

LISTENING PROJECT

Field Visit Report

Afghanistan

April – May 2009



This document was developed as part of a collaborative learning project directed by CDA. It is part of a collection of documents that should be considered initial and partial findings of the project. These documents are written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across a range of situations. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people at the time when it was written.

These documents do not represent a final product of the project. While these documents may be cited, they remain working documents of a collaborative learning effort. Broad generalizations about the project's findings cannot be made from a single case.

CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of the individuals and agencies involved in donating their time, experience and insights for these reports, and for their willingness to share their experiences.

Not all the documents written for any project have been made public. When people in the area where a report has been done have asked us to protect their anonymity and security, in deference to them and communities involved, we keep those documents private.

Table of Contents

Background on the Listening Project.....	4
The Listening Exercise in Afghanistan.....	4
Brief Note on the Context and History of International Assistance in Afghanistan.....	5
What People Said	7
1. Appreciation for Assistance and Positive Changes	7
2. Corruption.....	10
3. The Influence of Power Structures	13
4. Lack of Monitoring and the Importance of Presence.....	14
5. External Pressures and Agendas	16
6. Community Consultations.....	18
7. Quality and Gaps in Assistance.....	20
<i>Poor Quality</i>	20
<i>Piecemeal Assistance</i>	22
<i>Expectations</i>	23
<i>Aid not reaching remote areas</i>	24
8. Relationships between Conflict and Insecurity and Aid Efforts.....	25
9. Dependency and Powerlessness.....	27
10. Differentiation among Implementers of Aid Efforts	28
<i>Insider–Outsider Dynamics</i>	30
Concluding Reflections from LP Team Facilitators.....	31

Background on the Listening Project

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, with a number of colleagues in international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors and other humanitarian and development agencies, has established the Listening Project to undertake a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the ideas and insights of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient side of international assistance efforts. The Listening Project seeks the reflections of experienced and thoughtful people who occupy a range of positions within recipient societies to assess the impact of aid efforts by various international actors. Those who work across borders in humanitarian aid, development assistance, peace-building efforts, environmental conservation, and human rights work can learn a great deal by listening to the analyses and suggestions of local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term impacts of such efforts.

The Listening Teams are made up of staff from international and local aid agencies, with facilitators from CDA. The teams do not use pre-established questionnaires or a rigid interview protocol. Rather, we tell people that, as individuals engaged in international assistance work, we are interested to hear from them how they perceived these efforts. We ask if they would be willing to spend some time with us, and to share their opinions and ideas. In this way, we converse about their issues of concern, without pre-determining specific topics.

Many conversations are held with one or two individuals, but in some cases, larger groups form and what begins as small-group dialogues becomes, in effect, free-flowing group discussions. In most cases, conversations are not pre-arranged (except for appointments with government officials and other key stakeholders). A Listening Team travels to a community and strikes up a conversation with whomever was available and willing to talk, speaking both to people who have and have not received international assistance.

Over a period of four years, the Listening Project has visited twenty locations, with Afghanistan being the 15th. The Project is gathering what we hear from people in all of these locations in order to integrate these insights into future aid work and, thereby, to improve its effectiveness.

A collaborative learning process such as the Listening Project depends entirely on the people who took time to share their thoughts with us, and on the involvement and significant contributions of all the participating agencies. Those staff and community members who were involved in Afghanistan deserve great appreciation for their generous support, insights, and dedication.

The Listening Exercise in Afghanistan

The Listening Project organized a ten-day listening exercise in Afghanistan in late April 2009, with generous support from the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and the following international and local NGOs: Agence d'Aide à la Coopération Technique Et au Développement (ACTED), Afghan Aid, Aga Khan Trust for Culture, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Concern, Sanayee Development Organization (SDO), Shuhada, and UN Habitat. The participating agencies provided invaluable logistical support and staff to participate on the Listening Teams. In total, twenty-two staff from these organizations took part in

listening, and most of them were Afghan nationals, men and women, representing various ethnic backgrounds and several provinces of the country. In addition, CDA provided three facilitators who traveled out to the provinces, took part in the conversations, and facilitated the analysis.

Listening Teams visited neighborhoods in Kabul city and north of Kabul, and communities in and around Bamiyan and Badakhshan Provinces. These provinces were proposed by the participating agencies and selected in consultation with CDA based on where they had the most staff to contribute to the listening effort. The Listening Project made an effort to organize field visits in less secure areas of the country, however due to safety considerations and fewer staff available from organizations working there, the areas visited were all relatively stable and secure. The Listening Project is aware of this limitation in the scope of this field visit report and we acknowledge that the conversations contained herein represent only a small fraction of the opinions and experiences of the people in Afghanistan. We have captured a valuable snapshot of some perspectives and opinions on the cumulative effects of international assistance and have added these insights to the overall body of evidence gathered by the Listening Project. However, we do not attempt to draw broad conclusions from this visit. Subject to safety concerns and availability of funding, we will continue to pursue opportunities to listen in other provinces of the country to supplement what people said in April 2009.

In total, the Listening Teams in Afghanistan held 140 conversations with 300 people. Conversations involved men and women, youth and elderly people, people who have been direct recipients of international assistance and those who have not. Listening Teams met with representatives of local municipalities, village and religious leaders, local NGOs and community based organizations, school personnel, university professors and students, medical personnel, farmers, shopkeepers, internally displaced people, and other randomly selected people.

In addition to the listening conversations held in the provinces, Listening Project facilitators conducted a one and a half-day Feedback Session with government officials, representatives from the UN system and international and local NGOs, hosted by the MRRD. CDA facilitators shared the findings and analysis of what people have said in previous Listening Exercises (captured in Issues Papers available on the CDA website) and invited feedback and reflections from participants about their experiences in Afghanistan and other places. Some of their feedback is included in this report.

Brief Note on the Context and History of International Assistance in Afghanistan

After decades of war and interventions by outsiders, Afghanistan remains a highly fragmented and fragile state characterized by insecurity, deep structural poverty and a divided society. During the Cold War, various political and military factions within Afghanistan received external assistance from the Soviet Union and the United States, much of it in the form of military aid and weapons, which continue to be used today. External military assistance effectively dried up after Soviet forces pulled out of the country in 1989, while the Taliban and warlords sought control over large swaths of the country and its population.¹ In the 1990s, very

¹ Smart Development in Practice: Field report from Afghanistan. Oxfam America, p.2 <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/files/field-report-from-afghanistan.pdf>

little external assistance other than humanitarian aid trickled into Afghanistan as it was ravaged by civil war, and a large number of international aid agencies and Afghan aid workers assisted millions of refugees who fled to camps in Pakistan. Today, half of Afghanistan's population lives in absolute poverty, with over 2 million people lacking regular access to food, 70 % of the population are illiterate and 40% of the people are unemployed.²

Following the US invasion and the retreat of the Taliban forces in 2002, the international community pledged to support the security and reconstruction of Afghanistan. Currently 46 countries provide over 100,000 troops to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The United States, European Union, United Kingdom, Japan, and the World Bank are among over 60 countries and international financial institutions contributing to reconstruction and development efforts. While the international community has pledged \$25 billion to Afghanistan since 2001, it has only delivered \$15 billion, and assistance for reconstruction and development remains just a fraction of international contributions. Oxfam International reports that the "US military currently spends nearly \$100 million a day in the country, some \$36 billion a year. Yet the average volume of international aid provided by all donors since 2001 is woefully inadequate at just \$7 million per day."³

National Solidarity Program (NSP), a program initiated by the Afghan-government and funded by international donors, is widely recognized as a successful but under-funded rural development program. According to a recent policy brief by Center for a New American Security, "NSP is exemplary not simply in terms of the tangible services it has delivered to Afghanistan's population; 'owned' by the Afghans and run with an emphasis on transparency, the NSP is one of the few initiatives from Kabul to have generated significant goodwill among rural communities. Furthermore, the NSP has achieved concrete successes at a price tag considerably lower than large-scale, Western-led initiatives."⁴

Despite the massive injections of international assistance and security personnel, much of the international assistance has not been very effective due to endemic corruption, resurgent Taliban activity and a thriving illicit economy which have also combined to undermine the influence of the national government. Insecurity, weak state capacity, poor infrastructure and deeply ingrained mistrust have created a difficult environment for aid agencies to operate. Over 1,200 national and 301 international NGOs are currently registered in the country,⁵ and many have been exposed to threats and extortion as they struggle to differentiate themselves from the security agenda in an environment where the principle of "Do No Harm" has been repeatedly violated by non-humanitarian actors.

² U.S. Aid to Afghanistan by the Numbers, Center for American Progress
http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/08/left_behind.html

³ "Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan" Report by Matt Waldman, March 2008. Available at the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR).website: <http://www.acbar.org/>

⁴ John Nagl, Andrew Exum, Ahmed Humayun, "A Pathway to Success in Afghanistan: The National Solidarity Program: Policy Brief," March 2009, Center for New American Security. www.cnas.org

⁵ IRIN, "In Brief: Licenses of 172 NGOs in Afghanistan revoked." May 11, 2010.
<http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?ReportID=89089>

In Afghanistan, many donor governments are simultaneously combatants and aid providers, and there has been an increased use of for-profit contractors and the creation of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) to provide assistance in Afghanistan's provinces. PRTs function as joint civilian-military teams whose mission is to support the Afghan's government in extending good governance, security, and reconstruction throughout the country, and they primarily focus on construction of roads, schools, clinics, and technical assistance.⁶ However, according to countless reports, including one by the United States Institute of Peace, PRT-led assistance projects have "suffered from a lack of coordination and oversight. Military involvement in development brought criticism from relief agencies that claimed it put them at risk by blurring the distinction between combatants and humanitarian workers."⁷

Under these circumstances, listening to people on the receiving end of international assistance efforts has been both logistically challenging for aid agencies and highly susceptible to rapidly shifting dynamics. Reaching Afghans – particularly those in more remote and/or insecure areas – to build their confidence and trust, and engage them in reconstruction and development efforts, has been an extraordinary feat. For Afghans seeking to interact with international agencies, the implications have been profound – not least because the decision-makers for these interventions have often been out of reach.

What People Said

Several prominent themes emerged in the many conversations held with a range of people in Kabul and the surrounding areas, and in the provinces of Bamiyan and Badakhshan. Among the issues raised by people were the process of aid distribution and program implementation, corruption and influence of power structures, quality of and gaps in assistance and external priorities and agendas.

1. Appreciation for Assistance and Positive Changes

Many people expressed their gratitude for the outside assistance that has arrived since 2002. People made distinctions when speaking about interventions that have been most useful and impactful. For instance, many people mentioned improvements in infrastructure – roads, bridges, water, electricity, clinics and schools – as the most important developments at the community level. A sampling of the positive impacts people mentioned include:

“Any country that provides aid to Afghans, we pray for them and we pray for peace. I feel secure because of the international forces, if they were not here, neither you nor I would be here.”

Resident of Old City in Kabul

⁶ Since October 2006, the PRTs are part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission. There are currently 26 PRTs in Afghanistan, 12 of which are under US command. USAID Afghanistan/Provincial Reconstruction Teams Information Page.

<http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/Page.PRT.aspx>

⁷ United States Institute of Peace, “The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Lessons Identified”, Special Report by Robert M. Perito, October 2005, <http://www.usip.org/resources/us-experience-provincial-reconstruction-teams-afghanistan-lessons-identified>

“Agricultural aid and electricity has helped us to strengthen our economy and also helped psychologically. People are busy, less idle, engaged in work and they do not fight. They have less time to be engaged in illicit and unhelpful activities.”

Community member in Badakhshan Province

“A bridge was built by internationals here. Before this bridge, we had to carry our sick people on a donkey to the hospital and now we can go by road. It helped a lot.”

A woman in Badakhshan Province

“Life is a bit better now; we have electricity and potable water. Assistance has made a difference.”

Head of a Community Development Council (CDC) in Bamiyan Province

“The clinic here was built two years ago and it gives free medicine and vaccinations for children and adults. We see that the mortality rate is dropping and some of the illnesses that persisted here for long are being treated.”

A mother in Badakhshan Province

“We see big changes. Taliban destroyed everything and we had to rebuild our houses. Now, we have electricity and a school. We cooperated with another village for electricity. [An INGO] influenced us, but the result was ok. The decision was made through consultation: we invited one person for every ten families from the two villages. Everyone agreed because during the night, it is dark and kids could not do their homework. Also we no longer need to buy and carry kerosene for lighting.”

CDC members in Fulladi Valley in Bamiyan Province

“There was a wall constructed to divert the flood water to help save our village. Before the floods used to come and take my house. We feel more secure and not worried about the floods anymore.”

A woman in Badakhshan Province

“We are reasonably happy with the assistance. The road has made a big difference. The assistance [food for work for the road and free distributions of beams and building materials] went to more or less the right people.”

A farmer in Bamiyan Province

“If we had not received food aid we would have starved and would have had to leave our soil. Now we could stay because of the aid and we are grateful. Our situation has improved more than 50%—electricity, clean water, less sick people, and a road that has given people access.”

Community member in Badakhshan Province

“Before we had to carry water on our heads from the springs in the hills, now there is a water faucet in front of every house here which makes our lives much easier. We used to have headaches and the doctors told us it is because of the weight that we carried.”

A woman in Badakhshan Province

“Now we have a school building in our village--before we had tents for students. It was so hot in those tents that children were fainting and could not study. Things are better now.”

Community member in Badakhshan Province

“Community health workers are very good. They support people with basic medical care and have a very good impact on people’s health.”

Head of Shura (community council) in a village in Bamiyan Province

“Girls and boys go to school. People have received training in agricultural techniques. Because of aid distribution, the prices in the market were lowered which is a good thing for consumers.”

Community member in Badakhshan Province

“Now we have a road and a bus service, before we could only go with a donkey. Seven years ago, families were not allowing girls to go to school. Now people are educated and they no longer come to me to read and write their letters. Twenty years ago, my father and I were the only literate people in the village. Now the mullahs no longer resist girl’s education. They are neutral.”

Headmaster of a middle school in Bamiyan Province

“An aid agency brought us drinking water. Before that we didn’t have clean water and our children would get sick with diarrhea and other sickness.”

Villager in Badakhshan Province

“We had help with digging big wells. Now we can grow more vegetables and sell them on the market. We earn more money and are improving our lives.”

Farmers in Badakhshan Province

“Now we have solar energy and because of that we have TV and radio and we get to know a lot of things about the world and our country, and receive news from different parts of the country. We have a better sense of what is happening and have access to more information. We no longer need to buy gasoline and kerosene. This allows us to save funds for other important things.”

Farmers in Badakhshan Province

People also spoke about awareness raising and capacity building initiatives, which have brought new knowledge and skills to the communities:

“There have been big changes here. When I came in 2003, there was hardly any traffic on the roads. We set up some literacy classes and human rights awareness courses for women in the villages around here. They did not allow us to take their picture. We tried to hire female staff but no one came. Women could not move freely then or speak to men. Now there is no problem. We can work with women. What explains the change? Two reasons: the hard work of NGOs and the fact that people in Bamiyan are open to reform. They are tired of war.”

Head of a local development NGO sub-office in Bamiyan Province

“We did not care much for the vegetables before. An agency taught us about nutrition and how to eat better. Now we try to eat vegetables.”

“We were trained in planting trees to preserve nature and increase safety against mud slides.”

“There was a mass grave in our village and aid organizations helped us build a tomb there. Local people were paid to construct it. It is better than bringing a lot of technology and machines. It is better to rely on local human resources.”

Villagers in Badakhshan

People felt especially positive about organizations and projects that engaged them in the decision-making process. One person proudly proclaimed, “Whenever there is a new project in our village, we decide and participate in it.” Many people said that as a result of the participatory development approaches, such as that used by the National Solidarity Program (NSP) and its implementing partners (international and local NGOs), they now have important knowledge and the ability to differentiate and diagnose what is best for them in terms of projects that would meet their needs. Some people talked about the NSP as an example of a government-led project helping to create and strengthen people’s and communities’ capacity.

“This aid brought people together and united people and now people have developed skills at collective decision-making processes and how to come to agree and work together.”

Villager in Badakhshan Province

“In this village we were living together physically, 250 families, but not connected mentally. NSP has changed this. This is the real success of NSP...It was good to see so many projects designed through the voices of the people.”

A CDC member in Yakaolang, Bamiyan Province

“Compared to the last ten years, people are more aware and educated and able to make decisions at the community level.”

Community leader in Badakhshan Province

“NSP and CDCs do good work and people are happy and participate. Consultation has been good.”

A Mullah in lower Fuladi valley in Bamiyan Province

But commentary about the NSP was not uniformly positive. For instance, elders in one village in Bamiyan explained that the survey for NSP was done poorly and it registered less people than the actual number. They said that they had complained but that no one had listened to their concerns. They felt that because of personal problems between one of the villagers and the staff of the local NGO that was implementing the program that the survey process was mismanaged.

2. Corruption

In many conversations however, people brought up concerns about corruption and expressed deep mistrust of the ways in which international assistance was provided and of the multiple actors involved in the aid process. Listening Teams heard multiple people repeat the statement: “aid goes to pockets.”

In Badakhshan, people spoke about corruption around food aid. In Bamiyan, people spoke about corruption in both construction and food aid projects. In Kabul, many people brought up corruption in construction projects and expressed their general dissatisfaction with aid efforts, saying that much of the work done by outside actors looks like corruption to them. Many people said they do not understand what is happening around them, and when they read the news about the billions of dollars given to Afghanistan, they wonder where all this money has gone. They often suspect that it has been lost due to corruption. One person in Kabul described his perception of the distribution of assistance this way, “Twenty people in a row—give the first a snow ball, the last receives nothing.”

“Two percent of the population has received aid, the rest has gone to the government. What aid? Where? Can you tell me where? I haven’t seen it. If there is aid, then why do people go to Iran? If aid was distributed in Afghanistan then no one would go outside [the country] and the children would be in our schools. If aid, why are people begging on the street? The representative of the people is a thief, the NGO is a thief, the government is a thief, the foreigner is a thief.”

Musician in Old City in Kabul

“The donor comes to an international NGO, the INGO comes to a local NGO, the local NGO comes to a contractor, the contractor to a sub-contractor and finally we receive nothing.”

Resident of Kabul

“More money does not represent action.”

Student at a girl’s school Kabul

Several people in Kabul shared their understanding about how procurement officers give contracts to contractors for 10% of the contract amount. People speculated about how such deals are made: “Here is a \$4 million contract, give me \$400,000” or “Here is a \$100 million contract, give me \$10 million.” In one conversation, a person hypothesized how an American contractor had won a bid to build a road (the very road the Listening team was sitting next to) at \$750,000 per kilometer but then subcontracted with another foreign company to build the road for \$350,000 per kilometer. The individual assumed that \$400,000 per kilometer went straight to America for no work other than writing the proposal that won the contract. A number of other people questioned the honesty of contractors brought in by aid providers.

“Why is it that you don’t care about the corruption of your contractors? Why don’t you monitor? Why don’t you come and see?”

Resident of Kabul

“Contractors are bad. The main road near the village is poorly done because they took money out of the budget.”

Farmer and Shura member in Bamiyan Province

In one community in Badakhshan, people said they did not know what “procurement” was before the NSP process began in their village. They added, “Now we know that we need quotations and to have another person to monitor that everything is correct. This is decreasing

corruption.” In another community, people talked about how the funding process was streamlined so that the community council could access the money they had put into the bank by filling out a simplified form. Community representatives came to the office where the process took just a few minutes. They were pleasantly surprised and asked, “Where was all the red tape? That’s it?”

Out in the provinces, people pointed to a number of ways that valuable aid resources are siphoned off, mismanaged, stolen, etc. One example given in Bamiyan was about a literacy course funded and implemented by one of the international organizations which failed to deliver the stationery required for the students taking classes. The courses did not commence until the Education Department provided the stationery out of their funds. The shura member said, “I am sure that the staff use the stationery for themselves. Notebooks with [the agency] logo on them are sold in the markets. They are gifts from [the agency] and intended for communities, but the staff sell them.”

“Local NGOs are like robbers. We trust the internationals more, but there is a lot of wastage in international organizations, for example highly paid consultants in the ministries. Some earn \$2,000 per day. My boss in the PRT gets \$17,000 per month.”

Afghan journalist in Bamiyan Province

“There are many sacks of wheat coming to the community and each should be 50 kg. In the end they only weighed 40 kg and 150 sacks were lost.”

Villager in Badakhshan Province

“We are unsatisfied with the assistance of the INGOs working through local NGOs and the government. As you know, the large salaries are where the money goes. The INGOs should come directly to the people. A minister buys around ten cars which are expensive but are not needed.”

Shura member in Bamiyan Province

“There have been many promises but nothing has happened. The money has disappeared in someone’s pocket. Government and NGOs are brothers in corruption. Look at the [highway]—it cost more than \$1 million and it is falling apart. Money has been spent but it has been wasted. The origin of the problem is lack of honesty of agencies...NGOs bypass the government. NGOs do not understand our needs. The government knows but it is not honest. There is a disconnect between the needs of the people and what agencies are doing. Top-down is not a good relationship.”

Faculty member at Bamiyan University

“We hear about hundreds of millions of dollars but no office of accountability [referring to donor structures] to see how the money is spent.”

Member of Parliament in Kabul

One ministry official in Kabul who spent several years managing programs in a conflict-affected province shared his experience with addressing issues of corruption. While working in the province, he had insisted on changing the funding structure so the money was disbursed the day

the community presented their plan to their local NSP representative. According to their monitoring visits and reports, this was a very effective strategy because there was no time for bribes to change hands. He said there were four challenges that development actors have to contend with: 1) lack of trust; 2) interventions that are too slow once expectations are raised and plans are made; 3) everybody in the chain takes a sip from the bottle; and 4) failure to deliver on promises. He said the way to get around these was by “working with the people and to make sure they get the money. If you do these two things, you will be unforgettable.”

3. The Influence of Power Structures

When reflecting on the impacts of international assistance, people often commented on the way power structures at the national and at the community level influenced the process of aid distribution, beneficiary selection, project implementation, and the long-term results. In Kabul, most people referred to the national government structures, while in the provinces, people talked about local power structures, some of which were the local government bodies.

In many conversations, people spoke about favoritism in the decision-making process. In Badakhshan, many people brought up their distrust for authorities—both traditional and the new government structures. Recipients of assistance and non-recipients alike asked whether external assistance is promoting transparent forms of governance or reinforcing the existing opaque structures. Many people said they preferred having the agencies present and visible in order to ensure transparency, and some suggested that development agencies should control more of the aid flow.

“Every organization is under the influence of local community elders and tribal leaders. Aid often ends up in their hands and is not distributed based on need.”

Villager in Badakhshan Province

“[An international food aid agency] distributed wheat and flour to district officials and to community leaders. These community leaders did not distribute it equally: 3kg to one person but 10 kg to another person, more to their relatives. After a while, the wheat was found on the black market.”

Community member in Badakhshan Province

There were also discussions about Community Development Councils (CDCs) mirroring the old power structures because the elected leaders represented the “old power.”

“We are unhappy with the head of CDC. He does not listen to our complaints and does nothing ...He decided the women should do carpet weaving with no consultation. The trainer for the carpet weaving eloped with a village girl. It was a mess.”

Farmer in Bamiyan Province

The consultative process followed by the NSP does not vest all power in the CDC, so other voices and interests can also influence the priorities and courses of action. However, some people complained vociferously about the influence of old power structures within the CDCs, although they were often happy about the projects initiated.

“NSP works reasonably well. We talk to communities, explain technical problems to the village elders, and help them identify priorities. Some CDCs work well and are in charge. In other villages, the mullahs and elders, the previous elites, are in charge. In general, the CDCs are a good idea: now there is a place to discuss issues in an open way. But some CDCs are weak or not trusted by people because of the misuse of funds. Many are not representative because the old village leadership has become the new leadership. Arbabs [tribal leaders] and commanders still hold power in many CDCs. For example, we went to a CDC recently and asked about the elections. They said, “We were told to vote for ‘so-and-so’ by the elders.”

Head of a local development NGO sub-office in Bamiyan Province

“Impact of assistance? Where it has come it has been good. But there is imbalance: if we knew powerful people we would get more. Bamiyan center and Yakaolang are getting much more because the previous governor was from Yakaolang. The current governor does not pay much attention. People demonstrated about the [road being not wide enough], but nothing has been done.”

Farmer in Bamiyan Province

Some people suggested that “Aid agencies should do their work directly as opposed to working through the local government” or “Do not distribute to community leaders—they will take it. Work directly with people.”

“NGOs should work here directly. Government should fire corrupt officials. People should choose another leader for themselves. Aid will be more effective and our lives will improve when we all demand better leaders.”

Community member in Badakhshan Province

4. Lack of Monitoring and the Importance of Presence

Given the level of frustration over the influence of elite power structures on aid disbursement and concerns with corruption, it is not surprising that virtually every conversation involved urgent calls for better and more frequent monitoring visits to ensure that aid resources do not disappear and that intended results have been achieved. Many people were frustrated with the lack of transparency and how little verifying, monitoring and follow-up takes place once projects get underway and after they are completed. A number of people mentioned that aid agency staff should be more present to increase transparency and to improve the flow of information.

In Bamiyan and Badakhshan, people wanted more information from implementing agencies about the amounts that are earmarked for projects in their localities, the criteria by which beneficiaries or participants would be selected, and the expected outcomes. In Kabul, people on the streets and in neighborhoods outside of the city center, expressed uncertainty about whose responsibility--government or assistance providers-- it was to check if the projects were implemented properly. When people learned of new projects, they wanted answers to the following questions: “Was it done? Was it done well? Did it cost too much? Did Afghans get the benefit and not outsiders?”

“Donors should come back and see what they have accomplished.”

Community member in Bamiyan

“It was better under the Russians. At least they checked!”

Resident of Kabul

“When [aid agencies] were distributing aid, there were problems between two communities over the amounts that were distributed. A senior representative of an NGO should always be here to check and verify and supervise.”

Villager in Badakhshan Province

“[An INGO] was here and worked with returnees. About three out of ten villagers have returnee cards and they are among the neediest. However, their local staff didn’t enroll the right beneficiaries. He only enrolled those to whom he was related. Last year they did carpet weaving only for those who have relatives. Foreigners need to directly come to the villages. Local people are the problem. They have relations and cause problems”

Farmer and Shura member in Bamiyan Province

“An agency asked the representative of the community, being the CDC head and traditional leader, to select six women to take care of tree plants in a plantation. Instead, the representative sold the plants to the market or gave them to his relatives. Agencies should come directly to the community.”

Community member in Badakhshan Province

“Whenever the government or organizations help with something, they should always supervise and follow-up. Because when the organizations leave, the leaders of the village take advantage of the aid resources. Organizations should not just leave the project behind. They should always check.”

Villager in Badakhshan Province

“I was at a meeting with an NGO and I asked ‘Is the assistance going to the poorest?’ and no one answered.”

Resident of Kabul

“Because of the corruption in the government, we don’t get all the aid that was meant for us. 50 kg of wheat becomes 20 when it reaches the village. 30 kgs disappears. There is no investigation about this. Nobody cares.”

Villager in Badakhshan Province

“The quality of the jobs that PRTs do is really down. They give to local companies and do not monitor. NGO work is better because they monitor the activities.”

Administrator for an Afghan humanitarian NGO in Bamiyan

“NGOs have come to assess the situation but they do not follow-up.”

CDC members in Fuladi Valley in Bamiyan Province

“Whenever a distribution happens no one knows about it beforehand, or people are not prepared. We are rarely informed about what, when, how and for whom. Food distribution was for disabled and widows but they did not even know about it! When the food arrived, it all went into other hands.”

Villager in Badakhshan Province

“Assistance from outside is good. It can solve problems. But we see foreigners taking notes and asking questions, and nothing comes out of it.”

Headmaster in a middle school, Bamiyan province

In contrast, some people in Bamiyan and Badakhshan commented that there is a growing sense of trust in the work of international agencies. In a number of locations, people described projects and processes that they felt were trustworthy and commendable in their follow-through. For example, one person shared a story in which, “One agency brought aid and made the distribution according to a needs assessment. We were very happy with this and it was better than before.” Another person described a situation in which, “The agency left a receipt to farmers, whose animals were vaccinated. We thought this created trust between us and the agency.”

5. External Pressures and Agendas

Many people were perplexed about the process by which aid flows into Afghanistan and into their communities, and why donors push to disburse funds quickly to meet external deadlines. In Kabul, people knowledgeable about the aid system expressed frustration with donors who often change funding structures and rules to spend money more quickly. People insisted that when the process is sped up, it creates opportunities for the money to be stolen, saying that the faster the donors spend the money, the more likely it is to be stolen.

“There are policies of donor governments that the ministries are against, but they can’t do anything.”

Afghan government employee in Kabul

“There are foreign interests and agendas. The donors are not caring about the same indicators as locals. They only care about burn rate. Donors don’t fund for impact.”

Local staff at an international organization in Kabul

“The lack of flexibility and short time spans for projects—12 months—creates difficult conditions. Short time approaches are one of the main factors that instigate failure. In spite of this, the donors still ask for sustainability! Some donors only focus on specific issues, like gender, which makes it hard to relate to real conditions and needs as these priority areas are determined in top down fashion.”

Afghan government representative speaking at a Listening Feedback Session in Kabul

MRRD officials provided an example of just how this donor pressure to spend quickly undermines policies meant to reduce corruption and to build community capacity and ownership. Normally, NSP funds go to the communities in three installments, and each disbursement has to be spent before the next one arrives. The first portion comes from the communities, and they

have to raise the funds, put them into an account, and only then is the funding from donors is added. However, one bilateral donor providing funds to the NSP insisted that the full amount (\$50,000) be provided to the villages at one time. NSP staff expressed concerns that the money could be stolen if given in this way. However, the donor insisted that their fiscal year was ending and that the NSP partners had to spend the money quickly. They did as the donors demanded, and the money was gone.

A number of people in Bamiyan and Kabul speculated about the agendas driving the presence of the international community in Afghanistan and the work of international organizations. Besides offering rumors about international organizations in Kabul and other provinces building roads so that they can extract gems, artwork and other resources, people often said, “We don’t know what is happening,” or, “We are not sure what they are doing here.” People in Kabul also discussed the influence of US foreign policy agendas. One Kabul resident offered his analysis, “Foreigners—10% are good, 90% are political or have other agendas.”

“The donors have different agendas and these are directed from their own headquarters. They are listening less to the Afghan Government. The case with the PRTs is worse, where each PRT is different and is guided by military objectives without following the Provincial Development Strategies.”

Afghan government representative speaking at a Listening Feedback Session in Kabul

“At the Bonn Conference many countries promised to help because Afghanistan needs assistance. Foreigners come to help poor people. We hear rumors that they are here to take artifacts, but I disagree with them. Still some do have their own purposes.”

Student at Bamiyan University

“Our international friends said they would serve, but they didn’t, so there is a distance between them and my people. People now realize they are not here to help. No one is listening to us and we want to express our views. If the Americans can push the Taliban out in five days, then why is there still fighting? The military says they’re here to help, but the terrorists are getting stronger.”

Librarian in Kabul

“[An INGO] did some bad things here. They smuggled out a lot of artifacts. They were building a road in Chilistoon just so that they could get to a cave and dig the artifacts out. Their Afghan staff saw it...The Taliban are a good excuse for the West to be in Afghanistan. Terrorism is a golden element that allows the Americans to be wherever they want.”

Afghan journalist in Bamiyan Province

“Poppy politics, poppy policies. Nothing has worked, but why? Where do they export from? I have heard rumors of US air bases. Or maybe the ISI [Pakistan Secret Service]. The security collapse in Afghanistan has happened because we have not targeted the rural population. Seventy percent of the people are landless-farmers. The donors have pushed commercialization of agriculture. Who benefits from that? The landlords. In development plans, good governance is always one pillar. So why does bad governance continue? There’s donor pressure, but they don’t mean it.”

Afghan government employee

“If NGOs do the right thing, people are happy. But nowadays we do not really know what they are doing. If people are not helped, they will reject the NGOs because they are disappointed.”

Faculty member, Bamiyan University

6. Community Consultations

A number of people described needs assessments and consultations in which “NGOs or PRTs come, promise to do this and then disappear.” Both in Kabul and out in the provinces, people called for those providing assistance to take the time to understand the context, engage local people in determining and prioritizing needs, and then write proposals and implement projects. They also asked for agencies to ensure transparency and accountability throughout this process.

In Bamiyan, people expressed frustration that many households in their village were not counted and so they did not receive the fair amount of funds for their CDC. They believed that compared to other villages, their projects were much smaller and they blamed the government and its partner NGOs for this error. People often recounted the “promises” made by NGOs, PRTs, and government representatives and expressed disappointment that there were few visible results. Often people made comparisons about aid delivered to neighboring communities and provinces, such as: “This village does not have electricity, but the others do.”

“All the NGOs have authority in administration, but when they work with people they need to go to villages and talk with people.”

Student at Bamiyan University

“An engineer came and conducted a survey and we never saw him again. We think the Community Development Council took the money and distributed it among themselves.”

Villager in Badakhshan Province

“There are 150 NGOs in Bamiyan, but we don’t know what they do.”

Faculty member, Bamiyan University

“We ask many times for NGOs to help us, and to the PRTs, and many times they come, but they do not start any work. I do not know their exact work, except for [an International Organization]. They come and see. They just go up and back to their offices. The money that comes to Bamiyan all goes to their vehicles and salaries.”

12th grade student in Bamiyan Province

“Only wheat has been given. A PRT team comes, but does nothing. People are building the mosque themselves. Fuladi valley is the poorest area of Bamiyan.”

Kabul resident originally from Fuladi Valley in Bamiyan

“NGOs look at immediate needs, but may not be aware of why there’s a problem. Why is the child sick? They need to stay longer to get an idea of the real problems. They’re focusing on needs, not problems.”

Local resident of Kabul

Particularly in Badakhshan, women expressed concerns about the lack of meaningful participation in the management of development projects and efforts to ensure that women benefit from international assistance efforts.

“I was elected as deputy head of the Community Development Council (CDC), but I have never been invited to meetings or involved in projects. I asked what was going on, but the men do not even let me participate in the CDC meetings.”

Woman in Badakhshan Province

“Whenever an organization comes, they help males, and they ignore women. We need more aid for women. Many women want to participate in literacy courses; they are interested in reading and writing.”

Woman in Badakhshan Province

“I participated in a literacy course for adult women for 6 months. We learned a lot of things but it would have been better to have it last longer so that we can learn more. The government and aid agencies should support more tailoring and sewing courses for women and generally more adult education courses.”

Woman in Badakhshan Province

“Before there was no paved road and now we have a road and that is why we can send our sick to the hospital in the nearby town. But we wish in clinics, there were more female doctors so that more women can be seen by doctors.”

Woman in Badakhshan Province

In Kabul, MRRD staff explained that in the past, every ministry had a gender division, but they are all gone now, “because donors took the money away.” The concern is that if all the gender related work is now concentrated in the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, then no other ministry would deal with women’s issues.

A number of people also shared positive experiences with community consultations:

“There was good consultation [during CDC meetings], lots of discussion and we went with the majority. It was a good process. Now we know how to choose our projects. The women in the CDC did not have different views from the men, but the men did most of the talking...The CDCs of five villages meet every two weeks at the school and take decisions.”

Headmaster in a middle school Bamiyan Province

“[An INGO] organizes social audits where the whole community participates. This is a key element in our approach. Communities decide. Everything is in their hands...”

Afghan program officer working for an INGO in Bamiyan Province

“NSP explained to the people why they can’t receive certain types of assistance, how development interventions are sequenced and how decisions are made. People provided input into a planning and decision-making process they understood well.”

Afghan CBO staff in Kabul

“Shuras don’t have sittings like you with us now. So when assistance [agencies] come, they go directly to the shura and they decide who should receive assistance. [Consultation] is not a problem with NGOs because they do talk with the shura.”

Farmer in Bamiyan Province

“NSP was going to build the Community Hall. We told them that we live far away and could not benefit and wanted another project. They decided to create different projects and build a smaller Community Hall so that we could also have our project.”

Community member in Badakhshan

“For NSP there was a lot of consultation. It was well done, but for other projects there is less. Assistance comes from above.”

Staff of Independent Human Rights commission sub-office in Bamiyan province

7. Quality and Gaps in Assistance

The quality of assistance was a frequent issue mentioned by many people, often in relation to corruption and mismanaged funds. For example, people frequently mentioned road construction when speaking about the low quality of projects and they saw these projects as an easy way to siphon off funds allocated for infrastructure development. Many people also described the numerous problems that exist in their communities and explained how aid efforts have not sufficiently addressed the lack of roads, food security, irrigation and drinking water, agricultural training, children’s vaccinations, and clinics, and drinking water.

Poor Quality

Among many others, a pharmacist in the Fuladi Valley in Bamiyan said he was unhappy that many aid agencies come to Afghanistan, but then provide poor quality work: “We do not have roads, no big visible projects. Their work is bad quality, only a few wells and bridges. If I was the representative of the people I would tell aid agencies to work or get out.” Another person exclaimed, “You wouldn’t build a road this bad in your country, why do you do it here?”

“NGOs should always do best engineering quality. They should do the quality of other places, like where they come from. Low budgets make the quality of the projects bad. They should make the project fit the budget. Each assistance project has to have enough budget. If you have enough for one house, make one house don’t try to make three to four houses. If the budget is small then the road should be shorter.”

Mullah in a village school in Bamiyan Province

“Quality of work is bad. An example is the road in Bamiyan center—only the center part of the road was paved. The basic needs of people have not been addressed. There is no mosque at the hospital, no place for relatives to sit. NGO projects are 80% good, 20% bad. Sometimes the quality is inferior. Bad technique is the issue...NGOs and companies should do better technical work. We want the same quality as in foreign countries. Why is the quality so bad here as

compared to your countries? We need to improve from poor quality to super quality...”

A Mullah in Fuladi Valley, Bamiyan Province

“The military [PRTs] doesn’t build proper buildings, they build containers that cost \$14,000 and they use sand bags. The contractors are not working for quality. One hospital built by the community development committee cost \$120 per square meter. Another hospital built by a PRT cost \$800 per square meter. And the community development hospital is better!”

Community member at an NSP center in Mir Bacha Kot, Kabul suburb

“No one evaluates the PRTs? Everyone should be evaluated! The Government, the PRTs and the NGOs.”

Afghan government representative speaking at a Listening Feedback Session in Kabul

“The quality of NGOs is not as good today. The quality of the things they build is low. There is a new road in the Old City. The old road was built 50 years ago by the mayor. They rip up the old stone [to build the new road]. When I asked the engineer why, he said it (the road) doesn’t belong to you. The Russian government checked on the work that was being done. Today’s NGOs don’t feel responsible.”

A shopkeeper in the Old City in Kabul

“In schools, [an aid agency] gave wheat to our children but the quality was not good. The wheat was expired and many people gave it to their animals instead of eating it.”

Villager in Badakhshan

“In general Bamiyan has been assisted but not how we wanted. There is a well but it is dry and it doesn’t work.”

Driver for an international organization working in Bamiyan Province

“Agencies brought some projects which are not applicable and not useful in this area, for example, honeybee production. We do not need this, because this area is not appropriate for bees and we can’t take care of them. Also, the water storage facility is badly constructed. The water tastes bad after it has been stored.”

Community members in Badakhshan

“People are happy in their heart, but not impressed with the quality of assistance. One bad apple in an NGO and Bamiyanis will reject assistance as a whole—or pretend to do so. Change? We have security, we can claim our rights. The problem is not so much quality of assistance, although technical implementation is often not good, but that there has been little communication of the impact of assistance. For example, [a donor] held a big conference for local journalists, it cost \$28,000, but it was badly organized and the participants were unhappy.”

Afghan journalist in Bamiyan Province

“We don’t have direct relationships with NGOs and we don’t know which ones are working in the valley. Some projects are good, but many do not have good quality. Eighty percent are useful.”

Mullahs in a village school in Bamiyan

Piecemeal Assistance

Many people want assistance to be comprehensive and to address the multiple factors leading to their chronic poverty and vulnerability. They see too many projects that are small in their scope and short in their timeframes, and which often lack important “ingredients” such as capacity building. Afghans we spoke with understand the sheer enormity of the development challenges in their country, and therefore wish that outside interventions were more holistic, addressing the structural needs and aiming for long-term change and sustainability.

“Seven years ago, an aid worker asked me what we needed. I told her, ‘build a small dam for electricity.’ She said no and gave many reasons. We still have no electricity. There was an early failure of the government and internationals to involve the people. That is why we see a gap. The people talked about the economy, while the government and internationals talked about security. They are building services that people cannot afford, like hospitals or schools. If the people cannot afford them, what is the point? Our main product is grapes. We need to invest in water management, cold storage and juice factories.”

Resident from Mir Bacha Kot, Kabul suburbs

“Income-generating projects are needed but they need to be sustainable, entrepreneurial based, not just short-term projects with temporary outcomes.”

Community leader in Badakhshan

“Where has all the aid money gone? The Soviets at least built factories. We need factories, not small projects we can do ourselves.”

Community member in Bamiyan

“We need long term economic efforts. We need jobs.”

High school students in Kabul

“We received onion bulbs, pumpkin seeds and cucumber seeds but in very small quantities. This aid did not do anyone any good. If you are helping, do it in a way that really improves our livelihoods.”

Villagers in Badakhshan Province

“Approval of projects is symptom-oriented. There are many agricultural projects, but these are seasonal. There is no storage capacity [for harvested goods]. Another issue is that there are still floods and the floods destroy. The NGOs in the area declare an emergency for two or three days—but why not do something about the river flooding? There are all sorts of training—human resources, peacebuilding, vocational, livelihoods. I used to think people needed to learn. Now I know people’s needs are something else. I heard from the people, they need practical stuff, not just training. Such as schools, clinics, water, protective walls [for agriculture].

An Afghan development worker in Kabul

“The people work when the project is there. When the project ends, they don’t even have bread.”

Afghan development worker

“National Solidarity Program is good, but not enough. Each project is good on its own way, but too small to change the context lastingly. Larger investments are needed as well.”

Afghan staff of a local development organization in Kabul

“If we had big projects, like a hydro power station, this could lead to benefits over time and would create jobs. Now the projects are small and do not answer to our needs.”

Community member in Badakhshan

Increasing access to educational opportunities is one area where people wish to see more long-term, comprehensive assistance. For instance, a teacher in a village school said that one of the PRTs donated 150 tables and chairs. The school has several hundred students and so there are only a few chairs per classroom. The teachers select which students (usually the class head) get to sit on the chairs. Students see it as a form of injustice. The teacher said, “If one is trying to help, they should do it more fully.”

“Schools give books but no pens and notebooks. Teachers receive wheat and cooking oil and children receive cooking oil. Because of this assistance, many families send their kids to school. But when our kids reach 8th or 9th grade, the teachers are not able to educate them because their teaching skills and preparation are not enough. We don’t know if any assistance is planned for this problem.”

Woman in Badakhshan Province

“At the beginning in schools, they would give cooking oil and wheat to children. Everybody was happy and many children were sent to school and families benefitted from the aid. Then the food assistance stopped in school and families are keeping girls back. The number of students has decreased. The school building does not have glass windows just open frames in the wall. Boys are looking at us and teasing us and our fathers decided that we shouldn’t go to school.”

A girl in Badakhshan

Listening Teams also heard examples of assistance that was not appropriate in the local context. “Solar energy machines were distributed but no one told us how to operate them. Some instructions were available on a piece of paper but no one could read these. There were problems and people here could not fix the machines.”

Villagers in Badakhshan Province

“They dug a well in our village but it doesn’t have enough water and we don’t have machinery to dig deeper.”

Villager in Badakhshan

Expectations

Many people talked about their expectations from the government and from aid agencies, noting that development projects reaching their communities are too small to be sustainable and that they have very short time-frames. Staff at MRRD noted that there is a need for more conversations at the community level about how development efforts are sequenced and

acknowledged that many people continue to expect large infrastructure projects and many changes in short timeframes.

“Aid should have visible, tangible impact. Aid should be used to help us stand on our feet.”

Member of Parliament in Kabul

“Yes, there are changes but compared to peoples’ expectations and what has been done in other provinces, not enough has been done. This is why people are disappointed with the government and outsiders. In terms of civic-political rights, NGOs are doing a good job. But for economic-social rights, big problems remain. According to our annual survey, 50% of families are below the poverty line.”

Staff of Independent Human Rights commission sub-office in Bamiyan province

“I’m a librarian here, and if I don’t meet our terms of reference, I have to resign. If international NGOs can’t help Afghanistan, then they should leave.”

Librarian in Kabul

“Lots of NGOs [are here] but they don’t work, their help is not appropriate. For example, there is no road. Nothing is visible, no big projects. We need a hospital but there is no hospital. A PRT promised help with roads and electricity...a few days ago, I went to Mazar-i- Sharif and I saw many things, but why not here. I swear to God, nothing is done here.”

Pharmacist in a bazaar in Bamiyan Province

“[With the] PRTs, people are not satisfied. We do not need their efforts, but peace. “PRT” stands for reconstruction, but we see nothing from their efforts.”

Field worker in Bamiyan Province

“If NGOs do not help shuras, then the shuras cannot do anything. With no international assistance, the government will fail. We don’t want foreigners to come and give us money. We want some jobs and we want to work.”

12th grade student in Bamiyan Province

Some people noted the general trend in Afghanistan of voicing blanket criticism about the work done by international agencies and acknowledged that important results have indeed been achieved in some provinces.

“During the war we lost everything. Now we see big changes. I am satisfied with the role of NGOs even if many people complain. It is a fad to complain. A lot has happened. Look at the university: they have a new library and internet. Development happens gradually. Many people are illiterate here. They want to see changes in their household and they do not see the bigger picture.”

Head of a local development NGO sub-office in Bamiyan Province

Aid not reaching remote areas

Many people in Badakhshan and Bamiyan raised the issue of how rural and hard-to-reach areas are excluded from aid efforts due to the distance and difficult roads. Listening Team members

often heard comments such as: “The district capital got all the aid and our community, being far away, we did not get anything,” or, “We have not received aid for more than 10 years. We are too far away. But now we are receiving some from the NSP.”

“NGOs should know about areas that are remote where no aid has been distributed. They should attempt to work in hard to reach areas.”

Local official in Badakhshan

“Distribution goes to the easy to reach. For example, West Kabul doesn’t get nearly the distribution other places in the city get.”

Student in a girl school in Kabul

8. Relationships between Conflict and Insecurity and Aid Efforts

The on-going violence and the effects on international assistance efforts was mentioned frequently in conversations in Kabul, while people talked about it less in Bamiyan and Badakhshan, as these two provinces are relatively secure.

“Kabul was the only place we could be secure and get aid. We were driven off our land. All during the war we were secure, but now that the US military is here, we’re not secure because we can’t negotiate with them.”

Internally displaced person from a southern province speaking in Kabul

“From a bag of assistance, we don’t need very much. We need peace. If we have peace, we can even eat grass and stay in our own place.”

Internally displaced person from a southern province speaking in Kabul

“[The US military] arrests our young people without reason. They say we are Talib. We are not. So we left because of security. We want to work, but there are no jobs, so we send our children to beg.”

Internally displaced person from a southern province speaking in Kabul

“Where ISAF presence is less, there is more security. They can’t supply security for themselves.”

High school student in Kabul

“In the long term, creating jobs will create peace. Even the Taliban will take these jobs and come home.”

Internally displaced person from Southern province speaking in Kabul

“Aid closed the mouth of the commanders because they received it.”

Member of Parliament in Kabul

“People are afraid of the [Afghan] commanders. They don’t put their names on the list to receive aid because they don’t want to be targeted by the commanders, especially families with young girls.”

A shopkeeper in Kabul

“If we keep our beards long, we’re called Al Qaeda, if we keep our beards short, Taliban say we’re international. We pray to our god, we don’t need aid, we don’t want to be killed.”

Internally displaced person from southern province speaking in Kabul

There were differing opinions about whether international organizations should work in areas that are more secure or less secure and what the actual needs in these areas are. One person from Panjao said, “The key for success in development is security. If there is no security, organizations can’t implement a project.” A person coming from Ghazni disagreed: “We are in the most secure area. We hear from the media that many projects are running where there is insecurity. Not many efforts are here and we don’t know why.” He echoed the concerns voiced by others about how aid resources are aiding the insurgents: “In Ghazni, we also hear that some efforts are shared with the Taliban. If a community is supposed to receive 150,000, then 50,000 will go to the Taliban, and the rest to the project.”

Others also talked about how the focus on providing assistance to provinces where there is conflict and insecurity may be promoting perverse incentives. A consistent refrain in Bamiyan was that the province was getting scant assistance, as it had “neither Taliban nor poppies.”

“I don’t see many NGO people. They are not as active as they are visible. They are slow working. They are working where there is conflict, but here where there is security there is no work.”

Pharmacist in a bazaar in Bamiyan Province

“The government strategy vis-à-vis Bamiyan is problematic: priority goes to insecure areas. Some people are promoting insecurity in order to attract assistance. Many people say this.”

Staff of Independent Human Rights commission sub-office in Bamiyan province

“If the child is not crying, the mother will not provide milk. The cry is the rockets. If we don’t receive aid, we will have to make noise.”

Field worker for a development NGO in Bamiyan Province

In Badakhshan, people felt that their province is in a “shadow” as they see more money going to areas affected by violence. They provided some specific examples of how aid efforts and the actors that are involved in implementing these interventions can exacerbate existing tensions in communities or create new ones.

“They came to install solar panels in the community but they only spoke to the other clan that is more powerful. We protested and said that the project should also benefit us. The influential people, the other clan, then beat up some of our boys. When we called the police, they arrested us because they do what the influential people say.”

Male villager in Badakhshan Province

“When organizations come they would distribute aid to some villages and communities but not others. This has created many tensions and people wonder why they were not selected for the

distribution of resources.”

Community member in Badakhshan Province

“Some aid organizations encourage children to attend school by providing schools with food. But those children who are orphans are sent to orphanages which were also recently established and supported by outside assistance. This creates problems between communities. People perceive this as discrimination because they think that orphanages don’t have the same quality of services, teachers, and classes.”

Community member in Badakhshan Province

“Aid is not enough for the people. People are poor; aid is scarce and badly planned and distributed. Because of these reasons clashes happen between people for aid, for food.”

Villager in Badakhshan Province

“Because of aid, there are some splits in the community. There should be changes in the leadership of the community.”

Person in Badakhshan Province

9. Dependency and Powerlessness

Discussions about dependency on outside aid abound both at the ministry level and in conversations with villagers in the provinces. Senior level staff at the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development said, “Five years ago people were saying we’re building a culture of dependency here. Now people say we have crossed over. There are things we cannot seem to do without outside help, because we have gotten used to this.” The concern shared by several senior staff at MRRD is that many people in the Afghan ministries are quite young, and seem to believe the “money spigot” and the large budgets are permanent. There is an on-going effort to educate staff and communities about reducing costs.

In parallel with concerns about dependency, people often said “but we have so much capacity.” Some described this dilemma as the source of powerlessness, explaining that many Afghans feel powerless to put themselves in the driver’s seat for rebuilding and developing their country because they don’t control the resources. Some said that NSP had helped them take charge of their lives, but others expressed equal concerns that aid is “pacifying communities” and creating long-term dependency on outsiders and assistance to solve local problems.

“If people had rocks outside their house, they would not remove them but wait for an agency to help them.”

Villager in Badakhshan Province

“The agency arranged capacity building in agriculture for people. People came and asked for pay to stay. When the agency explained that the training would benefit them, some people left as they were not being paid.”

Villager in Badakhshan Province

“The communities now think more about [receiving] charity than in the past. People used to think differently, now people want to get things.”

Afghan development worker in Kabul

“People are dependent on the aid, have become very lazy. Lazier than before—they don’t want to work, they just wait for aid.”

Farmer in Badakhshan Province

“Don’t help people for free. Make them work and be part of the assistance project. If you are giving food, have them participate in construction.”

Several villagers in Badakhshan Province

“Expectations in 2001 were very high. Some NGOs are responsible for this. When there is a problem, people sit back and wait for the NGO to come. Assistance is having a negative impact on people’s ability to solve their own problems. After the Taliban, many NGOs came and distributed goods and food for free. Some damage was done. We do not do this anymore.”

Head of a local development NGO sub-office in Bamiyan Province

“Most of the aid coming here should be decided with sustainability in mind—income generating, not just handouts. These should be long-term, so that people work in long-term projects.”

Farmer in Badakhshan

“People were accustomed to free emergency aid, now they want to contribute. After three decades of war, change is coming gradually.”

Afghan Program officer working for an INGO in Bamiyan province

Some people also pointed out how they feel the sense of powerlessness continue and deepen in some communities even where local leadership has been charged with spearheading development initiatives through CDCs.

“We elected the shura, but we have no power. Our shura leader sleeps all day.”

Farmer in Bamiyan province

“Some people left the village. Most people still in the village are poor people. They spend the day thinking about food. They don’t have time to think about tomorrow.”

12th grade student in Bamiyan Province

10. Differentiation among Implementers of Aid Efforts

Some people discussed how the approach, quality of assistance and level of engagement differed depending on who was implementing assistance projects—government, international aid agencies, national NGOs, contractors, sub-contractors, military units and PRTs. While some described international and national NGOs using similar approaches, there were concerns about the honesty and objectivity of local staff and organizations in the delivery of assistance.

A number of people in Badakhshan and Bamiyan referred to aid agencies and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) as one and the same. People were critical of the work of the PRTs due to experiences with poor quality projects, unmet expectations and a lack of trust when it came to the PRTs' engagements at the community level. Some people wanted more NGOs to establish programs as they pointed out the differences in approaches and accountability between INGOs and contractors (often hired by PRTs). One major perception was that contractors always subcontract out, "so you never see the contractors."

"What development has happened has come through the private sector. The government does not have the capacity to spend money well. Distribution is not equitable. One school is good, the next school is bad."

Student in a girl's school in Kabul

"There is corruption in NGOs—they try to take assistance to their own villages and relatives. If the foreigners do the project themselves, it is good. The Afghan contractors don't do as well."

University student in Bamiyan

"One of the problems in Afghanistan is the lack of quality of technical staff. Setting up a power plant requires engineers, not mullahs. Government should not employ such people who have no expertise."

Faculty member at Bamiyan University

"No difference between Afghans and foreigners. If they come and work, they are both good."

Shopkeeper in a village in Fuladi Valley in Bamiyan

"When it (a project) belongs to the foreigners, they do something. When it is left to the local people, they don't do anything."

Farmer in Bamiyan Province

"Afghan NGOs are better than foreigners because they understand our problems. We do not know about foreigners. We are happy if they come here, but they only stay in Bamiyan center."

Head of CDC in a village in Bamiyan Province

"Why do foreigners come here? We are happy that foreigners bring us new ideas and human rights. Everything is in the hands of God, inshallah they do good work. When I was a kid we used to run away if we saw a foreigner, now they are accepted."

Pharmacist in Bamiyan Province

"International assistance should not go to the Government, but to international NGOs, not national NGOs. When the INGOs come, they are expats and work honestly. Local NGOs use low budgets, discriminate and only take care of themselves."

Driver for an international organization in Bamiyan Province

"[A bilateral donor agency] doesn't understand community mobilization. They contract the regional PRT commander to be in charge of community relations. So we [an INGO] have to say no to working with them."

Staff of an international development NGO in Kabul

“Development assistance requires at least three actors: the government, the donor, and the NGO. There is no culture of shared responsibility. All of the fault is put on the NGOs, never on the donors. Donors and the government do not allow NGO creativity. The donors use contractors in Afghanistan because the NGOs talk back. PRTs have no understanding of standards and indicators. Sub-contractors don’t want to work with NGO workers anymore because of the profits they get from working with PRTs.”

Staff person in an INGO in Kabul

Insider–Outsider Dynamics

People also shared their observations about the professional relationships between insiders and outsiders and expressed their disappointment with lack of mutual learning opportunities and lack of respect for local capacity that some outsiders have shown. Several people expressed strong resentment with what they refer to as the “paternalism of outsiders” and the top-down approaches in which outsiders make most of the decisions.

In Kabul, people said that more and more Afghans are resentful of the fact that they are not the ones leading large construction and development projects, and that a lot of money is spent on technical experts or contractors from outside of Afghanistan. They were frustrated about limitations placed on Afghan companies, which cannot be the lead on a contract and only serve as subcontractors. They interpret this as a lack of trust in their ability to handle large projects and also as the main reason why there is much money being siphoned off in the process by too many intermediaries. One of the local definitions of “corruption” given to the Listening Team was that corruption is anything that allows an expatriate to drop into the country for a few weeks and get paid out of the budget lines for Afghanistan. People feel that the resources meant for Afghanistan should go to Afghans and they want to see Afghans getting jobs, contracts, and the majority of aid resources.

“Donors believe there is a lack of capacity and that outsiders have to transfer their skills. But they don’t do it! Lots of short-term people are hired from outside because donors tell the Ministries to do it, for example to develop project cycle management, something that people in Afghan ministries already know.”

Afghan staff in the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development in Kabul

“Too often I see internationals put their foot on people’s mouths. They do not listen to us, there is capacity here but it is neglected.”

Translator working for a bilateral donor in Bamiyan Province

“During the Taliban time, all organizations were headed by Afghans, especially the UN.”

Afghan government employee

“The experts who come here are not actually professionals.”

Member of Parliament in Kabul

“A soldier sent from Poland costs thousands of dollars; an Afghan soldier costs \$400/month. Afghan soldiers are strong and powerful and smart and they know the context.”

Resident of Mir Bacha Kot, Kabul suburb

“Afghanistan has 6,000 years of history. We have lots of famous people; our expertise is not being used.”

High school student in Kabul

Concluding Reflections from LP Team Facilitators

The Afghans we listened to were frank in their assessments of external assistance efforts and the effects these have had on their society. People appreciate the international community’s concern and the help that has poured in since 2001, and they recognize improvements in the infrastructure, health, and education sectors. However, this appreciation was followed by urgent calls for aid providers to exercise more transparency, accountability, and respectful engagement with the Afghans whom these efforts are aimed to support. Afghan people, both in rural areas and within the national and provincial government offices, would like to know how the funds earmarked for the development of their country are allocated and spent. Moreover, they want to be engaged in determining the needs, priorities, and selection criteria for target provinces and areas, and in selecting indicators for measuring results and progress. People mentioned that a critical factor often missing is trust among the actors involved in funding, designing and implementing the development interventions in Afghanistan. This lack of trust results in poor communication and weak relationships between outsiders and the recipient government, as well as with the stakeholders at the community level. People’s comments indicate that without improved trust and greater transparency and accountability, the aid resources which have the potential to support local capacities for development may be wasted and fail to produce the lasting results that the international community hopes to achieve in Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan Listening Exercise and the resulting report would not have been possible without the dedication and hard work of the Afghan field staff of international and local aid agencies and without the support of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. We thank them for their time and efforts in facilitating conversations, translating, reflecting on what was heard and helping us understand how these comments fit into the much larger picture of external assistance in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan Listening Exercise was limited in scope because we were unable to conduct conversations in less secure provinces and there were limits to the time that team members from participating agencies could contribute to this field listening effort. We acknowledge that much more listening remains to be done in order to understand the cumulative effects of external assistance efforts in Afghanistan. Participants at the Feedback Session held in Kabul prior to the Listening Exercise, as well as those who attended the final debrief in Kabul, noted the importance of listening to people in each province of Afghanistan due to the variance in context and differing experiences with external assistance and actors involved. The Listening Project encourages people working in Afghanistan to continue to listen to the people of Afghanistan and we welcome opportunities to help Afghan voices be heard in the ongoing discussions about how to improve the effectiveness of international assistance efforts.