

Sustainable Recovery of Afghanistan:

Focus on Community-based Initiatives¹

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1. Background

Afghanistan is emerging out of more than two decades of conflict and internal strife that has left the country in almost total ruin in almost all respects. After the prolonged conflict and war, people are now returning to their hometown in Afghanistan, to find a massive pile of rubble instead of their familiar houses. The priorities of the country are many, as are its limitations to fulfill them. While a host of pressing needs, ranging from rebuilding of damaged houses to reopening of schools and health centers, must start without a loss in time, Afghanistan is called upon to do so in a manner that also contributes to its re-emergence as a socially meaningful and economically viable nation state. Unlike other rehabilitation programs, Afghanistan needs a holistic approach of physical and social rehabilitation. The need is to assist the Afghan people to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. Building trust and findings common ground is the first step in this regard. Like other societies, Afghan society is also complex. Thus, the most important thing is to know the community's needs and priorities and to find a sustainable mechanism to incorporate the efforts in the community resilience.

This paper attempts to summarize the current issues and problems in Afghanistan with specific focus on the disaster and development, and provides some examples of community-based initiatives, suitable to the local culture and tradition. The paper also summarizes the field experiences and incorporates earlier experiences of the community rehabilitation in similar socio-economic context.

2. The Problem

There are several emerging problems for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. These can be categorized as: Political Stability, Capacity of Government bodies, Confidence Building of the Communities, and Lack of infrastructures. The land cover map of Afghanistan (Fig. 1) shows that the country is full of mountain and rugged topography. Many part of the country do not have proper transport system, and thus this geo-morphological feature poses another big challenge to the rehabilitation issue, in addition to the above-mentioned topics.

The reconstruction of Afghanistan will require considerable investment in many aspects over a period of time. The urgent need at this time is to build houses for the people, and to provide necessary infrastructures. Basic amenities like water, sanitation, health and education are obvious needs in the current situation. A stable and strong government is required to run the infrastructures. This issue is linked to the political stability of the country and the strong leadership of the current government. Political stability and political commitment is the important factor, which in general affect much of the

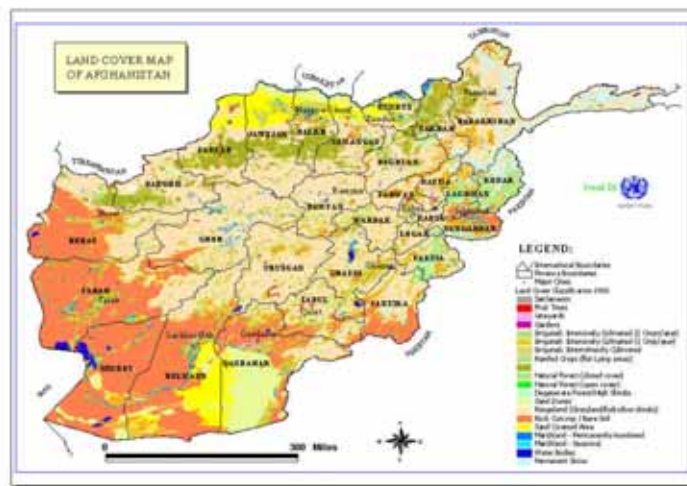


Fig.1. Land cover map of Afghanistan

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rehabilitation process, and has a special relevance to the Afghan scenario. The Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) and an interim administration were elected for 18 months, however the control and political supremacy of the elected administration is still in question, especially when it is outside the central region (ICG 2002). During the trip to Afghanistan in May-June 2002, the author noted that most of the government departments and ministries lack human resources, and thus capacity building in the government departments is another focus area.

Large parts of Afghanistan are prone to natural disasters like earthquakes. Several devastating earthquakes affected different parts of the country, resulting in severe damages to the buildings and infrastructures. Moreover, the country is undergoing severe draught for last several years. Afghanistan, being a major agriculture-based country, draught poses a severe threat to its agricultural economy, and thus the water related issues should be considered in the long-term rehabilitation program.

Over past several years, a number of humanitarian agencies, most notably the United Nations Centre for Human Settlement (UN Habitat) were working to build and strengthen community organizations in and around Kabul, Mazar-I-Sharif, Kandahar, Herat, Bamyan, and Farah (UN Habitat, 2001). The idea behind the Habitat program was to support the development of grassroots organizations at the neighborhood levels to carry out education programs, income generation activities, social services and local governance training.

United Nations Organizations, several donor agencies (both bilateral and international), and non-government organizations are putting their resources and efforts to rebuild the nation, along with the Afghani people. Framework of cooperation, strategic guidelines and action plans, have been formulated at different stages. In this important junction, it is necessary to build confidence and a culture of self-reliance in the community, and involve different stakeholder in the recovery process.

3. The Issues

3.1 Political stability and link with the communities

Following the Ministerial Meeting in Tokyo on 21-22, 2002, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank (WB) were requested to conduct a need assessment study. The assessment report stressed the need of involvement of the Afghan men and women at all stages in planning, design and implementation (Afghanistan 2002). The assessment also suggested to incorporate substantial components of institutional support to local communities and emerging government institutions.

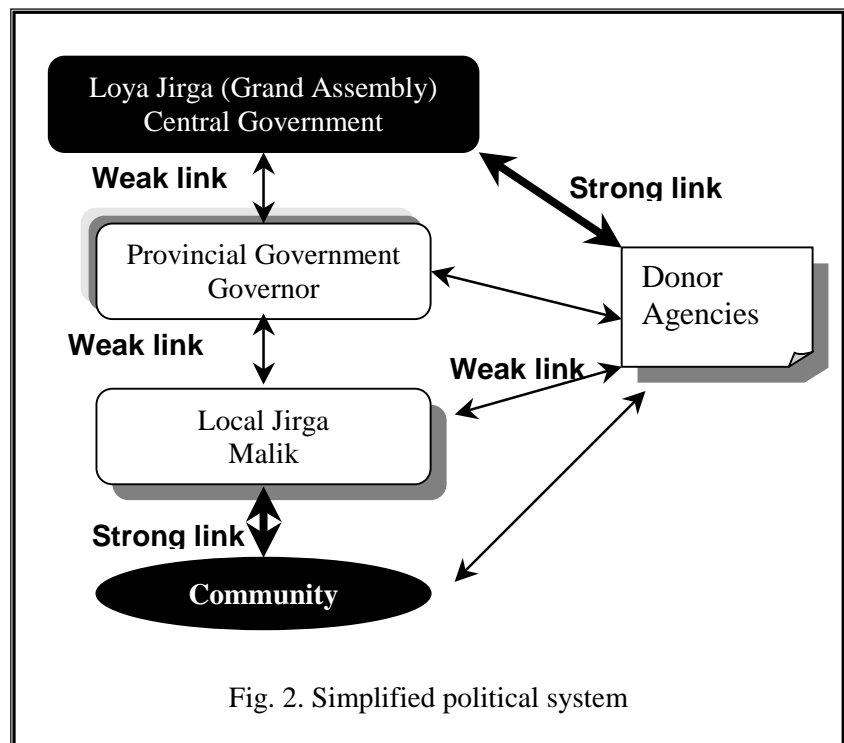


Fig. 2. Simplified political system

After the last Loya Jirga of June 2002, the command and control of the central leadership has been questioned several times by several people, including those of Afghani tribal leaders (ICG 2002). While the political stability and control of the central government is essential, this is a factor, which the outside donor agencies cannot do much. Fig. 2 is a simplified schematic diagram of the political system in current Afghanistan. While the links among the central government, provincial governments and local assemblies are still weaker, there exist a very strong link between the local Jirga and the communities. In contrast, most of the donor agencies have established a very strong link with the central government, however it often lacks the link with the local governments and the communities. It is found absolute necessary to

establish good workable relationship with the local Jirga, and win their trust and cooperation. This issue of strengthening the local government and political machineries is one of the important issues of the rehabilitation program.

3.2 Development and culture

The key issue of any type of rehabilitation, be it for natural disasters or conflicts, is the local culture and tradition. In this regard, the relation between culture and development should be taken into account; where the development should include human development, so that the creative potential of each individual and community is properly incorporated in the development practices. The issue is based on the much-debated theory, that the notion of development could not be restricted to the measure of GDP, GNP, or only economic development, measured in terms of money, and power of purchase, but, had to include human development so that the creative potential of each individual and community is taken into account. UNESCO (1993) defined culture as a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional characteristics, which define a society or social group. It encompasses the ways of life, the fundamental rights of persons, value system, traditions and beliefs. Culture can be defined in many other ways, one important being 'Man in Nature'. Similarly, there are many definitions of development. UNESCO defines development as a complex, multidisciplinary and holistic process, which goes beyond economic growth and integrates all the dimensions of life and all the energies of a community. Development is termed as the measure to enlarge people's choice. Sen (1999) defined development as the factor of quality of life and freedom of life. Especially, human development is regarded as the function of equity, productivity, sustainability and empowerment. With the rich history of tradition and culture, the Afghan rehabilitation needs to incorporate the cultural issues in development.

3.3 Livelihood and Income Generation

The other issue is related to the livelihood. More than 20 years of conflict and civil wars had left the country and its society with minimum choices for livelihood. Thus, while rebuilding houses, it is important to focus on the livelihood issues, suitable to local climate and economy and social aspects. Afghanistan, being an agriculture-dominated country, emphasis should be given on developing this sector, and for this irrigation and water is a major issue. Integrated rural development is thus a major factor for the sustainable rehabilitation of Afghanistan.

3.4 Natural Disasters

Frequent occurrence of natural disasters is another issue, which should be taken into consideration during rehabilitation. More than 50% of the country is prone to earthquakes (Arya, 1987). Especially, the north-eastern part of the country has high seismic risk, which is evident from occurrence of several devastating earthquakes in last decade. Thus, while rebuilding the houses, it is important to make earthquake-safer buildings, and a disaster resilient community. Recent earthquakes of March 25-26, 2002 were added blow to the fragile society and economy, when it is trying to recover from the war and conflict. The other aspect of natural disaster, the draught is discussed earlier, which has severe impact on the agriculture, the country's main economic backbone. This has also a long-ranging impact on the livelihood. Thus, safer construction and sustainable livelihood are linked with the disaster issue.

These issues have different types of effects on the success of the rehabilitation program. This can turn a donor driven program to a community driven initiative.

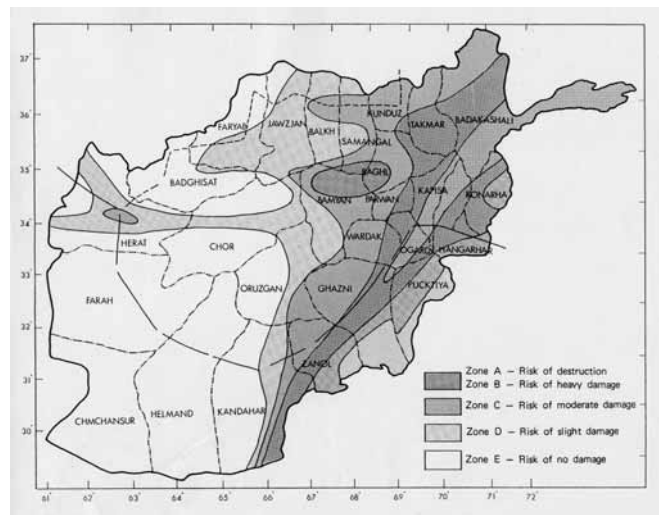


Fig. 3 Earthquake hazard map of Afghanistan

4. Situation Analysis: Experiences of the Field Survey

A field survey was conducted in the conflict and earthquake affected areas in Afghanistan in May-June 2002. The provinces covered were Kabul, Baghlan, Parwan and Logar, in the central region. The major observations are summarized below:

4.1 Housing and Shelter

Housing is the major issue, be it in the urban or the rural areas. In the rural areas, significant damages were noted in the reinforced concrete structures in Kabul, which were located around the main roads connecting Kabul with other major cities. Fig. 4 shows the types of damages, resulted from the conflict and the natural disaster like earthquake. Significant similarities are observed in both types. In the rural areas, the houses affected by the conflict are still waiting for the owners to return. In contrast, for the rural housing damages by earthquakes, people have started clearing the debris and hoping to construct a new house. At the current political stability, significant numbers of refugees have started returning to the conflict hit areas, which is a major pressure to the international agencies and non-government organizations (NGOs) focusing on the housing and shelter issues. The on-set of severe winter has pressed the time, and this throws a serious question on the quality of construction.



Fig. 4. Photos showing the effect of damages due to conflict in urban areas (a), rural areas (b) and due to natural disaster like earthquake in urban areas (c) and rural areas (d)

4.2 Infrastructures and Rural Development

The major necessary infrastructures include water, electricity, roads, schools and health centers. Infra rehabilitation being one of the visible aspects of the reconstruction program, is the most attractive one for any donor agencies. In case of Afghanistan also, significant progress has been made in the construction of major roads, repair of bridges, restoration of electricity and water supply system. With the UNICEF sponsored 'back to school' campaign, several schools were repaired, many temporary tents were put to be used as schools, with provision of textbooks and reading materials. However, all these effects were visible mainly in the urban areas, especially in the major cities, and very few donor agencies could really enter into the needy communities in the rural areas. Beside the visibility and donor's interest, the major reason for not entering into the rural areas was lack of security and stability in the remote areas, which are distant from Kabul, and lack of possible link between the donor and the community. Thus, the rural development issue did not get proper attention in the rehabilitation program.

4.3 Community Development

Very few donor agencies emphasized this important aspect of rehabilitation, since this does not produce immediate tangible results. Community development is a long-term process, which should involve people through building trust, making dialogue and establishing self-respect within the community. In this regard, UN Habitat's community forum initiative was found very successful and effective. This was noted in the Kabul province, in the village Tutumbara, which is around 70



Fig. 5. Photos showing the community development work: (a) community forum members, (b) image of community forum, (c) irrigation system developed by the forum, and (d) repair of road as a part of community work

km. North of Kabul city. Community forum is the first step of community organization and mobilization, where the local people select their leaders for the summarizing the needs and priorities of the community. This focuses how the individual needs can be merged into community needs. Fig. 5 shows the community forum activities. The characteristic feature of this forum is that resources are collected within the community, and each member of the forum has a voice in utilization of the resources for people's common use. Community forum is explained as a human body (Fig. 5b), with one head (forum chief), two arms (key resource persons) and rest as body (including everybody in the village). This was a very successful example on how the rehabilitation program can be owned by the local people.

4.4 Organizational Issues

There are several role players in the rehabilitation program of Afghanistan. These are the State, the UN system, international non-government organizations (INGOs) and local actors. Their perspectives and policies as observed from the field survey are listed in Table 1. This table is modified after Pieterse (2001).

Table 1. Perspective and policies of role players

Agencies	Perspective	Policies	Problems
STATE	Modernization and human development	Safety and security, Capacity building	Lack of human resources, Lack of trust and command
UN System	Human development	Capacity building, Ensuring good governance,	Lack of local perception, Lack of community link
INGOs	Human and alternative development	Empowerment, Poverty eradication	Lack of appropriate counterparts Relief vs. Development
Local Actors	Alternative development	Autonomous, Decentralization	Lack of link with the State and the donor agencies

5. Future Strategies for Effective Community Rehabilitation

Any rehabilitation program is successful, when the leadership and ownership goes to the local people. The local communities should be responsible for the problems and the prospective solution. Self-help, cooperation and education are regarded as three basic tools in this regard. When these tools are used according to the needs and priorities of the communities, the process becomes sustainable. The other aspect is the commitment from the community in terms of resources, which will

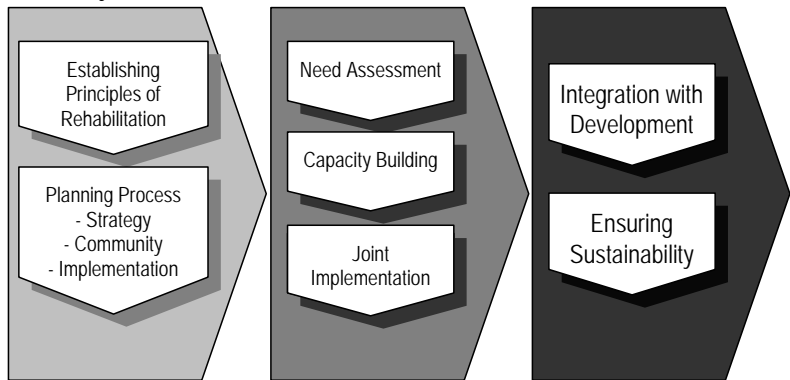


Fig. 6. Stages of sustainable community rehabilitation, from planning, implementation and exit policy

provide the ownership to the people. Confidence building process in the community is another focus area, which should be done by involving different sectors of the community in the rehabilitation process. The aim of the rehabilitation process should be gradual decrease of the role of the aid agencies, and increase of community initiatives. The process (Fig. 6) should be divided into planning, implementation and exit (for achieving sustainability). In the planning process, it is essential to involve the local communities, and to build the trust with the community. Prioritization of resources, training, awareness raising, education are other issues which should be included in the implementation process. The implementation should be done jointly with the communities, and the communities should take leadership. The most important part is the exit policy of the donor agencies, ensuring the sustainability of the process and the products.

With the above context, interventions in Afghanistan should be categorized into two different levels: one, the training and capacity building of the government sectors; and the other, community-based initiative at the grass-root level. The government sectors need resources in different aspects: human, infrastructures and planning and implementation. These are the key factors for its stability. In contrast, there are already existing resources in the community, which is regarded as its 'social capital', inherent to the community itself. It is needed to revitalize the social capital through training, consultation, participatory meeting, and confidence building process. The approach will take longer time, and is always a challenging issue for the immediate needs and sustainability. Sustainability will be ensured only when the state will have an established mechanism, and community will own the rehabilitation process. This should be the target area for future interventions.

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