common citizens to decide on development matters contests the conventional dominion of a select few men, in general, and the authoritarianism of the Taliban, in particular. The southeast's geographic, ethno-linguistic and political ties to the Taliban and other opposition factions bring these issues to the fore.

The International Rescue Committee's approach to the NSP appears particularly relevant to addressing these tensions. By extension to the greater Afghan context, it offers several potentially valuable lessons. First, IRC took both sides of the conflict equation into account by attempting to ground the participatory approach directly in the values and structures inherent in the local culture. Its integration of traditional ideology into the NSP provided a foundation of commonality. This offered an entry point in the realm of the familiar and avoided the more threatening tactic of presenting an entirely foreign (and western) concept for acceptance or rejection. Second, IRC's embrace rather than confrontation of Islam (the very bulwark of the opposition) embedded the process in that which was already accepted. By elevating the primacy of closely held religious beliefs, it drew fire away from the opponents' (such as the Taliban) religious argument. This had the added effect of making important linkages between Islam and development and between Islam and women's participation, adding fuel to the legitimacy of the NSP's principles.

⁷³ Alex Stolar, "Is Afghanistan the Next Afghanistan?" (New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, no. 2136, 16 October 2006), http://www.ipcs.org/South_Asia_articles2.jsp?action=showView&kValue=2151&country=1016&status=article&mod=a (20 November 2006).

⁷⁴ According to the previous US Secretary of Defense, in the past five years Afghanistan's economy has tripled, children's school attendance has increased 500% and access to basic health care has increased over 70% (Donald Rumsfeld, "Five Years Later," *The Washington Post*, 8 October 2006). Other statistics, however, question the breadth of such advances, saying much of these gains have been in urban areas and many question women's access to such progress (Ron Moreau, Sami Yousafzai, and Michael Hirsh, "The Rise of Jihadistan," *Newsweek*, 2 October 2006; P. O'Toole, "No Real Change for Afghan Women," *BBC News*, 31 October 2006).

Third, the respect portrayed by IRC's heavily consultative methodology presented a platform for the potential opposition's concerns and thereby deflated their resistance. Hiring staff who embodied the face of local society countered the contention of a foreign-led invasion of ideals and representatives. Finally, by engaging all members of society on a voluntary basis and creating a space for their voices to be heard (through the CDC Exchange and Solidarity Initiative and the Advisory Boards and Councils), Afghans from across the spectrum debated with each other over the best way forward. That necessarily required serious consideration of various viewpoints and consensus building to benefit Afghan society. It also implanted the program with the Afghans and decreased the foreign ownership.

While IRC's approach to the NSP offers promising lessons for the larger Afghanistan context, its long-term repercussions are unknown. For one, as played out in the political arena, engaging elements associated with fighting forces could simply feed hard line perspectives where the challenge both nationally and within the NSP is to disengage militant and repressive voices to ensure alternative viewpoints emerge. Similarly, reinforcing existing structures may aggrandize traditional forces and prevent the growth of adequate space for social change and new leadership. The test of time will tell whether embracing existing structures and leaders creates the entry point for positive change over the long-term or whether it simply perpetuates the very same systems that created the divides in the first place. The study suggests a need for greater examination where the evidence is not yet available to ascertain the long-term implications of this approach. The NSP in particular, CDR in general and the Afghanistan context writ large would benefit from closer scrutiny of the interface between tradition and positive social change and the time and commitment required.

Unfortunately, both at the national level and within the NSP, support may be inadequate to realize lasting acceptance of the new government's approaches, which, after 30 years of war, requires considerable patience and repetition. On the national front, less than half of the 2002 \$15 billion in pledges from the international community have been forthcoming. Inadequacies in infrastructure, social services and employment undermine the significant but less tangible new constitution and attempt at a participatory, inclusive and self-governing Afghanistan. International consensus points to lack of development, not ideology, as the primary motivating force behind the insurgents.⁷⁵ "Not enough money is being invested in creating a new Afghanistan. Improving Afghan lives is the only way to drive a stake through the Taliban or put the elusive Qaeda leader out of action," said a top US commander.⁷⁶

Similarly, the NSP's country-wide application is an impressive beginning but its recently-unveiled reduced funding and timeline for Phase II, which discontinues community grants after three years, is inadequate to battle the well-funded and -organized forces of authoritarianism. Establishing the culture of local decision-making requires continual practice and substantive support (as well as legitimizing the role of CDCs as permanent structures recognized within the

⁷⁵ Eighty percent of prisoners captured in a recent counter-insurgent operation said they were prompted to fight for economic reasons (Isby, "Five Years and Counting").

⁷⁶ Moreau, Yousafzai, Hirsh, "The Rise of Jihadistan," 1; See International Crisis Group, "Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency" for analysis of national and international failures leading up to the present-day insurgency and recommendations for remedial action.

Afghanistan constitution). The NSP's initial limitation to the MRRD isolated CDCs from much association with other line ministries. As more and more communities in Phase II "graduate" from NSP's three-year process, that lack of extensive interaction could undermine the use of CDCs as permanent focal points for local development.

Afghanistan stands at the threshold of accepting the popular participation premise behind the NSP and its national constitution or of returning to the authoritarianism of the previous regime. The winner in the battle over the country's future will have succeeded to a large extent by gaining the confidence of the Afghan people, not the least of which are those in the southeast where the struggle for control is representative of the larger context. IRC's recognition of this fact through its fundamental entrenchment in indigenous southeastern society offers a noteworthy model that warrants attention.

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