Towards Community Empowerment for Poverty Reduction: Study of Community-Driven Development in Herat, Afghanistan

Summary of Dissertation

Most of the Afghan population lives in rural areas where agriculture and husbandry are the main sources of their income. The agricultural production is not enough to meet all the needs of the local residents. In this case, a large number of rural people suffer from poverty. In addition, local communities face lack of access to basic services in the most part of the county. Therefore, local communities need external assistance in order to achieve a more moderately prosperous life. This dissertation aims to present poverty situation throughout the country and addresses rural development programs, including National Solidarity Program (NSP) and National Area-Based Development Program (NABDP), which were launched by Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) of Afghanistan with financial and technical support from the international community in order to empower local communities and eradicate the poverty.

Local communities have suffered more than any other social entities in terms of poverty and lack of access to basic services, including education, health, safe-drinking water, useful irrigation system, sufficient roads, and many more facilities. Since 2003, impressive efforts for the purpose of community
empowerment and local capacity building with the delivery of rural development activities change the situation and brought many hopes for local residents. In the beginning, Community Development Council (CDC) and District Development Assembly (DDA) were established as local institutions and community representatives at the village and district level to directly be in charge of identifying local priorities and implementation of NSP and NABDP funded sub-projects. The detail description of this study is summarized as below:

Towards Community Empowerment for Poverty Reduction

Poverty is an acute and catastrophic problem across the country of Afghanistan. This extreme and disastrous poverty originates from multiple instabilities, including war, security, and political issues. In a war situation, all efforts are subjected to the security and military issues. This is where the issue of providing basic services, including all utilities and development objectives are ignored. Such circumstances lead the people to migrate, suffer from jobless, and remain poor as always. Furthermore, dependency of the Afghan population on the agriculture sector which faces huge infrastructure problems, lack of knowledge, poor irrigation system, natural disasters, and tens of other problems are the main indicators of poverty in this county.

Therefore, rural development and poverty reduction are the key issues in Afghanistan which require government responsibility, and run in parallel with the needs of community participation to change the living situation in rural Afghanistan. Since the government acquires it’s meaning and moral legitimacy based on the response and demands of the society, therefore the ultimate goal for
those who are in positions of power and have a responsibility to be ensuring the peoples’ survival, livelihoods and dignity – by government and the international community – including the protection, provision and empowerment of local communities. Moreover, those who are in the position of receiver – people and communities – must take responsibility to demand and defend their rights.

Rural development and community empowerment can bring and facilitate the direction of improved happiness. Community empowerment as an approach of the rural development ensures local communities can overcome their priority problems. Government and empowered community can closely work to gain development achievements and create a favorable living condition for people in need through investment in local people. Such an atmosphere supports mutual trust among both government and the people. Vulnerable populations, who endured years of hardship, are not able to meet their needs. They need an insider and outsider to support them, both in terms of technical and financial help, in order to achieve development objectives and have a better life.

Afghans should take an active role in the development process, both as beneficiaries and as performers. Their participation can lead to better planning of projects and avoid costly errors. As Afghanistan’s history has shown, these mistakes can be very costly in economic terms, and most importantly, it can create severe humanitarian consequences. To link the development of early and long-term horizons, people need to be involved in the restoration and their potential benefits for maintenance of the sustainable development and peace building.
Local Institutions and Participation for Rural Development

Designing rural development programs, such as NSP and NABDP were ultimately associated with the needs of local communities across Afghanistan. These programs were formulated on the bases of Community-Based Development (CBD) and Community-Driven Development (CDD) approaches. Such Community-Based Rural Development Programs were introduced by World Bank/IDA and UNDP based on their experience and lessons learned from other developing countries. Since the CDD approach mainly concentrates on rural communities, it was the first experience for Afghan communities to take part in their development activities and made them responsible to act as the main decision makers.

Implementation of NSP and NABDP programs started through a systematic procedure where community mobilization and empowerment, followed by project implementation, in almost all villages throughout Afghanistan. Elections of CDCs as community representatives at the village level, and DDAs at the district level provided successful community participation. This community participatory aspect has enhanced the capability of mobilizing people and encouraged communities to identify and plan their own development projects effectively. Furthermore, such efforts were facilitated by the service being delivered with a high impact in rural areas. Culturally, the people of Afghanistan have a tight and friendly relationship among them, their collective activity and decision making in solving the problems and dealing with challenges makes everything easier as they know each other predominantly.
Community mobilization and situation analysis have been systematically processed for the purpose of better identification of the needs and problems, and searching for the best way of action and solution. Government itself cannot achieve the ultimate rural development goals, but providing a comfortable living situation for local communities is possible with the direct engagement of communities in rural development activities. Despite the political instability and security problems that are big challenges in Afghanistan, NSP could cover more than three-fourths of the rural communities to deliver its development activities.

Forming local institutions, including CDCs and DDAs, ensures community participation in which both men and women committed to act as a responsible body of decision-makers at all stages of the project cycle. Being engaged in the project life cycle makes local institutions more capable to plan, implement, and monitor their development projects. Whenever they work sincerely and honestly, they become more popular and more energetic among the community. In addition, their transparent and accountable way of performing makes government more responsive to their demands.

Currently, there are nearly 34,000 CDCs established as local institutions to serve and implement rural development projects at the village level. More than 70% of CDCs could successfully disburse their allocated block grants. Elected CDCs could prepare their CDPs on the basis of their most critical priorities and needs because of NSP limited funds. But most of the CDCs are concretely concerned about the sustainability of implemented sub-projects and are trying to obtain the commitment of other organizations and donors in order to implement
more rural development projects in their home towns. NSP could function as an educational institution on the ground, where CDCs members and other involved entities gained development knowledge and capacity enhancement.

NABDP, as the other national development program, has carried out rural development activities from 2002 to 2016 with the main goal of the sustainable reduction of poverty. DDAs were formed as local institutional at the district level in order to work closely with government and non-government entities to deliver better development activities for beneficiaries. DDA institutionalization, poverty reduction, institutional capacity development, and strengthening DDAs as a channel for productive infrastructure and socioeconomic development were the main focused areas of the NABDP. It was an important achievement for NABDP to link villages and districts with provincial and central government through DDAs.

Participation of women in development activities is also impressive attention for rural development. Women experienced the worst social situation in Afghanistan. For instance, during the Taliban regime employment opportunity, education, or even shopping was forbidden for women. Even now a large number of women live in an unacceptable condition in the southern parts of the county as there are segregated women only CDCs or segregated women only DDAs. In some instances, it is based on cultural norms and values, where women are not allowed to take part in any public areas. However, it is tangible that women have active involvement in almost all sectors in most parts of the country, such as education, health, industry, security, media, and so forth. Unfortunately, there are
still many challenges, including cultural norms and values, high illiteracy rate, and limited job opportunities which show the low level of women’s participation in any activities.

**Attitudes and Perceptions toward Rural Development**

Generally, formulating rural development programs was an incredible form of helping rural Afghan communities in history. There are observable impacts of implementing different sub-projects under NSP and NABDP both in terms of social and economic development. For example, the establishment of CDCs and DDAs provided social networking within the communities and made them more active and responsible to identify their priorities and implement their own wanted development projects. Currently, a larger number of local residents have access to basic services, including education, health, safe-drinking water, and many more infrastructures.

The overall peoples’ perception regarding the CDC and DDA activities and responsibilities indicates that most of the CDCs and DDAs members are influential people in Ghoryan, Guzarah, and Shindand districts, unlike many of the CDCs and DDAs members who are experienced and competent persons in Injil, Karokh, and Zinda Jan districts. CDCs and DDAs members are mainly focusing on their own benefits by implementing NSP projects in Ghoryan and Guzarah districts, but the public and social benefit is the main purpose of the CDCs and DDAs members in Injil, Karokh, Shindand, and Zinda Jan districts. Communities as beneficiaries of the NSP and NABDP projects are satisfied with CDC and DDA activities at a neutral level and their livelihood improved
moderately. Lastly, CDC and DDA members are trying to do their best for the maintenance and sustainability of the implemented projects, but they could perform at a moderate level.