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Farmers in Western Afghanistan picking desert flowers. Photo: Arne Strand

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Community-Driven Development or community-based development?

Review of Norwegian-funded CDC projects in Afghanistan



Map of Faryab Province, Afghanistan.
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Districts of Faryab
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ABBREVIATIONS

ACTED	Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development
ADA	Afghan Development Agency
ALP	Accelerated Learning Program
ARTF	Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund
AWEC	Afghanistan Women's Educational Center
AWSDC	Afghanistan Women's Skills Development Centre
CAWC	Central Afghanistan Welfare Committee
CBE	Community-Based Education
CC	Citizens Charter Programme
CDC	Community Development Committee
CoAR	Citizen Organization for Advocacy and Resilience
CMI	Chr. Michelsen Institute
DACAAR	Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees
DDA	District Development Assemblies
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
ICLA	Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance
MFA	Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
NAC	Norwegian Afghanistan Committee
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugees Council
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
NSP	National Solidarity Project
PTRO	Peace Training and Research Organisation
RRAA	Rural Rehabilitation Association for Afghanistan
SCCP	Social Council for Consolidation of Peace
SDO	Sanayee Development Organisation
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review of Norwegian support for Community-Driven Development projects in Afghanistan was initiated by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) to cover their support to five non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with an emphasis on the period 2018 -2021. These were the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR), the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC), Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

Initially, Norwegian support prioritised the Faryab province in north-west Afghanistan, but the NGOs implement Norwegian-funded rural development projects in several other provinces. This review, undertaken by CMI in collaboration with the Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO), combines a desk review of NGO-provided documentation with interviews with NGO headquarters in Kabul and fieldwork in Faryab, Badakhshan and Ghazni provinces during December 2021 and January 2022.

We first present **the literature on community-driven development in fragile contexts**, where the main success criterion identified that sets such projects apart from other development projects is the degree of involvement of the local population. However, the literature warns us to expect challenges imposed by insecurity, competition over resources and the potential for aid capture. In the literature review, we draw on some empirical evidence from the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) and the establishment of the Community Development Councils (CDC).

To contextualise this review and our findings do we identify **the dramatic changes Afghanistan has gone through** over recent years that have led to increasing insecurity and uncertainty, culminating with the collapse of the Afghan government under President Ghani on August 15, 2021. We reflect on how these changes affected NGOs' ability to operate, collaborate with Afghan communities and continue support for women, girls, and marginalised groups. The NGOs included in this study experiences limited changes to their local operations and programmes, though uncertainty over future restrictions on their operations were noted.

A main initial challenge posed by the international sanctions was to get funding into Afghanistan and access accounts in Afghan banks, this proved especially challenging for Afghan NGOs. This had gradually been overcome using traditional transfer mechanisms and later utilizing a United Nations system. It is difficult to compare NGO's experiences with Taliban rule during this 6 month + period with their time in power during the 1990s. Their emphasis remains on law and order, but Afghans have very different expectations from a government this time. One important similarity noted during fieldwork is how local community managed to influence on Taliban's local practise to meet community expectations and demands. Girls access to higher education and the women's access to jobs and projects are examples of successful local pressure, though not always broadly publicised.

We discuss the notion of **Afghan community-driven development** in some detail before we present an overview of the Norwegian-funded activities of the five NGOs and compare their approaches with the types of community organisations they interact and collaborate with. This varies largely from ACTED's *manteqa* (district) approach, NAC's expanded CDC approach, NCA's and their partners' priority for CDC involvement and DACAAR's and NRC's linkage to the CDC structures, while primarily working with project-related committees. A general concern noted in all projects visited was the notion of CDC's being captured and used by communal elites and strongmen for their own purposes, where the extent of corruption and nepotism disqualified them in the view of many communities as being their legitimate representatives. However, it was demonstrated that a thorough NGO involvement with CDC structures and enduring their involvement was an anti-dote to project and funding capture and misuse.

We then examine the NGO-provided project proposals and reports, base-, mid- and end-line studies, monitoring reports and internally and externally commissioned evaluations to establish to what degree

different projects met DAC evaluation standards, what observations and recommendations had been made and whether projects were adapted and changed over the implementation period.

The findings confirm those of a 2020 meta study of development assistance to Afghanistan concluding that **due to needs across all sectors, all assistance was found to be relevant**; security challenges increased implementation costs; and low capacity within the Afghan government had negative effects on project outcomes, results and impact. Monitoring and evaluation practices were found to be weak and project sustainability challenging to measure. What was determined to be effective were **interventions in the education and health sector and small-scale participatory infrastructure projects in rural areas** (including those under NSP).

The review discusses in more detail **the sustainability of the different NGO approaches** and projects, making a distinction between those aimed at training and support for individuals, which the individuals themselves are to sustain, those communities and their organisations are expected to maintain and hold responsibility for, and those ideally taken over by the Afghan government. The very encouraging finding was **that recipients and other members of the target communities replicated many individual projects**, confirming their value and ability to increase participant's income. For some of the larger projects (such as water-supply projects), it was necessary to have trained technicians and fee collection for continued maintenance to ensure sustainability, although there were several **examples of community reluctance to contribute** or expecting NGOs to continue their support. There were **few examples of the Afghan government having taken on responsibility** for projects, and even less is expected from the current Taliban administration. A general finding – in line with the literature – is that the more the communities are involved in project identification, contribution and monitoring, the greater the likelihood for investments to be continued and sustained, even in the presence of increasing economic and societal vulnerability.

Inclusion of and responses to the needs and rights of women, girls and marginalised groups was of high importance for MFA/NORAD and the five NGOs we surveyed. However, the strong influence of tradition and religious practices in many parts of Afghanistan – and especially in Taliban-influenced and later Taliban-controlled areas – made the pursuit of these goals more challenging. The NGOs applied different strategies toward these goals and had different degrees of including women in community councils, sub-committees or in separate councils, project committees and other types of associations. Their project types varied greatly, from stand-alone projects to those aimed at benefitting both genders. NGOs with a more consistent approach to involving women and to ensuring their influence on priorities and programming had been able to maintain their involvement since the Taliban takeover. Others met with local (and possibly Taliban) opposition and closed some of their projects, while the fieldwork found that most of the NGOs continued their projects for women and girls under the new Taliban administration. We found passing references to inclusion of and assistance targeting marginalised groups (beyond the poor), such as the disabled, but no systematic mention or assessment of such activities.

The general conclusion is that NGOs covered by this review contributed to a number of significant and positive changes in communities and for individuals in Faryab and the other provinces/districts they engaged in. Interviewees and the previous evaluations and reviews found the large majority of the projects relevant, effective and efficiently delivered and to some extent having reduced poverty and vulnerability.

The NGOs and the projects demonstrate a degree of learning adjustments and adaption to changing political, military and societal realities, with most activities ongoing by the end of 2021. Some of the NGOs could have done more to ensure **independent field monitoring and evaluations** and data collection to enable better impact assessments of impact. This leads us to:

Recommend that MFA and NORA make it obligatory for NGOs have a monitoring system in place and to commission external and independent mid-term and end line evaluations and strengthen their own data collection when supporting projects in fragile contexts. The number and type of external reviews should, however, depend on the scale, type and length of each project.

NGOs related to and engaged with **different types of community organisations**, though the practice and degree of inclusion of women and marginalised groups varied largely, and thus so did their de-facto ability to influence decision making and prioritisations. NGOs provided limited information to the communities about their project budgets, partly due to concerns for undue taxation or pressure from criminal groups, which reduced the community's ability to monitor and control assistance allocated.

Of the NGOs we reviewed, we found that NAC practises the closest to the notion of **community-led development**, and ACTED combines **community-led development** with assistance implemented in collaboration with community bodies. Meanwhile, DACAAR and NRC, despite their different mandates, are primarily implementing their projects **in collaboration with selected community bodies**. NCA has a clear **intention to promote and support community-led development through Afghan NGOs**, which some evaluations confirm to be successful. The selected case poses a question to what extent all their Partners were able to fulfil this intention. This leads us to:

Recommend NGOs to seek knowledge from the NAC model and consider adjusting their own approaches for community engagement. This seems particularly important for the inclusion and involvement of women and marginalised groups, despite the additional challenges and limitations the Taliban administration presently imposes.

Corruption emerged as a recurring theme during the fieldwork, as it was found to direct assistance away from those most in need, to reduce the communal value and impact of interventions and to reduce communal coherence and trust, including in the NGOs and in successive government administrations. This leads us to:

Recommend NGOs to combine internal anti-corruption policies and routines with monitoring, ensuring community (and not only elite) involvement in the project cycle (or aid distribution) and guaranteeing clarity on plans and budgets.

The main conclusion is that Norwegian-funded CDD and related projects have met critical needs in Afghanistan under the period reviewed. Both the NGOs and most of their projects receive a positive assessment in evaluations from the intended beneficiaries and from past and present representatives of the Afghan administration.

While the NGOs continue to provide humanitarian assistance, and the communities welcome this, it is the NGOs' opinion that this assistance is not sufficient to counter a sharp increase in poverty and that the **underlying causes will remain unaddressed if community development projects are discontinued**. It is therefore a good thing that while Norwegian funding through the Taliban administration was frozen from August 2021, development assistance through NGOs (including the five reviewed) and multilateral organisations was continued.

This review therefore:

Recommends a continuation of the Norwegian support for community-driven development in Afghanistan, as it contributes to reducing poverty, meeting critical needs of vulnerable populations and ensuring continued support for employment, education and increased societal influence and participation for girls and women.

However, it is important that the support **become community-driven**, so as to protect it from misuse and diversion towards power elites, now including the Taliban. This might require a degree of contact and dialogue with the Taliban administration locally, as well as transparency about assistance provided and requirements set for community involvement and beneficiary selection.

The broader reflection from the Afghanistan case is that community-driven development has proven to function well in fragile states and context, when sticking to the principle of involving the

local population in a meaningful way and finding ways to counterbalance the influence of powerful individuals and groups aiming to monopolise the assistance.

INTRODUCTION

This review of Norwegian support for Community-Driven Development projects in Afghanistan was initiated by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), to cover their support of five non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with an emphasis on the period 2018–2021.

Norway has since the early 1980s contributed with emergency relief and later rehabilitation and development assistance in Afghanistan. Since 2001 more of the assistance has been channelled through multi-donor trust funds, contributing towards the Afghan government's development priorities, combined with support for NGOs included in this study: the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR), the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC), Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). Norwegian financing of development projects controlled and managed by the Taliban administration were stopped from August 2021, and assistance has since been channelled through UN agencies, development banks and NGOs, including NGOs other than those covered by this review.

Deployment of Norwegian armed forces as a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to the Faryab province in 2005 led to an increase in allocation of development and humanitarian resources to the province. In addition to Norwegian NGOs, assistance was provided through the Danish NGO DACAAR and the French NGO ACTED, both engaging in different types of rural and community-driven development (CDD). Since the military withdrawal from Faryab in 2014, Taliban intrusion and increased insecurity has imposed a range of challenges for the provincial government and NGOs working in different districts. The projects continued in Faryab and other provinces of Afghanistan, and also included assistance for the internally displaced, provision of legal assistance, accelerated learning projects for children, and conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

With the collapse of the Afghan Government in August 2021 and the uncertainty this brought about, we agreed with MFA/NORAD that this review should not only be backward-looking, but also include an assessment of the conditions for community-driven development under the new Taliban administration. Included in this assessment are the various NGOs' abilities to collaborate with community organisations and to provide assistance irrespective of beneficiary's gender, ethnic or religious backgrounds. The aim was to provide a research-based reflection on possible future opportunities for community-driven development in Afghanistan – and the potential role of the NGOs.

The improved security situation allowed for fieldwork in late 2021/early 2022. Researchers from the Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO) conducted interviews with NGOs in Kabul, with NGO representatives, female and male beneficiaries and a range of stakeholders in 3 provinces, and then followed up with some clarifying questions for the NGOs.

In the Faryab province, the field team visited 6 districts where ACTED, DACAAR and NRC had their projects. In the Baharak District of the Badakhshan province, the field team visited NCA Partner organisation Afghanistan Women's Educational Center (AWEC) projects, and in the Jaghori district of the Ghazni province, they visited NAC's project. This provided this review a degree of diversity in living conditions and representation of different ethnic and religious groups.

REVIEW METHODOLOGY

The review was trust-based in the sense that the team relied on documentation provided by the five NGOs: their project documents, contracts, various reports and project evaluations and reviews (see Annex II). These documents, and previous evaluation findings and recommendations, formed the basis for the retrospective desk review and were contrasted with a stock taking and situation-based analysis of the project areas following the Taliban's gaining control over Afghanistan in August 2021. A major emphasis in this report is placed on the findings and observations from the field and project visits undertaken in the three selected provinces, on NGOs updates from March 2022, and on the views and opinions stated by project beneficiaries, different community organisations, community members and government/administrative representatives.

The review as agreed in the TOR (Annex I), placing an emphasis on the period 2018–2021, set out to:

- Compare approaches taken by the different NGOs in relation to how projects are organised in the different locations, how they – in particular cases – have been adjusted and developed over the implementation period.
- Compare and analyse the methods used in earlier evaluations to estimate the impact of the different types of interventions and how important the projects are for poverty reduction, community development and fostering broad participation.
- Compare and analyse the sustainability of the different interventions and approaches for community involvement.
- Compare and analyse the extent of the inclusion of women and marginalised groups in decision making, project implementation and monitoring/evaluation.
- Provide learning points on how projects – if required – can be adjusted and developed to increase participation, impact and sustainability.

It was moreover agreed during autumn 2021 to include the following questions:

- In light of recent developments identify and discuss viability of and limitations to possible options for continuation, implementation and sustainability of community driven development programmes in Afghanistan. This includes questions as:

What are the NGOs experiences from operating in Taliban governed areas/Afghanistan, including differences and similarities with the first period of Taliban rule?

What have been the main challenges encountered and (possibly) opportunities arising at national, province and district levels?

Have they experienced or managed to overcome limitations on movement, employments, implementation of projects or interaction with communities and community bodies, and in particular projects favoring girls/women/minorities?

Have they experienced pressure to discriminate against girls/women/minorities when providing universal services?

To what extent has international sanctions, funding restrictions or Taliban policy influenced project implementations, and do they envisage ways to overcome these – individually, collectively – and in case through which mechanisms?

For the longer run: what implication might these recent changes hold for the importance of and ability to working with and through community bodies and for community driven development projects?

And, time and budget permitting, provide a comparison of use of international funding mechanisms and implications of sanctions on humanitarian/development funding and implementation from other countries and/ or regions.

The field visits took place during December 2021 and January 2022 after review of the provided documentation and initial semi-structured interviews with the five NGOs in Kabul. Based on these initial findings was a fieldwork guide developed for whom to interview and whom to seek information

from (key informants) or run focus group interviews with to ensure uniformity in data collection between the NGOs, projects and locations (see Annex II). Given Taliban's restrictions on women's mobility and interactions with non-family males, we considered it unfeasible to send female researchers into the field. The fieldwork was consequently undertaken only by male researchers. Efforts were therefore made in all three provinces to ensure inclusion of women among interviewees and with a strong representation in the focus groups discussions. Of the total interviews, 66 were with men and 38 with women, and most of the women took part in focus group interviews, with targeted gender questions, or were interviewed during project visits. Nonetheless, a more gender-balanced team would have enabled consultation with more women and thereby would have been able to provide a deeper understanding of their degree of influence and assessments of the different programmes. To counter this potential bias emphasis was placed on the gender and minority aspect when reviewing the NGOs own reporting, and their monitoring and evaluation reports.

Testing of validity of data and results, which some of the NGOs' evaluations suggested should be improved, was also an aim for the fieldwork when emphasising the experiences and opinions of the project beneficiaries. The limited selection of projects and number of interviews, especially including women, limited our ability to test the reported data in a systematic manner.

In Faryab two researchers (including the team leader) visited six districts, including Maimane, Qaisar, Almar, Khwaja Sabz Push, Sherin Tagab and Dawlatabad. There were interviews with NGO staff at the province level and with six government officials at the province and district levels. The team was accompanied by the NGOs to the districts, but set up their own interviews with NGO staff and community members. There was a total of 68 interviews, some of which were more informal discussions with project participants and assistance recipients during project visits or at vocational training centres or education classes.

In Badakhshan two researchers visited the Baharak district, and the three villages AWEC worked in. Interviews were made with the Head of Economy department, a villages officer (*Modir Qariajat*) in the Baharak district, the AWEC project officer, four female (interviewed by phone) and three male members of the AWEC Shura, four CDC members, and four community male elders who were neither part of the CDC nor of the AWEC Shura.

In the Jaghori district, one male researcher visited the centre, Sangemasha, and Chelbaghto and Patoovillages. Researchers interviewed three government officers, four NAC staff members, five other individuals, including one female in Chelbaghto; four community elders, including one woman in Patoov; and five individuals, including shopkeepers, taxi drivers and elders, in Sangemasha.

The interviews were complemented by requests for further written details from some NGOs and verification of information obtained and comments on and supplements to the team's field observations. This allowed for an update in early 2002 on NGOs ability to operate and if they experienced limitation on employment or movement of female staff or women's project involvement and participation.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS¹

Community-driven development (CDD) is not a well-defined concept, and tends, strangely, to describe development projects that are externally funded and monitored against goals that external agencies set.² The *community* element includes attempts at involving the local population in identifying target groups,³ sub-goals, prioritising between sub-projects and various ways of spending funds, and/or involvement in implementing the projects in terms of labor, co-financing, or management. The funding agency will normally have goals that can reasonably be linked to community development, such as local governance, democracy and an active civil society, and quite often the projects focus on sectors that are likely to have direct local impacts such as education, primary health, microfinance, agriculture, microbusiness, and local infrastructure. The CDD term thus covers a wide range of development projects. One may argue that the main success criterion, which will separate it from any other development project, should be the degree of involvement of the local population. Meanwhile, it would seem that general impact evaluations that focus on other goals, such as poverty reduction, income generation, etc., should be secondary, unless community involvement is considered to be a means to reach these other goals, rather than being a goal in itself.

Below we will review both issues, that is, CDD as focused on community involvement, and as a means to reach other targets. In both cases we will focus on externally funded projects, and thus not review variations on, nor preconditions for, the potentially more effective community-driven development that happens independently of national governments or aid agencies. This narrow focus is motivated by a need to judge the efficiency of aid funding. We will still bring independent community development into the picture, as this will be an alternative to any externally funded development project, and thus will constitute the control the community exerts without external aid. One may well imagine that external projects may even have a negative impact on local development, especially if they crowd out local initiatives. The review will start with a general discussion, and then will shift to a review of empirical contributions, with a particular focus on fragile contexts.

CDD as community involvement

A core aim of CDD projects is to involve the local community in the development process. Ideally, this includes involvement at all stages of the project, from setting the goals, via identifying target groups, prioritising sub-projects and budgets, to monitoring implementation and evaluation of the results. But since CDD projects of the type we discuss here come with external funding, there will immediately be competition for those funds, and local strongmen will naturally be better positioned to take their share.⁴ Such local capture may even be appreciated by the local population as they in fact understand the political economy of aid, and thus that the externally funded projects may not have appeared in the first place without the efforts of the same village leaders. What will then be the best strategy for an aid agency that also understands the political economy of aid?⁵ That is, how can one

1 This is the general introduction and the Afghanistan part of a larger review of CDD in fragile states, to be prepared as a separate report.

2 For some reviews, see: **Binswanger-Mkhize**, H. P., de Regt, J. P., & Spector, S. (Eds.). (2010). *Local and community driven development: Moving to scale in theory and practice*. World Bank Publications.; **Mansuri**, G., & Rao, V. (2004). Community-based and-driven development: A critical review. *World Bank Research Observer*, 19(1), 1-39; **Casey**, K. (2018). Radical decentralization: does community-driven development work? *Annual Review of Economics*, 10, 139-163; **Wong**, S., & Guggenheim, S. (2018). *Community-driven development: myths and realities*. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, (8435).

3 **Conning**, J., & Kevane, M. (2002). Community-based targeting mechanisms for social safety nets: A critical review. *World Development*, 30(3), 375-394; **Galasso**, E., & Ravallion, M. (2005). Decentralized targeting of an antipoverty program. *Journal of Public economics*, 89(4), 705-727.

4 For one discussion of local elite capture of CDD projects, see: **Platteau**, J. P. (2004). Monitoring elite capture in community-driven development. *Development and Change*, 35(2), 223-246. There is also a parallel literature on local capture that focuses on formal local structures, see for example: **Bardhan**, P., & Mookherjee, D. (2006). Pro-poor targeting and accountability of local governments in West Bengal. *Journal of Development Economics*, 79(2), 303-327.

5 For one introduction, see: Gibson, C. C., Andersson, K., & Shivakumar, S. (2005). *The Samaritan's dilemma: the political economy of development aid*. Oxford University Press.

ensure real local involvement beyond local leaders? This is covered by the literature, normally using principal-agent theory, which is a sub-field of game theory where the principal (the aid agency, or even the local elite) moves first, taking into account the optimal response from the agents, potentially with the local leaders moving before the general local population in a three-step model,⁶ or even the local elite moving before the funding agency.⁷

Note that a core problem according to the literature will be that each local community will support their own leaders in the competition between villages for external funds, and in the process probably accept that the leaders take a share of the allocated funds. Such rent-seeking activities can in principle be minimised by use of objective targeting criteria and uniform programmes across villages.⁸ Programme uniformity will, however, conflict with the ideals of community involvement, where each village should come up with its own ideas for local development. The solution may be to allocate funds according to a pre-defined rule to avoid rent-seeking activities, but leave the villages to decide how to spend the funds.

But even if competition for external funds is minimised, the within-village competition for the distribution of funds will still exist. In response, the donors may attempt to side-track village leaders by working with NGOs or other community-based organisations (CBOs). But this may only move the political game to these organisations, with local leaders maneuvering to control the local NGOs and CBOs. As a result, attempting to adjust the power dynamics within a village is far from straightforward, and may not even be preferable, as it can be seen as an attempt to overrule local democracy. But in fact, community-driven development may in reality imply working with local leaders, and thus implicitly accepting that they receive their share of the funds.⁹ Some donors will, however, attempt to tilt the local balance of power by working with alternative local leaders, such as women's groups, trade-unions, human rights groups, and other community organisations. Before we go on to the empirical literature, though, what can we learn from the formal modelling of these complex principal-agent relations?

Strategic aspects

It is useful to discuss in some detail the strategic relations between a donor agency, village leaders and the local population, where the latter may be split into a target and non-target group. The donor agency comes with a budget and normally some goals. In the simplest case the goal is to let the population decide how to spend the budget. In general, however, the donor will have more specific goals, such as poverty reduction. The latter requires that the target group of poor people is identified. The local population will want to benefit from the budget and realises that this may depend on coordination among themselves and the behavior of the donor and potentially the village leaders. The village leaders may care for the population as well as their own welfare. This all adds up to a very complicated game, with different interests within each group, potentially also within the donor agency. The outcome may depend on the sequence of decisions made by different actors, as indicated by the game-theoretic literature mentioned above.

6 Platteau, J. P., & Gaspard, F. (2003). The risk of resource misappropriation in community-driven development. *World Development*, 31(10), 1687-1703.

7 Platteau, J. P., Somville, V., & Wahhaj, Z. (2014). Elite capture through information distortion: a theoretical essay. *Journal of Development Economics*, 106, 250-263.

8 For one empirical study where the level of elite involvement varied systematically between villages, see: Alatas, V., Banerjee, A., Hanna, R., Olken, B. A., Purnamasari, R., & Wai-Poi, M. (2019, May). Does elite capture matter? Local elites and targeted welfare programs in Indonesia. *AEA Papers and Proceedings* (Vol. 109, pp. 334-39). They found that elite capture is relatively low, while at the same time there is more to gain by improving the administrative procedures in targeting the poor. Thus their advice is to focus on other issues than the risk of elite capture.

9 Note that local capture may take many forms and will not necessarily turn up in project accounts. Within a village economy, there are many ways local strongmen can receive side-payments that are beyond the control of a funding agency. This can be via allocation of benefits from local public goods (forests, rivers, etc.), trade monopolies (shop, mill, transportation, etc.), or by way of favourable terms in the product, land, labour and credit markets, potentially on top of normal oligopoly behaviour. There is a large literature on such patron-client relations within village economies, including game-theoretic models as in: Basu, K. (1986). One kind of power. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 38(2), 259-282; Hatlebak, M. (2002). A new and robust subgame perfect equilibrium in a model of triadic power relations. *Journal of Development Economics*, 68(1), 225-232.

The village leaders may first suggest a use of the budget, which within a CDD framework may then be discussed with the villagers before it is submitted to the donor agency. Or the donor may suggest a use of the budget that they discuss directly with the village population, which will then include the local leaders. The first will be a sequential game with three steps, the second a sequential game with two steps, where the village leaders and population need to coordinate in the second step. In both cases the first movers may take into account what they expect to happen in the following step(s). In theory one may also imagine that the villagers suggest a use of the budget that is sent either directly to the donor or via the local leaders.

In sequential games the last mover will normally lose, in particular if the first mover knows what the last mover will accept. In that case the first mover can offer as little as possible. If the first mover, such as an aid agency, cares about the last mover this may no longer be the case. This, in turn, implies that the donor may prefer to move first and suggest a use of the budget, which in turn is taken to the villagers, while taking into account that the local leaders may have different interests than the population. Meanwhile, in a proper CDD framework, one may imagine that villagers are allowed to move first and suggest a use of the budget. If village leaders are able to get involved in that decision, they may take a larger share than in the case where the donor agency suggests a budget.

Now this game has only described one village, but there may be competition between villages, so that the game is not only about the use of a fixed budget, but also a competition for the size of the budget. In this case the villagers may prefer to involve local leaders, as they may be better placed to negotiate a larger budget. Thus, for each village a CDD approach, where the villagers coordinate with the village leaders, is preferred to a standard model where the donor moves first. For the country at large, however, this may lead to rent-seeking activities where leaders from all villages compete for the total donor budget. This problem can be solved by the donor's implementing simple allocation rules that do not allow for rent-seeking activities.

The conclusion is that a donor agency should not open up for costly negotiations about the distribution of funds within a country, but rather go for some simple allocation rules when it comes to the budget. This may still allow for local discussion of the within-village allocation of budgets. If villagers understand that the total budget does not depend on the efforts of the local leaders, then they may end up with more, say, in the final use of the money.

The final outcome may, however, depend on the degree of local control in the hands of local strongmen. The game we have described is part of a larger power game, and any surplus villagers gain from a programme can potentially be confiscated by other means. So a donor should take into account these broader power structures and attempt to find ways of strengthening the bargaining position of the poor and other marginalised groups. Again, strategic aspects are important: the donor should, for example, attempt to strengthen the outside option of villagers to make them less dependent on local strongmen. This may involve the transfer of assets, education, or credit and labor programmes that may provide villagers with an alternative to interactions with local employers and moneylenders. But in doing so the donor may have to take into account the local strongmen's ability to hinder implementation of the development programme.

Empirical evidence

The strategic aspects discussed above imply that the outcome of any CDD programme will depend on the local context, in particular the internal power relations both at the village and national level, as well as the design of the programme. This in turn means that any impact evaluation of a particular programme has limited external validity. We will still discuss some findings, and with an attempt to keep the discussion of strategic elements in mind. The focus will be on fragile contexts. There are already other reviews, and we will to some extent rely on those here.¹⁰

10 Casey, K. (2018). Radical decentralization: does community-driven development work? *Annual Review of Economics*, 10, 139-163; Wong, S., & Guggenheim, S. (2018). *Community-driven development: myths and realities*. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, (8435).

One CDD programme is the National Solidarity Project in Afghanistan. A large RCT was conducted to measure the impacts of the programme, which in turn led to a series of articles in top journals. These covered a number of outcome variables. The programme allocated block grants according to a pre-defined rule, which left the village to decide only on the allocation of those funds between projects. The RCT was designed to investigate precisely what we have discussed above, that is, allocation by way of local discussions (where local leaders may affect the outcome) versus direct decisions by the population (via a referendum). As expected, it was found that community discussions led to elite capture, while project implementation and welfare measures were not affected by the allocation method.¹¹ That is, welfare improved equally in each setting, and compared to a (third) control group of villages there was progress on access to drinking water and electricity, acceptance of democratic processes, perceptions of economic well-being and attitudes towards women.¹²

We also studied a similar programme implemented in Afghanistan with the help of a large RCT. That is, the *Targeting the Ultra Poor* programme.¹³ Our work builds upon a model implemented in a number of countries, which is found to lift people out of poverty, including in the longer run.¹⁴ The idea is that poor people face multiple constraints, and if all constraints are targeted at the same time, one can lift people permanently out of poverty. It also turned out that if one drops some of the programme components, then the programme may not work.¹⁵ The underlying constraints that keep people in a poverty trap are a combination of being initially poor (lack of assets, human capital, and collateral to raise loans) and market failures that result from a combination of people being initially poor and other underlying constraints (asymmetric information, large fixed costs) that limit competition and may leave people even without market access. Multifaceted programmes that target all these constraints at the same time will potentially help people out of poverty and may thus only need to run for a limited period of time. Similar to findings from other countries, in Afghanistan we found “significant and large impacts across all the primary pre-specified outcomes: consumption, assets, psychological well-being, total time spent working, financial inclusion, and women’s empowerment”.¹⁶

The ultra-poor programme is not a full scale CDD programme, since the local community is not involved in the design of the programme. But it has a CDD component in terms of a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) to identify the poor. And with the focus on village-level poverty traps, it is very much a community development programme and thus an alternative against which full-scale CDD programmes can be judged. Another similarity is that both programmes collaborated with the Community Development Council in each village.

11 Beath, A., Christia, F., & Enikolopov, R. (2017). Direct democracy and resource allocation: Experimental evidence from Afghanistan. *Journal of Development Economics*, 124, 199-213.

12 Beath, A., Christia, F., & Enikolopov, R. (2015). The National Solidarity Programme: Assessing the effects of community-driven development in Afghanistan. *International Peacekeeping*, 22(4), 302-320. For more details on the findings on female empowerment, see: Beath, A., Christia, F., & Enikolopov, R. (2013). Empowering women through development aid: Evidence from a field experiment in Afghanistan. *American Political Science Review*, 107(3), 540-557. For full details on the RCT see: Beath, A., Christia, F., & Enikolopov, R. (2013). *Randomized impact evaluation of Afghanistan’s national solidarity programme*. World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/16637>

13 For a longer description, see below; for a very short description see: www.misfa.org.af/wp-data/uploads/2019/04/TUP-beneficiary-Sughra.pdf

14 Banerjee, A. et al. (2015). A multifaceted program causes lasting progress for the very poor: Evidence from six countries. *Science*. 348(6236): 1260799; Banerjee, A., Duflo, E., & Sharma, G. (2021). Long-term effects of the targeting the ultra poor program. *American Economic Review: Insights*, 3(4), 471-86.

15 Banerjee, A., Karlan, D., Osei, R., Trachtman, H., & Udry, C. (2022). Unpacking a multi-faceted program to build sustainable income for the very poor. *Journal of Development Economics*, 155, 102781.; Sedlmayr, R., Shah, A., & Sulaiman, M. (2020). Cash-plus: Poverty impacts of alternative transfer-based approaches. *Journal of Development Economics*, 144, 102418.

16 Bedoya, G., Coville, A., Haushofer, J., Isaqzadeh, M., & Shapiro, J. P. (2019). No household left behind: Afghanistan targeting the ultra poor impact evaluation (No. w25981). National Bureau of Economic Research.

A dramatically changed Afghanistan

The locations of these Norwegian-funded projects have undergone major military and political changes over the project period, culminating with the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021. At the time when these projects started up, security had started to deteriorate, with the Taliban gaining a military hold and influence throughout northern Afghanistan, albeit less so in central Afghanistan. An increase in security incidents and civilian victims posed a major threat to travels and transport of commodities and sped up urban migration. Corruption took a firmer hold within the government (and NGOs). The realisation of the forthcoming international military downscaling or withdrawal and the potential for funding reduction led to an urgency for many among the Afghan elites to build up their personal reserves.¹⁷ In addition, Afghanistan was hit by a drought that reduced crops and income and caused internal displacement – followed by an unchecked Covid-19 pandemic.

By early 2021 the United Nations warned about a forthcoming human disaster and that increasing number of Afghans would end up in poverty. International donors' withholding of development assistance after the Taliban's takeover in August 2021 (financing 75% of the government budget in 2020) and the freezing of Afghanistan's financial reserves led to a collapse of the Afghan economy and increased unemployment, poverty and humanitarian needs. Despite a partial lifting of US sanctions on individuals in the interim Taliban government, UN agencies and NGOs struggled to get funding into Afghanistan and to access funds held in Afghan banks. The Taliban administration on their side have neither been forthcoming in addressing concerns over governance and human rights, nor have they done much in the way of assuming responsibility for their own population. Restrictions imposed on girls' education and women's access to work and movement are especially damaging for Afghan development, now and in the future. Continued or increased gendered restrictions are likely to further increase the tension between the Taliban administration and the international communities, including the UN's and NGOs' ability to operate and provide services to the Afghan population.

A practical challenge noted from the interviews was that some of the international NGOs and UN agencies had their international staff evacuated in August, and it took them some time to get these people back to Kabul and to re-establish their operations. Several directors and key staff of Afghan NGOs had either been evacuated or had decided to leave Afghanistan, reducing their ability to operate and continue their activities. This was a particular challenge for the Norwegian Church Aid that prioritises working through national NGOs, who also had experienced severe restrictions on accessing project funding deposited in Afghan banks.

The humanitarian disaster and uncertainty influenced the situation in the provinces and districts selected for this review's fieldwork, and thus interviewees' concerns and priorities as well. To situate the field findings, we therefore provide a brief presentation of the areas visited and what the interviews brought out about security, governance and humanitarian conditions.

Faryab, with its mixed Pashtun and Uzbek population, was an arena of armed struggle between the Taliban and the Afghan government and of internally and ethnically driven divisions that at times were linked to power struggles in the Afghan government. The government used military force to extradite an influential Uzbek who opposed the Ghani government before the 2019 Presidential elections. The Uzbeks responded by refusing a Ghani government-appointed (Pashtun) governor in spring 2021. In the meantime, the Taliban had taken a firmer grip on rural areas, set up their parallel administrations and demanded NGOs relate to them. The provincial capital Maimane fell to the Taliban a few days before Kabul, and they installed local Uzbek and Pashtun Taliban members in central positions in the administration, even though many of the administrative staff of the former government remained in their positions. The NGOs operating in Faryab had over time adapted to regulations and restrictions imposed by the Taliban in areas under their control, while finding ways to uphold projects for girls and

17 See i.e. SIGAR (2021) *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction* report, available at <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>

women and the ability for their own female staff to work and travel to the field. While more cautious in their approach they had by the time of the fieldwork not experienced restrictions on their programming.

By late 2021 the field research found the warfare had abated and the populations reported an improved security situation. While the population spoke positively about the Taliban administration, there was a noted uncertainty over their ability to govern and support the population.

The field research included a report of a dire humanitarian situation in Maimane, primarily caused by the drought, that has caused lack of food and very high unemployment. A survey PTRO conducted for another research project in the Maimane and Qaisar districts of Faryab found that the:

... majority of the respondents (79%) said they have received loans from relatives and friends, 40% said they have sold household belongings including livestock, and approximately 24% of respondents said their family members have migrated abroad with hopes of sending resources back home, and 18% reported internal migration of their family members.

The job migration was primarily to Iran, which traditionally has offered low-paying jobs to legal and illegal immigrants in the agricultural and building sectors. A sizable number of the recent migrants planned to move on to Turkey with a hope of reaching Europe.

Badakhshan is predominantly Tadjik inhabited, with some parts difficult to access due to mountains, and therefore the people are relatively poor. Small-scale mining and smuggling generated income, and different parties struggled to control the income. The Taliban historically never managed to gain an influence in the province or to control it militarily. However, over the last years they did manage to establish a presence in the province, thanks to a combination of inclusion of *Tajiks* in their ranks and the exploitation of the opposition against the Ghani government. During spring 2021 the local administration's crackdown on protesters increased tensions, leading central members of the administration to flee to Kabul and thereby ease the Taliban's military takeover. The Taliban installed *Tadjik* Taliban in central positions in the administration, with many of the administrative staff of the former government remaining in their positions. NGOs with strong communal anchoring and support had by the time of the fieldwork not had any restrictions imposed by the new administration.

By late 2021 the warfare had largely ended, and the population reported on improved security due to the absence of local milits/*arbaki* that had previously engaged in fighting and looting. However, many interviewed were uncertain about the Taliban's willingness and ability to provide them basic services and about whether the Taliban would engage in the same corrupt practises as the previous government.

Badakhshan reported the same dire humanitarian situation as in Faryab, with a lack of food and very high unemployment.

These crises had led to increased male labour migration to Iran, with some considering travelling further on to Turkey. Relatives were cautious about the prospect for remittances. The low wages paid in Iran could have a labourer work for one year to cover the fees paid to the human smugglers if they were not returned earlier as a result of being caught as illegal migrants.

Ghazni province is divided into a *Pashtun* south and a *Hazara* north (where Jaghori is located), where borders and grazing lands have been the subject of historical conflicts. Many *Hazaras* have traditionally migrated for protection and work, there is a sizable population in Quetta in Pakistan, and many seek job opportunities in Iran. The Jaghori area stands out with high education levels, including for girls, and good health services as prominent representatives managed to attract international (and Norwegian) funding for schools and a hospital. Many from Jaghori reside internationally, and remittances represent a major source of income for the population. *Hazaras* are *shias*, and they have been subject to oppression and massacres by successive regimes throughout history, including from the Taliban. The Taliban gained very limited influence in *Hazara* areas but recruited some *Hazaras* to their ranks. There was, however, a negotiated surrender to the Taliban in August 2021, though many *Hazaras* left for Pakistan and Iran for fear of persecution. In contrast to Faryab and Badakhshan, the Taliban installed a *Pashtun* district administrator in Jaghori, though with a *Hazara* deputy. This led to

major differences between how restrictions on women's access to employment,¹⁸ income and acceptance was handled in different parts of Ghazni, as reported by Human Rights Watch.

By late 2021 the field research found respondents reporting a high level of security, but some targeted killings a few months ago made people uncertain about the future and led them to keep a distance from the new and unfamiliar authorities.

Drought and lack of drinking water was found to be more severe than in previous years and became a main reason for internal migrations and for people leaving to seek jobs in Iran. Migration to Iran had increased following the Taliban's takeover, and many reported depending on remittances from family members residing in Europe, Australia, the US – and Norway.

Food is available in the market, but the devaluation of the *Afghani* has increased prices.

An observation from all three locations was that the Taliban administration had a positive and accommodating attitude towards the NGOs included in this review. Their fieldwork found no reports of limitations imposed on projects for girls or women, or limitations on female staff's work – except the demand for an accompanying male relative when travelling on to the districts, which many NGOs had practiced for years in Taliban-controlled areas. Afghan NGOs were, however, more uncertain over the future and types of projects they could engage in than the international NGOs were.

18 See i.e., on restrictions imposed on women, especially those working in government positions: Afghanistan: Taliban Deprive Women of Livelihoods, Identity | Human Rights Watch ([hrw.org](https://www.hrw.org))

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

The Community Development Councils (CDC) were introduced with the National Solidarity Projects (NSP) back in 2003. The project was implemented by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and initially financed by a consortium of international donors coordinated by the World Bank, later through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). While the idea for the NSP built on experiences from Indonesia, the respective ministers of Finance (Ashraf Ghani) and MRRD (Haneef Atmar) tailored it to the ongoing Afghan state-building project. The CDC was planned as the lowest level of the Afghan government structure, though that authority was never approved by the Parliament.

The CDC formation built on the traditional and usually all-male Afghan village councils that through internal processes were tasked with management of communal resources¹⁹, such as distributing water for rain-fed land and managing grazing areas, or organising voluntary work for maintenance of water canals, roads, the community mosque or the school. Many villagers and districts had an influential and often rich person/family that could host meetings, provide visitors with food and lodging, and be the contact point with the government. These were frequently referred to as the *Arbab* or the *Malik* in the village or the *Khan* at the district level or in the tribal structure representing a number of villages in a district. From the late 1980s, NGOs and later the UN organisations shifted their rehabilitation assistance from being channelled through the *mujahedeen* commanders to the more traditional village council structures, often referred to as the *village shura* (an adapted military term for “council”).²⁰ After that, some NGOs and organisations engaged with the traditional village councils, while others established their own structures.

The CDC concept moved beyond project delivery as it aimed to modernise and formalise communal governance and bypass the traditional village headmen and the *mujahedeen* commanders (if they were not one in the same). CDCs did this by introducing secret ballot elections (done before national elections to ensure acceptance of democratic processes), demanding female representation (to shape attitudes toward women) and providing administrative training and bookkeeping.²¹ The aim was that women either were represented in mixed-gender CDCs, had their separate CDC with a joint executive committee, or were members of “women working groups” in communities with social restrictions on female public participation. The third phase of the NSP programme (2010–2014) placed more emphasis on governance and gender equality and encouraged communities with separate male and female CDCs to integrate these into one. However, in practise many mixed CDCs did not have joint meetings and instead the female deputy leader (typically a female relative of the leader) would relay women members’ concerns to the male CDC head.²² A study of the CDC and traditional shura function in the Qarabagh area north of Kabul noticed that:²³

... the NSP represented a joint held vision, by the central government and international actors, that would offer an alternative to traditional governing practices at the village level. The CDCs were considered ‘modern’ because their representatives were elected and not approved through familiar ties or other patronage networks, as was the case with customary shuras.

19 See i.e., Murtazashvili, J.N. and Murtazashvili, I. (2021) *Land, the State and War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

20 Fieldwork in Herat province in 1998 found that the villagers frequently outmaneuvered the aid agencies by rebranding their traditional village councils to the NGO and UN requirements or including their members in the different aid *shuras*, thereby ensuring full control over the resources coming into the village. They served as a mechanism for a fair distribution (though not always as intended by the aid agency) when there was a representative village council, or the opposite if the council remained dominated by a person or one family.

21 A 2015 World Bank report discusses the goals set for the NSP project, and the degree they were fulfilled: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/22653/Infrastructure0developing0economies.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

22 Wimpelmann, T. and Royan, Y. (2015) *Afghanistan Country Report: End evaluation of the FLOW Programme – Going Beyond Numbers*. Oslo, ILPI, unpublished.

23 See Rivas, A-M. (2020) *Security, Development and Violence in Afghanistan. Everyday Stories of Intervention*. New York. Routledge.

There was an aim for regular re-elections to help exclude non-functional council members. An observation from a senior government official was the following (interview 14.02.2022):

Success and failure of CDCs could be attributed to the NGO facilitating partners and their capacities and their commitment to development.

A bidding process was used to select the international and Afghan NGOs' facilitating agencies, tasked with the formation, training and facilitation of CDCs in the different provinces. This included development of a Community Development Plan (CDP) and prioritisation of projects for the block-funds set aside for each village. The CDCs were used to channel new NSP block grants to the villages and to provide management contact with assistance from other ministries or NGOs. The structure was developed further with District Community Councils (DCC), with representation from all CDCs and structured to coordinate their activities. The *Afghanistan's Citizens' Charter Programme* (CCAP) introduced in 2016 included urban areas and aimed to combine and coordinate efforts between the different Ministries to "empower communities for better services".²⁴

A number of sources and interviews point to a gradual weakening of the government-established CDCs, despite attempts to revive them through the *Citizens' Charter*. Some raise questions about whether all of the facilitating partners were sufficiently qualified for the task of establishing and guiding the CDCs, which led to large differences between their capacities and skills.

One reason for the weakening of the CDCs was that the already existing "local shura" with a traditional leadership (elders, respected community members and religious leaders, as noted in Qarabagh) often continued in parallel with the CDC, with members possibly on several (or all) village councils.

Another reason was that more influential villagers re-established their influence over the CDC following the first round of elections, and then prioritised external funding for their own/family/network purposes. In Qarabagh this kind of move was moreover reported as a way to counter Kabul's effort to "diminish the authority of local communities".

However, Afghan researchers point out that realities on the ground are more nuanced. The social structures have significantly changed in the last 10 years in Taliban-controlled areas. Many of the influential tribal elders left or were forced to leave the area to provide the Taliban with space to impose their control. Most of the local Taliban leadership comes from families without a history of any tribal influence, and therefore they see the influential tribal elders as a threat to their power in the villages. This also goes for the *maliks*, CDC members and others involved in bringing aid to the Taliban control areas, who have subsequently shared resources with local Taliban.

Many of the influential tribal leaders benefitted from running businesses, construction companies, or were employed in government or other national and international organisations. Many of these were not interested in seeking benefits from aid coming to their communities, but would rather have an interest in assistance reaching the poor they would be expected to support. These tribal leaders are currently exploring possibilities to regain their lost influence and position in communities they regard as their constituencies. This dynamic goes against the interests of Taliban local leaders, their district officials and the corrupt village elders, and the NGOs can easily end up caught between these conflicting interests.

The third, and related reason, that the CDCs lost power and influence over time was the high level of corruption that gradually crept into the MRRD and NSP (and later Citizens' Charter) programmes from the leadership all the way down to the villages. The result was, according one source, that towards the end of NSP project "many CDCs only received 10% of the project funding budgeted for them" (email exchange 04.02.2022).

A fourth reason was that several of the NGOs did not use or only partially used the CDC structure when implementing projects funded outside the NSP and Citizens' Charter programmes. Some NGOs

24 For further details see: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2020/10/20/afghanistans-citizens-charter-program-empowering-communities-for-better-services>

established village committees for their particular projects or limited their consultation to the more powerful members of the village.

As the Taliban gradually established its influence and control over the countryside, it entered a symbiosis with the government structures that continued to provide basic services such as education, health and community development. NGOs and UN organisations were left with few other options than to relate to the local Taliban committees if they wanted projects to be continued or if they wished to enter new areas. In an interview in 2020 a national staff member of an international NGO summarised their dilemma in a norther province in the following way: “the Government demand a bribe to allow us to assist people in Taliban controlled areas, and the Taliban impose a tax upon us for us to work there, leaving less funding for the villagers”.

ORGANISATION AND PROJECT OVERVIEW

The five NGOs funded by the Norwegian MFA and NORAD are ACTED, DACAAR, NAC, NCA and NRC. While the main focus early on was on the Faryab province, the NGOs also implement Norwegian-funded projects in a number of other provinces, as Sar-e Pul, Daikundi, Samangan, Badakhshan, Ghazni, Khost and Kabul. There is quite a large span of activities and variation in how each organisation engages with community organisations. One major difference is that while Norwegian Church Aid works with, enables and channels funding through Afghan NGOs, the other NGOs self-implement their aid efforts.

The total reported budget in Norwegian Kroner (NOK) for the period 2018 to 2021/2022 is ACTED: 180 mill. (MFA); DACAAR: 78 mill. (MFA); NAC 99,1 mill. (MFA/NORAD); NCA: 49,5 mill. (MFA, NORAD and DIKU) and NRC 235 mill (MFA/NORAD). We have for this review concentrated efforts on what can be defined as rural or community development projects.

Below is a brief description of the five NGOs supported, and their projects.

ACTED is a French NGO, started in Pakistan/Afghanistan in the early 1990s and registered in Kabul in 1993, later to work internationally. ACTED has from the start advocated for a *manteqa* (district) approach through a set of *manteqa shuras*, rather than a more selective approach to a single village or a number of villages.²⁵ Their aim is to support a diverse range community development projects and foster collaboration within the *manteqa*, based on identified needs. Their model resembles the District Development Council, with representation from, on average, 10 village councils and includes more specialised committees, such as school management committees, water user groups, women farmer groups and breeder cooperatives. ACTED was Facilitating Partner in the National Solidarity Programme.

ACTED's projects were located in Faryab, Jawzjan, Balkh and Samangan Provinces, and in Faryab they did work in the following districts: Andkhoy, Dawlatabad, Sherin Tagab, Khwaja Sabz Push, Almar, Qaisar, Maimana, Kohistan and Pashtoonkot.

Their AGORA research unit established a *manteqa* profile, undertook a vulnerability assessment and developed training and development plans. Training was provided for local government staff, community workers and CSO staff, followed by delivery of block grants.

Among activities were:

- **Literacy and education courses**, local schools support, Kankoor courses and student scholarships.
- **Youth development centres**, with teachers and activities.
- **Vocational training centres**.
- **Off-farm job creation**, with apprentices and emphasising women business development.
- **Irrigation infrastructure** and social water management.
- **Agricultural productivity and value chain support**, including support for agro-cooperatives and women farmer groups, with an emphasis on sustainable agriculture and marketing and extension services.
- **Livestock and veterinary services**, including animal vaccination, support for poultry farms and breeder cooperatives.
- **Local market development**, with agro-fairs and establishment of a price information system.

ACTED aimed for 50% female beneficiaries, hired local female staff and secured women's involvement in the *Manteqa* structure. They had a priority for projects targeting women, internships for women and establishment of female CSOs and women farmers groups.

They reported problems with establishing female agro-farmers cooperatives, especially in Faryab province, and poultry backyards in Qaisar.

²⁵ Discussions with Frederic Roussel and Marie-Pierre Caley, White House, Peshawar.

ACTED informed us that they have a system in place for internal monitoring of their projects, a Manteqa Compliance Units, and they draw on the AGORA programme research unit for evaluations.

DACAAR is a Danish Afghanistan-focused NGO that started to assist Afghan refugees in Pakistan in 1984. DACAAR started with a sewing project for women and then moved into water supply and production of water pumps before moving inside Afghanistan from 1989 with construction and rehabilitation activities. DACAAR has throughout maintained their expertise on WASH, women's empowerment, and engineering and agricultural activities. DACAAR was Facilitating Partner in the Citizens' Charter project, facilitating establishment of CDCs and sub-committees. In addition to engaging with the CDCs (including female CDCs) and DDAs, they established water user groups, water management committees, women's resource centres, irrigation management committees and saffron producer associations. DACAAR maintains that they focus on most at-risk groups such as women and youth-headed households, farmers with little or no land, the elderly, the disabled and those marginalised by society.

Their Norwegian-funded activities in the Faryab province took place in Maimana, Pashtoonkot, Khwaja Sabz Push, Sherin Tagab, Dawlatabad, Andkhoy, Qaisar and Almar districts.

DACAAR had four main project activities:

- **Durable access to safe water and improved hygiene** and sanitation behaviour change.
- **Improved and sustainable increases in agricultural/livestock production** for male and female farmers.
- **Improved and sustainable business and employment opportunities** for unemployed youth and farmers (male and female).
- **Improved and sustainable social and economic opportunities** for vulnerable women.

DACAAR informed that they run base- and end-line surveys for their projects, have an M&E framework and trained staff (including female staff) for this purpose, an Internal Audit Unit and contract with external evaluators for mid-term reviews (Tagheer in 2017) and evaluations (NCG and Tadbeer in 2020).

NAC is a Norwegian NGO focused on Afghanistan, established in 1979 following the Soviet invasion. They operated medical teams and provided cross-border assistance from Pakistan, before moving into rehabilitation and integrated development projects from 1989 and establishing an office in Kabul in the mid-1990s. NAC has a high priority on gender, with an emphasis on health and education projects.

NAC emerged as the NGO that has worked most deliberately with the CDC structure and involves the councils from the very start to ensure the sustainability of their projects. However, they have gone further and extended the role and influences of community governance structures (not only the councils) into their programming. CDCs were initially planned to have two sub-committees, one on education and one on health, but based on NAC advice during the development of the Citizens Charter Afghanistan Programme for Jaghori, there are now seven CDC sub-committees (as per CCAP guidelines). And in Jaghori, NAC expanded the inclusion (and influence) of other groups and community representatives (such as elders, religious leaders, women, and youth) in the governance and community development processes.

NAC ran Norwegian-funded projects in the Badakhshan, Ghazni, Kabul, Khost, Nangarhar, Paktia, Takhar, and Faryab provinces, in the latter with activities in Maimana, Khwaja Sabz Posh, and Shirin Tagab districts.

The NAC project is titled *Empowering Rural Afghan Communities (ERA)*, and includes the following components:

- **Education**, including support for children in government schools: early childhood development, upgrading of teachers to diploma level, core competency programmes, innovative teaching and

learning methodologies, disability inclusion, students' parliament, strengthening of school *shuras*, capacity building of MoE staff, Technical and Vocational Education (TVET), Life and Livelihood skills for Women, and Education in Emergencies (in Faryab).

- **Food security and work**, including capacity building of agricultural officials and lead farmers, with a focus on increases in agricultural production, and self-help groups for women.
- **Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and climate change**, including school-, community- and district-based Emergency Relief teams, tree planting, community-based interventions, building capacities among district and province authorities in Badakhshan and Ghazni, preparing and responding to drought.
- **Health**, including training of midwives and health nurses, training of community-based female (and male) health workers (CHWs), mobile clinics (in Paktia), women-owned and -run maternal and newborn health Centers (CCCs), as well as capacity building of MOPH staff, Ghazanfar Institute of Health Sciences (GIHS), and support for association of Afghan healthcare professionals.
- **Conflict transformation and dialogue** (Badakhshan, Faryab, and Ghazni) – Peace-day celebration in Faryab, and dialogue methodology applied to problem-solving at Institute of Health Sciences.

NAC reports that they undertake base and end-line surveys for their projects, they have an internal M&E system and made use of external evaluations and midline reviews (see i.e., 2021 report).

NCA is an internationally oriented Norwegian NGO with a consistent engagement with Afghans since 1979. Initially NCA provided support to refugees in Pakistan and some cross-border support in collaboration with NRC. From 1993 more of the activities shifted to inside Afghanistan, going into rehabilitation, women's empowerment, rural development and peacebuilding. In 2020 NCA initiated a national-level peace dialogue and formation of a national Peace Building Working Group (PBWG) with 54 member NGOs and development of a national action plan for peace. NCA works primarily with and through Afghan partner NGOs, building their capacity and monitoring and evaluating their planned activities. NCA partner NGOs were Rural Rehabilitation Association for Afghanistan (RRAA); Sanayee Development Organisation (SDO) (these are discontinued in 2022); Afghan Development Association (ADA); Afghanistan Women Educational Centre (AWEC); Afghanistan Women's Skills Development Centre (AWSDC); Central Afghanistan Welfare Committee (CAWC); Citizen Organization Advocacy and Resilient (CoAR); Organization for Relief Development (ORD) and Organization for Research and Community Development (ORCD). These partners, several of which were Facilitating Partners for the NSP and Citizens' Charter programmes, work through CDCs or more specialised committees, such as female and male Peace Shuras.

NCA reports that they support projects in Faryab, Daikundi, Samangan, Khost, Kabul and Badakhshan provinces. For this review NCA suggested we review AWEC's projects in Badakhshan as none of the other partner NGOs had ongoing activities in Faryab. It turned out that several of AWEC's projects were funded from sources other than the programme under review.

Their main programme with NORAD funding, titled *Building Resilient Communities*, had the following components:

- **Peacebuilding**, including 1) inclusive, gender-sensitive peacebuilding; 2) *shuras* and mechanisms to prevent and transform conflicts; 3) increasing women's participation in peacebuilding processes; and 4) social group experiences with constructive inter- and intragroup relations.
- **Economic Empowerment**, including 1) enabling men, women and youth to establish micro and small enterprises; 2) vocational skill training and support to enable youth (male and female) to secure sustainable employment; and 3) increasing profits and productivity of men, women and youth through value chain development.
- **WASH projects**, including 1) having communities demonstrate ownership of WASH services; 2) having duty bearers integrate women's and men's recommendations into their plans; 3) having women, men, girls and boys practice hygiene measures that protect against key public health risks;

- 4) providing women, men, girls and boys with access to adequate and sustainable sanitation services in their households; and, 5) ensuring that women, men, girls and boys have access to sustainable, sound and minimum basic water supply services for domestic purposes.
- **Climate Smart Economic Empowerment (CSEE)** addressing 1) youth unemployment, 2) climate change and 3) food insecurity by increasing people's access to climate smart food production systems, jobs, and other income opportunities.

NCA moreover supported 1) community-based drug rehabilitation through the Nejrat Centre; 2) peacebuilding through inclusive and improved ethnic and tribal relationships; and 3) The Social Council for Consolidation of Peace (SCCP), previously known as the Religious Actors for Peace (RAP) programme with Sanayee Development Organisation, 4) provision of Protection and Wash Services to IDPS in Kunduz and Badakhshan with Afghanistan Women Educational Centre (AWEC) and Afghan Women Skills Development Centre (AWSDC).

The different reports submitted include a number of NCA and partners monitoring reports, and mid-term reviews and evaluations conducted by external consultants.

NRC is an internationally oriented Norwegian NGO with an engagement for Afghans since 1979. The engagement started with support for refugees in Pakistan and later also Iran, combined with some cross-border support into Afghanistan. NRC withdrew from their partnership with NCA in 1994 but returned in 2003, and is currently a leading NGO providing support and legal assistance for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). NRC places a strong emphasis on protection of vulnerable populations and gender-sensitive programming.

NRC reports that they utilise CDCs and other communal representative structures, such as *shura* and school committees, and individuals, as local and religious leaders, in their programming.

The projects covered by this review include the following:

- **Education, including community-based education (CBE)**, Accelerated Learning Classes (ALP), Education First Phase Response (for displaced) (EFPR), Better Learning Programme (for youth) (BLP) and Education in Emergencies (EiE).
- **Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance, ICLA**, for IDPs to obtain identity documentation, address their needs and disputes and provide access to essential services.
- **Urban displacement out of Camp (UDOC)** addresses displaced people living with host communities, particularly in urban environments, with provision of some camp management core functions.

Projects are implemented in the Faryab, Kunduz and Sar e Pul provinces.

NRC has a self-monitoring system in place for their projects and utilises external evaluators to review their projects.

COMPARING NGO APPROACHES

All NGOs in this review have a strategy to work with community organisations, from identifying the needs to respond to, organise the work, mobilise community resources, monitor implementation and sustain activities. How each NGO does these things, however, varies a lot, and we address these differences below where we draw extensively on the fieldwork findings.

However, to frame such a discussion let us first revisit some of the assumptions about the role of and engagement with different types of community-based organisations. Here it is important to keep in mind the Afghan government's (and the donors') investment in and funding of the CDCs and later the District Councils that have a presence throughout Afghanistan, though such councils were not necessarily continued or re-elected when the external funding came to an end.

One major difference in approach, as is identified in the literature on community development, has to do with whether the funding/implementing agency (or government) takes a minimalist approach and primarily views the community organisation or specialised committees as a vehicle for project implementation. Such an approach is arguably a more appropriate approach to more specialised or short-term activities. It can, drawing on Katz, be termed community-based development.²⁶

Alternatively, the funding/implementing agency may take more of a maximalist approach with an aim to develop and empower an organisation that on its own (or with external assistance) can plan, mobilise resources, implement projects and maintain and sustain investments in a manner that a majority of the community members accepts. This second kind of approach coordinates and intertwines readily with government planning, provision of basic services to the population and governance more generally.

The first approach can be more to complement, for a shorter period of time, a possible lack of government provision or a government's inability (on its own) to provide such services or to govern effectively. The latter approach is more resource- and time- consuming and requires the sustained presence of an external agency in an area for a longer period, as well as a fairly stable security and migration situation. Insecurity and job- and drought-related migration have posed greater and greater challenges in several areas of Afghanistan over the last years, certainly in the Faryab province where most of the projects were implemented.

In an impoverished community, a position on any type of community body tasked with prioritisation and distribution of resources can allow one the chance to prioritise such resources for their own or their family's/network's benefit. The CDC concept with election of representatives (possibly separate female CDCs) was meant to mitigate possible domination from individuals and ensure representation of women and minorities. However, that was frequently not the case, or the community bodies were "recaptured" by influential individuals, as the literature and this review has documented. The traditional community councils can be equally prone to misuse and majority/male dominance, although communities can also mitigate such challenges (as they have done for centuries) by securing over time the inclusion of respected community members, such as elders, educated or religious leaders, who can help maintain community control. Women are more seldom included though, except in areas with that being accepted and practised.

ACTED's 2019 Baseline Assessment: Household Component documents wide variation in communities' knowledge about and engagement in councils and development planning and activities. They identified a higher degree of knowledge and a more positive attitude in urban areas and among men, compared to in rural areas and among women. While ACTED collected its data in areas benefitting from ACTED's support, we might assume that the response to some of the key questions will be relevant to other areas and organisations:

26 Katz, D.J. (2017) *Community-based Development in Rural Afghanistan. First, Assume a Community*. Washington, Unites States Institute of Peace.

- When community-level meetings were held to discuss development planning in their area only 34% of households in general were aware that they were happening, but only 15% of the female-headed households said that they were.
- When asked if their input to community-level discussions was taken into account, 18% of all households indicated that it was, while only 6% of the female-headed households did.
- When asked if they considered local accountability mechanisms to be effective, 37% of all households supported that claim, but only 13% of female-headed households did.
- Asked if the local development planning processes were participative, 53% said that they were, but only 20% of female-headed households supported that claim.
- When asked if they planned to attend community-led meetings for development planning in the coming year, 32% overall confirmed that they were so planning, but only 10% of the female-headed households did.

The field researchers had two important observations that need to be kept in mind when analysing the interviews with the community representatives and the beneficiaries, which led them to seek additional local sources of information:

1. Communities were reluctant to be openly critical of the new Taliban administration, although there were differences across various provinces and districts, depending on history and the qualifications and reputations of the Taliban-appointed administrators.
2. The communities never complained directly about NGOs and expressed appreciation for the projects the team visited. While the people appreciated many projects, one needs to acknowledge communities' vulnerability and reliance on NGO assistance – and the communities' possibly also feeling indebted. Communities may have learned that complaining about an NGO may not change much, but might put their future assistance at risk.

ACTED had their own *manteqa* district approach that resembles the District Development Assembly model, with representation from village councils in order to provide assistance that can help develop a larger and naturally bounded area with a range of different activities tailored to particular needs. ACTED argues that they have adapted a unique approach that does not limit them to working with single CDCs (that serve as an entry point): instead, they are “developing socio-economical resource-based platforms” (including CDC members and others) that are sharing natural resources and other social factors, with an aim to develop a *manteqa* development plan. Reportedly, the *manteqa shura* has four sub-committees on: 1) agriculture, 2) procurement, 3) education and 4) monitoring/evaluation and conflict resolution.

ACTED had developed a detailed *manteqa* profile that provides detailed overviews of how each *manteqa* is organised, the role and influence of women and minorities and vulnerable groups, types of income, agricultural activities, and the availability of irrigation, education, and health facilities.

The field work established that ACTED had two implementation strategies. One strategy was to provide *manteqa shuras* grants to be used in each community. The *shura* is involved in the need assessment, design of the project, as well as in monitoring and implementations. For larger construction projects, the *shura* organises a bidding process with local construction companies, where the local communities provide 10% of the costs – or more in some cases – as their contribution.

The second strategy involves ACTED running centres or activities, such as Youth Development Centres, Vocational Training Centres, civil society support and cultural and sports events, where the CDCs' or *manteqa shuras*' involvement is limited to beneficiary selection.

The field interviews established that ACTED is well known in Faryab for its long-term involvement and for working in almost all the districts and thereby being very visible to the population. ACTED's footprint in Faryab emerged as broader than any other NGO operating in the province.

None of the *manteqa shura* members reported any weakness in ACTED's performance, but rather a high satisfaction with what ACTED has done so far. These members also praised ACTED's

achievements working through the *mantega shura*. According one member, the *mantega shuras* were transparent and prevented members from exploiting the assistance better than the CDCs.

The focus group meetings had a mixed attendance from the *mantega shuras* and the various projects. As a result, it was less evident who represented whom in the meetings, and to what extent the (ACTED-run) projects and the *shuras* were linked. Likewise, while there were reported both male and female shuras, most (younger) women in the meetings spoke on behalf of the projects, not the *mantega shura*. This could indicate that it was easier to sustain female representation in single projects rather than to have joint male and female representation in a *mantega shura*.

ACTED reported that they had noticed a positive evolution when it came to involvement of women, and currently 259 women are actively involved in the *shura* across 41 *mantegas*, especially in the meetings and trainings. Following the Taliban takeover, women were not able to attend joint meetings but remain by early 2022 actively involved in decision making at the *shura* level. During the last election for the *mantega* development platforms, 458 women were so far in 2022 elected in 37 *mantegas* compared to 259 in 2019.

A question asked of all communities and individuals was if they were informed about the funding made available for the project they were part of or should benefit from. The *mantega shuras* who assigned block grants had an awareness of the funding contribution, while that was not the case for those benefitting from or involved in ACTED-implemented projects, including women.

Here ACTED informed that they collected community contributions through the Manteqa Development Platforms for the block grants. However, in order to not add an additional economic burden on the most vulnerable populations, these contributions have only been collected from the large landowners. These landowners were therefore more aware of these block grants than the rest of the community members.

A final question was if the assistance had generated conflicts in the communities. None of the respondents reported any such conflicts and ACTED pointed to the responsibility of the *mantega* subcommittee to help resolve disputes in the communities.

DACAAR had a strategy to implement its work through local governments, the District Development Authorities and the CDC structures. The extent of corruption and nepotism in the CDCs had, according to DACAAR's headquarters in Kabul, led them to only use the CDCs as an entry point to identify influential community representatives and elders to involve in their programming. However, the CDCs has a key role in ensuring an enabling environment for project implementation and they provide lists of potential beneficiaries, then assessed by DACAAR.

This was confirmed through the fieldwork, where it was found that the CDCs had a very limited role in decision making for the different projects. For small projects, such as distributing greenhouses, improved seeds, saffron or establishing demonstration orchards, petitions for assistance were either submitted through the local government bodies or directly from individuals. DACAAR would then do a need assessment in the petitioning community, and the CDC ended up only being involved in verifying the information. When a CDC would suggest projects for its village, DACAAR would undertake their own need assessment and screen the suggested beneficiary lists.

DACAAR had a range of different water supply projects. Their procedure is to do a need assessment, a technical survey to find where water is available and then plan, design and implement a water supply programme calibrated to local needs. In some communities, hand pumps are installed, in others they prepared elevated reservoirs filled with water from a tube well (where the underground water is drinkable) or water is supplied from a remote spring in a nearby mountain. Their largest project is a water supply project in the Qaisar district (which the team visited) that provides water to all households in the communities.

For all these projects, whether a CDC exists in the location or not, DACAAR establishes a water management committee and assigns a trained technician to maintain the project. The committee is responsible for collecting fees in the communities, charging a fixed amount in cash or in wheat for the handpumps and a calculated per cubic meter of water for the larger water supply projects. Our research

found, however, that one local community benefitting from such a water supply project paid less in cash than they had agreed with DACAAR to pay, which could jeopardise longer-term maintenance plans.

DACAAR had a female vocational training programme with female staff who spent most of the time in the field, but whom the field team was not organised to meet. The field team was informed that some of DACAAR's project proposals/petitions had come from women, but the majority were from men. They were not made aware of any women on the water management committees and there was no female participant in the focus group meeting that DACAAR organised for this study. The only female beneficiary the team met was a widow who had received a cow as part of DACAAR's women empowerment programme.

Clean drinking water emerges as one of the biggest challenges people in Faryab are faced with. The positive changes resulting from the DACAAR water supply programme is very visible and appreciated in the communities where they have worked. The beneficiaries interviewed not only reported having clean drinking water, but also mentioned improvement in children's health, and reduced need for children and women to fetch water from longer distances.

Those interviewed who had received inputs and training in establishing and running greenhouses, apple orchards and saffron farms reported increased income. The team noted that many farmers had used this income to replicate or further extend their project.

None of the respondents or beneficiaries reported any conflicts within their communities and none related to any of the DACAAR projects. Efficient management of water and increasing land cultivation were reported as helping to increase agricultural output.

However, none of those interviewed, including the water management committees, was aware of the budget allocated to their respective projects. The argument made by DACAAR field staff was that they did not share such information to avoid Taliban demands for additional taxation or potential dangers from criminal groups and local strongmen. DACAAR HQ staff, however, claimed that they had been able to avoid such taxation through negotiations and demonstrating the benefits for the communities.

NAC had a more comprehensive approach to inclusion and involvement of community organisations and members than the other NGOs reviewed. This was confirmed through the interviews in Jaghori, where the respondents reported that communities and CDCs participated in the decision making and monitoring and evaluation of the NAC project. The CDCs were included in its project cycle, but NAC had not confined themselves to CDCs only. A wider number of community members (including women and youth) were included, and they had expanded the number of CDC sub-committees from the two planned on education and one on health to seven (now included in the CCAP guidelines):

1. Agriculture
2. Disaster Risk Reduction
3. Education
4. Environment
5. Health
6. Maintenance (for infrastructure)
7. Youth

In addition, NAC engaged with a number of specialised committees and associations involving members of the same committees, such as the Community Disaster Management Committees, Farmer Associations, School (Management) Shuras, Self-Help Groups for Women, religious leaders, THINK Labs, dialogue and conflict transformation programmes for youth, and a "Communities through Community Contracting" that supported sub-committees on Agriculture, DRR and Maintenance. NAC applies the same approach in Badakhshan and the Malistan district of Ghazni, where they have smaller project portfolios, as in Faryab and Ghazni City, and where they have established fewer sub-committees.

NAC Kabul office informed us that they conduct public meetings and publicise their plans before starting up a project. Respondents in Jaghori confirmed that in-depth discussions took place in the start of the project, which could include community views on the project design. Many respondents commended the participation of the elders and CDC members in the very first stages of the project. They also confirmed that communities participate in the implementation of the projects and provided some 10% in the form of labour, local materials, etc., which according to them established a sense of ownership to the project. The communities also play a role in monitoring the progress of the projects.

NAC reported that some CDCs included both women and men (as in the Jaghori and Malistan districts of Ghazni), while in other areas (as most parts of Badakhshan) CDCs were in reality gender segregated, though in NAC's view women still had influence. This arrangement has been continued under the Taliban administration. Female respondents in Jaghori confirmed the practice, and one expressed the view that women should be the ones deciding on project selection, including the community projects, but particularly those related to women.

This strategy seems to have had a positive impact. The respondents had a good overview of individual and community benefits from the project NAC implemented in Jaghori. They named projects that were targeted at the household level, such as seed distribution, demonstration orchards, etc. They also talked about projects for community benefits such as water handpumps and, more importantly, irrigation projects. However, very few knew the project budgets, though they reflected that they could use their own 10% contribution to calculate the total project cost.

The respondent informed the team that NAC had been in Jaghori for the last 10 years and thought that the long-term interventions help ensure that NAC and its staff provide quality work. Any mistake from NAC's side will result in them "losing face" in that community.

Most of the respondents assessed NAC's performance as very good, and there were fewer communal grievances noted with the CDCs in Jaghori in comparison with those in the other areas, which can possibly be attributed to the NAC approach of "widened CDC membership". As the review team observed:

This wider participation may have given little chance to CDC members to misuse the funds or benefit from the assistance if in case a CDC or its selected members were corrupt.

Those interviewed had a positive view of the NAC programme in Jaghori. Most of them mentioned clean water and irrigation schemes, such as irrigation water reservoirs. One explained that "before we could only use 5% of the water coming from the mountains in spring, after NAC constructed the dams, we might use 85% of it", which has led to improved agriculture and food production. This was confirmed by the three government officials interviewed.

Asked about the project's benefits for women and children, respondents cited the vocational training courses for women and education, as well as a football pitch for children.

Respondents said the project had no negative impacts, and there was no case reported of NAC projects creating tensions in the community. Government officials had not received any complaints, either, and their explanation was that that was "because NAC builds the consensus of the villagers at the start of the project and that is why there are no conflicts on the projects".

NCA, as noted above, works through Afghan NGOs. Following a discussion with the NCA Kabul office, projects implemented by Afghanistan Women's Educational Centre (AWEC) in Badakhshan were selected for the review at NCA, as there were no active projects in Faryab.

The NCA's Kabul office explained that their strategy is to work for five years in each district they target with a reintegrated development approach. NCA defines its exit strategy as part of each of its interventions and sets aside a follow-up budget to continue giving advice to the project participants after they leave a community. Partners work in the same areas to make sure community needs are assessed and responded to. Coordination in a given district can be an issue, though, and will at times

require NCA's facilitation. Some programmes, such as WASH, target a more limited range of villages than do peace building projects.

CDCs are always used as the local village structure NCA partners relate to, but their peacebuilding project covering a wide range of communities establishes *Peacebuilding Shuras* that include CDC members from a number of villages.

That strategy provides a challenge when all respondents in Badakhshan regarded the CDCs as corrupt. Even CDC members reported that the head of the CDC was not involving them in assistance distribution in the village. In most of the cases mentioned, CDC decisions were confined to the head of the CDC and a couple other members.

On paper, beneficiaries and CDCs are required to contribute financially but also to be involved in the project design, monitoring and implementation. That practise was questioned in the interviews in Badakhshan where respondents held a very hostile attitude to the CDCs. Some of the respondents blamed NGOs in general for being rigid and not willing to adjust their project designs or budgets, and not striving to have the CDCs as genuine partners at the village level. Some respondents expressed the view that if a project was not based on community needs and genuine involvement of the "Good CDC", then local contributions, monitoring and evaluation did not make any sense.

Unfortunately, respondents made a negative judgement of AWEC and their projects for conflict resolution and the building of washrooms (from another funding allocation). Many of those interviewed described their projects as poorly designed and not able to "help women stand on their own feet". The complaint was that the trainings were short and selection of participants not properly discussed with the communities. Only AWEC staff mentioned the hygiene kits distributed; none of the female or male respondents mentioned them when asked about their knowledge of AWEC projects. NCA later explained that women empowerment projects were planned for 2021, as requested, but had not been started up before the Taliban came into power.

Elders, including CDC members, were aware of the AWEC projects, but the district and provincial officials interviewed were not. The same CDC members, but also non-CDC members interviewed, questioned the selection of the project beneficiaries. The non-CDC members were of the opinion that some of the families were selected by the CDC head and others were friends or relatives of the AWEC staff, including those for whom the latrines were built.

A religious leader said he participated in the first meeting when AWEC planned to establish a conflict resolution committee. Despite promising his support and agreeing to be a member of the committee, he was never contacted again and was not aware of any work being done. NCA informed that this project was discontinued from August 2021 while they are reassessing a possible continuation. Another respondent, a teacher in a religious school, reported that AWEC had established a small library in the *madrassa*, which is used by girls, but was not aware of any other activity. According to NCA, this was library not funded by them. Only one of the respondents reported knowledge of AWEC informing elders that they had 300,000 Afs for construction of washrooms, though it is positive that budget information was shared.

The respondents did not find AWEC's projects to have made any positive change in their communities. The women's peacebuilding *shura* was thought to have been discontinued due to new Taliban rules, but also due to a lack of community participation. The washroom construction was deemed to be low quality, possibly because they had been constructed in the cold winter. One explanation for the latter, which NCA staff in Kabul raised, was that delayed and blocked transfers of funds might pressure partners to work on short deadlines and therefore continue construction work under unfavourable weather conditions. NCA had, however, made the same observations and discontinued funding for lavatory building from 2021 and rather supported Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) projects through AWEC.

Female members of the AWEC-established *shura* reported that they had received two rounds of trainings to establish a *shura*, to pass messages on to other women in the village and resolve conflicts related to women. Only one woman interviewed reported to have used her training to mediate a

conflict between a female and her husband's brother. Male respondents in the same community said they were not aware of this project.

Though this project was aimed to support women, those interviewed did not find it sufficiently relevant. In their view, trainings and the payment of transportation and food costs did not address the most pressing challenges women faced. Their request was for income-generation projects to strengthen and empower women's position in society.

The project was not reported to have any negative impact, except for the grievance over selection of households to receive washrooms and the poor quality of the construction.

In fairness, it should be noted that the changing circumstances with the economic crisis can explain the community members' criticism of AWEC projects. Almost all of the respondents, experiencing a very challenging humanitarian situation, asked for more vocational trainings and economic development projects for women. Trainings and awareness-raising were not rejected, but the respondents did not find these to be sufficient in the given situation.

NRC's Kabul office explained that they related to the CDCs as part of the local governance structure, and they utilised them for their programming but tailored their interaction to their needs. They therefore established separate *shuras* for education and WASH projects and trained respected elder mediators in the communities on legal issues. The ICLA project provides training on legal procedures and *Sharia* to mediation groups established by conflicting parties.

The NRC programmes in Faryab, such as their WASH and ICLA programmes, are by definition closer to humanitarian aid and a response to an emergency situation (focused primarily on the needs of IDPs) than are the community development programmes implemented by ACTED and DACAAR.

The Kabul office explained that they had a comprehensive system in place to tackle corruption and avoid misuse, open to both direct beneficiaries and members of the community. This includes a hotline, email messages, complaint feedback boxes and in-person complaint opportunities. They, however, had not received any serious complaints or reports of corruption cases.

The fieldwork concentrated on the Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP) for both girls and boys, which according to NRC offers:²⁷

flexible age-appropriate programmes that promote access to education in an accelerated timeframe for disadvantaged groups, over-age out-of-school children and youth who missed out or had their education interrupted due to poverty, violence, conflict, and crisis.

The project was well known to officials in both the past government and the newly established Taliban administration, as it had been implemented in previously Taliban-controlled areas, and accepted.

The present head of the education department expressed that NRC's classes were highly needed and he rated it as a top-quality education. That assessment was shared by the review-team following their observations and interviews with students, headmasters, teachers and the local communities, all of whom knew about the project. They noted that those students observed in the classes demonstrated their level of knowledge much better than those in public schools. An observation from a girl's class in Qaisar was that "the students were not only good in their lessons but had a remarkable courage to give speeches in front of guests and articulate their success and needs".

Teachers in public schools whom we interviewed reported that students coming from NRC's ALP programme achieved high marks in their classes. This proved an unexpected challenge, as an ALP teacher explained, they were constantly under pressure from the communities to increase the number of ALP students. Students in the public schools tried to enrol in the ALP classes, which is not allowed, and ALP regularly checked with the education department to help prevent this.

²⁷ Shah, R. (2015) *A meta-evaluation of the Norwegian Refugee Council's Accelerated Education Responses*. Faculty of Education, University of Auckland. Commissioned by NRC

An important observation from the team is that girls and female teachers benefitted the most from the ALP programme. The absence of girls' schools and the travel distance to the public schools were, according to NRC staff, the main reasons many girls had not joined schools, but the extensive internal displacement that has taken place in the Qaisar district and other areas has not helped, either. Therefore, elders in many communities interviewed explained that they had requested girls' class as part of the NRC ALP programme. Their concern was that when NRC allocated one class to a village, it was far less than what the community needed, and children might pass the enrolment age for the public schools before they can receive any schooling.

The team observed that NRC's staff members were well connected to the communities they are working with, and some had volunteered to teach the ALP classes. These staff members not only know the community members and the education committees well, but also had a remarkable knowledge about the students in the classes and their performance. The support NRC had provided to its teachers was identified as one key reason for the improved quality of teaching. Another factor was that NRC hired teachers from other villages if no one with the required qualifications were found in the village housing the ALP class.

Having family members of the education committee in the ALP classes kept the committee interested in the classes and aware of the teacher's performance, even more so if the classes were hosted on their property and they maintained close contact with the students.

A noted impact is the change in communities' and parents' thinking on the education of their children and particularly of girls. This impact is further reflected in the fact that it was not only the communities that demanded more ALP classes: such requests also came from Taliban-appointed staff at both the district and province level.

None of the respondents reported any negative impact of the NRC project, but rather a positive demand for more classes. Two teachers in female and male public high schools in Qaisar only raised the concern that ALP students received better stationery, books, clothes, etc. than regular students, and requested support to address that disparity.

A partial response to that concern was NRC's support for public schools to absorb students who complete the ALP classes. This included WASH projects and the building of extra classrooms on public school premises. In the Qaisar district, such extra classrooms were found both in boys' and girls' schools visited during the assessment.

The education project and the ALP classes are not very costly compared to their impact. The communities had knowledge of the teacher's salary, but not of any other costs or of the budget allocated to each ALP class. Government officials and school administration were not aware of the budget allocated to building classrooms, neither were the local communities.

EARLIER EVALUATIONS AND DOCUMENTED IMPACT

In light of the uncertainty caused by the Taliban takeover and possible limitation on the fieldwork we emphasised the review of the documentation provided by the NGOs, and in particular their field monitoring reports and external evaluations. These were then used to track if observations and recommendations made for the different projects were addressed or continued to be mentioned in later reports. We moreover compared the NGO reports with other studies and evaluations, such as those of the NSP projects, and meta reviews to establish if there were major deviations and to check if the NGOs' own reporting and evaluations provided a more positive bias towards their own programme than might be warranted.

The most comprehensive meta-review of evaluation of development assistance to Afghanistan identified was commissioned by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).²⁸ This report covering the period 2008- 2018 holds some important findings of relevance to this review.

One initial observation is that due to needs across all development sectors, all projects evaluated were found to be relevant. The question was rather what documented impact each project had on the ground.

The lack of security was a recurring challenge, leading to increased implementation costs. Another factor influencing results and impact was the low capacity among Afghan partners, in particular in the Afghan government. The effectiveness of the projects was therefore in general low, though the more effective interventions were in the education and health sector, followed by small-scale participatory infrastructure projects in rural areas. Projects aimed at better governance and increasing capacity were rarely effective because of the political challenges such projects faced.

The NSP project, which is of interest for this review, was found to contribute to an increase in services and infrastructure in rural areas, but to have little impact on economic growth or local governance.

While the project mandated representation in CDCs, the report states:

there is no evidence, however, that the formal participation of women in community-level decisions has had a tangible impact on overall gender equality impact. What was found though was that modest projects embedded in traditional structures helped increase access to health, education, and modestly improved livelihood for women, mentioning rural literacy projects, and livelihood projects as kitchen gardening and mushroom farming.

There was very little evidence of effective promotion of gender equality in the private sector, nor in large infrastructure projects. The report found monitoring and evaluation to be weak and rarely able to measure outcomes.

The “big lesson” emerging from 148 evaluation reports was that (p.24)

... aid only has a fair chance of being effective in Afghanistan when programmes are modest, rather small than large, do not assume unrealistic partner capacities, are aware of the cultural context, do not spend aid money too fast, do not spend aid money in insecure regions, and are equipped with solid performance measures and the means to track these measurements with baselines and follow-up data.

ACTED has its own research unit **AGORA** that prepares thorough and detailed baseline studies and reviews, but no external evaluations were provided for this review. When asked to comment, ACTED argued that AGORA operated independently from ACTED and had their own quality control mechanisms in place.

The team also considered the 2018 report *Increased Access to Quality Education for Women and Girls in Faryab, Afghanistan. Qualitative Achievement Report* (8 pages, of which 4 pages is the questionnaire

²⁸ Zürcher, C. (2020) Meta-Review of Evaluations of Development Assistance to Afghanistan, 2008 – 2018. Chapeau Paper. Commissioned by Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Germany. Division for Afghanistan and Pakistan

used). The finding, based on 30 interviews, is a general approval of the different components of the project, with a recommendation to continue as planned. There were some minor suggestions from the communities, including more community mobilisation to raise awareness about the benefit of education.

The *Increased Access to Quality Education for Women and Girls in Faryab, Afghanistan. Endline Assessment Report* from the same year is more comprehensive and based on a survey with 224 parents and 21 CDC members. One interesting finding is that only 53% reported to have a School Management Committee, 40% were unsure. Most of the findings resonate with the baseline study, though there is an increase in acknowledging the importance of education, from 24% in the baseline study to 87% in the survey. Among the recommendations was to build the capacities of the teachers and increase their numbers, for more women to engage in decision making and to better meet the needs of disabled students.

The two AGORA reports from 2019, one a baseline report, indicating the existence of an earlier version referenced in the 2018 reports, and a *mantega* profile for Jawzjan are detailed and nuanced, indicating a thorough research process and visualisation.

ACTED, however, shared with the team the challenges they during the initial phases of the project faced problems with recruitment and training of qualified staff and with the introduction of the *mantega* concept. On top of that came a lack of drinking water, saltiness of underground water and the increasing consequences of the drought, in addition to the remoteness of the province.

The absence of external and independent evaluations, at least submitted to the review team, influences on the ability to assess the longer term impact and to judge how important ACTED's projects have been for poverty reduction, community development and the broad participation of the beneficiaries.

The fieldwork, however, documented that the communities found ACTED projects relevant and activities well organised. There was a concern with an agricultural project where the fields were not properly prepared for irrigation and planting, and the team learned that one project ACTED staff presented as theirs was implemented by another Norwegian-funded NGO. The poorest segment of the population attended the vocational training projects, which were broadly expected to generate jobs and an opportunity to reduce their poverty. The same assessment was made for the agricultural projects and synergies collectives and associations can contribute to for increasing income.

DACAAR provided two external evaluations, one end review commissioned by the Norwegian MFA from 2018, covering the period 2013-2016, and a mid-term review from 2020 commissioned by DACAAR, covering the period from 1 July 2018. NCG/Tadbeer consulting conducted the first study, while Tagheer Mosbat conducted the second.

The 2018 end review concluded that DACAAR had been a reliable and competent provider of basic services in a challenging operational environment, with an outstanding performance. The report is, however, more nuanced. Pointing out progress on agreed plans and targets, it finds little systematic information on achievements with respect to impact and outcome levels. The WASH component was highly rated (97%), followed by natural resource management (81%), and promotion of saffron was deemed a success, but the review noted that Producer Associations had failed to fulfil their purpose of negotiating collective prices. The achievements of the Women's Resource Centre were less than anticipated (2 of 4 centres were closed or taken over for other purposes). No cases of corruption were reported, but the review reported that the security situation had prevented auditors from visiting project sites. Moreover, the review noted that "continued presence appears to be a sustainability strategy of DACAAR", and a strategy well known from "a variety of sectors in many countries".

Recommendations fall naturally from the identified shortcomings, and the review suggested that DACAAR should consider establishing a Project Coordination Committee, introduce a *Theory of Change*, and supplement financial audits with independent reviews and surveys when security permits. The review recommended further monitoring and follow-up of Women Resource Centres and strengthening of their capacity-building components. And due to the severe drought in Faryab, the evaluations noted that DACAAR should seek to align with government recommendations for larger reliance on water supply networks and available water resources instead of on boreholes.

The 2020 mid-term review combined a survey with 350 respondents with 31 key informant interviews and 24 in-depth interviews on the four thematic areas of Natural Resource Management (NRM), Small Scale Enterprise Development (SSED), Women Empowerment (WE) and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). It emerges as a very technical report describing how DACAAR has implemented these four projects and the results of each, but with very limited information (despite interviews with CDC and DDA members) about DACAAR's relationship with communities and community organisations beyond the one they themselves had established.

The mid-term review documented major achievements in an increase of agricultural income, the number of business start-ups, improved income levels, women's literacy, increased access to safe and clean water and knowledge of hygiene-improving measures. The stakeholders found DACAAR to be an effective assistance provider, though the Directorate of Women Affairs requested better coordination and reporting. Stakeholders mentioned the irrigation projects as very relevant. While projects were deemed to promote gender inclusiveness, it was suggested that DACAAR should try to reach more women with the livestock interventions.

Insecurity and corruption were reported as two major threats to the programme, though there were no reports of corruption where DACAAR had established a centralised procurement system for goods used in their different projects.

The main conclusion was that the DACAAR project was on course and the interventions "... relevant to the needs of the community being served" and having contributed to reducing the poverty in Faryab. Among the recommendations were more monitoring and after-reviews and a continuous and strategic engagement with their stakeholders, and a revisit of their results framework for better documentation of impact, and not only results.

The fieldwork for this review confirms stakeholders' opinions on the DACAAR projects, their relevance to the population, and earlier evaluation reports document a reduction in poverty for project beneficiaries. The CDCs, however, were a challenge in the areas visited, as the field team found that many were dormant, had ceased operating or had stopped maintaining infrastructure in the absence of funding. The concern is that such situations lead communities to expect NGOs to bring them more aid rather than prompting the communities to organise themselves in the absence of NGOs' presence and support.

Despite the documented results, it is difficult to assess the longer-term impact of the larger investments in the water sector if communal willingness to sustain them remains lacking. Sustained lack of willingness to maintain these projects would require a broader community engagement and participation. As a result, the observation of the 2018 end review that "continued presence appears to be a sustainability strategy of DACAAR" does not appear to be a tenable approach.

NAC presented a combination of baselines (2019) and midline review reports (2021) from their Monitoring and Evaluation Unit, with a number of externally commissioned evaluations of their general programme (2018) and of specific programme components such as conflict transformation and dialogue training in 2019, education equity and quality in 2020, and food security and natural resource management in 2021.

NAC's own baseline report from 2019 is based on 211 interviews in 30 communities in 3 provinces, covering the thematic areas of the Empowering Rural Afghanistan (ERA) Project. The study is thorough and detailed, with explanations and analysis of the findings.

The 2021 midline review report was conducted with 60% of the same respondents as the baseline assessment for a longitudinal comparison. It combined a survey of 421 households with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, and it set up comparisons between project participants and non-participants to measure the possible impact of interventions and to differentiate responses from male and female respondents. The education component was excluded from this study due to Covid-19 related closures of schools from March 2020. The reports are very detailed and demonstrate major progress on most activities and better results for project participants than for non-participants, but does also identify areas in need of further attention.

The first programme review from 2018 was undertaken by ATR Consulting, titled *Program Review of the 'Integrated Rural Development (IRD)' program and Facilitation of Country Program Strategy*, aimed at assessing the programme against OECD/DAC criteria, developing a draft *Theory of Change*, and supporting programme strategy development with a participatory approach.

The review found NAC to be “a solid, trusted and efficient organization to support and empower rural communities”, with a “capacity to respond to local challenges using innovative and very cost-effective approaches”. It found NAC able to adapt to changing needs and to understand well the local culture in targeted communities.

The report advised NAC to formalise their accumulated knowledge over decades working in Afghanistan. It recommended that they focus activities on two core components: 1) education and 2) food and work, and to mainstream other relevant activities under these two main components. The report suggested that NAC could achieve better results through a more integrated approach focusing on the community level, rather than at the district level.

ATR Consulting was also responsible for a 2019 field research report on *Conflict Transformation and Dialogue Trainings*. They found the NAC-organised trainings relevant for communities to promote resilience and an inclusive peace at the community level. ATR Consulting suggested that conducting such trainings prior to implementation of other NAC projects might help reduce conflicts (as over water) and make them more successful. The report did identify some shortcomings, though: participants were unable to lead trainings (of others) without a trainer's support, a demand for literacy excluded many from the trainings, and the timing of trainings needed to adjust to the agricultural season and the fasting period. Better monitoring and ways to evaluate the outcome of the trainings were among the other suggestions in the report.

In 2020, three NGOs, including NAC, commissioned Washington University of St. Louis (WUSTL) and collaborating universities to document their involvement in and the results of a project for *Education Equity and Quality in Afghanistan and Pakistan (EEQAP)*. The project aims to build contextually relevant models of community-based social accountability focusing on the education of disadvantaged children in 200 rural schools in three provinces in Afghanistan and in two in Pakistan. The project combines training of 30 enumerators for two weeks, a baseline survey and two rounds of workshops, including an additional one-day workshop per school, bringing together children, teachers, parents and school committee members to collectively decide on an intervention action plan. Actions suggested in the first round in 2018, and later implemented by the NGOs, were for new classrooms, access to water, teacher training and establishing of playgrounds. The report documents that the EEQAP facilitation teams trained about 1500 teachers in 100 intervention schools and 5000 children from Grades 3 to 5, including on inclusive education and diversity of learners, class management and project-based learning and playing and learning with children. Since March 2020, hygiene and awareness training about the risk of COVID-19 were carried out in all villages covered by the project.

In 2021 ARM Consulting undertook a *Review of Food Security and Natural Resource Management Component of the ERA programme*. The review was based on 434 interviews (54% women), 29 focus group discussions, 19 key informant interviews and four outcome-harvesting workshops. The report is very detailed and includes an assessment of project performance against OECD DAC criteria and recommendations, rating the performance of the project as satisfactory for relevance and impact, while rating its efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability as somewhat satisfactory, and reporting no unsatisfactory ratings on any of the criteria.

There is a documented improvement with respect to income and livelihood opportunities, access to nutritious vegetables, agricultural practices and increases in yields, and resilience against natural hazards. In addition, farmers' knowledge and skills have improved, as has the social status, livelihood opportunities, and saving and investment skills of self-help group members. Finally, villages are organised and better equipped for disaster response, where NAC also utilised supplementary funding from WFP and FAO to improve rural livelihoods and food security.

Despite the assistance, the ARM report found food insecurity and poverty prevalent in the target provinces and suggested several adjustments to the projects and training provided. The suggested

adjustments included more emphasis on female entrepreneurs, a better balance between training and support, and better addressing the needs of the illiterate and poorest segments of the communities targeted. There was, moreover, a suggestion for more detailed data collection to better determine the effects of the different interventions and the overall impact of the project, and for the project to prepare an exit strategy to better ensure sustainability of the activities.

The fieldwork for this review, as earlier mentioned, found NAC to have a thorough engagement with and support for the community organisations and confirmed the relevance of the NAC-supported projects in the Jaghori district. The external evaluations and the interviews confirm that NAC-implemented projects contribute to poverty reduction (although doing so is challenging under the present conditions) and to community-led development with broad participation, including of women. The longer-term impact remains challenging to assess, not least because investments in disaster response will only be possible to evaluate following the community's preparedness for and handling of a major disaster. Still, among the five NGOs reviewed, NAC emerges as the organisation with the most systemic approach to community involvement and assigning community members responsibilities, which one might expect to have a positive influence on sustainability.

NCA submitted a number of monitoring reports from their partners and themselves, but submitted only four external reviews and evaluations, of which three are about their peace support programme. This lack of reporting limits this review's ability to undertake a more comprehensive assessment of different NCA activities and those of their partner organisations, which is further complicated by the negative rating of one of NCA's partner projects in the Badakhshan province. To compensate for such a potential bias, we have done a more in-depth review of NAC and their partner organisations' narrative and monitoring reports, though such a review cannot compensate for the lack of external and independent monitoring and evaluations.

The first mid-term review from ART consulting in 2018 for the three-year (phase 2) *Building Resilient Communities for Sustainable Development and Peace 2016-2018* is therefore of interest as it covers all aspects of NCA's activities at that time, where the four main programme areas were 1) Peacebuilding programme, 2) Economic Empowerment Programme, 3) WASH programme, and 4) a cross-cutting theme on Strengthening Civil Society.

The review was largely based on NCA and partner reporting (where NCA was advised to prioritise stricter and closer monitoring of their data collection), complemented by 21 interviews with NCA and partner staff, local government and peace council representatives, 15 Focus Group meetings and 15 Key informant interviews.

The overall assessment is positive: the report concludes that the programme is on track with partners, stakeholders and beneficiaries well aware of the programme goal and what NCA intends to achieve. Beneficiary selection through the use of a local *shura* received positive notice and helped to improve the acceptance by the wider community.

The review identified the Economic Empowerment Programme (which met 16 of 21 programme indicators) as demonstrating the strongest progress, followed by the peacebuilding programme (which met 13 of 24 indicators, with low scores on women's participation in some areas) and WASH (which met 18 of 30 indicators). Increased insecurity in project areas and conservative attitudes towards involving and prioritising women are factors contributing to the lower scores on some indicators. NCA was also advised to ensure better reporting to government bodies and more systematic dialogue and exchanges between the different types of peace *shuras*.

There were mixed views on the sustainability of the interventions. While some respondents were convinced that individual beneficiaries and the communities would sustain and further develop the projects on their own, others were more cautious about the prospect that this would take place without continued NGO support and funding.

Drawing on NCA's own reporting to MFA of March 2021 on the project *Provision of Protection and WASH Services to IDPs in Kunduz and Badakhshan* (funded from the Norwegian humanitarian budget) the review primarily reports on progress towards goals (such as building of latrines) and less on the quality of the building or sustainability of the project. There was, however, a noted dissatisfaction with

the hygiene kits provided. The NCA report, however, argued that “the content of the hygiene kits is decided by the WASH cluster after several needs assessments and are relevant to beneficiaries needs”. The fact that none of the intended beneficiaries interviewed for this review recalled having received hygiene kits could be an indication of such dissatisfaction, if AWEC staff had in fact distributed the kits.

The first review of the 3rd phase of the NCA peace and dialogue programme is from 2016, undertaken by Norunn Grande from the Nansen Centre for Peace and Dialogue. The study provides a thorough examination of the various components of the programme based on reports from workshops and NCA documents, interviews with 15 members, and 17 key informants and government representatives.

The review concluded that two of the programme objectives were met, those being capacity building of the members and helping them to resolve conflicts over resources, family or identity at the community and provincial level. There had been less progress on the goal to support the Track 1 peace process, which had its own dynamics. Nevertheless, the review concluded that the programme had “...a strong potential for relative sustainability”.

Stephen Van Houten in 2018 reviewed the project *Strengthening the Religious Actors’ Network for Peace, 2017-2018*. In addition to a document review, there were 30 interviews and one focus group meeting, followed by a validation workshop. The Social Council for Consolidation of Peace (SCCP) programme was established in 2013 and has engaged with religious actors. The project is given a top score (5/5) for relevance, effectiveness and impact, a slightly lower one (4/5) for efficiency and only 3/5 for sustainability. Van Houten’s review found that the project would be difficult to sustain without external funding, and it advised NCA “... to pause and strategically reassess the key learnings as decisions are made about the future of the project”.

Still, the review pointed out that it was a unique and significant project with regards to peacebuilding in Afghanistan, with religious actors being key contributors to the peacebuilding process because of their community presence. The review noted that peace efforts were more effective when men and women worked together, and it commended NCA for having a strong monitoring and evaluation system that allowed for tracking of activities. Interestingly, the review also found that the project had resulted in many unintended positive impacts, including “... improvement of community access to education, health, bridges and roads.”

Among the recommendations was for NCA to continue their technical and financial support towards the development of the SCCP for the next 3-5 years, but with an aim to “... create an independent and functioning organisation.” There was also a recommendation to strengthen women’s SCCP membership and leadership roles and include more youth.

In 2020, Stephen Van Houten and Sarah Pugh undertook a *Final Evaluation of the Social Council for Consolidation of Peace (SCCP) programme (Phase 6)*. Given Covid-19 restrictions, the international evaluators conducted the evaluation remotely, with a national consultant attending seminars in Afghanistan. A total of 56 stakeholders participated in the evaluation, of which 26% were women.

On the outcome side, there was an overachievement of the religious actors (RA’s) engagement and connecting between formal and informal peace institutions, but a minor underachievement on their ability to deliver strategic peace initiatives. The evaluation found the programme to have responded to a number of previous recommendations, and the main conclusion was that the programme “...remains unique and relevant to peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan” and that the Network had become more visible and confident, with increased organisational capacity and coverage.

The review found the SCCP to be relevant for all stakeholders, showing strong programme progress and achievements (and thus effectiveness); the review found it to be efficient (though needing more financial support); and there was strong evidence on impact at both individual, family/community and policy/institutional levels. Meanwhile, sustainability in the absence of continued NCA support remained an issue, despite progress on securing wider involvement and support.

Van Houten and Pugh recommended NCA’s further funding and capacity building for a three- to five-year period, but combined with the development of an exit strategy for the programme after the completion of its 6th phase. An important observation was that:

this programme highlights the best of development initiatives in which a complex problem is addressed in an innovative, consistent, and longitudinal manner that builds local capacity with the goal of eventual ownership and sustainability.

Despite the negative findings from the AWAC project implemented in Badakhshan, where AWAC is a new NCA Partner, the sum of the other evaluations points to major achievements over time and impacts of NCA's peace programme. It even had some positive results on community participation, especially that of women. While the Track 1 process came to a halt following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, there are still calls from civil society (including at the Oslo meeting in January 2022) for a continuation to ensure a more inclusive Afghan government. Moreover, many of the religious leaders that have been part of the SCCP programme are likely to have achieved larger societal influence under the Taliban administration, and thus may feel a larger responsibility to secure a peaceful country that secures the basic human rights of all its citizens.

NRC provided a number of their own reports and evaluations conducted by external evaluators. The first three reports are from 2014, and we will only refer to them briefly here.

The one by Samuel Hall Consulting, *Evaluation of NRC's Youth Education Pack (YEP) projects in Faryab, Herat and Nangarhar*, pointed to the increased pressure on Afghan youth to either "fight or flight", identifying migration as an increasingly youth-based phenomenon. NRC's programme was found to be one of very few to be youth-based and to have had a clear impact on youth employment and income. Consequently, it was also one of the few to have a significant social and financial impact, particularly on women, leading to more resilient households. However, this report included a recommendation to refine selection criteria and processes, improve trainer capacities and strengthen NRC's monitoring and evaluation tools.

The second report, by Notio Partners, was an evaluation of the *Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLKA)* programme, and it found the programme to be successful overall, especially given the difficult context that Afghanistan represented. The relevance was found to be excellent, while effectiveness, efficiency and impact were found to be very good, but sustainability aspects were only rated as fair and requiring further attention. The main concerns the report raised were the need for further investments in nationalising staff positions, setting a longer-term strategic direction and an exit strategy, and engaging better with the Afghan government and civil society organisations.

The third was a joint NRC and Samuel Hall Consulting report on *Strengthening Displaced Women's Housing, Land and Property Rights in Afghanistan*. This was primarily to summarise trends from NRC's legal case analysis and to identify challenges faced by displaced women in accessing housing, land and property rights. The study provided a set of recommendations for the Afghan government and humanitarian and development actors, including strengthening of the legal aid capacity of the Ministry of Justice.

Turning to the more recent analysis and reviews, in 2018 NRC undertook a Child Protection Risk Analysis for their *Education in Emergencies, Children in Distress Education Programme*. The study was based on 49 focus groups discussions with 319 participants, 36 key informant interviews, observations and 1052 survey responses. They found that 42% thought the main reason for nonattendance at schools was children's need to support their families financially, 23% identified conflict and insecurity as the main barrier (including kidnapping on their route to school), 11% listed overcrowding in schools and 5% the long distance to get to the schools.

An important finding was that 96% noted the lack of psychosocial support services in NRC-supported schools, and 93% felt that that was the main service needed. There was a concern raised over the physical school environment, lack of recreational space and sport facilities, and (particularly for ALP schools) limited space in the timetable for such activities. NRC was criticised for not engaging local communities, for an absence of regular meetings with parents, and for the fact that staff and teachers did not involve the local communities in finding practical solutions to keeping the children safe. Only 4 of 22 classes included children with disabilities, 47% reported a lack of hand-washing facilities in

the schools and 78% reported the absence of separate toilets for girls and boys. The recommendations specified nine sets of actions to address and mitigate these challenges.

We have moreover reviewed a number of NRC's outcome-monitoring reports and indicator results summaries from different projects and locations. Although short in form, the methodology is well described and reassuring, and the reports provide assessments of progress, or lack thereof, and explanations in the form of endnotes.

The fieldwork in Faryab found that the ALP project, addressed in the 2018 study, was rated as excellent by students, communities and past and present authorities. Emphasis was placed on the quality of the education, the professional skills of the teachers, their commitment and engagement with the communities, and the quality of the teaching material. There was, moreover, positive feedback on the role of the school management committees. Although the fieldwork only covered a limited number of districts in Faryab, the experienced researchers did not come across any of the criticism raised in the 2018 study, rather they commended the knowledge level and articulation skills of the students, girls included.

While it is difficult to foresee if communities can sustain the NRC projects, or the present Afghan government, there are strong indications that the education, training and counselling will have a long-term positive impact on the individuals assisted and more generally on acceptance for education in the communities and ensuring the basic rights of marginalised groups and IDPs. While this might not have an impact on poverty reduction in the shorter term, education and securing of rights are important for poor and marginalised groups' and girls/women's ability to move out of poverty and play a more active role in the development of their communities. The sustainability of these types of interventions must therefore be judged differently from those aimed at community development.

SUSTAINABILITY OF INTERVENTIONS

When discussing sustainability, there is a need to consider the types of projects and who is responsible for maintaining and/or continuing the investments made through the various projects.

From the start there is a difference between two particular types of projects. On the one hand, there are projects with a longer-term development objective and strategy to involve the communities in some organised form throughout the project cycle, with the intention for these projects to be continued/maintained. And on the other hand, there are emergency/humanitarian projects that either have a short project horizon or are designed to meet urgent needs for a “temporary” group of beneficiaries, such as the internally displaced or refugees. Many of NRC’s projects fall into this latter category, though still requiring involvement and participation from the intended beneficiaries and their communities, and the communities they might be temporarily located with.

Projects that benefit individuals can be separated into two categories. One is training, education and capacity building in different forms and the second is the provision of physical objects, such as a greenhouse, a demonstration plot, a well, a latrine or a cow, just to mention some examples. Here it will be the individual beneficiary (or the close family’s) responsibility to utilise and maintain the assistance provided, though their incentive might be greater if they are part of a larger community or groups with similar interests or investments made.

Then there are infrastructure projects of different scales and sizes, ranging from a water pump for a number of families to irrigation systems for an entire village, or school buildings or a road benefitting a larger number of villages. Such projects require specialised knowledge to maintain, access to spare-parts and regular maintenance. This will require local organisation (and mobilisation), capacity building and collection of fees or payment per delivery (as for water). The assumption is that when a community contributes to a project and gains ownership, they will be more inclined to sustain their own investments. However, in Afghanistan and other conflict areas, communities and individuals must have sufficient income to afford to maintain such investments.

And, finally, establishment of associations or collectives aiming to increase market access and income potential will require efforts to sustain such organisations. The assumption is that the individuals, with their increased income, will contribute to the prolongation of such organisations.

Many of these assumptions are built on a model with close interaction with a national government, and the potential for them to assume responsibility for the projects in the longer run. The international sanctions presently imposed on the Taliban administration makes it no longer a requirement to align development projects with government priorities, or to involve, coordinate with and build the capacity of government institutions and staff.

Based on the evaluations and fieldwork, a nuanced picture emerges, though one with some uncertainty as to how the whole situation will develop during 2022 given the uncertainty over Taliban’s policies and local practises, to what extent they will take on responsibility for their citizens developments and rights and whether the Taliban will be confronted with an armed opposition.

ACTED has a mix of projects and enjoyed a good relationship and collaboration with the previous Afghan government. This reportedly continues now with the Taliban administration, and ACTED has continued their projects, including projects for and with women (verified in March 2022). The *manteqa shuras*’ organisational strength and community acceptance will be decisive for continuation of ACTED-initiated and -funded activities if external support is discontinued. This is difficult to make a judgement about, and the outcomes are likely to differ between the *manteqa shuras* and the types of projects these have prioritised.

The opinions identified by the fieldwork were that the ACTED-run Vocational Training Centres and Youth Centers and support to local CSOs were less likely to be sustained beyond the project period if external support were discontinued. The likelihood that the Taliban administration will resume responsibility for the projects is small.

This assessment is shared by ACTED, though they noted that in Faizabad the community had on their own established and volunteered trainers for a Youth Centre, though with ACTED providing supplies. ACTED hopes for continued funding for the Vocational Training Centres, but is considering handing them over to the communities, while ACTED works to raise the support and funding.

DACAAR's projects received mixed reviews on programme ownership and sustainability. The more detailed feedback from the interviews and observations holds relevance for other types of projects covered by this review and is therefore covered in some more detail. This is to allow for a nuanced discussion on potential sustainability of different types of interventions.

In general, some interviewees referred to DACAAR's use of quality materials and their strategy of working with communities and providing maintenance training as a way to sustain the investments. Others were however concerned about insecurity, and, moreover, women's ability to make use of project training and economic support due to societal and family constraints.

A very encouraging sign from the field work was that individual agricultural projects were replicated and copied by other farmers, which is an indicator of the sustainability of such projects.

Water supply projects are relatively larger, cover several beneficiaries and require different strategies to sustain physical structures established. Some of the visited communities had hand pumps installed, others elevated revisors filled from a tube well, and some were supplied from a remote water spring. For all these projects, whether a CDC existed in that location or not, DACAAR had established a water management committee. These collected 7kgs of wheat per household to maintain the hand pump and pay the DACAAR-trained technician. However, the team did identify several non-functioning water-pumps in one district, indicating that some committees/technicians might be failing or slow in their duties.

For the larger water supply projects DACAAR has installed a meter to gauge each household's water usage. While DACAAR staff reported a charge of Afs 15 per cubic meter, the water management committee reported that they only charged Afs 8 per cubic meter. This might be enough for paying the community technician, but was not sufficient to cover major repair costs. Even if Afs 15 is a small amount, interviews indicated that the communities expected the NGOs to (again) cover the larger repairs or investments. This finding was confirmed in a village in another district where minor damage and a need for fuel for a water-pump had ended the water supply. Despite the disadvantages this held for the villagers, they asked NGOs (and the field team) for a solar system to replace the pump rather than doing the repair themselves or investing in a system that would reduce their costs.²⁹

NAC took a further step than other NGOs reviewed in formalising and including the local communities by the establishment of a CDC sub-committee for maintenance of the projects. This came in addition to a demand on the community to contribute to the project, and requiring their involvement from project initiation to completion. It is notable that few of those interviewed raised concerns over the sustainability of the NAC-implemented project, although they requested the continuation of activities and an increase in geographical areas covered. As with DACAAR, the assessment was positive on individuals' ability to make use of the training and assistance received, and there were no recorded complaints on the quality of construction work (such as irrigation dams).

The 2021, the ARM Consulting evaluation raised some concerns over the sustainability of some of NAC's projects and advised them to prepare an exit strategy. However, other evaluations we reviewed did not raise sustainability as a major concern, though one must expect that education and health-related projects could be continued to a limited extent by either communities or the Afghan government and therefore would require external funding beyond the project period.

NAC has placed great importance on collaborating with Afghan authorities, including capacity building, in order to push them to take further responsibility for supporting and sustaining projects. This

²⁹ DACAAR informed that they have stopped constructing fuel powered water supply systems. They plan to replace fuel-based systems with solar-powered systems as and when funding can be secured.

is then likely to pose a challenge for handing over responsibility for some projects, if the international sanction regime remains in place.

NCA's project portfolio is more challenging to evaluate, as fieldwork raised questions about the quality, community acceptance and sustainability of projects implemented by one NCA partner in one geographical location with most of its funding from other sources than covered by this review. This claim, however, cannot be taken as a judgement of NCA's other partner organisations not included in this study. A general concern though is the community's rejection of the CDCs, which NCA and the partners had prioritised working with an attempt to undercut nepotism and corruption.

The evaluation of the peace project is generally receiving high marks, and although the last review suggested that NCA develop an exit strategy, the project can be expected to remain of vital importance for addressing localised conflicts, if not the national peace process, due to shifting power balances and a resurgence of historical conflicts over water and land.

While the AWEC project and partner organisation would require further attention from NCA, our review of evaluations, partners and NCA's monitoring and project reports are more reassuring when it comes to quality of investments and sustainability. NCA's success, however, will likely boil down to what extent the partner organisations include and are related to community organisations. However, we did not find this topic thoroughly discussed in the reviewed documentation.

NRC's projects target "temporary communities", such as the IDPs, where the hope is for them to be able to return to or become integrated into the host community, and vulnerable groups with an intention to reduce their vulnerability or ensure that a government or a community better protects their rights or cares for their needs. Specialised UN agencies such as the UNHCR does moreover have a mandate and an obligation to assist and protect these groups, but likely faces the same limitations as the NGOs.

Linkages to and inclusion of host communities and authorities in project planning and implementation is therefore important, though the aim from the start is not for these projects (and their beneficiaries) to be sustained, but rather for them to be shifted to new vulnerable groups and individuals. However, the additional support NRC provided for schools incorporating ALP students is an effective way to ensure their continued (and sustained) education.

The fieldwork established that "the ALP classes are in the most vulnerable and poor communities that would not be able to continue in case external support stops", though it also reported that "change in communities' and parents' thinking on education of their children and particularly girls has been one of the most important changes brought about by the project". Such an achievement can in itself help sustain the interventions and place pressure on the Taliban to accept girls' education.

INCLUSION OF WOMEN AND MARGINALISED GROUPS IN DECISION MAKING

Norway places high importance on the gender and rights perspective in humanitarian and development assistance, and requires that the needs of and the inclusion of women and marginalised groups be addressed in decision making, project implementation and monitoring and evaluation of Norwegian-funded projects.

Even before the Taliban takeover, promoting the gender and rights perspective has proved challenging in Afghanistan for a number of reasons. Primary among them are the societal and political restrictions on women's mobility and appearance and the strong influence of tradition and religious practise within the population. These challenges come on top of an increasingly demanding security situation and a more restrictive Taliban movement that limited the interaction between women and men, such as in the community councils.

The gender and minority aspects are therefore consistently addressed in the NGOs applications, reporting, meetings with the MFA and NORAD and in project reviews and evaluations.

There are some differences among the 3 provinces and districts prioritised for the fieldwork that had influence on the opportunity and ability for the inclusion of women in decision making. The Jaghori district of Ghazni has a long tradition of women taking part in processes and decision making (Jaghori also has fewer religious and traditional barriers to women's participation). There is more of an acceptance in Badakhshan, but practices differ among communities. In Faryab is there a difference between Uzbek- and Pashtun-inhabited and -governed areas, with more limitations in the latter and in areas that came under Taliban control before August 2021. The fact that the reflections of many beneficiaries pointed to family-imposed limitations on women's time and priorities is likewise important to keep in mind. The check-in that the team did with the five NGOs in March 2022 indicated no major changes to their access to and inclusion of women in their projects. It remains to be seen if the recent Taliban announcement on limitations on girls' education above the 7th grade, the use of *chadori* and encouragement for women to remain at home will have a negative influence on the NGOs, their female staff and their programmes.

Two general observations are, first, that it has proven more challenging to include women/girls and marginalised groups in decision making than to establish and implement projects targeting these groups. And, secondly, except for those identified as "poor" or specific groups such as the IDPs, we have found limited mention of assistance to other potentially marginalised groups such as the disabled in our review of documents or through the fieldwork.

ACTED has a policy to include both women and men in their *manteqa shuras*, or have separate *shuras*, and for both genders to be represented in their committees and associations. Women are to be consulted and have influence on projects and the bidding processes for any communal construction. ACTED's 2018 review reported some shortcomings in women's engagement in decision making and in meeting the needs of disabled students.

The review team noted that there were few female *manteqa* representatives in their meeting (a fact likely influenced by the Taliban takeover), but more (and younger) women on the project committees. There were a sizable number of female ACTED staff members, though the review team did not ask how many were in decision-making positions.

ACTED later informed that currently more than 40 female staff have a leading role in the implementation for their projects. In Faryab, the good governance team-leader is a woman and is overseeing all the activities in this sector and is acting as a gender focal point for the province. Two YDCs and four VTCs are managed by women. And, as noted above, female representation for the *manteqa* development platforms had a major increase during the last elections in 2022.

DACAAR emphasised their collaboration with CDCs, which according to DACAAR policy should include both women and men, as should the user groups and the water committees. It became difficult

to confirm the implementation of the policy during the fieldwork, as the team was not made aware of any female representation on the water management committee. And in contrast with ACTED, there were no female participants in the focus group meetings DACAAR had organised, although they were made aware that women had made petitions for projects.

DACAAR has a separate female vocational training programme with female staff, but the male team was not able to organise interviews with them or any female staff at the DACAAR office during the visit.

NAC has a policy for and reports on inclusion of both women and men in the CDCs/community organisations and various committees and associations they work with, including the Self-Help Group for Women. They reported that the Jaghori CDCs included both women and men, while in most parts of Badakhshan there was a separation between female and male CDC, but with mechanisms in place to ensure women's influence.

The fieldwork in Jaghori confirmed this statement and that the policy was continuing under the Taliban administration, with female CDC members confirming their involvement and influence in decision making (and asking for more influence). With the community representatives including the women firmly involved from the project planning to the monitoring, there is a stronger likelihood that the projects will be aware of and responsive to women's concerns and priorities throughout the process.

NCA's policy is to prioritise women and marginalised groups in all programming areas. Two of their Afghan Partner organisations are led by Afghan women and work explicitly on projects benefitting or protecting women and girls. A core principle of their long-lasting peace programme was to ensure involvement of and capacity building for women, such as for women to take a more prominent and visible role in conflict resolution and peace negotiations.

The evaluation reports and NCA reporting confirm these intentions and practices for their peace-programme. However, the Badakhshan fieldwork raises questions about the degree of community involvement and influence of both women and men on decision making, and the extent to which AWEC prioritised locally requested projects.

While NCA's own and partner reports emphasise a priority for projects benefitting women and girls, there is not sufficient evidence in the material reviewed to draw any firm conclusion on the extent of the involvement or influence of women (directly or indirectly) in priority setting and decision making.

NRC has a unique mandate to assist and protect the rights of refugees and IDPs, where many are women/girls and are categorised as vulnerable. For all projects reviewed, there was direct and sustained contact between the beneficiaries (including women/vulnerable individuals) and NRC staff and with groups representing the vulnerable/minority groups (such as the school committees). All interviewed provided a positive assessment of NRC's interaction with them and NRC's responsiveness to their requests.

ALP and ICLA are international and well tested programmes, as compared to projects intended to identify and respond to the needs of individual communities. The very positive responses recorded indicate, however, that NRC was in a position to respond to the needs of their target groups and had fostered a relationship that the target groups felt provided them contact with NRC staff and influence on NRC's decision making.

LEARNING POINTS AND SUGGESTION FOR ADJUSTMENTS

A general upshot is that the NGOs covered by this review have contributed to a number of significant and positive changes in Faryab and the other provinces/districts where they engaged. Interviewees in different project locations found the Norwegian projects relevant and that they to some extent reduced poverty and vulnerability, despite communities' current experiences of a humanitarian crisis and increased poverty in general. All of those interviewed requested further assistance, and many were explicit about the need for development assistance.

These opinions were supported by evaluations and review reports commissioned by the NGOs or MFA/NORAD throughout the project period. These found most projects to be relevant and effective and efficiently delivered, though impact was more difficult to measure for many projects and there were concerns raised over the sustainability of many interventions. Other evaluations and meta-studies of assistance to Afghanistan confirmed these findings.

The NGOs and the projects have adapted to a combination of learning from monitoring and evaluations and dealing with changing political and military realities, though without losing track of the overall ambitions of the projects. Social practices restricting women, Taliban regulations and corruption and nepotism in community organisations and government all posed challenges for the acceptance and implementation of the projects. Still, by March 2022, Norwegian funding for development programmes were continued, with NGOs confirmed most activities ongoing and able to find locally acceptable solutions to a more restrictive environment.

A lesson learned is that almost all projects and support are deemed relevant in a crisis such as the one that the Afghan population has and continues to experience. It was therefore encouraging that we found that communities raised their concerns when assistance or trainings were not deemed appropriate or of a sufficient quality.

A recurring request in many evaluations, which is supported by this review and the above observation, is for increased **independent field monitoring and evaluations** and for the NGOs to improve data collection to engage assessment of impact over time. This leads us to:

Recommend that MFA and NORA make it obligatory for NGOs have a monitoring system in place and to commission external and independent mid-term and endline evaluations and strengthen their own data collection when supporting projects in fragile contexts. The number and type of external reviews should, however, depend on the scale, type and length of each project.

All NGOs and their projects did relate to **at least one kind of community organisation**, either traditional, established as part of the National Solidarity Programme, set up by the respective NGOs, or some combination of these. Although the quality and impartiality of the various community organisations varied, in general we found that the Norwegian-funded projects had added to the strengthening of communities and their influence on priority setting and involvement in project implementation. The practice and degree of inclusion, including from women and marginalised groups, varied largely, and thus so did those groups' *de facto* ability to influence decision making and prioritisations – and subsequently the sustainability of the interventions. Limited information provided about project budgets reduces the community's ability to monitor and control the degree to which assistance allocated to it ends up used according to plans or to its prioritised needs.

We found NAC to have the most elaborate and reportedly best-functioning system for involving, maintaining and strengthening community-based organisations, which allows them to have influence from project identification to closure. NAC does this through an extension of the traditional CDCs with respected members of the community and by linking the various specialised sub-committees (and NAC projects) in with the main CDC. These examples of CDC/sub-committee cooperation featured women's representation, prioritised decision making and communities' management capacity (and ability to represent their demands to the government and aid agencies). These cooperative efforts

also built their capacity to mitigate and respond to disasters and climate change and to ensure the maintenance of the communal projects.

NAC emerges as closest to the ideal notion of community-led development.

ACTED with their *mantega shuras* had some of the same qualities, although it aimed to respond to needs and priorities in a larger (but traditionally cooperating) geographical area. While these *shuras* to some extent built on the CDC structure and were entrusted with managing contracting of communal projects, the inclusion and influence of women was less evident. Furthermore, communities appeared to have less direct influence on the projects ACTED implemented, although more and younger women were on these project-oriented committees.

ACTED combines community-led development with assistance implemented in collaboration with community bodies.

DACCAR and NRC both established and primarily relate to their specialised and project-related committees (such as for water, schools) and associations (such as farmer cooperatives), and worked to a lesser degree with the CDCs and their members. This is more understandable for the NRC projects, as they feature more of a specialisation on intended beneficiaries and a more limited time-horizon than DACAAR's clearly stated community-development objectives. Such a strategy can prove effective (and less bureaucratic) for project management while ensuring that information is provided to the direct beneficiaries and based on the feedback received. Such a strategy can, however, delink these activities from communal planning and the community's taking responsibility.

DACAAR and NRC, despite their different mandates, are primarily implementing aid projects in collaboration with selected community bodies and thereby be community-based.

NCA is for the reasons described above *more difficult to pass a judgement on*. They have a clear intention to promote and support community-led development through Afghan NGOs, and some evaluations confirm that their efforts have been successful. However, the Badakhshan case poses a question if that is the case for NCA Partners.

Despite a challenging environment and limitations set by culture and traditions, the fieldwork established that NAC and ACTED were able to develop and maintain a system for community involvement and leadership that goes beyond the management of the projects they fund and helps establish self-sustained communal organisations and systems. That conclusion will be tested over time, and it will therefore be important to establish solid data and continued monitoring of how the community organisations function and adapt over time. This is the learning point that might hold the largest influence on NGOs' and communities' ability to meet the project objectives and fulfil the DAC criteria.

These points lead us to:

Recommend NGOs to seek knowledge from the NAC model and consider adjusting their own approaches for community engagement. This seems particularly important for the inclusion and involvement of women and marginalised groups, despite the additional challenges and limitations the Taliban administration presently imposes.

Corruption was a recurring theme during the fieldwork, and various types of community organisations handled it differently, depending on their ability to distance themselves from powerful individuals and groups. Not only does corruption redirect assistance away from those most in need and/or reduce the communal value and impact of the Norwegian-funded interventions, but it is also likely

to reduce communal coherence and trust, including in the NGOs and their staff (who themselves can be tempted or convinced to benefit from the assistance).

The NAC- and ACTED-supported community organisations emerged as the best suited to and best enabled to address and avoid corruption and misuse of resources.

DACAAR and NRC rated in a mid-position, with a more selected and limited involvement of community organisations (but with their own preventive and monitoring systems in place).

One NCA partner emerged as not paying sufficient attention to the potential corruption challenges in their Badakhshan project, leading to communal complaints. Nonetheless, we are not in a position to judge if NCA could have done more to strengthen either their own control or that of their partner NGO.

Despite the Taliban's claim to address corruption in aid programming, corruption is a deeply embedded practice that is likely to continue in one form or another. A massive influx of humanitarian assistance as we see in early 2022 is by definition challenging to control, and the current fragmented aid system exposed limited will for cooperation, which increased the likelihood for (systemic) misuse. With a cash-strapped Taliban, local competition over resources is likely, and it is challenging for the UN and NGOs to refuse benefitting "local Taliban", even if working with or through community organisations.

Working with well-established and accepted community organisations tasked to monitor and sustain aid investments is to some extent an antidote to corruption, as is for the NGOs to communicate to them their plans and budgets so as to allow the community organisations to hold the NGOs (and donors) accountable. All of this leads us to:

Recommend that NGOs combine internal anti-corruption policies and routines with monitoring, ensuring community (and not only elite) involvement in the project cycle (or aid distribution) and clarity on plans and budgets.

This leads us to the conclusion and recommendations.

CONCLUSION

This review has established that the Norwegian-funded CDD and related projects have met critical needs in Afghanistan, and both NGOs and projects supported receive a positive assessment from the intended beneficiaries and past and present representatives of the Afghan administration.

The fieldwork established that while projects were relevant and the NGOs managed to secure an impact in an increasingly challenging context, communities' needs have not subsided, but rather have increased due to a continued drought, Covid-19 and, more recently, the sanctions imposed on the new Taliban administration. Their strict gender policy and limitations imposed on girls' education, female employment and movement, along with a general disrespect for basic human rights and media's independence, constitute major hindrances for continued large scale development support for Afghanistan.

While the NGOs continue to provide humanitarian assistance, there is an understanding that this is not sufficient to counter the sharp increase in poverty, if underlying causes remain unaddressed, businesses are not sustained, and new jobs are not created. This will again depend on the Taliban administration's willingness and ability to introduce a governance structure and type of administration accepted by the majority of the Afghans, as well as the lifting of their limitations on girls' education and women's ability to take part in and contribute to societal processes and development.

It is therefore welcome that while Norwegian funding through the Taliban administration was frozen from August 2021, development assistance through NGOs (including the five reviewed) and multilateral organisations was continued.

This review has established that community organisations – when operating in accordance with best principles for community-led development – can identify, manage and take a lead on assistance provision, and build mechanisms for controlling the aid flow and sustaining (at least smaller) investments. The community organisations remain outside of the formal governance system and excluded from the international sanction regime, as the UN agencies and NGOs are.

The fieldwork established that NGOs with development and humanitarian objectives, but not solely working on human rights and advocacy, have been able to continue their operations and projects targeting women, girls and marginalised groups. They have had to subject themselves to a degree of control by the Taliban administration (as they did with the previous one)³⁰ and have relationships with their local appointees in order to continue their assistance. However, the fieldwork establishes that the NGOs reviewed maintained control over their projects and funding.

This review therefore

Recommends a continuation of the Norwegian support for community-driven development in Afghanistan, as it contributes to reducing poverty, meeting critical needs of vulnerable populations and ensuring continued support for employment, education and increased societal influence and participation for girls and women.

It is though important that the support **to the largest degree possible be community-driven**, as to protect it from misuse and diversion towards power elites, now including the Taliban. This might require a degree of contact and dialogue with the Taliban administration locally, and transparency about assistance provided and requirements set for community involvement and beneficiary selection.

However, that recommendation would be accompanied by suggestions for placing more emphasis on the relations to and strengthening the capacity of community-accepted bodies, ensuring that assistance meets local needs, increasing monitoring and ensuring an independent evaluation. The lack of a recognised government to assume responsibility for the projects in the longer run and in impoverished communities is a challenge for securing sustainability of investments and defining an

³⁰ The Taliban administration's Ministry of Economy's draft NGO regulation is remarkably similar to the one presented by the Ghani-led Government.

exit strategy. These aspects should, however, not be overlooked, and the NGOs must at least uphold **demands for community contributions to the projects** to set them aside from humanitarian assistance and look for projects that the community can take responsibility for. Moreover, the NGOs need to maintain rights-based principles in the dialogue and interaction with the Taliban and communities on the need and rights for girls, women and minorities to not only be eligible for support but to be active participants in decision making and project selection and implementation.

Given the continued drought that influences poverty and migration patterns, there is also a general recommendation to remain **extremely cautious with respect to the longer-term water management aspects** for projects related to water supply, irrigation and improved agricultural production.

Projects that can contribute to **local employment and income generation for the most vulnerable** and poor (and often illiterate) are particularly important and should be kept in mind when identifying and planning for vocational training projects.

In this regard **education projects**, and especially those for girls and women, should remain a high priority. The NRC's community-based education projects were rated highly and are, in the current situation, of high importance as they provide girls access to education. Vocational training for girls/young women, as ACTED provided, will have an important function in securing for more women skills that qualify them for paid jobs. Although not included in the fieldwork, the same arguments can be made for continued support for NGO projects aimed at increasing literacy and securing basic, additional and professional education for girls and women.

It should be kept in mind that although the overall conflict level is at least temporarily reduced, 40 years of conflict have led to numerous local conflicts and the denial of legal, property and land use rights. This should warrant that the Norwegian supported NGOs apply a conflict-sensitive approach and the **continuation of (at least) the local peacebuilding and conflict transformation and dialogue initiatives**, not least as they will help ensure better interlinkages between projects and actors and thereby contribute to the "triple nexus".

A final suggestion is that the NGOs supported through these Norwegian funds take the opportunity this review has enabled them **to learn from each other's ways of engaging with and building the capacity of local communities and the CDCs**, and from each other's ways of engaging and relating to central and local authorities. The organisations and their staff represent at least 30 years of experience of working in Afghanistan and with Afghan communities. Sharing of positive and negative experiences and ensuring collaboration in the field could be an additional strength for a coming project period.

The **broader reflection** from the Afghanistan case is that community-driven development has proven to function well in fragile states and contexts when it has stuck to the principle of involving the local population in a meaningful way and has found ways to counterbalance the influence of powerful individuals and groups aiming to monopolise the assistance.

There are **three main observations** to keep in mind to ensure a degree of success on behalf of the intended beneficiaries:

The first observation is that any external resources in a situation with large unmet needs will trigger competition over access and control. Communal involvement, information sharing about project plans and budgets and an attention to sustainability all have a demonstrated ability to counter these challenges.

The second observation is that any development process is unlikely to be linear but is rather necessarily going to be a constantly renegotiated process with changing power dynamics. Strong communal rooting, understanding of shifts in communal power and influence and ability (and will) to adjust the composition of organisations/groups an NGO is engaging with can mitigate such changes.

The third observation is that in the end, community-led development depends upon assistance-delivering organisations and their staff, and their visions and policies, but not least investments in building and developing female and male staff's professional and organisational skills and to ensure an organisational learning culture.

ANNEX I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

Revised 11.10.2021

Review of Norwegian support for Community-Driven Development in Afghanistan

Introduction

Norway has since the early 1980s contributed with emergency relief and later rehabilitation and development assistance in Afghanistan. Since 2001, more of the assistance has been channelled through multi-donor trust funds such as the ARTF and LOTFA, contributing towards the Afghan government's development priorities, combined with continued support for NGOs as the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC), Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

Deployment of Norwegian armed forces as a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to the Faryab province in 2005 led to an increase in allocation of development and humanitarian resources. In addition to Norwegian NGOs, assistance was also provided through the Danish NGO DACAAR and the French NGO ACTED, both engaging in different types of community-driven development. Since the military withdrawal from Faryab in 2014, Taliban intrusion and increased insecurity has imposed a range of challenges for the provincial government and NGOs working in different districts.

A set of evaluations and meta studies of Afghan rural development programmes point to some success but raises questions over impact and sustainability of the interventions. There are international studies that document positive aspects of rural development (including agriculture projects), but few – if any – studies from fragile areas such as Faryab. We have neither identified any comparison of how NGOs with different thematic priorities (as rural development, WASH, education) and implementation strategies have operated and adjusted their activities over time within one geographical area such as Faryab.

Research proposal

The aim of this research project is to review and analyse the experiences with Norwegian-funded, NGO-implemented community-driven development projects in the Faryab province of Afghanistan, with an emphasis on the period 2018 – 2021, to:

- Compare approaches taken by the different NGOs in relation to how projects are organised in the different locations, and how they might have been adjusted and developed over the implementation period.
- Compare and analyse the methods used in earlier evaluations to estimate the impact of the different types of interventions and how important the projects are for poverty reduction, community development and broad participation.
- Compare and analyse the sustainability of the different interventions and approaches for community involvement.
- Compare and analyse the extent of including women and marginalised groups in decision making, project implementation and monitoring/evaluation.
- Provide learning points on how projects – if required – can be adjusted and developed to increase participation, impact and sustainability.

- In light of recent developments identify and discuss viability of and limitations to possible options for continuation, implementation and sustainability of community driven development programmes in Afghanistan. This includes questions as:

What are the NGOs experiences from operating in Taliban governed areas/Afghanistan, including differences and similarities with the first period of Taliban rule?

What have been the main challenges encountered and (possibly) opportunities arising at national, province and district levels?

Have they experienced or managed to overcome limitations on movement, employments, implementation of projects or interaction with communities and community bodies, and in particular projects favoring girls/women/minorities?

Have they experienced pressure to discriminate against girls/women/minorities when providing universal services?

To what extent has international sanctions, funding restrictions or Taliban policy influenced project implementations, and do they envisage ways to overcome these – individually, collectively – and in case through which mechanisms?

For the longer run: what implication might these recent changes hold for the importance of and ability to working with and through community bodies and for community driven development projects?

And, time and budget permitting, provide a comparison of use of international funding mechanisms and implications of sanctions on humanitarian/development funding and implementation from other countries and/ or regions.

We suggest multiple methods.

- A desk review and analysis of available progress, monitoring and evaluation reports from the Norwegian-funded projects and possibly reports from other donors supporting similar projects in Faryab.
- A desk review of the literature on community-driven development, with a focus on experiences from countries and areas of fragility.
- Remote interviews with HQ and a selected number of local staff (with interpreters) of the 5 NGOs on their experiences with implementing these Norwegian-funded projects, and their reflections on learning and suggestions for possible adjustments of approach towards/with the communities and their project implementation.
- Based on the above: remote interviews with a selected number of government staff (Kabul and Faryab) involved in community-driven development projects, MFA and NORAD experts, and a number of international thematic experts (as on education and WASH) with experience from Afghanistan.
- If security permits, and possibly limited to one intervention area: collaborate with an Afghanistan-based research institute/company for interviews with agency field staff – including monitors/evaluators – and a selected number of male/female/youth beneficiaries and CDC members with an emphasis on their participation, impact and sustainability of interventions and possible suggestions for adjustments.

Research team

Dr. Magnus Hatlebakk, Dr. Arne Strand, Dr. Torunn Wimpelmann and Afghan Research Institute/ Company (to be negotiated)

ANNEX II: EVALUATIONS, BASELINE ASSESSMENT AND EXTERNAL REPORTS

General

Christoph Zürcher (2020) *Meta-Review of Evaluations of Development Assistance to Afghanistan, 2008 – 2018. Chapeau Paper*. Commissioned by Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Germany. Division for Afghanistan and Pakistan

Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED)

ACTED's Appraisal Monitoring and Evaluation Unit (AMEU) (2018) *Increased access to quality education for women and girls in Faryab, Afghanistan*. Qualitative achievement report

ACTED's Appraisal Monitoring and Evaluation Unit (AMEU) (2018) *Increased Access to Quality Education for Women and Girls in Faryab, Afghanistan*. Endline Assessment Report, September 2018

AGORA (2019) *Sustained Rural Development Programme Phase IV, Manteqa Profiles: Findings from Key Informant Interviews in Northern Afghanistan*. Commissioned by Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development

AGORA (2019) *Baseline Assessment: Household Component. Quantitative Findings from Jawzjan, Samangan, Faryab, and Balkh Provinces*. Commissioned by Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development

Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR)

NCG/Tadbeer consulting (2018) *End review of the Norwegian Ministry of Affairs (MFA) support to the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR)*. Field Report January 2018. Commissioned by the Norwegian MFA

Tagheer Mosbat (2020) *Rural Development Program in the Faryab Province. Mid-term review Report*. Commissioned by the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees

Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC)

ATR Consulting (2018) *Program Review of the 'Integrated Rural Development (IRD)' program and Facilitation of Country Program Strategy. Final Report*. Commissioned by the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee.

ATR Consulting (2019) *Conflict Transformation and Dialogue Training, field research report 3*. Commissioned by the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee

NAC (2019) *Empowering Rural Afghanistan (ERA): Project Baseline Report*, NAC Monitoring and Evaluation Unit.

Washington University of St. Louise (2020) *2020 EEQAP report. Education Equity and Quality in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Commissioned by the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee, Swedish Committee for Afghanistan and National Rural Support Programme

NAC (2021) *Midline Review Report, Empowering Rural Afghanistan Program (ERA)*, NAC Monitoring and Evaluation Unit.

Afghan Australian Research and Management (2021) *A Review of Food Security and Natural Resource Management Component of the Empowering Rural Afghan Communities (ERA) program*. Commissioned by the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee

Norwegian Church Aid (NCA)

Norunn Grande (2016) *Religious Actors for Peace. Evaluation 3rd Phase of Project 2016-2018*. Commissioned by Norwegian Church Aid

Assess, Transform & Reach Consulting (ATR) (2018) *Midterm Review of "Building Resilient Communities for Sustainable Development and Peace 2016 - 2018 (Phase 2)*. Commissioned by Norwegian Church Aid

Stephen Van Houten (2018) *Strengthening the Religious Actors' Network for Peace, 2017-2018*. Commissioned by Norwegian Church Aid

Stephen Van Houyten and Sarah Pugh (2020) *Final Evaluation of the Social Council for Consolidation of Peace (SCCP) programme (Phase 6)*. Commissioned by Norwegian Church Aid

Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)

Samuel Hall Consulting (2014) *Evaluation of NRC's Youth Education Pack (YEP) projects in Faryab, Herat and Nangarhar*. Commissioned by NRC Afghanistan

Notio Partners (2014) Information. *Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLKA) Programme Evaluation*. Commissioned by Norwegian Refugee Council

NRC (with Samuel Hall Consulting) (2014) *Strengthening Displaced Women's Housing, Land and Property Rights in Afghanistan*.

NRC (2018), *Education in Emergencies, Children in Distress: A Child Protection Risk Analysis for NRC Afghanistan's Education Programme*. Kabul, Afghanistan.

NRC (2019) *Outcome Monitoring Report: Grey Water filtration. Gardens for Schools in Herat (AFFM1808)*

NRC (2020) *AFFM2008 ICLA Indicator Result Summary 2020*

ANNEX III: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview questions for semistructured interviews

Ver 18.11.2021

For guidance, to be adapted to the local context and whom the field team is able to interview/meet in each location.

Kabul offices

(Introduction to the review and objectives of planned field visits)

1. General questions on their assessment of the implementation of the Norwegian-funded Community development Programmes, where they were implemented, type of projects (self-implemented or through partners), and whether they are continued today and where?
2. What are the main “learning points” for:
 - a. *community (and gender, minority) involvement, how did the CDCs function*
 - b. *contribution to poverty reduction*
 - c. *security/corruption challenges*
 - d. *sustainability of their projects, how is it secured?*
3. Where are they operating today with Norwegian funding or planning for the continuation of their CDP project – with what projects, target groups and where?
4. What have been their main challenges and (possibly) opportunities operating at national, province and district levels – including:
 - a. *maintaining/recruiting staff (male/female)*
 - b. *continuing projects/activities*
 - c. *security/travels/transport*
 - d. *community contact*
 - e. *and, relations with authorities?*
 - f. *working with partner NGOs and the impact of the recent changes on their ability to operate*
5. As of today, do they envisage any changes to their CDPs – and if so, what changes?
6. For the fieldwork and applying a conflict-sensitive approach, any guidance on whom to meet and questions to ask?

Province and districts

Audience 1: Project beneficiaries, DCDs and individual members/villagers/observers

1. A general question about the situation in the area, as for security, drought, migration, food availability, communal relations, relations with authorities...
2. Their knowledge about the NGO and the project (and budget?), and
 - a. *assessment of the performance*
 - b. *community/individual benefit from then project*
 - c. *were some benefitting less or more from the project*
 - d. *were both men and women involved in/benefitting from the project*
 - e. *were the NGO's staff decisions influenced by anyone, like elders, government officials, etc.*
 - f. *do you think some people in your community are well skilled to influence NGOs staff to benefit personally or channel aid to one village or community?*
3. To what extent have the communities/CDC's participated in:
 - a. *decision making about the project*
 - b. *in implementation (what did they contribute with)*
 - c. *were they suggestions changes to the project*
 - d. *in monitoring and evaluation*
 - e. *in the maintenance/ sustainability of the project?*
4. What do they regard as the main results from the project, as in:
 - a. *positive changes in/to their community*
 - b. *as increased income/reduced poverty*
 - c. *improvement to their livelihood*
 - d. *benefits for children/women, marginalized groups/persons?*
5. Have they noted negative impacts, such as:
 - a. *conflicts within the community/neighborhood*
 - b. *changes to their natural resources (i.e., access to water, agricultural land)*
 - c. *challenges with maintenance of structures (i.e., buildings, waterpumps... depending on types of projects)*
 - d. *misuse of corruption?*
6. If a new project should be started, what would their main recommendations be for:
 - a. *what type of projects are most needed in their community*
 - b. *implementers' relations with and responsibility delegated to the CDC (and/or other community organisations)*
 - c. *ways to organise the projects*
 - d. *relations with authorities?*
7. Open question, but possibly if several NGOs operate there: are there other projects in your community/neighborhood, and any thoughts on this project and implementer compared to others?

Audience 2, NGO staff

0. A general question about their assessment of the situation in the area and their role as NGO, as for security, drought, migration, food availability, communal relations, relations with authorities, etc.
1. How do they assess the impact and quality of the project implemented in general and in particular communities, and were there unexpected challenges or results?
2. How was their relationship/interaction with the CDC and the community:
 - a. *did the CDC or others in the community participate in decision making*
 - b. *to what extent did women participate and how*
 - c. *in implementation (what did they contribute with)*
 - d. *in monitoring and evaluation*
 - e. *and in the maintenance and securing sustainability of the project?*
3. What were the main results from the project, as in positive changes in/to the community, and how was/is the project sustained – or not?
4. Have they noted negative impacts, to the community or them as NGO/individuals? Keeping in mind:
 - a. *conflicts within the community/neighborhood, (including gender related)*
 - b. *changes to their natural resources (i.e., access to water);*
 - c. *challenges with maintenance of structures (i.e., buildings, waterpumps... depending on types of projects);*
 - d. *misuse or corruption*
5. If a new project should be started, what would their main recommendations be for:
 - a. *what type of projects are most needed in this community*
 - b. *relations with and responsibility delegated to the CDC (and/or other community organisations/members)*
 - c. *ways to organise the projects; inclusion of women and marginalised groups*
 - d. *relations with authorities?*
6. If several NGOs operate here; are initiatives coordinated among the NGOs and with the local and province government?
7. More open question on future challenges, for the NGO and for them as NGO staff

Audience 3, District authorities

1. A general question about their assessment of the situation in the area and their role as government, as for security/rule of law, drought, migration, delivering services to the population
2. What is their knowledge of the project implemented and the NGO implementing it
3. Any thoughts on the quality and sustainability of the project
4. Have the project reached those in most need, and has their situation improved
5. What positive changes have they noted from the project
6. What negative impacts if any, or existing conflicts among the communities were exacerbated as a result of the project
7. How has their relationship been with the NGO
8. If continuation of the project, any priorities to keep in mind or adjustments to suggest
9. Generally, what would they describe as the largest humanitarian and development challenges in their district?

Audience 4, Province authorities

1. A general question about their assessment of the situation in the area and their role as government, as for security/rule of law, drought, migration, delivering services to the population
2. What is their knowledge of the projects implemented and the NGO implementing them
3. Any thoughts on the quality and sustainability of the projects implemented in the province
4. Have the projects contributed to positive changes in the province
5. How, in general, is their collaboration and relationship with the NGOs
6. Generally, what would they describe as the largest humanitarian and development challenges in their district?
7. What do they regard as the responsibility of the government to respond to, and where could the NGOs assist?


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