



# **THE ROLE OF CULTURE, ISLAM AND TRADITION IN COMMUNITY DRIVEN RECONSTRUCTION**

*A Study on the  
International Rescue Committee's Approach  
to  
Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program*

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## Introduction

In 2003, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) launched an ambitious community driven reconstruction (CDR) program in Khost and Logar Provinces in southeast Afghanistan, one of the more politicized and conservative areas of the country. The National Solidarity Program (NSP) aimed to address some of the most urgent rural needs in a country beleaguered by severe poverty, drought, weak infrastructure, inexperience in governance and a massive influx of returning refugees after two decades of war.

Executed by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), the NSP is designed and funded by the World Bank and supported by the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and other bilateral donors.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> With a budget of possibly \$950 million over six years, NSP will have allocated \$200 per family in every rural community throughout Afghanistan by program's end. 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 work. To date, it has implemented CDR programs in Indonesia, Kosovo, Azerbaijan, Liberia, North Sudan and Rwanda and will soon launch a large program in 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, all potentially significant in avoiding the high probability of a return to violence.

These objectives are priorities for both national and international actors working to facilitate positive outcomes in Afghanistan. IRC's long presence there, the size and scale of NSP and the relationship between CDR and IRC's Program Framework<sup>3</sup> make NSP a flagship program for the agency. Consequently, in 2006, IRC retained an expert consultant to analyze the way IRC approached the specific challenges and opportunities associated with implementing the NSP in a highly politicized and conservative region of Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> An Oversight Consultant (OC) supported the capacity building of MRRD and served as operational administrator for the facilitating partners (FPs) during the first phase.

<sup>2</sup> Community driven reconstruction uses CDD's conceptual underpinnings (implemented in a development context) and modifies and adjusts them to fit conflict-affected environments.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

The study was not intended to be a rigorous impact evaluation, nor a comparison of IRC's methods with those of the other 23 agencies implementing the NSP throughout Afghanistan. Understanding the limitations to data collection in the insecure southeast region, as well as the inability of conventional process evaluation to attribute change to any one actor, IRC sought to document its work with particular emphasis on the details of implementation. The following pages present an abridged version of the longer study which is available upon request.

## **NSP in context: Southeastern Afghanistan**

Afghanistan in 2006 was in a rapidly evolving state of institutional development. In four years, it had elected a president, written and approved a constitution, and elected members of parliament and provincial councils. Today's assembly "is an odd mixture of Muslim fundamentalists, former Taliban commanders, ex-Communist politicians, Western-educated women and even a former United Airlines pilot."<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that government offices are populated with both foreign and national advisors, embryonic ministries struggle with corruption, lack of familiarity with international governance standards and the complexities involved in trying to build an effective administration.

The same degree of fragility exists at the local level. Afghanistan's history and predilection for centralized government leave it without experience in establishing and running rural institutions. Both district and sub-district levels of local government are especially weak.<sup>5</sup> As well, there is a general "deep-rooted suspicion and distrust of central authority" among rural communities.<sup>6</sup> New provincial authorities that want to demonstrate their ability to solve local problems conflict with a central government keen to prove it is taking action to stabilize the countryside. Neither has the experience or a decentralization mandate to support its efforts.

The vacuum of rural institutions in the past was filled by tribal, religious and military authorities, acting according to political and factional motivations.<sup>7</sup> Many of these power holders retain significant influence. Tribal identity remains an especially powerful force in the southeast region, where IRC is the NSP's Facilitating Partner (FP) for Khost and Logar Provinces. Here, tribal *jirgas* (council of elders) tend to be particularly influential and tribal affiliation plays a large protection role. At the same time, the strong affiliation in the southeast with the *jihad* and associated political parties likely inflates the status and possibly the

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey York, "Afghanistan's Parliament, Like a Newborn, Struggling to Understand the Basics," *Globe and Mail*, 2 May 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Since the district elections were cancelled in 2005, the 365 districts are headed by appointed District Administrators who often have little motivation, incentive, understanding or 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) provides a strengthening network of grassroots institutions. Incongruously, the weak district level government leaves the CDCs 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 related to the growing distrust of the administration.

<sup>6</sup> Inger Boesen, "From Subjects to Citizens: Local Participation in the National Solidarity Programme," (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, August 2004), 6.

<sup>7</sup> 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).

number of returned commanders or former commanders. General conservatism in the region is magnified by the isolation, illiteracy, years of drought, and general poverty characteristic of its rural areas. These factors combined with an escalation of violence against aid agencies to create a climate of distrust, insecurity and skepticism just as IRC was launching the NSP.<sup>8</sup>

It is in this context that the NSP seeks to empower communities in local development and lay the “foundation for a sustainable form of inclusive local governance, rural reconstruction and poverty alleviation.”<sup>9</sup> Created in 2003, remarkably early in the reconstruction period and equally ambitious in size and scope, the NSP became known as the “largest people’s project in the history of Afghanistan.”<sup>10</sup> The NSP’s community driven development (CDD) approach directs decision-making on local development needs via block grants directly to the communities through a process that emphasizes participatory planning and accountability and growing relationships with local government. As the World Bank explains, “because public institutions in conflict and post-conflict environments often are weak or nonviable, CDD is increasingly used to help build bridges between the state and its citizens. It also is used to strengthen social cohesion where social groups are divided.”<sup>11</sup>

As both a governance and development initiative, the MRRD’s 24 Facilitating Partners (FPs) are assigned to different geographic areas to help local populations elect Community Development Councils (CDC) that design and execute projects selected by the communities. The FPs provide mentoring, facilitation, oversight and training in planning, budgeting, procurement, and monitoring.

FPs follow the NSP Operations Manual guidelines, which outline explicit steps based on four core elements:

- ✚ Community mobilization: facilitating elections to establish Community Development Councils and helping communities articulate a Community Development Plan (CDP) with specific priorities and projects to be funded under the block grant;

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<sup>8</sup> 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 U.S. coalition forces, and the presence of a widely respected regional leader put IRC in its inception and design phase of the NSP in a precarious position.

<sup>9</sup> National Solidarity Program, “Introduction,” <[http://www.nspafghanistan.org/content/index\\_eng.html](http://www.nspafghanistan.org/content/index_eng.html)> (12 April 2006).

<sup>10</sup> The NSP’s design is informed by previous World Bank community driven development projects and social funds as well as the Community Fora program conducted in the mid 1990s in Mazar-e-Sharif, Northern Afghanistan. For more on the World 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](http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/EXTCDD/0..menuPK:430167~pagePK:149018~piPK:149093~theSitePK:430161_00.html)> (February 2007). 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).

<sup>11</sup> 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), 8.

- ✚ CDC capacity building: training on project cycle implementation, including participation, consensus building, accounting, procurement and contract management, project operations, project maintenance, and monitoring;
- ✚ Transference of block grants to communities to fund identified projects; and
- ✚ Linking CDCs to other government ministries, donors and NGOs for continued funding of development needs and services.

While these are the minimal operational components of NSP, FPs apply substantively different approaches, supplementing the core areas described above with additional activities and initiatives.

## **Culture, Islam & Tradition: IRC's Approach as Facilitating Partner**

IRC took advantage of this freedom to add some relatively unique features. Most importantly, IRC grounded its work in Afghan cultural, religious and traditional norms and institutions. Many of these were widely perceived to present potential obstacles to Afghanistan's recovery and development, and some had had negative ties to suspect influences in the past. IRC prioritized exemplifying NSP's stated values of participatory and inclusive decision-making, gender equity, transparency and accountability in its own interaction with government, communities and the population in general.

This theme of incorporating Afghan beliefs, values and institutions is evident in IRC's modifications to the basic NSP design. Nine of these are explained briefly below, followed by a discussion of their potential outcomes.

**1. Contextual review.** At the inception of IRC's contract with the MRRD to implement the NSP in Logar and Khost provinces, IRC senior staff conducted an informal analysis of both provinces. The analysis consisted of discussions with Afghans about the social and cultural values of southeast society and the potential spoilers and supporters of the NSP process. It repeatedly revealed the passion with which Afghans believed that the NSP process must respect Afghanistan's culture and religion.<sup>12</sup> This finding led IRC to make four strategic decisions:

- To engage religious scholars, tribal elders and former military commanders directly in NSP;
- To hire all staff from within each province;
- To involve key stakeholders in all critical decisions and activities;
- To base the village selection process on the suggestions of local power holders.

**2. Consultative workshops.** The contextual analysis also revealed the consultative nature of Afghan society, suggesting the need to confer widely with key local groups and discuss the consistency between NSP's values and principles and those of Islam. IRC, thus, conducted a workshop in each of the two provinces for a broad spectrum of local society where it introduced the NSP and affirmed to the population its willingness to engage on Afghan terms.

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<sup>12</sup> While those involved in the review could not articulate how such respect should be portrayed, they were clear about what violated that respect. NSP staff then began to define the notion and develop means of exemplifying it.

The reaction to each provincial workshop was quite positive, despite some tension between government and tribal leaders. Although several leaders initially resisted the NSP's condition for women's participation, they eventually agreed after extensive discussion. Many expressed cynicism about actually seeing the financial benefits of the NSP based on their distrust in the government and experience with empty NGO promises. Nevertheless, they consented to the program under certain conditions: IRC must respect the local culture and the religion and it would not be allowed to proselytize. IRC accepted the conditions. By involving leaders publicly in the workshops, IRC reduced the prospect any individual could engage in vocal opposition without losing face.

**3. Advisory Boards.** IRC recognized the need to create a permanent, local authority to inform and guide NSP decision-making and to help temper the view that 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.<sup>13</sup> They guided IRC on culture, religion and social issues; disseminated information to prepare the public and help dispel rumors; publicly supported women's participation in elections, CDCs and project implementation; increased program transparency by monitoring projects with IRC engineers, provincial line ministry staff, District Administrators and tribal leaders; and helped to choose new districts based on NSP district selection criteria.<sup>14</sup> 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. Each new subject required extensive discussion and awareness-raising among the members. Such issues as the role of returning refugees and unsettled Kuchi (nomads) in the NSP process, the nature and function of civil society in helping realize Community Development Plans and women's participation in NSP entailed long conversations allowing full airing of the various perspectives.

**4. Advisory Councils.** For the first year of implementation, IRC also 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* (consultative council) members (one representative from each sub-district). Their role was to select the order of NSP communities to engage in the program, to oversee progress, to participate in decision-making and to solve problems.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Logar members included the provincial Governor (chair), District Administrators, former military commanders, Kuchi leaders, religious scholars, tribal elders, government officials from Ministries of Agriculture, Education, Health, Irrigation, Planning, Public Services, Refugees and Returnees, Rural Rehabilitation and Development and Women's Affairs, and in Khost the Chamber of Commerce, the Khost University President and the Minister of Tribal and Border Affairs.

<sup>14</sup> The Logar Board, however, 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 is looking to reassemble. In contrast, the Khost Board remains a formidable body with 100 percent attendance throughout its three-year history.

<sup>15</sup> While designed as temporary structures, IRC reinstated them in the latter part of 2006 to provide advice on the growing insurgency and insight into the population's view of the NSP, especially in areas plagued with violence such as Khawar District in Logar.

**5. Special Action Committees for Religious Affairs (SACRAs).** Initially, many religious scholars rejected the NSP and anything associated with the new central government or international organizations. Consequently, from the beginning IRC staff had lengthy discussions with mullahs on the role of Islam in development, referring to Quran passages on community members' responsibility for improving their own lives and to its inherent endorsement of women's participation in development activities. IRC subsequently established province level Special Action Committees for Religious Affairs (SACRAs) to engage religious scholars formally in the NSP program. SACRA members' primary role was to advise IRC on Islamic issues and to raise awareness about and endorse the NSP, its methodologies and its compatibility with Islam by speaking directly with people in mosques, madrassas and communities.<sup>16</sup>

**6. Village selection process.** Deciding which villages in the selected districts would receive NSP first, second and third represented a potentially contentious issue. Therefore, after leaders in the consultative workshops chose the initial round of villages, IRC established a district-level process to select villages as NSP expanded. Staff met with key stakeholders in newly selected districts to discuss criteria for NSP village participation. The meetings included a discussion on gender as well as security for IRC staff. Participants returned to their districts and tribes to consult with their constituents and then presented IRC with a list of the requisite number of villages. IRC widely publicized its process of engaging key actors to avert disagreement among tribal, ethnic, language, party and religious factions.

**7. Staff Recruitment.** To maximize local input and benefit from NSP, IRC decided to hire all NSP staff from within the provinces. This had several possible benefits. For one, IRC appreciated the visibility and economic significance of employing hundreds of individuals in an area where jobs were in high demand. Nearly 100 percent of IRC's staff, which was over 400 by May 2006, were citizens of the province (and most citizens of the district) in which they worked. Salaries would provide immediate economic benefit to the districts before NSP grant money reached the communities. IRC also recognized the public message of local ownership associated with having staff that were born and lived within the province. Finally, IRC theorized that by rendering the hiring process visible to all, the potential for corruption would decrease and by hiring individuals representing all factions and groups, no single entity could dominate. The result of IRC's policy was an employee base that roughly reflected local society, including the political, demographic and social structure of each province.<sup>17</sup>

An obvious exception however 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. However, finding qualified women willing and permitted to work outside the home was difficult throughout Afghanistan, though presumably more so in the conservative south. To address this issue, IRC

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<sup>16</sup> Between 6 October 2004 and 5 April 2005, SACRA members spoke with nearly 7,500 community members about the NSP (IRC, "NSP 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Quarter Progress Report," 5 June 2005, 12).

<sup>17</sup> IRC stipulated that staff could not work directly with their own community to prevent conflict of interest. Villages of the newly hired staff were also disqualified 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 NSP within areas not yet engaged in the program through staff's transference of information in their home communities.

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.<sup>18</sup>

**8. Community solidarity agreement.** At the initial consultative workshops, IRC presented the concept of a community contract 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 and the requirements for participation (most controversially, perhaps, the compulsory women's involvement) and of holding the community accountable for its participation in NSP and its relationship with IRC.

**9. Grassroots action as a catalyst for national change.** Several Facilitating Partners recognized that the number of communities engaged in NSP presented an opportunity to increase essential communication and understanding across geographic and social lines. In Logar and Khost, for example, IRC frequently brought together CDCs to mentor inexperienced communities through the initial stages of the program, especially the election process. IRC recognized the significant peacebuilding potential in such exchanges and with the growing support of other FPs consequently launched a nation-wide CDC Exchange and Solidarity Initiative to convene communities across provinces, regions and ultimately the nation. 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. The subsequent four exchanges grew progressively larger, 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 attracted the MRRD's attention and prompted a visit by the Minister's deputy, setting the stage for a national meeting in the western province of Herat in May and a visit by the Minister himself. The national meeting focused on the hot topic of CDC legitimacy as a community governing body, their future legal standing and their official authority. This served as a platform for the CDCs to address their own future and take part in the debate, which until then had ironically omitted their voices.

To provide a foundation for this Herat discussion, at the Balkh exchange, IRC proposed billing it as a "National Solidarity Exchange" and facilitated the election of 20 CDC

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<sup>18</sup> A significant factor in attracting female staff was the support of religious scholars through the SACRAs 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 wrongfully 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 be seen as upholding Islam rather than being devious in their intentions.

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 National Solidarity Exchange. After three days of late-into-the-night discussions, the nearly 350 participants from every province and Facilitating Partner in Afghanistan produced a declaration stating that CDCs should become an official part of development planning and local decision-making by formalizing their role as representative bodies within the constitution.<sup>19</sup>

The public consultation survey continued upon return among the FPs in 150 districts. The results were combined and fed into the discussion establishing by-laws for CDCs. Importantly, the Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development acknowledged the growing empowerment of the local governing bodies of his own Ministry’s making. He, consequently, called a national *jirga* in August 2005 in Kabul to bring CDCs to the awareness of other cabinet members and to discuss the legitimization of village level councils as a permanent function of local government. The three-day *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. In the process, “President Karzai expressed his determination to see the CDCs acknowledged as constitutional Village Councils.”<sup>20</sup> At the end of the *jirga*, cabinet members who were impressed with the breadth and impact NSP had had on the Afghan population consented to further discussion on the legal status of CDCs. The draft by-laws will be formally presented for vote in parliament.

## POTENTIAL OUTCOMES OF IRC’S APPROACH

The following are potential outcomes of the approach IRC took toward the NSP. They do not constitute definitive, measurable results or offer conclusions about the program’s impact or “effectiveness.” Rather, they represent tentative conclusions drawn from a host of sources, including project monitoring data; perceptions of staff, government and communities; interviews with key informants in Khost, Logar, Herat and Paktia provinces as well as government ministries and international agencies; World Bank and other evaluations, research papers; and official government data.

### ***Respecting local culture increased Afghan acceptance of NSP and IRC.***

Observers of and participants in IRC’s program said grounding its approach in local values and beliefs helped to curb antagonism and elicit acceptance for NSP as a government program and for IRC as an international NGO. IRC has a distinct reputation in its provinces and within the NSP writ large for consulting and respecting local institutions. The SACRAs were

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<sup>19</sup> 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 province levels. Institutionalizing CDCs as the community interlocutor with other ministries, international entities and other forms of official contact opens them up to more resources and interaction with external actors.

<sup>20</sup> CDC Working Group, “Consolidating Village Democracy in Afghanistan: A Background Note on Institutionalizing Community Development Councils,” 5 November 2005, 6, copy.

particularly effective at countering statements made in night letters<sup>21</sup> about NSP acting as a vehicle for Christian proselytizing. Commanders and mullahs “talked to people with their own words,” as one official put it, and convinced those with reservations that NSP supported much needed development. Its hiring practices meant IRC had credible, “reputable people represent the NSP to the community in an authoritative manner that the people could trust.”<sup>22</sup> 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 views.

***Engaging traditional leadership shifted key power holders’ attention to development.***

One important difference between IRC and other FPs is that IRC has harnessed the influence of former power holders (such as mullahs, *maliks*—community representatives—and commanders) to support the NSP process, while most FPs have purposely avoided engaging them. Where IRC works in Logar and Khost, there is evidence to suggest many leaders previously wedded to war have transferred their attention to development. For the first time, mullahs and ex-combatants on IRC staff, the Advisory Board or SACRAs are involved in irrigation projects and democratic elections. The shift in their attitude towards development has been well noted. As one Oversight Consultant 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.”

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. An IRC staff member who is also a *mawlana* religious scholar and former *mujahideen* and Taliban commander was animated about the change the opportunity to contribute to local development had made in his life saying the past three years have significantly changed his attitude. “If I were not engaged in NSP,” he claimed, “I would have some distant ideas about development but now I have an intimate, personal experience that has been convincing.” Given 400 staff and another 50 active non-staff participants, this shift could have a compounding local effect.

***Local hiring increased skills and resources in rural areas.***

IRC’s local hiring practice and ensuing training injected rural areas with lasting new capacity and local understanding of community mobilization and project cycles, not to mention income and savings. Instead of drawing on the capital and other urban centers for temporary supply of skills and education as most FPs did, IRC pulled from the provincial population, which manifested in a smaller pool of qualified staff and thus the need for extensive capacity development. The fact that NSP staff live in the same district in which they work implies the skills they gain through training and experience will remain in the area. Their ability to continue to apply these skills over time in an ongoing cycle of development rests on a number

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<sup>21</sup> 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 do not cease.

<sup>22</sup> Kakar, “Fine-Tuning,” 18.

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 appears to support project sustainability and increased self-reliance. In the words of a local official, in IRC's program "people are caring for maintenance of projects more than with other NGOs."

In addition, IRC's approach exposed a broad spectrum of society to new skills. IRC's inclusion of religious scholars, social and political leaders and government officials in its staff training, the training conducted for the Advisory Boards and Councils in the course of district and community selection increased the number and type of people exposed to development processes. This introduced a wide variety of citizens and leaders to such processes as international standard procurement procedures and secret ballot elections. The breadth of exposure increases the potential pool of individuals capable of organizing and supporting community development beyond the life of the NSP.

***IRC's approach improved relationships between key Afghan groups.***

A fundamental assumption of the community driven approach is that it positively influences important societal relationships inside communities and between citizens and their governing institutions. The study found that IRC's approach to the NSP improved the quality of four key relationships.

- ✚ *Intra-staff and intra-Advisory Board relationships* - The diverse composition of IRC's staff and Advisory Boards offered tremendous opportunity for interaction among historically disputing tribes, political rivals and to a lesser extent ethnic and language groups and religions. The often-touted sentiment among IRC staff and Board members was their 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 believed 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 members are quite proud of their organization and when exposed to alternative methodologies among other FPs, felt good about IRC's diverse hiring practices.
- ✚ *Relationships between general public and local leaders* - Another potential outcome 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 NSP, the study found a budding shift in community members' perceptions of religious scholars, commanders, tribal leaders and community elders. Many of these leaders interviewed said they recognize the destruction they had caused over time, 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. 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 in general, and to develop new behavior and roles for traditional leaders through IRC's approach in particular. Future study of post-NSP implications of IRC's approach could be illuminating.

- ✚ *Relationships between tribes, political factions and ethno-linguistic groups* - Anecdotal evidence suggests IRC's representative and consultative practices may influence inter-group relations within the provinces. The fact 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 that they were now "joined together." On an individual level, 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 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."
- ✚ *Relationships between communities and the central government* - Interviews indicated that IRC staff's close connection to communities had a positive influence on local perception of central government. The southeast region's factional nature and its links to external influences with their historical resistance to Afghan government have made government relations particularly difficult. The face of IRC not only as the local population but inclusive of local elders, former commanders and religious scholars appears to have helped convince many skeptics of the government's potential value.

***IRC's approach has influenced norms and behavior patterns.***

At first glance, IRC's embrace of traditional custom would appear to support conventional social trends. Anecdotal evidence is beginning to suggest IRC's approach has instead helped to encourage alternative behavior patterns in some key areas.

- ✚ *Security* - General perception is that the NSP has had something of a calming effect through its focused attention on development. IRC's methodology may have helped influence this behavior by engaging erstwhile combatants. According to IRC staff, when NSP first started, many party members from Khost and Logar exiled in Pakistan criticized the NSP as a government trap. It was not uncommon for individuals working for Afghan ministries to receive threatening night letters. As party members became IRC employees working with the NSP, however, both IRC staff and local officials said this animosity changed and the NSP gained a reputation of "supporting our society." Khost Advisory Board and SACRA members said their involvement had had a

positive impact on quelling opposition from the Taliban towards the NSP. This influence was illustrated recently when IRC suspended NSP operations in the Kharwar District of Logar. IRC former Taliban staff members met with the Taliban insurgents from neighboring Ghazni province and discussed the benefit of NSP to the communities and its positive impact on local conditions.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, the threat to NSP staff around the country has been real. The 2006 upsurge in violence precipitated 11 FPs to suspend their programs in 42 districts between March and August.<sup>24</sup> 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 limited compared to many FPs. The sense that 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. 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 issue of whether intimately involving leaders and citizens from the area increases the social pressure to divert resources to benefit local constituents. IRC tried to prevent this by making all of its activities and decisions visible to the public and by ensuring all parties were at the table by publicizing all its policies and conclusions and inviting interested actors to participate. Staff followed an almost dogmatic adherence to rules and systems to counter the Afghan relationship-based allegiance. For example, staff found they could use the rules as an excuse when friends and neighbors asked for help obtaining employment with IRC. Their standard reply was, “submit your application and if you are qualified, you will be invited for an interview.” Similarly, information about which individuals were invited to sit on the village selection council, the selection process itself, community project priority setting and the workings of the Advisory Board was available to all.

People’s acceptance of transparency grew with the consistent application of rules and openness. This reportedly surprised 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 referred to former IRC staff and board members who had taken up government posts and had brought the experience of transparent processes with them. They added that, “Transparency is not only in work but is becoming the common rule within families all the way to CDCs.”

✚ *Gender* - 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

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<sup>23</sup> While the insurgents agreed to return to Ghazni and not to disrupt the NSP program, other Taliban factions did not concur and continue to disturb order in the area; the program remains suspended.

<sup>24</sup> Oversight Consultant, “FP Program Suspensions,” NSP program database, 10 August 2006.

female staff: 22% in Khost and 28% in Logar as compared to a 17% average among FPs.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, it averaged only 26% women members on CDCs, notably lower than the 35% average among all FPs.<sup>26</sup> As Wakefield and Bauer warn, however, superficial representation does not change rules of behavior<sup>27</sup> 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 and staff agreed that women's roles were enhanced by 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. While the creation of the Gender Development Officer position in each province also increased awareness of gender-related issues, the biggest impact on women's involvement was IRC's engagement of religious scholars. Their espousal of Islamic doctrine in support of women's role in development raised community awareness and acceptance of women's participation. In Khost, this dramatically improved gender equity by increasing women's ability to work, to become members and even Chairpersons on CDCs and to participate vocally in community planning discussions.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

***IRC's approach strengthens institutions, principles and relationships necessary for good governance.***

An important aim of the NSP is to improve the legitimacy, effectiveness and accountability of local governance. More specifically, NSP seeks to build representative, local institutions equipped to plan, implement and advocate for community development; strengthen relationships between communities and lower level administrative units; and increase the populations' understanding and use of principles of good governance. Although many aspects of these objectives are inherent in the design of NSP, several appear to be particularly affected by IRC's approach.

- ✚ *Leadership support for but not dominance of new decision-making bodies -*  
Opposition to the new form of decision-making embodied in NSP was strong in many areas. 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. It may also have been

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<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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).

<sup>27</sup> 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), 1.

<sup>28</sup> IRC, "NSP Progress Report," 13.

<sup>29</sup> 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 NSP itself.

because of access to information about NSP through IRC's extensive consultations with traditional power brokers.

IRC's methods also seem to have eliminated an understandable concern that local elites would capture the new decision-making bodies, the CDCs. The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) found that power holders generally expected to be elected and that they frequently caused problems if they were not.<sup>30</sup> Although the actual influence elites projected on society through their roles in the Advisory Boards, village selection committees or SACRAs is difficult to determine, IRC's CDC profiles for Khost and Logar provinces indicate 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. While not reliable indicators of influence, these figures suggest that the individuals elected by secret ballot to membership on Khost and Logar Community Development Committees were not the former societal leaders. Instead, 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.<sup>31</sup>

- 🌈 *Links between communities and local government* - A hoped-for outcome of the community driven approach is improved relationships between communities and their government representatives at the lower levels. 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 pursued this by involving 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. In its own advocacy within the NSP, IRC strongly encouraged gradual provincial government takeover of some responsibilities in an effort to build its local legitimacy and capacity.

These efforts appeared to have results. IRC reported in mid 2005, "CDCs and local administrations within IRC's coverage area are increasingly consulting each other during planning and project development."<sup>32</sup> According to local interviewees, the Governor of Logar saw the importance of the community link and asked IRC to help further develop provincial line ministry ability to work with villages. As a result, a Logar District Administrator said his relationships with the communities had improved markedly since when he was a community member. Now CDC members bring their issues directly to him, serving 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. Part of this is no doubt simply the face of MRRD itself

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<sup>30</sup> Kakar, "Fine-Tuning," 15; Boesen, "From Subjects to Citizens," 46.

<sup>31</sup> Boesen, "From Subjects to Citizens," 46.

<sup>32</sup> IRC, "NSP Progress Report," 13.

through the NSP program, though this level of interaction could still 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.”<sup>33</sup>

## 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.<sup>34</sup> While US Government statistics show impressive improvements along these lines, many positive trends claimed have recently been reversed.<sup>35</sup> 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

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<sup>33</sup> Kakar, “Fine-Tuning,” 19.

<sup>34</sup> 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](http://www.ipcs.org/South_Asia_articles2.jsp?action=showView&kValue=2151&country=1016&status=article&mod=a)> (20 November 2006).

<sup>35</sup> 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).

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.

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 embedded the program within the Afghans themselves 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. 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.<sup>36</sup> "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

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<sup>36</sup> Eighty percent of prisoners captured in a recent counter-insurgent operation said they were prompted to fight for economic reasons (David Isby, "Afghanistan, Five Years and Counting," *The National Interest*, 2 November 2006, <<http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=12784>> 4 November 2006).

or put the elusive Qaeda leader out of action,” said a top US commander.<sup>37</sup> Only \$3 billion of the international community’s recently pledged nearly \$14 billion is dedicated for these purposes.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, the NSP’s countrywide 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 both continual practice and substantive support (as well as legitimizing the role of CDCs as permanent structures recognized within the 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 largely 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 southeast society offers a noteworthy model that warrants attention.

*Full Report Available on the IRC websites at – [www.theIRC.org](http://www.theIRC.org) and [www.IRCUK.org](http://www.IRCUK.org)*

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<sup>37</sup> Moreau, Yousafzai, Hirsh, “The Rise of Jihadistan,” 1; See International Crisis Group, “Countering Afghanistan’s Insurgency: No Quick Fixes,” Asia Report no. 123, 2 November 2006 for analysis of national and international failures leading up to the present-day insurgency and recommendations for remedial action.

<sup>38</sup> Of this, the US alone pledged \$10 billion, \$2 billion of which was allocated for reconstruction.

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