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Interviewee: Abdul Baqi Popal

Interviewer: Rushda Majeed

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MAJEED: This is Rushda Majeed on 2nd of November, 2013. I am in Kabul, Afghanistan and I am with Mr. Abdul Baqi Popal who has been involved from the very early years with UN Habitat on the Community Fora and is now working at the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) and he has also been involved, of course, with the NSP (National Solidarity Program). Thank you so much for speaking with me Mr. Popal.

If I may start this conversation by asking you a little bit about your current position and then the experiences that brought you here.

POPAL: *Thank you very much Rushda, it is great to have you here and welcome to Afghanistan. As you mentioned I am Abdul Baqi Popal, I am the General Director for Municipal Affairs working in the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, IDLG. I am currently responsible for 153 municipalities in this country. So except Kabul municipalities, I supervise and guide 153 municipalities of the country.*

MAJEED: Great. Prior to becoming the General Director, what were some of your positions and career trajectory?

POPAL: *I joined the United Nations in 1992. I worked four years with UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) at that time we had the mujahideen talk over the government, and then a lot of returnees were returning to home with UNHCR so I worked in Kandahar as a Admin/Finance Officer. By then four years with the UNHCR and then I joined UNICEF (United Nations Children's Emergency Fund), I was two years with UNICEF as a logistics and supply officer, because we were supplying a lot of support for mothers and children under UNICEF and vaccination campaign processes.*

Later on I joined UN-Habitat. So that was my longest career ever in UN-Habitat. One of the main reasons I stayed with Habitat longer was it is a community-driven process and great colleagues I had during the very harsh time of Taliban and after Taliban.

MAJEED: So when did you join UN-Habitat?

POPAL: *I joined in 1998.*

MAJEED: So you were involved in the very early years with the Community Fora. Can you tell me a little bit about what the Community Fora was and how did you think about it, how did it get started?

POPAL: *It was very interesting. The concept of Community Fora was one of the first initiatives in this country at least to give a chance to the community to talk over their problems, identify their problems and implement some of the projects themselves. Which Afghanistan, of course, has gone through very extreme regimes. After communist regime we had the Mujahideen regime and then we had the Taliban and now we are having our experience in democratic regime.*

During the Taliban period, which of course during communist regime also, people were not given a voice or a choice to discuss over their problems. Almost everything was prepared by the government engineers and economists, with little chance for community participation. So Community Fora gave this opportunity. We were lucky that this concept was initiated in 1995, in the northern province of Mazar. Then when I joined UN-Habitat in 1997, the first time was an admin in

finance and then in 1998 I took over as community liaison officer position and then Deputy Regional Manager, so at that time the office was opened in Kandahar. UN-Habitat office did not exist before 1997 in Kandahar. The experience which we had was at the beginning seemed a bit challenging, because people were not oriented and people were not familiar with participatory approach. On the other hand the government was Taliban. So they were not really keen to see a large number of the community coming together, discussing about their problems, identifying their problems and even implementing the projects. They were concerned and scared of people coming together at a large number.

Community Fora concept, which now we have the improved version. And we are lucky to have the National Solidarity Program, NSP--it was a similar structure. I can give some of the key components.

MAJEED: Yes, please.

POPAL: *The key component was, we had two groups,. There was a Consultative Board members, the CB we called it at that time.*

MAJEED: For the Community Fora?

POPAL: *Yes, for the Community Fora. Then we had the Management Team, MT. So the management team was responsible for administrative and day to day management of the CF—there were three people. One was the head, one was the admin in finance, one was secretary. In addition we had a large number of people who were coming for consultation. Among the neighborhood, there was no official election in a way, as we are currently experiencing in NSP, it was a consensus-building process.*

We had nine members, each a consultative board member. Then we had the three people in management team. So they were there consulting with the community and they were just coming up with problems, priorities and recommendations on how to tackle them.

The concept, which was very important and was very interesting, offered prioritization of the problems. The community was given a chance to select a project with a small grant, with a great impact. The grant was for \$9900 USD. The \$9900 was given to the community consultative board member so as per their prioritized list they can invest. For example they were buying a photocopy machine or they were opening a carpentry shop or they were having at that time English classes, computer classes, to make money out of that.

MAJEED: So it was all income generating.

POPAL: *Yes. So the \$9900 was initially for investment, which the community could invest more than 50%, 60%, but otherwise provided for social good, as they were renting a small house or a building that they could run their operations. The concept turned to be very successful, more than we expected, because there was a thirst for the consultation process, which the government or the country did not experience.*

Initially the Community Fora concept was started in urban areas and later on it moved to the rural areas as well. In cities there was more of a chance, more interest, more thirst for education. So in the Community Fora we had to make at least eight or ten major activities that took place. Almost in each Community Fora

we had a health clinic, because there was a doctor provided, a nurse provided by the Ministry of Public Health. This was very good because this coordination took place with the government entities, and medicine was provided by Medecins sans Frontieres and some other NGOs (nongovernment organizations) which were working during the Taliban period. Then, of course, there were community members who were coming as patients were charged a very small amount of money, you can call it like fifty cents for the medicine and the doctor visit.

With that money we were covering the salary, the top up salary for the doctors, because the doctors' salary was very low at that time. So it was really very interesting. The people could receive the service with quality medicine and at the same time it could sustain the cost because the cost was covered.

In addition we had education, which was at that time a unique process was for girl's education because no official school was offering education for girls. Because during Taliban time fighting was going on, there were some difficulties, and we didn't have schools for the girls. Luckily through this home-based or community-based initiative, we managed to have more than 100-150 girls coming to the Community Fora for getting their primary education. Then we had of course the boys' classes where they studied both religious and scientific books, which is also very encouraging for the people. Also the students were paying a small amount of money also.

At that time the concept of privatization was initially introduced. Now currently, with this government of course, we have a lot of private schools and private universities. In addition we had youth groups. That was a very important thing for a youth empowerment program. We had different volunteer groups in addition to their football and volleyball exercises that the youth was very encouraged to play. Of course when you talk about youth, you talk about energy, automatically this experience was coming out. So it was a very attractive campaign for the boys who were coming and doing the exercises. At the same time there was some calligraphy, some English classes, because they wanted to learn English language by then.

It was surprisingly interesting—in fact, I mentioned in 1998 we had the computer classes. People hardly know computers. We had five computers in each Community Fora, depending on their budget, sometimes three, sometimes two, sometimes five. But as far as my experience, personal experience was concerned in Kandahar—I still remember Community Fora of district four was the top Community Fora in Afghanistan, I can say. It was very vibrant. We had three young management team members, they were all very committed, very sincere. Now they are working in very senior government positions. I am happy that the Community Fora not only provided services to the community but also trained that young generation, so they could have their career built on that practice.

We had the photocopy machine services. People were coming and getting the photocopy service and they were charging, so some of the cost of the Community Fora was provided by this income generation that they were generating. The amount was very small, but I remember when we did evaluation after two years in 2000, the assets of the Community Fora were more than \$40,000. So that was a unique experience. In two years' time we just saw, because there was some data contribution from the community, there was some income generation. So the chairs, the desks, the whiteboards, by then, it was very, very interesting to see the students were learning and the teachers salary was fully covered by the fees that the students were paying.

In addition, it was very important to see that the community trust was built. Of course there were challenges. Whenever we had a workshop to talk and then use the marker to explain the concept, sometimes it was seen as we are spreading communism, as most of the discussion was about volunteerism or when we wanted to take photographs then we were in trouble with Taliban, I myself was put in jail three times by Taliban, because 'why I was taking photograph?' Then we had to justify that we are not taking photograph of human being, we are taking photographs of the flip charts or board and markers in the class, to justify to the donors to give us money.

At that time we had this great initiative of joint intervention of five UN agencies: UNDP (United Nations Development Program), UN-Habitat, [UNOPS, FAO and there was at that time we had this United Nations Office for Disabled People. This was very great to see that the United Nations, they came up with a concept called PEACE (Poverty Eradication And Community Empowerment --poverty eradication and peace building process. That was very interesting to see; how a joint UN came with this concept. Because in the rural area, this concept was implemented with a slightly different approach, because the rural area was not very active but they had a lot of physical projects. UNOPS was handling that part. That is how Community Fora was accepted and had buy in by United Nations. They would just put it in a bigger program because of that idea and Community Fora was accepted.

At the same time the community built their trust. People were coming for consultation, for really the services they were receiving, and there was no complaint of why they were paying a small fee for the students that they were learning. They saw the quality, they saw the environment, and the service they were receiving.

We had some challenges with the government, of course, because at that time election was not possible, to have elected representation of community members or community—.

MAJEED: Did you want to have elected representatives?

POPAL: *It would have been better to have, because that could ensure a lot of important elements. But still, consensus building--we've managed to have very qualified and committed people. We didn't have a serious challenge by then, but of course when the scale goes larger and we talked, it became challenges. So the Community Fora concept was similar with NSP, covering to one neighborhood-- which was around 200 families. Sometimes it could have been less; sometimes it could have been more.*

Those experiences give a lot of benefits to all: the people who were working; the people who benefited from the services. With the government there were still some challenges, but they were happy at least that the community was not frustrated because they could receive some services. The challenge was, of course, the government at that time wanted to have more influence. They were suspicious of what is going on in these centers, why we are focusing and targeting girls, and why the democratic process was taking place. It could, from one side, decrease pressure from the government. But on the other side, the legitimacy of government was somehow questioned. Because a lot of people had respect for international communities, they were providing services, and the people who were running the centers. We didn't need a lot of support from the government by then. It means that the government was feeling a bit redundant.

MAJEED: Left out.

POPAL: Yes, left out.

MAJEED: But how did you work with local government? Were there linkages with local government, or they let you operate on your own?

POPAL: *The government identified one of the directorates, because in Kandahar there was a Department of Labor and Social Affairs, and because some of the activities were more of like social affairs and labor is providing job opportunities, education classes... So our linkage, our key government counterpart at that time, was the Department of Labor and Social Affairs.*

MAJEED: Also, the other thing--so the Community Fora was started as an urban program. How well did it work in rural areas?

POPAL: *In rural areas people were very keen on projects, so that was the concept because the area was huge. There was agriculture, land and people wanted to help but of course the education part was also very attractive. The only thing that was not very attractive was the income generation project, because in cities you can see services are better and paid for. But in rural area it wasn't—like the example I gave, computer classes, English classes, some of those photocopy machines and the services for example. We had some carpentry shops. It was not very attractive in the rural areas.*

So this concept went very well. Then the first time during that very difficult period we managed to get the permission from the governor of Taliban—I still remember those hard days discussing for more than a week--and then we managed to convince the governor and to get the permission for opening the women Community Fora for the first time during the Taliban regime. It was 1999, mid-1999, when we got the permission for women Community Fora.

When the women came into fora we had three major activities that we agreed and we discussed with the Taliban regime. It was an income generation project, because at that time we had very severe drought, and the poverty level was extremely high. So we managed to hire in each Community Fora around 200 women and they were working for pasta production. So WFP (World Food Programme), one of the UN agencies, they were giving food for work, and UN-Habitat was giving cash for work. So this program worked very well. In those Community Fora these 200 women were producing pasta.

Then we had another component of that, once the pasta was produced and labors, and the ladies were receiving 5 Kg of wheat per day. I still remember those figures. It was a small amount. The women could earn this wheat with dignity and working because, at that time women had very difficult position and most of them were begging near the shrines. The poverty level was very low and there were a lot of widows there, a lot of disabled women were there. Afghanistan experienced a lot of mines.

So that was very good. Then in Kandahar we had four women Community Fora and then we had six men Community Fora, so altogether we had ten. You can imagine that we had more than 800 women working in the Community Fora. So one of the activities was pasta production, the other one was tailoring for income generation projects, so women could also learn, some of the girls. At that time women were not allowed to have their own shops, but there were home-based tailoring projects. And then once they could learn this tailoring--in three to six

months, basic tailoring- they were opening their own business at home. They were putting up small signboard: "women tailoring services".

The elementary school was very important for the families to send their daughters for primary education. Unfortunately one thing which was forced, as challenge, as not to have girls more than twelve years old, above twelve years old at that time in primary school. But still at least for the next generation we had hope, so they were coming from grade one to grade six. Then there was some primary education.

But for the women who were older age, they were learning some tailoring, and we were providing literacy classes as well so they could read the numbers and the writing, the size to measure the shoulders, sleeves, pants, these basic things. So it went ups and downs. Community Fora was getting closed when they were seeing we were providing some education facilities. Then we had to go back and convince them and get it opened.

It was very challenging, but very rewarding. I can say at that time even now in Kandahar, I don't see any agencies providing service for 800 women at a time. In spite of all this progress. So at that time the commitment and the support of the office was with us and the support of the community was with us. So once we had the community and office on our side, we could boldly discuss with Taliban in spite of all those challenges to get the permission.

MAJEED: Are their any Community Fora existing now?

POPAL: *Two of them in Kandahar, they exist. One is the women's Community Fora, but they are limited to only tailoring for income because the relief period has gone. Likely for one side people have gained some funding and some money. In education, we are lucky that we have thousands of girls going to school now in Kandahar. But of course in Mazar which at that time Community Fora they bought buildings from the sources they had from the project. Still some of those Community Fora centers are in Mazar but activities—it has been a bit of time that I have not been in touch, but Kandahar is my hometown, I go back and forth. I see this, the men came into forum also. They have got these English classes, computer classes, the consultation we were talking about, municipal services. So these are the two examples.*

But attention was drawn, because luckily we had a new initiative, and NSP came into existence. So people really just paid a lot of attention to that. Although the concept was a National Solidarity Program, the concept now is stuck with the MRRD (Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development) which is greater. They are doing rural solidarity program, so it is not national in a way. But we hope that we had that in both rural and urban. So this concept would have been better because if you call it a National Solidarity Program, it should be a national program. But still I am happy that more than 65-70% of the population benefits from NSP, which is a great initiative.

MAJEED: Can you tell me a little bit about the early years of the NSP? My understanding is that with the fall of the Taliban, and when the new government was coming in, there was a lot of conversation about getting some programs up and running quickly--and the NSP was conceived at the time. Some of the agencies consulted with the Community Fora and UN-Habitat. You were involved perhaps in those consultations?

I'm very interested in hearing some of those early conversations of what was the thinking at the time to lead from concepts like the Community Fora into national level, or at least rural level, programs like the NSP.

POPAL: That is a very good question, because we were all keen that one day we would see the concept which you are discussing at the small scale with the Community Fora to really just have it scaling up. So luckily the government changed and a new administration came in. It was almost the beginning of 2003 that we discussed the concept, and Dr. Ashraf Ghani who was the initiator of this concept with Scott Guggenheim. And they came. At that time, during social discussions, they were looking for such a program, such an initiative. Samantha (Reynolds) who was leading UN-Habitat at that time, so she came up with this idea that now we have to discuss with MRRD. At that time the ministry took the lead. They wanted to have a program of such scale, because a lot of villages and rural area was severely damaged and destroyed and the social fabric and economic fabric was totally broken.

From one side a lot of returnees were returning to their villages because there was a hope created. And from the other side there were no services in the rural areas. Most of the irrigation canals were totally destroyed. The harvest—there was no harvest. A lot of mines were there. On the other side, the job opportunities were not there. So things were moving toward that direction.

What happened? UN-Habitat was asked to explain this process. Then we explained this process to the minister, His Excellency Atmar was the Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and then with the support of Dr. Ashraf Ghani and Scott Guggenheim we just came up with this concept. Once we explained this concept, the concept was accepted.

There were a few concerns from the government side that Community Fora was in a very small scale, because they wanted to give relatively larger amount of money to the people. Our concept could be supportive to that process or not? Another one was because this concept was initiated, or generated, in the urban areas, could be applied in rural area as well, or not? These were the concerns.

MAJEED: So what was it--they wanted to give larger amounts of money, and the other one was that they were concerned about rural areas, and the third I missed.

POPAL: The third issue was the whole consultation process.

MAJEED: That it would take too long?

POPAL: The design of the program was through the consultation. They were in a rush to have such an initiative. Once we were explaining that if really the government wants to have a very comprehensive program on that scale, the national level, it needs one year to design. We have to bring all those examples. I'm honored, you know, because I was almost one of the lead persons of designing this program from day one.

MAJEED: NSP?

POPAL: NSP. We were nine Afghan members so I was taking the lead. Then we had Samantha and a few other internationals who were coming back and forth. So when we initiated this discussion, finally we had Ehsan Zia, who later became the minister of MRRD. He was adviser to the minister, Atmar. So he was the focal

person from the ministry and I was the focal person from UN-Habitat. So we had to discuss how to design.

So what the understanding was, in a way we can say the compromise, was that we had to design this program in six months' time, not in one year's time. So you can imagine there were a lot of other components that we wished to add to this package.

MAJEED: Why the rush? Why did the minister and Dr. Ghani want to get it quickly up and running? I mean I have a few ideas but I was curious.

POPAL: *Of course the great expectations at the community level and the social and economic aspect of that. People were returning on large scale to the communities and they didn't have drinking water. They didn't have roads, they didn't have agriculture, they didn't have the canals at least to get it.*

MAJEED: So they were seeing it as a means of delivering services quickly?

POPAL: *That was one aspect. The other is the social fabric, which was broken; people were not talking to each other because people were for ten, fifteen years out of the country and they came back and they didn't know their neighbors. There were people who were there. Then the culture of consultation had died almost because during Taliban time there was less consultation over development projects, because there were few development projects. So that was the main purpose, to give legitimacy to the government: that the government is listening to the public. That was one of the elements.*

The other one was injecting cash into the economy, into the root of the economy. So these were the two things. One was from the government side, the social perspective and consultation, which the government legitimacy comes from the other side. People needed services. That was a major challenge. So then we had to rush. The initial idea when we designed it—NSP had the five phases we call it, each phase. I'll give you an example of how you plant a seed, and how it can grow, and how the trees can give fruit and at the end of the day the people can collect the fruit. So that was the whole cycle of NSP.

MAJEED: A question also on the other point you had mentioned. Why the focus only on rural at that time?

POPAL: *The focus was not only on rural, but the minister of MRRD, of course, he was very proactive. He was very strong. Although, at that time I was the person responsible leading this team. We had discussion with Pashtun Owho was the Minister of Urban Development in this country and we shared this concept. Of course they were looking at it from the Ministry of Urban Development perspective, to have master plan, to have strategic plans, to have detailed plans, and then come up with the idea.*

Another challenge that the country faced was about informal settlements in urban areas. So it took for the ministry to really just get the momentum and understand the importance of that. But the minister of MRRD, they were already ready. So of course there was the personality of ministers, of course their proactiveness and their engagement was also there. Otherwise this program could start at the same time in both rural and urban areas. But we were relatively slow on the urban side, because the issue of informality which 60-70% of the population lived in informal settlements. By starting suddenly NSP because the land security, the security of tenure, the services you provide and the investment, which might go in vain,

because that area was not formalized, recognized by the government. So these were some of the challenges. The idea was really to start at the same time. But of course MRRD started the program and the program was designed—.

MAJEED: Did urban start a program at a later date?

POPAL: *Today we are discussing it, because the concept came two years before, discussing about the urban solidarity program, but a different name, because we had this funding from different UN agencies and luckily this concept started in 2003 in Kabul, as well as in a small neighborhood funded by the European Commission. So at that time it was more of support returnees and IDPs (internally displaced persons).*

So letting the community discuss about their problems in informal settlements. Then they came up with the same concept only Community Development Plan is a concept, which is discussed in NSP, but Community Action Plan is discussed in urban context. Although the small scale projects are going on. But in 2006 also we had some programs similar to NSP in urban areas. Today when I am talking to you we have five provinces that they officially have Urban Solidarity Program. Kabul they have started the first and then we have Mazar, Herat, Jalabad, and Kandahar.

MAJEED: Okay.

POPAL: *So we have the Urban Solidarity Program, so it is going on. It is not a nationally recognized one, because municipalities are involved and Ministry of Urban Development on a smaller scale. The ministry is not involved there to a great extent because there is no planning exercise in talking about strategic and master plan types. But of course, the community action plans are prepared at least which roads, which types of services--so road widening, water supply, drainage, all those services in urban consults are provided. The grant is almost the same, but it is not on budget; it is not coming through government funding. It is going off budget. So agencies are providing funding to the community directly; it doesn't go through government.*

But we are discussing with the World Bank recently, so we hope that we can have Urban Solidarity Program, which is a dire need for this country also in urban areas.

MAJEED: Sure. Going back, I'm sorry I interrupted you. You were just getting into the NSP design. So you had wanted a year but you were given six months to design it. You mentioned that there were nine other people from the Afghan side on the team.

POPAL: Yes.

MAJEED: Then you were working with other agencies and groups. What were some of the discussions and the planning that went in during the six months?

POPAL: *We had three challenges. One was the challenge we had inside UN-Habitat. We had to convince our team members, because at that time a serious question was whether it is a grant or it is a loan to Afghanistan from the World Bank side. Luckily it was a grant that was given. Another issue was about the team, of course, in Afghan context, giving a lot of power to communities suddenly was perceived threatening. We were again questioning the legitimacy of the government. If people can come up with the idea and then they design the*

program and then they implement the program so they get cash in their hand. So they will spend the money. That was also a discussion in UN-Habitat with the colleagues we had. So we had to put some measures in place to give this money in installment based on the progress. So that was the discussion we had. I still remember when we were hiring at that time a Social Organizer; we knew that the lead person was a social organizer to go to the community to mobilize the community and to discuss the importance of this program and convince them to agree.

When we were discussing about the criteria of what type of person we needed as a social organizer, we came up with a list that unless a person has a Ph.D. he could not do social mobilization. We said this person is very important, because he is dealing with the community and deals with the psychology of human beings, he should know about pedagogical scales. This person should have a social background. He should have an economic background because the person can discuss about this and the person should know about governance and good governance and should be a change agent.

So we discussed it and the criteria came up and then my goodness, this person should have three Masters and one Ph.D. So that was the challenge we had--because we had the great ambition. Of course things were really very great. Everybody was forgotten about the war, Taliban. We were designing. Everybody was so excited and happy at that time. So that was the internal discussion we had.

Then we had some old government employees. Although they were employees of the ministry and they were telling us, one of the senior officials, I remember the work, he told us, 'are you taking fire to the village?' We said, 'what do you mean taking fire to the village'. He said, 'well you are giving the 50,000 dollars or \$60,000 in the hands of the people. Then the community members will kill each other over this funding. This is a fire. Don't give cash in the hands of people.' I remember that phrase exactly; he said: 'don't take fire to the village.'

We had to really discuss with the government officials. Why are you so biased about people's implementation skills and their commitment and their sincerity. The community will not kill each other over \$60,000 or \$50,000, it is for the social good.

You know sometimes the idea was: if you just take money and then people would start to fight. One would take his or her portion. That was the idea.

MAJEED: No trust.

POPAL: *Yes. The third challenge which we—I—had, and I was lobbying for it because with the election because I come from Kandahar is a very conservative area. I was discussing with Dr. Ashraf Ghani that election is not possible in Kandahar. I remember Dr. Ashraf Ghani told me, 'have you ever experienced election? Have you ever voted in your life?' I said, 'no,' because I am the war generation, I hadn't voted until we had the election. The first voting that I saw was NSP, because the NSP voting took place in this country first, and then we had the presidential election.*

So then I said no. He gave me like a very nice advice—he said, 'Popal, you just go and try it. If it didn't work then tell me.' I was a bit premature in that sense that election is not possible in Kandahar. Because I was looking at my life with the communist regime and during Taliban times, so I had no experience of how an

election might take, or whether people would accept or not. It was a very new concept of having election in the rural area. I didn't know whether people would buy it or not because, I was a bit concerned that the whole program would be jeopardized and people would have serious rejection or restriction against the voting.

Then luckily we were discussing the design, and again the concept was there so the election has to take place. We had to prepare for each concept of NSP. We had to prepare the methodology, how we would handle it. Social mobilization: we had to develop training modules for different stages and phases. For election, we had to develop a mechanism, how the election should take place, a ballot system, how to prepare and how to endorse that. Afghanistan never experienced election at that scale and that stage. So we had to develop a lot of material.

This was like three challenges and three organizations. One was within UN-Habitat that our staff member had to discuss about the quality of social organizer, the trainer, the steps. One was the challenge to convince the old government employees who worked in the government. Of course the minister and other people had very supportive ideas, but still there were some old employees in the government who were not very pro of giving funds in hands of people. They said, 'okay, people can select their project, and then government can implement for them. So that was the concept they were telling us in the village, simply.

Of course there was another side of it. We had good coordination with some other agencies, national and international agencies, local players and local actors.

MAJEED: In terms of design?

POPAL: *Design, also with eleven government departments. We initially thought that this should be—NSP should be a program—it is, a national program of the government. But once the CDCs came in, the development councils were being established, are established, then other government entities should recognize them officially and they should not implement the projects in parallel. So that should be the structure. Then below the Community Development Council, which is of course the CDC, we could establish different committees. For example, the Committee for Education, health committee, and youth committee etc.*

If the Ministry of Education wants to apply or do it, they can go through Committee of Education, the Committee for Agriculture... There could be Committee for Irrigation, committee for anything. Any committee could be established. The idea was initially accepted by other government departments. But, it is sad to say it openly, but most of the government agencies are not recognizing the CDCs as a legitimate entity.

MAJEED: Still they're not?

POPAL: *It is still. There are some of the ministries that are going to, but unfortunately that is still one of the shortfalls of NSP. The recognition is not on very large scale, although they have a by-law, a lot of efforts took place. So that six months' time was very tense, but I want to say very excited moments of our life to design.*

MAJEED: So you were working with the MRRD, you were working with the Ministry of Finance and then in terms of the international partners, well the UN-Habitat of course was there—

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- POPAL:** *Initially discussed with UNOPS at that time because a huge amount of funding came through UNOPS for big projects. Then they totally jumped into those physical projects. They didn't have the concept before that we were working jointly together. They were in the rural areas. Then of course with the WHO (World Health Organization), with the UNICEF, we had discussions. They were supportive because they gave us some of their ideas and concepts into the questionnaire, because we were preparing community profile. So they wanted to know about children under the age of five for vaccinations, breast-feeding, those things we discussed with these agencies and we tried to put it into the training modules when the social organizer of trainers goes and they had discussed those concepts.*
- MAJEED:** Sure. During the design phase, were there other models you looked at? So the Community Fora is one, and you already had experience with that but were you looking at other things that had been implemented either in Afghanistan or elsewhere in the world?
- POPAL:** *Yes, the think tank was Scott Guggenheim, and then they had some international colleagues and support, they just told us there is an example in Indonesia. The Kecamatan Development Program, KDP. So then we could go and have a visit in this design phase. So we took this opportunity. We went there for one month.*
- MAJEED:** This was also in 2003?
- POPAL:** *It was yes, 2003. So we went there, and we spent one month. I still remember there were different islands and sometimes we were going by ship. I hadn't seen a ship, had not been on board in my life, so it was a little bit scary for us. Some of us went by flight to different islands. It has been more than ten years now we are talking about these issues. So we discussed. We went to different places, Sumatra, different islands. Some of the names are still there.*
- I remember in one of the villages I played chess because that was the only common language we had. It was really very interesting to go to those rural areas. A lot of environmental difference. Great food, great fruits we had. And also the area was very tropical area, so jungles and see all these trees and bananas. So it was very interesting for us to see.*
- We went to those areas and we saw the examples and how the Kecamatan program is doing in the rural area. It was very interesting. One thing which NSP played a stronger role and a stronger model in, as far as my knowledge is concerned, is that the election took place, a free and fair election. So during that time the Kecamatan Development Program didn't have the election. That was one aspect of difference. The other issue was when we were discussing, we came up with the idea of social auditing.*
- When people receive funding or projects are being implemented, every installment, before you pay the second installment to the community, there should be a social auditing concept. We initially discussed that we wanted that because in the Community Fora we had that mechanism. The consultative board members need to give the financial report and the progress report to the community for public hearing. At that time the idea of social auditing was not exactly as I'm quoting now, because this idea was brought by one of our colleagues from Nepal. So he was a great person. That was a long period that we would talk with different people who came and they had their contribution to NSP. So as a human being, and of course working in Afghanistan, every time people talk about success of NSP I am always honored because I was one of the*

members of designing it. So people who have come new, some of them know, some of them they don't know, but they always talk about great things.

So that was the initiative. When we saw those examples in Indonesia, we also learned some of the things because a lot of paperwork was there. We also had some concern that if we could really replicate this model, it won't be good, because the literacy rate in Afghanistan is very low. In Indonesia it was really a bit higher so we could see they organized books and there was literacy.

Then there was one of the other examples we saw. Some of those influential women in the rural area, they borrowed money or they took money from the Kecamatan program and not the poor women, they were doing their business. But not themselves. So they were kind of exploiting other poor women and they were producing some of those cookies, chocolates, different things that they have in the house they had. Then we thought, this is really not going directly to the poor families so the program does not—in some cases, there were a lot of stories there.

When we saw that we also took note of that that when we come back to Afghanistan, so we designed it at least to have a fair approach. That people can have a direct access, not through a second person. There are some vocal, outspoken people, in the way they can go and get the money and then they can really just give a little help to the poor families and they can exploit them in a way. So those were a few examples that we saw.

In addition, there were a lot of good initiatives. Life in the rural area was improving a lot with the Kecamatan Development Program. There were good training packages. There were some NGOs involved at that time also for different services. So that one month was both for us learning and looking at other countries, how they're performing and how things happen there. And also from a programmatic perspective and a personal experience was also very rich. We saw the people, very nice people in Indonesia, very calm people. I am relatively tall so I was taking photographs I could see all the people; they're very short. I have some of those photos, I look, number one I look very strange because of my big nose. On the other side I was very tall standing in the community. It was a learning experience over there.

MAJEED: *So when you returned, and you were still in the designing phase, how would you select villages? My understanding was that data on a number of villages may not have been available. How would you design, and also how did you come up with the amount that would go into each village like the \$200, \$300 per family?*

POPAL: *The initial experience existed in urban areas. We had this discussion because our percentage was very small, like an example of \$9,900. I remember Ehsan Zia, who was the minister, he said, 'yes, Community Fora is good, but what we are giving--we are talking about big amounts of money. But when we discuss funds per capita and then we thought, for example, for one or two projects and also the absorption capacity of the community.*

Then again we went into philosophical discussion about right-based approach or need-based approach. You are reminding me of all those days, great moments. We have some provinces like Panjshir, they're very mountainous and there are some valleys. We said: okay, if one community needs a bridge over the river, because Panjshir River is full of water, and it might cost \$500,000 or \$300,000 minimum [for] one village of sixty families. If you go with a need-based approached, how are we going to respond to the other people in other provinces.

If you go with a right-based approach, so each—so eventually we just agreed, let's go with a right-based approach, at least we can have an equal approach. So people would get—. Then when we came up with a discussion, we took three kinds of villages, villages of a hundred families, two hundred families and three hundred families. So that was at least for easy calculation because we didn't have a lot of figures. Then of course things evolved and changed every two years. There was an assessment and evaluation of the process.

Then we saw the different definition came up. Now at least I am talking about five year old figures when I tell you. The Ministry of MRRD they came up with a figure that less than 25 families could not be recognized as a village. It was before fifty. So if there are less than 25 families they can merge with other neighboring villages. That was one of the concepts. Then the village which is more than 300 families--that was a challenging part, because either to split the village, which they have a lot of common things, into two villages or keep the same.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, it was agreed that if the village is more than three hundred families, they should receive the package of 300 families. So the maximum package was \$60,000, which means \$200 per family. So that was—they came up with that concept. The definition of a family in Afghanistan is different.

At that time we were living together, so it was me—I was married and my brother married and my father and my mom. We were living in one house. Are we three families or one family? Then it was later on decided, okay, each one of you is a family no matter if you are living in a big compound or a small compound. So the number of population was initially gathered. That was the approach we went with, one hundred, two hundred and three hundred family categories, and later on we thought maybe it can change.

Managing of that funding was also a question, and also less than one hundred families. We thought maybe villages do not exist at that scale. There were few neighborhoods. But later on that was accepted and luckily the formula is still applicable and it is applying. Still there were some small, small changes, but the tough reality is some of those villages they were larger than three hundred families--four hundred or five hundred--they split unfortunately. Not with the wish of MRRD, but because of getting funding. So they said, 'okay, this is between us.' So they put Village A, or Village B, and were given a slightly different name which was good. At least they got additional funding, but was not good to break that social fabric which existed before so people were coming together for one mosque and then—.

So development has its pros and cons, it brought some concepts and ideas. The villages who were smaller than 25, everybody agreed because they cannot receive a lot of services different NGOs can help them, and different other government entities. But NSP just said if there are less than 25 families, they can merge with neighboring villages, and they still can receive the proportioned funding for less than 25 families. If they want to have one priority/project or they want to improve one of their irrigation canals, still the money could really suffice and they can help, they can be benefited.

So this approach continued, which was very good. Again, we were in such a rush. I remember and I'm sure if Dr. Ashraf Ghani was not there, it would have taken longer to design, he said, 'no, we are in rush, we have to finish that.' UN is a slow agency should not take so long, because UN has its bureaucratic name

that we should be very active and we should speed up the process. Luckily the program was designed in six months' time. We had a lot of challenges at the beginning, but because of the excitement we just ignored the challenges and focused on the way forward.

MAJEED: Also, in terms of collecting data: you were calculating how many villages were there. Did you have a team in place that was collecting that information or was that data, that information, already there?

POPAL: *No, we went to different entities of course because when we discuss about nine people, as nine Afghans, we were the lead members.*

MAJEED: So how was that designed internally?

POPAL: *We split the groups. One or two people went on training side, one for money for evaluation, one for reporting, one for leadership. I was leading with the government entities. I was the lead.*

MAJEED: Liaison?

POPAL: *Liaison. Then we had of course people with financial aspect of that, management of that. Nine of us, we took nine subgroups under us. We hired new people. Each member of the nine had two or three staff members hired by them. Then we went to different government entities. At that time I remember they said okay, in Afghanistan there are 20,000 villages. So you can imagine with ten years' time now people are talking about 40,000 villages. So that was the initial figure. We had some official figures that we had from the statistics office. The issue of the border between villages was not identified because of three decades of war. So it was very challenging and complicated.*

The good thing was that NSP, politically wise took a very good decision. They give three districts per province as a pilot.

At the beginning during this six months, I went personally three times to Kandahar to bring the real experience, to incorporate that into the design phase. At the same time we were writing and we were discussing, we were applying it in one village. Bala Karz, which is one village above the president's village (Karz), which is called Balliquaz.] We went to that village. It was very manageable size, and then we experienced that. We see how things can take place, the consultation process, the acceptance of the people, and if you do election how it is and so on.

Then we were, at the same time, in the six months of design phase, we had one village in the five provinces because we had these nine people from those five provinces working current with the Community Fora at that time. At the same time we were getting some information, some facts, some figures. So we just came up with some rough calculation that there were 20,000 villages and that the government should go to all 32 provinces at that time we had. Then later on we had two additional provinces added to the cycle. So three districts per province as a national program, it has to go, so that no province would complain that they have not received NSP.

There were three districts accepted, because it should go for economy of scale-- you cannot go to one district, because hiring a lot of staff and renting an office and equipment is expensive. So that was the initial part. Before I just jump to the implementation side; the cycle was based on those rough figures we had,

because we had no choice. The census had not taken place, and we didn't have the proper village numbers. Every two or three years we could see a lot of new villages because the people were returning from Pakistan, and they didn't go to their place of origin. They were living in an area that was closer to the city. So now in Afghanistan we have a challenge with a peri-urban area. So people who were from the rural area, they settled in a closer area to the city. They created a new village of 500 families, 600 families...60 families...80 families...100 families. So now in the list at NSP, I'm sure you will go, there are a lot of villages called "new village, new village." (Nawai Kalai) technology in Kandahar. So we had to give those names. In each district we had this Nawai which means new village emerging.

MAJEED: Also I'm curious about the other members of the team. You said you were the lead and then there were nine other people. How were these people recruited—these eight other people?

POPAL: *They were active members, they were provincial managers of UN-Habitat.*

MAJEED: So they're all coming from UN-Habitat.

POPAL: *Yes, I was regional manager, I was covering three provinces under my supervision, so Farah and Herat were under my supervision, as regional manager. But still we brought the provincial manager of Herat and Farah for the design phase. In the north we had the same regional manager so they had the provincial managers. We nine people, two of them were originally based in Kabul, we had employees, we had two women staff members, very strong staff members.*

MAJEED: You had mentioned your Indonesia experience. I was wondering what elements did you take from it? What elements ended up in the final NSP design, or which elements did you improve upon as the design progressed?

POPAL: *There were two things which were very interesting from the Indonesia experience—there might be more because it has been ten years if I have forgotten some of the things, apologies. One was the bookkeeping, the record keeping because it was very important to have all those funds—how they would be spent and recorded, because at the end of the day people might ask. That was one issue.*

The other issue was about the consultation and prioritization, how people come together and discuss, because that experience we didn't have. They had community halls in Indonesia. Later on we came up with these ideas. Some of them were constructed, because of lack of funding some of them weren't because some of these meetings took place in the house of one of the village elders or who was the rich person--we called [Khan?]-the Khan of the village's house. So that was how the initiative was—there were two things we learned from the Indonesian experience. Then we would see how people are happy.

Of course income generation was more organized because people were more business oriented in Indonesia than Afghanistan. People were farmers in Afghanistan, so they were not keen about small-scale enterprises. They were just dealing with farming and selling it, so there was no discussion about processing of that, so economy of value was not there.

We had some other elements, because Afghanistan culturally and religiously we had this consultation process. So when we were designing the training manuals,

every activity we were doing we had one of the verses [Indecipherable 00:52:52] of holy Koran at the top, consultation on the importance of consultation, transparency and the importance of transparency because in Koran we didn't have—them [Indecipherable 00:53:02] in Koran, then we had Hadith [Indecipherable], about greenery, tree plantation and its importance. It was very interesting. So most of the training manual, if you see NSP, the design, it is based on Islamic codes.

So people in rural area they can easily accept it, it is not a foreign idea. So that is how we thought about these concepts.

MAJEED: How did you build in the lack of literacy in certain parts of the country? You had mentioned that earlier; that at least compared with Indonesia, literacy was not as high.

POPAL: *Most of the activities which started Community Fora; literacy was one of the initial classes that people also recommended. With recruitment also because, in addition to nine people—we were the senior management—but there were already higher senior staff member of UN-Habitat. We recruited a lot of other new and young generation because the program had to evolve very quickly. Immediately after six months of design the government gave us two options: with UN-Habitat wants to be the oversight, they want to be the implementing partner. So when the design is finished we could not be oversight and doing the implementation because there was conflict of interest.*

We discussed, there were a lot of interesting parts, in-house discussion. So we thought: no, we are more of a field people, so we had better be in the field, not really just sit in Kabul and only to monitor because you can easily criticize people why it is not happening there. So let's feel the pain ourselves. Then we decided to implement the project. So we became the implementing partner and still UN-Habitat is one of the strongest FP, resident partner of the NSP.

I am glad to see that the government got the momentum, and the government is strong enough. Now the government has got very qualified staff members. And they are producing the training modules, the training—a lot of other training modules were developed, engineering modules, micro—hydro power modules for every type of physical project, for different trainings, for conflict resolutions.

So the ministry has really just stood on this. Now a lot of FPs are really receiving the training modules and manuals from the Ministry of MRRD. That is a good sign that the government really just took over and implemented. The oversight was doing the fund transfer, different World Bank process was there.

One thing which, to the last day of my working with NSP and UN-Habitat I had this challenge with the World Bank. Everything, every time I was coming and talking about simplification, because the forms of the World Bank were not really practical to go to the rural area. Every time I was coming I was seen like another complaining person. Honestly, we went to the villages and the forms of the World Bank are not very useful, practical. So we had no choice but—that is what affected the capacity and the quality of some of the components of the community because UN-Habitat employees or the FP employees had to fill in those forms. So there was a lesson learning chance from the community.

If the forms would have been easier the people could do themselves. So the capacity after ten years would have been built in the villages. But most of these forms were done by employees of the FPs, and that was one thing that was

different from other countries. Always we went and had the same argument. It is World Bank requirement, and then we had to accept. Then we were doing it ourselves. So the requirement was done, but the capacity of the community was not built at the scale or the pace we wanted to move forward.

MAJEED: That's a wonderful perspective Mr. Popal. At the end of the design phase what happened when the design was complete, how was it rolled out?

POPAL: *So the issue, the government of course--there was very constructive discussion that the decision with the design was made. The manual was given, in a way. Then we were given two choices: either to implement, or to be the oversight. Then the oversight, it was outsourced and it was one of the German firm—.*

MAJEED: GIZ?

POPAL: *GIZ, the German firm, won the contract--but still they were also new. So as UN-Habitat we came back to explain these things to oversight, how they should monitor us and what we meant when we designed those training modules, monitoring and reporting. That was one aspect of how we were contributing. Then we went and we accepted ten provinces.*

So UN-Habitat, we said, 'okay we will go and implement, because we had these five urban centers, and then we had another ten provinces. So we went on and we started implementation. Then every quarter, and every six months, we had this retreat coming back and sharing the experience. How did it work in Panjshir, how did it work in Herat, how did it work in the small and large provinces, the population challenges we had, the size of the villages we had, the problems I already discussed.

MAJEED: With the other facilitating—?

POPAL: *Yes and MRRD took the initiative, and there was a coordination platform. Now they're talking every six months, coming and experiencing. So my serious challenge was when I talked to Ashraf Ghani, I said, if the fund does not go to the village in one month's time-- after I waited for five months--I said I will resign and go to Pakistan. He said, 'no, no, no, the time is gone. You should never go to Pakistan again.' I said, 'no, because I have lost my image. I have talked to the communities for the last five months that the funding is coming if you do this, this, this.' And now because of the World Bank and Afghanistan Bank, all these processes have to be completed. In Kandahar--it is my hometown--most of the people know me, because I was working there. I said, 'I cannot stay. My image is going to really just go away and I cannot afford that.'*

Luckily after the discussion, after one month, the first fund was transferred. When this fund was transferred it was—if I do not use the stronger words, like a revolution in rural development in this country--because people go the last moment when they touched the money, they didn't trust the government of Afghanistan, that they would have the capacity and the trust in community to give us money, in cash. Even when I took them to the bank, because there was money—I mean they took the money. They were looking, they were still not believing; maybe we will take it back from their hand.

No, this is your money and you go based on your proposal and you implement. This message went across. Then we saw a lot of demand from other areas. We want to be part of NSP. We want to really just see NSP in our areas. So that was a major breakthrough in this country: that the government and people, the trust-

building process started. People really just took the money and they implemented.

Then we have a lot of history, which I can tell you for hours and hours on how people sincerely respected this money. The cost of the projects was so low because they went themselves to Herat to buy some of the equipment, the material needed for the village. Not from Kandahar because the cost was like five Afghanis higher. Then you can see how voluntarily they were working days and nights at the beginning. These were some of the great stories we have. Maybe in some villages there was the calculation of engineer was like \$50,000 and they finished it with \$35,000. They had \$15,000 surplus. Then they were doing an extension of the work so they were doing more stone masonry work. Or another part of the village said no, we need this money here and there.

Then we ended up having a lot of change in the project proposal, amendments of the project proposal because we had to change the program, ingenious. So those were the great moments that these success stories took place.

MAJEED: When was the first block grant dispersed? You said there was a five-month delay. Was it in the very first tranche?

POPAL: *The first tranche. If the first tranche had come, then the second—always you can discuss the installment. There was—it was the trust issue for me, that my image, that I say that the money will come and you will touch the money. The people will believe in me, but they waited. It was May 2013 when people touched the money.*

MAJEED: 2003?

POPAL: *Sorry, yes, 2003. That was the day when I had my photo with His Excellency Atmar, and then I delivered a small speech. I said this is the money—because he signed the first check and then people took their money from the bank—.*

MAJEED: So the Kandahar community was the first one?

POPAL: *The first in the history of NSP. It is really one of the village in front of the airport of Kandahar, so it was very close to the airport so it is called the Mandi Sar village, I still remember. Mandi Sar village is the first village of NSP in this country that they received block grant, the first block grant—the first installment of the first block grant.*

MAJEED: Were there problems with successive tranches, or even with not in Kandahar specifically but in other parts of Afghanistan? I've heard that they were not as regular later on as well. So I was wondering if that was an issue.

POPAL: *Of course, for many reasons, there were ups and down cycles. The first tranche was a lot of pressure to transfer. The trust was built. Then of course, the project, when GIZ had their own internal system. Not every project proposal was approved at the national level. Can you imagine sending—?*

MAJEED: Every single—?

POPAL: *Can you imagine sending every single file with all those documentations to Kabul? An engineer looks at this file here and if one small item was missing they would reject the proposal. Can you imagine? It was taking a very long time.*

MAJEED: But that would not be something you would envision in the program—?

POPAL: *No, because that was because we didn't know what part we would accept. What we were lobbying for was decentralization, give more authority—but the capacity didn't exist. Of course when GIZ won the contract, they had their own system for ensuring the fund delivery and the transparency and the accountability, all those things. But after three years of suffering—two years—then the decision was changed that those projects, unless they are very high technical--the construction of a bridge for example--then those projects have to come to Kabul. The rest, only the list of the project is coming to Kabul now. So only an engineer, or a manager, he looks here, there are ten projects. Only the name of the project, the value and the amount. Then they sign off. So the process was expedited very much. There were up and down cycles of the NSP.*

MAJEED: When the project was proposed it was decentralized, then who would be approving it at the local level or just the communities decided?

POPAL: *No, the oversight consultant, they opened their offices.*

MAJEED: So they had local offices.

POPAL: *The local offices. There were two engineers, one administrator and one head of that office, and they were looking at those proposal to approve. Then every time there was a question-- so people and UN-Habitat engineers were going to explain to the engineer of the Over Sight Consultant because we had taken like 50 cm depth of the stone masonry because the land is hard instead of 60 cm for instance. Sometimes the geographic location was not known by some of these—. So the cycle took its momentum. If people were involved in identifying of the projects, in prioritizing the projects and their contribution of 10%, which was—in every project there was 10% contribution of the community. So they had to identify that one, and selection of the final project.*

Then with the low capacity, engineers of Facilitating Partner FP, at that time UN-Habitat--they were designing the project. But sometimes it was good, because in the survey stage the village representative was there, because the people there knew when the flood comes, how much water comes to this canal, for example, or what is the strength of the soil, what is the quality of water. This was a very practical approach. The committee representative was giving us very clear and good information. But the technical skill was not there. That was one side.

When the project was approved, most of the projects were done by the community themselves because they had a lot of masons, a lot of carpenters. You know people already existed in the local villages. Then it created very good job opportunities. Most of the young generations were hired by the projects at the rural area. So this was how it took place. Sometimes because of these bureaucratic issues, sometimes lack of funding—because the fund did not transfer from the bank to the national government, the national government would not transfer it to the local banks--there were a lot of delays. But it was not as serious as we faced at the beginning, this was the issue of trust. What created this challenge was the slow funding, because once the first installment was transferred, then people were waiting for two months for the second installment. You cannot keep the mason for two months until the second installment comes, or the laborers. The momentum was lost.

When they were going and then the second installment is coming. When you were coming to the site, almost 20% of the project was damaged, because some

stones were taken by the kids, some of the holes were filled by the sand or dust. This was the challenging part, that we had always this argument. Then slowly, slowly, this was changed. Even if this project really badly needed it, the fund can go in two installments, not in four installments, because every installment was taking at least three months. Can you imagine a project of six months was completed in one year at least, and still that challenge still exists? That was the unfortunate side; the momentum was lost with some of the projects, because the nature was different, it was like a one or two installment payment.

That was also a mechanism that was developed to show some flexibility. If a community was doing 80% progress, the acceptance was at 100%, but if the progress in the field is 60% you endorse it for 80%, because by the time they go to 80% the other installment can come. So there is no gap in the implementation part of that.

MAJEED: Very good. In terms of implementation, how good or—I know that NSP had mandated a certain—that women would be involved to a certain extent. How well did that actually play out in reality?

POPAL: *In the beginning of course it was very attractive and interesting, and of course because of Afghanistan being as diverse country culturally, socially—even religiously in some part--the issue was in some provinces like Herat and Mazar, there were more educated people and they were very successful of the women coming to fora. So for us in Kandahar, women coming to the fora were socially very strong. But the election part was not really very strong, because some of the women had still some resistance, and they didn't know how to vote.*

Explaining these things—they didn't have literacy. Then our women's social organizer had to help her, because the election of NSP, as you might know, it is very interesting in the rural area, it doesn't have a candidate. So people come together, and they sit and they look who is a very nice person. They only write the name, and they cast the vote. So there are no candidates. We experienced that in Afghanistan in rural areas because in rural areas we had commanders, we had the warlords, we had the landlords, and all these people.

Another interesting example, it reminds me. In Kandahar, like in 25% of more or less villages, we had the farmer who became the head of the village and not the previous landlord who was Khan or was Mallik of the village.

MAJEED: So it shook up—?

POPAL: *Yes, it shook up the people. Some of those people who were very rich, they were so upset. He is my farmer, I give salary to this person, and he has become the head of the village, the head of CDC in a way. So that was a very good aspect of that. It had some challenging part as well. If we had the candidate process in election, then no farmer could dare to stand in front of his boss/landlord to put his name as a candidate.*

MAJEED: Yes, for sure.

POPAL: *And the warlord—if a warlord comes, and then another competitor comes in, his life would have been at risk. So that is what we agreed: no candidates. Then people look around, and they just write the name, and put in box, and the voting counting is going to take place. That was one thing which was very learning.*

The other issue was we saw that more than 30% of the young generation came into the CDC leadership. In our culture normally in Jirga shura or the consultation process, no one less than 40 years would sit there. It is always about 40 because they are considered to be wise, experienced people. There is another important aspect of that. For women also, for women CDCs.

In Kandahar, those figures which I can say from 523 when I was there, I just left UN-Habitat, 523 CDCs we had established. Out of 523 we had 103 women CDCs. So you can imagine the proportion was like 20% or something, but in other provinces it was 50/50. In some provinces it was 40/60--so there are different issues. Then up to 2006 and 2007, we enjoyed a lot working and experience, and a lot of development took place.

I can give you an example, that people had never seen a car in their village in their lifetime. When the roads were widened and they saw a car is coming, everybody was so excited to see that. So some positive things took place.

So you can see people demolished their walls, and let the car come to the village. A lot of graveling projects took place. This was a very active life in the rural areas. People were complaining, some of the women of the village, were losing their baby before birth because by the time they bring it to hospital at city central, it was too late--that road is terrible, a lot of bumps, a lot of cars were broken--it took longer period. That was when the roads were constructed, so people were so happy and excited. The distance between rural and urban centers got shortened. People could sell their products, like the price, it was more good profit. Before it was like Afs 1000/km it became like Afs500/km. All those benefits the people saw. A lot of hand pumps for drinking water. Irrigation was because a lot of blockage was there for Kariz (water flowing underground) because we have this Kariz concept in Afghanistan, which is underground with different [Indecipherable]. So they used a lot of resources.

So the villages in the rural areas, like in four or five years totally changed. You could see more gardens, orchard, and houses being constructed. Hope was created. But the sad side is in 2007 we saw the insurgency coming back. Then we had to work on a different concept, which I led for some time. The issue was, the concept was a high-risk strategy, came in 2009 and 2008, because a lot of incidents took place.

At the beginning few village heads were targeted and killed by the Taliban, and then later on the number increased. So people lost that momentum of really supporting the NSP in some rural areas, particularly in the southern part of Afghanistan.

MAJEED: People were attacked because of the NSP?

POPAL: *Because of this program was seen as a government program, and people were very happy and excited. In the southern region had some contacts with Taliban. We were trying to convince them, because as I explained before with the Community Fora I had very tough discussions with different senior government officials and convinced them, being a person of Kandahar I knew the language, culture, and religion--I could argue with them. When I talked to them I said, 'this benefits people; it has nothing to do against Taliban.' They were telling us, 'don't think that we are so simple people. We know because if people are happy then they will support the government and not us. We will not let this program,' some of them were saying. Then some of the people were beaten—especially in the*

finance, the treasurer, and the money was taken from them, then the equipment was even taken from them.

In some parts even they asked them to bring all the raw materials they bought, like bricks for construction of the community hall. They forced the people to bring it to the Taliban site. In different areas they had, perhaps. The momentum was slowly, slowly broken down.

Still, in spite of all those challenges, it is one of the most successful programs of the national government and people are happy. But of course unfortunately we lost a lot of elders in the villages. That was really—they were targeted.

MAJEED: This was 2007?

POPAL: *It started in 2007 and then 2008 and '09. Then 2009 was the worst year. Actually now the records are with MRRD, so they have how many people were targeted and giving these examples. So positive change was there, people were really believing in this governance aspect. Of course when we did the first election in the villages, after one or two years then we had the first presidential election. So it held because the first time in the history of this country we had a presidential election. But people were already familiar with how to vote; that was very exciting for this country.*

MAJEED: Was that part of the thinking, that once the people get used to voting then it would be easier to conduct national scale elections?

POPAL: *We didn't mention that, but of course it was meant that way. We didn't want to be seen more as a government-type process. But what took place, I'll give you one, maybe two, of those examples. When we were conducting election in the village and the mullah came and then delivered a speech. Everybody who votes means he is pro-American because these ballots, ballot papers will be collected and it is going to go for the Bush election. People were so simple in the villages. They really tried to really just deceive some of those villages. Some of the mullahs really just boycotted the election process.*

But as you see people were so committed and they just said, 'okay, mullah, if you don't want to vote, thank you very much, we will vote.' They voted in their villages. So even you can see how people were trying—they were misguided, misled. Then what we did, we asked with our office--because normally we collected these as a proof, and we put a leather band and then you put it in boxes. In case somebody asks you in that village the election has not taken place, for transparency reasons. In those villages that you feel people are not very happy that you take their voting ballots back to the office, you count them in front of them and tear it off in front of them. Nobody is going to take this vote count of the presidential election for Bush or whatever. It was very interesting.

So those are some of the examples. Some of the mullahs, and some of the people who were against elections, tried to just influence people. They didn't have really a stronger say when transparency increased.

MAJEED: That was one of my questions, was how well did the elections proceed at the local level? Were there areas that were more difficult where elections weren't able to happen?

POPAL: *Definitely. It became more difficult after 2009. That is when we developed a strategy called high-risk strategy.*

MAJEED: Can you tell me a little bit about it?

POPAL: *This is a high-risk strategy because when we were working, and all these coordination meetings that were led by MRRD took place, and said now people are not willing to vote and there are complications and challenges. That is what people slowly, slowly realized about monitoring of the project. Our engineers cannot go to the site anymore, with equipment, and camera and all the equipment. So then they thought okay with high-risk strategy what we need is have photograph taken and then it should come to—will you accept the photography. We changed the concept of social organizer because we had social organizer and then we had the village facilitators.*

The village facilitator was a person who was hired from the village, and then they reported. So we had no choice but to trust that person. With less monitoring mechanism we had for insecure areas. The election was not a mandatory process anymore. So they said, okay if people come together and there is consensus building and people agree, they will accept that part.

MAJEED: How did they get the money to those communities?

POPAL: *Through this—village elders had to come to the community. They could come to the city, get the money from the bank, they could put in their pocket and go back. Still certain minimum requirements remain the same, but since the flexibility with monitoring took place, some flexibility with election, some flexibility with women—before at least we had to have one or two women's projects but it was not mandated any more. If there is a hand pump installation, people can benefit.*

MAJEED: You were discussing the high-risk strategy. How well did it work? Were you able to assess that projects were implemented?

POPAL: *Yes, this was good. There was some flexibility at least. It included those villages that they could receive assistance and benefits. Otherwise those villages could have been totally left out. This high-risk strategy has helped those FPs who are working in very high-risk areas. So it was no longer important than if they had done all the secret ballot election, and the project sites and the engineers cannot go there. Some of those processes-- transfer of funding and they bring the receipts. No matter that the finance was in the village, or the social auditing. The requirement was decreased, luckily it worked. But of course the quality was affected, if not suffered. Still some people, if they have the benefit they can take. Recently I hear, because most of the local FPs have also learned, just to convince people and people convince Taliban in their areas that this is for the benefit.*

So it is working. I have not heard serious challenges, at least with the friends I talked with because I have been away for the last three, four, five years from NSP directly. But I have my friends, a deputy minister. He was in Kandahar, so we had a discussion and we see now and then. We have not heard any serious problems with NSP implementation.

MAJEED: That's interesting. You mentioned one thing about people talking to Taliban and convincing them it is their project. One of the things I heard from interviewees was that sometimes there would be a Taliban tax or something like that to be able to continue implementing the project. I just wanted to hear your perspective on that.

POPAL: *There are three categories of Taliban, unfortunately. I'll give you the example. When I was managing the project, I had three cases out of 500 cases, which was still very minimal, that was with the community support. One of the generators installed in the village and one of the villagers was shot by Taliban. People wanted to have electricity. That was one thing which later on the concept of generator was also abolished, it put a negative list because of the environmental pollution affairs, but that was one of the cases. We had two more cases, one case where Taliban took the treasurer and beat him and took the money that he had received from the bank. We had a third case where not only money but even the raw materials and the supplies which were on the site were put on the tractor and was taken to the Taliban.*

MAJEED: This is only Kandahar?

POPAL: *This is Kandahar, but we had cases in other provinces as well. So it was like 2009 before I left Kandahar where I was managing. That is how it was. There were categories. There were Taliban who were really very radical and they had a group of foreigners in their groups; people from Pakistan, people from Uzbekistan and all this. So then it is very difficult to convince those Taliban because the groups when they come they are very radical. People even lost their lives, they killed villagers with shots. That was different because those villages still have problems; they are not implementing NSP.*

The Taliban is mobile also, they don't stay in one area very long, so when they have gone they can slowly start their second part of the project.

There were categories of Taliban where they were from other provinces. They were coming, they didn't know the villages. So it was difficult to convince them, but a few chances were there to convince them and let the projects go on. The third category was a little bit easier because Taliban who are from the same village or from the same district even so they knew each other, parents and cousins. They were soft and they were flexible. So people were trying to really just find the connection with those Taliban that are from the same village and try to convince them. 'Tomorrow if you take the government, the road is needed for this village. This clinic is needed, this hospital is needed.'

Most of the NSP projects are very community oriented. It is for the benefit of all. So then we had success stories there, more. But with the first category unfortunately we had less. With the fighting--as I am sure you have not gone and hope you don't go through this exercise--people do not stay in one area for a longer period. Either they are transferred, or they are killed, or they are just going for other assignments. So then things change. That is our Afghan experience.

MAJEED: Absolutely. Also related to that, reports of—as you said it is easier to convince some Taliban and so those projects are not attacked and are allowed to be implemented?

POPAL: Yes.

MAJEED: One of the things I wanted to ask is the relationship of NSP to other government entities. For example the district level government, the provincial level government...well NSP is a program, but more in terms of the CDCs. How did they—if they did, work with other government entities or worked on their own?

POPAL: *Definitely it worked with other entities, but the problem is sometimes their legitimacy was recognized strongly. For example, if the Ministry of Public Health*

had a clinic; they went through the consultative process and the CDCs, and they respected their Community Development Plan because we were there preparing Community Development Plan. Then every year they reviewed the Community Development Plan. If in the development plan is a clinic, and there is no funding that year, so still it remains on the list, but they are taking the second priority, or the third priority for example for the projects. But mostly those projects which are within their zone of influence because they have \$60,000. Luckily last year the repeated block grant started, after unfortunately eight years. But the idea was to come with a concept what we designed and how it varied.

So the issue was with the funding. So then the Minister of Public Health, or the Department of Public Health in that area, they had the discussion with MRRD and the CDCs in a particular area, a cluster of areas, because the idea of cluster was also initiated later on with the Japanese funding. A group of villages would come with a bigger project, and how that could be funded. That was also how people could put money together from different villages.

If there are four or five villages, they can put their money together and they make one big project, which is for the benefit of all five villages. Sometimes a school is not for one village, it can be for two or three villages, or a clinic, or a road. Water canals can benefit others. So this was some of the nature of those projects. The eleven government departments were consulting.

Suddenly, because sometimes the line ministries were not respecting the CDCs, they had their own plan, they had their own approach. Also the school was being approved and the governor has being inaugurating it without consultation of the community. For example he would say 'no, the school is needed in the center of the district.' So then he or she was running that exercise. That was the sad side of it.

Every year or maybe every two years now, there is a Jirga, MRRD they call it, a big gathering around like 1000, or 2500 community elders to Kabul from all the provinces. Every district sends one or two representatives. So you can imagine that scale, and they consult. Then they bring some of those ministers for giving a speech to have a buy-in. Also, they are making a request for the ministers: CDC should be respected. But some of them are political, some of them are discussed; sometimes it is respected, sometimes it is not respected, to consult with the CDCs and recognize that as the official platform for all consultation process mechanism.

MAJEED: Right.

POPAL: *But the consultation is there. Not acceptance but at least they share things.*

MAJEED: What about relationship to other councils—earlier my understanding is that there weren't councils like the CDCs but then later on other ministries may have started either creating their own councils or the traditional shura, of course, were always there. So how do those relationships work out?

POPAL: *There was one good exercise, which started as per the design was there. The villages where they have the representatives will have its election among the CDC members, the nine, ten or fifteen. They can send one or two persons to the cluster level. Then at the cluster level election took place. They send one representative of a cluster to the district council. It is not official council because we didn't have elections, but the Council Shura, the district shura for example.*

This was called DDA, District Development—I don't know what A stands for, I've forgotten. [Assemblies]. They call it DDA shuras.

The DDA shuras were mainly people who were coming from the CDCs. That was more representative and any support was coming at the district level when there was a DDA. They were all new, they were coming from different villages, and they knew the process and they were respecting each other. They were elected bodies at the grassroots level anyway, even if they were not elected bodies at the district level, officially recognized.

But of course NSP didn't have blanket coverage. So not every single village had a council, CDC, at that time. So there was other type of shura, which was created for insecure areas by different agencies like USAID. They called it ASOP shura. It was mainly for different purposes, security, mitigation of some risk... Then we ended up having two types or three types of shuras there. At the district level there were common shuras, the tribal shura was there. There is the ASOP shura, and there was DDA shura, and there were some other types of shura, which went by one name or another, agriculture, irrigation or education shura.

Then recently, for the last one year a new concept, an agreement between ILDG, my organization, and MRRD has taken place about DCC, District Coordination Council, I think. So they have started that process and it has gone to the cabinet, hopefully it will be passed by the cabinet.

It means at the district level one shura should exist. That can really help a lot. Then MRRD, DDA and ASOP of IDLG will merge together in one DCC. So [in] the DCC the political aspect will be taken by us, because we are dealing with the governance, and the development part work will be done by MRRD. So that document is available if you need to, we can share the concept.

MAJEED: That would be interesting. The IDLG's mandate is? What is IDLG's mandate?

POPAL: *It is local governance. So if it comes all to those political aspects of that—governance, transparency, accountability—we are dealing with four major entities, IDLG, all the governors are IDLG employees, all the mayors, and all the district governors, and provisional council. So we are responsible for these four entities of establishing government. So you can imagine if the governor, mayor, district governor and provisional council. So we are dealing all with issues of political aspects of that, the governance aspect of that. And MRRD is dealing with the—.*

MAJEED: Development.

POPAL: *Development part of that.*

MAJEED: So then what would the relationship be? You would be managing, or at least be working with, all these governed bodies down to the very local level and then MRRD would provide support as far as funding and development, development funding is concerned?

POPAL: Yes.

MAJEED: What would the reporting be?

POPAL: *In terms of conflict mitigation or political aspect, social governing, it will happen through IDLG. But when it comes to the projects, prioritization, development and funding it is MRRD.*

MAJEED: Okay, that's helpful, thank you so much. Also, you mentioned that these were the councils, and that was very helpful, thank you so much. I was wondering as the CDCs progressed in the NSP work, there were also the PRTs that came in and other external, multilateral organizations that came in and had their own reconstruction projects and agendas. I was wondering how that either conflicted with or worked with the CDCs at the local level?

POPAL: *For the most part unfortunately, it undermined NSP. In the most part the process which we had initiated was destructed, because they were coming up and installing hand pumps, or building a school, without major consultation on our part. It would happen because people said 'oh, you're talking for one year and you're giving us \$60,000. Look at PRT, they're coming in two months and they're giving us funding,' for example. The funding was not given to the community but they're giving to contractors, and the quality was not ensured and they didn't have a lot of say, but the hand pump was needed.*

What we had some discussion initially with the PRTs, luckily some areas they respected because what they needed, and we introduced a list of all the CDC members with telephone number, and they had discussion with them. But that was also problematic because villagers didn't want to talk with them, Americans or Canadians or whoever were in Kandahar to really come to town, sit and have tea with them. By the time they had gone they were killed by the Taliban, definitely. So this was the challenging part. But that's how they were picking up the projects, without major consultation.

But in some areas, when we shared a list of the CDCs and list of the CDPs, Committee of Development Plans, so they were picking up projects out of that plan. That could somehow complement. So that was benefit because we could not afford the second project or the third project out of CDP. Sixty thousand or fifty thousand or forty thousand for a village was only enough for one or two projects not for others. So that was how PRTs were playing a complementary part, as we discussed. But military people—I hope you know, but if you don't know, we know what type of people they are. So they had their own thinking. They were always thinking they are right and how things can be done quicker, faster, but without consultation, it didn't matter. Military people believe less in consultation process and buy-in to process.

Unfortunately, most of their projects were targeted by the Taliban. If they were building a school without people's buy-in and commitment, you could see the construction. Before it was completed, it was blown up. You see the projects they were doing and the next day you were coming and it is really affected one way or another. So that is how the short fall of some of those projects were done. This was how we were having this interaction with the PRTs and the international communities.

Interviewer: Thank you so much, that was very helpful. One of the—I still have a few more questions.

POPAL: *Fine, fine.*

MAJEED: In terms of the design, so you have the design and then the implementation we talked about. But the program has been around for now ten years. Were there any changes in design that were made along the way or has the design remained the same throughout? I mean of course you mentioned the high-risk strategy so that is definitely an adaptation of the design, but in terms of the main design?

POPAL: *We had greater ambition for NSP. Unfortunately we thought—unfortunately for many reasons, for many years NSP remained as it was initially designed—with some added value for sure. But we perceived that every village or cluster of villages should turn into an economy-generating entity. For example, if that particular village has got good pomegranates, or they have good apples, or apricots, so they can do the processing of this fruit. They can dry it, they can pack it, they can sell it. It should have a value-chain process. Also it should—the CDC should not be a consumption of government funding, you know like take the money and spend it.*

At one point we thought after three or four years when they received repeated block grants they should produce their own products from the village or from the cluster of villages and level it. Okay, this is for instance pomegranate or grapes for example. So this, then that could be an identity, a production identity. That is what we envisaged. The dependability on the government should decrease, because government, especially Afghanistan government, without international support, we are a poor country. We cannot afford to continuously give \$60,000 to every village. Can you imagine 40,000 villages times \$60,000 dollars. It is beyond government ability and capacity, which we have little of. That was the dire need at the time. So hope this idea is being discussed that we need to turn these CDCs into...one component is about generating money in these entities, so you can see how we can build the capacity of the people that they can become entrepreneurs, how they can become skillful, into saving groups.

You know these concepts of villages, which [are] in the different countries. I'm sure India has it, [though] I have not been [there] from the development side, but I have been to Nepal, I have been to Sri Lanka, I have been to Pakistan. I know these countries; they have these kinds of programs. Slowly, slowly things will change.

But one of the limiting factors is, again, security. Sometimes when we have good ideas, we cannot apply if we do not have a proper continuity. Certainly if we are cut off from the village for six months because of insecurity, a group of Taliban reside there. Then you cannot think normally. Always you have to go with what is possible, what is not possible. But that is how the concept was.

The other issue was the legitimacy of the CDCs as a political entity; [they] should be recognized by the national government. Unfortunately the Independent Election Commission, IEC, does not recognize them as elected bodies. In spite of all our efforts, all spending time, doing the voting—they are respected at the village level, but recognition doesn't come, political recognition, from the IEC because they are an independent commission. So that was the second shortfall.

The other one is because we thought that as I said before, the CDCs were clustered together because for government, national government, it is easy to support the clustered level. Five to ten villages come together and make one entity, which we call it a CCDC, Cluster Community Development Council. Then it is easy for government entry point, and for consultation process, and for some projects. The time has gone that every village needed because that is covered by one grant or another grant.

Now we need to discuss with the bigger scale at the cluster level: school, roads, water supply, electricity. We don't need to have so decentralized system for every village. Then the other option was to really step out of this cluster. We need to have an election and then send one representative at the district level.

So district council would have been established through this bottom-up approach, a real and sincere one. Not a one which is driven by politicians. But that is not respected yet. Hopefully the DCC will take another one step forward so that that entity can be established; at least instead of having so many different bodies, we [can] have one body that people can respect. Then later on, as you said, there could be committees established. But the political entity it should be one, that is the concept at least.

MAJEED: I know that at least in terms of funding, or how the World Bank has defined it, is that there is the NSP Phase One, Phase Two and the Phase Three. That is in their documentation. Maybe MRRD is also talking about these phases, but are these only from the perspective of a timeframe, or do you think there have been actually some changes between a phase one and a phase two.

POPAL: *No, it is mainly timing—.*

MAJEED: And the funding.

POPAL: *Don't quote that, I have been away. I don't know, that is what I want to make [clear], but as far as I was, it was C1, C1.1, C plus 1. Like all these things were based on timing-wise. We started in three districts, then it went to six districts. So the six districts, the additional three districts with the same approach was C1. Then it became C2 for three more districts. Then it became C1.1 plus something. I don't know how more it has continued, but that time with the three cycles when I was there. It was mainly because of time. Of course there was some added value, not because of change inside the package.*

MAJEED: The design. So that is just a matter of time and scaling up. Not scaling up nationally but—.

POPAL: *Geographically scaling up.*

MAJEED: So do you think the design has remained static?

POPAL: *Not static, but no major change. It was more reactionist—I hope the English word is right, because they were reacting to it. So when there was a problem, they had to react. It wasn't proactive, because they didn't have maybe time, or didn't bring additional consultants to really look how things can be changed. Because initially when we had the design phase we had a lot of ideas how this can evolve. Some of them were picked up, some of them were not picked up, for different reasons.*

MAJEED: One of the other questions I had was that a lot of the projects turned out to be infrastructure projects. I don't know if you agree, through the NSP. So one is that it was need-based, but do you think that the design or even the program was a little biased towards infrastructure projects, or was it mostly need-based because it was coming from the community?

POPAL: *At the beginning the challenge was that the World Bank was very strong, because they were giving money, and they were not flexible because what we discussed with them—. They came up with a list. So the negative list was longer than the positive list. You cannot do this, this, this... Then what can we do? Okay, we were left with three or four projects. Protection wall—a few examples [like] that. That was the challenge. Later on that list was discussed and agreed with the bank, so something was changed. They said okay, kariz cleaning is in the negative list. We said, okay, if it is not kariz cleaning, then what should it be?*

Then in [Kariz] rehabilitation because you need a lot of strong workers because the [Kariz] have collapsed. It is not cleaning.

So we had to give new technologies, not [carris] construction, it is not [carris] cleaning, it is [carris] rehabilitation for example.

MAJEED: One of the questions I had was related, in terms of variations of how the program was implemented--and you've touched upon it already in terms of how it worked in different areas--but I was curious as to geographically or even different areas. Was it harder to implement in some, easier in others? What were some of the factors that contributed to that? You've already mentioned—.

POPAL: *It is very good to mention. We had hardship and challenges in different areas, differently. Like in Kandahar, we had security restriction and limitation but seasonal-wise we had no problem, because we could implement projects throughout the year. You could see Bamyan because it was very secure area but it had very short summer for implementation of the project. Here winter was coming and that was—. In some areas, geographically, distance between one village and another village--it was short but there was a big mountain in between. So you can imagine for a facilitating partner or for such another to go, they have to go like eight hours on foot. That was the only way to get to that village. We gave some of the allowance at the beginning, hardship allowances to people.*

For Kandahar we give security allowance, because it was very challenging to go and work there. Otherwise people will not join the organization. Then for those areas we were working in Bamyan and Panjshir they had to walk distances. Good for their health, but it is very long distance. So we—they had to implement in those parts, so the hardship elements were there.

We established guesthouses in our district offices at that time so it was one aspect in terms of how hot geographically it was, weather-wise, it was. And of course the success was totally different. Like in Bamyan women had no social and cultural restriction and limitation. Women were easily coming together; they were talking about the projects. But the challenge we had was three challenges. One was UN-Habitat challenge, one was the government, MRRD, challenge. One was the World Bank challenge. People would come up with the projects. Income generation project was on the negative list of the World Bank. Although we as facilitating partner and the ministry agreed: whatever people demand, that, is what we supported. So the bank had a lot of resistance, at least for three, four, five years when at the beginning it was there.

Then the government was not very much interested. They were interested but not very much interested in the governance side, training side. So then for us, as a UN agency, as an Afghan team that we were so committed for us, projects were the tools, not the means. We wanted to ensure good governance for the future of this country, the future of this village. If NSP finishes no matter, at least the capacity existed. So our priority was governance, which was time consuming, and nobody appreciated that.

Government was running of the project. How many projects have you implemented because they wanted to give a bold figure to the President or to the international community that we had 5000 projects, funded 5000 projects, running in this country? The bank was not interested in either. They were interested in figures. How much fund has flowed through the NSP process? So

you can imagine: three of us as three partners, or stakeholders. We were trying to achieve something, but the priority was different for each of us. So still I hope it has decreased, but hope it has really just not been an obstacle.

So now FPs are given very strict deadline, so you have to finish the project with this and that much time. But recently they have changed it. For example, an FP can implement a program in a particular village from three to five years, which is good at least. So if they cannot implement it for six months or nine months in one particular village, they can put it on hold and they do it next year. But they will not give them additional funding. So for agency it is rather easy; if I don't want to work there, why should I hire staff members for that particular village. You see the things have changed. Some flexibility in the morality has been brought recently, I have heard that, which is good and positive. But still for the bank, as the name is bank, so figures were important. They want to mention 20 million dollars have been spent this year for NSP, no more about projects.

The government was keen to know number of projects, nature of projects i.e. another would say we have graveled 20,000 km of road in rural Afghanistan through NSP, which is a positive thing. For UN-Habitat it was important to see how much capacity i.e. training they have provided. What were some of the success stories, how many conflict mitigation mechanisms was put in place? We have some—one of the examples: two villages were not talking for twenty years in Arghandab District Twenty years these two villages were having serious problems because they were killing each other's members. And through NSP, when they saw and they discussed, they managed to bring these two villages to talk in peace so they really resolved their problems.

The success stories when we were writing it, was really a lot of good success stories there. You know, you can imagine about this hostile situation it became a very friendly atmosphere. One of the other success stories we had in Arghandab was during 2009 when Taliban came in they did not allow them... All the elders came together and asked the Taliban, we will not let you operate from our area. The maximum compromise they did was they told the Taliban "if you want to pass through our villages you can, but you should not operate from our village". You see how people were committed, and they really just took that risk. These are some of the success stories that go through NSP. This is what the governance is; it is not about only projects. It is about unity, it is about importance and understanding the value of the program. It is their own village.

If NSP finished or not, they have to continue. So these were some of the things, the three different stakeholders looking from three different perspectives. All were for good reasons I'm saying, but of course as you can see the bank, and the government, and UN--they came together and they weren't following the pattern.

MAJEED: Yes, I understand. In terms of the facilitating partners, were there variations in how the facilitating partners operated? Were there some that were particularly well—well you part of the UN-Habitat.

POPAL: *The major ones.*

MAJEED: But in terms of kind of taking, zooming out and taking a broader view.

POPAL: *There were, still there are, 22 FPs, as far as I know. Four or five are relatively famous and they had good approach and they were doing it. Some of them were implementing projects, because that was their area that they were working. Of course, at the beginning the approach was slightly flexible. Whatever type of*

training modules you developed, you developed your own. But I say at the beginning for the ministry, luckily got the momentum and their areas got stronger. So now most of the FPs are following the government guidelines and methodology. And the coordination mechanism is also good platform. So if some other people have got better ideas, they can come and discuss it with other FPs. Then the training modules can be revised. The implementation modality can be revised. So this is how things have slightly changed.

One thing which is a bit complicated: if the government gets stronger then they are not good listeners. In government, they get very strong then they will say to you as FP that you are my contractor; you have to implement the way I tell you. That is kind of you become a recipient, no more you can equally sit at the table and discuss. That is some of the shortfalls.

MAJEED: That is a good point, thank you for that. Just in conclusion, I was wondering if you could tell me what the position is now—I know you have not been directly involved—but just your assessment of how well the NSP is working. Overall, how successful you think the program has been or, in terms of the design—you must have established certain broader metrics of success—how well it has met those?

POPAL: *Well, there are components which have worked well and some not I can summarize into three. This program is still the national flagship program of this country. It is very good. For the first time we have a program which is nationwide. That is a good thing, it is that program. Nobody has been left out. But still that is real. The second thing, it is the functioning mechanism for spending money. Most of the ministries have got stuck, and they cannot spend their money with such bureaucratic procedure and capacity. And MRRD, through NSP, has managed to have a flow of cash through the community. That is one of the major functions of a government to provide services.*

MAJEED: Right.

POPAL: *If you cannot provide services then what are you doing? So in an Afghan context, maybe now the country's private sector is more active or engaged, what we are talking in the rural context, in spite of all those challenges.*

The other important—which is the most important—is the governance and social fabric. So the culture of consultation has revived. There were a lot of challenges in this country. So now people are coming back to discuss their problems and priorities. This consultation is more inclusive. So before when we talked about consultation and decision it was about gray beard or gray hair, not like it was women and men talking together. So now there is inclusion, the inclusive part of the approach is there, young and old, the teacher, the different people who come from different backgrounds. So those issues are resolved at the village level. So people, if they talked it is for the sake of the village. People respect and appreciate that no matter if you are only twenty years or if you are sixty years, that culture of inclusive participation and consultation.

But of course this governance is a broader concept. Again the transparency and accountability, which now people are wise enough to understand. How much is the entitlement for that grant for that village? It is \$60,000 or \$40,000? How is that fund being spent? They have a chance to go and talk, they have a chance to sit in the social auditing process, to see how much money has been spent and how much is left. How much of one bag of cement was procured?

For example, in social auditing, if they have to say we have bought forty bags of cement, per bag, \$200. A guy will say, 'wait a minute, 200 per bag? But in that shop I saw it was \$180, how can you do it with \$200?' So that is minimizing the corruption, increasing the transparency. So people are more aware of what is going on, who is being hired, who is not being hired. Who have favored whom; who is not favored. Everybody is aware. If not everyone, most of the people are aware. Not everyone has the time to be aware, if they are interested to know. So nobody can block them, nobody can stop them.

People also know that people have access to FP offices, people have access to MRRD district office. They can go and say, 'well, I am part of this village but I am not even aware of the funding of our village.' So the source of sharing of information has increased. That is the positive element. So from the three perspectives which we saw: projects and service delivery, which is good for the government, governance, which people want to see, and it needs to be further strengthened. But they also have updated knowledge and experience they gain; they can talk over issues. The capacity, which still is getting better.

MAJEED: Great. Thank you so much for that Mr. Popal. Anything important that I've missed that you would like to add or any advice you would want to give to others who may be interested in implementing something similar in their countries?

POPAL: *The issues we discussed, as stakeholders. But unfortunately there shouldn't be a process of enforcing some of the ideas. In other words as we say, it is not carved in stone or it is not Verse of Quran, that you cannot change that. My frustration with the World Bank was about the simplification of the forms. If there is a requirement, yes, but there should be minimum requirements that we should do. Otherwise, as an example, if people were doing that simple filling in the form, by now people would have done a lot of things by themselves. But those complicated forms were done by the FP partners. Then people learned little, and institutional memory does not exist.*

Yes, it met World Bank requirement. The bank is happy because they signed off on those things. And the time; for development and putting a tight time limit does not work. Everything has a time limit, but not for development and dealing with such programs. You need to really just give a bit of more time so that people really have time. Now what we spent—for example, if you spend time during the election process, it helps for the election process. You have to go to every mosque, to every corner to see the parts of an election. But if you do election quicker and faster, it is possible, but in the end you will have a painful process. Right people will not come on board, people will not be aware, they will not recognize the legitimacy of the CDC members. This is some of the tough experience that we got. That is one.

And of course, different countries are different. Like climate-wise, the transfer of funding. If Bamyan if you pay money in three installments you are killing people in Bamyan. They have got only six months for implementation. If the two installments get there and the third and fourth will come the year after, you don't have that project anymore being implemented. So this is sometimes geographical and seasonal approach. At the beginning it needs to be calculated. Otherwise you design; okay, every project should receive four installments. It is like a blanket, the coverage. It doesn't happen in most of the countries, especially those that are in dire need. Those countries where they have that kind of facility, fair enough.

The bank has maybe copied it from Indonesia, so maybe it is a tropical area that really doesn't change winter and summer, so you might not have major changes. The bank focus was more...experience was more copied from that area.

MAJEED: Sure. Actually that leads me to one more question, which I forgot to ask. In terms of the financial system, NSP was implemented at the time when the country didn't have a proper financial system in place.

POPAL: Yes, yes.

MAJEED: I don't know if you had experience with that, and could you tell me a little bit about how that system was set up?

POPAL: *One of the driving factors which forced the government to make its banks functional was NSP. The other one was the salary of the military officers, soldiers and other—every province, every district they need to have. So that is really a driving factor. You know sometimes these developing projects and the World Bank, we are thankful to the World Bank for many, many good things they have done in this country. This was one of the things.*

When the project is there and the mechanism is established, it is a driving force for different entities of government to function better. Today, even some of the other government entities, they wish they had a system like NSP. But because of their limitations, because of the delegation of authority in the provinces, that is another problem. Afghanistan is a unitary system, we have a very centralized system. It is not like India to have a federal system or at least every state has its authority. But government is government. We cannot change much. The good thing is if there are justifiable reasons, and we have stronger lobby groups to really make things happen. The government says we cannot do it, don't give me the problem, give me the solution and recommendations, then it can be more practical. So that is what the banks and the government institutions are functioning better. Especially MRRD which is dealing with the major national program, so they had to build their capacity.

That was also a pressing factor on MRRD also, not only on the bank, but on the government of Afghanistan. So that is how things changed for the positive. We do hope that we have this program really with slight modification a better and a stronger program for this country.

MAJEED: Sure. What kind of modifications would you foresee?

POPAL: *The issue of, as we discussed, about timely payment to those villages, because otherwise the momentum is getting lost. Also as we said, the time should not be like ten years--we should not repeat the same scenario. We are growing. Communities are also growing. New added—components should be added. People will have okay NSP \$60,000, one or two projects. So then it is not as valuable as people think. Every five years there should be some changes, if not major. In ten years we should have a package which can benefit, people can benefit more, government can benefit more.*

As an example, if other ministries recognize the CDCs, they would have received more assistance. But more projects in a transparent and accountable manner and legitimacy increases. So the commitment of CDCs toward government would have increased. Now CDCs are labeled MRRD CDC, that is the sad side of it. It is not like a government CDC, it is not like a people's CDC. You won't have the ownership, that it is our CDC. Then it would have been different.

MAJEED: On that point, with it being seen as MRRD CDCs, earlier on in terms of MRRD and some of the relationship with other ministries--and of course a large amount of funding was going through the MRRD--how did the MRRD work with other ministries? Or did it not, and was that a source of contention in any way?

POPAL: *It became very serious at some point, because even at the cabinet level some of the ministers complained to the President. Now we have to close down our ministries. Why? Because MRRD is building clinics, they are building schools, they are just doing all other sectoral work, not only rural development. A lot of attention was going to MRRD, a lot of focus was on MRRD. So that is how sometimes it gets to that stage. Also there were two extremes, CDCs are left only with doing something which other ministries cannot do.*

MAJEED: True.

POPAL: *So there are two extreme sides. If you only cannot build your clinic in that particular area, then you ask me as MRRD. There is a choice. Can you do this clinic for me? These are also two extremes. We thought okay, the political entity once it is established, then the committees was a better solution.*

MAJEED: Yes, which is—.

POPAL: *Minister of Education, we have nothing to interfere, I don't want to spend your money. You talk to this entity, which is a national entity for this country. So then education committee is established. You just talk as much as you want, as detailed as you want, as brief as you want. But at least respect the platform, don't establish another structure.*

MAJEED: But how did MRRD manage these problems when they arose at the national level? Were certain projects taken away from it?

POPAL: *Ministry of Finance got unhappy to see focus was a lot on MRRD, other ministers were not happy. That is what the NSP itself was not appreciated to the extent it should have been. Well, you're only spending money, so what else does it bring to the country. What is the—those are things which MRRD can explain and justify did not have strong backing by other ministries. If MRRD had better played this whole deal having other countries to have the buy-in, then at the cabinet level they would have no problem with the Ministry of Finance.*

MAJEED: Sure.

POPAL: *Because today the World Bank is behind NSP, stronger. Otherwise the Ministry of Finance would not give the amount of money to NSP.*

MAJEED: Right, that was my question, how do—.

POPAL: *You are taking the bulk of this money and you just spend it in rural areas. Line ministries are getting a certain portion of funding. Line ministries are for delivery of services. Now MRRD does not have a specific really just brand that they sell. They have rural water supply, is MRRD. There are a few other projects. But now they are doing multiple—if you go through the list of NSP, more than hundred of clinics are constructed; more than hundred of schools are being constructed, many micro hydropower for electricity generation is there. But the Minister of Electricity and Power can ask where does the income go for electricity generation, it is a source for the country.*

MAJEED: Yes.

POPAL: *So these are still some of the issues, but other ministries, because of their capacity they do not have, they hope they find it and then they can do the work. MRRD might not even need that, because now MRRD is one of the functioning ministries and they are doing a good job.*

MAJEED: Great. Thank you so much Mr. Popal. This was a wonderful interview.