READING FOR SESSION ON AFGHANISTAN

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

An Afghan boy ran to a man working in the field, shouting, "Your wife fell into the river!" The farmer raced to where she'd gone to fill her water jug—then started up the bank searching the fast-moving water. "No," shouted the boy. "The current carried her downriver!" The frantic farmer turned, shouting over the river's roar, "Boy, you don't yet know Afghan women. Always, they must swim against the stream."

A modern Afghan joke

The above gag, popular in post-Taliban Kabul, reveals a very different view of Afghan women from the locked in, powerless figures behind *burqas* of the popular media internationally.[1] The Afghan people are aware and appreciative of how their women press to move forward. Currents of life are pressing on the people, both men and women, as they struggle to swim against the flow of victimization by international pressures.

In the summer of 2002, through the highlands of Afghanistan, poppies flowered in fields that before had grown wheat, expanding far beyond where the flowers had historically been grown. The record crop was harvested. In 2003, more poppies were planted. Harvests increased still further in 2004, seventy-five percent of world production was now coming from Afghanistan's fields. After a military invasion to drive them out, the warlords had rejoined in partnership with Al Qaeda and were creating webs of partnerships with the people.

How did the warlords manage so quickly to reestablish a partnership with Al Qaeda and the people? On the other hand, why was creating partnership so difficult for the reform-minded Afghans and international community? Poppy growers took advantage of a failure in building relationship and mutual understanding with the international partnership. With great fanfare the international community focused on form and governance—and did not engage or really listen to the Bottom-up partner. Overlooking partnership with the people—although very strongly talking about it—and viewing them as poor and just needing aid, proved to be a major oversight. The international community came by the planeload (as too often is the case by those who seek to do good in times of crisis) seeing themselves as saviors, handing out gifts. As a

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[1] The figure of the powerless third world woman is a common one in development discourse and media coverage. For critiques, see Mohanty, Chandra, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" *Feminist Review* (30), Autumn 1988, 61-88. And Escobar, Arturo, Escobar, Arturo. *Encountering Development: the Making and Unmaking of the Third World.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

result, the most critical factor for mobilization of energy was not used: the legendary, unrelenting self-reliance and creativity of the Afghan people.

It should be no surprise that people who suffered for 23 years from repeated brutality would put the welfare of their families ahead of international priorities. The international community, in their pride of driving out the Taliban, overlooked the people. They congratulated themselves. They really believed military action had achieved the victory. They overlooked the fact that it was the people who by denying fleeing terrorists' safe-haven in their villages had been a true partner because they removed the base for immediate counterattack. The role of the Bottom-up partner was taken for granted. Into that vacuum the Taliban and Al Qaeda returned.

When the international attacks came following September 11th, Taliban and Al Qaeda commanders knew they would have to disperse. Our co-workers reported that as the commanders disbanded their soldiers they gave poppy seeds, saying, "Go home. Plant these; they will produce many times the profits you get from wheat. First our *jihad* struck America from the sky. Now we will enter America through her blood veins." As leaders scattered by pick-up trucks, donkeys, and motorbikes, American planes switched from bombs to bags of wheat in a well-meaning effort to win the loyalty of the people and avert impending famine. Outside assistance was trying to engage the Bottom-up. While the wheat did ameliorate the famine, it also glutted the market, causing wheat prices to tumble. People asked the practical question: why grow wheat when so much is being given away for free?

Practical villagers turned to the profitable alternative. They knew the farming cycle. In the black seeds they had entry to a sequence of tasks that could make them rich. On some level, the people were aware that those who had so recently oppressed them were being helped to again purchase arms so they could return to power. But against the backdrop of famine, against the hope of immediately enjoying a better life after war, the prospect of a toehold of wealth prompted the people to focus on tomorrow for their families rather than the day after. The seeds gave them entrance dues to the world of market and opportunity.

The abundant wheat gave them food. It was like being given an unexpected fish from the river of life. In addition, they were being blessed from the other direction; Al Qaeda provided rods, baited hooks, and a ready market, so the people took that also. They had food plus a new way of making a living. One situation made them recipients, and the other made them partners—even when they probably would have preferred to be partners with the international agencies. To people long denied almost everything, taking both was the obvious thing to do.

One of the greatest challenges for international assistance is the difficulty for donors to create partnerships. Every group talks about "partnership" but international assistance almost invariably promotes dependency because it is "assisting" people; it is "giving" them something. Just giving something, no matter what it is called, does not create partnership. The focus is on the donor. There is little awareness what is going on inside the recipient's life. But to do otherwise requires a different approach of assistance. In this case the Taliban/Al Qaeda group was offering a practical option, a process farmers knew how to take. International assistance, by contrast, gave gifts of wheat and promised

a wealth of products that were much wanted (schools, clinics, water wells, and the like) but consistently did so through gifts. Moreover, the lack of partnership with the people was made worse because the process by which these gifts were bestowed was baffling, from officials who were not from the community driving away in Land Cruisers after making offers with complicated explanations in papers people could not read. How could the local people truly own these gifts when they were so thoroughly wrapped in foreign paper but not wrapped so people can open it? Assistance can move to corruption in the method of its giving as it can in theft through falsified accounting.

Intent to help is not helpful when it does not help. The Afghanistan government was trying to do the right thing. So was the international community. But, words of helping people help themselves are not actions. By contrast, the actions of Al Qaeda were helping people help themselves—even when they were ultimately also undermining the future. With no system for engaging at the community level, the well-funded international partnership wasted its resources. By contrast, the Taliban and Al Qaeda rapidly took control in thousands of communities, even though the people did not want them and the most powerful nations had armies positioned to stop them. The beginning must get energy growing—in this case, small black seeds that produced a good profit. With those seeds energy was sparked and nurtured. But sparking the energy of avarice is not the same as empowerment. The Taliban and Al Qaeda did not give vague promises; there was no paperwork for illiterate people. The people knew how to take the step they offered toward that partnership. It built on centuries of farming experience. In contrast, the international community was trying to provide a move toward complex living by building long term capacity among the people—clinic-based health care, paved roads, a market economy, democratic society with free elections. To a people long deprived of such options people had to choose between a process they can readily do contrasted with a process they do not know how to do or really understand.

The dilemma is the reality that donors need accountability. But stating the problem in rigid either/or conditions puts the focus on results rather than on *finding a way that can achieve both community and donor accountability*. As the situation became further polarized in Afghanistan over the next couple of years, the international community continued to view the process as just a challenge of delivery and they turned to intermediaries. When intermediaries were introduced, partnership with the Afghan people became complicated not simple. Two groups of eager intermediaries had no trouble figuring out how to grab hold of the massive flow of international assistance. First were the NGOs. Many had been working in refugee camps in Pakistan or were coming in from other "emergency" sites around the world. Into these highly professionalized structures much of the new assistance disappeared. They knew how to fill out the paperwork; they claimed to offer a bridge to the people. While immediate benefit came to some people, the NGOs controlled the delivery of social change. This was complicated more as international corporations became part of the process. The second group to move into the void was the warlords who started wearing suits and held the NGOs and foreign governments hostage by threats of violence. Deals were worked out under their protection, and rumors raced through the villages about those who reaped the profits.

People in mud-brick villages, where one-quarter of the children died before age five, could not fill out the applications, and they soon realized the harsh truth. Assistance

would have trouble reaching them. Promises kept coming, but for many their homes did not have roofs, wells that had been dug often stopped before they hit water because the money ran out, many children were still not going to school, and their apricot orchards were still denuded. In spite of these difficulties the AID programs did achieve remarkable and measurable impact. In five years they doubled agricultural production. They gave incentives for alternative crops even while poppy production was reaching 60% of GNP. Over two million people were provided health care, with 90 % of them being women and children. Five million children were given immunizations. For the educational gap 50,000 teachers were trained.

Afghans, like any people, want to be self-reliant, to define their own destiny. As a people they are great examples of human resilience. Armies have long tried to control this crossroads: Alexander's legions, Genghis Khan's hordes, Russian and British empires in their Great Game, the Soviet invasion, the CIA in counter-response, and then a cabal of Pakistani and Saudi fundamentalists calling themselves "students," or Taliban. The Afghans resisted all. And then, with a very different set of books, came the invasion with checkbooks and account books. The newest empire tried to offer freedom from isolation, illness, illiteracy, and poverty—things all people want, things that make people self-reliant. But these were offered without an effective system of implementation, without "the how." They were offered as gift prescriptions, not as process.

The people, meanwhile, were caught in old traditions of tribal identities of Pushtun, Hazara, Uzbek, and Tajik. The opportunism fostered by the bags of assistance being off-loaded from trucks, by health services promised, by the wells and irrigation given to those who had land and this all caused people to pull away from partnership since the flood of assistance did not mobilize their energy. History gives many examples how the energy for change can come from community mobilization—Gandhi's Indian independence movement was one of the most positive. Leaders such as Gandhi understood that it was energy they were managing they use words such as *satyagraha, truth energy*. Gandhi himself famously recognized this by saying, "There go my followers. I must hurry and catch up." Perhaps one reason why social leaders today seldom seek to mobilize social energy is that they know people's energy can so easily get ahead of them.

The SEED-SCALE Process of Social Development in a Transitional Community in Kabul

Understanding how to mobilize energy is the first step. Abdullah Barat demonstrated this with his actions in the back streets of Kabul. Two decades of war coupled with crushing drought throughout Afghanistan took away opportunities for refugees returning to their village farms. People cut fruit trees for fuel and killed their remaining sheep for food. With liberation from the Taliban, hundreds of thousands rode into Kabul on trucks or walked in carrying a bundle on their shoulders. They hoped that life in the city would bring new opportunities. But Kabul offered scant opportunities—the city and its economy had been destroyed.

The refugees packed into buildings reduced to near rubble. Settlements grew without a plan and without services. Abdullah, whose regular job was in distant Bamian Province working for Future Generations Afghanistan came into Kabul regularly for

119

meetings. On these visits he often stayed with relatives, some of whom had moved as refugees into a chaotic part of the city. They asked what he did back home.

Abdullah explained SEED-SCALE—that every person has a few calories of energy that can become seeds for change. That while most people invest most of their energy just to hold their place in life, there is a margin of energy each person has that can be redirected. This margin of energy is often their only resource. Even if the person has other resources, this discretionary margin controls utilization of the other resources. In the war-scarred settlements, Abdullah said, the opportunities people would generate would come from how they invested this energy. It was not just a matter of what one person did, but a cumulative total of their combined investment. He explained that individual entrepreneurship just opens individual opportunities, and then the fortunate move on leaving the bulk of people as they were.[2] But if one person joined his or her margin of discretional energy with those of others, collectively they could create a social force that could overcome obstacles no individual could surmount alone.

Because the margin of available energy is small, and the time one person has is always limited, gathering collective energies requires a process. Without a process, people's energies spin off and dissipate. The people asked to learn more, demonstrating that participants must want to take this approach for it to work. Then, without investing a dollar, without setting up a social service program, without hiring a staff member, Abdullah continued to teach SEED-SCALE. The people in the enclave were from the most discriminated Afghan ethnic group, the Hazara. Few knew how to read or write. There was no apparent money. Abdullah explained that despite this lack of resources, they could help themselves—there were seven tasks they had to do.

First, the community needed leadership. Rather than vote and select a leader, which would immediately create competition, he advised a different approach, to collectively make decisions, not struggle for dominance. After discussion, a few people stepped forward, promising to work as a coordinating committee.

Next, he told them that the community had to build from what they had. What were their successes? There was little chance outside resources were going to be given— no "war on terror" resources here. "Conducting our first survey," the committee secretary, Akbar, later informed us, "showed us strength we never imagined. We had known we were from four ethnic groups, but we had no idea that we were 41,000 people. We came together across our groups and started talking."

The community then was told to learn their options, ideas to adeptly adapt in order to adopt. As people who had just come together, the most critical need was no longer to be separated by ancient communities and ethnic groups, but to bring in ideas. The committee sent representatives to Bamian Province to see Abdullah's work there. When the representatives returned from their field trip to their ramshackle Kabul settlement they realized that their first survey had been only a head count. Beyond its lack of accuracy, it gave no real understanding of who they were. People had been estimating how many people were in a neighborhood using sweeping generalizations. How could they create a survey with the truthfulness that they had just seen in Bamian? With

Abdullah's help they gave geographical boundaries to their community using hill slopes and stagnant ponds. Within these boundaries they gave a name to each winding alley and dust-filled street. They painted a number on any structure on each street where people were living. Out of chaos there began to be order. Volunteers went house-to-house with a better designed questionnaire, identifying that their community had come from 11 provinces, totaled 65,000 people (not the earlier estimate of 41,000), lived in over 7,000 households, and had a name for each head of household.

Wards were created within the community. Each ward held meetings, identified certain buildings as neighborhood centers, and in three started classes, one of which was also used as a mosque. Systematic dialogue began in these centers, using the strategy they had learned in Bamian on how to make neighborhood plans. From these an overall unified plan was outlined. Plans were at first basic, listing a few objectives and who would take a lead to implement these with the resources they had.

One objective in their collective plan was getting out the vote in the upcoming national elections. On voting day, 90 percent of their citizens turned out and their candidates won. Another objective was the need for sanitation—Abdullah had explained how the filth on the streets, particularly the defecation, was the cause of their many of their illnesses. With growing social pressure, people started to build latrines. The three learning centers added an ever-growing number of classes, and in a matter of months about 150 students were studying at each center, mostly adults.

Then the cycle of seven tasks started over. Focus remained on their successes and the growing of their energy. Members felt compelled to catalogue their problems, and others kept pointing out their failures, but the coordinating committee held the success focus and prevented the group from slipping into feeling victimized. The committee started identifying and training individuals who had shown particular leadership, approximately 60 persons. From this group, subcommittees were created, setting out trained committees for ten wards, small local coordinating committees. They analyzed their situations ward-by-ward. People were told as they went around Kabul and to their home provinces to return with ideas. More sophisticated workplans started to be created in this second round of doing the seven tasks. Progress was palpable through the dusty streets.

The neighborhood learning centers kept adding classes: literacy classes in Dari, English classes, computer training when discarded computers were acquired as gifts (at times there were five people on a computer, coaching each other), instruction in calligraphy, art classes, photography instruction as residents lent personal cameras, a youth theatre that then led to community drama performances. The list grew; one neighborhood center tried an idea, another adapted it in a modified way for their neighborhood.

The central committee decided they needed a library. With no budget for books, they sent requests to all the homes to bring in any and all books. People searched their homes, then through the city of Kabul, soon returning with hundreds of books. A borrowing rotation was set up by a specially created library committee. More books continue to come in—all without even a tiny allocation of money.

The political clout they had demonstrated during the elections started to produce results. The elected officials had at first done little. But the community did not let them forget how they got into office. Electrification followed to once-dark slums. Central waste collection began. From an initial Outside-in mobilization by Abdullah of Bottom-up activity, now there was support coming also from the Top-down. A three-way partnership had not been there to begin with, but it was nurtured.

Discussions grew, the idea came that they needed a way to go back and forth into the more prosperous parts of the city. The coordinating committee assembled started making inquiries, and it turned out there were financial resources in the community. They started using an old car. A regular schedule developed after a while. In the learning centers training programs began to teach people how to get jobs. As people went out each day for work, the community started seeing paychecks coming in.

Dialogue began with a French NGO to open a clinic. Continuing advice from Abdullah plus more sophisticated advice from Future Generations health experts started a package of home-based services. Community health worker training began, as did health education for mothers. Emphasis was on the prevention of illnesses and the health changes that could be done in homes.

Perhaps the most important action of all was that, through discussions with Future Generations, the committee realized the success they rode was exceedingly fragile. It would be easy to lose momentum. As the pressure for shared action became less urgent, people would start shifting to individual ends from the collective ones they had been following until then. Or, outside groups (both government and NGO) could start to take credit for the work that was underway, and, as there was more to show, would start making the decisions. Abdullah advised the committee that they had to build their expertise. They sent representatives to courses around Kabul to learn how to stay on top of the processes.

The main coordinating committee along with the neighborhood wards decided to transition into the *shura* system of representative governance. They needed to formalize structure and to open processes for participation. Within this new structure, a separate, targeted *shura* was established to let women have both a voice and a vehicle for action. (It was here on these now more optimistic streets that we heard once again the joke about women swimming upstream.)

The momentum of change had been underway for two years. People who live on the margins shun solutions that might bring trouble. But its citizens demonstrated they are ready to work for their own vision. This is what Abdullah understood as he began to work with them. He showed the people a process (four principles, seven tasks, and five evaluative criteria) by which to take this self-reliance and to nurture it.

Most people who seek to help speak of "not giving a fish but teaching people how to fish," but frequently they insist on giving just one bite before they start teaching, a bite to whet the appetite, then when learning lags they feed added bites. What Abdullah realized was "don't feed at all;" have them learn from the beginning, and help them learn to use what they have. When the commodity that will improve their lives is shown to be a resource they already possess, then resourcefulness is the result rather than a compulsion for resource consumption. Working with resources already owned—and everyone who is

alive owns the resource of energy—then technologies, social systems, information, financing follow. Momentum will shape to local ecology, economy, and values.

In a world where economic resources grow more controlling and natural resources become scarcer, the good news is that the most important resource is more abundant than ever before: human energy. Conventional resource foundations (using economic growth or extracting natural resources from the earth) remain for those who can follow traditional approaches. But for those who lack financial or natural resources (or who choose not to use these, recognizing the global crises such approaches have spawned) an alternative way is offered.

Human energy has many forms. People labor with muscles, brains, spirit, and aesthetic senses. And while each of these is different, at their core all are forms of energy just as natural energy is the same and can change such as lifting turning to heat, heat transforming to electricity, electricity into magnetism, and behold the light. Energy is energy. The energy that keeps us alive also mutates through living, labors, and love. Human energy is not a metaphor. Energy in the social sciences is energy as in the natural sciences; it is just a lot less predictable because it is influenced by the wills of people.

The Seven Tasks of SEED-SCALE--A Cycle of Tasks for Social Change

The cycle of social change can be compared to one of the most universal human activities, the cycle of agriculture. The agricultural cycle is a series of tasks: fields must be cleared, plowed, planted, watered, weeded, protected, and harvested. Each task in the cycle is integral to the whole process. This cycle is repeated among all agricultural people all over the world. Certain activities dominate at certain times in the year, but ultimately all are performed. Around the world, crops differ, so does technology, but the basic cycle does not. A standard cycle of social change makes calories of physical human energy grow. SEED-SCALE proposes a parallel cycle that allows the calories of social energy to produce, directing growth in health services, income, or protecting nature.[3] There are seven tasks in this cycle:

Unlike the agricultural cycle, in social change the sequence in which tasks are done is not crucial—tasks should be done when they can most easily be accomplished. In earlier writing, we called these tasks "steps," but that word was often interpreted to mean the sequence had to occur in a specified order. Moreover, some tasks and perhaps all (especially at the beginning), can be done in an imperfect manner. *But it is essential to complete the full cycle.* One cycle leads to the next, and in that next cycle the focus can be on improving tasks. Refining the process is what generates change. Focusing on one task is like a farmer who spends too much time refining plowing, does not get seeds into the ground, and certainly will not reap a harvest. This does not mean it is unimportant to strive for excellence in tasks, but true excellence emerges out of doing the full cycle.

First Task: Create (or Recreate) a Local Coordinating Committee

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[3] The cycle of seven tasks grew originally from a UNICEF methodology termed Triple A (Assessment, Analysis, Action) which, like the Positive Deviance was also developed for nutrition programs. We believe it is not happenstance that nutrition programs regularly produce innovations. Improving nutrition must be done through behavior changes—and while some programs continue to hand out supplemental food—it is obvious that in nutrition long-term answers will only come through changing behaviors. To do so, requires a process people can do, a sequence of tasks.

Local community-based social change is best managed by a coordinating committee, a team of people at the local level representing all three partner groups and major factions. To be most effective, it is not just a community committee but has outside representation also. The team can be small to begin with, a group of self-selected individuals from any of the three partners. Then, as the cycle of tasks is established, membership must become steadily more inclusive, bringing in the marginalized, especially women and minorities as the participation of women and minorities makes collective energy grow rapidly. An increasingly used term to identify the pioneers who start this change is "social entrepreneurs." Our experience shows that it is better if such pioneers operate as motivators of a group than if they directly lead by energy and charisma.

Unfortunately, expectations continue to look for a single leader, saying that a single leader, especially one who is strong, will more clearly articulate the vision. Examples are given of Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King. We say "unfortunately" because such leaders are rare, difficult to keep, too busy to train, and particularly hard to replace. It is more feasible and certainly more universal to create a collective. Often, a single leader becomes identified with a faction, and so while effective with that group, is less able to get sustainable or comprehensive change. The most reliable leadership is collective.

The reliable option is to put in place a coordinating committee. Having a committee is particularly likely to bring together multiple factions, age groups, and genders; each can have its representative. In leading, all will have a chance to lead in their group or area of competence. Collective leadership creates an expanding sense of ownership in the change process, a higher likelihood of creative input, an increased probability of financial transparency. A coordinating committee gives communities the forum to engage money, ideas, and outside agendas. It provides oversight, making it more difficult for individuals to take advantage of special access they might have. A committee also balances the priorities of groups that seek to impose their agendas—academic professionals who may try to impose research for their personal careers; NGOs with single-cause agendas; politicians caught between local constituencies and national goals; or businesses wanting to make money.

Size and committee composition will differ depending on laws, traditions, and stage of the project. However, it is hard to imagine a committee that will have fewer than seven members—perhaps four from the community, two officials, and one change agent. Possibly the committee could double in size. But efficient functioning depends on preventing the committee from growing so large that it acts like a congress.

Second Task: Identify Past Successes in the Community

Building on success is one of the four principles of SEED-SCALE, and this principle is operationalized in Tasks Two and Three. Every community, even the most destitute, has successes. Without successes their children, history, food, and language would not have survived. War stories of how Afghanistan defeated the mighty Soviet empire and incidents from decades of civil war. Stories of success in this war-torn land has few other points of hope on which to build—and sharing victories are good ways of empowering the community. These are the stories people tell their children, the stories that bring laughter and the stories that make them proud. Like any community, the successes are

many: a winning sports team, a festival, a son or daughter who left to become famous, a tale of heroism. They are day-to-day ways of passing along the resourcefulness and determination that all people need to share if they are going jointly to own their future. Getting people to articulate successes is not simple. It usually takes Outside-in skilled questioning, because people tend to overlook their successes and focus on problems. People often take their history for granted and are surprised when Outside-in change agents ask about their past successes and say this shows what they can now do.

Identifying successes generates positive energy, whereas a needs assessment promotes inadequacy. Successes pull the community together—contrasted with the almost reflexive tendency to blame others which happens when people talk about problems. Blaming tears a community apart and rigidifies factions. Change agents or officials, when they are doing their job well, often are able to point out successes because they know what other communities are doing and can see what is innovative in a community. Care must be taken to identify successes actually done by the community and not successes other organizations brought. In the world of politeness and politics, a frequent tendency is to ascribe a community success to a leader or a donor with the hope of getting more money. But to build community energy it is better if the people can take credit—if a donor or leader needs credit there are ways of recognition.

Third Task: Study Successes Elsewhere

Only occasionally is extension simple enough so communities see something in one place then adopt it spontaneously. More commonly, people adapt ideas as they adopt—and this needs to be done adeptly. It can occur in the usual serendipitous way where people hear about successes in other places, and perhaps even visit. They take what they see, if it works, use spreads. This happens all the time in trade. Or, it can occur through formal extension programs by government or NGOs. Typically the content is standardized for such extension, and while enthusiasm occurs usually the dynamism withers. However, standardization often prevents localization.

Today even in the remotest communities new ideas come in through the Internet, books, television, and radio, as well as ancient modes of visiting and trade. As people constantly experiment with and share ideas this process is underway even in once isolated places like Afghanistan. The process can be termed Surveillance for Success. Once established it becomes an on-going community habit: what ideas can we adeptly adapt and adopt? This natural communications is powerful, capturing ideas that might crop up in conversations. Outside-in agencies can promote such training as a low cost and extremely cost-effective tool. In extending this learning, the objective is not just to demonstrate an idea but to empower people to realize their capacity to take that idea. Seeing the successes of others opens consciousness. People ask: What is happening in the world that can benefit us?

Fourth Task: Conduct Self-Evaluation

Community decisions have typically been made by those with money, who decide based using their opinions and enforce those decisions using their power. More effective is to decide using local evidence—which gives immediate relevance to action. Local evidence-based decisionmaking, however, must be easy enough to do that busy people

opt for this over opinions. Examples from Afghanistan illustrate this link between data gathering and action.

An early project in Bamian was planting trees. Over the centuries much of Afghanistan had been deforested, but deforestation had worsened dramatically with 23 years of war. Surrounded by deforested mountainsides, communities were desperate for wood. One shura decided to plant trees. They knew it would take years for trees to grow, but they had confidence and traveled a day's distance leading a long donkey train to get saplings from an organization that was giving them away. As people along the route saw the loaded donkeys returning, they asked questions. Interest rose and the idea spread. In the first season, 150,000 poplar and willow trees were planted.

A few months later, they surveyed the trees to see how many had survived. Despite an effort to protect them, roughly half the saplings had been eaten by wandering donkeys. After lengthy oratory, the *shura* decided that all donkeys in the valley should be tied. If a donkey was found loose, a village constable would tie it up until a fine was paid. There were then amusing scenes of donkeys running across the land, pursued from one direction by a *shura* member with a rope to tie it up and the frantic owner from the other with another rope—but the result was that the donkeys stopped eating saplings. Building on this success, the *shura* then passed a regulation that any animal, not just donkeys, wandering into fields would result in its owner being fined. In addition to the benefit of protecting the saplings, getting errant animals under control reduced a frequent excuse for violence in a violent society.

Fifth Task: Engage in Effective, Evidence-based Decisionmaking

Effective decision-making guides action—who will do what, when, where, and with what. All these *w*'s are important, and getting the specifics makes or breaks the success of a decision. Without them decisions remain just talk, but with them a workplan process can be initiated. The seven tasks create the framework by which community members fill in the boxes of a simple but comprehensive plan matrix. Everything is put on one sheet of paper (or it can be painted on the side of a house so the whole community can see how they need to allocate their energy). The format is so clear it can be read by marginally literate people, even by a politician.

Objective	What to do	Where to do	When to do	Who inside	Who Outside	How	Needed training	Needed supplies	Remarks
1.									
2. 2a.									
3.									

126

Initial workplans almost always are too complex. People put up objectives they do not begin to have the training and resources to accomplish. A workplan is not a wish list. A community attempting its first plan should simply fill in the matrix by bringing together people's opinions. From that, people will become familiar with the expectation that they are part of community planning and expected to do jobs. Complexity comes in subsequent applications as plans produce success and the community gains competence. Sophistication is the result not so much of advice given by experts but from community members growing skill levels. To achieve accountability, monitoring the workplan is as crucial as financial bookkeeping. It provides a paper trail of evidence. *Workplans monitor community energy the way a budget assigns money or an audit assesses whether a budget was followed.*

Sixth Task: Take Action According to Workplan

In implementing the workplan as many people as possible should be involved. By choosing what priorities they take on, how they engage workers, and what priorities to undertake next, the local committee demonstrates whether it is a coordinating committee or a controlling committee. The distinction is central to creating empowering energy. Coordination readjusts tasks as complications and momentum build, engaging people rather than directing them. Some workers will take on too many tasks; others will promise much but accomplish little, but in either case energy does not grow. Empowerment—the objective that is more important than any planned target—expands as members together learn how to complete their duties.

To start, only a few tasks should be undertaken, and these must be achievable. The emphasis is on getting the tasks done with a growing energy so that for the next set of tasks energy is greater. Plans must not exhaust energy but build it, raising excitement in the community. While getting tasks accomplished is important, more important is to help the community feel that they have durable change underway that is expanding to all. This growing ownership will mobilize growth of community participation, which in turns brings in more energy and a diversity of community resources.

As energy increases, special attention needs to be paid to the role of professionals. They can either become allies or enemies. Professionals are usually the most articulate, technically expert, and accepted representatives of the Top-down and Outside-in. Sometimes they are also community members, and therefore may have two roles. In our efforts, the most common obstacle to sustainable progress is usually some group of professionals that decides to change what was shaped by the community rather than accepting the idea that coordinating committees must lead. The workplan is a way to respond to public desire for community action.

Politicians talk about partnership during election cycles, but often then do not support action between elections. Similarly, nearly every donor agreement and NGO mission statement now includes statements requiring community participation, but, despite this language, real participatory action is difficult.

Seventh Task: Make Midcourse Corrections so as to Strengthen the Four Principles and Five Criteria for Progress

As action gains momentum more obstacles will emerge than any plan can prepare for. Midcourse corrections respond and redirect momentum. *Effectiveness in SEED-SCALE is defined as the degree to which action strengthens the four principles and five criteria of progress.*

The tendency will be to focus on whether or not workplan objectives are being met. SEED-SCALE is not a results-based process. It is a process whose purpose is to grow energy from seeds of success to larger holistic success; it is this process of growing energy that reliably creates results. Focusing on just achieving objectives tends to cause people to blame each other; it often strains the partnership, and that weakens momentum. Momentum is more important than achieving targets. Midcourse corrections are therefore learning experiences. The mindset of seeking constant improvement creates cohesion and creativity rather than a mindset of following orders. Seeking continuing improvement does not happen by constantly starting over. It occurs by looking for incremental improvements. The process must be always developing the next small step for the coming time and place. Making corrections is not blaming people. Rather, it is a process of making people more effective, the process of growing understanding while looking for improvement. This prevents the common pattern where managers seek to hide mistakes. Robert Chambers correctly proposes the phrase "embrace error" to reflect the needed open attitude.

With midcourse corrections as a known part of the process, planning does not need to be overly detailed at the beginning. The workplan becomes an organic document, not fixed like an engineering blueprint. However, each change, of course, must be recorded so the workplan continues to ensure accountability. Using this approach, the process has many of the attributes of the widely practiced methods of quality assurance management in business. Budding energy when a group starts to feel empowered is fragile, like a spark that can snuff out. The cycle of the seven tasks is effective for two reasons; first, it avoids the need for impractical levels of perfection. It is flexible; as each step is completed and repeated, results improve. Success comes not from getting the process right but just making things better. The second reason is that the cycle is defined by function and process, not by outcomes, and hence can be used in almost any social situation to evolve locally specific solutions. It is a general process to achieve answers that fit time, place, and culture. The seven tasks systematize all the diverse *w's* of social change into an understandable and manageable process of how to move forward.