

Jennifer McCarthy

Questioning the NSP

Agency and Resource Access in Faryab Province

1. INTRODUCTION

Technocratic ‘top-down’ approaches to development began to incorporate participation both conceptually and practically in the 1970s.¹ However, the model of participatory development that has dominated policy discourse and programme implementation has not, for the most part, been a genuine opportunity for engagement in the development process. In this brief chapter I draw upon one woman’s revealing story about her struggle to survive in Faryab province (Figure 1) to demonstrate that Afghanistan’s example of this participatory development model, the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), has struggled to create an environment in which some of the country’s poorest families can access the resources they require to survive. I draw upon this personal story, communicated to me by Seema herself primarily through photographs, to argue that the NSP has not enabled marginalised villages and individuals to increase the degree of agency they exercise to access resources such as water and

food. Agency is defined here as ‘the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them.’²

I was driven to conduct this research after observing over a number of years that, despite the implementation of the NSP, residents of the villages and households in Faryab province continue to struggle to feed themselves. The NSP is a participatory development programme with a complex series of impacts on rural villages. From the early days of its implementation in 2003 there have been rumblings of discontent from within NSP villages across the northern province of Faryab and indeed across the country.³ This chapter draws on qualitative research conducted in Faryab province in 2008 and 2009 to identify how and why some vulnerable families have not been able to improve their lives after several years of NSP implementation.⁴

¹ Anthony Bebbington, ‘Reencountering Development: Livelihood Transitions and Place Transformations in the Andes’ *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (2000) 495–520; as well as Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press 1995; Richard Peet and Michael Watts, *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements*, London, Routledge 1996; James D Sidaway, ‘Spaces of Postdevelopment’ *Progress in Human Geography* 31, 3 (2007): 345–61.

² Naila Kabeer, ‘Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment’ *Development and Change* 3 (1999):438.

³ Palwasha Kakar, ‘Fine-Tuning the NSP: Discussions of Problems and Solutions with Facilitating Partners’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2005.

⁴ Seema’s story, only part of which is shared here due to space constraints, is only one among many from wider research discussed in more substantial pieces, including McCarthy, ‘Reframing Participatory Development and Livelihoods in Afghanistan’s Rural North: A Power Analysis to Understand Variegated Realities of Vulnerability’, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, King’s College, London, 2011; McCarthy and Mustafa, ‘Despite the Best Intentions? Experiences of Water Resource Management in North Afghanistan’ in *Strengthening*

Figure 1.
Map of Faryab Province



2. THE NSP

As a key government stakeholder in Kabul conveyed to me in an interview in June 2009, the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) sits proudly at the top of the long list of Afghanistan's development interventions. It is being implemented in all of the country's 34 provinces and has been advertised as a success in, among others, *The Economist*⁵ and *The New York Times*⁶

Post-Conflict Peacebuilding through Natural Resource Management, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

⁵ Behre Kamal, 'Wise Council: Village-development Councils are Taking on More Serious Roles' *The Economist* 25 March 2010, available at www.economist.com/node/15772771 (accessed 12 October 2010).

⁶ Sabrina Tavernise, 'Afghan Enclave Seen as Model for Development', *The New York Times* 12 November 2009,

for mitigating corruption, facilitating dispute resolution and engendering ownership over development projects. It is my contention that the pitfall of this programme, and this model of participatory development generally, is rooted in the lack of recognition of the actions and strategies already practiced by households across the country prior to the start of NSP. I argue that the NSP and this model of development programming can be more effective when time is taken to understand how households and communities already access resources. The existing practices need to be incorporated into the design of such programmes so that the programmes build on and strengthen the actions and strategies that are already effective instead of trying to establish new ones.

www.nytimes.com/2009/11/13/world/asia/13jurm.html (accessed 12 October 2010).

3. CASE STUDY 1: WATER

Figure 2 shows the garden in which Seema and her husband Ehsanullah have been working as labourers for twelve years, approximately six years before the NSP began in their village, Lower Charvak. They are landless and their payment for this work is half of any food that is produced. The presence of the NSP in their village since 2003 has not resulted in any significant alleviation of the pressures facing Seema and her family. Central amongst a host of other issues they face, such as increasing debt and tension within their extended family, is the problem of accessing irrigation water.

Figure 2.

A view of the garden in which Seema and Ehsanullah are labourers



Photo credit: Seema, Lower Charvak, Faryab Province, Afghanistan, 2009.

The stakes for Seema and Ehsanullah are high in this line of work. If Seema and her husband fail to grow any food for the landowner, they must pay a steep fine. Seema states that in 2008 they were forced to pay the landowner AFG 3000 (approximately US\$60):

[The landowner] said it doesn't matter if you were able to grow food or not, you should pay [He asked,] 'Why can't you produce any food on this land? If I were to give this land to anyone else to work, they could grow food.'⁷

This was a harsh penalty since not only did Seema and her husband not benefit from any food for their efforts, they had already invested in agricultural inputs such as seed, fertiliser, as well as a water pump and piping for the 2008 growing season. The payment of this fine forced them to take a high-interest loan in order to have enough

money to feed their family. The lender visits their house frequently demanding the money, which they do not have to pay back. The productivity of this land is of paramount importance to Seema and Ehsanullah. Because the garden provides their primary livelihood, Seema felt forced to come up with another way to ensure that it can be productive despite a lack of rain during the growing season. She decided to steal water.

Seema and her husband pay an initial AFG 500, equivalent to around US\$10, to the *mirab* who is responsible for overseeing the distribution of water within the streams. This is all they can afford and yet it does not provide enough water to keep the garden irrigated throughout the growing season. So in addition, under the cover of darkness during the summer months, they pump more water, for which they have not paid, from the irrigation stream into their storage hole (Figure 3) before using it to water the garden. The hole is four meters deep and was dug collectively over two days by Seema, Ehsanullah and their two eldest children. Seema fears that if the *mirab* were to find their pump he would take it away from her, charge a hefty fine, or worse. During daylight hours she keeps the water storage hole covered, the pump hidden in a mulberry tree, and only puts their plan into action at night when their neighbours are asleep. As it is for so many women and their families in many countries, accessing irrigation water is neither a straightforward nor an equitable process for Seema.⁸

Figure 3.

The temporary water storage hole used by Seema as part of the plan she devised to ensure the garden is irrigated as required



Photo credit: Seema, Lower Charvak, Faryab Province, Afghanistan, 2009.

⁷ Focus group discussion, Lower Charvak village, June 2009.

⁸ Farhana Sultana, 'Fluid Lives: Subjectivities, Gender and Water in Rural Bangladesh', *Gender, Place and Culture* 16, 4 (2009): 427–44.

Seema took these photographs and shared this narrative with us in order to illustrate how the presence of the NSP in her village has not had a positive impact on her and her husband's ability to access water, perhaps their most vital resource. The NSP, which resulted in the creation of a community development council (CDC), some road improvements and a shallow well in Lower Charvak, has not in any way provided Seema with what she needs to support herself and her family. Seema demonstrates that exercising her own agency to access essential resources is an important element in building an effective livelihood strategy. She is adapting to her circumstances and has managed to devise a strategy by which, albeit with a degree of risk, she can access the water she needs to irrigate the garden and fulfil her livelihood duties as a mother and a labourer. While she feels that the NSP has been implemented and very much left her and her family behind, she is not entirely powerless in that she is an active agent in exercising her power to access water as required.

4. CONCLUSION

Agency is possibly the single most vital factor determining how and when people access resources. The NSP creates spaces of power and participation that are experienced differently by men than women, and the ability to exercise agency within these gendered spaces can at least partly determine patterns of participation and, as my wider research demonstrates, access to resources. Blind to the existing strategies employed by target populations in accessing resources, this prevailing model of participatory development

exemplified by the NSP can be somewhat disconnected from the realities of rural life. I argue, and also fear, that programmes like the NSP may become increasingly irrelevant to vulnerable or disadvantaged groups who rely on the exercise of their own agency to forge participatory spaces themselves rather than waiting for the NSP to do so for them.

I suggest that if programmes such as the NSP are to increase the lasting positive impact they have on people's lives, the planning and design phases must take long enough to acquire a better understanding of how people are coping with the difficult conditions they face on a daily basis. For example, the NSP's implementation in Faryab province may have had a more positive impact on Seema's family if those who were facilitating the programme were able to recognise how important water is to her and had addressed what she really needed to survive—a small grant or loan, for example, to ensure she could pay for enough irrigation water, enjoy a productive harvest, and begin to pay back her debt.

Seema is only one story of many in her village of Lower Charvak. I learned from other research participants that the rising price of water due to scarcity was becoming a challenge for other landless families as well. If the NSP were to prioritise learning about the agency that is being exercised to access resources, particularly in times of scarcity, and then incorporate a reflection on how these exercises of agency can be built upon in consultations with the women and men who most need support in accessing resources, then simple and inexpensive steps could be taken to dramatically improve someone like Seema's chances at providing for her family.

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Jennifer McCarthy is currently based in London as the Catholic Overseas Development Agency (CAFOD)'s programme officer for Afghanistan and Pakistan, having completed her PhD in Geography at King's College London in 2011. Jennifer's research focused on gendered Afghan experiences of vulnerability and power dynamics in villages involved in participatory development programmes.

Jennifer's engagement with Afghanistan began in Canada in 2002 when she coordinated advocacy for a women's rights organisation in support of Afghan NGOs. She then moved to Afghanistan in 2004 to work on women's and girls' leadership programming before beginning her Masters degree in Environment and Development also at KCL. She was a coordinator for an international NGO in Faryab in 2005. Jennifer also worked in Indonesia and Burma before starting a non-profit organisation in Faryab in 2009 called Dollar-a-Day and raised funds through living on \$1 per day for 30 days.

ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter is part of a larger volume called *Snapshots of an Intervention: The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001–2011)*, edited by Martine van Bijlert and Sari Kouvo. The volume is a collection of 26 short case studies by analysts and practitioners, each with long histories in the country, who were closely involved in the programmes they describe. The contributions present rare and detailed insights into the complexity of the intervention and, in many cases, the widely shared failure to learn necessary lessons and to adapt to realities as they were encountered.

The chapters and full document can be found on the AAN website (www.aan-afghanistan.org) under publications.

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