

BY STEVE ROMANOFF

## Working Through the Challenges Of Afghanistan

In December 2004, DAI began work on the Afghanistan Immediate Needs Program (AINP) in Nangarhar Province, the heart of the country's eastern region. Nangarhar was a traditional poppy producer, but between 2004 and 2005 farmers almost eliminated the crop. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) designed AINP as an employment-generation program to reach former poppy growers, and by January 2006 the program had worked with 100,000 people in 600 villages to rehabilitate irrigation systems, flood-protection walls, and roads while women participated in garden and handicrafts programs. Although there were security incidents, in general the work proceeded expeditiously.

By all measures, this was a highly successful program in a demanding environment. The explicit goal was to generate 2.5 million days of paid employment and training, mostly for former poppy producers. Implementation relied on a "learning process approach"—we learned as we proceeded to meet, and eventually surpass, our goal. This article outlines—on a very practical level—how that success was achieved, in the form of seven lessons learned.

### 1. Participatory Methods— Working with Village Councils

In addition to coordinating with government authorities at provincial and district levels, any project in rural Nangarhar must engage village and tribal leaders:

- **Shura:** the council of village elders (present in 85 percent of larger villages)
- **Malek:** village leader or headman—likely to be a traditional leader on the shura—who serves as a link to the district government (99 percent of larger villages)
- **Mullah:** religious leader (92 percent of larger villages)

### THE CHALLENGE OF NANGARHAR

Nangarhar is a culturally conservative province with currents of social and cultural change. The society is structured by tribal identity, patrilineal kinship, and village authority, and Islam is powerful at all levels. Subgovernors and police are present in district centers, but the school teacher is the only government presence in most villages. Conflict between villages is common. Militia leaders or "warlords" had strong influence during the decades of war, and the drug trade has become an increasingly powerful force. The presence of international military forces and the shift to elections for choosing provincial leaders are new elements whose impact remains unclear.

Opium poppy plantings in Nangarhar averaged 17,000 hectares between 1994 and 2005, representing 23 percent of Afghanistan's total, according to United Nations data. In late 2004, Nangarhar's governor endorsed the national policy to abandon poppy production and conveyed that message to farmers through the police, district subgovernors, and village elders. Part of his message was the promise of international assistance. AINP arrived at the end of the 2004 planting season.

Most farmers did not plant poppy in November and December of 2004, and production fell from the long-term average to roughly 1,000 hectares. Of this decline, more than 90 percent was due to voluntary restraint rather than eradication. Toward the end of the project, AINP asked workers why they had stopped growing poppy. The results were surprising in that they highlight the influence of central government and international donors.

#### Why did you stop growing poppy?

Asked by the President to do so	37%
In order to receive donor monies	25%
Islam says it is unlawful	15%
Wished to avoid eradication	12%
It's a dangerous occupation	9%
Asked by the provincial governor to do so	7%
Asked by a village leader to do so	3%



- **Mirab:** “water master,” in charge of agricultural irrigation (60 percent of larger villages)

Conflict resolution, for example, relies on the malek and shura, followed by the mullah and the district subgovernor, according to AINP surveys. In contrast, “commanders” (or “warlords”) are looked to for conflict resolution in only a third of villages.

The village councils, and sometimes tribal leaders in the district center, were tremendous assets for AINP. The shuras helped select the subprojects, and then they worked with AINP engineers to design them. Sometimes, when AINP engineers arrived to plan a subproject, they found the shuras did not agree with AINP’s vision. In many cases the shuras were right, and the AINP team tried to adapt. For example, we originally planned to work on simple irrigation canals, but found that many villages were more interested in traditional underground channels called karezes (infiltration galleries). Eventually, AINP rehabilitated dozens of them.

Shuras selected the laborers, a sometimes complex task involving negotiations among villagers over who would work and for how long. The mirabs, responsible to the shura, were of great importance in organizing work. Another important task was conflict resolution. It is inevitable that there will be conflict when a project straightens a road, interrupts irrigation, works with women, allocates labor, and so on, and the shuras handled those issues. Shuras also provided security by escorting AINP staff. Many shuras agreed to maintain the works rehabilitated under the program, or assigned that duty to the mirabs.

We did encounter some problems working with shuras. For example, women traditionally do not participate in shuras. A few shuras thought the project should pay people for giving up poppy, rather than for working. Others wanted to collect part of the cost of the subprojects as a fee. Some wanted to add workers who would not work. And parochial interests inevitably played a role. But AINP explained its rules in these matters, and shuras accepted them. Finally, most shuras have limited administrative capacity. The National Solidarity Program is working to increase that capacity, but progress is limited because most Afghans are not literate.

## 2. Project Administration: Get in the Field

*Direct implementation made the program faster and reduced costs.* An unusual feature of AINP was that the prime contractor, DAI, implemented most of the fieldwork for employment generation. DAI hired 85 percent of the village-level workers directly. Even for subcontracted work, DAI’s experience with direct implementation allowed us to provide close supervision. Subcontracts or grants were a better mechanism than direct implementation when the subcontractors had relevant social or physical capital that gave them specific advantages. For example, the work Relief International (RI) and Rubia had

done with women in Nangarhar made these organizations particularly effective in household support projects under AINP.

*Local people filled most of the technical positions.* By hiring locals, DAI found committed and capable staff, avoided resentments, and improved its knowledge of local conditions.

*Staff spent most of their time in the field.* Within weeks of starting work, AINP set up district offices where site engineers could sleep from Saturday to Tuesday. Senior engineers and the chief engineer worked with shuras to plan subprojects and resolve problems, and the Chief of Party was in the field frequently. Accountants worked with shuras to arrange payments and security, and monitoring and evaluation staff regularly visited the shuras.

*USAID provided hands-on supervision.* USAID’s office in Jalalabad enabled communications with the Mission in Kabul and with the governor. Before the project began, USAID had facilitated an Alternative Livelihoods Technical Working Group that permitted effective work with the provincial authorities.

## 3. Finding Space for Women

Providing women with income-generating opportunities in Nangarhar was challenging because women are typically poorly educated and many husbands and families resist the idea of their working. Even educated women have difficulty working outside the home. Most women are not free to travel, buy materials, sell finished goods, or network. Many bear a heavy childcare burden. Special consideration must be given to working and eating space for female workers, for their own comfort and reputations and for the comfort of the male staff. Still, there was room for innovation. AINP workshops revealed demand for girls’ education and clinics, and elders were concerned for widows and poor women.

Despite difficulties, women worked or trained on 450,000 days under AINP—more than three times the goal—and accounted for 15 percent of employment days. Of that total, 285,000 days were spent training women, for which they were paid \$600,000; the remainder was for work on mainstream projects. How was this accomplished?

Subcontractor RI already had a women’s program in place and undertook most of this work. The main RI subproject, reaching almost 3,000 women per day, involved kitchen gardens, bee-keeping, home-based dairy production, and poultry farming. AINP grantee Rubia, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that markets crafts, also based its work on a prior project—a grant allowed it to improve to a point where 70 percent of its crafts were saleable. DAI mainstreamed women by hiring them as cooks on labor-intense projects, work they could do at home, and conducted one subproject under which refugee women harvested olives.

AINP's final survey showed that most shuras were pleased with the inclusion of women. In short, this traditional society allowed sufficient latitude for AINP to implement support for women—in ways respectful of local custom—despite cultural limitations on women's roles.

#### 4. Selecting Projects I: Participation

AINP's principal job sources were canal rehabilitation (43 percent), flood protection (30 percent), road rehabilitation (11 percent), and handicrafts (10 percent). AINP rehabilitated 1,000 structures such as dikes, flood-protection walls, and road culverts; reconstructed 147 km of earthen roads; de-silted 2,300 km of smaller irrigation channels; and prepared thousands of kits for small-scale income-producing activities. How did we get to this mix of outputs?

Within two weeks of arrival, AINP ran workshops in all 23 districts of Nangarhar for more than 2,000 people. Rural elders nominated 3,000 projects and urban leaders another 300. Processing and ranking the project nominations took several days of intense but worthwhile effort.

There were some surprises: for example, the frequency with which villages requested flood-protection walls and karez rehabilitation. And the size of requested projects posed a challenge to employment goals. But within weeks, the data were processed, priorities were set by the Technical Working Group, and approval was gained from the governor for 86 high-priority projects. Participatory workshops proved no hindrance to getting started and the cost was minimal.

#### 5. Selecting Projects II: How AINP Ended Up with 260 Subprojects

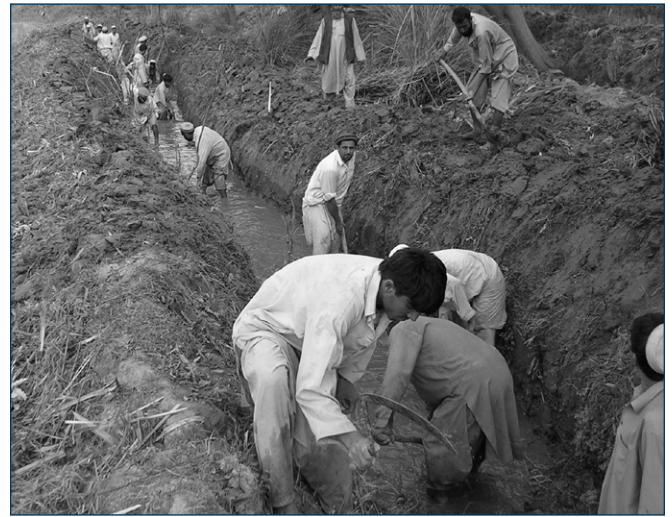
DAI initially proposed to implement 54 projects generating 2.5 million days of labor. On average, each project was to cost \$230,000 and generate 46,000 days of work. In fact, AINP implemented 260 subprojects with an average cost of \$50,000 and 11,000 days of labor or training. The shift of emphasis, which happened in the first month of implementation, was not driven by the project design but was a response to the kinds of projects identified by villagers and the geographic dispersal of the population. For example, if villagers are most interested in cleaning the village karez, and that only takes a crew of 25 to 50, there is little chance to employ 1,000 people.

The smaller the project, the higher the potential costs. One engineer may oversee 800 workers on a large project to clear drainage ditches, but if each project only employs 100 workers at a site, it is difficult for the engineer to cover even half that number. Therefore, AINP revised its estimates of oversight engineers, transportation, and monitoring—within an unchanged budget. We hired interns, junior engineers, and local engineers to cover more projects, backed up by a senior

engineer; clustered projects geographically to make it easier for one engineer to cover several projects; and focused on fewer kinds of simpler projects.

#### 6. The Cluster Approach

AINP worked in 600 villages—almost every large village in Nangarhar—and every zone of irrigated agriculture. How was this unexpected coverage achieved? First, USAID ranked the districts and allocated targets to each, prioritizing those that traditionally grow poppy and ensuring work in all districts.



Moreover, tribal realities pushed AINP into remote areas and led us to a “village cluster” approach that proved effective. At first, the project functioned as if each village were independent. But as work began, word spread to neighboring villages, in some cases generating opposition. In one case, where we planned to work with only one village and one subtribe, three and eventually five subtribes came to petition for subprojects. The representatives met to expand the activity to cover a stretch of the river and include all five subtribes.

Generally, a higher-level shura allocated the resources. Even if resources were limited, the shuras shared them. Sometimes the grouping of villages along roads or canals made working with all of them a necessity. In other cases, the principle of equity—a paramount concern—required allocating the work among villages or subtribes. The equity principle also had the (unplanned) effect of dispersing subprojects across the landscape because the shuras made sure every subtribe or major village in the district received some benefit.

The cluster approach made implementation easier. A single senior engineer could cover the cluster, and sharing materials avoided procurement delays. In its second month, AINP expanded from employing 1,000 people per day on the original village projects to employing 5,000 people in cluster

subprojects. By the end of AINP, subprojects were active in places where no NGO had worked and, as one engineer put it, “no one has worked since the time of the king.”

## 7. Security: Build Relationships, Keep a Modest Profile

Eastern Afghanistan is less dangerous than the south, more dangerous than the north. AINP suffered explosions, robbery, and threats, but no casualties. A key element of AINP’s security strategy was its good relations with the villages and tribes, which resulted in shura guarantees of safety. Employees kept a low profile, traveling in old cars, wearing local dress, and generally comporting themselves modestly and sensibly. AINP did not hide its U.S. Government affiliation and it complied with USAID branding requirements. On the other hand, we distinguished our efforts from military and counter-narcotics operations. Field offices had unarmed caretakers, while the central office had a “medium profile,” with guards and other protections. AINP hired local guards with some international training, because international guards could have been counter-productive.

On May 11, 2005, demonstrations erupted in Jalalabad and elsewhere to protest reported disrespect for the Koran at the prison at Guántanamo Bay. Demonstrators burned NGO offices, UN compounds, and the governor’s office. But AINP engineers stayed in Jalalabad and no AINP subproject had to stop; once in motion the subprojects almost organized themselves.

Above all, the villagers wanted AINP. When demonstration organizers came to AINP sites to recruit a mob, workers and their leaders refused to join. On the project side, our engineers lived in the field, knew the villagers, and got on well with them. The technical simplicity of the subprojects meant local foremen and engineers could oversee implementation in the absence of the engineers. Supplies and equipment were on hand and emergency payment procedures in place. Similarly, the projects were administratively simple, with local people keeping most records.

A week after the riot, 350 elders gathered to discuss the situation with AINP staff and the governor. They ended by offering protection and inviting the staff to return as guests, a powerful concept in Pashtun society. National and international staff were back in the villages 10 days after the disturbances.

## Are These Lessons Replicable?

Some elements of AINP may be applicable elsewhere, particularly in conflict zones, where the quick delivery of assistance to gain credibility among a skeptical, sometimes distressed, population can mean the difference between success and failure. Development work in environments that require similar adaptation to cultural differences and security risks may become more common in the years ahead, even as work in other countries is taken to a higher, more programmatic level. Yet replication should be treated with caution. Other areas in Afghanistan are riskier and more conservative than Nangarhar. Factors such as the tribal framework and the capability of local engineers turned out well for AINP, but might not in another case. And the drive to replace poppy cultivation with jobs restoring village infrastructure was appreciated in Nangarhar, but may not be so popular elsewhere.

Of course the one thing that cannot be guaranteed in replication is the quality and commitment of the staff—local and international, from Nangarhar University interns to senior engineers—whose efforts made AINP such a rewarding experience.

**Dr. Steve Romanoff**  
is a Principal Development Specialist at DAI. He was Chief of Party on the Afghanistan Immediate Needs Program.



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DAI  
7250 Woodmont Avenue  
Suite 200  
Bethesda, Maryland 20814 USA

Tel.: 301-718-8699  
Fax: 301-718-7968  
[www.dai.com](http://www.dai.com)