Home > People Power

People Power

Author: Sayed Yaqub Ibrahimi

Community-based development programme can boast some remarkable successes, but some say it falls short of its lofty rhetoric.

For Mohammad Jaan, nothing is more important than the four hours a day he spends at school. But up until a couple of years ago, the 14-year-old from the Daulatabad district of Balkh wouldn't have had the time for study, as he spent much of the day ferrying supplies of drinking water for his family.

"Now I spend the time at school, because the National Solidarity Programme has built a well in our village," he said, grinning. "My father spent his whole life saving us from thirst. But now my life will be different from my father's."

The National Solidarity Programme, NSP, which aims to reduce poverty and improve living standards in rural areas, was launched in August 2003, with the slogan "for the people, with the people, by the people".

At the heart of the initiative, coordinated by the ministry of rural rehabilitation and development, is community ownership of infrastructure projects: village residents elect community development councils – consisting of between five to 15 members – which select projects for funding, decides on who will implement them, and monitors progress.

The consortium of donors behind the programme - which includes the World Bank, the European Union, and the governments of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, and Germany - had together pledged over 375 million US dollars to the project by August 2005.

By the end of last year, the NSP had spent a total of 166 million dollars, reaching 194 of Afghanistan's 364 districts – around 10,000 communities. To reach its target of 20,000 of the latter by June 2007, it will have to move ahead at full speed.

"We have not spent our allocated budget," said Fazel, a coordinator with the programme. "Since we started from zero, it was slower at the beginning - we need about four months to get a council to stand on its feet. But our plans are going quicker year by year and we are not far behind [schedule]."

According to Fazel, 6,900 communities will be added to the project in 2006, and the NSP will reach its target comfortably. Over the next five years, the rest of Afghanistan's districts will be drawn into the programme.

For many of the villages that have benefited from the NSP, life has changed dramatically.

"We now have eight wells and a reservoir in our village," said Mohammad Hassan, a member of the local community development council in the village of Baghawi, in the northern province of Sar-e-Pul. "Water was our main problem, and no one had done anything for us."

The village is proud of its accomplishment, he said, and pleased that its residents had a say in the process.

1

"These local councils are our own. They talk to us and ask us about our problems and we ourselves advise them what to do for us," he said.

In cases where the project chosen requires specialised skills, experts are brought in from one of 24 non-governmental organisations, NGOs, working with the NSP.

"All of these projects need specialists," said Engineer Najia, project coordinator for the NSP. "They include building bridges, roads, schools, flour mills, wells. The rural areas of Afghanistan have neither engineers nor experts, so the councils mostly implement the projects by the NGOs working within the NSP."

The local councils, she added, can monitor the NGOs and they have the authority to launch enquiries.

In some villages people themselves implement the projects.

Mohammad Shah, who lives in Sar Asiab, a village in Balkh province, said the village was doing without NGOs. "We have built many things such as a well, a road and a bridge over the past two years," he said. "People work themselves, make money as well as build their village. This is a big opportunity for us."

But many people are not so enamoured of the NSP.

"We really need a school and a health clinic," said Maulawi Qader, a resident of the village of Kishindi, also in Balkh. "We have been asking for three years, but the NSP just says that they do not have schools and clinics in their plan for the current year.

"Instead, they build bridges for people who have no roads."

Another villager, Khair Mohammad, a council member in Baghawi, confirmed this.

"I myself have given three jeribs [6,000 square metres] of land so that people can build a school," he said. "But when we asked the NSP, they said they don't have schools in their plan.

"We do not trust any government programmes. We don't need any bridges, yet they are building them for us."

Najia acknowledged that there were problems in some areas.

"Most of the time when we put the request for a school in to the ministry of education, they say they cannot provide teachers. So we tell people that we have to postpone building a school and make them focus on other development projects," she said.

Health clinics present a similar problem when there are no doctors to staff them.

"Building a hospital or clinic without [medics] is useless," said Fazel. "In areas where people have asked for clinics, the health ministry may not have personnel."

The NSP concentrates on infrastructure, he said, rather than other necessities such training or operating expenses. The amount given to each village is calculated on the basis of 200 dollars per family.

"If we use the money for teachers' salaries or generator fuel, it will soon run out," said Fazel. "We are trying to have people spend the money on infrastructure so that they'll have something permanent."

But Najia said the NSP has done more than just build wells and bridges - it has increased the capacity of villages to run themselves.

"At first people in rural communities knew nothing about how to get anything done," she said. "But now they are able to organise development projects in their villages. Certainly there are many problems - it is a new programme. But we will solve them gradually."

Sayed Yaqub Ibrahimi is an IWPR staff reporter in Mazar-e-Sharif.
Location: Afghanistan
Focus: Afghanistan