

BY ERICA ISAAC AND CHUCK COON

LGCD Survey Provides Roadmap for Stability Programming

Villagers in Qal'a-i-Arjal were delighted when their government office was painted, furnished, and equipped with a new roof. The government was improving, they said, and they felt greater stability—no small gain in Gardez District. About 100 miles to the northwest, villagers in Kolalan in Nurkh District scoffed at a virtually identical \$14,000 project. Government service there had actually worsened, they said, and their lives were less stable.

How is it that similar projects such as these in eastern Afghanistan evoke such opposite feelings? DAI recently polled 5,411 Afghans to explore the reasons why and get a better handle on the results of its stability programming across the country.

The survey's major finding is powerful. It clearly shows that projects delivered by the Afghanistan government gave Afghans a greater sense of *amniyat*—a Pashto/Dari word signifying predictability, community resilience, and physical security—than projects delivered by some other entity. For example, a well dug under the auspices of the Afghan government gave locals a greater feeling of stability than one delivered by foreign militaries, nongovernmental organizations, contractors, or anyone else. Who paid for the well or dug it did not matter; who requested it and managed its successful delivery meant everything.

Perceptions of stability are crucial because the U.S. and Afghan governments are effectively engaged in a contest with anti-government elements for the support of the populace, a contest that will be won in large part by the side that can deliver stability to the Afghan people. For projects in Afghanistan such as the U.S. Agency for



A pollster interviews a villager in Parwan Province.

International Development (USAID)-funded Local Governance and Community Development (LGCD) Project, now coming to an end after five years in the field, the LGCD Stabilization Survey lays out a blueprint for future crisis mitigation and stability work and for evaluating that work through the eyes of local people.

“There is no ready-made manual for this type of work; each project is highly contextualized, new, and very dynamic,” said DAI’s Patrick O’Mahony, who for two years, through September 2010, served as LGCD’s Chief of Party. “It is inevitable that you learn as you go. This survey gives all of us empirical evidence to show what works and what doesn’t, warts and all. It’s an earnest and smart approach to get at the truth.”

Added William Thompson, LGCD’s current Chief of Party: “The findings are yielding tremendous insights

The Right Word for Stability

“Amniyat” is a term common to Dari and Pashto that means both stability and security. “Subot” is an alternative term. When LGCD designed the survey questionnaire in May 2010, it sent surveyors out to field test different uses of the two terms and carefully tease out the differences between them, as defined by survey respondents. Ultimately, the project arrived at a particular question using the term *amniyat* as its key measure of stability because this term showed strong correlation with other measures of stability. This made the team confident that it had worked through the construct validity problem presented by the abstraction “stability.”

– Samuel Schueth
Senior Monitoring, Evaluation, and
Research Advisor, LGCD

on what project interventions make the greatest impact, and on the role the government must play to bring about stability in the most challenging parts of the country.”

LGCD VILLAGES DOING WELL

The survey shows that villages where LGCD operates were bucking the national trend of deteriorating perceptions of safety and stability. According to a 2010 Asia Foundation Survey—entirely separate from the LGCD polling—Afghans’ fear for their personal safety has risen steadily in recent years, as has their fear of participating in public activities or traveling from one part of the country to another. But the LGCD survey found that LGCD villages—which are among the most at-risk in Afghanistan—are more than holding their own in stability, with



An LGCD water pipe scheme in Khogyani, Nangarhar Province.

59 villages reporting greater *amniyat*, 24 villages rating a stalemate, and 27 villages reporting worsened stability.

“It is a positive that the percentage of Afghans affected by LGCD activities is holding steady in terms of seeing stability improving, considering the relatively higher levels of insecurity elsewhere in the same districts,” said Dr. Samuel Schueth, who along with Dr. Carroll Patterson, also a survey methodologist, oversees LGCD monitoring and evaluation and crafted and managed the survey. “It is likely that if not for LGCD activities, perceptions of stability in LGCD’s areas of operation would have decreased in line with the national trend.”

Staff from the respected Afghan pollster ACSOR conducted the ambitious survey, polling residents in 123 villages covering 64 districts and 20 provinces. Interviews were conducted in locations where LGCD had worked in the previous three months. While not delivering a perfect report card, the survey validated LGCD’s original premise and its underlying approach to winning hearts and minds for the Afghan government: that improved service delivery by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) is key to stabilization efforts.

The survey and its findings have commanded audiences with analysts who brief General David Petraeus, commander of the International Security Assistance Force; with Ambassador Karl Eikenberry and other VIPs from the Department of State and USAID; and with RAND analysts and military Human Terrain units, among others.

For DAI and other implementers acting on behalf of the U.S. and Afghan governments, winning over local residents has been extremely challenging, as has meaningfully measuring the impact of development programs. Take the villagers of Kolalan cited above, for example.

They were not swayed that the local government office got a makeover. Officials there were considered corrupt, and supporting them was, in the eyes of local people, simply enabling bad behavior. Sure enough, shortly after the high-profile opening ceremony, the new furniture disappeared from the renovated office. The local government was further delegitimized, and citizens there felt even more uncertain about the future.

WHICH PROJECTS PROMOTE STABILITY?

A major accomplishment of the LGCD Stabilization Survey has been to determine what “stability” means—and does not mean—to Afghan observers. The results clearly show that predictability, resilience, and safety, or *amniyat*, are

most likely felt by Afghans who see their government as delivering the goods: namely, an improved ability on the part of the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army to provide security, more and better GIRoA services, and a GIRoA that is more responsive to ordinary citizens.

Other predictors of *amniyat* were the availability of food, education, and irrigation, and the ability to travel safely, particularly to the extent that these things are provided through GIRoA agencies. For example, the survey showed that GIRoA's ability to provide potable water made people feel more stable, but the ability of others (NGOs, foreigners) to provide potable water did not.

“This data confirms the policy that stabilization projects should work through GIRoA in order to improve stability, and should even redouble efforts to do so,” Schueth said. “Government-provided security, as opposed to that provided by international or other forces, is the key service for improving stability, but government services and responsiveness in general matter more than other specific types of services, such as providing potable water.”

People were also more likely to say that *amniyat* improved where LGCD disbursed more funds on project activities. Larger disbursements over fewer days predicted improved stability, verifying the importance of quick-impact activities. And the nearer the project, the bigger the impact: disbursements within one kilometer of a village improved stability more than those further away.



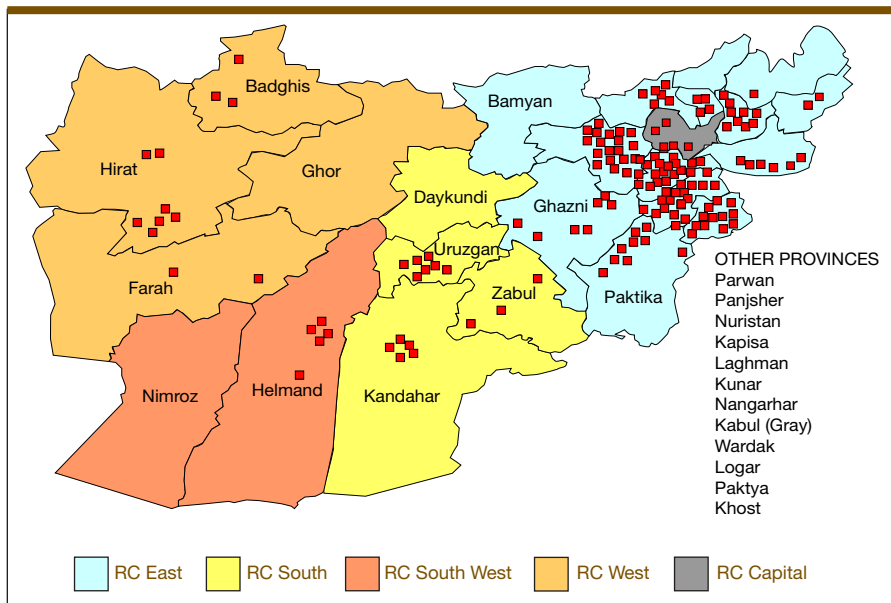
Canal cleaning in Char Chineh District, Uruzgan Province. The survey findings favor irrigation projects tied to long-term agricultural benefits.

Many factors—some surprisingly, some not—were identified as not fostering *amniyat*: a foreign military opening a new base nearby; a system of adjudication by tribal, sharia, and Taliban courts; a person's occupation, income, or land ownership; and even improved health or increased job opportunities.

Irrigation and education investments generally increased feelings of stability, but the money spent on such projects had varying results. Irrigation, for example, sometimes literally divided communities, and its ability to encourage *amniyat* varied considerably, no matter how much money was spent on the project. On the other hand, education almost always yielded *amniyat* in proportion to the money spent on it, prompting the survey to conclude that education initiatives should not be shortchanged.

Surprisingly, at least to some Westerners, Afghans' perception of increased employment opportunities showed no statistically significant relationship with stability. Because many of the jobs that LGCD generated were on small irrigation projects that provide cash for a few weeks of work, and improved irrigation is significant for stability, the survey concluded that short-term employment matters less than the long-term

STABILITY SURVEY SAMPLING POINTS IN REGIONAL COMMAND AREAS



benefit of improved irrigation. If irrigation and hence agriculture is improved, local farmers are likely to keep busy tending their fields instead of becoming insurgents. Long-term employment generated by improved conditions for agriculture should be the stabilization goal, the survey showed, not merely doling out cash for short-term work.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The LGCD Stabilization Survey delivered overarching lessons, some of them far from new: seeing development programming through locals' eyes, and measuring it that way, is essential to its success, especially in fluid environments; decentralized programming is the best way to achieve stability if the people and systems are available; there is always a gap between Western norms and host-nation beneficiaries' expectations; and actions to support state legitimacy are central to state-building programs.

In line with the survey findings, DAI-led projects in Afghanistan—ongoing efforts to develop agricultural credit and small and medium-sized enterprises, for example, or to build cities' capacity to deliver services—are focused on

putting the Afghan government first in prioritizing, mediating, facilitating, consulting, monitoring, and maintaining such development activities. They are shaping their messaging accordingly so these activities are not left to “speak for themselves,” but readily convey what they are: products of the Afghan state.

As the survey team wraps up its work with interviews in Kandahar, site of the remaining LGCD activities, DAI is weighing other USAID projects in Afghanistan on which to use this tool. The Incentives Driving Economic Alternatives for the North, East, and West

LGCD Stabilization Survey Achievements

- Defines “stability” through Afghans' eyes.
- Affirms that Afghans feel more stable when goods and services are rendered by their government, regardless of who is paying for them.
- Empirically tests what activities contribute to Afghans' perceptions of stability, and enables prioritized programming according to these findings.
- Provides a starting point to identify factors that hinder stabilization programming, such as implementation quality or corruption.
- Establishes a template for evaluating future stabilization work.

(IDEA-NEW) program, for example, could be similarly evaluated, with tweaks made to account for that program's job creation and income generation objectives. But no matter where or when DAI next asks local people about stability, one aspect will remain constant: establishing the *local definition of stability* will be the first order of the day.

By measuring the Afghan citizens' perceptions of stability—using their own definitions—and by implementing activities that the citizens say are the most important, we acknowledge and applaud the fact that our beneficiaries are defining our success. ■

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