

## Small Grantee Feature

### Lessons in Development: Afghanistan and Bosnia

For the past 10 years, the international community has often tried to transplant “best practices” or “development successes” to Afghanistan with the idea that developing or post-conflict countries have experiences that might be instructive to Afghans. In fact, Afghans have a few successes of their own that they are eager to share. Senita Slipac and Sonia Eqbal think that Afghanistan’s National Solidarity Program (NSP), a development initiative that empowers local communities to improve public goods and services, is certainly one of those stories.

The NSP is the Afghan government’s flagship program for reconstruction and development of Afghanistan’s villages. The program has mobilized 70 percent of the country’s villages and spearheaded the election of Community Development Councils that plan, manage and monitor rural development and infrastructure projects. In this regard, NSP has dynamically reached out to rural communities and laid the foundations for inclusive local governance.

Senita Slipac, a Bosnian American who heads a scholarship organization that for Bosnians, and Sonia Eqbal, a seasoned NSP community trainer from Afghanistan, met at a Hollings Center [Next Generation Dialogue](#) in May 2011, entitled [“Afghanistan-US Relations: Development, Investment and Cultural Exchange.”](#) Slipac had spent some time in Afghanistan, visiting Community Development Councils in 2007, and was impressed by the receptivity of local communities. Slipac and Eqbal discussed the issue of lack of local ownership in Bosnia and the perception held by local communities that development and reconstruction projects are imposed on them by international organizations.

When Slipac and Eqbal realized that similarities were more visible than differences between Bosnia and Afghanistan, they came up with the idea of a workshop that would allow Afghans to share their experiences with fellow Bosnians. The 3-day training workshop took place in February 2012 in Sarajevo. At the workshop, Afghan NSP professionals made presentations about Afghanistan, described the implementation and impact of the NSP and discussed the applicability of the NSP in Bosnia with their Bosnian counterparts. Three trainers from Afghanistan participated as well as six Bosnians of Serb, Croat and Muslim origin. After the workshop, Slipac and Eqbal traveled to several towns and villages across Bosnia to observe community related projects and to gauge the feasibility of an NSP-like mechanism for Bosnia.

The Hollings Center supported the organization of this workshop with a [small grant](#). Sanem Güner was in Sarajevo to observe the training workshop and subsequently interviewed the organizers, Senita Slipac and Sonia Eqbal.

**Güner:** What towns did you visit outside of Sarajevo to observe on-the-ground development projects?

**Slipac:** We visited the southern cities of Rudo and Ljubinje, which is where the war started in 1992. One of the towns is Serbian/Orthodox and the other is Croatian/Catholic. They were brutally killing one another during the war, and since the war there was little to no collaboration until both communities realized they could benefit by working together. They started a project a year ago growing watermelons and berries and successfully transporting them to Norway. It is very interesting that this project was built on a very similar concept like the Afghanistan NSP where the community invests a percentage of the necessary funding, forms councils, and the local municipal government provides the necessary financial and coordination support. The communities got together; one offered labor, one machines, the municipality invested money while the second one pledged to help as well. The model is almost identical to NSP and it works! The communities were

not forced to work together but rather they came together out of necessity. This is not to say that they now suddenly love one another, and they make it clear that until recently they did not collaborate at all. But the situation made them realize that they need each other and that through working together they can achieve a better outcome for all. To me, this is the only kind of post-conflict resolution that can work because it was community-driven and initiated.

**Eqbal:** Looking at these Serbian and Croat villages working together was inspiring. There are 1,000 families benefiting from one piece of land. We thought that if we were to do a pilot NSP in Bosnia and Herzegovina, these two villages could be the first sites. But before that, it is important to acknowledge that trust is still an issue between these towns.

**Slipac:** We also visited a project up north in the small town of Zepce where agriculture has been very successful. They have everything ready to go, like machines for bigger production; they have materials that are missing some components that other communities in Bosnia can provide. However, they do not have good cooperation with the rest of Bosnia. During our workshop, we were talking about the lack of coordination as being one of the biggest problems for Bosnian farmers, and Zepce was a perfect example of that. They would be much more successful if they had some coordination unit to help facilitate collaboration with farmers in different regions and to link producers to buyers and sellers.

**Güner:** What would you say were the most interesting exchanges among your Afghan and Bosnian participants at the workshop in Sarajevo?

**Slipac:** The most interesting moments were when we realized the similarities of our two countries. Until then, no-one fully understood how much we could learn from one another. “What can Afghans and Bosnians learn from each other?” I was asked this question many times when I was planning the conference. The point behind the success of this project is the fact that no matter how different the countries might be before the conflict, they share many similarities as they try to bounce back from the destruction of war - combating corruption, finding ways for groups that fought each other until recently to now want to work together and managing that cooperation in the best way possible.

**Eqbal:** Weak institutions, weak government and governance, economic barriers, slow development and corruption are issues that we struggle with in both countries. In Afghanistan, despite the billions of dollars spent, we aren't even near where we should be. As a concerned Afghan, it makes me sad and frustrated to see that Afghanistan is not fulfilling its potential. Looking at Bosnia and Herzegovina 16 years after the war, I see hope, but I also see the same shortcomings. This makes me feel closer to Bosnians. The nature of the war we experienced might be different, but we can identify with each other's frustration and misery.

**Güner:** What were the key conclusions at the Sarajevo workshop?

**Eqbal:** We all agreed that there is room for NSP to be implemented in Bosnia, but not in the same way it is implemented in Afghanistan. In Bosnia, the focus has to be on promotion of agriculture. Clearly there is potential, but needs should be identified on the ground. In some places there is land, but no water. In others, seeds are low quality. There is a need for standardization to facilitate exports, and need for scalability to be able to cater to the needs of consumers. Sometimes, something as simple as building farmers a common storage facility could make a difference. But the most important step—the first step—is to mobilize people and communities.

**Güner:** What was the most memorable experience you had while carrying out this project?

**Slipac:** The site visits were the most memorable because we were able to see two projects that each had significant resemblance to the Afghan NSP. This was evidence for us that NSP could work in Bosnia, but both projects lacked one main component, something we established during the workshop as the biggest obstacle to programs in Bosnia—coordination. So the discussions at the workshop showed that there was already a need for an NSP-like project in the field, and that it could fill an important gap.

**Güner:** What will be your next steps?

**Slipac:** The next step is to draft a proposal that we can pitch to the World Bank and other organizations in order to finance a project that would help us implement the findings of the workshop. The idea is to use the findings to develop a Bosnian NSP.

**Eqbal:** Afghanistan's new Minister of Rural Development takes a lot of pride in the NSP and wants to showcase it as an Afghan success story. So the Ministry of Rural Development might be interested in hosting a delegation from Bosnia to observe the NSP in action.