

# Lessons from The National Solidarity Programme in Afghanistan

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## KEY FINDINGS

- The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) serves as a success story that has improved many Afghan lives and laid the groundwork for potential longer-term development.
- The NSP had a positive effect on access to drinking water and electricity, acceptance of democratic processes, perceptions of economic wellbeing, and the participation of, and attitudes towards, women.
- The NSP worsened perceptions of the quality of local governance among men.

Years of conflict have severely damaged social and economic opportunities in Afghanistan by severing ties between villages and the central, provincial, and district governments, offering little opportunity for representative or participatory governments. In addition, local governance in Afghan villages has often been dominated by village elders, thus offering little opportunity for representative or participatory decision-making. Afghan culture also has entrenched a limited social and political role for women.

The National Solidarity Programme (NSP), a community-driven development approach, has been undertaken to try and address this situation. Community-driven development is based on

participatory planning in which community members, assisted by government and development experts identify and implement projects that directly respond to their needs. These projects benefit communities by providing better targeted and more efficient development programmes in the short term, and encouraging sustained participation in the longer term through local representative institutions.

The NSP in Afghanistan, funded by the World Bank and a consortium of bilateral donors, is designed according to this community-driven approach. It aims to improve the access of rural villagers to critical services, and to create a structure for village governance centered on democratic processes and participation of women. The program is structured around two major interventions at the village level: (1) the disbursement of grants to fund village-level projects that are selected, designed, and managed by the council in consultation with villagers; and (2) the creation of a gender-balanced Community Development Council, elected by secret ballot and universal suffrage.



*Afghan citizens go to the polls to exercise their constitutional right to vote in presidential and provincial council elections.*  
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National Solidarity Program (NSP) wells built in Aqee Boy and Ortabiz-e-Farghana vilages.  
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infrastructure projects in irrigation and transportation had little impact on crop yields or the ability to get goods to market. Furthermore, the NSP worsened perceptions of the quality of local governance among male villagers.

### Lessons learned

The first lesson of the NSP is that community-driven drinking water and electricity projects generally have some positive effect in the short term. However, the strong positive impact has not been durable. This may be because the improvement in quality is perceived less as locals become used to it. However, it could also indicate a gradual degradation in the quality of drinking water

produced by the new schemes, either due to a lack of maintenance or design flaws.

Another lesson can be drawn from the worsening perception of government amongst male villagers. This may be due to the diffusion of authority created by coexistence of community development councils with local customary institutions, as well as the ambiguous mandates of the councils after a project is completed. This underscores the importance of clarifying the role (and existence) of the community development council vis-à-vis existing local customary institutions following project completion.

The second phase of NSP will face sizeable challenges in sustaining progress. In the more conflict-impacted south of the country, difficulties in carrying out community development during periods of violence may be heightened if international security forces draw down in 2014. The programme will continue to face challenges from Afghan government agencies and local elites whose power might be threatened by the NSPs goals. Finally, without further grants and opportunities for representative councils to distribute funds and implement important community projects, many of the positive results of NSP may wither.

## Impact of the National Solidarity Programme

The National Solidarity Programme had a number of positive effects in Afghanistan, it:

1. Substantially increased access to drinking water and electricity.
2. Improved acceptance of democratic processes;
  - increased the number of community members who vote.
  - Increased the proportion of male villagers who supported elections.
  - Increased the frequency of meetings of representative councils.
  - ncreased the number of village members who would like to challenge or change leadership decisions.
3. Improved opinions about women's political and social participation:
  - Increased enfranchisement.
  - Increased representation in governance bodies.
  - Increased access to goods and services.
  - Increased access to counselling and support networks.
  - Increased mobility outside of villages.
4. Increased perceptions of economic wellbeing.

However while the NSP clearly had many positive effects in the short term, many of these faded quickly after it was completed. Furthermore, the NSP had a limited impact on economic outcomes, even in the short term. In particular,

### IMPLICATIONS

- Sustaining and expanding on the gains of NSP requires continued commitment and financial assistance.

*This Research brief is based on WIDER Working Paper 2013/112 'The National Solidarity Programme: Assessing the effects of community-driven development in Afghanistan' by Andrew Beath, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov.*

