

Community Development in Afghanistan

A Vision for Inclusive Growth

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Afghanistan's journey towards sustainable community development calls for a multifaceted approach. The country has endured decades of conflict, displacement, and economic instability, creating complex needs across rural and urban communities. Drawing on similar experiences in India, especially in states that have grappled with high levels of poverty, rural-to-urban migration, and limited access to services, Afghanistan can adopt a community-led socio-economic model centered on *integrated agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods, rights and entitlements, reintegration of returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and essential services in health, WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), and education*. A development approach that integrates life skills, vocational training, and gender inclusivity will be essential to foster resilience and self-sufficiency among Afghan communities.

1. Integrated Agri and Non-Agri Livelihoods

An agriculture-based economy remains foundational for Afghanistan's rural areas. Taking inspiration from India's community-driven agricultural models, a strategy that promotes diversified income sources and sustainable farming practices would empower Afghan farmers to withstand economic shocks. Initiatives could include:

- **Agri-Business Development:** Developing cooperative models similar to those in India can allow farmers to pool resources, reduce costs, and gain better market access. For example, in several Indian states, farmers have organized around high-value crops and established marketing cooperatives, creating value chains that sustain local economies. This could be replicated in Afghanistan by promoting high-value crops and livestock farming suited to the local climate.
- **Skill Development for Agri and Allied Sectors:** Training in modern agricultural techniques, organic farming, and crop diversification would significantly improve yields and sustainability. Agricultural TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) programs can equip Afghan youth with skills in food processing, packaging, and agri-business management, fostering rural entrepreneurship and reducing migration pressures.
- **Non-Agricultural Livelihoods:** In regions where agriculture alone cannot sustain livelihoods, promoting non-agricultural jobs such as handicrafts, small manufacturing, and service-oriented businesses can provide additional income. India's experience with *Self-Help Groups (SHGs)*, which empower women to undertake small business activities, could serve as a powerful model to replicate in Afghanistan.

2. Rights and Entitlements

Awareness of rights and access to entitlements are vital components of social equity. In India, grassroots organizations have worked extensively to inform communities about government schemes and rights. In Afghanistan, a similar approach is necessary to build a culture of empowerment:

- **Access to Land Rights and Legal Aid:** Many Afghan families lack formal documentation for their land and properties, leading to disputes and vulnerability. Implementing community-led legal assistance programs would enable residents to secure land rights, an essential step towards economic stability.
- **Social Entitlement Awareness:** Educating communities on healthcare, educational, and economic entitlements could help them access existing resources more effectively. Using a rights-based approach, Afghanistan could empower local leaders to act as liaisons, connecting citizens with available aid programs, legal assistance, and government schemes.

3. Reintegration of Returnees and IDPs

The displacement crisis in Afghanistan demands a holistic approach to reintegration, especially for returnees and IDPs. Drawing from India's experience with internally displaced populations, community development efforts should focus on:

- **Housing and Infrastructure:** Establishing safe housing, infrastructure, and basic services in areas with high numbers of returnees and IDPs is essential. Community participation in the rebuilding process, combined with international support, could ensure sustainable and context-sensitive resettlement.
- **Social Cohesion Programs:** Displacement often causes friction between residents and newcomers. Encouraging dialogue and community-building initiatives can help foster social

cohesion. In India, peace-building initiatives have shown that when communities actively engage with newcomers, conflicts decrease, and mutual understanding grows.

4. Health and WASH Services

Without basic health and WASH services, any community development effort remains incomplete. The challenges of healthcare access in Afghanistan can be addressed through:

- **Community Health Workers:** Training local residents as health workers to provide basic healthcare and hygiene education can be transformative. India's *Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs)* model can serve as an inspiration for creating similar roles within Afghan communities, where women could play a critical role in promoting maternal and child health, vaccinations, and nutrition.
- **WASH Education and Infrastructure:** Community-led sanitation and hygiene programs are needed to reduce disease and improve quality of life. In partnership with international organizations, Afghan communities can set up clean water sources, build latrines, and educate residents on hygiene practices. These programs, if led and managed locally, would have a long-lasting impact on health outcomes.

5. Education and Life Skill Development

Education is the foundation of community empowerment. With Afghanistan facing critical educational gaps, community-based models offer a pathway to more accessible and inclusive education:

- **Community-Based Education (CBE) Centers:** Community-led education centers, similar to India's *Balwadis* (preschool education centers), can help provide early childhood education, which is crucial for lifelong learning. Local CBE centers can also teach vocational skills, especially to older children who may have missed formal schooling.
- **Life Skills Training:** Integrating life skills with formal education equips young Afghans to better handle societal challenges. Topics such as financial literacy, health awareness, and basic legal rights would be invaluable for students. Additionally, initiatives aimed at empowering young women through education, much like India's *Mahila Shikshan Kendras* (Women's Education Centers), could address gender disparities in education.

6. Encouraging Remittance Income and Workforce Development

Finally, a critical yet underutilized resource in Afghanistan is the potential for remittance income. Drawing from experiences in India, where remittance forms a significant part of rural incomes, Afghanistan could encourage workforce development and migration for skilled work:

- **Vocational Training Programs:** Afghanistan's workforce can benefit from specialized training programs in construction, healthcare, and skilled trades. These programs can prepare workers for jobs within Afghanistan as well as in the international job market, creating a steady stream of remittance income.
- **Inclusive Opportunities for Women:** Empowering Afghan women with skills for home-based and community-level work, like tailoring, handicrafts, and agro-processing, would create additional income sources. This can be fostered through women's cooperatives and local enterprises, helping to shift societal norms about women's roles and expanding their economic participation.

A Model for Afghan Communities: Passionate, Inclusive, and Doable

The Afghan community development model must be practical, scalable, and rooted in local culture. By fostering agri-business, enhancing rights awareness, supporting returnees, building healthcare and sanitation infrastructure, and promoting life skills education, Afghan communities can achieve a self-sustaining cycle of growth and empowerment. The roadmap is challenging, but examples from India's vast experience in community-led growth show that it is possible. Afghanistan's journey will rely on the resilience of its people, the inclusivity of women, and a shared vision of progress.

Community development is not just about meeting immediate needs; it is about fostering hope, dignity, and the capacity to shape one's own future. This approach to socio-economic development will enable Afghanistan's people to become active agents in transforming their communities, ensuring that the journey towards peace and prosperity becomes a reality, not just a vision.

--KHARKA Ravi, PhD Research Scholar.