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\$1,000 for a kebab? Afgha

By Anand Gopal

Afghan villagers trained by an international nonprofit organisation are tackling corruption at the local level through 'social audits'

IN the remote Afghan area of Kalan Gazar amid the rough-hewn mountains of northern Afghanistan, a man gingerly steps forward at a village assembly. "Why did you spend so much money on cement?" he asks village leaders - the first time he has so openly questioned authority.

They check their records and reply: "The cement is high quality, and it was the best deal we could find."

The man sits back down, apparently satisfied.

This bland exchange - one of many at a meeting where local officials must defend their use of public funds - is part of a groundbreaking programme to bring accountability to a nation ranked one of five most corrupt by Transparency International, a corruption watchdog. The problem extends from top officials to local village leaders, and it's fuelling anger at the government and building support for the insurgency.

Now, villagers trained by an international nonprofit are tackling corruption at the local level through "social audits". They gather to

inspect the books of shuras, or elected councils, that oversee many villages and receive funds from the government and NGOs to undertake development projects. In many villages that uncover corruption, residents voted their shuras out in subsequent elections.

"For the first time, we feel like we have some control in our lives," says one villager, Rahimah, who like many Afghans has only one name. "We can finally hold our leaders accountable."

"It used to be that our shura would get money and we'd have no idea what happened to it," says Begum, another villager here in Kalan Gazar, in northern Baghlan province. In some areas, money earmarked for a development project had simply vanished.

To help build Afghans' capacity in dealing with such problems, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) introduced the idea of social audits - meetings that scrutinise the books of the village council - in hundreds of villages.

The villagers select a "social audit committee", made up of those whom the community deems the most honest and industrious. AKDN then trains the committee on how to inspect the shura's financial transactions - the training is needed because many villagers are illiterate or have never examined financial dealings before.

Committee members follow the money

trail, tracking down receipts, interviewing labourers, and grilling shura members. Their efforts culminate in a village-wide assembly where committee members present their findings, then invite members of the community to ask questions of the shura or levy allegations. The assembly closes after the village votes on whether they are satisfied with the shura's dealings.

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"This process is crucial to bringing a vibrant democracy to Afghanistan," says Sujet Sarkar, head of the AKDN's Local Governance Programme.

The village shura receive one-time grants for development projects from the government, so thus far the social audits have taken place once in each participating village.

in villages fight corruption

In the Kalan Gazar social audit, locals gathered to appraise the implementation of a micro-hydro generator, which harnesses energy from a river to bring electricity to the village, and a programme that trains women in tailoring.

The Social Audit Committee checked the quality of materials and interviewed labourers to ensure they were paid. They made a taxing two-hour journey to the provincial capital and

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tracked down the merchants who provided materials for the projects, to check that their prices matched the shura's stated outlay.

In the public meeting, the committee presented detailed figures on the shura's expenditures. Then, slowly at first, villagers stepped to front of the meeting and questioned the shura on various details.

Their queries ranged from the technical ("How many kilogrammes of steel were used?") to the social ("Why don't you implement more projects that benefit women?"). For many of the villagers, this was the first time in their lives that they were questioning authority or challenging elected officials.

The Social Audit Committee here found no serious instances of fraud, and the locals largely approved of the shura's work. But this is not always the case. In one village, its committee found that the shura paid nearly \$1,000 for a kebab, prompting irate questions.

In another case, a committee uncovered a trip that the shura took to Kabul, where the councilors stayed in a nice hotel, using public funds. The village forced the shura members to agree to stay in modest accommodation on future trips.

Because the committees present their findings to the public quickly (most audits are completed within days), and because they can appeal to the public if there are any problems, it is difficult for shura members to intimidate the committee.

"This is creating a lot of fear among the shuras," says Muhammad Nabi, a government official in Baghlan province. "It puts objective pressure on the shuras and helps limit abuses of power."

Initiatives to strengthen local governance, such as the social audit programme, will be key in helping to build a modern

democracy in Afghanistan, says John Dempsey, a legal expert with the United States Institute of Peace, a think tank.

Officials hope the programme can one day evolve into more advanced methods of government accountability. In some Latin American countries, for example, cities are involved in "participatory budgeting", where communities collectively decide the municipal budget.

But such innovations might still be a long way off here. Despite the programme's successes, those involved say there are still many hurdles to overcome. The AKDN has implemented the programme in more than 400 villages, but these are all in the peaceful northern regions.

The ongoing war and precarious security situations in southern and eastern Afghanistan prevent the AKDN and most other aid agencies from operating there. Moreover, some shuras in the north have refused to cooperate in the process. But Mr Sarkar says some of these shuras are succumbing to pressure from the community to accept social audits. Many hope that the experience Afghans gain in these audits can be transferred to the southern provinces if the war ends.

"This is our job," says Farzana, a member of the Social Audit Committee here in Kalan Gazar. "We have a responsibility to show all Afghans that we can hold our government accountable."

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