

Reviews

MARY BETH WILSON, *Impacts of Participatory Development in Afghanistan: A Call to Reframe Expectations. The National Solidarity Programme in the Community of Shah Raheem*. (Studien zum Modernen Orient 24). Berlin: Klaus-Schwarz-Verlag, 2013. 524 pages, €39.80. ISBN 978-3-87997-431-3

Poverty in Afghanistan remains persistent and security challenges are increasing. Afghanistan is ranked the second poorest country in the world, with 70 percent of the population living below the poverty line of 2 US dollars. The vast majority of the population (about 80 percent) live in rural areas, where the poverty rate is even higher, literacy rates are lower, and services are scarcer. Government institutions, as defined in the constitution, either do not yet exist below the provincial level or their capacities are very weak, making delivery of the most basic services all the more difficult. An estimated 1,800 illegal groups, in addition to the resurgent Taliban force, threaten security in many parts of the country, and a series of attacks in the past couple of years have illustrated that even the capital city of Kabul is not adequately protected against them.

The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) is the largest development programme in Afghanistan, and aims to build local governance and provide basic public infrastructure in rural Afghanistan. According to World Bank data, since its inauguration in 2003, NSP has established 32,000 Community Development Councils (CDCs) across 361 districts in all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces and has financed nearly 65,000 development projects at the total cost of 1.5 billion US dollars. About 17 million rural people are claimed to have benefited from improved access to basic services.

Mary Beth Wilson puts NSP under the microscope by investigating the programme's impact in the community of Shah Raheem at Balkh province in the north of Afghanistan. In her dissertation she starts by presenting an overview of development theories (Chapter One). It serves to show that "participatory development has re-emerged as a favoured development approach" (p. 415). Remarkably, she passes judgment without even considering the international debate about aid effectiveness. It is difficult to avoid the impression that Wilson often uses the terms "development" and "development aid" interchangeably.

The comprehensive literature review is followed by the presentation of her framework of analysis (Chapter Two), which investigates the programme's impact on four areas: personal, economic and social security and empowerment. This framework, however, is not congruent with the NSP objectives, which are more moderate and not mentioned by Wilson at all. In Chapter Three Wilson describes in detail her predominantly qualitative methodological approach,

which includes a household survey and interviews. It is noticeable that all instruments were applied after the NSP interventions were completed in Shah Raheem.

Next, Wilson approaches her research location in a number of concentric circles. First, she renarrates development aid (not development) in Afghanistan (Chapter Four) and introduces the NSP at the national level with the question: "Is a participatory development approach an answer to Afghanistan's development problems?" (p. 226). She does not provide a straightforward answer. However, she tends towards "yes" throughout the text. But does she really mean development or does she unintentionally mix development problems with problems of development aid? The demand for participatory development and empowerment derives from failures in development aid. With her call to reframe expectations she shares the trust in reforming the aid business with its "cartel of good intentions" (see William Easterly (2002): *The Cartel of Good Intentions. The Problem of Bureaucracy in Foreign Aid. Journal of Economic Policy Reform* 5(4), pp. 223-250). As a matter of fact, this issue is different from investigating developments in Afghanistan's rural communities.

In the next circle, the district of Khulm, where Shah Raheem is located, is explored (Chapter Five). After patiently reading 324 pages we arrive at Shah Raheem, and the implementation of NSP in the community is discussed (Chapter Six). The hard facts are: NSP has established a CDC in Shah Raheem and it has implemented three infrastructure projects: a deep well with generator, a shallow well with hand pump and a community centre at a total cost of 22,400 US dollars. The community contributed additional ten percent of the cost in cash or kind.

In the next chapter the analytical framework is applied to the impact of the NSP on the personal, economic and social security and empowerment in the community of Shah Raheem. Finally, the findings are reviewed with the focus on expected and observed changes in the community and "hidden realities" (p. 425). Let us look at a few of these. The research reports disillusioning findings about the huge discrepancies between the very high expectations of a national programme and the reality in a village. First, the community of Shah Raheem is artificial in the sense that three villages were brought together in order to qualify for NSP support. Wilson reports good news about the shallow well with hand pump, which is used, and repair and maintenance is paid for by community members with their own money. The deep well, however, is used only when the nearby river has run dry. Funds for operating and maintaining the generator are usually not available. Unfortunately, we are not informed about any effects on the state of health in the community. The basic structure of the community centre is of poor quality and rarely used. Despite presenting numerous facts and figures, the understanding of attitudes and behaviour of community members regarding the use or not of the NSP infrastructure remains limited. This seems to indicate the limitations of the methodology and the

empirical data, which were collected after the NSP interventions were completed. The findings rely exclusively on the perceptions of interviewees and their willingness to share them with an outsider. With empathy for the villagers Wilson, nevertheless, detects mistrust in the community and describes it as “sign of a tenuous social setting” (p. 388). This mistrust seems to have survived the NSP intervention and, therefore, deserves more attention.

The investigations by Wilson indicate confusion about the NSP projects themselves and the mandate of the CDC. The CDC and at least two projects are not sustainable without external assistance. The participation by women was poor and did not correspond to the high expectations. The impacts regarding personal, economic and social security and empowerment are summarized as small and incremental.

The recently released randomized impact evaluation of the NSP by the World Bank – though highly critical of the impact of the programme – provides a different reading altogether. Wilson’s micro-level perspective does not intend to be representative; nevertheless, it provides valuable insights and enforces the need for accompanying research in support of programme planning and implementation. I should like to add the need for strengthening research capacities in Afghanistan by cooperating with local research institutions and universities in interdisciplinary research projects.

Wilson’s dissertation is “a call for greater honesty in the development field” (p. 430). Perhaps even outspoken opponents of development aid can agree. After all, this brings us back to issues of development aid, far removed from developments in Shah Raheem.

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DANIEL NAUJOKS, *Migration, Citizenship, and Development. Diasporic Membership Policies and Overseas Indians in the United States*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013. 432 pages, £30.00. ISBN 978-0-19-808498-3

Many scholars in the field of migration have observed a recent shift in research interests and research demands. A new focus seems to be evolving around the simple question of how transnational migrants can contribute to the economic and social development of their countries of origin. The opportunities allegedly arising from the so-called “migration-development nexus” have motivated several countries to take a more active interest in their overseas population. Governments are now increasingly trying to “engage” diaspora communities, emphasizing the bond between the migrants and their country of origin. The question of identity, belonging and citizenship of emigrants, dealt with through specific “membership policies”, is assumed to have acquired an economic dimension. In a remarkable two-way mechanism, countries of origin are more