

# **Assessing *Participation in Women's Development* Projects in Afghanistan**

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis assesses the concept of *participation* as it was manifested by different parties in international aid projects targeting women's empowerment in Afghanistan from the perspectives of 10 Afghan development professionals who worked in the aid projects from 2009 to 2016, as well as from analysis of a number of project evaluations and my personal experience. The research is based on the premise that because the Afghan professionals had a local background and linguistic skills, they would have had a deeper understanding of the basic needs of Afghan women than most expatriate staff. The research found that the project designs were not based on customized research and needs assessment specific to the timing and objectives of the projects, that the project beneficiaries, even sometimes local staff, were not involved in planning and decision making, that the plans made were mostly not implemented, that the quality of implemented projects was unsatisfactory, and, finally, that the lack of sustainability measures and coordination with government and stakeholders raised concerns about the longevity of the projects.

**Keywords:** Participation; Empowerment; Communication; Development; Aid; Gender  
Equality

*To Pezhman, my companion through peaks and valleys*

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## List of Acronyms

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| AAN     | Afghan Analysts Network  |
| AIHRC   | Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission                    |
| AREDP   | Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Program                   |
| AREU    | Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit                           |
| ASAP    | Accelerating Sustainable Agriculture Program                       |
| ASGP    | Afghanistan Subnational Governance Program                         |
| ASMED   | Afghanistan Small and Medium Enterprise Development                |
| AUAF    | American University of Afghanistan                                 |
| AWAC    | Afghan Women Advocacy Coalition                                    |
| CIDA    | Canadian International Development Agency                          |
| COP     | Chief of Party   |
| CSC     | Communication for Social Change                                    |
| CSO     | Civil Society Organization   |
| C4D     | Communication for Development                                      |
| DCOP    | Deputy Chief of Party  |
| DDG     | Danish Demining Group  |
| DoWA    | Department of Women's Affairs                                      |
| EG      | Enterprise Group   |
| ELA     | Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan                             |
| EVI     | Extremely Vulnerable Individual                                    |
| GIZ     | German Technical Cooperation                                       |
| IDEANEW | Incentives Driving Economic Alternatives for the North, East, West |
| IKS     | Indigenous Knowledge Systems                                       |
| I-PACS  | Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society                         |
| LGCD    | Local Governance and Community Development                         |
| MDGs    | Millennium Development Goals                                       |
| MoE     | Ministry of Education  |
| MoRR    | Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation                              |
| MoWA    | Ministry of Women's Affairs  |
| MRRD    | Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development                   |
| NAPWA   | National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan                  |
| NATO    | North Atlantic Treaty Organization                                 |

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| NGO    | Non-Government Organization                                      |
| NPP    | National Priority Program  |
| OTI    | Office of Transition   |
| OXFAM  | Oxford Committee for Famine Relief                               |
| RAIP   | Rural Access Implementation Program                              |
| RFA    | Request for Application  |
| RFP    | Request for Proposals  |
| SCA    | Swedish Committee for Afghanistan                                |
| SIDA   | Swedish International Development Authority                      |
| SIGAR  | Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction         |
| SKS    | Scientific Knowledge Systems                                     |
| SME    | Small and Medium Enterprises                                     |
| SWSA   | Stronger Women Stronger Afghanistan                              |
| TED    | Technology, Entertainment and Design                             |
| ToT    | Training of Trainers   |
| TPM    | Third Party Monitoring   |
| UN     | United Nations   |
| UNDAF  | United Nations Development Assistance Framework                  |
| UNDP   | United Nations Development Program                               |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| UNHCR  | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees                    |
| UNICEF | United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund           |
| UK     | United Kingdom   |
| U.S.   | The United States  |
| USAID  | United States Agency for International Development               |
| VSLA   | Village Savings and Loans Associations                           |
| WAW    | Women for Afghan Women   |
| WfWI   | Women for Women International                                    |
| WLD    | Women's Leadership Development                                   |

# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

This thesis is a critical assessment of themes closely related to the concept of *participation* of different parties including the beneficiaries, in the context of international aid targeting women in Afghanistan. The purpose of this thesis is to bring to light and to evaluate how this concept is realized in practice.

### Conceptual Framework

The present thesis fits into the field of communication for social change (CSC), also referred to as communication for development (C4D), which seeks to utilize communication as a means of enhancing the voices of marginalized groups to empower them to participate in their own development. In 1997, the United Nations agreed on the following definition for C4D as part of the General Assembly Resolution 51/172:

“Communication for development stresses the need to support two-way communication systems that enable dialogue and that allow communities to speak out, express their aspirations and concerns and participate in the decisions that relate to their development”.

The principles of CSC are, however, shared across a variety of fields of communication and development that include, but are not limited to, participatory communication and development, sustainable development, behavior change communication, communication for advocacy, human development, development ethics, and post-colonialism.

The research questions I have attempted to respond to in this thesis project are

1. Is the international community meeting its own definition of inclusion and participation in women’s development projects in Afghanistan?
2. Do the projects targeting women’s empowerment meet the needs of the beneficiaries, in this case, specifically, Afghan women?

I have attempted to respond to these questions through a thorough examination of who **participates** in the *design, planning, and implementation* of the development process, supposedly aimed at Afghan women's empowerment. Specifically, I have reviewed a number of project evaluations and highlighted themes relevant to participation and analyzed a series of interviews that I personally conducted in August of 2016. The interviews allowed me to take a closer look at the issues and to include the opinions of local professionals who were the bridge between the grassroots and the international aid initiatives. In highlighting the above themes, my purpose also was to bring to light the greater question of justice, specifically in regard to if and how the project beneficiaries and local populations participated in projects that affected their lives most of all.

## **Outline**

The following outline presents a brief summary of each of the chapters to follow in this thesis:

**Chapter 2** is my personal reflection on how I came to be interested in the field of women's empowerment and the challenges I encountered as a communications professional in the field. The aim of this chapter is to give the reader an insight into my position in regard to women's empowerment, which may also help demonstrate my personal biases regarding the research project. As this chapter is a personal reflection, rather than being research oriented, the reader might experience a mismatch in tone and authority between this and the rest of the chapters in this thesis.

**Chapter 3** provides a theoretical context for the thesis through a review of the literature that traces the emergence of the concepts of *participation* and *empowerment* in the global development agenda. This historical review includes a collection of typologies and definitions of *participation* which serve as a basis for assessing the project evaluations (in Chapter 5) and interview analysis (in Chapter 6). This chapter also shows the interconnectedness between the two concepts of *participation* and *empowerment* and provides the theory as well as practical contexts for the two concepts in the real world.

**Chapter 4** provides a history of the efforts towards gender equality in Afghanistan during the last century, as well as in the aftermath of 9/11. The purpose of this history is to provide the reader with background that will assist in understanding the period under study in which the research, covered in the next two chapters, was undertaken.

**Chapter 5** reviews and assesses government and agency-mandated evaluations of 12 mainly American and UN aid projects that targeted women in Afghanistan. The chapter discusses the findings of these evaluations relating to such issues as project design, planning, implementation, effectiveness, sustainability measures and so on.

**Chapter 6** introduces the interviewees and presents their experiences and views on a series of questions related to the design, implementation, and efficacy of the projects they were involved in.

**Chapter 7** offers findings, recommendations, and conclusions. The findings are specific to participation as well as the development approaches in general. The recommendation section first explores two different types of solutions based on (a) the root causes of the development problematic and (b) symptomatic solutions. However, both of these solutions are considered non-realistic given the realities on the ground. A third *hybrid* solution is then briefly described and proposed for future research.

## **Chapter 2. Through My Eyes: The Contribution of International Aid Agencies to Women's "Development" in Afghanistan**

Having been born a woman in Afghanistan has taught me many lessons, lessons which are less attributable to myself than to others who share this identity with me and who have suffered far more because of it. Admittedly, by virtue of having been born into a Bahá'í family, and having spent the war years out of the country, I was granted many privileges over other Afghan women, especially in regards to societal restrictions and those stemming from internal family dynamics. For this reason, I will reflect not only on my own experiences in this paper, but, as well, on those of others who have played an important role in shaping my worldview with respect to the contributions of international aid organizations towards women's development in Afghanistan.

Taking a critical approach, I will reflect on my experiences and, selectively, those of others I have come across in my effort to answer the question: Do aid agencies empower Afghan women? I will try to answer this question not only from the actual experience of being a recipient and observer of international aid, but also as an insider working for international aid organizations focused on women's empowerment in Afghanistan for many years. By taking a critical approach, I start with a recognition of the unequal power relations that has led to gender inequality in Afghan society. Through reflection on my experience, I intend to contribute to the body of knowledge, as the title suggests, through my own eyes and my personal understanding of society and the effects that I have observed of aid agencies on me and on my community.

### **The Formative Period: *What brought me to this question?***

Eleven years had passed by the time our family had returned to Afghanistan in the year 2002, following the United States' intervention. Although living conditions were poor, the public in general was profoundly hopeful and quite positive about the international community's development efforts. This was especially the case for the women of Afghanistan who had been suppressed throughout decades of war.

Walking the streets of my hometown and feeling the burning glares of my countrymen was the first time I became conscious of my difference from them. It was also the first time I gradually became aware that my being a female not only made me vulnerable to harm, but also placed me at a disadvantage. The first time I rode a public bus it felt like a violation, with a crowd of eyes not only staring intensely, but also looking for every opportunity to harass me with comments and gestures. My sister and I decided thereafter to walk for 45 minutes everyday to school instead of taking the bus, so that at least the suffocating atmosphere could be avoided, if not the stares.

Another memorable experience that was to play an important role in shaping my worldview was in high school where my sister and I were the only two girls who did not cover our faces with the traditional veil. Although females were no longer obligated to wear the traditional blue burqa (chadari) by the government, many of my classmates said that they were accustomed to wearing it and that, in fact, they felt free by doing so since they were not identifiable behind the veil and felt protected from the menacing stares. I felt insulted every time I heard about this definition of freedom from my female classmates. A friend, Sarah, who had returned from Tajikistan in the last year of high school, would spend hours striving to convince our other classmates that the thing they called freedom was instead a prison and that for real freedom to take place, Afghan women would have to come out from their shells and strive for justice.

The personal stories of my classmates however were quite different from ours. Jamila was 25 and the eldest of her five siblings. She had lost her father during the war years and her mother was a wage laborer with an income that was not at all sufficient to provide even basic food for her family. As a result, the family had to rely on her uncle for financial support, who was now the male patron responsible to also maintain the integrity of their family. He had not received an education himself and was very skeptical of girls going to school. It was because of her mother, who lied to her brother about needing Jamila to help her at work, that Jamila was able to come to school.

Sajia, another classmate, belonged to a Pashtun tribal family. She was living together with her paternal family and cousins, and important decisions in such families are made not by one person or the family, but by the whole body of tribal elders composed of men who typically have only received a religious education from conservative clerics. She felt very lucky to have been allowed to go to school, even if it

came with restrictions over which she had no control like wearing the burqa. She knew, however, that despite her love for higher education, she soon had to be married to her fiancé whom she was destined to see only on her wedding day and from whom her father had already received half of the money that he was “giving” (i.e., selling) her for.

I remember the day Jamila wept while relating to me and Sarah her story and asked us how it would be possible, given her circumstances, for her to be free? We were both left with no answer and remained silent for a number of days at school, because we realized not only that we did not have any answers, but also that we were in no position to even speak of freedom without knowing the risks. Sarah and I were free only by circumstance, not by struggle.

I mention these two stories not because they are extreme cases, but, rather, because they are the stories of the average Afghan family, where women are trained to receive, accept, and execute the orders given by the opposite sex. Most of my classmates considered themselves very fortunate for having been allowed to come to school in the first place, as they had been prohibited not only from receiving an education during the Taliban period, but even from stepping out of their homes unchaperoned. Some wished they never had to go to school, because they thought that they were too old to learn anything, and it was hard to catch up. Yet others among my classmates considered themselves responsible for upholding their families' integrity; and now that they had been allowed to go to school, they had to be careful about the way they dressed, spoke, or behaved.

Concerns such as what would I do if I were Sajja or Jamila and if and how would I deal with such a situation occupied my thoughts throughout my high school years and beyond. At times I felt depressed for belonging to such a paternalistic society. Other times I would blame the women themselves for not resisting the status quo. And on other occasions, I felt lucky for not having suffered what the majority of Afghan women experienced on a daily basis. At the same time, I did not know if anyone could help a society that was not ready to accept change and open itself to new opportunities. How could I help Sajja or Jamila or my other two dozen classmates? Sometimes I felt as if leaving matters ambiguously in the hands of destiny or fate, which was the solution that Afghan society and especially women had accepted, was perhaps the best that could be done. I always knew, however, that there had to be better solutions and that such

solutions would undoubtedly be difficult and challenging. Yet, I did not know where such solutions were to be found, and, if found, how were they to be implemented?

### **The Transition from Early Impressions to Collaboration in Women's Development**

It was in those days that I would randomly hear talk of women's political involvement, the elimination of violence against women, and economic empowerment of women from the media and in the conversations of the average person. Though I would not be able to make much sense of these issues at the time, I desperately wanted to participate in these discussions so as to at least relieve my conscience.

So, what was the international community and what did it have to offer the women of Afghanistan? As a teenager, whenever I saw a foreigner walking in the streets, I perceived them almost as angels who would save us from the ills that remained from the many years of war, and I was inspired to join them in such an effort. I finished high school at the age of 17 and took the university entrance examination (called the *Kankor examination* whereby one is placed in any department that the higher education authorities place you). As a result, the higher education people decided that a majority of the female students that year should be placed in the education department because there was a need for female teachers. I was placed in the field of mathematics in the department of education, a subject which I highly disliked during my school years. I came to resent the government's being entitled to make decisions affecting my future on my behalf. This resentment, and the fact that I was a feasible candidate for NGO work (a female with basic knowledge of English), led me to apply for a job in a USAID-funded organization that supported education. I worked in the monitoring and evaluation department, and, despite the minor role of data quality inspection that I had, I felt like I was contributing to a bigger cause that would lead to the betterment of my country. A year passed, and I knew that I was now at the official age of going to university and could not lose more time. Nonetheless, despite my disinterest in the field of mathematics and the highly dysfunctional education system, I studied in Kabul Education University for two and a half years.

As soon as I came to know that the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) was established in Kabul, I was eager to enroll in classes, and all I needed was a job to be able to fund my education. In my search for any random job, I started working in the

Human Resource Department of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation Development and ultimately joined AUAF. After about seven months of working in the human resource department and finding that it did not contribute much toward my goals, I was eager for a more purposeful role. And, although it was a short term one, I decided to move on to the project responsible for convening the first women's council. This was a first of its kind women's gathering, where we had to gather 400 female representatives from across Afghanistan who would stay in a luxurious hotel in Kabul and discuss the most pressing issues to be presented to the country's president. I remember that as the council was coming close, my workload was increasing. I received calls until midnight for making all of the arrangements with the photographers, the media, the president's office, and so forth. When the grand day arrived, I saw a group of passionate, resilient women who spoke with courage and presented the condition of women in their respective provinces. I felt very proud that day to have contributed to such an historic event in my country, especially because President Karzai himself came, received the declaration that these women had written, and promised to incorporate its recommendations into the policies of the relevant ministries. This was the peak of my hope that the condition of Afghan women would improve. I felt that I was in the right place and that Afghan women were now taken care so that their rights and freedoms would gradually, if not immediately, improve.

### **The Beginnings of a Change in my Perceptions**

For the next seven years of my career, however, I mostly saw the same women and a few new faces at other conferences, workshops, and training events that I participated in, organized, photographed, or reported as part of my different roles revolving around communication and reporting in a few international organizations. The talks were similar, the conclusions were similar, and the recommendations also sounded similar. Despite the millions of dollars in funding and a ministry designated for "Women's Affairs", where I eventually came to work at a later period, I realized that the lofty language that had inspired me to choose the career path that I was on had materialized into short-sighted, inefficient, and unsatisfactory results. The development effort did not assess or satisfy the very basic needs of Afghan women. The needs I perceived were subtler and did not require substantial funds, but, rather, more effort to first assess the needs of Afghan women and then to strategically address these needs by considering the power relations that ruled society -- not by politicizing the matter and putting women

in the forefront who still had a long journey to go towards equality and who were in no position to implement change at a societal level. For instance, if one sought to empower Sajia, one would have to first enlighten the tribal elite. Other examples of priorities would include providing education, not only for women, but, perhaps more so, for men, so that, with time, a change in perception could take place.

In the following points, I will only highlight a few prominent examples of how I saw the international community's mandate of women's empowerment materialize:

1. It was sometime after the first council gathering that I realized how different and distant this new emerging class of Afghan women, including myself, were from those I knew from school as well as my neighbors and relatives. This new class of women were the very first to learn English, and as soon as they had some command of the language, they either worked for an NGO like I did or would choose a rather more successful path of creating their own NGOs and receiving funds from donor agencies.
2. Due to women's "development" being at the forefront of all written international aid documents, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)<sup>1</sup> and ensuing policies, it became a popular path for making money. A few colleagues came together and created either a consulting firm or a local NGO that included *women* in the title and suddenly they were recipients of millions of dollars in funding since the most convenient route for international organizations to spend their money was to subcontract their work to local NGOs. This was even further exacerbated by the fact that USAID-contracted projects had to spend their funds within the fiscal year in order to receive funding for the following year. Several USAID employees, interviewed by Oxfam, "critiqued the USAID's current contracting system, including its unrealistic objectives, the excessive cost of private contractors, as well as the multiple tiers of subcontractors" (Oxfam, 2009, pg.6).
3. The mechanisms and structures of international and local organizations for designing projects were random, poorly coordinated, and exclusively depended on the competency of staff. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan

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<sup>1</sup> MDGs were millenium development goals set by the United Nations member states and international development organizations in the year 2000, to achieve eight goals by the year 2015 globally, one of the goals being *gender equality*.

Reconstruction found that the hundreds of millions of dollars allocated for Afghan women over the course of a decade could not be accounted for due to a lack of efficient tracking mechanisms by these projects (SIGAR, 2014). I personally came across (expatriate) managers who had difficulty in simply writing their day-to-day emails and others who designed annual work plans in their offices and then handed them over for implementation to the local staff without any consultation with the staff, let alone the target recipients.

4. The types of development work that were designed seemed to reflect more of a trend than to be actually based on an assessment of the needs of women or capacitating them to serve others. Awareness raising, conferences, and workshops, which have become a trend globally, remained at the top of the list of activities in every organization with which I was employed. For example, the United Nations Development Project on Gender Equality, my most recent employer, had four main pillars (justice, economic empowerment, capacity building, and policy development). The funding dedicated to each pillar was insufficient for doing even rudimentary work and, thus, most of the programs that were planned were short-term, surface level, and inconsistent. Given the bureaucracy inside the UN system, which I won't discuss here, by the time the annual work plan would be approved by the authorities, it would already be the second quarter, and in the best-case scenario, it would take nine months to hire relevant staff, to plan implementation, and to actually execute the plan in different regions.
5. The more this new class of women advanced, the more they became distanced from their actual identities and communities. This also created a mistrust at the grassroots level not only towards the international community, but also towards this class of NGO workers. I remember that at one point, the target women in the provinces would no longer attend these workshops and conferences. And the solution that most of the NGOs came to use was to entice them with a stipend to get them to participate.

Cynically, it seemed as though the issues and challenges of the development agencies were greater than those of Afghan women. Related to this is the question of how the patriarchal society of Afghanistan was any different from the patronizing system of international aid agencies who claimed to be able to solve the problems within the

country but, instead, added more to them? To the Afghan mind it looked like the development effort was more about a power struggle between old versus new, tradition versus modernity and East versus West than about the empowerment of women. And was my role as a communicator, working to effect this change, isolated from such perceived power struggles or, rather, a direct instrument of the West, which in the guise of “development” was intended to create a power shift in the country? Regarding concept of relationality, I felt a responsibility in relation to the sentiments and interests of my fellow Afghans, while in relation to authority and power, I was at the same time accountable to my employers.

At a mid-point in my career, I was placed in conditions where three forces played a major role that effected a change in my behavior: Society expected me to work for women’s rights effectively, because I had the language and the skills to be involved and because of my identity as an Afghan female, to keep in mind the best interests of my fellow Afghan women. In a professional context as a communications officer, I was expected to do what was asked of me and to be efficient in achieving results. This force was a very critical one as I was the person responsible for highlighting, reporting, and most of the time also polishing up the reports to make the projects look more effective and put the organizations I worked for in a positive light, whereas they were in fact quite dysfunctional. The third force was a need for me to provide for family and for my education. Under the burden of the diverse and even conflicting responsibilities involved in working on behalf of Afghan women but also in the interests of aid agencies, a fourth force arose -- my own conscience, which constantly prodded me to question whether the work I was doing was actually contributing to the cause of justice.

Contemplating the issue of justice in the context of the development work I had experienced, I came to understand that there were two different tiers to consider. The first one related to the international community and whether it was genuinely there for creating a more just and equal society for women. Having such motives would have manifested themselves in first trying to understand the society, in this case, the needs of the women at different levels by encouraging *participation* in their own development by voicing their needs, and then designing and implementing projects in accordance with those needs aiming at their empowerment. However, the conclusion I came to over the years proved to me that the international community was not concerned with the needs of women. In contrast, it was there to introduce and strengthen Western liberal ideals, a

global trend identified decades earlier by Petras (1997) who concluded that “the mass of NGOs are increasingly instruments of neoliberalism.” (Imperialism and NGOs in Latin America) Priority was also placed by these NGOs for employing their own citizens, most of whom were there only to acquire higher salaries without any consideration for the target populations, respect for their existing culture, religion, or care for creating an equal society. The money spent on offices, residences, vehicles, salaries, and, most importantly, security for the expatriate staff was what comprised the majority of the cost. The local subcontractors and employees were the second tier of beneficiaries who could really be considered the only source of assistance to the local community.

The second level of examining the question of justice in this context was from my own standpoint. Was I, as a communications officer, actually serving justice, when, after having witnessed all of the aforementioned problems that questioned my commitment towards my own people, I still continued to work for the aid agencies? Or was I rather, as a communicator, the voice of Afghan women? Had I not worked in this capacity, would I be in a position to generate knowledge in this regard? And had I not received an education, would I be able to produce any knowledge? Would that knowledge be considered as relevant to the demographic that I had chosen to dedicate my career to in the first place? In response to these thoughts that I often reflected on, my resolution was essentially utilitarian -- to do the best I could under the given circumstances so as to be at least the cause of more happiness than suffering. To cite Bentham (1996), “In principle and in practice, in a right track and in a wrong one, the rarest of all human qualities is consistency (p. 587).” I chose therefore to strive to improve the conditions of Afghan women, rather than take a political or rebellious stance by critiquing development efforts while doing nothing to help mothers, sisters, and daughters to gain some semblance of independence so they could help their families with the most basic of human needs. This meant that the communications strategies that I developed and the reports I published for viewership by project donors complied with organizational demands that would perpetuate not only ineffective development projects, but continue the flow of donor funding to fuel these projects. Something is better than nothing, and should I have not communicated the rosy picture that was required, the daily troubles faced by women would not be alleviated.

The path that I consequently chose was to perform my work to the best of my ability. This enabled me to be a recognized voice in my organization as an agent of

change, however trivial that change was, given the limitations that would exist. That which I strive for, however, has always been to have a greater voice to bring about fundamental change. Once I finished my degree from AUAF and I could hand over family responsibility to my younger brother, I decided to continue my education in the hope of acquiring the capacity to have that bigger voice. To quote a character from a Dan Millman novel, "The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new." (1984, p.113)

## Chapter 3. Participation and Empowerment

The present chapter provides a literature review on the emergence of the concept of participation in the field of development on the global agenda and its inseparability from the concept of empowerment in a development context.

*Participation* is a complex and challenging concept that encompasses an array of disciplines which can have contradictory meanings in different contexts depending on one's interpretation. As White (1996) argued, its having the status of being a "hurrah word" "blocks its detailed examination", and it "can take on multiple forms and serve many different interests" (pg.7). Tosun (2000) referred to *participation* as "an umbrella term for a supposedly new genre of development intervention" (p. 615). Botes and Rensburg (2000), in turn, described "community participation" as "one of the most overused, but least understood concepts in developing countries" (p. 41). Tosun (2000) compared the concept of participation to that of democracy and stated that

it may be easy for policy makers to see it as an evolving concept and popular to accept in theory, but troublesome to execute in practice and putting the idea into operation is not precisely comprehended, particularly in developing countries. (p. 616)

Kyamusugulwa (2013) noted that participation, as a concept in development, is over 80 years old. He outlined various terms in the literature that signify the idea of participation although they may differ to a small degree from one another. These include "public participation, popular participation, collective action, collective management, social capital, community-based/community-driven action, stakeholders or civic engagement" (p. 1266). In general, Kyamusugulwa agreed that participation is closely connected with the concept of community, both in terms of geographic location and group associations, as long as these groups have shared interests and mutual concerns. Participation is also related to governance regarding the need for balancing power between the elite and the grassroots. The principles of governance that are closely connected with that of participation include transparency and accountability, for reasons relating to the inclusion of, and answerability to, the public and/or donors. "Citizen engagement, equality and social inclusion (gender, ethnicity, age, religion, etc.), ethical and honest behavior, equity, partnership, sustainability and the rule of law" are other principles of governance also related to participation (pg. 1268).

If there is common ground among theorists and practitioners on the subject of participation, it is their agreement on the fact that the meanings of participation are relative to context. Despite the vague nature of this concept, today one can hardly find a project without consideration of the “participation” of its beneficiaries in one way or another (Tosun, 1999).

Ever since its inception in the field of development, participation has been a frequently visited theme by both theorists and practitioners. According to Colin Sparks, the years 1987 to 1996 witnessed the peak use of participatory development in the realm of theory. However, as participation transitioned from theory to practice in the years that followed, it took on greater complexity and faced greater criticism (Sparks, 2007). The discourses that started in the 1980s around participation have transformed into mainstream “sustainable” development practices. Participation is now considered “a core ideal, both as a human rights issue and as a means for increasing the efficacy of interventions” (Harder, Burford, & Hoover, 2013, p. 41).

As Parfitt (2004) outlined, “Participation can be seen as an essential value in development despite its ambiguity” (pg. 555). The importance of participation is demonstrated well by Mill’s (1973; quoted in Low, 1991) analogy in which he argues that the way human beings learn anything is through practice and experience rather than by simply being told how to do things. The role of participation is thus important for increasing public education as well as for practicing democracy.

### **Recent History of Participation**

Some authors have argued that community participation has existed in the development field since the 1950s under different labels and terms (de Kadt, 1982; Gow & Vansant, 1983, as cited in Tosun, 2000). However, in more recent history, participation has been associated with a reaction and a form of mild resistance to top-down approaches to development, citizenry rights, and social movements (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). The underlying assumption for an increase in participation is that it increases the level of people’s ownership that will in turn increase the sustainability of projects beyond international funding (Das & Takahashi, 2014).

## ***The Participatory Paradigm***

Emerging from Latin American countries in the 1980s, the Participatory Paradigm (also called Alternative Development), as part of the *basic needs approach*, brought enlightenment to development thought. Participation as a paradigm succeeded the two earlier paradigms of development thinking, namely, the *dominant* and the *critical* paradigms. It is known to have started with Friere, who worked in North Eastern Brazil and who implemented a literacy campaign among the peasants which sought to give the peasants a voice to raise their concerns about what projects they needed and how they wanted the projects to work for them. He then implemented these projects with great success and published his experiences. Friere's main argument was that stakeholders of development must be able to actively participate in and influence decision making regarding their communities in order for social change to take place. The outcome of such development is then envisioned to be more useful for the local populations and more sustainable due to the sense of ownership the local populations then enjoy. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Friere (1983) stated:

This is not the privilege of some few men (and women), but the right of every (wo)man. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone -- nor can he (or she) say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words. (p.76)

Almost immediately after Friere's publication, not only did scholars in Latin American and other developing countries endorse his ideas, but so likewise did the early scholars of the dominant paradigm: Daniel Lerner, Everett Rogers, and Wilbur Schramm, whose later publications evidenced their agreement with this new way of thinking (Servaes, 2008). Robert Huesca stated that "the concept of participatory communication for development is the most resilient and useful notion that has emerged from the challenges to the dominant paradigm of modernization" (Servaes, 2008, p. 194).

Several development agencies, including USAID, World Bank, and CIDA, based on the research that they independently undertook, confirmed the proven long-term benefits of the participatory approach. The report confirms those programs that adopted participation as a value both at the level of the organization and on the ground, were the ones to succeed more than other organizations. (Jennings, 2000)

Although the theoretical paradigms in the development field evolved from that of “participatory” to succeeding paradigms such as neoliberalism, sustainable development, human development, post-development, and post-colonialism, the element of participation, with all its ambiguity, remains a necessary ingredient in all such paradigms.

## Participation in Theory

### Typology of Participation

Participation, according to Tosun (1999), was a “tricky concept” both to define and to achieve. Theorists who come from diverse disciplines and different perspectives categorize the types of participation in varying ways. From a political perspective, Sherry Arnstein (1969) developed a typology of the following eight types of participation:

**Table 3-1 Sherry Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation, (Arnstein, 1969, p.217)**

|   |                 |                   |
|---|-----------------|-------------------|
| 8 | Citizen Control | Citizen Power     |
| 7 | Delegated Power |                   |
| 6 | Partnership     |                   |
| 5 | Placation       | Tokenism          |
| 4 | Consultation    |                   |
| 3 | Informing       |                   |
| 2 | Therapy         | Non participation |
| 1 | Manipulation    |                   |

The level of engagement and decision-making power of citizens in this typology increased by the type. Arnstein considered the first two types (Manipulation and Therapy) ones that would “enable power-holders to ‘educate’ or ‘cure’ the participants” (p. 217) and as evident from the above table, she categorized them as “non-participatory”. She then described Types 3 and 4 (Informing and Consultation) as those that allowed the participants to have a voice, but no authority over decision making. In Type 5 (Placation), she said that participants were asked for “advice”, but again with no guarantee that it would be considered in decision making. She categorized Types 3, 4, and 5 as “Tokenism”. In Type 6 (Partnership), Arnstein described participants as sharing decision making power with the conventional power-holders, and in Types 7 (Delegated

Power) and 8 (Citizen Control), participants increasingly gained power over decision making. She categorized Types 6, 7, and 8 as “Citizen Power” (Arnstein, 1969, p.217).

Peruzzo (1996, cited in Sparks, 2007) developed a typology for participation that can be applied to a variety of social settings. She divided participation into three main categories and four sub-types:

1. Non-Participation.
2. Controlled Participation: Limited Participation, Manipulated Participation.
3. Power Participation: Co-Management, Self-Management

*Non-Participation* being self-explanatory, in *Controlled Participation*, authorities had control over participation, which, as Peruzzo described, could be divided further into two sub-types, Limited and Manipulated Participation. *Limited Participation* described an organization that set the main goals and objectives, but had room for consultation in the implementation of the project. The second sub-type, *Manipulated Participation*, took place when there was plenty of room for decision making by participants, but the organization manipulated and reserved decision-making power. *Power Participation* was the type where political powers influenced the main direction of the project. In the *Co-Management* model, several external and local stakeholders made collective decisions in the form of forums and so forth; however, this model was extremely challenging to maintain and eventually one group dominated and took over. The last model, which Peruzzo also described as being extremely rare, was the “*self-managed*” project model, where all participants made collective decisions about the goals and objectives of the organization and were able to execute such decisions as well. In cases where such a form of participation existed, it was found in voluntary associations rather than in government or other organizations (cited in Sparks, 2007).

Jules Pretty (1995), offered an extension to Arnstein’s ladder of community participation to agriculture development projects, and identified seven types of participation:

1. Manipulative
2. Passive

3. Participation by consultation
4. Participation for material incentives
5. Functional participation
6. Interactive participation
7. Self-mobilization

The level of participation by the beneficiaries of this typology increased in descending order as well. *Manipulative participation* she described was where people could be on groups and committees with no say in the decisions and where participation was completely pretentious. In *Passive participation* people were the receivers of information and were told what had already been decided. *Participation by consultation* encouraged participants to consult, but the professionals were in control of decision making and not liable for incorporating any views. Examples of *participation for material incentives* included participating in a training program or a meeting for food or money. *Functional participation* was done in an effort to participate in the planning of goals already set. *Interactive participation* was where people participated in strategizing and planning in decisions about their locality. *Self-mobilization* was the type of participation where people took initiatives and made decisions independent of any organization. Although initially meant for agricultural development projects, this typology can be argued to have use in other development projects. It does certainly apply to a number of projects in Afghanistan that will be reviewed later in this thesis.

White (1996) argued that participation was always “political”, in the sense that it identified who got to participate and “on whose terms” (p.6). In her view, even though the word *participation* might have implied nothing more than good intentions and positive action, this illusion could obstruct people from examining its different uses, which could potentially serve many different parties. She believed that participation was driven by interest and divided it into four types, shown in the table below:

**Table 3-2 Typology of Participation by Sarah White (1996)**

| Type                  | Top-Down       | Bottom-Up   | Function  |
|-----------------------|----------------|-------------|-----------|
| <i>Nominal</i>        | Legitimation   | Inclusion   | Display   |
| <i>Instrumental</i>   | Efficiency     | Cost        | Means     |
| <i>Representative</i> | Sustainability | Leverage    | Voice     |
| <i>Transformative</i> | Empowerment    | Empowerment | Means/End |

She further identified the interests of the top-down authorities and the grassroots, as well as the functions that each type of participation served. *Nominal participation*, as she described, would be used by the authorities in order to legitimize an activity. The grassroots would see the opportunity for “inclusion” regardless of the outcomes. The function of this type of participation was no more than a display. *Instrumental participation* was where in order to satisfy a development need for the community, people were asked to perform a certain aspect of the activity, for example, to do the labor needed for construction of a school. The function of participation was a means to achieving results. In *Representative participation* people were allowed to form their own groups and leverage the needs of their group to the NGO for the purpose of having a voice. *Transformative participation* she described as a type of participation in which groups of people were formed on their own for the purposes of their own development regardless of any support from outsiders. White (1996) acknowledged that these categories did not encompass the dynamics involved in participation. Diversity of interests within each group, the effect of the passage of time on the quality of participation, possible conflict creation through participation, and the role of power in the definition of interests were the possible dynamics she outlined as influencing participation at different levels.

Ravallion (cited in Mansuri & Rao, 2012, Forward, p.8) distinguished between “organic” and “induced” forms of participation. He defined *organic participation* as participation by the groups formed outside the formal structure of the government, in some cases opposing the government, whereas, *induced participation* was formulated by government structures to meet their goals of civic engagement. He argued that in

order to be more effective, induced participation needed approaches that were “long term, context sensitive, committed to developing a culture of learning by doing through honest monitoring and evaluation systems, and that have the capacity to learn from failure” (p.8). He came to the conclusion that an ideal situation for participation was to “work within a sandwich formed by support from an effective central state and bottom-up civic action” (p.8).

Khwaja (2004) believed that community participation had its own place and did not apply to all kinds of projects. He divided development projects into “technical” and “non-technical” types, and, based on data collected from 99 infrastructure projects in northern Pakistan, he found that though community development was a useful tactic for increasing output in non-technical and accessible projects, it was proven to impose limitations on the outcomes of the technical projects (Khwaja, 2004).

It is worth mentioning that the typologies enumerated in the above were only a few of the existing ones that have been developed for participation. Theorists in different disciplines and fields of study have further divided participation into categories based on their fields of study which have not been captured here; for example, there existed typologies of participation for children’s education, youth’s participation, and so on.

Although the above-discussed authors gave different names to the types of participation, in essence, they are similar. In the following table, I have inserted the above-mentioned typologies based on the authors and have used Arnstein’s categorization of non-participation, tokenism, and citizen power to divide the types into those three categories. I have started with Arnstein’s comprehensive typology (on the left) through to Ravallion’s brief typology (on the right) in an effort to create a master typology.

**Table 3-3 Master typology of participation**

|                   | Arnstein        | Pretty                                | Perruzzo                  | White          | Ravallion |
|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------|-----------|
| Non-Participation | Manipulation    | Manipulative                          | Non-Participation         |                |           |
|                   | Therapy         | Passive                               |                           |                |           |
| Tokenism          | Informing       | Participation for material incentives | Limited Participation     | Nominal        | Induced   |
|                   | Consultation    | Participation by consultation         | Manipulated Participation | Instrumental   |           |
|                   | Placation       | Functional participation              |                           |                |           |
| Citizen Power     | Partnership     | Interactive participation             | Co-Management             | Representative |           |
|                   | Delegated Power |                                       |                           |                |           |
|                   | Citizen Control | Self-mobilization                     | Self-Management           | Transformative | Organic   |

The ideal type of participation as is evident from all the typologies is the one where people themselves initiate, design, and prioritize programs/projects for social change. Whether or not this “Citizen Power” is realistic depends on the ground realities and given circumstances. One conclusion that can be drawn from the typologies with certainty, however, is that the closer a project is to the bottom of the above table, the more likely it is for those involved to experience true participation. Hence, the standard of participation against which the initiatives of the international community for Afghan women’s development would be measured is “Citizen Power”.

## Defining Participation

As previously mentioned, *participation* is an umbrella term which has use across multiple disciplines. The following are a variety of definitions that have been offered for *participation*:

- “A voluntary contribution by the people in one or another of the public programmes supposed to contribute to national development, but the people are not expected to take part in shaping the programme or criticizing its contents” (Economic Commission for Latin America, 1973, cited in Hira & Parfitt, 2004, p.45).
- “A process during which individuals, groups and organisations become actively involved in a project” (Wilcox, 2003, p.50).
- “Participation includes people’s involvement in decision-making processes, in implementing programmes, their sharing in the benefits of development programmes and their involvement in efforts to evaluate such programmes” (Cohen & Uphoff, 1977, cited in Parfitt, 2004, pg.538).
- “Community participation is that form of voluntary action in which individuals confront opportunities and responsibilities of citizenship. The opportunities for such participation include joining in the process of self-governance, responding to authoritative decisions that impact on one’s life, and working cooperatively with others on issues of mutual concern” (Til, 1984, p.311).
- “A process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them” (The World Bank, 1996, p.3).
- “It is an educational and empowering process in which people, in partnership with those able to assist them, identify problems and needs and increasingly assume responsibility themselves to plan, manage, control and assess the collective actions that are proved necessary” (Askew et al, 1986, p.5).
- “Participation is concerned with...the organized efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations on the part of groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from such control” (Pearse & Stiefel, 1979, cited in Parfitt, 2004, p. 538).

- “Designing development in such a way that intended beneficiaries are encouraged to take matters into their own hands, to participate in their own development through mobilizing their own resources, defining their own needs, and making their own decisions about how to meet them” (Stone, 1989, pg. 207).
- “Community Participation refers to an active process whereby beneficiaries influence the direction and execution of development projects rather than merely receive a share of project benefits...the objectives of CP as an active process are: (a) empowerment, (b) building beneficiary capacity, (c) increasing project effectiveness, (d) improving project efficiency, and (e) project cost sharing” (Paul, 1987, cited in Hira & Parfitt, 2004, p.45).
- “People participating together for deliberation and collective action within an array of interests, institutions and networks, developing civic identity, and involving people in governance processes” (Cooper, 2005, p.534).
- “Community participation, as an ideal type, involves a shift of power, from those who have had major decision-making roles to those who traditionally have not had such a role” (Willis, 1995, p.212).
- “Popular participation is, in essence, the empowerment of the people to effectively involve themselves in creating the structures and in designing policies and programmes that serve the interests of all as well as to effectively contribute to the development process and share equitably in its benefits”. (African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation, Arusha, 1990, p.6).

Accepting the fact that no important concept can be fully defined in a complete and consistent manner and that there always might remain “an element of contradiction” (Derrida, cited in Parfitt, 2004, p. 554), it may not be productive to enter the discussion of which definition might better define participation. What might prove more efficient, however, is to examine how these definitions describe (a) the role of participation and (b) the motive behind participation.

One role that was shared among the above-mentioned definitions is the enhancement of the process of development. That is, whatever the context, or whichever the discipline theorists belonged to, participation remained a constant variable in terms of adding value to people’s own development and the development process.

The motive and rationale for participation seemed, however, to fluctuate among these definitions. This takes us to the debate that Oakley (1991) outlined, asking whether participation was a means for achieving a greater goal or an end in itself. As Parfitt (2004) noted, the two contrasting perspectives were indicative of “an ambiguity at the heart of the concept of participation, which has clear potential to manifest itself as contradiction” (p. 539). He also noted that to see participation as a means rather than an end has serious implications for how the target beneficiaries were viewed and the power relations between the authorities and beneficiaries. Parfitt also argued that to see participation as a means to an end, the end being out of reach for beneficiaries and in the hands of authorities, might be a challenge to the existence of the concept of participation altogether as it is yet another form of a top-down approach towards the so-called “development”.

Since the most comprehensive of typologies mentioned in the above section was that of Arnstein (with 8 types), I have categorized the above-mentioned definitions in accordance with her typology of participation in order to get clarity on the role of participation each of the theorists assign to participation.

**Table 3-4 Authors categorized in Arnstein’s typology of Participation**

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| Manipulation    |   |
| Therapy         | I. Economic Commission for Latin America  |
| Informing       |   |
| Consultation    | I. Til  |
| Placation       | I. Wilcox<br>II. Cohen and Uphoff   |
| Partnership     | I. World Bank<br>II. Askew et al  |
| Delegated Power | I. Pearse & Stiefel<br>II. Stone<br>III. Paul   |
| Citizen Control | I. Cooper<br>II. Willis<br>III. African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation |

As Cooper (2005), Willis (1995), and the African Charter of Popular Participation in Development and Transformation (1990)'s definitions of participation were closest to the concept of citizen control, these would be considered the standard against which I have compared the efforts of the international community in this thesis, not because the expectation from the international community is perfection, but in order to have a true standard for comparison. More specifically I emphasize the following:

- Who participated in the designing of the projects aimed at Afghan women's development.
- Who participated in the planning and implementation of these projects.
- Whether there existed "collective action" as described by Cooper (2005) that involves an array of stakeholders aimed at involving the target populations in their own development.
- And whether the target beneficiaries were "empowered" to participate effectively.

### **Theoretical connection between participation and empowerment**

Participation has been closely linked to empowerment, to the extent that empowerment is almost inherent in the meaning of participation. As mentioned in the definitions of participation provided above by the African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation, "Popular participation is in essence the empowerment of the people" (Arusha, 1990, p.6).

Defining participation, Paul stated that one of the objectives of participation is "empowerment" (Paul, 1987). Askew (1986, p.5), however, defined participation as "an educational and empowering process". We notice from the two definitions that in the former, participation was a means to empowerment, but, in the latter, empowerment was a means to participation. Entering the discussion of which one from among participation and empowerment is a means, and which one an end, is a long-debated matter among theorists that may recall the chicken and egg analogy. It may suffice to say that the two concepts are very closely connected and that one may be incomplete without the other.

As suggested by the name, the concept of power is fundamental to understanding empowerment. Nelson and Wright (1995) broke down the concept of power in the context of participatory development projects into two types: “power to” and “power over”. The first type – “power to” -- referred to a course of action where both the project beneficiary and the project itself questioned the realities with which they began and eventually both changed their comprehension. It mainly empowered the beneficiaries to gain self-confidence, to be able to negotiate relationships, and to believe in the power of a group over an individual. The second type – “power over” – was, however, an advanced form of power where one was mainly concerned with obtaining political power, the power to make decisions and have a voice significant enough to bring social change. This type could be seen as “self-mobilization”, “citizen control”, and “self-management” in the typologies of participation mentioned in the above section by Pretty, Arnstein, and Perruzo, respectively. As can be seen, the definitions of empowerment and participation are quite similar.

The origins and history of participation have, however, been “poured into development” from a wide range of disciplines and sources and it was not possible to discuss them in this thesis due to space constraints. What is important to say is that “empowerment retains a prominent place in agencies’ policies concerning gender, but often appears in a diluted form, neutralizing its original emphasis on building personal and collective power in the struggle for a more just and equitable world” (Cornwall & Brock, 2005, p. 1046).

### **Participation in Practice**

Brisson and Usher (2005) said that despite decades of exploration and analysis on the participation behavior of citizens, there is still no adequate understanding of the approaches and ways to increase participation levels.

Sewell and Coppock (1977, cited in Tosun, 2000) argued that the appearance of participation as a new “catchword” was only due to its ideological nature and deep rootedness in social and political theories. In the late 1970s, they outlined two reflections of public participation in a development process: philosophical and pragmatic. The first had to do with a democratic ideology of involving and consulting the public in matters and decisions that affect them. The second, however, had to do with the planning and

procedures involved in practicing such an ideology. They argued that issues lied in the pragmatic arena where the elite failed to represent the poor and did not address public preferences. As a result, the public lost motivation to participate.

It is important to acknowledge, first and foremost, that participation is a political process (White, 1996) and that it is the political structure which identifies the general direction of any development intervention. As Tosun (2000) put it, “It is the political structure or system that determines pre-conditions for participation in the development process” (p.616).

Based on the co-management model (defined under Typology of Participation above), Emmanuel Marfo (2007) observed that negotiation was a vital factor in conflict resolution. With respect to citizen participation and expectations, Marfo’s research in Ghana led him to the conclusion that

the need to be sensitive to opening social and political spaces for citizen participation, flexibility to allow dynamic interplay between the influencing factors and the representation process, and some empowerment interventions to create civil consciousness to ensure demand for downward accountability. (from abstract in Marfo, 2007, p.398)

### ***Challenges facing participation and empowerment in the real world***

Despite having broad political and academic acknowledgement and use, the term *community participation*, according to Davies (2001), has not yet evolved into a “revolution in practice” (p.194). Drawing upon her research in South Bedfordshire, she found three main barriers that indicated a lack of participation. The first barrier, as she described was, the non-existence of “access and awareness of, planning processes”. She followed by describing “public mistrust of planning” as the second barrier due to “vested interests”. And as a final barrier, she referred to “a lack of societal space for greater participation” (p. 202) all in a demanding world short of time.

Citing Cox, Flint and Natrup (2014) mentioned that the issues arising from delivery of aid have for a long time “been viewed through problem solving” rather than “critical lenses” (p.275). While the problem solvers worked within the framework of development to seemingly improve the delivery of aid, for example, the delivery of aid through more accountable institutions, the critical theorists questioned the “fundamental structural impediments to the delivery of aid” (p.275). As an example, they cited Mark

Duffield (2007 in Flint & Natrup, 2014) who argued that the development initiatives after 9/11 comprised a hegemonic neoliberal security agenda and had only resulted in alienating and creating distance between NGO workers and the aid beneficiaries by creating “green zones” and “bunkers” for the aid workers. As will be discussed in later chapters, this scenario particularly applies to the case of Afghanistan, where the expatriate workers remain behind “protected” compounds completely detached from the local populations, but have a huge role in decision making in regard to utilization of aid.

Due to the nature of participation being vague and the expectations many, the criticisms of the concept, too, are many. I refer to the most pronounced ones in the following points:

### 1. The effect of the State, Power and Politics on Participation

Morgan explained how governments can get in the way of full participation in many different ways including “partisanship, funding limitations, rigidity, resistance of local and national bureaucrats, and the state’s inability to respond effectively to the felt needs of the populace” (Morgan, 1993, cited in Botes & Rensburg, 2000, pg.45).

Rahman (1993) referred to the bureaucratic thinking of government officials who favor the top-down control of the people at the expense of the people’s voice and representation. The belief in the notion of participation according to Gilbert (1987, cited in Botes & Rensburg, 2000) can be greatly misused given that power is in the hands of the wrong people. Authors also referred to participation as a “tool” in the hands of governments who use it to practice domination and control over the poor and to legitimize the government systems in place. (Botes & Rensburg, 2000; Constantino-David, 1993; Gilbert & Ward, 1984; Morgan, 1993; Rahman, 1993)

Kyamusugulwa (2013) also noted that power and politics were the factors that placed and identified the role of participation in a society. He referred to the agreement among some authors that the participatory approaches were naïve and further mask the real power structures by showing a fake picture of inclusivity. He criticized the participatory development approaches for “elite-capture” (p.1271), where those in power tend to specify the general direction of a project, thereby subordinating the oppressed local communities even further. As Bordenave (1995, cited in Sparks, 2007)

argued, in a society where the economy lies in the hands of a few, the consequences of strict and full participatory values are hard to imagine.

### II. Lack of methodological framework

According to Khwaja (2004), participation was an abstract matter for the local communities (namely, the beneficiaries of aid), as there did not exist a practical understanding of the implications or even conditions of participation for these communities. Flint and Natrup (2014) also mentioned that “a workable model” for “real engagement with communities” has so far not been stabilized (p.275).

### III. Predetermined goals of the aid agencies

Kyamusugulwa (2013) highlighted the fact that the priorities of the aid projects were predetermined and there was not much leeway for community participation. Botes and Rensburg (2000) referred to the issue of predetermination of goals by the development projects and mainly by the development “experts”, generally foreigners and the not local communities themselves. They mentioned that the participatory approaches normally entered the scenario after the design had been completed and agreed upon. Participation in such instances became a mere “attempt to sell preconceived proposals”. It was a process of “convincing” the beneficiaries through “consultation” and not receiving any input from the local communities whatsoever (p.43) In the case of Afghanistan, as will be discussed later, even such consultation with the local communities are rarely witnessed.

### IV. Effect of Participation on Speed and Efficiency

One of the principles of full participation is involving all parties in the decision-making process, but if materialized, this can affect speed and further funding as a result (Jennings, 2000). An example of the complexities involved in decision making is the tension between indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge. Although participatory development would, in theory, give equal value to indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) as it would to scientific knowledge systems (SKS), for improved productivity, the IKS has in effect usually served, at best, as complementary to the scientific knowledge system (Awa, 1996, cited in Sparks, 2007). Hence, one variety of participatory development would leave the matter to the judgement of the development professional to see which prevails in what case or context. In practice, such professionals have gone through the

Western educational system and have almost fully internalized the Western SKS. Leaving the discussion to their judgement would question the existence of participation. The challenge of participatory development, at the same time, is the ability to handle cases where gender-based violence or ethnic discriminations are part of IKS norms and value systems.

According to Friedman (1993), the development experts and government authorities, as well as the beneficiaries themselves, often want quick results, but lack the patience to go through lengthy discussions with all stakeholders or to listen carefully to them. This lengthy process has led many to think that participatory approaches are not worth the time, effort, and resources required for the uncertain possibility of target populations' participation (Alihonou et al., 1993; Kaya, 1989; Paul, 1987).

#### V. Glorification of the development successes

In addition, as many authors agree, the achievements and accomplishments of the aid projects are widely “quantified, documented and communicated”, and the failures are often under-reported (Rahman, 1993, cited in Botes & Rensburg, 2000, p.45; see also, Dudley, 1993; Friedman, 1993). As a result of not highlighting the failures, serious improvements cannot be introduced in current or future project. (Botes and Rensburg, 2000).

#### VI. Participation as a creator of conflict

Equal participation and conflict resolution being mandates of the participation doctrine, one role identified for development experts is that of acting as facilitators in solving societal issues. Bringing two sides of a conflict to the same table and trying to resolve their issues may sound rewarding, but, in practice, this can prove quite challenging, especially if the intervention is to remain “non-political”. Once involved in deeply rooted communal conflicts, these practitioners can get involved in quite a messy business. Creating an egalitarian society with existing power structures in different societies can be extremely chaotic. Related challenges also depend on the degree to which compromises are made to the ideals of participation.

White (1996) argues that conflict creation is a necessary ingredient of participation. She states that

if participation means that the voiceless gain a voice, we should expect this to bring some conflict. It will challenge power relations, both within any individual project and in wider society. The absence of conflict in many supposedly 'participatory' programmes is something that should raise our suspicions. (p.15)

There is, however, no measurement as to how much conflict would be acceptable and what would constitute disruptive. This is a critical question for the projects assessed in this thesis.

### VII. Lack of public interest in becoming involved

Evidence suggests that when provided with the opportunity, only a few step forward to participate (Rydin & Pennington, 2000). "If participation is so rewarding, and effective, why doesn't everyone participate?" is the question asked by the scholars who look at the psychological reasons of non-participation in local communities (Wandersman & Giamartino, 1980, p.218).

Participation requires a skill that only a few have or are willing to acquire. This lack of skill directly affects a lack of participation (Mohammadi, 2010). Njoh (2002) avers that when the public is not satisfied with the planning procedure, one of the ways the public protests is by a lack of participation and engagement. A poor understanding of contextual models of planning further deteriorates public participation, since the only models that are developed and used are those born and developed in the West (Swapan, 2014).

### Connection with my thesis project:

While I agree that all of the above-mentioned types of participation do contribute to understanding the concept of *participation*, none, however, covers the holistic nature of participation. This is not due to a lack of understanding of participation but, rather, the vagueness and generality of the concept.

When investigating this concept in the context of development projects aimed at Afghan women's empowerment, it became apparent to me that participation is multi-layered and can have complex multiple perspectives. Under the general direction of the research questions of (a) whether the international community is meeting its own definition of *participation* and (b) whether the international projects are meeting the

needs of the populations they are serving, some layers of participation, outlined in the following points, will be uncovered in this thesis:

1. Participation of the international community in Afghan women's empowerment.
2. Participation of Afghan women in their own development.
3. Participation of local and international staff in the implementation of development projects.
4. Participation of government and stakeholders in the Afghan women's development process.
5. Participation of men and other segments of society in women's empowerment.

Having reviewed the literature on *participation* and *empowerment* in this chapter, in the next Chapter (4), I have provided background and context on Afghanistan and the modernization efforts (especially in regards to women's rights). The intent of Chapter 4, then, was to provide concrete background for the research undertaken in this project.

## Chapter 4. The Afghan Context

Before an assessment of participation and empowerment of women in contemporary Afghanistan can be considered, it is important to understand the context in which the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan occurred and the “NATO occupation” evolved, as well as the background history of previous women’s empowerment efforts. After all, Afghanistan did exist before the 2001 invasion, although not necessarily through the lens of the mass media, and the projects I assessed in the next two chapters were certainly not the first to focus on women’s participation and empowerment. In order to situate my study in the history of Afghanistan, I have divided this chapter into three sections: (1) pre-intervention, (2) intervention, and (3) post-intervention.

### Pre-intervention

For a long time, Afghanistan was used to serve the geopolitical interests of other countries. As a result, the development of the country and its people were influenced by this geopolitical context in which Afghanistan was used as a buffer zone, initially between the British and Russian empires and then between the Soviet Union and the United States. This led to the corruption of authorities through foreign influences and the receipt of aid from outside sources free from any system of accountability to the people (Johnson, 1998). Though this process was gradual, it flourished in the projects I reviewed, most of which began after 2001.

Many scholars (Barfield, 2012; Billaud, 2015; Payind, 2013) drew similarities between the current reconstruction programs and the post-World War modernization and reformist ideologies that occasionally inspired Afghan elites from the West over the last century. Julie Billaud (2012) stated that those modernist efforts, along with the American-led intervention, shared one characteristic, that they were all “grounded on a top-down approach to women’s emancipation...staffed by an urban middle-class elite and deprived of significant financial means to carry out its vaguely defined mandate (p. 19)”. Billaud (2015) described four prior eras in which women were the subject of political agendas, namely, “the modern monarchies (1920-1973), the communist regime (1979-1992), the civil war (1992-1996) and the Taliban regime (1996-2001)” (p. 33). Each of these eras are briefly described below in order to contextualize the condition of Afghan women throughout the last century.

### ***The modern monarchies***

The history of women's empowerment and the struggles surrounding it is not new and has been continuing for at least a century. Theorists divided the eras of reform and modernization in Afghanistan differently, but the beginning was usually associated with King Amanullah Khan (1919-1929) and his father-in-law Mahmud Tarzi's reforms during the 1920s when the topic of modernization was hot on the world agenda. Strong associations have also been drawn between King Amanullah's reformist ideology and his contemporaries -- Ataturk, the President of Turkey (1923 -38), and, later, Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-79), the King of Iran, both also being Western-influenced, anti-traditionalist reformists (Barfield, 2012).

King Amanullah's wife, Queen Soraya, was the first to appear without a veil in the public arena. She further encouraged other women to leave traditions behind and enter the public sphere. The efforts made by the king and his wife in education, certain public freedoms, family laws that protected women's rights and their choice to marry, employment, and the creation of a women's press were the first steps they took for liberating women from traditional ties. Later, King Amanullah even imposed the European dress code on both men and women in the capital of Kabul (Kabeer, Khan, & Adlparvar, 2011). Because of his ties with Europe and his love for radical reforms, the king faced an equally radical traditional resistance from the alliance under the religious *ulama* who accused him of being a Western puppet who was implementing Western values in the country (Barfield, 2012).

King Zaher Shah, the eldest son of Mohammad Nader Shah, became king at the age of 19 in 1933 after his father was suddenly assassinated. He reigned over Afghanistan for 40 successive years. Though initially he was known to have been only a symbolic young ruler, and during the time his country was being run by his uncles, King Zaher Shah slowly gained power until he was ruling Afghanistan independently and democratically. Under his reign, the 1964 constitution was collectively written by community leaders and representatives whom he had invited from across the country to form a constitutional jirga. This constitution introduced some positive, modest reforms in women's rights, though not as radical as those his predecessors had introduced. For example, women had the right to vote, but were given the choice to keep or abolish their veil (Barfield, 2012).

By 1965, women had the right to vote, and a few even enjoyed leading positions in the government. The last decade of King Zahir's reign was known as the "Decade of Democracy". In an effort to implement "true" democracy, the constitution also prohibited the royal family, excluding the king, from holding any government position or taking part in any political activity. This led to King Zahir's overthrow in 1973 in a coup by his cousin Daud Khan who, before he was exiled, had been prime minister under King Zahir. Daud declared Afghanistan to be a republic and himself, the prime minister. Although he did not stay in office for more than five years (1973-78), Daud introduced reforms that were more emancipatory for women, while, at the same time, suppressing the religious fundamentalists. According to Sonali Kolhatkar (2002), women occupied 15% of legislative posts by the 1970s and also some in the civil service.

### ***The communist regime***

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan took place via a coup d'etat led by Nur Muhammad Khan Taraki, backed by the Soviets. In an attack on the presidential palace in 1978, the coup brutally killed Prime Minister Daud and the whole royal family and placed first Nur Muhammad Taraki and then Babrak Karmal (who had earlier started the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) as prime minister. This Soviet-backed government promoted equal rights, granted women the right to work, increased the legal marriage age, reduced the bride price, and implemented a massive education campaign for women's literacy (Kabeer et al., 2011). Aside from these efforts, the Soviets also started to criminalize and even secretly arrest and kill the indigenous opposition. Once again, however, seven different groups of mujahideen (those who engage in jihad, or Holy War) , supported by Washington (obviously in opposition to the Soviets), as well as by Saudi Arabia, emerged from among the rural religio-traditionalist populations and defeated the Soviets within six months of their formation. Over this period, from the 1988 Soviet withdrawal, these collaborating groups acquired and used the name *mujahideen* and fought against the government that was left on its own by the Soviets to fight for itself.

### ***The civil war***

The mujahideen, supported and equipped by the United States and Saudi Arabia and living mostly in the refugee camps of Pakistan, officially came to power in 1992 after

defeating the Soviet Union. According to Emadi (2002), one of the initial decrees of the mujahideen government in 1992 was to abandon the freedom of women to appear in public without a veil. This was further exacerbated by another decree a year later that dismissed all female public servants and employees from their work and stated that

women need not leave their homes at all, unless absolutely necessary, in which case, they are to cover themselves completely; are not to wear attractive clothing and decorative accessories; do not wear perfume; their jewelry must not make any noise; they are not to walk gracefully or with pride and in the middle of the sidewalk; are not to talk to strangers; are not to speak loudly or laugh in public; and they must always ask their husbands' permission to leave home. (Emadi, 2002, p.124)

After coming to power 1992, these mujahideen warlords started to fight for power amongst themselves. Having fulfilled its purpose of winning its proxy war over the USSR, the United States also left Afghanistan totally unattended. Afghanistan was now torn apart between different mujahideen fighters, often using left-over Soviet or American equipment. During these years, women were subjected to all sorts of violence, though to not as much rape as is often the case in war time as respect for the protection of women was a well-maintained, traditional practice. People fled to the neighboring countries of Iran (Shia) and Pakistan (Sunni) by the hundreds of thousands (Dupree, 1992). This warlord period, sometimes cooperative, sometimes conflictual, lasted from 1989 to 1996.

### ***The Taliban regime***

Also a product of the fundamentalist Islamic education found in the refugee camps of Pakistan, the Taliban were trained in the same spaces and used the same resources as the mujahideen, with aid from the United States having been replaced by aid from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The Taliban (literally meaning *students*) were predominantly young rural Pashtun boys removed from their families to be educated in *madrassas* (Islamic schools), run by teachers attached to the Deobandi school of Islamic theology<sup>2</sup>. Therefore the curriculum was easily shaped for a theocratic party dictatorship.

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<sup>2</sup> Deobandi school of thought emerged in early 19<sup>th</sup> century in Deoband, a small town in Saharanpur district of Uttar Pradesh province in India. This school was associated with reviving the puritanical teachings of the Sunni sect of Islam and spread to different countries including Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

The Taliban made their way to Afghanistan in 1996 and controlled about 80% of the population three years into their formation (Billaud, 2015). Ironically enough, the appearance of the Taliban in Afghanistan, at least initially, brought with it a message of peace for the country, which had been torn between different mujahideen factions, with the people fearful of being looted at any given moment. The Taliban promised security and enforced the Islamic penal code to punish violators and continued the post-communist era's control on women's lives.

Total exclusion of women, including from Kabul University, and further sanctions on women's mobility and dress code, completely removed more than half of the population from the public arena and left the country impoverished and in acute need of resources to survive. Given the number of men who had been killed in the civil war, single mothers suffered most. Should a woman be seen in public not meeting the exact requirements for the length of her burqa or with slight disobedience to the dress code, she would be beaten along with her *mahram* (male escort), who was held responsible for her modesty (Dupree, 1992). Men would be equally punished if they did not adhere to the length of their beards and turbans. Gradually, however, despite the existence of fear, finding small leeways like the hiring of mahrams, women began their secret activities such as underground schools for girls, small businesses, vocational trainings, and so forth that proved beneficial in the years after Taliban (Povey, 2003).

Before moving on to the intervention period that will be covered below, it is important to provide a picture of some of the prevailing social and economic realities that characterized Afghanistan when the American-led armies arrived and subsequently launched their own aid projects.

### **General social conditions pre-western intervention**

By the time of the Taliban, the previous reformist ideologies had all been radically defeated by the traditionalist and religious groups who continued to perceive reforms, especially liberties associated with women, as nothing but foreign interference. Earlier efforts at modernization had unfortunately always been top-down and mostly influenced by a foreign presence. As a result, modernization had long been used as a tool for mobilizing the traditional urban elites and had therefore been resisted by traditional Afghan communities. Barakat and Waldell (2002, cited in Kabeer et al., 2011) explained

that these efforts are characterized by an “ideological tug-of-war between modernizing tendencies within the urban elite, the forces of conservatism represented by the Islamic ulama upholding the sharia law, and a variety of rural and tribal communities governed by customary law” (p.6).

No government had (neither has it to date) been able to fully penetrate rural barriers and establish a true central authority in Afghanistan. Law enforcement bodies like the courts had either been absent or weak in rural areas. What had existed were traditional legal bodies called *jirga* or *shura*, the legacy of the first king of Afghanistan, Abdurrahman Khan. These shuras were generally composed of senior male elders who dealt with the adjudication and protection of public goods, day-to-day matters of crime, and various family conflicts, and who governed or administered societal laws.

According to the Icon Institute’s National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (2011-2012), the population of Afghanistan by 2012 was 76% rural, with only 24% comparatively urban. Due to geography, security, and other reasons, reforms and development work had historically (and continue to) been concentrated in the capital of Kabul and, secondarily, in urban centers in the north (Mazare-Sharif), west (Herat), east (Nangarhar) and somewhat south (Kandahar). As a result, there were dramatic differences between the capital and the provinces, as well as between the urban centers and rural areas. The differences lay in the income-generating activities, education levels, services provided to them by the government, and challenges facing them, not to mention the vast diversity of cultures in each of at least 15 ethnicities residing in Afghanistan. This divide was (and are) felt even more in the roles associated with women and perceptions surrounding their rights.

Generally, rural women were (as they continue to be) confined to the home. Some did receive an education, but rarely were they allowed to study beyond the fourth grade, which traditionally only served the purpose of giving them the ability to recite the Quran and to perform basic calculations. Their mobility was restricted in varying degrees from province to province. In most cases, a woman needed to have a male escort to accompany her outside the village. An average traditional rural woman was responsible for a range of domestic chores by the age of 6 (e.g., gathering firewood and water, tending goats), was married by the age of 15 to someone chosen by her father, and would have more than one child by the age of 17. In many ethnic cultures, the father

received a bride price, which further degraded the status of the women as the one who has been paid for.

Historically, resistance to notions of modernization, especially women's equality, always existed among rural people who argued a religious basis for the subordination of women and their submission to male family members, be it their father, husband, or brother. This resistance existed equally among rural women who were influenced by their male relatives and the religious clerics dominant in rural societies. After all, these women were the ones who secretly supported the mujahideen's fight against the Soviet Union and sent their boys to the madrassas to become Talibs (Dupree, 1992). The progress made by the Taliban in controlling rural provinces could not have occurred without the support of women in some powerful households.

### **The Intervention**

Immediately following the September, 2001, U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan, there was a flow of donor agencies and countries who wanted to help in the reconstruction effort. A primary justification for U.S. intervention was to "rescue" women who were suffering under the Taliban rule. As Suhrke (2007) notes, "The rights of women became a primary symbol of the new order and, given the Taliban's dismal record on this, an important post hoc justification for the intervention" (p. 1303). Feminist activists in many countries pushed this issue onto their public agendas and worked it into their media discourse: Cabinet ministers in donor countries could not ignore such pressures.

Referring to the U.S.-led intervention as a form of structural violence, Dossa (2013) states: "Using the Taliban as a reference point, they [the United States] have ensured that they are not implicated in the everyday and structural violence to which the people of Afghanistan have been subject over the past three decades" (p.433).

The Bonn Agreement, signed in December 2001, appointed members of the interim government, including a Vice Chairman for Women's Affairs, and ensured women's participation in the emergency Loya Jirga, which would appoint the transitional government, and in the constitutional Loya Jirga, which would draft the constitution. The new constitution (2003) granted women equality before the law and allocated half of the seats in the house of elders and about 28% of the seats in the lower house of parliament

to women (Haidari, 2005). A ministry dedicated to women's affairs was also established shortly after the Bonn Agreement, aided by a number of aid organizations and NGOs. The first steps for women's empowerment, therefore, involved the introduction of a quota system and increasing women's visibility in the public arena. Julie Billaud (2012) stated, however, that "these reforms were the easiest ones to introduce in order to meet international demands for gender equality and political plurality", and that they were "labelled by many ordinary Afghans as a purely cosmetic sham, which the power elite espoused in order to maintain international aid flows" (p. 33).

From the onset, the post-9/11 "democratisation process" was intensely controlled by outsiders. "Technical experts from the West...were shipped in to implement the agenda for reforms" (Billaud, 2012, p.32). These experts identified what was to happen to the future of Afghanistan. They were the ones to draft the Bonn Agreement and to execute it. Whether or not this was done successfully is a question for later discussion. These experts were further to be found in advisory positions across the ministries, the presidential office, and the parliament. They led the NGOs and international organizations and had a large role in decision making for just about any important business in the country. Maliha Chishti (2016) entered Afghanistan as an expert in 2002 as part of a Toronto-based NGO. She describes how, as an initial step, she performed a needs assessment survey of the women for whom she was working. Their priority needs being access to basic healthcare, she wrote a proposal for a mobile clinic and presented it to the government of Canada, who, as she explains it, "politely rejected it". What they offered instead was to fund human rights training to these women, with double the amount of money (TED, 2016). This example explains very well the nature of the aid work in Afghanistan, where those providing the aid decided what the needs were, and neither those who received it nor those who administered such projects were deeply engaged.

### **Post-Intervention**

After the initial shock of the United States' intervention in the aftermath of 9/11, a bigger shock for many people was that the United States, who had supported the mujahideen in their war against Russia before 1988, was once again supporting equal rights for women and, at the same time, was also providing well-paid leadership

positions to warlords in order to build support for the new government, some of whom were well known for their indifference to, even contempt for, women's empowerment.

The international community did not allocate the necessary time or resources for researching indigenous knowledge systems after the intervention, or for investigating the lessons learned from previous reformist ideologies. According to Daulatzai (2006), women were indirectly forced to redefine themselves based on the classes and ranks of victims categorized by the aid projects in order to benefit from the opportunities, most of which were in the form of superficial short-term awareness raising gatherings and workshops carried out primarily through the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Criticizing the nature of the interventions, Huma Saeed (2015) pointed out that these projects focused more than was necessary on so-called awareness raising which only led to heightening women's sense of vulnerability as they were not in a position to change anything.

Kabeer et al. (2011) pointed to a divide in the development sector "between those who believe that all attempts to advance the cause of women must be firmly grounded in the universality of women's human rights and those who believe it must be negotiated on the basis of Afghan values" (p. 7). This divide led to a lack of clarity in the theory and tension in the practice of gender equality across many projects; these differences tended to be dealt with on the basis of personal beliefs and experiences of the individual aid workers.

Citing Barnett Rubin and Humayun Hamidzada (2007), Chishti (2010, p. 252) explained that not only was the "aid to Afghanistan only a fraction of the amount allocated to other post conflict countries," but also the amount that was been allocated was nowhere to be seen on the ground, the speculation being that most of the aid was misused for the high overhead costs, salaries, and extravagant lifestyles of expatriate staff as well as on the high pay rate to the local NGOs and employees. Dossa (2013) explained her experience as an expatriate ethnographer living in Afghanistan:

The *angrez* (foreigners) and the local Afghans lived in two different worlds. The former (the military, the entrepreneurs, and the donor agency staff) were well protected by armed guards in their SUVs, and enjoyed amenities that many felt were earned by placing their lives at risk in a war-torn country. The Afghans (with the exception of the upper class) struggled on a day-to-day basis. They received no protection from the bomb blasts, and they survived on the bare minimum. The Afghan men who earned their living as guards risked their lives to protect the *angrez*. Each day as I

crossed the border, from my life of comfort (air conditioning, hot water, and abundant food) within the walls of the expatriate compound to local areas, I felt both uncomfortable and helpless. (p.436)

In his article “Western Gender Policies in Afghanistan, Failing Women and Provoking Men”, Javed Bahri (2014) referred to his research on male perceptions of the gender equality efforts in the country and found that these efforts “provoked even educated Afghan men into taking up more defensive and conservative positions instead of convincing them that women deserve equal rights” (p.163, Abstract). He further argued that in a society that was scarce on its basic resources and needs such as food and employment, these NGOs, without any contextual understanding or research, had conducted “gender trainings” exported from the West. These not only did not help liberalize women’s conditions in any way, but furthered making women targets of male provocations. These provocations, I personally believe, were revealed in the form of continued domestic violence, street harassments, joining of the insurgent groups, departures from the country, and much more.

Chishti (2010) explained that years after the US-led invasion and NATO-occupation, “Afghan women continue to suffer in disproportionate numbers from weak social, economic, and health factors, exacerbated by widespread insecurity and violence” (p. 250). Not only had women not been adequately supported, but they had also increasingly become the target of attacks and violence, which also included aid workers. As a result of bombings and target killings of both national and expatriate staff, many projects either discontinued their work altogether, especially in the southern and eastern provinces, or relocated to the urban centers where there was normally more control of the surroundings. This again pushed these projects away from rural women. Chishti stated:

In Afghanistan, nation building is being carried out by the short- term aid commitments of the United States and the international community, which are keen on facilitating a quick and cheap strategy for state recovery. The intention appears to be to “modernize” this largely rural-based traditional society in the least amount of time, using the least amount of financial resources, and without shouldering any responsibility or accountability for the inevitable gaps, shortcomings, contradictions, and failures that are often associated with such a massive undertaking. The coercive reordering of states like Afghanistan, pejoratively labeled as “belligerent” or “failed,” into market-based democracies is what most clearly identifies imperialist nation building in its latest formation. (2010, p. 253)

This chapter provided a background on how the general population dealt with modernization ideologies in the past and highlighted those aspects of the context that are necessary in understanding the culture and its receptivity to foreign ideals.

One important aspect of this context was the class divide between the rural and urban populations that, as mentioned previously, has not been bridged since the beginning of the modernization efforts. Efforts to change the rural populations backfired radically in the past, and are believed to continue do so in the present/future, but is yet again being ignored by the international community. Another class divide was between the group of elite women that emerged in the aftermath of 9/11. These women mainly resided in the capital and had semi-feminist ideologies. They were typically at the forefront of gender equality initiatives. Some of these women opened their own NGOs and received funds from the international community for implementing part of their projects, and others held leading positions in the parliament/ministries/international NGOs. Laila from Herat Province, one of the women Burr ridge, Payne, and Rahmani (2015) interviewed for their study, in regards to the reconstruction efforts for women, stated:

I think there haven't been many changes. The changes were not foundational and they did not cover women all around Afghanistan ... Only a few women are holding senior governmental positions as a symbol. But women in rural and remote areas are living in a state of poverty. (p. 142)

Another aspect of the context was the long-standing foreign presence and the inability of Afghanistan to be an independent sovereign state. Saikal (2006) claimed that the current situation of Afghanistan was attributable, first, to the contest of power among leading Afghan elites and foreign countries over the last few decades, and, second, to internal elements such as societal and ethnic division, or geographic segmentation. Saikal further stated that what made the country an attractive choice for foreign intervention was its rich mineral reserves, potential for advancement of infrastructure, and its capability to accommodate a military. I believe that the intentions of the U.S. and its allies in Afghanistan, in addition to their strategic geo-political interests of having access to the neighboring countries, was also to build an urban liberal class supportive of democratic ideals; this would be a step towards establishing their own supremacy and also strengthen an imperialist agenda.

Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) argues in her article, "Do muslim women really need saving?", as apparent from the title, that Muslim women do not need saving by foreign intervention. She condemns the US and the international community of what Spivak has also condemned imperialist regimes for, that is: "White men saving brown women from brown men" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p.784). Just after the arrival of US and NATO forces Abu-Lughod refuted the long-standing US mission of liberating Afghan women from the burqa by reminding us that the burqa was not introduced by the Taliban, rather, it already existed and was practiced by the women of one of the regions of Afghanistan prior to the Taliban. In this regard, Abu-Lughod highlighted the surprise of foreign liberals by noting that "even though Afghanistan has been liberated from the Taliban, women do not seem to be throwing off their burqas."

Referring to the incompatibility of the western agenda for liberating women, she referred to her 20 years of fieldwork experience in Egypt and mentioned that,

"I cannot think of a single woman I know, from the poorest rural to the most educated cosmopolitan, who has ever expressed envy of U.S. women, women they tend to perceive as bereft of community, vulnerable to sexual violence and social anomie, driven by individual success rather than morality, or strangely disrespectful of God" (p.788)

This is true of the situation in Afghanistan where equal rights with men is the least of the average woman's concerns. The Survey of the Afghan people by the Asia Foundation (2015) found that the biggest problems facing Afghan women nationally were (1) education / illiteracy, (2) unemployment / lack of jobs, (3) domestic violence, (4) lack of rights / women's rights, and (5) forced marriages / dowry.

In light of the above points, and given the intentions of the U.S. and its allies in Afghanistan, it is not surprising that these international projects, as has been alluded to in this chapter and which will be explored further in the subsequent two chapters, are internally dysfunctional and can claim only minimal results.

## Chapter 5. Assessment of Project Evaluations

The present chapter provides an assessment of project evaluations for select projects whose primary or secondary beneficiaries were women. Preliminary to this assessment, however, in order to provide some important background, the challenges that confront those who carry out project monitoring and evaluation on the ground will be briefly discussed. This chapter tends to focus mostly on American and UN agency projects because they have been larger and more numerous than others; moreover I worked in some of them during the period under review. However a Swedish-funded project is also included here.

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR, 2016), as part of its quarterly report to the U.S. Congress in 2016, reported the findings for monitoring and evaluation of USAID programs in Afghanistan by the Office of the Inspector General which shockingly indicated that “only one instance out of 127 contracts, grants and cooperative agreements where prescribed multi-tier monitoring was being used.” (p.9). Furthermore,

the USAID/Afghanistan mission provided plans for only six of its 127 project activities; none explained how USAID could decide how much monitoring was needed. Mission offices also did not have annual monitoring plans, as required, to guide the work of contract third-party monitors, even though USAID has spent more than \$242 million on their services since 2006. (p.10)

The reasons mentioned in the report indicated that despite security threats, impediments to movement, conflicts of interest, staffing, sustainability, and vulnerabilities to corruption, there were also technical challenges, namely, “the challenge of monitoring and of collecting and using the information needed for decisions to expand, modify, relocate, or terminate a program”. (p. 9)

Humanitarian Aid in 2015 noted that the highest number of attacks on development workers took place in Afghanistan over the last seven years in a row. In volatile and insecure environments where project staff themselves could not go, companies from the localities who claimed to have access were contracted to perform what was called Third Party Monitoring (TPM), which replaced direct monitoring by project employees over the last decade. In fact, TPM in Afghanistan became a “sizable

industry with an estimated annual volume of around USD \$200 million” (Sagmeister et al., p.2) and the demand grew.

TPMs had their own challenges as well. Based on the interviews that Sagmeister et al. (2015) undertook with agency workers about the capacities and the quality of the work of the TPM providers, agency workers gave scores ranging from 5 to 7 out of a possible 10, acknowledging, as well, the limitations imposed by security concerns. In provinces where security was a bigger concern, such as Kandahar, Farah, Helmand, and certain eastern provinces, the number of people who could truly claim to have had continuous access to the population were very few; hence, competition for TPMs was almost non-existent. In these provinces, because of the poor security and inaccessibility, organizations also had to subcontract the implementation of their programs and, therefore, the line between the implementing partners and the monitoring partners was sometimes blurred, making it difficult to verify the information TPMs provided.

The evaluations carried out by agencies such as SIGAR and TechSystems, were once performed, not publicized for the most part, and were kept as internal confidential documents for reasons not fully known. In some cases, even project staff did not have access to them, which further impeded self-evaluation and communication in order to learn new project practices. The assessments made in this chapter were therefore limited to those evaluations that were available online for projects having women as their primary or secondary target groups and also meeting the following criteria:

1. Were performed by a party unaffected by the project.
2. Were comparatively impartial.
3. Were based on actual field visits and interviews rather than mere desk reviews.

Desk reviews were not considered because they were largely based on reports collected by the projects themselves, and, as will be discussed in later sections, often exaggerated the achievements of the projects’ performances. For example, one project evaluation found online was UNDP’s Gender Equality Project, which was performed by a consultant hired by the UNDP along with an existing employee and was used to raise funds for the second phase of the project. I discovered this fact when I worked for the second phase of the project. In only one instance was a desk review considered, this

being Pain, Rothman, and Lundin's 2015 evaluation of seven SIDA projects, since the individual evaluations for each project were performed in the field.

The project evaluations assessed for the purposes of this chapter are as follows:

1. Evaluation of USAID projects targeted for women's empowerment, 2014.
2. Evaluation of Afghanistan Subnational Governance Program (ASGP II), 2011.
3. UNHCR Shelter Assistance Project Evaluation, 2012.
4. Women for Women International's (WfWI) Stronger Women, Stronger Afghanistan Final Evaluation, 2016.
5. UNICEF Female Literacy Program Evaluation, 2014.
6. Evaluation of the USAID/Afghanistan Ambassador's Small Grants Program to Support Gender Equality in Afghanistan, 2011.
7. Desk review of the evaluations of seven projects (2015):
  - Afghan Analysts Network (AAN)
  - Afghanistan Research Evaluation Unit (AREU)
  - Afghanistan Subnational Governance Program (ASGP)
  - Danish Demining Group (DDG)
  - Rural Access Implementation Program (RAIP)
  - Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA)
  - Women for Afghan Women (WAW)

The methodology used to assess these evaluations was to code each evaluation (using NVIVO software) for recurring themes under the umbrella terms of *participation* and *empowerment* and then to analyze them, keeping in mind the two main questions of, first, whether the international community was meeting its own definition of participation and, second, whether these projects were meeting the needs of the target populations.

### **Project Scope**

In their efforts to align with different national and donor priorities in order to win development contracts, most projects became too ambitious for their size and capacity. Attached as Appendix A is a set of ASGP's eight broad objectives aligned under each of: the National Priority Program (NPP), ASGP Programme Document, UNDAF, and UNDP

Country Programme Document, captured from Bryld, Polastro, Ghorbani, and Daud's (2014) evaluation of ASGP. Pain et al. (2015), in their evaluation of ASGP, noted that

attention must be given by SIDA to not overburden projects in the design with ambitions and objectives that may not be complementary. It is unrealistic to expect that one project can deliver results that are instrumental, conceptual and capacity development all at the same time. (p. 28)

In addition, there was also the significant issue of geographic scope: "ASGP made a laudable attempt to implement its program in all regions of Afghanistan, but might have been more effective had it concentrated on fewer areas and in greater depth in underserved, especially rural, regions" ( DevTech Systems, 2011, p.vi).

Evaluation of the Female Literacy Program (2014) also assessed the number of women and girls targeted by the project as being highly ambitious given the prevailing realities on the ground, especially barriers such as security concerns, societal norms, and lack of mobility, which served as impediments to participation. Similarly, Huber and Zupancic (2016), in their evaluation of WfWI's Stronger Women Stronger Afghanistan, concluded that the reason for their lack of efficiency in reaching their project objectives was an "overly ambitious results framework for the timeframe of the project" (p. xii). In the same vein, one of the reasons the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations (MoRR) was unhappy with UNHCR's Shelter Assistance Project was because of the extensive number of provinces and the ambitious number of shelters they had planned to cover, which subsequently affected the quality of the implementation (Siegel et al., 2012).

### **Lack of Contextual Understanding**

Lack of awareness and understanding of the Afghan context is one of the most common issues that arises with international aid projects in general. For example, Pain et al. (2015) pointed out the publications produced by the AAN project that supposedly targeted internationals as well as "well-educated nationals", but were mostly written in English and thus reached only a very small percentage of the population (p.17).

The evaluation team for ASGP had convened a workshop with stakeholders where the participants identified the missing elements needed to achieve the outcomes set by the program, namely, the "four mutually reinforcing assumptions about the theory of change" (Bryld et al., 2014):

1. That the laws and frameworks established actually enhance local level accountable service delivery.
2. That there is political will to implement policies and laws favouring accountable local level service delivery and representative governance.
3. That there are the resources needed to enable the capacities be made into use.
4. That the people of Afghanistan have an interest in engaging in participatory local governance. (p.19)

During their field visits, the evaluation team could not confirm any of these assumptions, and concluded that “the programme in its current design will not be able to contribute effectively to meeting the objectives, and thus eventually questioning the relevance of the programme in the present context” (p. 20).

The evaluation team for UNHCR’s Shelter Assistance Program found that “the most vulnerable households use the cash for more immediate purposes than the construction of shelters, e.g., prioritizing food over the purchase of glass panes” (Siegel et al., 2012, p.27), which suggests two different problems: the first, that the needs of the most vulnerable populations differed from those that UNHCR had assumed, and, second, the efforts of this project were not coordinated with those of the World Food Programme, who had also worked in the same regions. Furthermore, the shelter designs were not in alignment with the cultural sensitivities of different localities. For example, the evaluation team noted that the “surrounding walls are notably a major requirement: in cases where they could not be constructed, especially in heterogeneous environments where neighbors were not related, absence of privacy and security lead to abandonment of shelters” (p. 32). The beneficiaries simply preferred living with their relatives than in the rooms without surrounding walls. This was an even greater challenge for families headed by a female.

In UNICEF’s female literacy programme, it was noted by the majority of participants in one of the assessed provinces that the “one size fits all” design of the curriculum for women was only suited for younger women and those in urban settings who had better opportunities to carry their learning forward (which, in turn, motivated them to learn faster) and whose efforts would perhaps result in employment. Although the target beneficiaries of the project did include older urban women as well, the materials were not well suited for them. (Bernard, 2014)

Huber and Zupancic (2016) in their final evaluation of Stronger Women, Stronger Afghanistan, found that the assumption that women's income generation had an impact on different aspects of their empowerment (an assumption on which the program design was based) was not accurate unless their income was "to the level that it considerably impacts the overall household financial situation" (p. x), which was quite rare in the case of female Afghans given their level of literacy and the employment opportunities to which they had access. This evaluation also suggested that the economic empowerment trainings provided by the project, as compared to their income generation activities, were not consistent, suggesting that the program was "somewhat inconsistent with the realities of women's situation regarding decision-making and access to inputs and resources, which in turn would limit their ability to take the skills they had learned and translate them into income generating activities" (p. vii).

### **Baseline Data and Needs Assessment**

In order to be effective and contextually appropriate, a necessary component for any intervention is performing a baseline study and identifying the needs of target populations. According to Siegel et al. (2012):

Measuring the impact of the programme is not possible without a proper baseline of needs identifying what the initial economic and social conditions in the area of implementation were. Baselines can also help in providing a clear perception of community relations to avoid creating tensions through the programme. (p. 147)

The absence of such assessments was repeatedly reported across the evaluations assessed in this chapter, making the job of evaluators difficult, as there was no basis to allow for comparison.

DevTech Systems' evaluation of ASGP (2011) revealed that "the baseline data to determine impact is not available in sufficient detail to provide for pre- and post-treatment analysis typically used in social science research" (p. vi). Pain et al. (2015) further recommended that the theory of change needed to be strategically incorporated into the design of the projects with the elements of contextual understanding explicitly drawing on "causal pathways and the time-frame between project initiation and the expected outcomes" in the seven evaluated projects of SIDA (p.28).

One of the selection criteria for beneficiaries in UNHCR's Shelter Assistance Program was the requirement to belong to a vulnerable household. When it came to implementation, however, rather than seeking people in need, the localities selected for implementing the program were those that had a larger number of returning refugees because it was easier to build several shelters in one locality, "whereas neighbouring communities [were] completely left out of the programme, fuelling potential tensions" (Siegel et al., 2012, p.88). In other cases, like that of Kuchi Abad in Kabul and some localities in Laghman province, where there was reported to be an "over-reliance" on the local authorities for beneficiary selection, the village head (malik) selected beneficiaries by lucky draw.

### **Beneficiary Participation in Program Design and Implementation**

The selection process for beneficiaries relies first on the design of the program that may identify who the target population is and what the criteria for selecting them is. Second, it relies on the amount of planning, time, and resources allocated for the purposes of selecting the appropriate beneficiaries. Conflict of interest is one of the problems that can most prominently and easily occur in the selection process. The evaluation team for ASGP noted that "there was no competitive, transparent mechanism for recommending grantees, and no RFP/RFA process of announcing the availability of grants" (DevTech Systems, 2011, p.7). Some of the grantees were thus selected via personal and professional ties which had a negative effect on the image of the organization. One example of a conflict of interest was the blatant redistribution of 42% of the grants initially intended for female-led organizations to male-led organizations without any proper justification.

In the Shelter Assistance program as well, UNHCR was assessed to be weakest in the selection of beneficiaries. First, the project design was self-contradictory when it came to targeting the most vulnerable community members by limiting it to those who already had access to land, and, second, by not making the effort to find the most vulnerable amongst the landowners. In UNHCR's Shelter Assistance Project, "more than half of the UNHCR beneficiaries did not qualify as EVI (Extremely Vulnerable Individual) households" (Siegel et al., 2012, p. 130). The sample interviewees of the evaluation had only 2% female heads of households, whereas their number in the general population was substantially larger, due to the losses incurred by the many years of war.

UNICEF's criteria for selection of teachers in the Female Literacy Program was similarly considered to be problematic in some of the provinces due to their lack of capacity and academic competitiveness. The selection criteria only required the teachers to be "from the community and clever" (Bernard, 2014, p. 41). In many cases, these teachers were introduced by a local authority and instantly hired without an assessment of their qualifications, which adversely affected the project's outcomes.

Pain et al. (2015) reported that out of their seven evaluated projects, "most projects have failed to reach the most marginalized groups within their thematic and geographic areas" (p.17). This report also referred to the evaluation of the Women for Afghan Women (WAW) where "there was no specific targeting of especially vulnerable women" (p. 17). Despite "participation" and "ownership" being a central discussion in the international efforts in Afghanistan, "strong evidence on inclusive processes is missing, suggesting rather limited ownership" (p. 6).

In most projects, female participation was used in an artificial manner. For example, in the UNHCR Shelter Assistance Program (2012), "the beneficiaries did not have a say in the choice of the model of shelters that they would build, as this was instead decided by UNHCR" (Siegel et al., 2012, p. 29); however, women's participation was something that was highly sought after. This shelter provided two rooms, one bathroom, and one small kitchen with a standard design and standard material used in every shelter. In this and many other projects where decisions had already been made, female participation was no more than a trivial concept that had to be somehow reported. Despite the number of challenges women had to face to overcome their socially constructed roles in order to participate in these projects, there was still no real space for their participation in a meaningful way. Only 13 out of 60 surveyed as part of UNHCR's Shelter Assistance Program indicated that women were participating in the selection process of the beneficiaries. When asked about their role, however, it became clear that even those 13 were UNHCR staff, not community members. (Siegel et al., 2012)

### **Participation of Stakeholders: Coordination and Duplication**

Which entities participate in a program, what lessons are learned from other similar projects, and how these entities can contribute towards the betterment of a

project all depends upon how well a project is coordinated and how stakeholders are engaged in the design, planning, and implementation of a program.

ASGP had a special grant program called Advocacy Coordination Grants (ACGs). These were granted to established groups for awareness raising and advocacy purposes, but a requisite for qualifying for these grants was to join a coalition formed by ASGP called the Afghan Women Advocacy Coalition (AWAC). The formation of this coalition was controversial “as some interviewees felt it was trying to displace the Afghan Women’s Network (AWN), a group that had served as the platform for advocacy groups in Afghanistan for 17 years” (DevTech Systems, 2011, p. 6). This had been a common problem in many projects — where instead of looking for and coordinating with existing groups, new ones were formed that created inefficiency and confusion, even tension among participants.

According to UNHCR’s Shelter Assistance Programme Evaluation (Siegel et al., 2012), “There is no strong forum to discuss reintegration; everything we do, we do in isolation” (p.127). In addition, the evaluators pointed to the non-existence of such a forum on a provincial level for sharing the lessons learned, despite other donors also having a similar mandate. The evaluation team for UNICEF’s Female Literacy Program also noted weakness in the area of coordination both within the project and across the literacy sector (Bernard, 2014).

Huber and Zupancic (2016) in their Evaluation of Stronger Women Stronger Afghanistan revealed that

at the local level WfWI staff seem to have positive relationships and productive coordination with government actors and influential local leaders such as elders and mullahs. However, staff members did not describe any efforts to coordinate at the macro level or with actors such as DoWA, AIHRC, the police, or justice actors at the local level. (p. x)

Nor was the program satisfactorily aligned with the laws and wider agenda for rule of law in the country, an essential factor for fulfilment of gender equality.

DevTech Systems (2011) found that the six USAID-funded projects had several of the same grantees. These projects included Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS), IPACS II, ASGP, Local Governance and Community Development (LGCD), Accelerating Sustainable Agriculture Program (ASAP), Afghanistan Small and Medium

Enterprise Development (ASMED), and Incentives Driving Economic Alternatives for the North, East, West (IDEANEW). This was a considerable problem, not only because the same grantees were selected by all of these projects, but also because there was no coordination between the projects funded by the same entity, especially between I-PACS and ASGP, both of which claimed to build the capacity of these grantee CSOs. Given that there was no meaningful link between USAID programs and other such programs or local governments, DevTech Systems (2011) recommended “that USAID/Afghanistan develop an internal process that would ensure collaboration among programs with similar goals and objectives, but avoid duplication” (p. vii).

### **Employee Roles and Participation**

Project staff play a key role in the quality of work, both in terms of the level of their professionalism and of their understanding of the context, as well as in their level of commitment. In the case of Afghanistan, lack of professionalism and commitment was not only common amongst international staff, who had accepted to work in Afghanistan primarily for monetary gain, but also among the local populations. The causes of such a lack of commitment were many and beyond the scope of this chapter; however, it may suffice to mention that the factors covered in this chapter inevitably affected the overall work environment, as well as individual commitments.

DevTech Systems (2011) observed that like in many other projects in Afghanistan, “Staff turnover was a constant problem for ASGP” (p.15). They noted that “forty-eight ASGP employees, including eight international staff members, either quit or were terminated in less than two years” (p.15). Additionally,

grants were on hold again from the middle of December 2010 to April 2011, at least in part because of the departure of the ASGP Deputy Chief of Party at the end of December and the arrival of the new DCOP at the end of March 2011. (p.11)

All of this turnover eventually left ASGP with one year for implementing the work that was designed for two years. Further details on this topic are provided by the participants in my research in Chapter 6.

## **Planned Versus Implemented Activities**

None of the projects performed what had been initially planned, owing to a variety of factors. The ambitious scope of these projects, combined with the pressure of spending funds within tight deadlines to secure future funding, as well as the lack of staff professionalism, did not allow for the achievement of planned results. Consequently, some projects concentrated more on one aspect of their program. DevTech Systems (2011) noted:

The ASGP, facing delays, difficulties, and a very short timeline, appeared to have concentrated exclusively on its small grants program. The requirement to develop a communication strategy and information campaign to publicize the grants program and, more importantly, build a network of CSOs to create synergy for advancing women's rights and improving women's lives, was apparently dropped. (p.1)

In comparison, other projects did implement more than one activity, but with unsatisfactory outcomes.

Pain et al. (2015) noted that out of the seven evaluated projects, the ones that had a more tangible nature, such as the construction of schools and roads, demining projects, and so forth, achievements were more noticeable than in those projects that were conceptual in nature and whose agenda was to transform attitudes.

## **Quality of Implementation**

The procedures involved in approving proposals and introducing changes to programs were overly complex and highly time consuming, especially in projects for which the design required approval from higher officials. There were also continuing opportunities for overstating project achievements and for corruption, variables discussed in this section. The procedures for obtaining approvals significantly affected project deliverables, and, in turn, project success. In the case of ASGP,

there was a significant delay (July-December 2009) immediately after the program was announced while the Embassy made revisions to the program design. This included allocating \$6 million of the original award for ASGP to a separate grants program managed by the U.S. Embassy's Political Section. For four months in the next year (June-September 2010), no ASGP grants were approved, virtually halting program implementation, after which ASGP staff received 200 approvals in one day. This was probably caused by an overly-complicated, multi-step approval structure,

with not only many steps within ASGP and USAID to gain approval, but the requirement that the U.S. Ambassador had to review and approve every grant personally, regardless of its size. (DevTech Systems, 2011, p.11)

The administrative and logistical policies and procedures involved in the implementation of programs with many of the projects reviewed for the purposes of this thesis were dysfunctional, according to an important third-party evaluator:

The ASGP did not give any advances of grant monies to recipients. The program expected CSOs, including newly-formed groups with no prior experience with grants, to pay for grant activities out of pocket, and then get reimbursed. This policy generated complaints from every focus group CSO representative and recipient interviewee with whom the Evaluation Team spoke. When this policy was mandated, and why it was not changed in the face of the overwhelmingly negative response from grant recipients, is unclear. The grantees' difficulties and displeasure were regularly communicated to the Regional Project Managers as well as the main ASGP office in Kabul. (DevTech Systems, 2011, p12)

USAID's OTI project undertook the reconstruction of kindergartens in five ministries. The funds allocated to each one was, however, \$55,000, and the quality of work was therefore poor. USAID evaluated the program three years later and reported that the work performed was unsatisfactory "with leaky roofs and pipes and broken door handles" (DevTech Systems Inc., 2005, p. 8). A similar problem was also encountered in the UNHCR shelter assistance program where the quality of the material used for the shelters was too poor to be sustainable. (Siegel et al., 2012).

The Female Literacy Program evaluation indicated that the project design had failed to define what literacy meant and what level of literacy would be deemed satisfactory. Hence, as graduates of this program, women were "deemed to be literate when effectively they are not. Consequently, they are unlikely to receive further needed support given the project's emphasis on reaching new learners versus consolidating the learning of earlier ones" (Bernard, 2014, p.4). Bernard noted that the source of this problem lied in "the limited and inconsistent professional capacities of teachers and of the Literacy Officers supervising them" (p. 39) who had received brief and inadequate training for the job.

Most of the evaluations mentioned the very limited effectiveness of the projects, if any. The ASGP program evaluation noted limited efficacy both regarding achieving the overall objective and the effectiveness of specific programs within the ASGP.

The evaluation team of Stronger Women Stronger Afghanistan noted that only 8% of the program beneficiaries started earning after the program; the rest were either earning before the program or are not earning at all. The training programs supposed to equip participants with business skills were reported by more than 80% to have not been using what they learned at the trainings provided with SWSA (Huber & Zupancic, 2016).

i. Corruption

Corruption was a prevalent issue in the context of Afghan development. Two of the project evaluations reviewed for this thesis explicitly mentioned matters of corruption, while others referred to corruption implicitly with respect to the high overhead charges for international staff. The WAW project's financial audit report by SIGAR (2015) noted that "WAW did not properly calculate the currency exchange rate, which resulted in WAW overbilling the U.S. government" (p.1). WAW also "charged the government \$126,219 for New York-based positions, but was unable to provide adequate supporting documentation for these costs. (p.1)" All in all, they

identified \$1,083,283 in total questioned costs, consisting of \$844,152 in unsupported costs — costs not supported by adequate documentation or that did not have required prior approval — and \$239,131 in ineligible costs — costs prohibited by the grant, applicable laws, or regulations. (p.1)

In the shelter assistance programs, flaws were observed in the beneficiary selection process where shelters were being used for storage rather than living purposes. In one instance, the evaluation team noted that both a husband and a wife had received separate shelters from the same project. Some beneficiaries also mentioned that they owned more than one shelter provided by other NGOs which hearkened back to the issue of lack of coordination between donor agencies.

ii. Overstating Project Outcomes

SIGAR reported that hundreds of millions of dollars had been spent on women's empowerment initiatives and many activities were reported by USAID to have been accomplished by its projects. Proof for this claim however was lacking, as well as the evident lack of a causal relationship between reported results and activities performed by USAID projects. Furthermore, because there was no specific reference to which achievements were made by which project, it was hard to track whether or not these activities had previously been reported.

For example, the State Department and USAID commented that 3 million girls are now enrolled in primary and secondary school, but they did not identify what specific U.S. program made that possible, how much was spent on the endeavor, or what the eventual outcome of the enrollment was. (SIGAR, 2014, p.39)

According to SIGAR (2014, p.40), the State Department and USAID asserted that “women’s life expectancy has increased from 42 years in 2002 to 62 years today”. However, other than stating that “USAID and the wider donor community have significantly contributed to rehabilitating Afghanistan’s healthcare system”, there was no mention of how or which specific programs funded by the United States brought about an increase in Afghan women’s life expectancy.

Stronger Women Stronger Afghanistan’s project evaluation indicated a flaw in WfWI’s endline reports that showed 69%, 99%, and 99% of women in years one, two, and three, respectively, had started earning after receiving vocational training, whereas only 23% of women surveyed for evaluation purposes were confirmed to have been earning an income, and only 8% reported having started earning after the training; the rest were reported to have already been earning before joining the program. (Huber & Zupancic, 2016)

### **Sustainability Measures**

There are several aspects that can be considered in order to assess whether or not a program is sustainable. The following questions indicate some ways in which to ensure sustainability.

1. Have sustainability measures been incorporated into the design?
2. Does political will exist for the project?
3. If so, has the program created successful partnership with government counterparts?
4. Have the program beneficiaries been empowered? If so, to what extent?
5. Is there an exit strategy in place?

ASGP’s evaluation noted that temporary results were prioritized over long-term strategies. Based on DevTech Systems’ collected data, the conclusion was made that ASGP grantees were not empowered through these grants, but that, rather, the system

increased their dependence on ASGP. Furthermore, neither funding nor vision existed for the long term. Given the bureaucratic procedures partly imposed by the design itself and partly by individual ASGP staff, little room for growth was available to grantees, and, in contrast to the initial intent, the project “did not change women’s leadership or empowerment” (DevTech Systems, 2011, p. vii). The “Quick Impact Grants”, through which ASGP provided grants for projects such as “advocacy, economic development, family health, education/literacy, and social/political” (DevTech Systems, 2011, p.2), were assessed to have been short-lived, especially after a long bureaucratic approval process; at the same time, the implementation lasted on average for only four months. Literacy projects, for example, were assessed to be too short to have any impact, especially given the unavailability of baseline data, which made it difficult to determine whether improvements were made.

After the activities were approved, there was monitoring by ASGP in most cases, depending on the region, to see if the grant activities took place, but there was no mentoring, no linking of products to a supply or value chain to help find markets to sell the products, or help develop a simple business plan. This, despite promises made in January 2011 by the Ambassador and other senior Embassy personnel, who agreed to assist ASGP CSOs to find expanded markets for their products. (DevTech Systems, 2011, p.10)

An example of the lack of sustainability measures and difficult grant and budget approval processes was demonstrated in the case of a woman who had requested under \$5,000 via a proposal to buy “eggs, an incubator, a generator (because the electricity was erratic in this area), and some chicken feed” as a small business opportunity. The budget for the generator was dropped by the ASGP staff which led to the project’s failure.

Pain et al. (2015), in SIDA’s evaluation of seven projects, observed that in six of the seven projects, an exit strategy was not present in the project design. SIGAR (2014) also observed that

although U.S. agencies have reported that conditions for women in Afghanistan have improved since 2001, those same agencies, as well as members of Congress, non-governmental organizations, and members of Afghan civil society have expressed concerns that any gains made in this area may be difficult to sustain. (p.1)

### ***Working with the government***

One aspect of sustainability is a project's ability to partner effectively with government in order to hand over the project upon its completion. For the most part, this relationship was not very effective in the projects assessed. Trust between these entities, the capacities to handle projects, and the nature of the relationship itself were obstacles to achieving this partnership. In UNHCR's Shelter Assistance program, the level of distrust between this program and the MoRR was mutual. The Ministry in Kabul was completely unaware of UNHCR's program, as it was a rural-based program, and resented having been kept in the dark by the UN agency. This situation demonstrated the problems in an absent handover mechanism, where it was implied that the responsibility to carry on with project activities would be handed over to MoRR after the project was completed, but MoRR had not been adequately involved in the project's undertakings. At the same time, due to issues of corruption, lack of capacity, and mismanagement, UNHCR decided to completely cut the central MoRR authorities out of the equation and directly deal with provincial departments. "Furthermore, MoRR representatives do not fully agree with the deeper objectives that this strategy is supposed to fulfil in the frame of the regional 'Solution Strategy'" (Siegel et al., 2012, p.121). As summarized by a senior MoRR representative: "We don't believe that UNHCR should focus on reintegration. We believe that its expertise is on movements, not on stabilization" (Siegel et al., 2012, p 121).

Bernard (2014) in Evaluation of UNICEF's literacy program, noted two types of sustainability problems. First, whether individual students would be able to retain and develop the knowledge they had acquired and, second, whether the government and the international community would be able to maintain an informal education system to allow easy access to education for rural women. As a response to the first question, the evaluation team noted that despite the demand on the part of both married women and younger women and girls to continue and advance through the program -- at least to the point where they are able to enter sixth grade -- this was not fulfilled. Hence, most of the students remained only partially literate, with no mechanism in place to further their education. As a response to the second question, neither government, donors, nor local authorities themselves could continue with the literacy program after it had ended, so it was not sustainable. Many efforts were made locally, and phone calls were also made to

UNHCR in Kabul to inquire about the continuation of the program, only to receive a response that an adequate budget was not in place to sustain the program.

Huber and Zupancic (2016) in the Stronger Women Stronger Afghanistan project evaluation, stated that sustainability was measured in the form of follow-up activities with program participants. From among the participants

only 28% of respondents reported that they had received follow-up support from WfWI since graduating from the training program. Of those who had received follow-up support, 76% had received support in the form of a follow-up interview, 35% for establishing self-help groups, and 36% for facilitating self-help group meetings. Only 13% of those who had received support received help in accessing markets. (p. x).

This chapter highlighted the themes relevant to *participation* and *empowerment* and provided a variety of examples found in the project evaluations under study regarding those themes. Further fine-grained examples and details about the communicative aspects of project process and practices are provided in the next chapter on data analysis of the interviews conducted for the purposes of this research.

## Chapter 6. Interview Data Analysis

This chapter is based on research conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, during the period August 5 to 25 of 2016. This research involved in-person interviews with development sector professionals, including both men and women.

### Data Collection Method

Due to security concerns in Kabul, I was not able to stay for more than 25 days. During this time, I interviewed 2 of my former colleagues and, using a snowball technique, was introduced to and interviewed 8 other professionals, totaling 10 participants. Unfortunately, the working culture in terms of planning and scheduling is such that the meetings/interviews usually could not be scheduled beforehand. The process of introductions, familiarizing each participant with the thesis topic and its underlying rationale, as well as scheduling appointment times, all took longer than expected. Although initially I had planned to interview at least 15 people, the limited time and circumstances did not allow me to identify additional candidates who both met the selection criteria and would also be willing to be interviewed. The criteria employed for selecting participants were as follows:

1. Were local employees with relatively proportional representation of male and female.
2. Had a minimum 5 years of experience in women's empowerment, including having worked in at least one international project.
3. Were willing to participate in the interviews and respond to questions about one of the projects for which he or she had previously worked.

The participants represented different roles and positions in project hierarchies and also, at the same time, had several years of experience working for Afghan women. The reason I decided to interview local and experienced employees, and not international staff, was because of my belief that most of the local staff had a better contextual understanding and were in a better position to compare international efforts with local needs. Three interviewees were male, and this was due to the fact that equal rights and women's empowerment is a society-wide concern and the opinions of male members of society who have chosen a career path to support women within a

patriarchal society like that of Afghanistan should not be ignored. Although specific consideration was not given to ethnicity in the selection process, the participants did come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, with origins in and knowledge of different provinces. The ages ranged from 20 to 40 years. All had completed their university education.

### **Limitations and Challenges**

The limitations of my research included the limited number of participants for the reasons stated above. However, the assessment of evaluations and academic articles used for research in this thesis certainly supported and added to the findings. The questions asked were based on personal reflections of my experience working for the United Nation's Gender Equality Project. The questions might, therefore, be considered to be leading by some. The challenges I encountered during the interviews was the limited time (about 90 min) per interview, which did not allow for in-depth and detailed inquiry. In addition, some of the participants did not know the answers to some of the questions (e.g., one participant did not know who authored the proposal for their project, as she had joined the project at a later stage). The responses also were based on the personal opinions and reflections of the participants and could be deemed to be a reflection of their general level of satisfaction with aid organizations. Each person spoke in the confidence that their views would be represented anonymously, and there was seldom any pressure of time in these conversations.

### **Method of Analysis**

Where possible, the responses have been clustered to prevent repetition and the overstating of certain points. In some instances, however, where differences were pronounced, detailed information has been provided regarding participant responses.

### **Research Participants**

*Note: Names below are aliases used to protect the identities of the interviewees.*

**Interviewee 1:** Zoya worked with Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan (ELA), a UNESCO project funded by Finland, Japan, and Sweden. She had been working with this organization for over a year, but had several years of experience, including personal

initiatives advocating for women's rights and highlighting the challenges facing women and girls.

**Interviewee 2:** Tahmina, for the purposes of this research, was responding to questions about a previous project she worked with, namely, Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Program (AREDP), funded by the World Bank and implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). She came from a religious/traditional district of Kabul and had overcome many challenges in pursuing both education and employment due to her gender.

**Interviewee 3:** Salma was a well-known women's rights activist who worked for one of the components of PROMOTE, the largest women's empowerment program led by USAID for women to date. This project was headed by a female Afghan Chief of Party (CoP) and aimed to bring large numbers of female Afghans to leadership levels.

**Interviewee 4:** Jawid had a graduate degree in gender studies from a neighboring country and had worked in two consecutive projects focused on women's empowerment over the past 6 years. He currently worked for a UN project inside the Ministry of Women's Affairs and was responding to questions specifically on this project.

**Interviewee 5:** Sonia worked in a leading role in a donor agency in Afghanistan, and was also a youth activist. She had a degree from a reputable university in the west, and had been an influential figure in recent years.

**Interviewee 6:** Yasaman responded to questions about one of the previous projects she worked for named LAPIS, funded by the U.S. embassy and implemented by the Moby Group. As part of this project, her role was to find successful women from across Afghanistan along diverse career paths and highlight them as role models for other Afghan women using various media outlets. She too was a well-known activist who worked with youth and women to fight for equality at different levels of society.

**Interviewee 7:** Khyber had been working for USAID projects for over a decade and was then working for the Women in Governance component of PROMOTE/Tetrattech/USAID. He had not exclusively dedicated his career to women's empowerment, but had for at least 5 years worked in projects specifically designed for gender equality.

**Interviewee 8:** Simin was responding to questions about her work in the Kabul City Initiative Project of USAID. In her role, she conducted and maintained a women's collective *shura* inside the municipality and commemorated special days and events for female staff, as well as for the women residing in Kabul. After having worked in several projects as a gender specialist, she was considered a competent professional in this area.

**Interviewee 9:** Nusrat was responding to questions on his role with the UNDP where he was in charge of overseeing many projects related to women's empowerment including economic empowerment, gender responsive budgeting, gender studies institutes, and the elimination of violence against women. His responses were therefore more general in nature. He also had a reputable degree from abroad and considered working for both men and women a way out of the challenging political atmosphere.

**Interviewee 10:** Fereba was responding to questions about one of the previous projects she worked for, namely GIZ, German Technical Cooperation and the Afghan Civil Service Commission. Her role was mainly to mainstream gender into government institutions. She had many years of experience working with the Ministry of Women's Affairs through several gender equality projects.

These individuals were each asked a series of questions about the above-mentioned projects aimed at women's participation and empowerment. This was done in an effort to conduct a basic assessment of these projects from the perspective of employees and to observe whether or not the initiatives that they currently were or had been a part of played a crucial role in Afghan women's empowerment.

The sections that follow are summaries of responses to questions asked of interviewees. These have been organized in chronological order corresponding to a project life cycle, from the initiation of a project, to its implementation, and ultimately to its final outcomes.

### **Project Design and approval by remote authorities**

The first in the series of questions inquired as to ***Who authored the proposal for the project?*** This was an important question, because proposal writers are the initiators of a project. The expectation is that the author will write a proposal that is

based on research, contextual understanding, and assessment. The proposal is an important document, because once it is approved and a contract is won and signed, then that proposal serves as the heart of the project. Depending on the donor, very few, if any, changes may be introduced. It is therefore important to examine the research and analysis that led to a project design, as well as which parties were consulted and how the final design was selected. What was important here were the ways in which these responses described coincided with the third-party project assessments described in Chapter Five.

Participant responses all indicated that the projects were either designed outside of Afghanistan altogether or were written by consultants who travelled to Kabul for a short period of time. In the case of the latter, participants were asked if a needs assessment was performed before the drafting of a proposal. The responses of the participants can be categorized as follows:

Five participants stated that a needs assessment was not adequately performed and the proposal was written outside the country. This group verified that there were major incompatibilities between the project designs and the needs that they thought were necessary. For example, the literacy project was designed to improve literacy for women and girls who did not attend regular schools for a period of 9 months. It was also expected that these women would join regular schools after finishing this program. The project designer was not aware of the reasons why these women did not attend regular schools. Based on her own field visits where she was supposed to collect success stories for the project, Zoya learned that there were three major obstacles to these women's attending regular schools: (1) mobility issues where schools were far from their residence, (2) lack of security measures, and (3) societal patriarchy whereby male family members would not allow women to receive an education. Additionally, there was a small percentage of older women who were embarrassed to go to school with younger age groups. Zoya found out that because all of the age groups were taught together, it was difficult for the participant women to learn adequately in order to enter higher grades appropriate to their ages. Due to teaching deficiencies, most of the women who attended could barely pass the first grade, and most of them still decided to not join school for the reasons given above.

Two of the projects were based on needs assessments performed many years earlier for other projects. As a result, issues of incompatibility with the needs of the recipient population were similar to the first group of projects described above, namely, the needs assessment was outdated, and the scope of the project was different. PROMOTE, the largest aid program for women's empowerment to date, was based on the Asia Foundation's program documents implemented over a decade ago without a consideration that the needs of women 10 years ago might be different from those of the present. In addition, this project was specifically focused on enhancing the leadership skills of female citizens, whereas the Asia foundation had a more general approach towards women's empowerment.

In two of the projects, needs assessments were performed, albeit, by staff members with minimal to no prior experience. These assessments therefore lacked the necessary detail and thorough understanding of the needs which, again, comprised the same challenges.

In one case, the participant did not know who designed the project. She joined the project at a later stage and, due to high staff turnover, was not able to provide this information.

### **Project Planning in an Unstable Management Environment**

While the main scope and design of a project is identified in the proposal, the approaches are mainly outlined in the work plans developed at the project level on an annual/bi-annual basis. In order for the best approaches to be chosen, depending on a project's scope, there may be a need for the incorporation of different voices, including expert advisors, beneficiaries, and stakeholders. Also, a feedback mechanism is needed, so that plans can be improved upon every year. The participants in this research were therefore asked to ***state whether there was a planning procedure in place for project implementation and, if so, to explain who from amongst the staff participated in it.***

Everyone (9 participants) except Yasaman stated that a planning procedure was in place. Yasaman mentioned that because the project goals were not complicated, requiring only that they find successful Afghan women, the localities were simply divided amongst staff in order to conduct the search.

Of the remaining nine, four participants said that the department heads, in some cases local and in others international, were responsible for making plans. The subordinates for three of the projects were completely out of the picture and were only tasked with activities. In the case of one of the projects (AREDP), each individual staff member was to make an individual plan in accordance with their responsibilities and the project goals which were then incorporated into the team plan. Tahmina said that not all department heads instituted the same practice; however, because this was the practice in their department, she observed that the staff had an increased sense of ownership and performed their duties in a more responsible manner.

In four cases, the department heads made plans in consultation with the government stakeholders. Three mentioned that there was not much room for fundamental changes to the plans, anyway, and involving the government offices was a symbolic act to demonstrate their involvement. One participant mentioned that government officials were corrupt and when consulting with them, they made demands on the project to benefit themselves and not the people they represented. For example, one of the officials requested the project to include his office renovation and to furnish his office with modern furniture, which, for obvious reasons, was not accepted by the project management, but such requests were not rare among municipality staff and were, in some cases, approved.

Salma reported that planning took place on an annual basis as part of a staff retreat where the teams made their department plans together and then presented them to the rest of the project and incorporated recommendations as necessary.

As to the question of whether or not there was any flexibility in bringing changes to the proposal, three interviewees responded in the negative, with only four interviewees stating that there was a possibility for bringing some changes, but only on a very small scale. For example, a few of the beneficiaries in AREDP requested marketing training, which was not specifically mentioned in the proposal, but was somehow justified and provided to them.

#### *i. Beneficiary Participation in Decision Making:*

In all of the contemporary development projects discussed in this chapter, participatory development was rooted in a theory that involved incorporating the voices

of participants into the development process. When it came to implementation, however, the story of how this worked might have been different than the intent, according to these interviewees. The participants in this research were asked ***whether or not the beneficiaries were asked for any feedback in regard to the project, and, if so, what was the degree to which their recommendations were incorporated?***

Nine out of 10 interviewee responses indicated that there was no mechanism in place to incorporate beneficiaries in the decision-making process. However, when suggestions and recommendations arose (in one case through the bi-annual field monitoring reports), one out of those nine indicated that management tried to incorporate these comments into the planning, and eight others confirmed that recommendations were not taken into consideration. The 10th participant, however, mentioned that in her project, the decisions were made in consultation with project beneficiaries who were essentially female government employees in the ministry. She personally believed that this probably would not have been the case if the target groups had been women at the grassroots level.

Zoya said that it was only when she went for a field visit to an eastern province that she realized the scale of the issues faced by the women and the degree of her project's dysfunctionality. The women she saw in an overcrowded classroom were from all age groups and led by a female teacher who was having difficulty helping these students. Zoya explained that every single woman she talked to after the class mentioned that nine months was too short a period for learning anything serious, especially given the fact that they belonged to different age groups and had different capacities. The teacher was not professionally trained to help each student with her specific needs. In addition, these women had issues of mobility and, given the patriarchal society they belonged to, faced a great deal of struggle just to enter the program and remain in it for nine months. The participants who were about to finish the program did not think it was worth the struggles they had to undergo to enter into the program.

## **Project Implementation**

Subsequent to design and planning, what remains is the quality of project implementation. Quality is affected by several factors, the most prominent of which is highlighted in the following subtopics.

### *i. Staff Roles in Complex Organizations*

Having a contextual understanding of Afghanistan and the needs of Afghan women is clearly an important requisite to being involved in not only the design and planning of projects, but also in their implementation. The dynamics involved in the roles that local and international experts play in planning and decision-making processes then became important. The next question asked to the participants was: ***What were the roles of national and international staff, as well as that of male and female staff, in project implementation?***

Responses to this question are categorized into three groups:

1. International staff have full planning and decision-making authority; local staff only take orders (3 participants).
2. International staff do consult with local staff and stakeholders on planning, but they are the final decision makers.
3. International staff share decision-making power with local staff.

#### Group 1:

One of the members in the first group mentioned that the CoP in her project had a military background and operated the project as one in which everyone would simply take orders from him. She mentioned that there were instances where she resisted the decisions, but to no avail. In one instance, she had requested being allowed to spend the budget allocated to the gender department on supporting women's small business initiatives rather than on creating handicraft exhibitions for them on a monthly basis -- an undertaking that would have produced just a one-off event that would not have earned much for the women. However, despite there being flexibility in the project documents for how the gender budget could be spent, he did not approve the request, simply because he did not like it. Staff were likewise indirectly threatened with losing their jobs

in cases where they expressed disagreement with the CoP. In one instance, a group of three local employees left a project together and informed USAID authorities of the problems encountered, but nothing was changed, and the CoP remained in his post until the end of the project.

Yasaman reported that there were seven program staff in the project she was involved with: three international and four local. She stated that the international staff, who were guided by the U.S. embassy, would carry out implementation exactly as the U.S. embassy wanted it done. There was no room for flexibility. It was the same form being filled for each individual woman showcased. Flexibility existed in identifying successful women, because international staff did not know many of them. Except for Yasaman herself, the three other local staff were male. She noticed a level of reluctance by her colleagues to be fair in their search for successful women. For example, her colleagues did not travel to the difficult-to-reach provinces, nor did they follow a higher standard when searching for successful women. “If the people handling the project were local youth and were trained and actually given authority, it would probably have worked a lot better”, she said.

According to Nusrat, there was a lack of trust between national and international staff in almost all of the UNDP projects for which he had been responsible. He believed that this was due to the fact that some national staff in the field were quite competitive and therefore tended to recommend impressive approaches and inputs to the work plan, but the leadership on the projects were unable to effectively manage these suggestions and at times felt threatened by the local staff, to the extent of either ignoring them altogether or eliminating them from important meetings with the country office (the main UNDP office in Afghanistan). This situation led to increased resentment on the part of the local staff towards the international staff which, in turn, resulted in an increased lack of coordination and planning.

Group 2:

In Zoya’s current literacy project, international staff were hired as consultants to advise each of the departments, but, in reality, they functioned as department heads and reported directly to the project director who likewise was not a local. They did consult with the local department managers, but because the project was, like many other UN

organizations in Kabul, highly male-dominated and dominated by one ethnicity, male Pashtun ideas about women's participation and interaction were incorporated into the project. For example, the curriculum designed for female literacy was a reflection of the male perspective on how Afghan women should live. The lessons in this curriculum were about how to maintain cleanliness at home, how to take care of children, how to dress, and so on. There wasn't much in the curriculum to help these participants become competent in the sciences or to prepare them for the job market and so forth.

Salma stated that in the WLD project, most of the employees were local, including the chief of party who was the first female Afghan CoP in Afghanistan and who brought a strong team of female Afghan professionals on board. The international staff, one of whom had even published a book on this subject, headed only a couple of departments, which were, at the same time, the least successful departments in terms of output and deliverables. The reason for this, Salma believed, was a lack of contextual understanding and mobility restrictions for foreigners. It was a lot easier for national staff rather than international staff to go into the field and talk to people. The number of competent international staff in Afghanistan was very limited and their mobility restrictions due to poor security, as well as their inability to communicate in local languages, were obstacles that kept them from developing contextual understanding, according to Salma. Hence, most international staff, restricted to the compounds designated for them, ended up spending a lot more time behind their computers and disconnected from real life in Afghanistan. The new CoP had only been in office for 10 months. Previously, an expatriate (American) CoP had been managing the project, and there had been very little progress. This situation had, according to Salma, raised significant concerns from the donor (USAID). She said that all projects led by Afghan leadership were not necessarily successful. Salma mentioned that *progress*, however defined, certainly had to do with people's motivations and how much they cared about the women they were reaching out to, and, in the case of this new Afghan CoP, the motivation did exist. Salma mentioned that although the decision making at the implementation level should have been done within the project, this particular project was sometimes micromanaged by USAID – usually by Americans who, for the most part, were aggressive implementers and only needed numbers without any consideration for whether a project was succeeding or not. This interference impeded fulfillment of the CoP's intentions for the project.

In the IJMA project, Jawid related that in UNDP projects that are based on a direct implementation model, as this one was, several entities are involved with decision-making.

- The macro-level decisions are made by the UNDP country office, where national staff have contributory roles in decision making, and international staff are the decision makers.
- Micro-level decisions are made at the project level. For the first time, the local/expatriate divide at the project level is removed because the project manager is local and is qualified, but there is a lack of authority and, for a lot of decisions, she must seek approval from the country office (the main UNDP office in Afghanistan).
- Regional staff are also part of the planning, but their plans are overseen by the project manager and then the country office.

Sonia, being the director of her project, expressed that “all final decisions are made by my American boss”, who visited Kabul annually. She said that most of the recommendations and suggestions that were within the scope of the project were accepted by him, but there were some things that were not accepted and that made Sonia unhappy. One such example she gave was that the recipients of the funds had been the same organizations over a number of years. Sonia had suggested that these funds be granted to smaller and more vulnerable projects, but this suggestion was rejected by her boss because one of the selection criteria for the grantees was that they were able to have all their reports in the English language and use the technical terminology. These smaller organizations, she believed, might have done a better job at the grassroots level, and it was only due to their inability to report adequately in English that they were sidelined. Although this problem could have been solved by recruiting a few translators to help them with report writing, what was chosen was the easier way out, which was to feed the existing projects who by now had the expertise to showcase their work in a positive light.

Group 3:

According to Tahmina, one distinguishing feature of AREDP was that the MRRD minister himself held very conservative opinions about women's modesty and speech in the workplace, and this view was shared by most of the men who were hired as project managers as well. She said that only one international staff member was assigned to AREDP, a female expert from India. This woman had negotiating power and funding consultation roles with the donor (World Bank), but did not have much involvement at the implementation level. Thus she had a slightly higher status than a manager because of her link with the Bank, but was still discriminated against as a female. One reason for this may also have been the project manager's pessimistic views regarding having a female advisor who was also from India (culturally not respected); thus female staff were mostly subordinates, and so were also closely monitored by the project manager, someone chosen by the minister. Tahmina related that she was happy with the work that the project was undertaking for Afghan women's economic stability. The internal treatment of local and international female staff, however, defeated the purpose of offering assistance to women for her.

Both Khyber and Fereba said that planning was done by their government counterparts, and the technical support and funding was taken care of by the projects as long as the plan was in accordance with the scope of the project. Upon further inquiry, however, they did say that the capacity of the government was very limited and that government staff sometimes needed assistance every step of the way in order to plan.

*ii. Planned versus implemented activities:*

After planning is completed, the quality of implementation is what defines the success of a project. The participants were thus asked ***whether annual plans are actually implemented. And if so, to what degree and with what quality?***

To the first question the responses included the following:

1. About half of the time.
2. About 70% of the time.
3. Close to the target.

The primary reasons offered by the first group for such low performance included the bureaucracy and logistical procedures of the organizations they worked for, the capacity and level of commitment of the staff, and impediments posed by the government counterpart's procedures and leadership. The other two groups were comparatively more satisfied with the numbers and objectives met.

To the second question about the quality of implementation, the majority (7) of the participants said they felt that the quality of work performed on the ground was unsatisfactory for reasons such as ineffective project design, poor understanding of the needs, ineffective coordination with the government and other stakeholders, lack of a budget for important work, limited staff capacities, and political and stability reasons. Two participants, Fereba and Khyber, were satisfied with the performance of the NGOs, but attributed the lack of overall effectiveness to their government counterparts. One participant (Tahmina) mentioned that in light of the difficult conditions, she was satisfied with project quality; however, she thought that there was room for improvement in terms of training staff who were implementing the project on the ground because their degree of success sometimes depended on the technical knowledge of the responsible staff member.

Examples provided for lack of quality were many. Salma, for example, reported that she had to provide Training of Trainers (ToT) outside her scope of work to the trainers who were responsible for making the project a success. The curriculum had been developed by ordinary staff who were not experts in leadership. The training provided no more insight and knowledge than reading a few articles online at best, but the expenses for implementing such a program and bringing the women to Kabul to stay in expensive hotels to receive training was wasteful.

### **Sustainability Measures**

An important factor that could indicate effective planning and implementation relates to whether or not measures have been sought out for sustaining projects upon completion and after funding is exhausted. The participants in my study were therefore asked ***if they had observed sustainability measures in the planning process, and, if so, how these were implemented?***

The responses included the following:

1. No sustainability measures:

Three participants stated that there were almost no sustainability measures in place in the design of the project. There were assumptions made, such as in the ELA project, where it was assumed that once women went through the literacy program designed by the project for a period of nine months, they could join regular schools. However, this was a purely idealistic assumption and not based on any research whatsoever. The twofold challenges, one relating to the women themselves, and the other, to the project, were ignored. As discussed previously, these challenges included women's lack of mobility, security issues, societal patriarchy, teachers' lack of expertise, deficiencies in the curriculum, and so on. Zoya stated that every field report (in which beneficiaries mention improvements they seek from the project) suggested that the literacy training programs should be in place for at least two years (currently these are 9-month programs). However, this request was never considered for implementation simply because it had not been included in the proposal. This response defeated the purpose of implementing field reports; nevertheless, funds were spent pursuing these reports again and again because they were part of procedure. There was no mechanism in place to even follow up with the women who had finished the literacy program to see if it had been of any use to them or if they had been at all able to enter the formal educational system, which was the primary purpose of the literacy training. The only focus was on hitting the numbers and completing the training programs regardless of quality or sustainability measures.

Yasaman's project was only designed to give women exposure. It was short-term by design, and there were no sustainability measures in place.

Simin also reported that her project's initial design was amended many times, and the gender component itself was incorporated later (which she believed to be more of a symbolic addition, as it had a very limited budget allocation) with further management decisions impeding growth. The only activity that she thought could be of value after the project ended was the women's *shura* that she established for the municipality-wide participation of women to come together and have a shared platform to discuss their challenges. It took, however, a year for her to convince the authorities, and in the one year that remained of the project, internal politics made it difficult to even elect a chair and a secretary. Simin herself left the project a couple of months before its end.

A female municipality employee reported later to her that the shura was still symbolically there, but the chair had changed several times and the meetings were irregular.

## 2. Sustainability planned but not implemented

Five participants mentioned that sustainability was planned but not implemented. Each of their specific cases is presented below.

Salma reported that sustainability measures were part of the plan in the WLD Project. For example, the educational institutions contracted for implementing WLD's training programs had signed MoUs with WLD based upon which these institutions were responsible for institutionalizing and implementing the training curriculums after completion of the project. In this way, the women would go through the curriculum through these institutions after the life of the project. The extent to which this was implemented is not known, however, especially given the fact that these subcontracted institutions were not accountable for ensuring sustainability, for example, by tying funding to the successful implementation of sustainability measures.

Jawid related that sustainability measures existed, but only at the level of discussion. He insisted that he did not put the blame solely on the project and its design but placed it equally on the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the project's implementing partner. He was responsible for creating a monitoring mechanism for MoWA so that they could follow up on project progress towards NAPWA (National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan) indicators. He experienced difficulty working with MoWA because of their lack of commitment, and once the software had been developed and he had finally trained a few people in MoWA, they still never followed up with projects, and it was as if the database had never been developed in the first place.

Sonia said that they did ask their grantees to consider sustainability measures, but it was not realistic, in some cases, for the grantees to sustain themselves beyond donor funding, let alone think of sustaining their work. There were only rare cases where the grantees had managed to continue their work by fundraising and so forth. Sustainability was a new phenomenon in Afghanistan, and her view was that given the political and social instability, people didn't think beyond the next week.

According to Khyber, the project hired an advisor to work with the government regarding sustainability measures, but the government's lack of commitment impeded

growth, and, at the same time, unless the government took charge, the project was not going to be there for good and there would be no way for the project to succeed.

Nusrat said that there were political pressures to extend the projects at all times, especially from the Ministry of Women's Affairs, because they were personally benefitting from the projects for the cost of their trips and vacations and so forth, and it was always a political battle. "Sometimes I would win over but at other times, I had to give up," he said.

### 3. Satisfactory sustainability measures

Tahmina stated that sustainability measures were a significant part of the planning process in the AREDP project. The beneficiaries would start with forming "Saving Groups" who would be promoted to Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) and then to Enterprise Groups (EGs), followed by Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). By the time they would reach the level of SMEs, they were able to sustain their businesses on their own without any support from the project. From beginning to end, the process took about nine months on average.

Fereba considered sustainability to be the incorporation of gender ideals in the structures of the relevant ministries. She did acknowledge that incorporation of such ideals on paper and in reality were two different things, but deemed it sufficient for this specific project and said that maybe in the future, other projects would help with better implementation of such policies.

#### ***Working with the government:***

An additional factor that could indicate the sustainability of these projects is successful partnership with local authorities. Eventually, after the withdrawal of international aid from the country, local authorities would be responsible for leading the community toward the desired development goals. Participants were therefore asked to ***identify the kind of relationship their project had with the local authorities, and whether or not they thought that the local authorities would in one way or another continue the efforts being made by the project.***

Nine out of the 10 participants worked with government institutions, 7 of them with the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and 2 others, with the Ministry of Education and

Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. Tahmina related that despite the satisfactory project outcomes of the AREDP project, the working environment for female employees at the ministry itself was not very pleasant. The minister himself, as well as the project managers he had assigned, were traditionalists when it came to women's rights. They were quite pessimistic about working women; hence, in general, she said, we felt that we were being monitored at all times for our modesty. Other than this, it seemed that the projects in this ministry and the ministry itself were more efficient with their deliverables and outcomes as compared to other government institutions. Tahmina stated that due to the fact that the World Bank project worked inside the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and under the general direction of the minister himself, the efforts were more aligned, and she did not consider herself or the project separate from the ministry. Although the lengthy procedures were inevitable, in general, this project was able to make a difference. She believed that despite the project being comparatively successful, the possibility of such efforts being continued after the exhaustion of funding in the ministry did not seem realistic.

For the literacy project, Zoya worked with the Ministry of Education. She believed that the ministry was not only highly corrupt, but that there was a lack of capacity to perform the day-to-day activities. For example, the salaries of teachers were paid through the ministry and although they were delivered by the project at the beginning of the fiscal year, it took the ministry several months to process payments before they reached the teachers. Zoya explained that most of the staff at the ministry were elderly and were used to having the same manual systems that they had used for decades. What made the international projects more efficient is that the work force mainly comprised younger generations who had easily adapted to the digital world. She believed that if the two efforts (international project and the government ministry) were completely merged in a way that younger generations such as herself would be trained and equipped by the project in order to work for the ministry, they could prove to be more effective in the long run.

Seven participants (Jawid, Sonia, Khyber, Nusrat, Fereba, Simin and Yasaman) worked with the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Below I have summarized the challenges they have highlighted about working with MoWA in their own words:

- MoWA is known to be one of the most corrupt ministries where favoritism and corruption are considered to be the norm.
- The leadership in MoWA was chosen strategically to be subordinate to other ministries. Due to the presence of warlords in key government positions and the ministries, it would have been contradictory to the interest of the warlords for MoWA to have strong leadership. In order to keep the international community happy and the flow of funds coming, therefore, weaker leadership was appointed to minimize the impact of MoWA.
- Corruption and lack of professionalism are taken to a different level when it comes to the ministry.
- MoWA was politically using various donors and projects for different purposes; they never had a unified approach to give a policy narrative to its project partners.
- There was competition between different department heads and some disagreements that had affected the internal politics in a way where the staff were split into supporters and haters of the people in leadership roles.
- The existence of the ministry is neither good nor bad, it's "useless".
- The lack of capacity was so low that when the minister asked for me to update her on a conference and I started doing so, she cursed at me to not update her like I was reading a book and to do so in simple words so she can understand.

All participants agreed with the fact that working with the government was quite challenging. These problems were identified as owing to the following reasons:

1. An incompatibility between the salaries offered by the international organizations versus the government.
2. Differences in work cultures, conflicting demographics between young development professionals and older government staff, as well as differences in computerized versus paper-based processes.
3. Lack of staff professionalism.
4. The prevalence of corruption and conflicts of interest.
5. A lack of staff commitment to the projects that was rooted in pessimism, leading to a motivation primarily of employment and personal gain.

Towards the end of the interviews, participants were asked to **name the biggest barriers facing Afghan women** from their personal point of view. In answering this question, they were asked also to **compare these barriers with the activities undertaken by the projects under study**.

In response to the first part of the question, both Zoya and Tahmina considered cultural patriarchal norms and close-mindedness of both men and women to new ways of thinking as the biggest barriers facing women. In Zoya's words, "Sexism, discrimination, and perceived incompetence are symptoms of cultural limitations facing women, as a result of which women get used to being victims and remain silent". Tahmina emphasized that even the most educated of men are accustomed to discriminating and judging women who are seen purely as sex objects and who are often sexually harassed. Even within international projects working for women's empowerment, the female staff were highly discriminated against in the sense that male ideas were prioritized over women's (as discussed previously regarding incorporation of male ideas in the literacy curriculum for females).

Salma believed that the biggest barrier, not only for women, but for society itself, was dependence on the international community, whereas every person should feel the responsibility to be engaged in the development of their own country. Outsiders "would never have a complete picture, nor the purest of intentions for us Afghans". She believed that "unless we realize that this is our responsibility, things will not change". For example, PROMOTE was implemented only in the five biggest cities of Afghanistan, and when asked how girls from other provinces and remote districts benefited from the programs of this project, a foreigner's response was that everyone could come to the cities and apply to the programs. They lacked contextual understanding that in Afghanistan, girls could not travel by themselves from one province to another and live on their own. Hence, she believed that Afghans themselves must take the lead in order to design and implement local projects.

Jawid believed that a proper mechanism was needed for the development of women in the long run. He mentioned that the efforts so far had been focused more on short-term projects with quick results, which had not proven beneficial for women. The creation of a proper mechanism was a priority need for Afghan women's development

because “the small projects that are not part of a bigger mechanism cannot be sustained”.

Sonia mentioned that there were a few priority areas, the first being economic empowerment of women, but for that to happen, women needed protection both inside their homes and outside. The justice system did not provide protection to women and, hence, they could not fully and confidently participate in society because if they reported any harm experienced by them to the police, the likelihood would be that they themselves would be punished or imprisoned for the harm is greater than those of men. Perhaps widening the circle of women working for gender equality would be one way of approaching a solution, she said.

Yasaman, too, confirmed that what was currently taking place – specifically, the brief events and short-term training and awareness raising programs and so forth -- were “absolutely useless”. She thought that organized, long-term education was necessary and a priority need for women. If the concentration of the international community were on education, she said, “Today we would have a number of women in the lead, without the support of the international community”. As a second priority, she mentioned attention to women’s health and emphasized that women outside the capital and big cities also needed medical care and attention and that having good health was a prerequisite to just about anything that women would wish to achieve.

Khyber saw education as a priority, followed by access to justice, access to health, and provision of human rights. He emphasized that understanding the context must be a prerequisite to implementation of any initiative, but such understanding required a lot of research that the projects did not allocate time and resources for.

According to Nusrat, the biggest barrier was the incompatibility between the development initiatives and community needs, which was further exacerbated by the bureaucracies of both the international projects and the government. “The development institutions do not speak the language or represent the voice of those Afghan women who are living in rural and urban settings”, he said. He believed that these development institutions and the government were only doing business, not development work. He referred to a cost analysis that he performed at one point in his career and found out that by the time the aid actually reached the target population, its economic value was close

to nothing because a huge part of the aid, he discovered, went into the operation of the programs. “Moving forward, it is critical to do an in-depth research, to have community-level focus group discussions and bottom-up approaches for planning in order to improve development interventions”, he asserted.

Fereba believed that the biggest barrier to women’s development was a lack of women’s economic independence which made them vulnerable in many instances and forced them to rely on the men in the family. “Lack of education, access to technology, significant presence of women in leadership” were also barriers preventing women’s effective development, she stated.

Simin believed that in order for development to take place,

there are several areas that need to be addressed and worked on simultaneously. For example, girls cannot attend school unless the security condition, their families, and their economy allow them to; hence there has to be a multi-pronged approach and mechanism to support different aspects of women’s lives.

To the second part of the question, namely, to compare these barriers with the projects under study by each participant, Zoya said that

if I were to only look at the title of the project and the progress reports by the project, I would certainly think that it is making a huge difference in the lives of Afghan women. However, from my position, I do not see the project addressing any important barriers to women’s lives.

Tahmina, on the other hand, saw the AREDP project as a contribution towards women’s empowerment and believed that, even though few in number, there had actually been cases of women who had used the opportunities provided by AREDP to become economically independent. “One of the solutions to the cultural barriers is enhancing the women’s ability to earn. Once they enter the job market, then the way may be paved for breaking the other norms,” she said.

In general, Zoya, Simin, Salma, Jawid, Yasaman, and Nusrat (6 participants) believed that Afghan women’s priority needs had not been addressed by their projects. Sonia, Fereba, and Khyber believed that their projects contributed in some ways but did not address the priority needs. Tahmina was the only one who was satisfied with the work of her project, but she did not approve of the work environment for the women inside the project. All in all, there seemed to be agreement among the participants about

the priority needs being fundamental groundwork that addressed education, justice, health, security, economy, elimination of patriarchal norms via multi-pronged education, ownership of development initiatives by the Afghan community, a long-term mechanism for development, decreasing bureaucracy, and increasing compatibility with societal needs.

There was a general sense of compassion and commitment toward women's empowerment among the participants either due to their personal experiences with discrimination or to their close relatives'. In the other two cases, their first commitment was not specifically to work for women's empowerment, but their more general commitment was to contribute to the betterment of Afghan society as a whole.

This chapter provided a summary analysis of the 10 interviews I conducted with local professional employees of various international aid organizations. Not all of their views could be captured in this chapter, so only those more related to the two concepts under study, namely, participation and empowerment, were considered. Recalling the two main research questions of (i.) whether international aid organizations were meeting their own definition of participation, and (ii.) whether the needs of the recipient populations, in this case Afghan women, were being considered in the design and implementation of projects. Based on their responses, it can be concluded that the international community is neither meeting their own definition of participation, nor considering the needs of Afghan women. The question of women's empowerment was moved to the margins of these projects. The detailed findings of the data analysis will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 7. Findings, Recommendations and Conclusions

This chapter offers findings based on the interviews analyzed in the previous chapter. In the recommendations section, I explore two options, one adhering to the root causes of the development problematic and another adhering to the symptoms. A third, hybrid solution is then offered as being more realistic given the current conditions.

### Findings

The discussion of the findings follows the same format as the discussion in the previous chapter on data analysis (Chapter 6): It begins with project design, followed by project planning and implementation, and concludes with assessments and lessons learned.

1. **Project Design:** All interviewees said that the designs of all their projects were not based on research specific to each project. Rather, project designs either relied on research performed for previous projects, even from other countries, or were not based on any research whatsoever. With respect to the former, the data underlying the research obviously suffered the disadvantage of being outdated and, therefore, arguably irrelevant to any later project. Similarly, heavy borrowing from prior research and other written proposals did not account for differences in project scope, nor did it even address the same populations. This, in turn, reduced the efficacy of the project proposals --- the governing document for the whole life of any project. Additionally, project designers were either mostly expatriate staff or consultants. In a couple of cases, where they were local staff, they lacked adequate skill for performing a needs assessment. As a result, most of these designers were completely alien to Afghan culture and lacked proper understanding or undermined the needs of Afghan women. This led to significant incompatibilities between design and implementation, examples of which were discussed in Chapter 6. Another issue encountered was that some projects were too ambitious in scope given the limited time and funding allocated to each of the objectives. This situation limited the effect of the projects to a few temporary and surface-level activities.

2. **Project Planning:** Work plans for the projects under discussion were made mostly at the project management level. Very little, if any, change could be introduced to a project proposal because that process itself would require a considerable amount of time due to the bureaucracy involved. The approaches selected for planning were also based on the personal interests of management. In some cases, they involved staff, and, in others, staff would be completely ignored. For the most part, stakeholders and/or project beneficiaries were not included in the planning process for the decisions that most affected their lives. Having (or not having) the flexibility to bring changes to a project proposal was a concern to all the participants in my research, especially as a result of encountering needs expressed by the beneficiaries which were different from those of the proposal but still in line with the scope of the project. Had the proposals for the above-mentioned projects been based on realistic empirical research, the ability to introduce changes into the proposals would have provided room for improvement. These 10 project professionals believed, however, that their abilities to implement such changes were not deemed important by project managers, except on rare occasions. Whereas project design should have a feedback mechanism in order for beneficiaries to have a stake in the decision-making process, the projects under review lacked such feedback. Even in cases where feedback was received through alternate means, it was either neglected or lost, either because of a lack of flexibility or a lack of concern for the beneficiaries.

### 3. **Implementation and Practice**

*Role of Expatriate versus Local Staff:* One conclusion that can be made from the interviews conducted for this paper is that for projects in which international staff alone were responsible for all of the decision making, outcomes were not seen to be satisfactory by these observers. In contrast, projects with competent local leadership were considered to be more successful by the employees, further confirming that more successful project outcomes were also seen positively by the donors. Such an observation can be appreciated given that international staff have little or no understanding of, nor personal stake in, the development and empowerment of the target population. Moreover, these interviewees did not say that foreign staff were incapable of understanding the conditions of Afghan

women, but simply that (for many reasons) few spent long enough in the country and/or in the countryside to do so. The structures of communicative practice within and among projects did not enable these expatriates to arrive at that kind of understanding.

*Planned versus Implemented Activities:* According to the interviewees, who were “on-the-ground” professionals, there was a notable mismatch between planned versus actual project activities. The numbers mattered more to the donors and top managers than the quality and efficacy of the projects; that is why quality was sacrificed at many project levels, from design, to planning, to implementation.

*Sustainability Measures:* Sustainability measures were seen as unsatisfactory by the majority of the interviewees. Though sustainability measures may have existed in most of the project plans, there were two matters of concern for these professionals. First, whether or not the sustainability measures were realistic, and, second, whether the capacity and funding for sustaining such projects existed. Unless a project focused on economic empowerment, as in the case of AREDP, and actually left the beneficiaries empowered to continue their own development, sustainability in such projects was hard to achieve. Also, considering the case of AREDP, a conclusion could be drawn that sustainability measures were effective when designed into the project rather than when superficially assigned to other stakeholders after project completion. A further consideration was the varying sustainability measures required across different types of projects. Whereas it might have been practical to sustain the beneficiaries in a project having economic empowerment as its focus, it might not have been easy to do so in a project focusing on capacity building. Additionally, the success of sustainability measures might solely have depended on the success and efficacy of the project itself.

*Working with the government:* According to the interviewees, the standards set in each of the projects aimed at women’s empowerment were set by their donor agencies. Those standards defined the relationship and level of involvement with the government. Despite the desire for sustainability that was expressed in most of the key project documents, the government was not fiscally capable of taking on the responsibility of sustaining projects initiated by donor agencies. The

reasons included not being genuinely involved in project planning and implementation, the inability of government staff to sustain projects, the lack of will to perform some of the project activities, and incompatible pay structures between the government and donor agencies (the government could not afford to pay its own project staff at the same level as the donor agencies).

Further to the findings above, there was also a set of findings spoken of by the interviewees that were more general to development and did not necessarily fall under the theme of participation. These are summarized below:

1. The nature of donor funding in Afghanistan, where there was a given project design that required planning and implementation within a limited timeframe and a fixed budget, in specific localities, and for designated target groups, did not allow for local initiatives to naturally generate alternate and more effective solutions.
2. The lack of coordination amongst donors and stakeholders that supported women's empowerment projects created a sense of frustration among these local professionals. This problem of a lack of coordination was recognized by many, but there also was an unspoken consensus that as long as such cooperation was not enforced by a central agency, no NGO by itself would take the initiative to do so, especially given the established habits of communication and culture.
3. International staff lacked the commitment and, at times, the capacity to successfully plan and implement projects specifically for Afghan women, especially given the fact that most of their time was spent behind a desk in secure para-military compounds away from the target populations.
4. A division was also been created between the elite feminist group of women (who generally owned NGOs, received funding from donors, and were also members of the parliament) and the women who were working at the grassroots facing everyday challenges. The latter increasingly developed a mistrust towards the elite women who used and misused their positions to receive more funding for themselves at the cost of the women requiring development aid.
5. The phrase *gender equality* had become provocative for many Afghan men and even for women in rural areas because it represented the Western model of gender equality, which was perceived to be unaligned with Islamic principles and values.

6. Subcontracting in projects was another common cause of the poor quality of aid when it reached the grassroots. The work got passed on from the donors to the Kabul-based or provincial capital-based NGOs, who then subcontracted the work to other more local NGOs. The quality of work that was eventually implemented through the layers of subcontracts was deeply and negatively affected.

## **Recommendations**

In an environment like Afghanistan, the question of development comprises a complex web of issues. It is dependent on many different factors, including the foreign policies of donor governments and the UN, the political will of the authorities in what is one of the most challenging political environments in the world, the diversity of cultures and ethnicities within the country, and the cultural and ideological divide between rural and urban populations. To offer recommendations without considering the broader network of interconnecting issues would risk being naive and ineffective. For the same reason, it is also important to realize that it is not possible to seek solutions for participation and empowerment in projects for and about gender equality unless the general theories of development are considered.

Like any other problematic, two general approaches can be taken to make recommendations for the issue of women's empowerment and participation that will be discussed below:

1. Diagnosing and treating the roots of the problem.
2. Identifying and treating the symptoms.

### ***Diagnosing and treating the roots of the problem***

Though this approach would be the most effective, it is dependent upon a variety of other factors, including the transformation of development theory altogether. This solution, if viable, may take generations to achieve. Such a solution would, in effect, have to subscribe to either post-development or post-colonial theories.

*Post-development*, though a critique of development, is a critique of the intent, and not the outcomes, of development. Post-development authors such as Ferguson (1990), Escobar (1996), Rahnema (1992), and Sachs (1992) question the ulterior

motives and interests that underlie development. According to Sachs, “It is not the failure of development which has to be feared, but its success” (cited in Pieterse, 2000, p.175). These and other post-development authors believe that modern development theory is driven by political thought and is enhanced by academia. They criticize the top-down approach of development theory altogether as a structural issue created by the governments and political system in place. The development process that was founded, initiated, and funded by Western political powers is perceived to have been an advancement of such power through “development”, leading further to the suppression of weaker nations. Development is seen by post-development theorists, as the title of Latouche’s book suggests, to be a *westernization of the world* (Latouche, 1996). The “end of development” is what Rahnema (1997) recommends as a solution to the development problematic and suggests a “genuine process of regeneration able to give birth to new forms of solidarity” (Rahnema, 1997, p.391.).

The solution, according to this doctrine, lies in traditional and indigenous knowledge systems and ways of doing things. Escobar (1995) in his book *Encountering Development: the Making and Unmaking of the Third World* argues that the very notion of the “third world” is created by the development rhetoric. Even though the assumed premise of development discourse is to eventually reform impoverished countries, it still distinguishes the split between “reformers and reformed” (Leckey, 2014).

The critique of post-development theory therefore lies in the solutions it proposes and not its own critique of the development paradigm. Pieterse (2000) argues that if post-development solutions are actually implemented, then the international community is completely off the hook and the poor are left alone to deal with the damage that has been imposed irresponsibly on them for decades.

From an intellectual perspective, one of the origins of post-colonialism is believed to have its roots in Marxist critiques of capitalism. From a theoretical perspective, however, Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* (1978) is considered to be an entry point for discussion of post-colonialism in academia. Drawing upon Gramsci and Foucault’s ideas, Said analyzed the composition of American and European hegemonic knowledge production actors and discussed how colonialism was legitimized in the territories of “the orient” by “the occident”. He criticized the knowledge produced as a result of so-called

development as only having been designed to meet the motives of the West, rather than meeting the needs of the East (Ziai, 2007).

Post-colonialism takes issue with the very discourse of the third world and believes it to be a creation of the first world to further enhance its own supremacy. Centered on the Eurocentric approach to development, post-colonial theorists argue that modern development practices ignore and/or minimize the value of the global South's experience and knowledge creation systems (Sharp & Briggs, 2006).

Spivak (1988), a prominent post-colonialist author, argued that there is a language to development theory and its approaches that are enhanced by Western knowledge systems. And this language is a significant barrier for the subalterns to communicate approaches that are not compatible with the Eurocentric perspective. This transfer of knowledge requires a translation medium that is consistent with development theory. What ends up happening, according to Spivak, is what she calls "epistemic violence" towards indigenous knowledge systems, because indigenous knowledge is subordinated to the Eurocentric system of knowledge.

Another matter that greatly concerns post-colonial theorists is how the process of Western development was portrayed as a linear and inescapable universal path for achieving prosperous societies that emerged naturally out of enlightenment. At the same time, the development of the global South was not natural and had to be vigorously sought after. Biccum (2002) argues that this double standard only enhances the supremacy of the West over the global South and places the West at the centermost of human advancement. Pretty (2004) also critiques the discriminatory nature of knowledge systems that only acknowledge their own language and argues that scientific knowledge may be weak when it comes to understanding complexities associated with traditional and sustainable agriculture. This is an aspect of the lack of socio-cultural understanding of Afghanistan found in the projects under discussion here. In Afghanistan some project staff (both Afghan and international) do not speak the language of female participants, and many participants are women who cannot read simple project materials due to the language incompatibilities.

On a more practical level, post-colonial theorists such as Pender (2001) hold the view that even though being complete outsiders, international organizations such as the

World Bank are considered to have a distinguished knowledge of third world countries and should be regarded as the highest authorities in policy making and advocating for change. At the same time, the World Bank has gradually acknowledged the importance of indigenous knowledge, albeit only as a supplement to enrich scientific knowledge and not as an equal (Pender, 2001).

Despite their similarities, several authors, including Simon (2006), have noted the minimal effort that has been made to bring together the concepts of development and post-colonialism. As Sylvester (1999) put it a long time ago, "Development studies does not tend to listen to subalterns and postcolonial studies does not tend to concern itself with whether the subaltern is eating" (p. 703).

### ***Identifying and treating the symptoms***

Choosing this type of solution may include some easy and, at times, challenging fixes. The solutions may include:

1. Thorough research and needs assessment of the context and the beneficiary populations in all the localities where the projects are to take place.
2. Flexible project designs that allow for changes with less bureaucratic delay.
3. Decreasing the number of international staff and replacing them with local professionals.
4. Hiring additional professional staff and providing them with contextual training.
5. Effective monitoring and evaluation procedures with everyone involved.
6. Effective planning in which the most relevant stakeholders are involved.
7. Involving project beneficiaries in the design, planning, implementation, and impact assessment processes, with feedback to future project implementation and practice.
8. Supporting researchers whose studies on gender and development are not entirely tied to specific projects, but whose thinking is available to Afghan project planners and to the Advisory Committee described below.

Most of the above-mentioned solutions may not be practical given the rigidity of the current system described in this thesis. This point can be appreciated knowing that development professionals are hardly ignorant of most of the problems outlined in this

thesis, as evidenced by the project evaluations published by development organizations (to which I have referred in Chapter 5). Nevertheless these problems persist, either because of the planning environment, which emphasizes only the delivery of numbers in order to cost out and justify the next phase, or because of a lack of commitment and professionalism, or both.

A third type of solution, however, presents itself as a middle ground between the two extremes. This type may be referred to as a *hybrid* solution to the problematic of women's empowerment and participation. It is, however, dependent upon the premise that the international community and the donor agencies would have a serious commitment towards the betterment of Afghan society -- in this case, specifically Afghan women -- and would be genuinely concerned about contributing to the betterment of their lives through participation and empowerment.

Related to this might be Homi Bhabha's (1984) description of hybrid communities that he argues emerge under the influence of imperial powers, and adhere to the culture of the imperialist nations. In describing the hybrid communities he coined 'colonial mimicry' and described it as "the desire for a reformed recognizable other" (p. 126). Those who have been reformed, he concludes, do not have useful identities as they are separated from their original identities and cannot fully belong to that of imperialist nations either. I do agree with Bhabha that hybrid societies are created as a result of colonialism, but do not agree that they are not useful. In fact the adaptability of these societies I believe demonstrate their receptivity and openness to new ways of thinking and doing things. In the context of Afghan society, those working for international organizations, have been influenced by Western cultures, and can be called hybrid societies, but this does not take away from their understanding of their own culture. I personally believe that Afghan professionals can successfully take the lead, because they understand both languages, namely that of development and that of indigenous societies and therefore can play their intermediary role in managing both.

My third solution-- which I call a hybrid solution (an approach inbetween the root causes approach and the symptomatic solution finding) involved formation of an advisory committee composed of experienced Afghan development professionals by the President's Office (perhaps led by the first lady) which is specialized in gender equality and whose members have demonstrated a proven commitment to and understanding of

women's empowerment. At least a handful of such people currently do reside in Afghanistan and have the capacity to lead the gender equality initiative of the country. Using thorough on-the-ground research of women's needs and the factors affecting those needs, they may identify the most pressing priorities of women in each rural and town locality. As already mentioned, focus and funding should only be given to the most pressing needs. For example, since more than 80% of women have not received any formal education, having 50% of the seats in the parliament may not be a priority, as this process would not only encourage a poor representation of women, but also provoke resistance from males and other segments of society, as is currently the case. In contrast, if the priority at the current stage were to focus only on fundamental needs such as education, health, access to justice, and human rights, then the parliamentary seats would be a struggle for the educated women themselves to fight for at a later stage. Such an approach resembles a temporary or quasi-post-development method since there is initial involvement by the international community, which is subsequently replaced by knowledge systems indigenous to Afghanistan.

In order to ensure sustainability, these advisory committee members might be placed inside the ministries chosen to be a priority by Afghan women (e.g., the Ministry of Education) as gender professionals. Gender departments do currently exist in some of the ministries, but most of them are merely symbolic, having very weak staff and limited resources. Their weakness is currently an essential part of the whole system, in my opinion. Allocating strong leadership that is well aware of the gender equality initiatives of other ministries is crucial, as these leaders can create a shared vision across government ministries and bring about a transformation from within the entire existing government structures. A central database might also be created where all the needed information is updated on a regular basis, and where the committee members interact with it and among themselves in a thoughtful "learning" way.

Donor funding could then be aligned with the needs-based priorities and partner with the gender departments of the ministries, who would essentially serve as the advisory committee members. Ideally, donors would only provide funding and audit spending, but given the current realities where there is a set of procedures and bureaucracy in place for spending funds on a timely basis, escaping such procedures may be impossible, and, given the level of government corruption, it may not be advisable anyway. Hence, given existing circumstances, it may be better initially to only

realign the focus of all of the aid agencies supporting gender equality toward priority needs instead of having simultaneous projects across multiple sectors with insufficient funding. It might also be beneficial to have each project specialize in one segment of a need (e.g., one project only supporting a literacy department at the ministry of education, rather than the project having an array of objectives with limited funding allocated to each). The coordination and partnership in this case might be stronger and more intimate.

One might question that if Afghan professionals have gained their experience from the international community, then why would they be in a better position to lead? After all they were trained in the same projects that the international community was leading. To answer this question, it is worth mentioning that what separates Afghan professionals from the international community is their personal and societal interests. Having restricted mobility, the international staff work behind the walls of closed compounds, unable to see the effect of the work they are undertaking and waiting for their next visit home where their real life takes place. Their daily work however also affected (or was supposed to affect) the lives of Afghan professionals and their families on a daily basis. They walk the same streets as the target populations, attend the same social events and are exposed to the same dangers. Hence, even though these local professionals worked with the international projects, they were aware of their own interests and vulnerability; they hoped that the work will influence the lives of their fellow country-men including the lives of their own families and themselves. It is also worth mentioning that some, if not all Afghan professionals, had to some degree adopted existing practices from the projects they have worked with. However, these practices are not necessarily negative; being placed in leading positions will provide Afghan professionals with the opportunity to think more critically about the ways of working that will support them and their communities.

To provide details about such a platform would at this stage be premature; however, some characteristics of such an initiative might include the following:

- Providing time and space in order to come up with a local and creative process of empowerment for the period that the research and needs assessment are considered viable.

- Researching and finding out about the existing social structures and then utilizing them for the purposes of the project(s) in question, rather than investing into forming new groups, which further creates confusion in the society.
- Planning and true coordination among the different ministries, including creation of a shared database involving researchers, project planners, and field staff.
- Enhancing the ownership of program participants and the wider society by including them in project design, planning, implementation, and sustainability.
- Including all segments of society in bringing about equality is crucial; hence, some mechanism must be put in place that enhances the awareness of everybody, women and men, probably through the school curriculums, religious elders' sermons, and so forth would be beneficial.
- Devising a strategy for reducing and then eliminating corruption.

Indigenous knowledge(s) in the context of Afghan women's development would culminate in seeking solutions for the problems facing Afghan women as well as Afghan societies through the creativity and inclusion of all segments of society considering the social realities. For example, Islam is an indigenous knowledge system that can be used to advance women's development in Afghanistan by incorporating reforms and practices that are found in more liberal Islamic countries. Through these means, cultural norms which are not essential to Islam such as early marriage or preventing education for girls, can gradually be phased out.

These solutions are aimed primarily at creating a spark of inspiration in the search for more sustainable development. It is hoped that future researchers will devote projects solely aimed at solution-seeking in the problematic context of development in the Afghan context, with sustained attention to empowerment through participation.

### **Lessons Learned**

Enumerated below are some of the lessons learned during this research, which are provided as a future reference for those interested in a similar area of research.

1. I started collecting and looking through the project evaluations and analyzed them after having already conducted the interviews. As a result, some of the

information between the evaluations and the interview analysis overlap. Had I analyzed the evaluations beforehand, I would have probed deeper into the matters already present in the evaluations.

2. Due to the limited timing and lack of resources, I selected participants from all of the different sectors working for women's empowerment. It might have been more effective had I pursued only one of the sectors as, for example, women's economic empowerment. The results of such research could have had more practical outcomes.
3. A larger number of participants, as mentioned previously, would have allowed for more perspectives.
4. Additional time allowance per interview, or conducting an interview in two meetings, could also have helped me dig deeper into some of the questions.
5. Under better security conditions, it might have been beneficial to also interview the beneficiaries themselves in order to acquire a better measure of the efficacy of these projects

### **Concluding Remarks**

This thesis provided a holistic look at the issue of participation in women's development projects in Afghanistan. To ground the thesis in theory, first, a literature review of the concept of participation in the context of development was provided. A background on gender equality efforts in the recent history of Afghanistan was then offered in an effort to situate the thesis in its context, followed by an analysis of a few project evaluations targeted towards women's empowerment.

With the background established, the participant interviews were then analyzed, followed by offerings of findings, recommendations, and lessons learned. The main findings of the research were that the design of the projects did not rely on customized research and needs assessments specific to the timing and objectives of the projects; project plans and decisions were not made based on input from the local beneficiaries nor, sometimes, from the local project staff; most of the plans made were not implemented, and, when implemented, quality was unsatisfactory; lack of coordination with government institutions, as well as with other projects engaged in similar work, in combination with the

non-existence of an effective exit strategy in most of the projects, were impediments to sustaining the projects after aid was spent.

Acknowledging the fact that in the current complex context of development, separating and offering recommendations for the specific issue of participation may not be wise, I explored two types of solutions for development: those pertaining to the root of the problem and those offering symptomatic solutions. The first type offered long-term solutions such as post-development and post-colonialism. The second type offered fixes to the current system, at the same time acknowledging that these fixes may not be realistic given the challenges of the current system. A third type of solution which I labeled a *hybrid* solution, focused on localizing development and was offered as a solution, together with a list of characteristics necessary for its realization. The hope is that these recommendations would only be a beginning stimulus of a thoughtful process rained at exploring new ways of doing development through future research in this area.

The conclusion of this thesis is a negative response to the two main research questions of: i. whether the international community is meeting its own definition of participation in women's empowerment projects in Afghanistan, and ii. whether the participants of these development projects are adequately involved in the decision-making and implementing processes. Revisiting the question of justice, it can be concluded that, what is taking place on the ground in the name of Afghan women's empowerment does not fit the definition of justice, which recalls Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, "Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals" (New York Times, p.10).

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## Appendix A.

### ASGP's Objectives

|   |
|---|
| <p>NPP 4 Objectives<br/>(to which the ASGP is aligned. These are not explicitly referenced in the document)</p>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- To establish national-level policies, laws, systems and mechanisms to provide an effective and efficient framework for subnational governance.</li><li>- To develop the capacity of Provincial and District-level institutions to lead and coordinate local affairs, ensure service delivery and bring good governance.</li><li>- To develop the capacity of Municipal institutions to deliver services to Municipal populations and bring good Municipal governance.</li><li>- To promote representation, participation, accountability and transparency, especially through Local Councils and other representative bodies.</li></ul> |
| <p>Objectives from ASGP II Programme document (cover page)</p>  |
| <p>UNDAF level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Government capacity to deliver services to the poor and vulnerable is enhanced</li><li>- The institutions of democratic governance are integrated components of the nation</li></ul>  |
| <p>UNDP Country Programme outcome level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- The state has improved ability to deliver services to foster human development and elected bodies have greater oversight capacity</li></ul>  |
| <p>ASGP application to Sida paraphrasing new UNDAF objective 2</p>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- An effective, more accountable and more representative public administration is established at the national and sub-national levels, with improved delivery of services in an equitable, efficient and effective manner</li></ul>   |
| <p>Synthesis of the above objectives. This synthesis present the basis for the ToC and the evaluation. The synthesis was initially suggested by team, then presented, refined, and agreed at workshop</p>   |