



## INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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Interviewer: Rushda Majeed

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MAJEED: This is Rushda Majeed on 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2013. I am in Kabul, Afghanistan with Dr. Ashraf Ghani (Ahmadzai) who was the former Minister of Finance and we are speaking about Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program (NSP). Dr. Ghani, thank you so much for speaking with Innovations for Successful Societies. If I may start this conversation by asking you a little bit about—a few words about the conditions here in Afghanistan in 2001 when a new government was formed and what were some of the challenges to which you thought a program like the National Solidarity Program would be a possible solution?

GHANI: *Thank you for coming. I'm glad that you have undertaken the comparative research.*

*In 2001 I returned to Afghanistan on December 21, 2001 after having been away for 24 years. When I landed at Bagram Airport which was the only place where I could land because a couple of airports were still heavily mined, the Shomali Plain which had been one of the greenest parts of the country was totally devastated. I went through ten provinces in one month. There was physical devastation, signs of war. There was climatic devastation because of five years of drought had turned everything into brown.*

*Then there is psychological devastation. Women always put their arms around themselves; they really did not feel that they could open up. I went to a village where my family has been for 600 years and I embraced about 700 men. There was nothing but bones on them. At Kabul University where I taught from '73 to '77 I saw my former colleagues and they were a shell of their former selves. In terms of statistics, Kabul of the '70s was about 700,000; it had grown in 1992 to about two-and-a-half million. In 2001, December, it was around 400,000.*

*Our son, who was at Stanford, then a junior at Stanford, came for a year to help rebuild the country. We could not find him a bed for four months; he was sleeping in a sleeping bag. I passed through Kabul south driving and I saw onions. This is within the old walls of the city and they were packed and I was surprised. So I got down and I asked. They were being sent to Peshawar. Kabul did not have the purchasing power to buy the onions that were produced within its half-mile radius. Five million people had been made refugees; a million and a half had been displaced. Our urban centers had been totally destroyed.*

*The World Bank at my request estimated the damage between '77 and 2001 and it came to 140 billion dollars. So that gives you the scale. The other side was I spent Christmas in Peshawar among the refugees to take stock and people were just waiting to come back. All the UN (United Nations) were estimating 400,000 or something like that and people just rushed back.*

*They came to a country that they both knew and didn't know. Those who were born here and had left were finding the devastation unbelievable. Those that were born abroad, and it hurt, and sort of seeing that their mind's eye the Afghanistan of their parents could not believe it because the Afghanistan that was described to them was not there.*

*This area of the city were among the first to start building here in 2002, was totally destroyed. I mean western Kabul was like an area after the Mongol invasion; it was just a series of ruins. So the impetus was to literally create a core of solidarity. The idea was that all Afghans were citizens of a new Afghanistan, with rights and obligations.*

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*So we had a choice. I had spent ten years at the World Bank and then I was on secondment to the UN for a couple of months to put together the Bonn Agreement. But I wrote the plan for reconstruction of Afghanistan on September 11<sup>th</sup>. I knew that the world had changed and after that I did not go back to the bank. I resigned in February, on February 1<sup>st</sup> actually, 2002 because there was an imperative of duty and there was a fundamental debate. Where do we start? Top down or bottom up because that was the usual style.*

*My answer was that this debate was nonsense. They were saying that you could not begin with a marginal ministry and a half-destroyed country etcetera, etcetera. So the answer was not to think planning but think design. Planning means you've solved the problem and you sort of go. Design means you have to figure the rules of the game, shape the playing field and re-shape the players in terms of rules that would change the face of a country.*

*So what is it that we did? The first was to say that the rural Afghan was an agent, not a recipient. Our greatest problem in accepting of this view was ironically was with civil society. They preach participation but they believe in hierarchy. They wanted to be in control of the lives of rural Afghans. So they knew best. Because of this they vehemently opposed elections, elected councils.*

MAJEED: The CDCs (Community Development Councils)?

GHANI: *The CDCs. The CDCs were all opposing. No, these were not CDCs because we formed the council, the idea. The NGOs (Nongovernmental Organizations) were opposing elected councils to be in charge of setting priorities. They were saying Afghans have traditional leaders. Therefore resources should be channeled through the NGOs to the so-called traditional leaders who would then decide on priorities. They were saying that I'd come after 24 years and I was carrying foreign ideas.*

*My answer was very simple. I said, what's your beef? If they voluntarily elect their traditional leaders we'll have confirmation that you're right. If they don't elect them I'll have confirmation but the source of legitimacy has to be the vote of the individual.*

MAJEED: When you say "they" Dr. Ghani, who do you mean?

GHANI: *It's the NGOs. A lot of the NGOs were opposed to this and so were our friends from the World Bank and other places, with the exception of Scott (Guggenheim). That is why I had to bring Scott. He is one of my oldest friends and I called him in from Indonesia and I said, "I need you here otherwise we can't level the playing field."*

*So empowerment, which is talked about in every World Bank document and every NGO around the world preaches it to each other in conferences, was the test. Of course, you know I had the authority so I told them that it is either that or I won't give them any room, period. So hierarchy was harnessed in the service of participation. Because as the Minister of Finance, I could make those decisions.*

*The second area where we faced immense resistance was in terms of gender participation. I argued that women had to be on committees, on various councils. They were again telling me Afghan women, you know, it's this so-called view of tradition. I said I'm the grandson of a woman who grew up in exile in India, came as an educated woman, raised six sons and a daughter and also grandchildren and all of them went to college, not only in Afghanistan but in the west, got*

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*Ph.D.s and that her land, a couple of thousand acres of land were still being referred to as her lands while they belonged to her husband. So there is this misperceived view of women in Afghan society as passive. An agency applied to women, and as you've seen the analysis, against all odds women's participation has proven a remarkable asset. Then came to prioritization so they show us who will set priorities.*

*My view is that villagers should set priorities. Who knows their problems better than themselves? Other actors of course had very different views. No they should plan the priorities. We arrived at the very small negative list of what they could not do. But it was a huge positive list.*

*Then there were questions. How do you create a nation? The answer was that they have to have the same rights and obligations. So solidarity I hope I have explained to you, it is to fund the core of the social capital and then the institutional capital that will enable people to come together. This is like the French stone soup. There is the story that two, three of Napoleon's soldiers went to a village hungry and the villagers refused them because the villagers would hide their assets. So they said, "We know how to make stone soup." They all got very curious. So they started boiling about four stones. Soon they started saying, "You know the soup would be excellent if you had this—salt, etcetera." Soon enough they had a feast.*

*This really happened in Herat. I mean before National Solidarity a group of people had come from Iran and they were living in total confusion. They didn't know what to do. But once National Solidarity came, because it organized them, it gave them the vehicle, they put ten times the assets of National Solidarity into rebuilding the villages. So solidarity is that, national which means that you look at all the regions of Afghanistan at exactly the same. That meant they transparent criteria. So you begin from the poorest, the ecologically most marginal and the areas where the largest numbers of internally displaced refugees have returned and work your way towards more strength.*

*So the village level, the dynamic changed fundamentally, and the net result was armed men who were driven out of the villages through National Solidarity. They found no space. Old leadership, roughly around 40%, made its reappearance but 60% was new leadership. It demonstrated that you could net the country again. Its most satisfying part was last year I think I went to a gathering of 1700 representatives of National Solidarity from across the length and breadth of the country. They talk as a village, as a unit. They have no disputes. They do not accuse each other of favoritism. They do not say that one village has received preferential treatment over the other, etcetera.*

*If you go to a meeting of the governors in 34 provinces, all kinds of accusations are flung at each other and the government. The second part was the argument from other places including the international institutions was well, you cannot begin big; you have to begin small and scale up. My argument was that's nonsense. Why do I need to begin small? The country is not small. One has to come with parameters of design that solve the issue of scale from the beginning.*

*So we began with one district in every province. That was scale. You had to solve the problem of scale by mobilizing the capabilities that existed. This meant reassembling people—for instance, we had a huge concentration of NGOs in cities. I don't want the NGOs in cities. Urbanites can take care of themselves quite well, thank you very much. If they want to be our developmental partners*

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*they have to be in the poorest part of the country. Why do they need to concentrate in the richest part of the country?*

*So we shifted the parameters of their existence totally from areas of privilege to areas of poverty and exclusion. That mean they had the facility. The other was, we had to position them because they were used to a new form of patronage. Where they replaced either the old Khans and Maliks, the landed, or they replaced the man with the gun, commanders.*

*If you put—it is not individuals or institutions, it is, if you put the rules of the game in a manner that gives power, decision rights, over social agents to some others, they will exercise them. So the rules have to be such that they really need to understand that they are facilitating. They are not deciding for. That was repositioning. So their roles were very well defined in terms of facilitating elections, not making decisions and priorities. What do they know?*

*I could sit down and say well, I have studied this country for fourteen years, I know its 600-year history, this and that. I make the ideal plan for 34,000 villages in Afghanistan. They would have had to wait 34,000 years. Or I say look, these are the parameters of design. This is the playing field; these are the rules. They will decide and we will monitor and reflect, and learn together.*

*Then there was the question of the Ministry. This was one of the weakest ministries in Afghanistan's history, particularly in the last 30 years. It has now turned into one of the strongest ministries because the program created the capability. Of course I brought Minister (Hanif) Atmar who had impressed me as one of the most important leaders that emerged from the Afghan civil society. I had missed him and, in Peshawar in a conversation one night when I was Chief Adviser, both national security and national economic adviser to the President, in the first five months, he was extremely critical of the government.*

*I liked him because of that. The man has immense talent. So the day before the new cabinet was being elected. I went to him and I said, "Will you come to join the cabinet?" Fortunately he accepted. He brought with him enormously talented peoples. Within no time it became a leading ministry. The moral of the story, a national committee gets development totally wrong. It is a series of stale answers that they keep repeating. They don't know how to do design thinking. They always apply a previously planned model because their leaders are not innovators. They're not leaders, they're bureaucrats.*

*Two, they have very little trust and the capability of social agents to think independently. Three, they go for intermediaries where rhetoric, rhetorically they say all the right things but their practice does not correspond and fourth they have all these preconceptions regarding capacity. That capacity means to them, their type of capability. I don't need your type of capability, their type of capability. We need the type of capability to problem solve.*

*Lastly in terms of conflict, long conflict environments, they misjudge the people's capability for innovation. People who've lived with long-term conflict are some of the most innovative entrepreneurial people on earth. They have to live between day and night, between gray and white and black. They have to keep maneuvering. These are people who are problem solvers. The other part, with the international community's developmental approaches, they confuse literacy with capability. They think that literacy is a prerequisite of capability. There is no relationship between literacy. Do we know that Alexander was literate? Probably, he was a student of Aristotle. But (Emperor) Akbar? No. I mean one of the most*



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*important empire builders used probably dyslectic. Anyway, but he couldn't. We need to understand that leadership and knowledge takes very different forms. Bookish knowledge technically learned through drilling is not the same as social knowledge. If we really harness social knowledge and if we can design the parameters of human action, it is far better than to over regulate because if you're thinking that every nook and cranny can be taught to a man, no human has that kind of capability. But that is the heritage of the bureaucratic industrial era.*

*You wanted military planning top-down, detailed to everything. I think it was a huge gamble that a billion dollars gone to the Afghan villages I think has been much more efficiently spent then any other billion dollars spent in this country. Of course the other part, which is unfortunate, I designed National Solidarity in phases and they're stuck in phase one. So there is a stalemate. Now they're running out [Indecipherable].*

MAJEED: In designing the program Dr. Ghani, were there any models or any innovations in particular that you had looked at while coming up with the design for the program?

GHANI: *The name I've forgotten; it came from Mexico. President (Carlos) Salinas, had done his Ph.D. in Harvard on village solidarity and ran a program from there. Jonathan Fox has written, has edited a book but that completely replaced it. It is only later. The ideas came from several places. One is Canada. The concept of national program is a distinctly Canadian innovation as a vehicle of nation building. I then compared studies on citizenship. In Canada they're connected to the tissue of rights and obligations of citizenship and this national program model is the key, there is some literature, Bantan in particular has written on this. If you look at fixing failed states there are preferences to that.*

*The second area was Spain after World War II. There was a Spanish priest who started a company called Mondragon and Mondragon, it really change from a social enterprise to one of the largest corporations in history. And had I remained at finance or in the government, which I refused after the end of 2004, but a lot of reflection of World Bank experience and global experience on citizenship went into this.*

MAJEED: Just a final comment Dr. Ghani, what advice would you give others who are looking to implement something similar in their country?

GHANI: *They should think outside the box. They need to know their country and they need to really understand that designing a national program is very different than building a developmental project. The developmental institutions are a victim of project model thinking. The late Robert McNamara did exactly with World Bank what he did. He made it for this. It is a standard cookie-cutter approach. For this thinking, it is just the opposite of design.*

*Ford himself was one of the greatest design thinkers on earth. This again, if you look into the biography. Some of his thinking was totally out of the box so he could design the parameters of an assembly line for a complex product and simplify it. But in others, when you standardize it you lose and they become victims. So one project, etcetera, etcetera. They need to think through and they need to think functions and levels of government and their interrelationship very carefully. I did not have time unfortunately at that time to reach the district, the municipality. I had the opportunity to reshape about five ministries in the fiscal*

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*and monetary system, but I did not have the opportunity to reach to the municipality and the province and the district.*

*National Solidarity was supposed to be followed by district level, municipal. Simultaneity was a problem. If you had the team in the range of thinking than addressing—we had five levels of governance, all five of them together which is what we hope to do now, would have had a range of multiplying effect that you could have not really believed. But we did what we could at that.*

MAJEED: Thank you so much.

GHANI: *My pleasure.*