

Development, Cultural Values and Disability: The example of Afghanistan

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"I see humanity as a family that has hardly met" (Theodore Zeldin)

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan is suffering from nearly two decades of war. Even before the war it did not score high on indicators of social development. Now it occupies a spot almost at the bottom of the global league table. The primary factor affecting any attempt to do sustainable development work in Afghanistan is the war. However, to many development professionals working for the United Nations and foreign NGOs (non-governmental organisations), cultural factors also appear to present obstacles to development. These factors are a mixture of values that derive from culture, ethnicity, and religion, and tend to be lumped together as "cultural values". While foreign agencies agree in theory that "the core concern of sustainability is that the initiative be soundly rooted in the context and the consciousness of the environment in which it operates" (Tamas 1996), and therefore that "local culture" should be respected, in practice they often find that local cultural values in Afghanistan conflict with their own values, and indeed their own ethics. Dialogue to establish a common understanding is often abbreviated or absent. Often, the discussion about cultural values is regarded as too sensitive to even embark on. The result is that "development" remains largely an activity initiated and controlled by foreigners. Local people do not initiate, let alone control, such "development". This paper assumes a view of development that is about much more than material benefits. Development, as conceived here, is the sum of people's own aspirations, efforts, and learning towards bettering themselves materially, socially, intellectually, and spiritually. The paper draws on lessons learned in a large Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) programme in Afghanistan run under the auspices of UNDP/UNOPS, and implemented by local NGOs. The extent to which the programme is relevant to local values is considered. In addition, it is argued that CBR (and, by implication, other) programmes can engage communities in a dialogue that seeks understanding with local values; and that the understanding engendered by such dialogue can in turn lead to a sustainable development process that

goes beyond the field of disability.

'DOING DEVELOPMENT' IN AFGHANISTAN

Among the many challenges that face development agencies currently attempting to undertake sustainable development in Afghanistan, one could list the following:

- Afghanistan presents the classic profile of a war-torn country. The most essential requirements for sustainable development, such as stable communities, shared long-term aspirations, basic health and education services, and legitimate external trade, hardly exist. These factors are not to do with culture, but with the war. But the war has its roots in a conflict in which "values" (whether cultural, ethnic, or religious) have played an important part.
- Donor governments are reluctant to fund long-term development programmes on the grounds that it is an emergency situation and there is no government in control of the whole country. Funding is mostly short-term, usually for two years or less; this inevitably means that project planning is forced to fit into short timescales.
- It is recognised that development efforts can play a role in either hastening the arrival of peace or (inadvertently) fuelling the conflict. Yet there is a general lack of understanding, among both donors and programme planners, that changing perceptions in a way that could lead to peace will take time, especially in a country like Afghanistan which is characterised by traditional cultural values and ethnic divisions. Programmes which change their focus every two years are unlikely to have the desired impact.
- Afghan NGOs exist, but they are not "grassroot" NGOs in the standard sense of that term. The open expression of opinion is not possible in all parts of Afghanistan. Accordingly, local NGOs have emerged in response to the availability of foreign funds, rather than as indigenous movements for development and social justice. Hence Afghan NGOs (as well as foreign agencies) tend to "do development projects" rather than engage in a development process based on local constituencies and a broader vision of social change.
- Most importantly, many "programmes do not know how to define the knowledge people have acquired through generations of survival in often inhospitable conditions and incorporate this information in the

conceptualization and design of development initiatives" (Tamas 1996).

The general picture of development work in Afghanistan is of a series of top-down programmes that recognise, on paper, the importance of consulting local people but, in practice, generally fail to do this in a way that goes beyond discussing "shopping lists" of local needs. Fortunately, there are some exceptions (notably the Habitat programme in Mazar, which has fostered the creation of women's community fora; these fora can be described as "grassroot" in the sense that they are true community fora in which the members set the agenda for development).

All of these challenges boil down to one overriding quest: how to engage in a dialogue directed at building a common understanding between development workers and beneficiaries. This requires an approach to programme design, implementation and evaluation which values process as much as product.

The process of building common understanding requires much longer timescales than are currently accepted by donors and development agencies in Afghanistan. The process is as complex as it is time-consuming; it defies neat solutions and raises difficult questions. For example, how does a development agency get close to local people without playing into the hands of local power politics? With whom does it engage in dialogue about social development (which is of equal concern to men and women) when communities are typically represented only by the most powerful men?

A promising way forward lies in the use of field workers who see themselves as social animators, not just technicians; as people who raise questions and encourage thoughtful answers, rather than just deliver a service. Clearly, this will have implications for training: there is more to training social animators than technicians. But the benefits can be significant. One programme which has the potential to function like this is CBR, since a core feature in most CBR programmes is the use of cadres (teams) of field workers who engage on a daily basis with communities at family and village levels. Experience from a CBR programme in Afghanistan highlights the potential for taking this forward.

A LARGE CBR PROGRAMME IN AFGHANISTAN

In Afghanistan, local surveys indicate that probably about 3% of the population of 20 million is disabled. This gives a figure of about 700,000 people. War injuries (mainly from mines) and polio account for about half this number. The

other half is composed of people with mental retardation, cerebral palsy, leprosy, deafness, blindness, and multiple impairments. As with all disability statistics one must distinguish between incidence (the number who are born or made disabled) and prevalence (the number who survive). 3% is an estimate of the prevalence. It would be almost impossible to measure the figure for incidence in the present circumstances.

Services for disabled people in Afghanistan have tended to focus on the provision of orthopaedic aids and physiotherapy. This is because the appalling conditions in most hospitals mean that a limb damaged by a mine explosion will be amputated rather than saved, so amputees are the most visible manifestation of disability in the country. One foreign NGO is working with deaf people and two others with blind people, but that is as far as specialised services go.

It is in this context that the Comprehensive Disabled Afghans' Programme (CDAP) was set up by UNDP and UNOPS in 1995. CDAP has developed into a national CBR programme which operates in thirteen provinces of the country, and employs some four hundred paid staff and several hundred volunteers. CDAP serves about 27,000 disabled people annually. All the staff are Afghan with the exception of one expatriate programme manager.

The key agents in the field are Mid-Level Rehabilitation Workers (MLRWs), male and female. They each cover a population of between 15-30,000. Their role is to: activate local CBR committees and disabled people's organisations; recruit volunteers; identify disabled people in their area through a local survey; and arrange appropriate services for each disabled person. For example, disabled children need to be integrated into schools, including madrasas (Quranic schools); disabled adults need training in employment skills and loans to set up small businesses; families need to be enabled to help their disabled child to develop - this may involve referral to a physiotherapy centre, or a prosthesis or orthosis from an orthopaedic workshop. The MLRWs arrange what is needed by mobilising local resources and, where necessary, by making referrals to appropriate services.

MLRWs are given a general training of five months spread over a year in topics such as community development, psychology, child development, teaching and learning, and CBR principles, as well as how to work with people who have specific impairments. MLRWs are supported in their work by a smaller group of specialists: physiotherapists, orthopaedic technicians, employment support

specialists, special education resource persons, CBR supervisors, trainers, and a resource centre. The total number of paid staff in one project area may reach 90, half of whom are MLRWs. MLRWs are expected to recruit up to five volunteers each.

Other important aspects of the programme are:

- An Information, Education and Communication (IEC) component, which aims to raise disability issues within Afghanistan, and also in the wider aid community (in Pakistan and beyond) through newsletters, radio broadcasts, posters, videos, leaflets and discussions. For example, CDAP organises regular national workshops on disability in Afghanistan for which it brings together about thirty agencies.
- A budget from which it can fund other agencies working in disability. Through this mechanism it gains a much wider picture of what is going on in the field of disability in Afghanistan than it would through its own programme alone.
- Under a new UNDP integrated programme, CDAP has now started to target vulnerable people other than disabled people.

How far can this programme connect with local communities in a way which respects their values but also acts as a catalyst for change? In order to answer this question it is necessary to consider two sets of values: first, some of the cultural values in Afghanistan which have a direct bearing on development work in general and disability in particular (discussed in the next section); secondly, developmental values that are relevant to disability, common in much current global discourse about disability, and central to the conceptualisation of CDAP (discussed subsequently).

CULTURAL VALUES IN AFGHANISTAN

The ethnic nature of the conflict in Afghanistan is related to where people perceive their identity to lie; this is inevitably bound up with values - whether cultural, ethnic, or religious. This fact alone indicates that there is no single "Afghan culture". There are, for example, differences between the culture of rural and urban communities, even within the same ethnic group; and there is a marked contrast between the cultures of different cities such as Mazar, Kandahar, Kabul, and Herat. It is also difficult to disentangle "culture" from "politics". The Taliban, for example, who insist on rulings such as shaving under the armpits and having a beard at least six inches long, indulge in a political

manipulation of culture in the name of religion. Although the Taliban are mostly Pushtun, their particular brand of politicized culture and religion is not supported by many Pushtuns, especially the more educated. Here, it should be noted that the following analysis contains several specific references to Pushtun culture, which looms large in many outsiders' perception of Afghanistan. However, about half of Afghanistan is not Pushtun.

The complexity of talking about "culture" in Afghanistan has been compounded by the fact that eighteen years of conflict have seen some traditional value systems reinforced, while others have broken down. So, on the one hand, ethnic identity has become more not less important. On the other hand, the extended family system has eroded as many husbands are killed, leaving thousands of widows. Furthermore, the fact that three million Afghans have experienced different cultures through being refugees in either Pakistan or Iran has also had an important impact on cultural attitudes and expectations. It has, for example, demonstrated to many of them that education is the key to development - of the individual and his or her family. Indeed, the lack of education in Afghanistan is one of the main reasons why many Afghan refugees are reluctant to return. At the same time, the monastic style education of large numbers of Afghan boys in the Quranic schools of Pakistan spawned the Taliban (which means "students" or "seekers").

With these complexities and caveats in mind, attention turns to some dominant features of Afghan culture: Islam, the extended family, the community, and social structures of segregation.

Islam

The one thing that is common to all Afghans is their commitment to Islam as both a belief system and as a social programme.

If great numbers believe a prophet is authentic and they are in agreement on the means to apply the messenger's teachings in their lives, the result is order and social progress. Unity of belief is linked to collective well-being (Tamas 1996).

Islam brings with it a sense of social responsibility, evident in such things as zakat and ushr - forms of charity to those who have less. Helping deprived people, which includes disabled people, is a religious (and therefore charitable) duty through which the giver accrues credit for the hereafter. Islam brings a

strong sense of morality. People are respected and earn status provided they keep to the moral code. Islam also provides a meaning system, a source of hope, and a gathering point. The mosque is the centre of the community.

Family

The typical Afghan village house consists of a high-walled compound enclosing a complex of inter-connecting mud buildings which accommodate the extended family. From five to thirty people (if not more) may live in this space. Walking through an Afghan village, one is conscious that most activities go on behind these compound walls, and are private. Interaction in public spaces is much less than in an Indian village, for example.

In common with many other poor societies, survival in a subsistence economy like that of Afghanistan depends primarily on cooperation and mutual support within the kin group. The extended family is the prime source of social welfare. Contributing to the family is prized much more highly than making one's own way in the world. Anybody in receipt of a regular income is duty-bound to contribute to the common family fund; dereliction of this duty is despised, and for the vast majority of Afghans, is unthinkable. If a family member cannot contribute because he or she is disabled, this has an important bearing on their status in the family.

In traditional rural Pushtun society the survival of the family - or at least the degree to which it flourishes - is related to its status, which in turn is related to its reputation. Reputation is determined principally by relations between the sexes, which means that men protect the family's "honour" by not allowing women to interact in the public domain. Fear of disgracing one's family honour in some way, however slight, serves as a very powerful force for social and also religious conformity.

The guardians of family honour are the senior men in the extended family, who command the obedience of all other family members. Power resides very definitely in these men, and it is used. While these values are strongest in Pushtun society they are also reflected to a lesser degree in the other ethnic groups of Afghanistan. Significantly, an inability to marry because of disability would deprive a man of the possibility of ever reaching such a position, and therefore reduces his status, actual and potential.

Community

In Pushtun society community decisions are traditionally made by a jirga, a permanent council of respected and powerful male elders. Power comes primarily from the number of male relatives a man has (not necessarily from wealth). In all parts of Afghanistan, the concept of a shura also exists; this is a council formed for a particular purpose. When the central government is strong, these two types of council, jirga and shura, tend to be weak. When the central government is weak, the jirga and shura tend to be strong.

At the village level people are inclined to give their allegiance first to their own community (through the authority of the council) and second to the government. Local tribal and ethnic loyalties are therefore reinforced through this mechanism. In the present era, marked by the existence and activities of development agencies, it is common for development agencies to "consult the community" through a shura which either already exists or which is created for the specific purpose of relating to the development agency. The concept of "good governance" in the modern sense (an explicit objective of some UN agencies) is not easily understood by people who have had traditional community decision-making mechanisms for hundreds of years. (The relations between these councils and the CBR committees and disabled people's organisations formed within the CDAP programme will be discussed below.)

Segregation

In effect, there are (at least) two levels of discourse in Afghanistan: one private, one public; one female, one male. Power belongs to the public sphere to which women do not have access. Jirgas and shuras do not include women as members, although in some parts of the country there are separate women's councils (for example, there are women-only CBR committees in the CDAP programme, and as mentioned above, community fora in Mazar are run by women).

The discussion on gender relations in traditional societies, especially Muslim ones, is complex and is the point where indigenous values clash most obviously with "foreign" values. It is normal in the west to portray Afghan culture as inherently oppressive of women. But most Afghan men and probably many Afghan women perceive the differential treatment as ensuring respect for women, by protecting them from harassment and from what they regard as the demeaning task of having to engage in wage-earning in the public domain. The

idea (frequently quoted in the west) that disabled women suffer the double disadvantage of being disabled and of being female was firmly rejected by well-educated women working for the CDAP disability programme. They did not accept that being a woman was in itself a "disability" (CDAP 1998).

According to anthropologist Benedicte Grima, a Pushtun woman's identity and her emotions are culturally determined (Grima 1993). As for the veil as a symbol of oppression, Grima's and other anthropological studies of Pushtun communities reveal that a Pushtun village woman would no more consider going out without her burqa than she would consider going out naked. She regards the veil as an essential part of her public identity as a woman. This does not apply in all parts of the country; in the northern, predominantly Uzbek city of Mazar, for example, women attend a co-ed university dressed in western clothes, unveiled (see Grima 1993 and Doubleday 1988 on Afghanistan constructions of gender).

Integration

It is very difficult for a foreigner to determine what the words "social integration" mean in a context where segregation is the norm; where most interaction occurs within the private space of the home; and where women in many Afghan communities only interact socially at events such as weddings and funerals. Who is marginalised? What is the measure of marginalisation?

A "western" analysis might insist that a Pushtun woman's acceptance of the veil as part of her identity means she has internalised oppression. The same is true of disabled people: accepting an inferior position in the social hierarchy "as the normal state of things" might be constructed as evidence of internalised segregation. Moreover, the general belief that a process of integration must start with changes in perception by the person segregated is particularly difficult in the context of Afghanistan. Attempts to "modernise" the country by various rulers (most recently by the Communists in the 1970s) have been the main cause of conflict, especially where changes to the role and status of women have been pushed.

Clearly, a detailed understanding of social relations and values - especially the meaning and relevance of integration in a society that practices and values social segregation - is enormously important for the design of social development programmes. A programme which aims to "integrate disabled and other marginalised people into their own communities" (UNDP 1997) cannot

possibly measure whether it has reached that objective unless it understands, and has defined, what both marginalisation and integration mean in that particular cultural context.

DISABILITY AND DEVELOPMENTAL VALUES

The following paragraphs outline a view of disability and developmental values that are common in global development discourse. How they apply to Afghanistan and the CDAP programme will be examined later.

Disability is particular in development terms because it amplifies and illuminates a range of issues that are at the heart of development discourse and ethics, such as notions of normality, equality, empowerment, rights, survival, the individual versus the collective, discrimination, and social support systems (Coleridge 1993).

Development is about the process of change. Charity, despite its good intentions, is counter-development because it does not promote change; it perpetuates the status quo of inequality. (It may however be the prelude to developmental awareness.) Development is a self-generating process which must start with the person or group who are the subject of development. Nobody can develop anybody else, although others can create a favourable or unfavourable climate for our development. We can all either enable or disable each other's development by our attitude towards each other.

Development is closely connected to the idea of empowerment, which means having a belief in our own intrinsic worth and the self-confidence and self-esteem that flow from that. If we think we are not worth much, then we cannot develop. Low self-esteem is the hallmark of a person who has internalised oppression. Of all people, disabled people tend to be most disempowered because they are caught in a vicious circle whereby negative social attitudes create low self-esteem which produces a type of behaviour that in turn fosters negative social attitudes. The only way out is for disabled people to start the process of change in themselves.

The medical model of disability does not take this view. It says that the disabled person must try to overcome their disability by some means or other in order to join in with the mainstream. This implies that the disabled person is intrinsically of less value because of their disability. This has devastating implications for the disabled person's ability to grow and develop. It is very insidious, and is present

in just about every encounter between a disabled person and other people, especially professionals. In the former communist countries, as an extreme but at least frank example, anybody working with disabled persons is called a "defectologist". Disabled people are regarded as defective in the medical model.

The social model poses the opposite view. It says that even though the person has an impairment that cannot be changed, she or he is still of equal intrinsic worth. It is society that must come to terms with their disability and accept them as they are.

So we can choose between two basic models of society: a closed, exclusive model where beauty, fitness, and uniformity are most valued and abnormality is rejected, or an open, diverse, and embracing society where difference is valued and people are accepted for what they are, regardless of their functional ability or appearance.

However, disability is not only a social issue and the social model cannot be used to the complete exclusion of the medical model. Deafness, for example, is a barrier itself, regardless of surrounding attitudes. One cannot say that all problems faced by disabled people stem from negative social attitudes; impairment is also a factor. That is why disability is not exactly parallel to race or gender as a social issue. There is a need for a rehabilitation process which does indeed try to lessen the handicap.

In summary, there is a need to think of disability as a development and social issue in which the rights and needs of the disabled person can be met by inclusive rather than exclusive social attitudes, coupled with an individually-focused rehabilitation process where necessary. How can this view of disability be applied in Afghanistan?

DISABILITY, LOCAL VALUES, AND CBR IN AFGHANISTAN

The original design of CDAP, written in 1994, was a classic example of an external, non-consultative project formulation, written by three western development specialists from Sweden and Germany who did not visit Afghanistan during the formulation stage. The present project document, written in early 1997, had the benefit of a major evaluation of the programme conducted in the summer of 1996. However, that evaluation did not seek to probe cultural relevance explicitly. This task belongs to ongoing monitoring of the programme, and must be built in to its management and implementation

strategy. This means, as stated at the beginning of the paper, that its staff must be trained as social animators, to raise questions, to be objective and reflective about their own culture, and not simply to deliver a packaged service.

One senior worker in CDAP has identified what he calls a CBR conflict zone in the programme, where local concepts of disability, culture, poverty, the nature of CBR, and local social values meet (Wahdat 1998). The following paragraphs explore this conflict zone and summarise conclusions that can be drawn so far on whether the programme is in tune with local values and whether it can be used for stimulating and animating a development process that is wider than disability.

We have already identified a number of factors leading to the segregation of disabled people, in particular the importance of being able to marry in order to conform to social norms of acceptance. Where this is impossible, the individual lives in a kind of liminal limbo. Not only may a disabled person not be able to get married, but the presence of a disabled person (male or female) in a family may affect the marriage chances of other members of the family (because disability is regarded as shameful) and cause resentment towards the disabled person within his or her own family.

Apart from the crucial matter of marriage is it possible to identify other attitudinal factors affecting disabled people in Afghanistan? It is often thought in the west that disabled people get a particularly rough deal in poor countries like Afghanistan, and extremely negative myths are perpetuated, for example that disabled children are killed at birth. Attitudes to disability in Afghanistan have never been systematically researched, but all one can say at this stage is that anecdotal evidence points in the opposite direction from these myths. In rich countries like America it seems that disabled people get their worst treatment from the wealthy. 'Successful' Americans obviously feel more threatened by disability as a 'defect', and therefore a departure from what they aspire to, than people of lower social status do. Discrimination against disabled people seems to occur, according to American researchers, in direct proportion to wealth (Murphy 1987). In a country as poor as Afghanistan it may be that there is less discrimination towards disabled people than there is in America. Poverty is a great leveller. On the streets of an Afghan town it is common to see a disabled child being pushed along in a crude cart by other children, with no sense of embarrassment. Amputees are such a common sight that they are accepted as part of the normal scene in a bazaar. The caring and concern shown by both mothers and fathers towards their disabled children, especially the mentally

retarded, never fails to impress. The main problem is not neglect but over-protection, under-stimulation, and ignorance of how to help the child develop.

However, this does not mean that it is better to be a disabled person in Afghanistan than in America. Most obviously, the survival rate of disabled Afghans is low, as a result of inadequate or non-existent health services, not because their families reject them. There is, for example, almost no treatment for spinal injuries, which means that many paraplegics and most quadraplegics die within a year of injury from pressure sores or urinary complications. Some disabilities are more "acceptable" than others. Amputees, partly because their ability to communicate and reproduce is not impaired and partly because they may be regarded as having made a sacrifice in war, are easily accepted. Other disabilities, especially congenital ones, are often regarded as a shame, and are largely absent from public view. It is common for parents to claim that their child became mentally retarded after a rocket attack in order to conceal the congenital nature of the disability.

Disability is still generally seen as a medical problem or one brought about by divine punishment of a person's bad luck, which can be removed only through either medical or religious intervention (or both). The quest for a cure has often been protracted, expensive, and hopeless. Such attitudes (by no means unique to Afghanistan) make it difficult for a CBR programme, which offers no cure, to gain early respect.

The notion of empowerment, as described in the section on disability and developmental values above, is very problematic in Afghanistan. The word is inappropriate. In a seminar on cultural values with the CDAP management team already referred to, the word "empowerment" was rejected by all the participants on the grounds the power in Afghanistan means power over somebody else. It is not regarded as win-win, only as win-lose. One can only be empowered at the expense of another. The group favoured the word "enablement" instead. But even this is a concept not easily understood in a situation where people may not aspire to individual development at all, imbued with cultural values that are dominated by the need for collective family survival and kin-group solidarity.

The formation of disabled people's organisations has brought "rights" into the consciousness of many disabled people at the village level. By rights they usually mean equal access to what limited services are available, especially health and education. Disabled people's organisations tend (as elsewhere in the world) to be dominated by men with mobility impairments, which in Afghanistan

means amputees. Given that many of these will have been disabled in war and are therefore ex-soldiers they are often forceful, and are not obviously lacking in self-esteem. The main problem is to achieve representation of other disabilities in the disabled people's organisation.

The attitude of people with other impairments, especially sensory, is often depressed. This is particularly true of women.

CBR by its nature is long-term, time-consuming, usually not very visible, and with few material inputs. What is the general community view of a CBR programme? How do they compare it with other aid and development programmes which bring more material benefits? Does a programme lose credibility and value in the eyes of the local community if it is dealing only with "ideas and paper"? A common response from CBRCs and disabled people's organisations, as well as from individual disabled people, when asked for their recommendations to improve the programme, is that it should deliver some kind of "incentive", by which they mean material handout. The employment support element of the programme, which gives skill training and loans to disabled people, is what many adults see as its main value. CBRCs also regularly ask that such loans and training be extended to very poor nondisabled people such as widows.

What status do CBR workers hold in the community? Are they respected for what they do? If yes, is that because others admire them for working with disabled people? Is religion a major motivating factor for them? How far can they be catalysts for wider change in the community? As already noted, the potential for a CBR programme to make a contribution to development on a scale wider than disability rests on these field workers. Their selection and training is therefore of crucial importance. It is worth stressing that the physical energy required to be a CBR worker (MLRW in this programme) in rural Afghanistan is considerable. To cover a population of 15-30,000 they have to travel large distances in extremes of climate on roads which in many cases hardly exist, either on foot or on a bicycle, or in one case on a horse. To keep up the level of visiting required day after day, month after month and year after year, in numbing cold and blistering heat, demands a very special kind of commitment. The astonishment perhaps is that a CBR programme works at all under these conditions.

When questioned on their motivation for the job MLRWs frequently report that religion does play an important role, coupled with a desire to serve their

community. Getting to know their community brings its own rewards for many, who see their status rise by the fact of having to mobilise people. Employing disabled people as MLRWs presents a problem because of the physically taxing nature of the job, but a few MLRWs are disabled.

The mechanisms for dialogue with local communities are the individual families, and the CBRCs and DPOs at village and district level. The membership of the CBRCs is drawn from local health workers, teachers, disabled people, parents of disabled children and other interested persons. Sometimes they are congruent with local shuras dealing with general development issues in their own community, sometimes they are independent of these shuras. Disability is not a power issue; it is not something which people fight over. These CBRCs represent neutral territory. Dialogue with these groups is likely therefore to yield a closer reading of what people think and feel about development issues generally, and they can be used as an entry point for such discussions. At the same time their members see their membership as giving them more status in the community than they had before, as well as experience of organising, debating, and deciding. They count for something in their own eyes, and in their own communities. Disability does indeed open pathways to a different view of development that is not based either on power or materialism (Coleridge 1993).

Separate female CBRCs exist in both Taliban and non-Taliban held areas. The sense of personal and group empowerment in these all-women committees is probably greater than it is for men because women have so few opportunities outside the home to have any influence on community affairs.

To illustrate the role of these committees, the minutes of a (male) CBRC in Herat in January 1998 reveal that over two meetings they discussed the following issues: finding a place to run a vocational training course in tailoring for disabled women, raising the money to provide lunch for the trainees, identifying a skilled person to act as trainer, the lack of textbooks in schools, home schooling for girls, malnutrition in several families. They arranged the training course successfully, and identified women who could provide home schooling for girls. As can be seen, their discussions were not limited to disability issues. They were obviously and justifiably proud of the two achievements of arranging the tailoring course and home schooling for girls. The field worker, who had instigated the formation of this committee, remained in the background, observing and encouraging, a genuine but discreet change agent. Something was happening in this community that was indeed developmental. The word 'empowerment' came immediately to mind in

observing this process, even though it may not translate well into Farsi.

CONCLUSIONS

People feel threatened when their values are attacked or start to disappear. When there is fighting everywhere, when the economy is in ruins, when the future holds no hope for one's children, to see one's whole value system also threatened means that the sky has fallen in. The core values described for Afghanistan, in particular Islamic charitable duty, the strength of the extended family, honour, well-defined roles for men and women, and respect for senior males, bring order and predictability to a society living in a harsh and unpredictable environment. It is perhaps inevitable that poverty, war, and destruction stimulate the emergence of leaders who preach the loss of traditional values as the cause and a return to traditional values as the cure. The same phenomenon has occurred in Europe and elsewhere. For foreigners to challenge these values as 'counter-developmental' is not likely to be met with a positive response, especially when 'western values' are not necessarily seen as producing a more cohesive society. Development programmes have to take Afghan values as the given starting point and work within them.

If development is about moving forward on a path towards greater understanding and control over our lives, a process which is more than the provision of material benefits is necessary. Material benefits, even though they are absolutely necessary in a country as poor as Afghanistan, do not amount to development. Culverts, bridges and wells, though vital, do not in themselves make people more inclusive, democratic, or peace loving. A shift in perceptions is necessary. A process must be engaged in which centres on aiming to change perceptions, not to change culture. Changing perceptions is the key to altering behaviour. An enormous difference to the way we live our lives can be created by a shift in perceptions about things we have always taken for granted or never questioned (Zeldin 1994). The difficulty is that our perceptions are conditioned by our cultural background, and changing them is not something that most humans do spontaneously. Some outside trigger is required. Seeing development as the creation of self-sufficient communities who do not need outside influence is not only unrealistic; it is a flawed model. We all need external stimuli to enable us to grow and develop (Zeldin 1994).

The role of a development worker is to give people the confidence that they do have the ability to develop themselves. At the same time he or she needs to challenge perceptions, from within the culture. Well-trained field workers

working within their own cultural context are in a much better position to challenge perceptions than foreigners. The role of foreigners is to ask the questions of the field workers but not to provide the answers; these must be provided by local people from reflecting on their own context and values. Foreigners can ask the questions in different ways, which include providing the materials and the experiences which challenge field workers to change their own perceptions. Discussions on cultural values need to be a regular and normal part of the process of running a development programme and not ignored or left aside as 'too sensitive'. In this way a thinking, questioning, experimenting cadre of field workers can be created who are true catalysts for change within their own culture.

A CBR programme is at base about changing perceptions. Evidence from the CDAP programme shows that changing perceptions about disability can be an important step on the road to deeper understanding about more general development processes. As one field worker in Herat recently said during a discussion about development, 'If we had started a CBR programme twenty years ago in Afghanistan we would not need the UN today.'

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