



Afghanistan

Integrity Watch Afghanistan

A case study by Oxford Insights. Commissioned by Hivos' Open Up Contracting program.
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Citizen engagement and participation is a key ingredient for building accountability, driving improvements and innovation, and increasing trust between actors within the public contracting process.

This case-study is part of a larger study that explores and compares the direct results and benefits of this citizen engagement and participation, and the various strategies adopted by different open contracting initiatives to achieve these benefits. The complete study and results are found [here](#).



Sources

To produce this case study, we interviewed staff at Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA). We also reviewed IWA's publications, reports by donors like the World Bank, and academic research.

Context and Beginnings

Following the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, foreign aid rushed into Afghanistan (see Chart 1). It entered a system in which power, public office, and wealth were distributed through patronage and familial networks, and yet donors and Western governments did not properly anticipate that this would exacerbate the corruption already prevalent in the country. As a Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report put it in 2016, 'weak systems of accountability [. . .], a large influx of money, and poor oversight of contracting and procurement related to the international presence' had damaging effects.¹

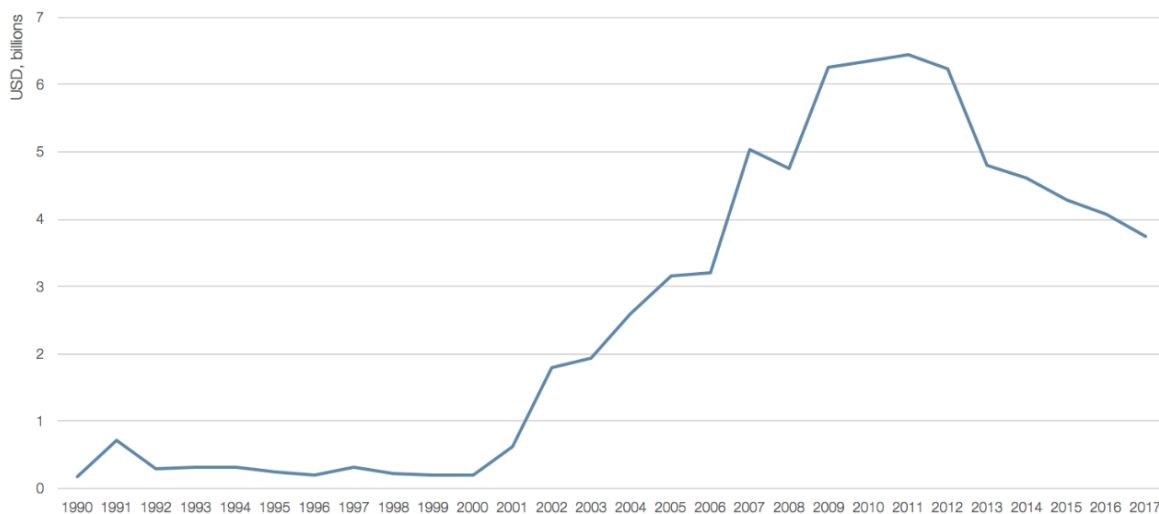


Figure 1: Afghanistan, net official development assistance and official aid received (constant 2015 US\$). Source: World Bank.

Infrastructure contracts emerged as a site of heightened corruption risk, with Integrity Watch Afghanistan beginning an infrastructure community monitoring program in 2007. Interviewees reflected that, before 2007, aid organizations' primary goal was to simply spend money, and that neither aid agencies nor contractors had any interest in transparency, or monitoring contracts. One person suggested that the situation was 'scary', with 'billions of dollars' poured into the country without any oversight mechanisms within the Afghan government.² A consequence was projects being constructed that were of poor quality.³

¹ SIGAR (2016). *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the US Experience in Afghanistan*, p.6. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/LessonsLearned/SIGAR-16-58-LL.pdf>

² Interview with interviewee P8, 2019.

³ *ibid.*

Project development

IWA began by training citizen monitors in villages in Jabel Seraj in how to examine contracts, conduct basic technical assessments of construction projects and interrogate contractors' accounts for evidence of misspending. This forms the 'information' part of the CBM process, by which 'citizens learn the quality of service provision', and wherein having access to government contracts with construction companies is crucial.⁴

Next, IWA try to ensure 'enforcement': here, monitors will directly encourage contractors to solve problems, possibly in combination with the rest of the community. If this does not work, the monitors will appeal to 'sectoral monitoring groups'; these are formed quarterly, tasked with solving projects-related problems, and contain senior representatives of infrastructure-related national ministries, media, and civil society organizations. Community monitors can also raise issues with 'provincial integrity networks', coalitions of local civil society organizations and media who work on general transparency and corruption issues, and can advocate for contractors and government to respond to specific infrastructure issues.⁵

In autumn 2019, an IWA interviewee told us that infrastructure-focused community-based has covered 1262 projects over 13 provinces over 11 years.⁶ Moreover, since the initial infrastructure-focused project in 2007, IWA has introduced the community-based monitoring (CBM) method into different sectors: courts and the justice system (2011); extractives (2013); schools (2014); health (2018). Since around 2018, have also begun conducting social audits, a more intensive and costly practice than simple CBM. They bring together technical experts, ex-civil servants, civil society and activists to review projects that have been completed, before releasing detailed reports on their findings.

Finally, IWA also lobbies at the national level. They work to ensure that CBM receives due attention from the media, have a seat on the National Procurement Commission (an oversight body chaired by the President), and advocate legislative changes. The IWA was instrumental in supporting the 2014 Access to Information law, which enshrines citizens' rights to demand documents and data from government entities, and was described by interviewees as a 'milestone' and a 'historic moment'.⁷

In 2016 IWA signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Procurement Authority (NPA) and the Open Contracting Partnership, under which the NPA was 'committed to provide the mechanism and platform to publish public procurement information' for civil society organizations.⁸ This also led to the NPA beginning to release data compliant with the Open Contracting Data Standard on the Afghanistan Government Electronic Open Procurement System (AGEOPS) in 2018.⁹

⁴ Berman et al (2016). *Community Community Monitors vs. Leakage: Experimental Evidence from Afghanistan*, p.3. <https://econweb.ucsd.edu/~pmdowney/pdfs/wp/IWA.pdf>

⁵ Interviews with interviewees P2 and P3, 2019; Berman et al (2016). *Community Monitors vs. Leakage: Experimental Evidence from Afghanistan*, p.14.

⁶ Interview with interviewee P3, 2019.

⁷ Interviews with interviewees P2 and P3, 2019.

⁸ Open Government Partnership Afghanistan (2018). *National Action Plan - 1, 2018-2019*.

https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Afghanistan_Action-Plan_2017-2019_EN_UPDATED.pdf

⁹ <https://ocds.ageops.net/>

Project goals

From our interviews with IWA staff and our document review, we can identify IWA's goals in relation to infrastructure contracting since their 2007 launch:

1. To improve the quality of individual infrastructure projects, prevent funds being lost to corruption in infrastructure, and to increase transparency on infrastructure contracts and spending.
2. To do this by increasing the capacity of local communities to hold contractors and authorities to account, rather than reducing contractor underperformance and corruption from the top down.
3. To substantially expand the amount of information that is available to local communities by embedding change within central government, and to encourage central government to support transparency and reduce corruption more generally.

Impact

Impacts on Civil Society

By their own assessment, IWA have been successful in achieving their goals for civil society. IWA interviewees cited two measures in support of this:

1. The 'fix rate', or the percentage of problems identified in individual projects that actually get resolved. Interviewees reported that this rose from 20% in 2010 to 87-89% in 2019.¹⁰
2. The 'Access to Information' percentage, or the percentage of projects in IWA's monitoring scope that they have been given information on (including contracts, statements of work and drawings, for example), either from the contractor or government. This rose from 75% in 2015 to 100% so far in 2019.
 - a. We also established that the total budgetary value of projects for which IWA has 'access to information' rose from \$32 million in 2016 to \$3,193 million for Jan-Oct 2019.

¹⁰ Interview with interviewee P8, 2019.

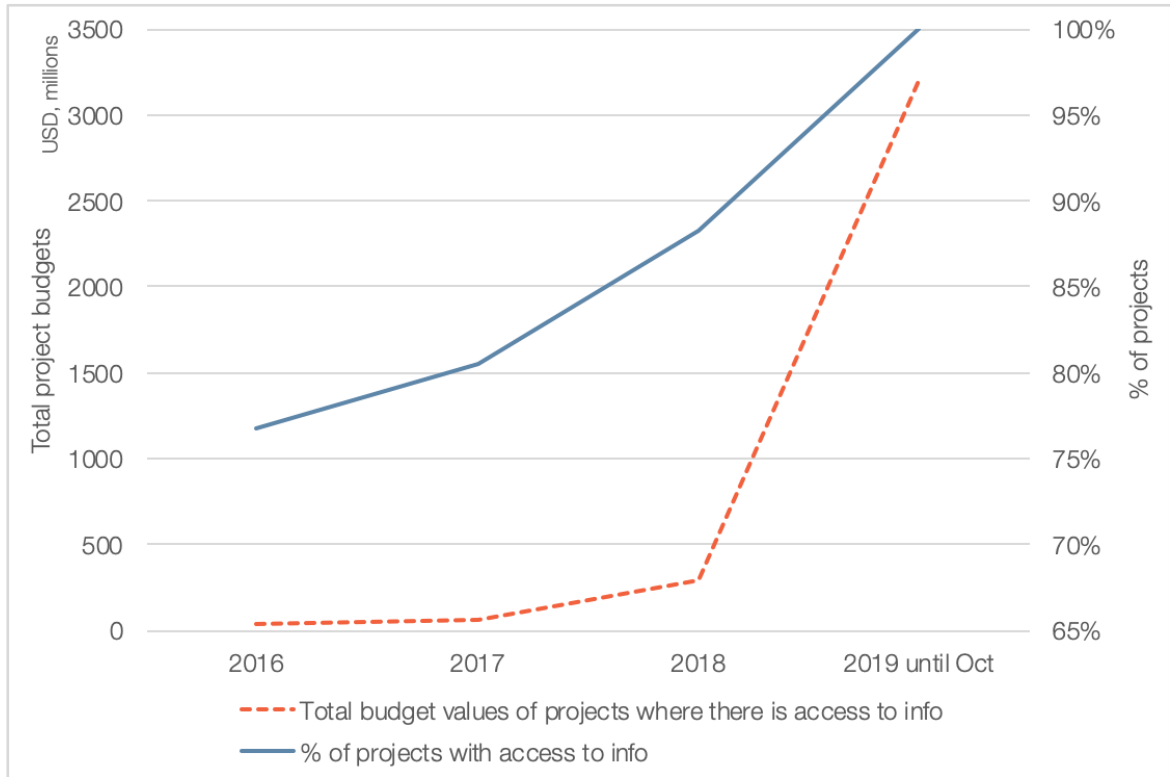


Figure 2: value and percentage of projects with access to information

Quality of construction projects and contractor performance has improved, but it is difficult to monitor. Research published in 2017 by academics at the University of California San Diego, meanwhile, concluded that IWA’s ‘training community monitors substantially improves construction quality and contractor performance.’¹¹ They ran a randomized control trial on roads projects over four years. Where IWA-trained community monitors were tracking projects, the researchers found no initial difference in quality between monitored and unmonitored roads.

However, the first winter caused a substantial decline in the quality of non-monitored roads in comparison to those that were monitored. After four years, the quality difference between the two groups was no longer significant, but the UCSD researchers suggest that this was due to further government investment in non-monitored roads, alongside ‘IWA scaling back its investment in some of the treated villages.’¹² That is, this diminished effect seems not to negate the finding that community monitoring results in higher-quality projects.

There has been a positive change in attitude towards the government among community members. IWA say that CBM has become an ‘accepted practice’ within the villages they target, and has contributed to a growth in confidence in the government in the communities. One person told us that, for villagers used to CBM, ‘government is not an alien power’.¹³ Given the enormous challenge in Afghanistan of fostering trust in the state above tribal (and even insurgent) affiliations,

¹¹ Berman et al (2016). *Community Community Monitors vs. Leakage: Experimental Evidence from Afghanistan*, p.16.

¹² Berman et al (2016). *Community Community Monitors vs. Leakage: Experimental Evidence from Afghanistan*, p.4.

¹³ Interviews with interviewees P2 and P3, 2019

these are a notable discrete successes, but seem not to have contributed to a broader increase in trust: IWA said that they had not seen evidence of a ‘huge spillover effect’ on the country.¹⁴

Impacts on Government

IWA believe that they have a ‘clear impact’ on the central government’s approach to public procurement and transparency.¹⁵ Understanding what pressures and incentives are most powerful when government leaders make decisions is very difficult. This means that we are unable to draw out simple and clear lines of causation between CSO’s lobbying efforts and the actions of politicians. Moreover, it is hard to isolate the exact effects and influence of IWA’s CBM programs as part of this lobbying. Nevertheless, one interviewee firmly emphasized the importance of using data gathered through civic participation to inform campaigning at the national level.¹⁶ As this suggests, CBM is a core part of IWA’s activity. Their political capital can therefore, in part, be attributed to this emphasis.

It is clear that IWA’s leading position within a network of influential actors (including other CSOs and aid organizations, for example) has helped them shape government policy. They have extensive and frequent access to the highest level of government. Since 2014, this has coincided with the presidency of Ashraf Ghani, who has been an important supporter of reforming procurement and introducing greater transparency.

The passing of the Access to Information Law in December 2014 was a ‘milestone’.¹⁷ The act enshrined an already-existing constitutional right to information, and states that all government entities must provide ‘information’, broadly defined, to ‘any individual or organization’ upon request.¹⁸ IWA had worked hard ‘for a long time’ to persuade the government of the need for new transparency legislation, finally seeing success following Ashraf Ghani becoming President in September 2014.¹⁹ It is possible, therefore, that it took a new government eager to demonstrate its reformist credentials to open the policy window sought by IWA. IWA contributed to the law’s drafting.²⁰ Moreover, their director was invited to the law’s signing, reflecting their extensive advocacy and the political capital they apparently bestow.²¹

But IWA are also ready to criticize the government in public. Their Executive Director, Sayed Ikram Afzali, also sat as the chair of the Oversight Commission on Access (OCAI) to Information, the body established to oversee progress under the new law. In 2016, he said that the legislation had not been properly implemented due to a lack of resources: ‘I hope that government will not suffice by only making laws, but will also pay serious attention to paving the ground for the implementation of the laws’.²² By 2017, the OCAI was arguing that certain ministries were

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Interview with interviewee P5, 2019.

¹⁶ Interview with interviewee P8, 2019.

¹⁷ Interview with interviewees P2 and P3, 2019.

¹⁸ *Integrity Watch Afghanistan* (2016). Access to Information in Afghanistan: a Preliminary Review, p.9
<https://iwaweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ATI-report-English-for-screen.pdf>

¹⁹ Interview with interviewees P2 and P3, 2019.

²⁰ *Open Contracting Partnership* (2020). Taming crocodiles in Afghanistan: Can open contracting give corruption fighters the upper hand? <https://www.open-contracting.org/2020/01/31/taming-crocodiles-in-afghanistan-can-open-contracting-give-corruption-fighters-the-upper-hand/>

²¹ Interview with interviewee P8, 2019.

²² *TOLONews* (2016). Access to Information Law Still Not Implemented. 19 October 2016.
<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/access-information-law-still-not-implemented>

systematically avoiding following the Access to Information Law, and that the commission had been created to 'mislead the public'.²³

IWA's continued scrutiny and activism has contributed to further reforms, including more open data. In March 2018, a revised Access to Information Law was introduced. It mandated a new transparency oversight commission, the Information Commission of Afghanistan (ICAN). Unlike the OCAI, ICAN has an independent budget, giving it greater freedom to operate.²⁴ Reflecting this improvement, Afghanistan placed 1st in the world in the 2018 Global Right to Information rating, which scores countries according to the strength and scope of their freedom of information legislation.²⁵

Later that year, the National Procurement Authority (NPA) began publishing contracting data according to the Open Contracting Data Standard via its online portal AGEOPS. This followed the 2016 MoU signed between the NPA, IWA and the Open Contracting Partnership. IWA are also civil society observers on the National Procurement Commission, which itself oversees the NPA, and which must approve contracts above a certain threshold.²⁶

Alongside these reforms, government bodies have developed a much more positive attitude towards openness and transparency over time. One interviewee reflected that there was a 'completely new' narrative emerging, in which access to information on spending was a topic of discussion and debate at a range of levels, reaching to the most senior people in government.²⁷ Within local government, too, IWA have noted an increasing willingness to provide information. Local monitors are now 'welcomed' when they ask for contracts or project details. Our interviewee attributed this change to organizations working together to advocate for greater disclosure, indicating the wider importance of relationship-building and collaboration.²⁸

Enabling factors

Central government

What allowed IWA to successfully lobby for the introduction of new transparency laws and to contribute to a 'culture change'? As with all cases where broad attitudinal and policy changes reflect a range of possible factors, it is difficult to isolate where CBM programs provided IWA with persuasive evidence or political capital in their lobbying; where IWA's influence ended; where the government responded to incentives set by other actors.

Support from central government is crucial in getting quick results. IWA is not 'at the mercy of government' to continue its work, one person reflected, but if central government leaders are willing, a reform can be implemented in 'as little 6 months'. If this enthusiasm is lacking, it can take

²³ Faramarz, S. (2017). Watchdog Accuses Govt of Violating Access to Information Law. *TOLONews*, 22 May 2017.

<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/watchdog-accuses-govt-violating-access-information-act>

²⁴ UNAMA (2018). Afghanistan's Fight Against Corruption: From Strategies to Implementation.

https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistans_fight_against_corruption_from_strategies_to_implementation-14_may_2018.pdf

²⁵ *Global Right to Information Rating* (2018). Afghanistan Jumps to Top Position on RTI rating. <https://www.rti-rating.org/news-reports/afghanistan-jumps-to-top-position-on-rti-rating/>

²⁶ Stephenson, M. (2018). Guest Post: Afghanistan's Radical—and So-Far-Surprisingly Successful—Public Procurement Reforms. *The Global Anticorruption Blog*. <https://globalanticorruptionblog.com/2018/03/08/guest-post-afghanistans-radical-and-so-far-surprisingly-successful-public-procurement-reforms/>

²⁷ Interview with interviewee P8, 2019.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

'over six years' to 'pressure and mobilize actors' to ensure change. This also demands many resources and much effort from across civil society, our interviewee stressed.²⁹

Crucially, too, the *kind* of reform requires different levels of government support. CBM was relatively easy to introduce, we were told, requiring 'minimal' government support. Social audits require much more support from the government, though. Finally, transparency on companies' beneficial ownership, which is not currently in place, 'requires huge amounts of support.'³⁰

IWA's good reputation and prominence helps them gain influence across the government. They are seen as trusted advocates for procurement reform and transparency. One interviewee said that IWA's influence at the top level of government was partly due to 'luck', but that they have seen their access increase over time.³¹ Now, their visibility is crucial. IWA is seen with the President on a weekly basis, which means that they have leverage over ministers in other departments and provincial governors. IWA's strong media presence strengthens this visibility. Partnerships with organizations like SIGAR buttress IWA's influence. IWA have 'powerful friends', one person said.³²

'Evidence-based advocacy' is a major factor in capturing and sustaining influence at the national level, IWA say. It is here that CBM plays the most obvious role in their campaigning. The data provided by village monitors is collected in a central database, which they combine with other sources and literatures to put out research reports, create news releases, and pressure agencies to take action. Here, the programs team, which oversees the CBM program, must collaborate with the Kabul-based advocacy unit to ensure they receive the right information.³³

IWA have strong core funding, allowing them to plan their actions and strategy over multiple years. Of course, access to funding plays an important role in ensuring any CSO's success, and this is no less true for IWA. Specifically, however, one IWA staff member emphasized how convincing donors (here, international aid agencies) to give core funding, as opposed to short-term project funding, allows them to be relatively self-sufficient in working towards longer-term goals.³⁴ This person reflected that IWA's work needs 'continuity and stability', and this would be jeopardized by having to direct money to projects 'at the donor's request'. While our interviewee did not mention this, a clear further consequence of this kind of funding is that IWA is not reliant on the Afghan government for its survival. In one crucial respect, therefore, it is free from political influence.

Having a board with genuine power over the organization's executive leadership is crucial. IWA say that this is rarity in the country. Similarly, a 'robust' recruitment process has apparently provided IWA with a well-qualified and committed executive leadership, where other NGOs may hire on the basis of nepotism.³⁵

²⁹ Interview with interviewee P3, 2020

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Interview with interviewee P8, 2020.

³⁴ Interview with interviewee P8, 2020. Much of IWA's funding is given from the Tawanmandi program, a joint aid initiative which includes agencies like the UK's Department for International Development and the Swedish International Development Agency. See IWA's annual audited accounts for more information:

<https://integritywatch.org/introduction>.

³⁵ Interview with interviewee P8, 2020.

Community-based monitoring programs

It is arguably easier to isolate the factors that enable success at the level of the CBM programs. This is because the intertwining of different causes and relationships is less complex than when considering success in lobbying for new legislation and advocating broad structural change.

Having access to the right information is crucial. Simply, the CBM method cannot function effectively if project-specific documentation is not provided. One interviewee said that before they had access to contracts and terms of reference, they were able to check the quality of the materials used in a project, but had no means of directly holding a contractor to account. Another pointed out that since requirements vary so much from project to project, it is not possible to assess performance against a general understanding of a particular sector. CBM did function before the 2014 Access to Information law and its 2018 extension, but this is now an invaluable tool. IWA's chief, Sayed Ikram Afzali, believes it is responsible for the rise in successful information requests to above 90%, as shown in Chart 2.³⁶

Local communities act independently in holding the government and contractors to account. It is crucial that these communities sustain a culture of scrutiny with minimal central support. As one person said, 'everything is done by the community for the community.'³⁷ Of course, the CBM model is by definition reliant on community involvement. But this support must be self-sufficient, IWA stressed. Early on in their existence, they concluded that encouraging a top-down approach to transparency would probably fail. They saw that there was no central political will to support increased transparency in infrastructure; donor organizations seemed equally uninterested. IWA therefore came to favor the 'bottom-up' model that they currently use.³⁸

This interviewee stressed that for IWA to lobby on villagers' behalf for information would 'sabotage the process'. It is only through locals themselves making demands and advocating for their interests that public officials will learn to become more cooperative and accountable, as, ultimately, it is the public to whom officials are accountable.³⁹ Therefore, IWA instead sought to instill and foster a broad 'cultural shift' in support of transparency.

By demanding documents from local officials, communities create a sustained pressure for transparent government. Information requests have appeared to activate and reinforce local officials' willingness to respond to information requests. One interviewee also believed that this bottom-up pressure has contributed to changes at the national level via IWA's advocacy, and ultimately, a more efficient and quicker process for requesting data at all levels of government.⁴⁰

IWA must still properly foster these grassroots efforts, however. While IWA are reluctant to directly perform monitoring and make information requests themselves, they see it as crucial that they motivate and support their community monitors. Seeing, for example, IWA's media conferences at the national or provincial level, ensures that grassroots monitors do not feel

³⁶ *Open Contracting Partnership* (2020). Taming crocodiles in Afghanistan: Can open contracting give corruption fighters the upper hand? <https://www.open-contracting.org/2020/01/31/taming-crocodiles-in-afghanistan-can-open-contracting-give-corruption-fighters-the-upper-hand/>

³⁷ Interview with interviewee P8, Integrity Watch Afghanistan.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

neglected or alone; more seriously, if CBM is perceived as a common cause, monitors are less likely to be targeted individually for criticism and challenge.⁴¹

Barriers

Attitudes of government and officials and ministers were a major obstacle. At the beginning of the program, in particular, provincial civil servants with construction and infrastructure in their portfolio apparently sought to block or delay the scheme. Initially, the government did not trust community members to carry out their monitoring effectively.⁴² While we were told that the broad situation has improved, there is still not full support for IWA's work. One interviewee put this down to ministers' unwillingness to treat problems strategically. They said that there was a view in some areas of government that corruption should both be 'managed', rather than actually solved.⁴³ Similarly, IWA believe that some ministries meet with them simply to minimize their criticism, rather than with any interest in the issues they wish to raise. While some ministries may wish to maintain a working relationship with IWA, they do not fully trust them.⁴⁴

Local government officials have few incentives to cooperate with IWA. IWA recognizes the importance of maintaining good relationships with government officials. At the local level, officials are crucial to the success of CBM, but may have few incentives to cooperate. One interviewee said that it was therefore important that IWA took care not to harm officials' prestige unless they had hard evidence available. This is a contributing factor to IWA's decision *not* to make all the details within their database fully open: information fed back from community members could damage officials' reputations without a full or deliberate argument having been made.⁴⁵

Geographical factors were also a barrier, specifically the disconnect between the center and the periphery. The fact that power is centralized in Afghanistan has handicapped local authorities who may be in a better place to make decisions on projects. Where contracts have been signed by central agencies, they are less likely to take into account local issues.⁴⁶

Security concerns made it dangerous to enter remote villages to conduct monitoring. These are more dangerous for outsiders to enter. Instability also restricts the possibility of opening up certain datasets.⁴⁷ In one case, we were told, IWA considered making the GPS coordinates for school projects publicly available. However, they were informed that this would put the schools at risk from insurgents, who might use them for targets or even military bases.⁴⁸

Some contractors are too powerful for communities to modify their behavior. This is largely due to the lack of a consistent and stable authority across Afghanistan. Some contractors, we were told, have close ties to security agencies; similarly, warlords may have interests in the companies involved. Interviewees told us that there had been projects in which this has severely restricted their progress.⁴⁹

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Interviews with interviewees P2 and P3, 2019.

⁴³ Interview with interviewee P8, 2019.

⁴⁴ Interview with interviewee P5, 2019.

⁴⁵ Interview with interviewee P8, 2019.

⁴⁶ Interviews with interviewees P2 and P3, 2019.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Interview with interviewee P8, 2019.

⁴⁹ Interviewee with interviewees P2 and P3, 2019.

Lessons

IWA believes that their success is due to three features of their program: that it is long-term, community-based and informing national advocacy.

Ensure long-term commitment to change to ensure consistency in a CSO's program focus areas. IWA respondents were proud that they had been active in Afghanistan for over a decade. This is not simply a case of maintaining a continual media and on-the-ground presence and a national lobbying campaign; it is also about having a theory of change that can be implemented over many years. As discussed above, a crucial element of this is having sufficient core funding to allow operational freedom, as opposed to jumping between projects on short-term funding. Interviewees said that other NGOs had not paid enough attention to this requirement.⁵⁰

Build capacity in communities, to ensure that a continual demand for transparency is sustained and developed from the grassroots. Interviewees were critical of NGOs who send in assistance 'from the center', or who 'do trainings and capacity-buildings [...] and then leave'. They stressed that the focus should be on fostering 'culture', rather than simply teaching skills and offering technical assistance. This also means engaging communities 'as a whole' rather than fostering and rewarding the efforts of individuals. Of course, this also requires long-term or core funding, rather than project-specific grants on a time-scale of 2 months to 2 years.⁵¹

There must be mutual support between national advocacy and community-level projects. One interviewee was especially firm on this point, describing IWA's method as a 'hybrid approach'. Here, the starting-point is to use communities as leverage to drive a 'cultural shift'. In our interpretation of this point, this might mean that local authorities and contractors begin to see it as perfectly natural that they would pass on documents and contracts on projects to communities, because communities consistently ask them for this information. Our interviewee said here that it is crucial to mentor and train community representatives without IWA taking on much advocacy work themselves.⁵²

Use research to advocate for transparency reforms at the national level. As mentioned, an important aspect of their national lobbying is to use media campaigns to demonstrate to community monitors that they are part of a collective effort. National lobbying also involves lobbying for policy and legislation changes, as exemplified by the introduction of the Access to Information law. But the final, and crucial, part of IWA's advocacy is to use data gathered at the community level, and fed into a central database, to inform research that can reflect the strength of the community-level work, create pressure for further policy changes and justify IWA's privileged lobbying position.⁵³

⁵⁰ Interview with interviewee P8, 2019.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

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Colophon

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