



ISTANBUL PRINCIPLES FOR CSO DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS

3 FOCUS ON PEOPLE'S EMPOWERMENT, DEMOCRATIC OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

Civil Society Organizations are effective as development actors when they support the empowerment and inclusive participation of people to expand their democratic ownership over policies and development initiatives that affect their lives, with an emphasis on the poor and marginalized.



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Photo: Sandra Calligaro/AKFC

Community development councils in Afghanistan: Aga Khan Foundation Canada

Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) is a non-profit international agency supporting social development programs in Asia and Africa, as a member of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Its programs concentrate on selected issues in health, education, rural development, the environment and the strengthening of civil society.

CHALLENGE

AKF believes that communities must ultimately guide, define, and own their development process. To this end, AKF establishes structures that enable local partners to create and implement their development vision. Security, governance and infrastructure issues in Afghanistan pose major challenges, however, and require multi-faceted partnerships to achieve sustainable and locally owned development outcomes.



RESPONSE



In Afghanistan, AKF is working with the government, civil society, and a wide range of local and international partners to create social and economic opportunities. Building on three decades of experience in neighbouring Pakistan and two decades in Tajikistan, AKF's community-led initiatives in seven central and north-eastern provinces are strengthening governance and improving health, education, and livelihoods as part of a long-term commitment to address poverty and instability in the country.

The Afghan National Solidarity Program (NSP) is an initiative by Afghanistan's Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. It aims to develop the ability of Afghan communities to identify, plan, manage, and monitor their own development projects through local democratically-elected institutions. AKF is a leading implementing partner in this initiative, and draws on its civil society strengthening experience in Pakistan, Tajikistan, and India to build and enhance the capacities of Community Development Councils (CDCs). The CDCs mobilize communities, initiate local development projects, and bring attention to delivery gaps in government services.

AKF has developed "NSP Plus," which provides training to CDCs, as well as provincial governments, departments, local organizations, and other community and district councils. The training focuses on capacity building in a range of subject areas — such as leadership, conflict resolution, gender sensitization and disaster risk reduction — and introduces bottom-up accountability mechanisms.

LESSONS LEARNED & BEST PRACTICES

AKF invests significantly in the ability of local institutions to manage and direct their own development. Through its programs, AKF creates linkages between village leaders and government officials, as well as connections between leaders in different communities and at different levels of government (local, provincial, national). In supporting CDCs, AKF focuses on capacity building and developing specialized knowledge at all levels, such as through the Social Audit.



The Social Audit provides an open forum for community members to ask questions or raise concerns with the CDCs about the details of project implementation and expenditure of funds. This is important, as the community is required to contribute at least 10 per cent of the cost of projects in cash, materials or labour. Local representatives trained by AKF's social organizers first check the council's receipts and financial accounts before a presentation is made to the entire community defending all expenses. The community then determines if they are satisfied with the overall quality and outcome of the funded projects. At the end of the Social Audit, a committee discusses the process and gives the council a rating on its performance, which is used to assess where the council needs to make improvements in its work. Such a process fosters bottom-up transparency.

As a result, local CDCs have become more active in fulfilling their development responsibilities. For example, in Badakshan province, Social Audits have paved the way for stronger, more responsible local governance. Community members determined that individuals were not performing their duties, leading to the replacement of almost 40 percent of people in leadership positions.

The Social Audit has also empowered local women to participate as well, within the limits of cultural restrictions. Women's participation varies from village to village - in some cases, women participate actively by asking questions, while in other cases anonymous questions are written and placed in a box carried through the crowd. Even the limited involvement of women, however, may help change attitudes in the long run.

While CDCs have been successful in Afghanistan, they face a number of challenges. Corruption, conflict, and weak government capacity persist throughout the country. However, programs like the Social Audit continue to help communities fight local corruption by tracking in detail how funds are spent. AKF-led training on conflict resolution help CDC members identify and address the root problems related to a variety of community conflicts, preventing violence and the disruption of future development initiatives. Such initiatives go a long way to creating local capacity and sustainability. This approach, however, requires strong community acceptance and a long-term commitment, a hallmark of the AKDN approach in this region.

MAINSTREAMING/KNOWLEDGE SHARING



Elements of AKF's "NSP Plus" program have been adopted for the next phase of NSP. They will be implemented by facilitating partners on behalf of the Government of Afghanistan, and are to be adopted by CDCs across the country.

NEXT STEPS

Ongoing challenges and fragilities in Afghanistan mean that now, more than ever, communities need ongoing support to build local institutions in a range of sectors. The multi-input approach of the AKDN through areas such as capacity development, natural resource management, market development, girls education and maternal and child health, will help to strengthen leadership, improve livelihoods and enhance communities for the long term.



FURTHER INFORMATION

"Social Audits in Afghanistan: Making Local Governance More Transparent"
<http://www.akdn.org/blog.asp?id=765>

Go here for more examples of how Canadian civil society is improving its development practice: <http://www.ccic.ca/IP-case-studies.php>