

The Citizens' Charter: Contributions to Poverty Reduction ¹

This brief discusses various aspects of the Citizens' Charter approach to poverty reduction. These include incorporating a deeper understanding of poverty dynamics into the program's architecture, engaging provincial and district level authorities and programs, promoting the strategic use of poverty data to inform policymakers, and testing and then scaling up pro-poor initiatives.

PRO-POOR APPROACHES IN THE CITIZENS' CHARTER

Staff capacity: pro-poor mind-sets and attitudes

Between 2003 and 2015, following decades of conflict, the Government of Afghanistan implemented the National Solidarity Program (NSP) to help rural communities mitigate and overcome the destruction of village infrastructure, the erosion of livelihoods, and the fragmentation of society.

The NSP was built around the idea of letting rural communities identify and rank their infrastructure development needs, which could then be built from a fixed block grant transfer. The means for agreeing on what those priorities were and for overseeing the proper execution of the works was through a Community Development Council (CDC). This was a representative village-level development body elected by the villagers, that would engage in participatory planning, allocate development funds, and oversee the implementation of subprojects.

Although intended to promote participatory planning, this emergency program initially gave more emphasis to infrastructure development, with only a limited focus on building equitable, inclusive, and pro-poor development governance institutions. And the capacity-building work for the CDCs lacked perspective in terms of how power, class, and gender relations reflect marginalization and exclusion.

As a result, local patterns of inequality were, for the most part, taken as given. Neither staff nor members of the elected CDCs paid much attention to how existing inequalities and forms of exclusion could be addressed.

References:

1. Brigitta Bode, Social and Participatory Development Consultant. August 2018.

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It was only in the later years of the NSP that the program began to explore how poverty dynamics and local practices exacerbate the income shortages of the poor. But in 2015, NSP was mandated to implement a (large) pilot rural public works scheme that aimed to reduce seasonal hunger in the winter months – or “lean season”.² It was at this time that a focus on understanding poverty became paramount. An in-house study explored seasonal hunger and coping mechanisms, labor and loan relations, and to a lesser extent, the factors affecting women’s mobility and their participation in labor markets.

The goal of this work was to guide not only the rural public work scheme, but also the development of the NSP’s follow-up program, the Citizens’ Charter. As with the NSP, the heart of the Citizens’ Charter would be the participatory planning and management process overseen by locally elected CDCs. Although the Citizens’ Charter built on the NSP foundation, it expanded the objectives and scope to include the delivery of services that required the participation of other government ministries, such as health and education. The Charter would use the same participatory planning procedures as the NSP but could now address technical issues, such as how to sustain the presence of doctors and teachers, how to achieve national standards for service delivery, and how multiple ministries could use bottom-up planning processes to reach the poor without being captured by local elites.

UNDERSTANDING POVERTY DYNAMICS

The patterns that emerged from the study and the participatory analysis done in the “training” villages were

combined with socioeconomic information from quantitative and other sources. Then findings pointed to a number of multidimensional drivers of poverty, including:

1. Landlessness and marginal land holdings that are insufficient to provide for the basic needs of a household.³
2. Conflict, which causes death, displacement of families, and loss of assets.
3. Underemployment among a large group of men, who rely on unskilled, seasonal daily wage labor.
4. Low daily wage rates and rising food prices.⁴
5. Seasonal hunger leading to “erosive” coping strategies such as the sale of assets, loans, and advanced wages.
6. Poor health and the stunting of children, leading to long-term and even generational wellbeing implications.⁵
7. Lack of access or unequal access to services (health, drinking water, irrigation, transport, energy, education) and natural resources (irrigation water, pasture, forests).
8. Exploitative relations between classes (advance selling of labor, money lending at usurious interest rates).⁶
9. Vulnerability to natural disasters (periodic droughts, floods, etc.).
10. Exorbitant costs for social events (weddings, funerals) and bride prices, forcing families to sell valuable assets or take loans.⁷
11. Poor sanitation.⁸

References:

2. The Maintenance Cash Grant (MCG) program under the NSP channeled \$73 million of unused NSP CDC block grants to over 11,000 communities creating much needed short-term employment with 800,000 households benefitting from the additional labor days. MCG was implemented in various phases, with the third phase providing on average 20 labor days of work, allowing households to purchase basic food items to mitigate food shortages in the lean season.
3. Over 60 percent all rural households are landless and half of those that do own irrigated land, own less than 2.5 jeribs. (CSO, 2018, National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2016-17. Afghanistan Living Condition Survey, Kabul, CSO: pp. 89-90).
4. Between 2011 and 2015, real wages fell by 15 percent in agriculture and 11 percent in construction, whilst wheat flour prices increased; see online: <http://www.fews.net/central-asia/afghanistan/food-security-outlook-update/november-015> accessed Feb 6, 2016.
5. See GoIRA, 2016. The Maintenance Cash Grant Initiative: Case Studies from Balkh, Herat, and Nangarhar. Kabul, Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, National Solidarity Program III.
6. Ibid.

Some causes of poverty (items one to four in the list given) go far beyond the capacity of a community or cluster of communities to solve. They require strategic government intervention through improved security, regional development, or public investment schemes that increase overall productivity and can address landlessness and under-employment. Other causes, however, can be more easily addressed by government and community interventions (e.g. improved service delivery, access to resources, and sanitation, disaster preparedness). And some can be mitigated by communities' own interventions through collective action (e.g. pushing back against exploitative relations, reducing social expenses that require high interest loans, etc.).

Poor groups do not only face income poverty. Conflict, transformational but often disruptive economic and demographic changes, and even increased social mobility are weakening traditional mechanisms of social insurance such as extended family ties, unpaid community service, and redistributive rituals. Poverty's visible phenomena, such as widespread seasonal hunger, are not simply an outcome of "market failures." They are an expression of the loss of social entitlements and risk-mitigating cultural practices, coupled with an overall lack of access to new public services and entitlements because of poor households' lack of voice and because of their exclusion from local decision-making.

Recognizing that local development programs can only complement the kinds of growth-promoting structural reforms that governments must carry out to end poverty, the possibilities of community interventions to improve poor people's successful participation in growth are nevertheless virtually unlimited. Communities can choose to end social and cultural practices that destroy surplus or marginalize the poor. Community involvement in local infrastructure construction and service-delivery oversight reduces costs, dramatically speeds up delivery, and increases ownership and sustainability. Community managed delivery of clean drinking

water will reduce illnesses, days lost at work, expenditures for health services and medicines.⁹ Using community partnerships to increase access to roads, energy, and irrigation will improve poor people's ability to reach services, product, and labor markets. And enlisting communities to complete downstream irrigation networks will generate more workdays for the masses of unskilled, landless laborers as more land is brought under cultivation or cropping intensities increase.

WHAT NEXT: DIGGING IN AND SPREADING OUT

The Citizens' Charter is part of a broader national anti-poverty strategy that couples improved growth with structural reforms such as improved land administration and land security, market connectivity, and labor mobility, intended to raise rural productivity and improve access to markets. The Citizens' Charter's chief role in this strategy is to ensure that the opportunities that growth brings are not limited to the well-off, but that through better governance and improved representation, poor people also benefit from the new opportunities.

Achieving this requires a constant process of experimentation, analysis, and improvements to the Citizens' Charter's design. But not everything can be launched at the same time; priorities and sequencing are fundamental. Multiple innovations need to advance learning, but they must also be feasible to manage and sufficiently significant given a context of widespread conflict, limited managerial capacities, and an extremely diverse social and economic environment.

Aware of these constraints, the following section summarizes three of the initiatives that policymakers and technical teams have proposed as priorities for the coming three years. These are:

- Improving the engagement of provincial and district authorities and managers.

References:

7. Ibid.; GoIRA, 2015. Fifth National CDC Consultative Conference: Building Self-Reliant and Prosperous Communities through Pro-Poor, Inclusive, and Participatory Development. Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, National Solidarity Program III;
8. CSO, 2016.
9. The CC will shortly roll out its Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) strategy to achieve and end to open defecation and provide safe confinement of excreta in all communities. This and the awareness campaign that is part of CLTS to conscientize the population of the relationship between hygiene and prevalent diseases, will be crucial to work towards a healthy population.

- Using poverty analysis for policymakers.
- Special pro-poor anti-poverty programs:
 - One program to reduce welfare shocks to the very poor.
 - A second to increase gains from better marketing.
 - A third push to improve rural–urban linkages so that poor villagers can retain more value from what they produce.

1. ENGAGE WITH PROVINCIAL AND DISTRICT MANAGEMENT TEAMS ON PRO-POOR WORK

To date, the NSP and Citizens' Charter programs have been focused heavily on building the quality of program staff and raising the quality of training of partner non-governmental organizations. The hands-on, intense, residential training has improved understanding of poverty dynamics, created a sensitivity to power relations, and emphasized the need for good facilitation and for social organizers to follow the principles of inclusion, equity, and participation.¹⁰

Yet, with its expansive implementation modality the Citizens' Charter must now engage provincial and district authorities and managers more directly than has been the case in the past. The national government has provided clear signals that it will be embarking on a long-term program of deconcentrating and then decentralizing administrative and financial authorities.¹¹ Increasing subnational government's understanding of Citizens' Charter and their role within the program takes on increased importance. The situation is potentially delicate because the Citizens' Charter provides direct financial transfers to communities, rather than developing an intergovernmental transfer system. This retains the principle of full community decision-making control, but potentially causes resentment among local governments that feel bypassed rather than helped by the devolution of responsibilities, despite the obvious efficiency gains.

This problem is being addressed in two ways. At the level of policy, the Citizens' Charter management group is part of the central government's planning team for designing the subnational governance roadmap and national priority development program. The roadmap gives local governments specific functions for consultation with the Citizens' Charter Community Development Councils (CDCs) as well as responsibility for overseeing the quality of service delivery by the program's participating agencies. It also provides normative guidelines for community representation through the CDCs in district and provincial assemblies.

At the more technical level, the government ministries involved in the Citizens' Charter have over 100 provincial and district managers and senior staff whose understanding of the process and objective of the social and institutional work is still somewhat limited. As government managers, there is a natural tendency to give priority to top-down targets and timelines, despite local factors, such as intra-community conflict, technical mistakes, or problems with obtaining supplies, that inevitably produce variance. However, forcing compliance with overly rigid timetables and formal indicators can quickly lead to a breakdown in trust between citizens and the facilitators and weaken program quality.

Citizens' Charter has made some initial efforts to improve its understanding using both top-down and bottom-up means. Because of the program's status as a national flagship, the country's president has carried out direct consultations with provincial governors during his monthly meetings. National and regional workshops and socialization seminars attended by cabinet officials have provided a consistent message of central government support. The government has also instituted high-level incentive reforms through the financial architecture of Citizens' Charter, which lets the Ministry of Finance re-allocate funds from low-performing participating ministries to better performing ones¹².

Just as important have been follow-up trainings for provincial and district staff. Building a deepened understanding of

References:

10. See "The Case for Substantive Facilitation" in ISE's Next Generation CDD series

11. Afghanistan is a unitary rather than a federal state. In practical terms this means that for the near future, provinces and districts will continue to be representatives of the central government rather than autonomous entities with revenue, policies, and programs of their own. Thus, basic services will continue to be delivered by national agencies such as education and health and not by provincial governments. However, the planning and monitoring authority of subnational governments will increase considerably over time.

the program generates high levels of commitment and also ensures that important processes are not rushed, nor deadlines set that work contrary to the program quality for which the Charter aims. Further, as more and more line agencies join the program,¹³ it becomes increasingly important to invest in making sure that these new agencies understand the program's core principles and operating modalities, and are properly rewarded for following them. Brief trainings have been conducted, but more are needed. Under the program there is also a proposal to link success in the field with government staff performance reviews and coaching, though this has not yet been approved.

Scale up subnational pro-poor initiatives and collective actions through learning circles

Communities' failure to question or act upon economically and socially detrimental practices is not always due to existing power relations. Weak facilitation, or a history of internal conflict, for example, can block effective collective action. Regardless of the cause, having community members meet elected representatives and committed community members from other communities to learn about their work and how they achieved success can inspire leaders to initiate, or demand support, to achieve change. Champion communities that can explain to neighbors how they confronted and solved common problems are emerging. These are a valuable resource that may be formalized through learning circle workshops that engage multiple communities and their facilitators. Such learning circles will also allow social organizers to learn from their peers and the communities how they can improve their facilitation and strategies of mobilization.

Ensure the technical and institutional strengthening of CDCs, CCDCs and their subcommittees

Citizens' Charter program staff are building the capacity of rural CDCs and clustered CDCs (CCDCs) to engage in analyzing poverty diagnostic data that will help communities set overall priorities. But areas for improvement such as

agriculture, natural resource management, and irrigation require technical input. Technical ministries such as rural reconstruction, agriculture, or energy and water will need to create formal working groups that meet frequently with CDC subcommittees. During these meetings, they will need to discuss the findings from the community profiles and gap analyses that provide the poverty profiles, indicate the key crops, identify the mean and average sizes of landholdings, and the percentage of communities' population that faces seasonal hunger. They will also need to consider strategies and technologies that could support the various types of farmers found in a community to increase the agricultural outputs of their lands.

Cluster CDCs to engage subnational governments

The sheer number of Afghanistan's highly dispersed communities¹⁴ militates against direct contact with local governments and service providers. Under the Citizens' Charter, all communities are clustered, with four people from each CDC (including the Chair and Vice Chair) joining their Cluster Community Development Council ('CCDCs'). These higher-level bodies each represent anywhere from five to eight communities and have a direct link to the District Citizens' Charter Management Committee (the 'District Committee'), which is led by the District Governor and includes the most senior ministry representatives for district-level health, education, agriculture, and rural rehabilitation and development.

The District Committee meets quarterly with each CCDC to discuss the cluster's development progress and the resolution of grievances related to the Citizens' Charter, or to send the complaints on to the Provincial Citizens' Charter Management Committee. The District Council also provides a platform through which locally elected representatives can share their concerns – for example, how to respond to a natural disaster, poor crop output because of lack of rainfall, food shortages or conflict over a natural resource.

References:

12. For more on allocating national budgets and rewarding performance see the Institute for State Effectiveness's work on Team-Based Performance Management and Auction Based-Budgeting.
13. The Citizens' Charter's initial design involved seven ministries, of which four are operational sector ministries (education, health, agriculture, energy). As it scales up, more ministries are using the CDC structures for special programs such as disaster relief, migrant's reintegration, or cultural heritage protection, among others.
14. At present there are at least 35,000 recognized communities.

The institutionalized linkage between CCDCs and the district governors represents an important step towards developing state–society relations. The District Committees will, over time, become critical units for accountability and service delivery. CCDCs are encouraged to present their work – the poverty profiles of their cluster, crop patterns, etc. – to educate the governors and line ministries on community dynamics and livelihood strategies. At the same time, locally elected representatives to the CCDCs have periodic opportunities to meet the most senior government official of their district and line ministries to share via community scorecards their membership’s assessment of government service provision and demand the resolution of key issues.

2. DEPLOYING BETTER POVERTY DATA FOR POLICYMAKERS

Make use of vast and valuable MIS data to understand contextual patterns

Over the past five years, Afghanistan has made big improvements to its statistical records and management information systems (MIS), including the National Vulnerability Monitoring System and other poverty tracking surveys. Analysis of the data provides new insights into population dynamics and poverty – particularly for understanding possible new classes of poor, such as those affected by natural disasters, conflict, and displacement. It also aids better understanding of the pathways out of poverty, where occupational and spatial changes are likely to play an important role. This analytical work will be done primarily through the government’s High Poverty Council and will be critical for the ongoing, long-term design of the Charter.

However, while national – and to some extent provincial – statistics are improving, disaggregating national surveys to a level that is a sufficiently granular to account for local-level variance remains a long way off. Complementing the national surveys with the analyses put together by facilitators and CDCs, and the community profiles collected by village volunteers, provides valuable information on important topics. Many of these issues are often disguised or underreported – for example, land concentration, number of households that are food insecure, rates of women selling labor, real wage rates, debt, violence and insecurity, and so on.

This descriptive work yields a typology of communities that allows consideration of how the Citizens’ Charter’s various activities play out in relation to different contexts. The community “types” that emerge can be presented in the learning circles, where staff and community representatives may discuss strategies and share practical lessons. This field-level analysis can be used to refine the mobilization processes of introducing the program to communities, making it more effective in villages that tend to be harder to engage in participatory and inclusive development.

Advocate for pro-poor approaches at higher levels

Tabulated statistics are the vocabulary of government planning. Armed with data on poverty and an understanding of the local dynamics, the Citizens’ Charter team can improve the work among other ministries, the cabinet-level Poverty Council, donors, and civil society organizations that are also formulating pro-poor development or advocacy programs. For the High Poverty Council, a focus on structural issues – landlessness, capture of valuable properties, corruption, under-employment, lack of regional development – will be key. This will help the government to develop and fund policy reforms that can redistribute productive assets, end the problem of recurrent debt, and remove constraints that block poor people from engaging successfully with developing markets. Field data and case studies can also help the national government formulate better, more prioritized strategies for dealing with structural problems associated with the rule of law, such as land alienation, violence, and access to justice.

3. LOWERING RISK, INCREASING VALUE: MAINTAINING CONSTRUCTION AND CASH GRANTS, THE VILLAGE GRAIN BANK INITIATIVE, AND IMPROVING RURAL–URBAN LINKAGES

Citizens’ Charter programs are intended to improve overall village welfare and productivity by guaranteeing basic levels of service delivery. But there is also a need for specialized programs to overcome the particular problems faced by the very poorest households. As discussed in the previous section of this brief, poverty must be actively reproduced to be sustained over time. Unfortunately, in Afghanistan there

is no shortage of factors that keep poor people poor. Above and beyond the structural drivers of poverty cited earlier, there are two key drivers of sustained poverty: the frequency of natural and social shocks that wipe out any capital reserves, and chronic food shortages that place the urgent need to find food ahead of other priorities like children's education or finding off-season work in other locations.

Within the Citizens' Charter, there are two initiatives to address these constraints – one which provides special block grants for labor-intensive works to communities with high levels of returning, vulnerable internally displaced and returnee populations, and the Community Grain Bank Initiative.

The Maintenance and Construction Cash Grants and social inclusion grants

The Maintenance Cash Grant (MCG) program was first piloted under the NSP, where it was meant to provide a self-targeting source of short-term employment of roughly 20 days. Unlike standard cash transfers, whose primary goal is to smooth out poor people's expenditures regardless of how they spend the money, the MCG program had the more specific secondary purpose of rehabilitating productive village infrastructure.

The program was generally successful in both getting money to villages without corruption and ensuring that village labor went to productive activities. But field analysis showed that there was plenty of scope to improve the quality of work and the inclusion of the very poorest, who were often women, older people or people with disabilities. These people often could not participate directly in public work schemes – the former because of sociocultural limitations and the latter because of their physical impairments.

To address the shortcomings of the MCG program in the NSP, the Maintenance and Construction Cash Grants (MCCG) program in the Citizens' Charter made the following improvements:

1. Larger grants to ensure that a considerable number of poor households in each community covered have access to additional workdays.
2. Target direct beneficiaries based on the Citizens' Charter well-being analysis, which identifies poor and very poor households with specific criteria, agreed up on with the larger community.
3. 40 days' labor for each poor household that qualifies to ensure that the entire lean season (three months) can be mitigated through the funds earned.
4. Set the remuneration at the high end – i.e. AFN 350 (\$4.40) per day – to allow the program to perform better in terms of its social protection function and to address the intrinsic need to supplement the limited labor days available in farming and construction.
5. Allow for rehabilitation and new construction and relax the ratio of labor vs inputs from 70-30 to 60-40.
6. Supplement the “reduce seasonal hunger” campaign in these high returnee/IDP districts with matching grants of up to \$2,000. These funds can be used to assist those very poor households that cannot participate in the rural public work scheme (for example, women-headed households, or those in which the men are too old to work, have disabilities, or drug dependencies).

The grain bank (“reduce seasonal hunger”) initiative

The grain bank initiative is designed to reduce seasonal hunger among the very poorest people – that is, community members who suffer from periodic or sustained food scarcity. Case studies showed that the number of very poor households can reach as high as 15% of community members. Unlike “ordinary” poor households, who face food shortages during the lean season but, with men as the primary earners, retain the means to earn income locally or migrate seasonally to cities or neighboring countries, the main income earners in very poor households are women. Because women's mobility is restricted (more in some areas than others), very poor households face hunger for prolonged periods and generally have a poor diet.

The grain bank initiative builds on Afghanistan's strong traditions of social solidarity and cultural beliefs in social justice. Better-off and middle-class households, local businesses, and those that have left the community to build their lives elsewhere voluntarily contribute a share of their harvests or income to a community-owned food reserve that provides the poor with a guaranteed food security floor over the course of the lean season.

This program for the very poor is still in its early stages. But in just nine months, grain banks have been established in over 2,100 communities, and more than \$600,000 in food and non-food items have been mobilized by communities. While

there is a need to conduct further case studies and look into aspects of this work in more detail (e.g. the effectiveness of CDCs and key sub-committees, how they drive the mobilization and collect food and cash, food storage, distribution, record keeping, community monitoring, inclusion and exclusion errors, etc.), early results are promising. Positive results so far also include secondary benefits, such as rebuilding trust in local authority as well as a sense of responsibility among local elites.

Urban–rural linkages

If the public works scheme and the grain bank initiative will reduce the impact of periodic shocks on poor and very poor households, Citizens' Charter's investment to improve rural–urban linkages are intended to expand opportunities for poor people through direct access to input, product, and labor markets.

The urban Citizens' Charter is working in four cities – Kandahar, Jalalabad, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Herat – which opens up the opportunity for rural CDCs to “twin” with their urban counterparts. The program will begin this linking work by exploring with adjacent CDCs and key individuals such as farmers of various landholdings, laborers, and small business owners, possible complementarities between a city and its hinterland. This might be in terms of crops, services, or skilled and unskilled labor.

This exploration is likely to identify opportunities, including opportunities for neighboring communities to pool transport and seasonal sales arrangements for bringing produce to urban markets without middlemen. Information about urban crop prices, goods, services, and skilled and unskilled labor demands can also be exchanged through a simple technology, such as text messages. With more direct access to urban markets, poor farmers are also more likely to discover short-term employment opportunities during the agricultural lean season, reducing their reliance on moneylenders when it comes time to plant, and increasing their exposure to improved farm inputs such as certified seeds and hatchlings.

The work ahead will build on expanding peoples' options and choices. For example, when middlemen buy up crops purchased at the farm-gate, the producers usually lose the profit to be had from the higher prices in cities. By helping farmers sell directly to urban markets through pooled transport, direct contracting arrangements, and shared

market spaces, urban–rural linkages can double or even triple the share of the sales price that comes back to the farmer. If successful, the proposed twinning with urban CDCs will provide their rural counterparts with better knowledge of local market conditions, reduced costs if they have to stay overnight in the city, and opportunities to build their own marketing chains through the urban CDCs.

The region's economic geography – cities and their interactions with surrounding settlements – must be considered to establish new or strengthen existing linkages effectively. For the most part, middlemen are not just exploitative: they usually provide key functions in terms of credit, transport, quality control, storage, and any post-harvest processing. Citizens' Charter's analytical functions help villagers gain a holistic perspective on what is involved with market sales so that risks are properly identified and alternative ways to provide these functions are part of the community's marketing plan.

CONCLUSION

This brief summarizes the improvements being made to the Citizens' Charter to increase its ability to reach and benefit poor households. Its starting point has been that while sustained, large-scale poverty reduction requires a significant improvement to national growth and the development of a transformational, industrialized economy, the Citizens' Charter can make big improvements in helping that process become more inclusive. But to succeed in this goal, policymakers and program managers need to have a more fine-grained understanding of the poverty dynamics within communities. This will help ensure that interventions are addressing perceived needs and providing feedback between poor people and program staff.

Three types of improvement have been paramount. First, a significant amount of upfront investment in skills, analysis, and coaching was needed to improve the awareness of program staff and to make the Citizens' Charter team more of a learning organization rather than a more standard delivery system. Second, quantitative and qualitative field data will need to be collected on an ongoing basis and fed back into the models and procedures that the program is using. Third, special program initiatives, such as the community grain banks and the urban market linkage program, can overcome some the constraints on villagers' growth, welfare, and ability for self-improvement.