

Community Empowerment in Afghanistan

A REVIEW OF THE UNDP EXPERIENCE IN THE 1990s

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While rebuilding the state is our central focus, our goal is a system of governance where people are the principals and the government the agent of a citizenry, who actively participate and engage in building democratic institutions.

H. E. Hamid Karzai, Statement to the Tokyo Conference

I. Introduction

1. Throughout the 1990s, rehabilitation and development work has gone well beyond the pressing humanitarian assistance to returning refugees, internally displaced and other vulnerable groups. External support could however not be provided in the traditional manner through an established central authority. From the very early stages of United Nations intervention, efforts have been directed at the level of communities or groups of communities, in some cases reaching up to district level.

2. The individual UNDP-sponsored programmes have over the years had different project denominations, depending on the scope and focus of their activities. Two projects were implemented by FAO and are currently known as

- Food security through sustainable crop production, and
- Livestock development for food security.

Two more projects were executed by UNOPS, now known as

- Strengthening the self-help capacities of rural communities, and
- Comprehensive disabled Afghans programme

A fifth project, finally, dedicated mainly to the welfare of urban residents is implemented by UNCHS (Habitat), now called

- Rebuilding communities in urban areas.

3. All five projects received core funding on a continuous basis from UNDP. These resources have been supplemented with trust fund and cost-sharing contributions from a number of different donors. Except for the last two years, total resources applied to these projects amounted to some USD 20 million annually.

4. In general, the implementing agencies responded in the only way possible to the troubled conditions of prolonged warfare and deteriorating central authority that prevailed during the 1990s. Virtually all rehabilitation and development assistance was directed to local levels. Area-based programmes in zones of intermittent peace were progressively expanded. While projects attempted to meet apparent needs in different areas, they were to start with carried out as stand-alone efforts, pursuing diverse sectoral goals, even when using similar approaches.

5. An assistance regime of remote control developed from the earlier cross-border operations from Pakistan and was reinforced by the unsettled conditions within the country, which also continued to make for operational separation of activities according to their humanitarian or development content. NGOs were the main vehicle for delivering both humanitarian aid and assistance to rehabilitate community assets, principally village infrastructure of all kinds, as well as for providing ad hoc social services. Efforts were at the same time made to enlist the participation of beneficiaries in programme decisions affecting their communities.
6. By the mid-1990s, the various projects had decisively shifted their focus, emphasizing increasingly community-based organization, seen as a vital ingredient in project work. These approaches were reinforced by an international forum held in Ashkabad in 1996, which sought to develop a consensus on the purposes and method of outside assistance to Afghanistan. It zeroed in on a few salient concepts. Peace-building was an overarching objective, supported by a more long-term approach integrating efforts in the humanitarian, rehabilitation, development and human rights sphere. It was agreed that these efforts should address the concerns and needs at the community level and support Afghan civil society in its various forms.
7. These considerations led to the establishment in 1997 of the P.E A.C.E. Initiative ¹, which was to harmonise the various approaches applied by the five projects mentioned and to increase their impact by exploiting synergies and potential economies deriving from closer coordination and a more unified management.
8. Aside from their different sectoral orientations, the PI projects differed in the scale of coverage they attempted. The FAO livestock and crop production projects, and the Comprehensive disabled Afghans programme, aimed at extensive national coverage, whereas the UNOPS-executed rural development programme and the urban renewal project of Habitat (UNCHS) limited their interventions to selected focus areas. The number of PI focus areas has varied over time but mostly stood at 26 rural districts and 6 urban areas, and were selected principally in terms of accessibility and ethnic and political balance.
9. The consolidation of the five projects into a single programme, which operated for over four years, was based on the premise that their common and shared objectives were sufficiently strong to give them the character of an integrated programme. It was also predicated on the assumption that there is a positive correlation between peace-building and conflict prevention on the one hand and, on the other, human welfare, poverty alleviation, community empowerment, improved governance and the observation of human rights. As rural and urban environments condition these relationships in different ways, the projects included in the PI focus on both rural and urban areas.

¹) P.E.A.C.E. is an acronym for Poverty Eradication And Community Empowerment. In the following the five projects concerned will be referred to as the PI projects.

II. Evaluation Findings

10. Mid-term sectoral reviews of the progress made by the individual projects against their original sectoral targets were carried out in the first half of 1998. A thematic evaluation of the P.E.A.C.E. Initiative as such was conducted in September 1999 to supplement the technical reviews, to assess the validity of thematic aspects and assumptions, to provide an input for the next phase of the programme and to guide the allocation of fresh resources.

Area-focused development

11. The thematic evaluation drew attention to the fact that the PI programme to all intents and purposes consisted of what is commonly known as area development schemes, which have become current in many parts of the world during the last 15 years. By definition, they operate in selected districts or provinces of a country, chosen according to diverse criteria, and attempt to respond to local needs in a comprehensive manner, mobilizing community self-help, local decision-making, civil society organizations and private sector enterprise. Technically, their approach is multi-sectoral, and there is in general a built-in strong support for group and individual income-generation.
12. As a general conclusion, the evaluation team noted that area programmes of this kind had a given place in Afghanistan, where social and economic structures were in ruins and government institutions in a state of collapse. Under the circumstances, and with little certainty as to what the final outcome would be, area-based schemes derived from the logic of the actual situation on the ground. In terms of providing external support for rehabilitation and development, the area-based approach offered the best possible response - with potential for sustainable impact - to needs expressed by the communities themselves.

Action at the level of communities

13. There was a second persuasive logic. Action at the level of local communities held the best prospects of addressing some of the most difficult issues confronting the country, the collapsing infrastructure and social services, food security, gender discrimination, environmental decline in rural and urban areas, and the expanding cultivation of opium poppy. Engaging directly rural and urban communities and civil society offered the best chance of making a difference by creating capacity among communities to better help themselves. It could furthermore help lay the foundations of local governance by reviving and fostering traditions of self-government.²

²) The seminal OECD/DAC document "Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation" (1997) endorses the area-based development approach as a "best practice", provided it is strategically linked to community empowerment and local governance. Its principal critique is that area-focused development addresses issues of national scope in piecemeal fashion. While some communities may benefit, others will not. The question thus arises whether sufficient critical mass is present to be catalytic and, by example, create a momentum for change, horizontally among other communities and vertically from the bottom up. Such questions are not easily answered, as many complex factors are involved, some of them fortuitous in nature.

14. In terms of sectoral coverage, the evaluation team noted that considerable progress had been made in refocusing attention on social services, generally at the expense of infrastructure. It recommended however that work in the area of health and education should be strengthened further, in particular because health and education are a priority of a beneficiary group whose voice is not always heard, namely women.
15. As regards the various forms of community mobilization used, these are summarized in paragraphs 23 – 30 below. The evaluation team endorsed them as valid approaches to the complex issues of empowerment, participation and self-help. It believed that uniformity of method need not be sought, at that stage, in the formation of local community structures, and that only a future Afghan government should in the end rule on their relative merits, as the foundation for local governance.

III. Achievements and Constraints

16. The overarching goals of the PI programme were stated to be poverty alleviation and the empowerment of communities, as pathways to the strengthening civil society, local participation and governance, the observation of human rights, all being part in the final analysis of the peace-building process.
 17. In this order of things, the present report is concerned with the practices and methods used to empower local communities. To document project results in this area, the report will therefore review the following aspects of programme implementation:
 - The type and number of community-based organizations (*shuras*, community forums, common interest groups and cooperatives) created at village, sub-district and district level, as well as the nature of the business they conduct;
 - The resources available to community-based organizations from the projects, or directly controlled by them through micro credit and revolving funds.
 18. The mobilization of local communities provided throughout the principal leverage for moving towards the multi-pronged objectives of poverty alleviation. Four distinct strategic elements of poverty alleviation have been at the center of project activities, i.e.
 - Improved food security and nutrition
 - Better access to social and common services
 - Creation of sustainable livelihoods and income-generating schemes, and
 - Wider distribution of programme benefits, especially among women.
 19. The intent of this report is not to record the various achievements of the PI programme in the above areas. These achievements have been presented in progress reports and mid-term reviews, and are described in the thematic evaluation. By and
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large, they conclude that programme results have been substantial despite severe operational constraints.

20. These constraints need to be highlighted, as they also affected the community mobilization work. The chronic political uncertainty and fluid military situation, the absence of administrative structures in the social and economic areas, and the parallel entrenchment of an illicit war economy were basic structural impediments that continuously affected field work in the focus areas.
21. In particular, the short-term planning horizons and funding patterns that resulted from political volatility have basically been at odds with community empowerment objectives, seen in the medium and long term. Furthermore:
 - ❑ programme disruptions and the evacuation of international staff occurred regularly after 1997 affecting particularly the focus areas of Mazar, Bamyan and Wardak;
 - ❑ the absence of a banking system in project areas and difficulties in conducting normal financial operations;
 - ❑ the UN security regime, which restricted the number and duration of international staff visits to Afghanistan, increased costs and limited access to project areas;
 - ❑ restricted access of women to employment and social services, and in particular the impact of the Mahram edict, harmed project implementation and reduced interaction between project staff and Afghan women, compromising work aiming at better gender equity in the distribution of project benefits.
22. A positive by-product of these various restrictions and obstacles has been to move an increasing level of management responsibility to Afghan project staff in the field. This “afghanization” represents a real asset and a vitally important element for the future as the PI moves into a new phase of assistance challenges and strategies.

IV. Empowering Local Communities

23. **Overview.** Community empowerment has been a cardinal UNDP objective in Afghanistan, both because of the corrosive effects of poverty and warfare on local social systems and because of the virtual absence of formal structures. Cumulatively over the years, over 2100 separate community-based organizations (CBOs), farmers groups and cooperative associations have been (re)activated in the course of implementing the constituent projects of the PI programme. Of these, 173 (or about 8 percent) have been formed by women; another 15 were “mixed” organizations. In all cases, community-based organizations have been strongly linked to project activities.

24. PI projects adopted different methods when engaging recipient communities. Each was informed by past experiences, and tried to make their method relevant to the immediate needs, aims and social environment of their respective programmes. The UNOPS-executed rural rehabilitation programme (ARRP/CSH) has a long history of community engagement and is the most wide-ranging, comprising over half of all community organizations formed. Project-sponsored *shura* cover more than 930 village communities in a system of pyramid representation that reaches up from villages to district committees, which convene regularly to discuss community needs and proposals.
25. Although *shuras* have mainly been devoted to adjudicating village disputes, an inherent strength of the *shura* development committees (DCs) is that they build on existing traditions of village committee formation. The process of instituting *shura* development committees carefully prepared and then supported by a gradual introduction of material and infrastructure support on the part of the programme.
26. The community forums (CFs) sponsored by Habitat, concentrated mainly in urban centres, are less numerous, 41 in total and functioning in six cities and towns in 2000. CFs are led by a consultative board (CB), supported by a management team (MT), which carries out the day-to-day business of the forum. A special strength of the CF model is that it incorporates a regular mechanism for direct community consultation and a capacity for managing funds in support of local services such as schools and clinics. CFs have been particularly successful in ensuring relatively high women's participation (45 per cent of Kabul neighbourhood forums consist of women). In all cases, the formation of a CF is supported by an initial start-up grant of \$9,900 provided by Habitat.
27. Over the years, the comprehensive disabled Afghans programme (CDAP) has sponsored the formation of some 500 men's and 66 women's voluntary groups, called community-based rehabilitation organizations (CBRO) to advocate in favour of the disabled and to mobilize communities in their support. These groups regularly liaise with CDAP professional staff, local institutions and other agencies, in order to secure services and promote the integration, through employment and education, of the disabled into mainstream social life.
28. For their part, the FAO livestock and cereal crop development programmes have interacted directly with farmers through common interest groups for poultry, dairy and bee-keeping activities, as well as for fruit tree plantation and the growing, treatment and distribution of quality-certified seed. The former project has also supported some 250 district veterinary field units (VFU), instituted 99 animal health training groups, and supported over 100 village groups for women with income generation schemes.
29. In recognition of the importance of capacity-building, both in managing the fledgling community-based organizations as such and in establishing criteria for use by communities when selecting projects of interest to them, the different UNDP programmes have throughout the 1990s devoted considerable effort to training

community workers and the community constituencies at large. Community mobilization was always seen as demanding extensive preparation as well as continuous attention and time-consuming follow-up.

30. In all PI projects, different credit systems have been used in support of activities designed to generate income, both communal and individual, to initiate social services, to encourage community initiatives and to support vulnerable groups. The creation of revolving funds has throughout been seen as a vital corollary of community empowerment and reflects the need to create investment opportunities in a cash poor environment.

Community-based Organizations Operating at Village, Sub-district and District Level

31. **(a) Strengthening self-help capacities of rural communities (ARRP/CSH).** Community participation has consistently been a prominent feature of UNOPS-executed area rehabilitation and development programmes. Well before the PI, village participation and ownership of rehabilitation interventions became a primary objective of implementation. Programme resources were deployed to create and nurture *shura* development committees, at the village level (VDC), the cluster village level (CVDC) and district level (DDC), as the basic participatory structures, which would continue working once project assistance had come to an end.
32. In all cases, community mobilization started at the level of the village, which was approached through the mosque, and the cooperation of the local mullah sought. This was followed by a basic social survey, mapping out the existing social stratification within the village, the number of families, landowners, farm labourers, widows and disabled. In this way, the project was able to structure the information directed at the villagers, provide them with guidelines on the selection of *shura* members, monitor the outcome of the designation of village representatives and counteract any tendency to solidify the influence of the most prosperous villagers.
33. Meetings to sensitize villagers to the importance of electing representatives caring for the best interest of all villagers – not only for their own village but also for village clusters and the district - could last several days. Once *shura* development committees had been formed, their members were in turn gathered for initial training through a one-week workshop and provided with guidelines on how to perform their task and to help identify the needs of the community in consultation with the various stakeholders. About 8,000 community leaders and workers have been so trained; continuous monitoring of their performance and job training, some of it technical in nature, has been a consistent feature of the project.
34. Project empowerment strategies has hinged on the activation of these *shura* development committees, whose role was bolstered by infrastructure and social service projects as well as credit/income generation schemes. Some 60 per cent of

programme resources have been expended on infrastructure work in the irrigation, water and transport sectors, and 16 per cent on social services. As of the end of 2000, over 650 sub-projects had been completed at a cost of USD 9.5 million, with community contributions, cash and in-kind, mainly in the form of labour, estimated at USD 1,6 million.

35. The strategy of offering inducements to strengthen local decision-making, planning and implementation capacities can thus be said to have paid off. As of end-2000, a total of 1,205 *shura* development committees had been formed, including 45 *shuras* for women. Of these 951 were village committees (VDCs), 241 cluster village committees (CVDCs) and 13 had been created at the district level (DDCs). These committees had reached a point where they were themselves responsible for the implementation of 60 per cent of all sub-projects, with materials and technical assistance provided by the project.
36. Quantitative targets for the formation of community committees have been achieved in the districts of the Southern region, whilst progress has been slower elsewhere. Measuring the success and impact of community development activities is more difficult given the qualitative nature of the results sought. Some crude indicators however show a growing self-reliance and readiness to start collective initiatives, such as:
 - ❑ Sustained interest of local residents in committee meetings, as measured by rates of participation, which has been reported to exceed 75 per cent;
 - ❑ Greater participation in the planning, implementation and post-project management of inputs. Participation has been stronger in the Southern regions where the community-building process is more mature. Thus, maintenance committees have been formed to manage improved roads and other facilities;
 - ❑ Growth in spontaneous community initiatives not sponsored by the programme. In the 10 Southern districts where this indicator has been monitored, 160 communities initiated activities independently, and 225 have approached other aid agencies for support.

Irrigation given pride of place

In Kandahar, almost all infrastructure sub-projects are related to irrigation systems and therefore relevant to the recent drought, which is rated to have been the worst since 1971. The sub-projects involve the digging of wells and installation of water pumps, canal crossings, flumes, canal intakes, division boxes and check-dams, the desilting of irrigation ditches, new canal construction and service roads.

Canal cleaning sub-projects are widespread within the district, but also demand varying degrees of inputs. One of the largest canal rehabilitation sub-projects has been implemented in Dand District. The rehabilitation of the Saifudin canal was implemented in cooperation with the community and the district authorities. ARRP/CSH contributed USD 110,000 and technical advice. The authorities brought a bulldozer to the project, and the community contributed with USD 4,360 in cash and unskilled labour.

37. The DCs (and their executive committees at the district level) have served as an effective locus for needs assessment, credit provision, income generation and training for other PI partner activities, most prominently for the improved seed multiplication programme, and to a lesser extent the CDAP and livestock programmes. In one peri-urban district of Kabul, local committees have helped identify beneficiaries for Habitat's shelter recycling scheme.
38. It is significant that, despite the cultural obstacles, women *shura* DCs have proved successful in identifying avenues for community organization and entrepreneurship.
39. **(b) Food security through sustainable crop production.** Project activities are not confined to PI areas, and have been pursued in some 250 districts with varied success. As far as the PI is concerned, the project stresses community-based approaches through the formation of participatory farmer groups and has aimed at building up a privatized seed industry with the support of the CVDCs and DDCs. At this level, the project has been particularly effective in empowering district *shuras*, and exploited linkages with work to stimulate employment creation, seed production, the repair of irrigation infrastructure, farm mechanisation and other social and economic activities in rural areas.
40. The project focus is on establishing relationships with farmer groups, such as contract growers of improved seed and fruit tree seedlings, and generally through the so-called Farmers' Field School approach. Repeated contacts with grain seed and orchard growers were entry points for a succession of project-sponsored training programmes designed to improve farmer operations.
41. In the PI areas of Kandahar and Farah, the project has had a significant impact, by using DDCs, and their executive committees, as instruments for managing the distribution of seed, and by building up community-owned revolving funds. These are in turn applied for expanding the use of improved seed as well as for making loans to landless and poor for a variety of income-generating activities. Some relevant indicators are:
- In the two growing seasons 1997-99, 750 MT of foundation seed was entrusted to 17 PI district *shuras* along with 795 MT of fertilizer, which was sold to contract growers in cash or on credit. Almost 7,000 farmers have subsequently benefited from the use of improved seed, reportedly doubling their production;
 - More than USD 140,000 have been accumulated by these district *shuras* and are available to them for further seed multiplication operations and for other community-sponsored projects;
 - In the Farah Province, three district *shuras* have available for rental to farmers 42 items of agricultural machinery, 12 of which have been purchased from funds the communities have themselves established.

42. **(c) Rebuilding communities in urban areas (Habitat).** Even before joining forces with UNDP's PEACE Initiative, Habitat began to place less emphasis on physical infrastructure rehabilitation, starting in Mazar-i-Sharif, and shifted decisively to the creation, build-up and strengthening of community-based structures providing social and economic services to make up for the break-down of municipal services. By end-2000 it had established 41 community forums (CFs) in 36 districts of the 6 designated PI centres (Mazar, Kabul, Bamyan, Farah, Herat, and Kandahar).
43. Project objectives are to:
- ❑ improve the living conditions of urban residents, particularly the poor and disadvantaged, through health and education services, repair of physical infrastructure and enlarged opportunities for local employment;
 - ❑ raise municipal capacity to develop mechanisms for maintaining and repairing essential infrastructure;
 - ❑ assist urban residents, both men and women, to organize themselves in viable decision-making bodies, able to address their development problems through a process of consultation within the community, of shared knowledge and commitment.
44. Key activities are i) organizing the community at the urban neighbourhood level by creating a decision-making forum to address collective needs and establish priorities; and ii) providing seed capital for setting up community funds to finance social services in primary education, basic health and to provide small-scale credit to poor families for community-sponsored businesses.
45. Community participation and ownership are thus a central operational strategy, leading to the mobilization of communities in self-managed and self-sustaining community forums. These CFs, of which 6 are constituted by women, 16 men and 15 mixed, meet on a three-weekly basis; in addition, they are linked together in a support network of 6 city-wide CFDOs (community forum development organizations). There are also regional CFDOs, which have similar functions but operate in the context of the regions.
46. As with the *shura* model, Habitat used the mosque as an entry point to mobilize the community at its most basic level; community forums have in many instances continued to hold their monthly meetings in the mosque, in part to mitigate Taliban qualms about holding public meetings in other town locations.
47. Throughout, sustained training of members of the CBs (each consisting of 10-15 persons elected by the CF) and of the MTs (normally 3 office-holders) has been a centerpiece of Habitat's project effort. This training was divided into "core training" and technical training. Core training was structured in three separate modules or phases, a start-up "foundation module" lasting several months and dealing with the principles of community organization, concepts of development

and self-help, and general management rules. One year after the establishment of the CF, this training was followed by a “deepening module”, targeting MT officers and CFDO members and offering training in the minutiae of management and administration, in particular business accountancy, as well as the in the principle of accountability towards constituents.

48. Short technical training modules, run by specially selected resource persons, expanded on good administrative practices with courses on education, environment, health and sanitation, etc. Finally, provision was made for a “training of trainers” module, choosing trainees with experience in a given technical field and who could further disseminate the message of the benefits of community organization.

Coping with urban blight

Roads are in a terrible shape, due to neglect and lack of maintenance. Drainage channels have clogged up, leaving sewage to seep out into the streets. Refuse is uncollected for long periods. The large urban centres are growing with the influx of former refugees and internally displaced. Public services are few and far between, residents must travel long distances to reach such services, and public transport is non-existent or prohibitively expensive.

Residential housing in urban centres have been destroyed by shelling and other war operations. This destruction is most visible in the large cities of Kabul, Kandahar and Herat. In the city periphery, housing lots are often heavily mined, hindering new settlement. Shelter projects, with recovery of usable materials, are constantly called for.

Social services have virtually disappeared, and city neighbourhoods give priority to the restoration of primary education facilities, basic health clinics and sanitary services.

There is no shortage of challenges for committed CFs.

(From a visitor’s report)

49. While slower in the south and central regions, CF formation progressed well in the various towns and peri-urban areas selected, in particular the establishment of women forums:
- Here also, an indicator used for measuring community participation is attendance at the monthly meetings held in mosques and community centres. Another indicator used is the number and type of contacts that CFs make independently of Habitat with other projects or aid agencies, to develop partnerships;

- ❑ CFs provide a venue for women and men to address common issues affecting their neighbourhood. Their problems range from the need for social services;
 - ❑ City-wide apex community forum development organizations (CFDO) foster partnerships to promote inter-forum trade, exchange and credit to gain economies of scale, to capitalise on comparative advantage, and to optimise vertical and horizontal integration. They will further initiate rural-urban exchanges with other rural and urban CFs, of goods, services, and agro-businesses;
 - ❑ The project has developed methods of communication within and between CFs in city neighbourhoods, through bulletin boards, newsletters and meetings, to exchange information and to develop a sense of identity within the CF structure.
50. **(d) Comprehensive disabled Afghans programme (CDAP).** Since 1995 CDAP has worked through national and international NGO implementing partners to create an integrated system of community organizations, community-based rehabilitation workers/volunteers, employment/educational support and disability services. CDAP activities have not been limited to PI focus areas.
51. Conceptually, community-based rehabilitation (CBR) transfers responsibility for handling disability issues to local communities. The project supports the formation of volunteer CBR committees (CBRCs), made up of influential community members, in order to promote awareness of disability issues locally, and to create an advocacy platform on behalf of the disabled.
52. The CBR approach thus relies heavily on successful local empowerment. Apart from raising awareness, it mobilises and enables communities to address needs of disabled members, and to provide access to available services and benefits. The main actors are: a) CBR committees, composed of educated residents interested in disability; b) disabled persons organizations (DPOs), providing a framework for mutual support and self-help; c) community volunteers dedicating 2-12 hours per week on work with the disabled.
53. Staff training and upgrading in the various forms of individual disability has been emphasized at all programme levels, through regular workshops and courses, with the project-employed mid-level rehabilitation workers (MLRW) interacting with the different village-based organizations. MLRWs, most often recruited by CDAP implementing partners from within the communities, receive training covering seven different disability categories. The training of disabled beneficiaries is delivered both in homes and in vocational workshops and other centers where available.
54. The growth of community organizations between 1997 and 1999 is reported as follows:

- ❑ the number of women CBRCs grew from 16 to 51, mainly in the Northern and Central regions.
 - ❑ the number of men CBRCs grew from 253 to 354 during the period;
 - ❑ one new women DPO was created, for a total of 15;
 - ❑ the number of men DPOs nearly doubled, from 77 to 143..
55. In order to strengthen programme coherence in the PI districts, CDAP has worked with ARRP-supported local *shuras*. However, given the general-interest character of the *shuras*, there is some question as to whether they can substitute for CBRCs in addressing the specific needs of the disabled.
56. **(e) Livestock development for food security.** The project has been active not only in the designated PI districts but across the country, at regional, district and village levels, establishing or supporting veterinary field units in 253 districts. Its immediate objectives are
- ❑ to augment the capacity of livestock owners to engage in financially viable animal husbandry and production activities; and
 - ❑ to provide an improved, self-reliant and cost-effective veterinary service to keepers of cattle, sheep and goats, poultry, horses, donkeys and camels.
57. A key activity consists of organizing and supporting veterinary field units (VFU) staffed by at least one qualified veterinarian, a para-vet and various numbers of auxiliary vet personnel. Technical and material support in their establishment is provided through 15 national and international NGOs. VFUs are intended to operate as far as possible on a self-sustaining basis, recovering costs for vaccines and drugs from farmers. A union of veterinary field associations has been formed as a vehicle for procuring inexpensive and authenticated drugs, so that VFUs need not only rely on the market for their supply of medicines and vaccines.
58. The ultimate aim is to enable VFUs to function as privatized entities, with sufficient business and resources to replace equipment assets and to cover running costs. To the extent that VFUs are engaged in disease surveillance and other survey activities, as well as in farmer training programmes, their operations have been subsidized by the project.
59. Again, training has been an important facet of project activities. A combined training and extension method known as PIHAM (a set of animal health and production improvement training modules) has constituted the project's key approach for engaging farmer groups and individual farmer families as active partners in planning and implementing project activities and for involving communities directly. Continuous technical guidance has been provided to milk and poultry cooperatives. Whenever required, the project has also provided technical advice to individual borrowers from village and district *shura* micro credit schemes. Some relevant indicators are:

- ❑ 3 fully functional, privatized VFUs at the district level;
- ❑ 99 PIHAM farmer groups established at village level;
- ❑ 107 village women groups;
- ❑ 4 poultry farmers associations, with in all 150 member producers;
- ❑ 2 milk collection and processing cooperatives in Kabul and Kandahar.

Resources Controlled by Community-based Organizations through Micro Credit

60. (a) Strengthening the self-help capacities of rural communities (ARRP/CSH)

Of the PI projects, ARRP/CSH has operated the largest credit programme, amounting to over USD 680,000 and covering several hundred villages. Village funds have in general been launched in association with one or more income-generating activities, which are supported by an initial start-up grant in cash or equipment. The funds operate on a locally derived loans system called “*beitul maal*”, the terms of which are culturally familiar to users.

61. Village funds are modest in size, mainly support small-income generating projects and are held in Afghan currency. By contrast, district funds may reach USD 15,000, and are used for substantial agricultural programmes. These larger district funds are supported primarily by agricultural and transport earnings (seed production, tractor rental, busing services). In Farah, for instance, revolving funds have been sensibly invested in the resale of improved wheat seed varieties, for which there is strong demand.

Reinvesting resources from revolving funds

In the Panjwai District, 5 tractors and 3 mini-buses have been acquired by the DDC and continue work under the supervision of the district executive committee, supporting eight education centres and providing other social services. Project support has been limited to training in management practices and book-keeping.

In the Dand District, the DDC has purchased 6 well-drilling machines from its revolving fund, planning to dig over 200 wells in the district to mitigate the effects of the recent drought. At the DDC’s request, the project assisted in the procurement of the drilling machines and in preparing a management plan for the use of the machines.

(ARRP/CSH progress report, December 2001)

62. **(b) Food security through sustainable crop production.** The project has imaginatively exploited the demand for improved cereal and vegetable seed by providing resources for the revolving funds managed by district *shuras*. While limited to PI focus areas, this approach serves the purpose not only of expanding

the use of improved seed but also of funding other income-generating activities among community members. Orchard nursery establishment is by now to a large extent a privatised activity. Some relevant indicators are:

- ❑ The distribution of improved seed in PI focus areas is carried out through village and district *shuras*, which act as seed bankers and invest the proceeds from the initial grant to extend further credit to farmers to cover input supplies. Proceeds are also used to establish income-generating schemes benefiting constituent communities and to assist landless poor. To date, holdings of over USD 150,000 have been accumulated for such purposes in PI focus areas;
- ❑ Cumulatively, as of mid-1999, 269 private fruit tree and vegetable nurseries have been established in 22 provinces, along with 7 project-based mother stock nurseries, from where imported and selected local plant material is distributed.

63. **(c) Rebuilding communities in urban areas.** In order to secure sustainable livelihoods, three major interventions are supported by the project and financed from CF funds. One relates to social service providers (in dispensaries and clinics, literacy courses, library, kindergartens, etc.). The second involves the creation of community businesses; the third concerns income-generation opportunities at family level, initially with credit provided from community revolving funds.

Investing in production

In Kandahar, some CFs have jointly hired a tailor and invested in a sewing machine for the small-scale production of clothing and for offering courses in tailoring. The arrangement functions both as a training facility and as an income-generating activity. Such facilities are established in Districts 2 and 6, and in all CFs for women. CFs for women have established facilities for embroidery, along the same principles.

These activities appear very constructive: with low-cost investment, they offer training and upgrading of skills in the community and create new employment opportunities. Some CFs are ready to integrate disabled persons in this work. For carpet weaving and tailoring, District 6 had employed a disabled man as tailor, training at the same time 4 ap

Some CFs have more ambitious plans, as joint ventures with other CFs. Districts 1 and 4 plan to es ory, and the two poorest CFs, Districts 5 and 6, want to take up y-making.

(From a visitor's report)

64. The initial start-up grant of USD 9,900 is only made to the CF once there is clear evidence of neighbourhood interest, organizational capacity and the submission of viable projects for income generation and cost recovery. This seed capital is

provided for the purchase of equipment and services, and for the establishment of a revolving fund. The fund is used to provide credit for labour and materials. Innovative approaches are employed to strengthen the ability of communities to maximize business profits in an unstable market, through diversity of investment and lending. Specific output indicators in this area include:

- ❑ sustainable livelihoods (in management, administration, accounting, crafts, business, commerce), benefiting 500 men and 300 women;
- ❑ vocational training provided in over 70 per cent of the enterprises selected either for community businesses or for individual income-generating activity;
- ❑ 3,000 women employed in production of relief materials (quilts, sweaters);
- ❑ 12 neighbourhood funds established for mature forums for investment in commercial activities, services, and infrastructure;
- ❑ 550 kitchen gardens and 37 demonstration plots established (both for community and households).

65. **(d) Comprehensive disabled Afghans programme (CDAP).** To improve access to sustainable livelihoods, CDAP deploys an employment-support officer in each district, who, in collaboration with mid-level rehabilitation workers (MLRW) and CBR committees, identifies beneficiaries for job-placement, vocational training and small credit schemes.

66. The credit is provided by the NGO implementing partners, which make loans of USD 100-200 directly to beneficiaries for income generation. The credit is released after vocational training, recovered after 22 months, and then revolved. Although a majority of beneficiaries have no prior experience of running a business, credit recipients are in general confident about repaying their loans. Current data indicate however that overdue repayments exceed those completed on time.

67. In the PI districts, CDAP also targets vulnerable women and children for vocational training, combined with credit support, although results have been uneven. CDAP employment support during the 1997-9 period was as follows:

- ❑ Cumulatively, 844 men and 487 women received credit for income generating activities;
- ❑ 295 men and 361 were placed in group vocational training or individual traineeships (1998).

68. **(e) Livestock development for food security.** The project encourages the formation of cooperatives and facilitates their acquisition of raw material and access to the market. Efforts to stimulate income-earning opportunities related to livestock include wool spinning and carpet weaving, milk collection, support to household and larger scale poultry producers, animal breeders, molasses block production, and fish pond culture. As at mid-1999 some of the indicators are:

- ❑ 49 men and 260 women trained in wool spinning and carpet weaving;
- ❑ Milk collection from 90 farmers, producing up to 20 tons/month;
- ❑ 26 inseminators trained in 8 centres, and 354 artificial inseminations conducted;
- ❑ 35 fish ponds dug and stocked with carpet fingerlings;
- ❑ 700 tons of molasses urea blocks distributed in 12 provinces for use in on-farm demonstrations of concentrates; 200 tons used in PI focus districts.

V. Community-based Organization in Practice:

Lessons Learned

69. A full critique of the methods of community empowerment employed in the UNDP Afghan programme is not possible within the scope of the brief review attempted here. The experience and material for determining best practices is certainly at hand. A formulation of best practices would however need to be underpinned by extensive sociological field investigations; it must further involve collaboration with NGOs and Afghan sociologists.

70. In this space, only preliminary conclusions can be drawn, and a limited number of salient practical aspects of the PI experience, as testified by mostly Afghan staff, will be discussed. These relate to:

- The role of community empowerment in the programme
- Interaction with official authorities
- The importance of capacity-building and sustained training
- The degree to which CBOs represent their constituents
- How priorities are decided and benefits distributed
- The role of NGOs in programme implementation
- Revolving funds and micro credit
- The issue of opium poppy cultivation

71. **The role of community empowerment in the programme.** One of the principal lessons learned is that economic or social small-scale projects undertaken at the village level do not by themselves lead to development. To achieve sustainable human development, the various projects have to be part of a process that changes

the community environment and peoples' lives. Such a transformation can only be accomplished by building up community-based organization and village-level institutions.

72. It is clear from the brief project-by-project review above that much progress has been made in this regard. Intimate linkages exist between the community-based institutions assisted by the PI programme and the operational work undertaken to alleviate widespread poverty. Indeed, it is obvious that such linkages are both ubiquitous and productive.
73. It is equally evident that inducements, in the form of project support in cash or kind, are needed in the initial stages of the establishment of CBOs, as a device to establish credibility and gain the trust of the community. While the CBOs set up during the 1990s at various stages of development, it is furthermore clear that local "ownership" of community undertakings grows as the organizations themselves learn and mature. Groups formed more recently tend to have a shopping-list approach to community projects; long-established ones appear more ready to take a lead in planning and managing project activities by themselves.
74. No community can make a valid contribution to decision-making regarding its own affairs unless it also controls resources needed to implement those decisions, at least in part, financially or through community labour. The sense of ownership is however not necessarily a function of the community financing the lion's share of sub-project costs; what matters is that it has a stake in the undertaking, and that without this stake the project will not materialize. The record shows that even with a minority share, CBOs will in the vast majority of cases act responsibly in the use of resources, be they small or large.
75. This is not to say that, over time, CBOs should not be induced to maximize their contributions. The reliance on outside financing is in the long run a constraining factor in terms of sustainability. CBOs should therefore also be encouraged to bear the costs of community organization and plan for maintenance taking into account the resources at their disposal, budgeting within their means. This underscores another lesson learned, the need for purposeful training of community leaders and workers.
76. **Interaction with official authorities.** For long periods in the 1990s, Afghanistan experienced a steady erosion of central political institutions. Government technical departments worked without operational budgets, and their presence in the rural areas of the country was sparse and ineffective. International assistance at the community level developed from cross-border operations under conditions of armed civil conflict, when continuous links with established authorities were not always possible.
77. Close contacts were however maintained with the internationally recognized Government of the early 1990s, whose Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and

Development clearly endorsed the first UNDP efforts at community mobilization, building on the *shura* system.

78. No rehabilitation activities can however be conducted in a total political vacuum, and inevitably a working rapport must be established with any de facto authorities. Thus, in more recent years, while policy priorities and technical issues were in general not discussed with the Taliban authorities, they were kept fully abreast of ongoing work at the village, sub-district and district levels. On one point, the situation of women and girls' education, international pressure remained persistent, but was largely unsuccessful. Except for the gender issue, Taliban authorities acquiesced with the programme strategies applied, giving a reasonable indication of their support.
79. In city and town environments, under the CF model of community mobilization, productive contact was continuously maintained with the municipal authorities in recognition of the fact that town authorities were the primary interlocutors with community boards (CB) and the city-wide community forum development organization (CFDO).
80. **The importance of capacity-building and sustained training.** As apparent from the preceding chapter, all projects have given primary emphasis to raise awareness among villagers and community members at large of the implications, in terms of rights and responsibilities, when the community is given a decisive voice in handling its own affairs. Extensive preparation to gain as good knowledge as possible of the social environment, through surveys, workshops and repeated visits, has been essential.
81. It has also been a time-consuming exercise. Sustained attention has been devoted to capacity-building among community representatives and workers, not only in the technical areas but also in creating awareness of their duties and responsibilities towards the community. It is clear that without such capacity-building the effort to render community mobilization self-sustaining would be fruitless; nor would it be possible to place resources under community control or make them subject to community participation and decision-making.
82. **The issue of representative institutions.** The development committees at village, cluster village and district levels have, in the ARRP/SCH project, been legitimized as part of the *shura* system, a form of community organization with which Afghans are fully familiar. This is structured as an apex organization, whereby the interests of up to 120 district villages converge; a full meeting of the DDC therefore gathers a relatively large number of individuals, and in practice day-to-day business is delegated to a small group called the executive committee (EC); it is with these committees that ARRP and other PI partners interact at the programming level.

83. The VDCs normally consist of 5 members, elected by a general assembly of the entire village, in the range of 30-50 households. Each member of the VDC can therefore be said to represent 6-10 families, with the result that there is frequent informal contact between villagers and the VCD member. Accordingly, general meetings are only foreseen on an annual basis.
84. Village representatives in the cluster village CVDC (4-6 villages) and the district DDC are selected at the village general meeting. In this connection, it has been noted that, over time, increasing distance develops between the EC decision-makers and their village constituencies. As EC members are not elected in closed ballots, a mechanism for regular rotation of EC members would ensure better representation in the middle and longer term, particularly of vulnerable social groups and marginal villages.
85. The community forum system sponsored by Habitat does not have a similar grounding in local tradition, and draws instead its inspiration from necessity. While in principle, a CF represents a neighbourhood made up of 200-300 households, the present CFs have had to cast their nets considerably wider, representing communities of up to 10,000 people. Other districts are even larger, such as the Kabul District 6B, which has a population of 210,000. Although CFs hold monthly meetings with their membership, with between 20-120 persons in attendance, it is clear that only a small proportion of the community is integrated in the decision-making process, giving ample scope for the consultative boards (CB) and management teams (MT) to play a dominant role.
86. The CFs are networked with higher municipal structures, as well as other aid agencies through the Community Forums Development Organization (CFDO) of the city. The CFDOs are at the apex of the community structure, with district *shuras* acting as consultative bodies in the middle, and CFs at the base. CFDOs work as a city-wide support and resource body, and are the critical interface between CFs, municipal bodies and other development partners. Their perceived usefulness led to the creation of regional CFDOs, tasked with similar duties; a scheme to create an inter-regional CFDO was however abandoned.
87. **How priorities are decided and benefits distributed.** Community level intervention generally contains a measure of risk, as community empowerment implies working with existing local social forms and power relationships. Individual members of the community, who are better off, will in the nature of things take advantage of any good opportunities on offer. Any assumption that local groups are entirely new configurations, or built in a power vacuum, would be misleading. Even where elected CBOs are in a position to reduce the influence of “power brokers”, the latter may carry the day. While this observation is not uniquely applicable to the Afghan context, it has implications for the distribution of programme benefits.

88. Local structures tend to activate internal, often invisible social processes, reflecting the power dynamics within the community; tracking the actual distribution of benefits is therefore difficult. There is evidence that, in many of the rural areas, *shura*-selected beneficiaries appear to be relatively well off members of the community. In one case, a fodder crops beneficiary was found to own some 30 *jeribs* of land and own 35 heads of cattle. A project-supported drinking well was located at the doorstep of his new house. In another case, a *shura* member was found to be the contractor for a project to provide shelter to widows.
89. It is difficult to say if such cases are exceptional or constitute a pattern, despite all efforts to the contrary. As noted earlier, the management teams and consultative boards of the CFs have in reality significant discretion in deciding how resources are to be allocated. At any rate, such cases point to the fact that using community-based methodologies uncritically will not necessarily reach the poor and most vulnerable. A better understanding of how PI empowerment methods interact with local realities, levels of authority and systems of representation, is accordingly very desirable. The progressive “afghanisation” of the PI programme, has been able to provide social insights at the local level, which would otherwise not have been available, and thus probably increased transparency.
90. It is worthy of note that local development committees, particularly in the ARRP/CSH project, tend to give priority to agriculture and other income-earning activities over social service rehabilitation (health, education). This probably derives from a natural preference among rural communities. The relative lack of interest in social services may however also relate to the scarcity of direct representation of women in the committee system. CFs appear to have resolved this imbalance more satisfactorily than the other PI projects. Possibly, a better sectoral balance can be struck in the longer term between local interests as expressed by the (overwhelmingly male) *shuras*, and objective social needs.
91. Similarly, despite all efforts, there is evidence that the most vulnerable members of the community and disabled persons continue to face an uphill struggle. In the PI districts where community-based rehabilitation committees (CBRC) have not been established, it will be necessary to provide specific inducements for stronger representation of disabled persons on the village and district *shuras*.
92. **The programme role of NGOs.** Support to national NGOs is part of the PI strategy to strengthen and build capacity among organizations of civil society or the private sector. While often handling larger amounts of money than national NGOs, international NGOs are a clear minority of implementing partners in all five constituent projects; international NGOs in turn often also draw on the human resources of national NGOs.
93. There are about 200 NGOs active in Afghanistan, 30 of them international, grouped in four coordinating bodies. Only the Agency Coordination Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) has international NGO members. In addition, there is a

group of some 10 reasonably well equipped quasi-NGOs that are in fact remnants of former government departments that have reorganized themselves as private contractors.

94. Reliance on NGOs is not the same in all projects. The FAO livestock project has entered into programme agreements with in all 43 national and international NGOs and other bodies, six of them with contracts exceeding USD 100,000. Outside the PI focus areas, the cereal crops development project also relies heavily on NGOs for its seed multiplication programme. In the case of ARRP/CSH, attempts are increasingly made to delegate the handling of NGO service contracts to the district *shuras*, as a way of transferring monitoring responsibilities and ownership for these processes. Habitat, for its part, has pursued a policy of minimizing the use of NGOs.
95. None of the national NGOs has been established for not-for-profit purposes or has a constituent membership. The designation of these organizations as NGOs is therefore in part a misnomer, depending on the meaning given to this term. In particular, NGOs engaged in community construction jobs in reality operate commercially as contractors. This of course does not detract from the need to contract them for project work, as purveyors of private and public goods.
96. The ARRP/CSH project has established region-based rosters of NGOs, whose human and financial qualifications are examined before they are listed on the roster. For the longer term, the heavy reliance on NGOs as implementing partners should be reviewed at regular intervals. There appears for instance to be an inherent incongruence between CDAP's community-based approach and its deployment of NGOs in the field. Implementing partners can easily weaken direct links with communities/beneficiaries and complicate programme and staff management, at the expense of close programmatic interaction between local and central levels.
97. The early privatization of NGOs, such as those engaged in seed processing and multiplication also needs to be regularly reviewed. It is recognized that time is necessary to build up a seed industry and livestock production units. The general approach to subsidising the formation of common interest groups and cooperatives is a necessary starting point. At the same time, attention should be paid to exit strategies in the case of poultry and milk farmer cooperatives, based on the general philosophy of cost recovery and user fees.
98. With respect to veterinary field units (VFU), privatization has been slower than expected and is confined to the eastern parts of the country, in the more prosperous livestock areas. This is probably attributable to management deficiencies within the VFUs themselves and inability to establish regular supply lines of vaccines and drugs, rather than the lack of initial capitalization, raising a general question as to whether formal privatization is at this stage an effective approach except in the most prosperous areas.

99. **Micro credit and revolving funds.** The PI experience clearly demonstrates the fact that outside support to community-sponsored projects is a *sine qua bon* for consolidating the growth of community-based decision-making structures. During the PI phase, this support was supplemented with the institution of micro credit and revolving funds, designed to raise and manage funds for use by the communities themselves.
100. The record-keeping of financial transactions by CBOs appears regular and transparent. Considerable effort has been made by both Habitat and ARRP/CSH to follow up the introduction of credit through training and guidance, through reporting and impact analysis, particularly as concerns access by vulnerable groups. Loans are extended for periods varying between 6 months and 2 years. The repayment record is rated as satisfactory; delays are frequent, but write-offs are relatively rare, such as in the case of *Beitul maal* loan recipients, whose project sheep succumbed to the drought.
101. As some district revolving funds involve comparatively large and growing sums of money, ongoing vigilance continues to be necessary to ensure that conflicts of interest between the several actors and levels of authority are minimized, and that benefits are distributed equitably.
102. To varying degrees, credit provision appears to enhance the sense of local responsibility and participation in the development process, by raising individual stakes and promoting initiative. This is particularly so where revolving fund support is accompanied by sustained management training and follow-up, as with most CBOs in the PI programme.
103. At the same time, the variety and effectiveness of credit schemes currently used across the programme has led to a measure of confusion, even friction, as to which scheme should have pride of place. On the whole, as micro credit initiatives, they all show good promise but are still in their infancy and will need more time to prove themselves. Comparative studies are still needed, along with on-the-job learning before final conclusions can be drawn.
104. **Opium poppy cultivation.** The cultivation of opium poppy continued to thrive until the year 2000 when Afghanistan emerged as the world's leading producer of opium. According to a report prepared by the UN Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), production had more than doubled, reaching some 4,600 tons of opium, with the area under cultivation rising by over 40 per cent to almost 100,000 ha.
105. In 2000, the Taliban authorities issued and enforced a ban to cultivate poppy. This ban was spectacularly successful and reduced opium cake exports to between 5-10 per cent of the earlier figures. As a result export and farm-gate prices have trebled, presenting the Interim Authority with the difficult problem of maintaining the gains made hitherto. An offer to compensate land-owners for

each *jerib* of land kept opium poppy free, and financed with external funds, constitutes the main present response.

106. Poppy cultivation was not a major factor in PI focus districts. With its emphasis on sustainable alternative livelihoods, community-based development programmes are however a natural vehicle for efforts to encourage crop substitution. It is however not a straightforward proposition, and such projects have so far not met with great success. In one Kandahar district, where project-supplied improved wheat seed and fertilizer were provided against a community commitment to reduce poppy acreage by 50 per cent and burn an equivalent part of any opium produced, acreage in the 1998-99 growing season actually expanded.
107. While many factors are involved, such as the risk of crop failure, credit and advance purchases by traders, alternative development at the local level remains a key strategy for UNDCP as well as UNDP. Under poor irrigation conditions, the benefit to farmers growing poppy is estimated to be 2.5 times that of growing wheat, labour costs included. With good irrigation, the benefit is reduced to a ratio of 1.5, pointing to a general strategy of improving irrigation systems at the village level. As regards the objective of community empowerment, it is of interest that the UNDCP moved to involve district *shuras* more closely with undertakings to reduce poppy acreage, rather than relying exclusively on NGO implementing partners to negotiate such arrangements as go-betweens with the offending villages.

VI. Community Mobilization in Perspective

A matter of more than local interest

108. Few will dispute the right of people to participate in decisions that affect their own lives or the need to devise mechanisms that allow communities to play an active role in deciding their immediate and long-term needs, in planning the allocation of resources available to them and in helping to implement the various agreed projects.
109. Not all countries are in a position to state unequivocally that such conditions obtain in their own societies. Even where political and economic conditions are favourable, there is an ongoing search for modalities of community empowerment that are viable and practical. The decentralization of political and economic power most often proceeds in fits and starts, and is a gradual process at best.

110. By force of circumstance, experience in community mobilization, through trial and error, has been acquired on a considerable scale in Afghanistan, where for many years central political authority has been virtually absent. Indeed, over an extended period of time, about 30 districts in 6 provinces, which is approximately 10 per cent of the entire Afghan territory, has been a well-sized testing ground for mobilizing communities and for methods of providing assistance at the grass-roots level.
111. For this reason, the scope and method employed by the PI has an interest that goes well beyond those immediately concerned, be they government planners, donors, UN agencies or NGOs. As an approach to development cooperation, it provides pointers to the aid community as a whole, when confronting post-conflict settings in many parts of the world.

Safeguarding the results

112. The UNDP experience in community mobilization is in particular reflected in the methods of community-based organization that were sponsored by ARRP/CSH and Habitat. The former used the *shura* system on a substantial scale to lend legitimacy to its CBOs, the latter put in place a pragmatic model based on a limited number of neighbourhood forums, attempting to relate directly to its constituents through monthly meetings.
113. At times, for no good reason, the two approaches have been seen as competing. The thematic evaluation in 1999 held however that both systems represent valid enterprises in community empowerment and recommended that they should be pursued. Uniformity of method was not essential and might even have created uncertainties and lowered programme cohesion.
114. It will be seen from the section dealing with the issue of representation in the preceding chapter, that while CFs were created and meant for a neighbourhood catchment of 200-300 households, many CFs were in reality responding to the needs of communities numbering several thousand families. As an increasing number of CFs are organized to represent constituencies of no more than 300 households, the distinction between the CFs and the VDCs begins to blur. There is a difference in terminology, to be sure, office-holders have different designations, and “management teams” are termed “executive committees”, but to all intents and purposes CFs and VDCs have lately appeared to be moving towards a synthesis of the two models.
115. Fledgling community-based organizations are however fragile entities, and any visible withdrawal of external support can cause lasting damage. There is for instance some evidence that the reduced funding for the PI programme over the past two years has put brakes on the positive momentum and self-assurance that was a striking feature of the community mobilization effort at the end of the 1990s.

116. Abandoning for whatever reason the work to strengthen and refine community organization would therefore be a serious setback to community mobilization in Afghanistan. Other models of community-based organization may well be instituted, and should certainly be allowed to develop. What should be avoided is that one system is placed in a position to dismantle the model and accomplishments of another. For this reason, the Government and aid agencies need to pay attention to whichever CBO model, if any, has been applied in the provinces and districts that may now be selected for short-term or long-term support.
117. In the meantime, positive cross-fertilization between different forms of community engagement require that methodological aspects be openly and constructively discussed, based on the monitoring of results and impact analysis, so that best practices are identified, in terms of
- assessing needs and targeting beneficiaries;
 - levels and strategies of investment through revolving funds;
 - the effective representation of women and marginalized groups;
 - measures to enhance long-term sustainability.

The sustainability factors

118. Over and above concrete and physical achievements, the UNDP experience of community empowerment in Afghanistan has shown that active community participation carries with it some intangible benefits and quality implications. As local-level institutions mature, and assets grow, they tend to work more independently of the sponsoring project and act in what they perceive to be their best interest.
119. Not only do such communities begin to feel a collective sense of pride, breaking a perception of powerless resignation, but a climate is at the same time created where individual claims to fair treatment and accountability towards members is enhanced. Such results are only achievable over time and should be continuously nurtured.
120. The success of community mobilization efforts is generally judged in terms of the sustainability of the village-level institutions created. Sustainability is in turn a function of, first, the psychological preparation of community members and of sustained training of community leaders and workers. Second, sustainability hinges on the extent to which communities can obtain aid resources or raise their own funds for projects favoured by the community.
121. The first condition, a sustained programme of training, is in the nature of things time-consuming and, in a sense, never-ending. As for the second condition, continual tapping of external resources can easily lead to long-term dependencies. As far as possible outside support must therefore be linked to systems of cost recovery and the application of user fees. International

assistance is usually transient, and when it ceases, communities face the first test of true self-sufficiency, whether they can secure the wherewithal to budget for their needs and properly husband their resources.

A stepping-stone in the process of democratization

118. It is held by many that community empowerment and participation, and the ability of communities to choose their own leaders, represent the best strategy for overcoming, in the longer term, the prevailing “warlordism” that is plaguing Afghan society.³ Community empowerment can therefore be seen as part of the national reform agenda and a first stepping-stone towards the devolution of authority to regional and district levels, and the process of democratization. As universally recognized, this is not a simple matter. To be successful, deliberate policies of decentralization require extensive preparation and the development of national consultative and consensus building mechanisms. Eventually, they must further involve:
- supporting legislation and a regulatory framework defining the rights, functions and powers at the subsidiary levels of governance;
 - determining the administrative and financial systems that need to be put in place;
 - mobilising the necessary human capacities and financial resources to enact the policies adopted.
119. These elements may still appear to be distant requirements in the case of Afghanistan. The point being made here is that building a national consensus in regard to decentralization involves not only national political organization and central government departments but extends to civil society, to the regions and to local communities.
120. The history of attempts to institute various degrees of local government is replete with situations where the process of decentralization has stalled. Part of the explanation is often that the national consensus to bring the process to fruition has not been sufficiently strong, because the need to create conditions leading to pressures from base constituencies to further democratize has been neglected. Area-based programmes, such as the PI or other national programmes now being launched, that include community mobilization as a key objective are in this sense part of an advance national consensus-building effort in the spirit of the quotation from the Tokyo Conference figuring at the head of this report.

³) This point was made, rather emphatically, by Dr. Ashraf Ghani, Director of the Afghan Assistance Coordination Authority (AACA) at the UNDP-sponsored design workshop for the National Area-based Development Programme on 14 April in Kabul.

