

# The Schools the Taliban Won't Torch

One ingenious aid program is stabilizing the toughest parts of Afghanistan. The U.S. is cutting its funding.

By [Gregory Warner](#)

The road from Kabul to Azra, a mountainous district in Afghanistan's central Logar Province, is, in places, not a road at all. At some points it's a rocky riverbed, at others an open desert. For one terrifying stretch, it's a twisty gorge known as the Dubandi Pass, famous for carjackings by Taliban bandits. The steep terrain and treacherous roads have always made this part of the world remote, even by Afghan standards. Tribal ties are stronger than national loyalties, and the unguarded border with Pakistan makes the region an easy access point for insurgents. Azra is the kind of place that both Kabul and Washington worry about most.

As violence has risen, development in this area has floundered. The United States Agency for International Development is funding a much-needed new highway in Azra, but work crews have been repeatedly evacuated because of insurgent threats. This past summer, the murder of two aid workers in a nearby district led Azra's only local nongovernmental organization (NGO) to shut down its office for a month.

But there is one project here that's proceeding relatively unimpeded. One



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sunny morning in July, I visited a small hydropower facility under construction in the village of Dadi Khel. There I watched a few dozen villagers building a small channel, slapping together stones and mortar beside a riverbank. When the project is finished, river water will spin a turbine that will bring electricity to about 300 village families. It will be enough power to allow those residents to turn on lights, iron clothes, and watch Bollywood soaps—a small advance in the face of their many problems, perhaps, but also the first development project that any villager here can remember. And it's remarkable that it exists at all.

This hydropower plant is possible because of something called the National Solidarity Program, a five-year-old development initiative funded by international donors but administered by the government of Afghanistan. It's the only development program present in some of the country's most remote villages, and it operates on the idea that small infrastructure projects like the turbine in Dadi Khel do more than just turn the lights on. They also give Afghans, including those in regions distant from Kabul, some grounds to feel a stake in the success of their own government—and one more reason to resist the call of the Taliban.

Military efforts continue in Afghanistan, but they alone will not bring stability to the country. What's also necessary for the success of coalition efforts is that the Afghan people begin to feel allegiance to a state. Such allegiance depends in part on the government being able to address some of their most basic concerns. As James Dobbins, director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at RAND Corporation, puts it, "It is the development of Afghan institutions that will offer some possibility for the international community to diminish its commitment."

In a country where almost all the recent news has been bad news, the National Solidarity Program, or NSP, offers a rare glimmer of hope. While there are some things the NSP can't do—it can't build national roadways or electric grids, for instance—it can perform at least two vital functions in Afghanistan: bringing small-scale development to volatile areas like Azra, and helping to nurture more accountable local governing bodies. Unfortunately, the NSP is starting to crumble, because the United States won't properly fund it.

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**I**n the work of Scott Guggenheim, a maverick World Bank staffer who in the late 1990s pioneered a similar program in Indonesia. At the time, development work in Indonesia was a thorny business: the ruling Suharto government was unreliable and deeply corrupt, and funds intended for aid projects often went missing. Guggenheim wanted to work directly with local villages, but in a way that would avoid a main pitfall of past "community-based" aid approaches: having money siphoned off by dubious local leaders.

So Guggenheim designed a program that would distribute small grants to villages and thereby, as he told the *Washington Monthly*, ensure "greater local accountability." When the Kecamatan Development Program was launched in 1998 (the word *kecamatan* means "subdistrict"), Guggenheim's staff organized town hall-style meetings to ask villagers how they thought grant money should be used. Local leaders were charged with administering the projects and required to take bookkeeping classes and keep minutes at planning meetings. Billboards above project sites indicated how money had been spent, encouraging local oversight. "The core elements were requiring that citizens participate and that there be high levels of transparency about how money was being transferred and used," one of Guggenheim's former Bank colleagues, Dennis de Tray, now at the Center for Global Development in Washington, said. "It had to be auditable."

Not only did villagers help plan what to build, they also managed the funds. The fact that the program gave the residents this discretion was a radical step for the World Bank, which, like most donors, preferred to maintain control of how its resources were spent. Guggenheim believes this element was crucial to its success. Because villagers, rather than a foreign aid agency, controlled the purse strings, there was a much greater sense of local ownership over projects—it was their money to lose. Villagers therefore watched more closely and demanded more from the councils that managed the projects. Eventually these councils, supported and trained by the program, took on additional tasks, such as channeling international hurricane assistance. The significance of the approach "wasn't just that people got a water pump," as Guggenheim said, but "that they selected a water pump and [the government] gave it to them."

According to World Bank reports and independent evaluations, the Indonesia program succeeded in its twin goals of enabling small

Indonesia program succeeded in its three years of creating small development projects and strengthening local governance. But it was another unexpected accomplishment that really caught the attention of Bank officials and the international aid community: when the Suharto government collapsed, the World Bank had to suspend most of its aid programs, but Guggenheim's program was able to continue operating. The reason was that, unlike other aid programs, the Kecamatan Development Program could function even when there was no central state to work with. The World Bank coined the term "community-driven development" to describe this development model, and under then president James Wolfensohn launched similar programs in other conflict-ridden areas, from Nepal to Colombia.

In late 2001, shortly after the fall of the Taliban, a friend of Guggenheim's from graduate school, Ashraf Ghani, was appointed as the new finance minister of Afghanistan. Ghani had followed Guggenheim's work and wanted to try something similar at home. So Ghani phoned up his old friend, reaching him in the car on his way up a volcano in Indonesia. "Scott," he said, "we need you in Kabul." In early 2002, the pair set about designing an ambitious community-directed development program for Afghanistan—and the National Solidarity Program was born. As with the Indonesia program, the mission was twofold: to erect small development projects, and to build trust among a village population that for a century had known government only as a predatory force.

**W**ith Ghani's aggressive advocacy, the National Solidarity Program got off to a promising start, attracting a top crop of talent from the international aid community. A daily stream of radio messages proclaimed the "largest people's project in history," stirring local anticipation. That fall, the first participating villages elected their new community development councils—representative bodies to manage projects—via the country's first secret-ballot elections.

On my visit to Dadi Khel, as I toured the hydropower plant that was being built, I saw firsthand what was unique about this aid program. Next to the construction site and nailed to a tree was a large poster protected in a wood frame, visible to any villager who walked by. The poster was covered in numbers scrawled in Magic Marker. A villager explained to me that the numbers indicated the dates of each bloc grant disbursement. Residents told me that unlike with most development projects, where residents may

not even be aware a project is happening until the day building contractors show up, they had been donating free labor on the weekends to save costs and speed up the arrival of electricity. "This is *our* money," one local teacher said. "All the time we are checking whether it's spent correctly." An independent study by the United Kingdom's York University found less prevalence of corruption in the National Solidarity Program than in other aid programs in Afghanistan.

Local ownership and oversight turn out to have other benefits as well. NSP projects are often more cost-effective, because villagers contribute their own labor, don't require extensive security details, and are better able to negotiate lower materials costs in local markets. The World Bank estimates that projects built by the NSP in Afghanistan are on average 30 percent cheaper than those built by foreign NGOs. And unlike too many other development projects in Afghanistan, the NSP doesn't involve American troops.

Maybe the most surprising characteristic of NSP projects is security related. In a survey last year of school burnings by the Taliban, Human Rights Watch observed that schools built by the NSP have less chance of being destroyed by insurgents than schools built by other aid programs. The reason, as Dennis de Tray explains, relates to the matter of local ownership. "If you're the Taliban, you feel some comfort in attacking things built by foreigners," de Tray says. "But you don't want to create animosity among citizens you're trying to recruit to your side." Sarah Chayes, author of *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban* and now a resident of the southern city of Kandahar, told me that because NSP projects are less subject to corruption (that is, to local commanders and officials coopting donor money), villagers are more willing to maintain and defend them. "If people feel invested in a project," said Chayes, "they'll protect it, at least within reason."

At the same time that the NSP tolerates low-security environments, it can also help to bring greater stability. As a March 2007 report, *Breaking Point*, by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., explains, "Where government presence is limited or where officials are perceived as unrepresentative, corrupt, and weak, people have turned to elders, tribal chiefs, and imams ... [P]articularly in the south, a lack of central government presence and insecurity has

opened provincial districts to abuse by the Taliban and local commanders." The CSIS policy recommendations for enhancing security in Afghanistan include "expanding and deepening the NSP program."

Unfortunately, an Afghan success story like the hydropower plant at Dadi Khel will probably end there. The village council has no money for the freshwater plant they'd like to build next. Though the original design of the National Solidarity Program called for recurrent grants to communities, funding for future projects has been nonexistent—largely as a result of inattention and indifference from the U.S. government.

As of November, the NSP had completed almost 30,000 small aid projects, from hydropower plants to schools to village water pumps. More than 18,000 villages had elected community development councils (out of about 25,000 total villages in Afghanistan). But without additional money to spend, most of those councils will likely dissolve, rather than develop into bona fide governing bodies.

In Guggenheim's Indonesia program, on the other hand, village councils that successfully completed a project could bid for a second bloc grant. The more projects they built, the more adept they became at organizing their communities and the more accustomed villagers became to the idea of local accountability. After the fourth or fifth grant cycle, Guggenheim said, something like real responsive government started to emerge.

Yet without significantly increased funding, Kabul now faces a difficult choice that Guggenheim never had to make: it can expand the program into more villages, or it can continue to support those councils already in existence. It lacks the funding to do both. As Anwar Ul Haq Ahady, the finance minister who succeeded Ghani, argues, there's political pressure on Kabul to expand the program to villages that don't have the NSP and are clamoring for their fair share. Kabul has responded to this pressure by introducing the program into more villages, but as a consequence has been forced to cut off support to many others. This means that councils that are just beginning to acquire the habits of governance essential to nation building will have their efforts cut short. Guggenheim, who visited Afghanistan this fall for the first time since the NSP's launch, said he was "quite disturbed" by the current situation.

The underlying problem is a budget crunch. As of this writing, the National Solidarity Program has received roughly \$700 million dollars in funding. Approximately 95 percent of that sum has come from two World Bank funding streams: a direct grant, and the reconstruction trust fund that the Bank administers. Of that total, the United States has provided just \$13 million, or about 2 percent. A spokesperson for the NSP says that the program is \$197 million short of what's needed to expand into Afghanistan's remaining 7,000 villages, let alone to continue working with already established village councils.

According to the RAND Corporation, the American-led nation-building effort in Afghanistan is the least-financed such effort in sixty years. For the first three years after the Taliban fell, the consensus opinion among American and NATO commanders, and the international community at large, was to strive for a "light footprint" in Afghanistan. Donald Rumsfeld articulated the strategy in a February 2003 speech, saying that American and NATO forces should attempt to do more with less, and avoid the kind of strong presence favored by the previous administration that, he said, had created a "culture of dependency" in the Balkans.

Rumsfeld's deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, did not break from the approach during his tenure as World Bank president, which began in March 2005. Although he was briefed on the progress of the National Solidarity Program, he did not advocate for increasing funding for it or any other aid program in Afghanistan.

Washington's failure to support the NSP is also emblematic of its top-down approach to Afghanistan's reconstruction in general. Since 2002, the United States has given just 6.3 percent of its aid money through the Afghan government. Meanwhile, most of the international community is moving in the opposite direction. At a January 2006 meeting in London, representatives from the United Nations, major donor nations, and the Afghan government met to develop a new framework for reconstruction, known as the Afghanistan Compact. One of the principles of the agreement was that donor nations would give more generously to accounts over which the Afghan government has discretion, such as the trust fund that covers about a third of the National Solidarity Program's budget. The next year, most major donors' annual pledges to this fund rose significantly: Canada's contribution jumped from \$50

the fund rose significantly. Canada's contribution jumped from \$97 million in 2006 to \$121 million in 2007; Germany's went from \$20 million to \$67 million. The contribution from the United Kingdom, already a firm supporter of the program, rose from \$128 million to \$131 million. However, the annual U.S. contribution to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund *fell*, going from \$74 million in 2006 to \$50 million in 2007. Even as the Bush administration has increased overall funding for Afghanistan this year, it has resisted efforts to relinquish more control of the budget to the Afghan people themselves.

The net result is that the NSP's budget is only marginally above what it was before the international community pledged to change course at the London conference. This is already having a deleterious effect. Last year, for example, independent researchers found that 93 percent of invoices to the NGOs that help train village councils hadn't been paid. In an alarming number of cases, funds promised to villages have been delayed, stoking local resentment. "[We told] a lot of these communities, 'Choose your project,'" said one former aid worker who has advised the NSP. "They met, they planned, they started work on their projects—and then the money didn't come." He continued: "I'd be pissed too." Indeed, the delays in dispersing bloc grants—due both to underfunding and donors failing to deliver promised funds on time—undermine the goal of building trust between citizens and local councils. As the aid worker put it, "The cardinal rule in development is that you don't make promises you can't deliver."

Of course, it's difficult to fault the Afghan government for wanting to expand the National Solidarity Program beyond what its current budget realistically allows. In October 2007, hundreds of village council representatives from thirty-four provinces gathered in Kabul for a conference in support of the NSP. In order to give those citizens the means to make a difference in their collapsing country, Afghan President Hamid Karzai needs help from both the World Bank and Washington. At a time when billions of dollars of U.S. aid are spent on military and counternarcotics efforts, the United States has contributed an embarrassingly small fraction of that cost to an aid program that could help build the foundation for long-term stability in Afghanistan. It's essential that the United States act to save the NSP while there's still time.

**Gregory Warner** is a freelance writer and radio producer.