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Afghan Enclave Seen as Model for Development

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

JURM, Afghanistan — Small grants given directly to villagers have brought about modest but important changes in this corner of [Afghanistan](#), offering a model in a country where official corruption and a [Taliban](#) insurgency have frustrated many large-scale development efforts.

Since arriving in Afghanistan in 2001, the United States and its Western allies have spent billions of dollars on development projects, but to less effect and popular support than many had hoped for.

Much of that money was funneled through the central government, which has been increasingly criticized as incompetent and corrupt. Even more has gone to private contractors hired by the United States who siphon off almost half of every dollar to pay the salaries of expatriate workers and other overhead costs.

Not so here in Jurm, a valley in the windswept mountainous province of Badakhshan, in the northeast. People here have taken charge for themselves — using village councils and direct grants as part of an initiative called the National Solidarity Program, introduced by an Afghan ministry in 2003.

Before then, this valley had no electricity or clean water, its main crop was poppy and nearly one in 10 women died in childbirth, one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world.

Today, many people have water taps, fields grow wheat and it is no longer considered shameful for a woman to go to a doctor.

If there are lessons to be drawn from the still tentative successes here, they are that small projects often work best, that the consent and participation of local people are essential and that even baby steps take years.

The issues are not academic. Bringing development to Afghans is an important part of a counterinsurgency strategy aimed at drawing people away from the Taliban and building popular support for the Western-backed government by showing that it can make a difference in people's lives.

"We ignored the people in districts and villages," said Jelani Popal, who runs a state agency that appoints governors. "This caused a lot of indifference. 'Why should I side with the government if it doesn't even exist in my life?'"

Jurm was tormented by warlords in the 1990s, and though it never fell to the Taliban, the presence of the central government, even today, is barely felt. The idea to change that was simple: people elected the most trusted villagers, and the government in Kabul, helped by foreign donors, gave them direct grants — money to build things like water systems and girls' schools for themselves.

Local residents contend that the councils work because they take development down to its most basic level, with villagers directing the spending to improve their own lives, cutting out middle men, local and foreign, as well as much of the overhead costs and corruption.

"You don't steal from yourself," was how Ataullah, a farmer in Jurm who uses one name, described it.

The grants were small, often less than \$100,000. The plan's overall effectiveness is still being assessed by academics and American and Afghan officials, but the idea has already been replicated in thousands of villages across the country.

Anecdotal accounts point to some success. There have even been savings. When villages in the Jurm Valley wanted running water, for instance, they did much of the work themselves, with help from an engineer. A private contractor with links to a local politician had asked triple the price. (The villagers declined.)

Even such modest steps have not come easily. Jurm presented many obstacles, and it took a development group with determined local employees to jump-start the work here.

One basic problem was literacy, said Ghulam Dekan, a local worker with the [Aga Khan Development Network](#), the nonprofit group that supports the councils here.

Unlike the situation in Iraq, which has a literacy rate of more than 70 percent, fewer than a third of Afghans can read, making the work of the councils painfully slow. Villagers were suspicious of projects, believing that the people in the groups that introduced them were Christian missionaries.

"They didn't understand the importance of a road," Mr. Dekan said.

Most projects, no matter how simple, took five years. Years of war had smashed Afghan society into rancorous bits, making it difficult to resist efforts by warlords to muscle in on projects.

"They said, 'For God's sake, we can't do this, we don't have the capability,' " Mr. Dekan said. "We taught them to have confidence."

Muhammed Azghari, an Aga Khan employee, spent more than a year trying to persuade a mullah to allow a girls' school. His tactic: sitting lower than the man, a sign of deference, and praising his leadership. He paid for the man to visit other villages to see what other councils had accomplished.

"Ten times we fought, two times we laughed," Mr. Dekan said, using the Afghan equivalent of "two

steps forward, one step back.”

When it came to women, villagers were adamant.

But forcing conditions would have violated a basic principle of the approach: never start a project that is not backed by all members of the community, or it will fail.

“People have to be mentally ready,” said Akhtar Iqbal, Aga Khan’s director in Badakhshan. If they are not, the school or clinic will languish unused, a frequent problem with large-scale development efforts.

Five years later, the village of Fargamanch has women’s literacy classes and a girls’ high school. Over all, girls’ enrollment in Badakhshan is up by 65 percent since 2004, according to the Ministry of Education. The number of trained midwives has quadrupled.

Health has also improved. Now, 3,270 families have taps for clean drinking water near their homes, reducing waterborne diseases.

The councils are also a check on corruption. When 200 bags of wheat mysteriously disappeared from the local government this year, council members demanded they be returned. (They were.)

When a minister’s aide cashed a check meant for a transformer, Mr. Ataullah spent a week tracking down a copy. (The aide was fired.)

“The government doesn’t like us anymore,” Mr. Azghari said, laughing. “They want the old system back.”

While Badakhshan’s changes are fragile, the forces of modernization are growing. Televisions have begun to broadcast the outside world into villages. Phone networks cover more than 80 percent of the province, triple what the figure was in 2001.

Perhaps most important, Afghans are tired of war, and seeing the benefits of a decade of peace might be enough to encourage new kinds of decisions.

Ghulam Mohaiuddin, a farmer, seethes when he remembers the past.

“The jihad was useless,” he said, sitting cross-legged in his mud-walled house.

Suddenly, a loud blast went off, startling his guests. He laughed. It was the sound of canal construction, not a bomb.

“Now we’ve put down our weapons and started building,” he said, smiling.

Sangar Rahimi contributed reporting.