

## **OD and International Development: Insights from Afghanistan**

**Suzanne M. Zaldivar, MSOD**

Co-founder of Inspired-Inc.

Adjunct Professor, Master of Science in OD Program

American University, Washington D.C., USA

Executive Committee, International OD Association

### **Abstract**

As OD practitioners struggle to find ways to add value in a complex and unstable world, this article about a consulting project in Afghanistan affirms the value of an OD orientation – the embodiment of OD beyond its culture-specific tools and methodologies. Since the original publication of the article, the US has decreased its presence in Afghanistan and the field of OD has increased its presence in building capacity around the world. The rich dialogue continues about what approaches work across cultures, and what methods must be adjusted or discarded. What remains is the vast potential that OD as a practice has in bringing wholeness to organizations and society.

*Keywords:* organization development, international development, Afghanistan, cross-cultural consulting, change

### **Introduction**

I recently took part in a USAID capacity building project in the public sector of Afghanistan. The highlight of my stay there was a meeting with a governor and former warlord who spoke with appreciation about organization development. The biggest challenges were security and mind-numbing bureaucracy. I felt humbled by the opportunity to participate, in even a small way, in the healing of this war-ridden country. Ultimately, my contribution to the project was completely different than I anticipated. The learning was exponential.

In addition to having the opportunity to learn a little more about this ancient part of the world, I learned quite a bit about what an organization development orientation (defined as the embodied discipline of an OD practitioner) could provide in such a setting. Specifically, the OD discipline informed how we entered a complex system, as well as how we identified and negotiated with stakeholders.

It also became clear that capacity development, as understood by the international development community, is closely related to organization development. In addition, I experienced first-hand the tension between the theory which the West has espoused for the development of Afghanistan versus what is actually taking place, and its implications for our work.

Furthermore, I came away with a deeper appreciation of the power of presence

and awareness over a problem-fixing orientation, which is especially critical in a traditional culture. Ultimately, I remain convinced that the embodied discipline of OD, beyond its tools and methodologies, holds deep potential in addressing the problems of today's world.

### **A Challenging Environment**

Afghanistan, located in Central Asia, boasts 5000 years of history and has survived countless attempts at foreign occupation. Its culture is deeply tribal at its core, and remains resistant to western influence, even in its capital, Kabul. Emerging from 30 years of war, it appears stunned, its people wary, suspicious, oppressed and fearful. Layered on this scenario is the tension of the visible presence of US and international military forces, ongoing attacks from opportunistic insurgents, including the Taliban, and a frustrated constituency that has yet to really experience the progress so promised after 2001.

Attempting to close the development gap left by warfare and oppression are countless international donor agencies (e.g. USAID, UNDP, World Bank, Aga Kahn Foundation) and private consulting firms who are providing a range of services from restoring roads to reconnecting severed banking systems. In my case, a private consulting firm with a USAID contract sought me as an OD expert with international development experience for a public sector project. The project focused on capacity development within the ministries of the Afghan government. A colleague with USAID and Muslim- country experience accompanied me, and we launched on a 7-week engagement that included work in Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif in the north and Herat in the west.

### **The Intervention**

The stated purpose of our contract was to help with short-term capacity building within a mature, longer-term project. We were also asked to provide expertise in OD and process consulting to a consulting system accustomed to expert consulting. We had the dual role of engaging with a client in the Afghan government while simultaneously engaging and educating the private consulting firm.

After some groundwork in Kabul, my colleague and I were asked by the consulting firm to travel north to Mazar-e-Sharif to meet with the Governor of Balkh Province, General Ata Mohammed Noor (a former mujahideen, warlord and previous member of the Northern Alliance, which was supported by the U.S. against both the Soviets and the Taliban) and subsequently west to Herat to meet with Herat Governor Sayed Hosayn Anwari, in order to assess capacity development needs. A phenomenally skillful Afghan counterpart, without whom we would have failed, accompanied us.

### **Stakeholders in Abundance**

As an OD practitioner, one of the first things I do is to identify who my client is and to get a lay of the land—some kind of mental picture of the various stakeholders.

This can be a challenge under typical conditions. In this engagement, despite the fact that we had a contract with the consulting firm, the identification of a primary client remained elusive in such a complex and politically sensitive environment. Standard practice says that the client is the one who pays the bills. Was the primary client the consulting firm because they were paying my fee? Was it USAID, to whom the consulting firm was subcontracting? Was it the Afghan government who really “owns” the problem? Due to the murky layers of “clients” we encountered, we chose to function more in terms of an open-ended path of negotiation and contracting, what Block calls “ceaseless negotiation” (1981), with various stakeholders whose power and investment in our work was not always obvious and sometimes never fully clarified.

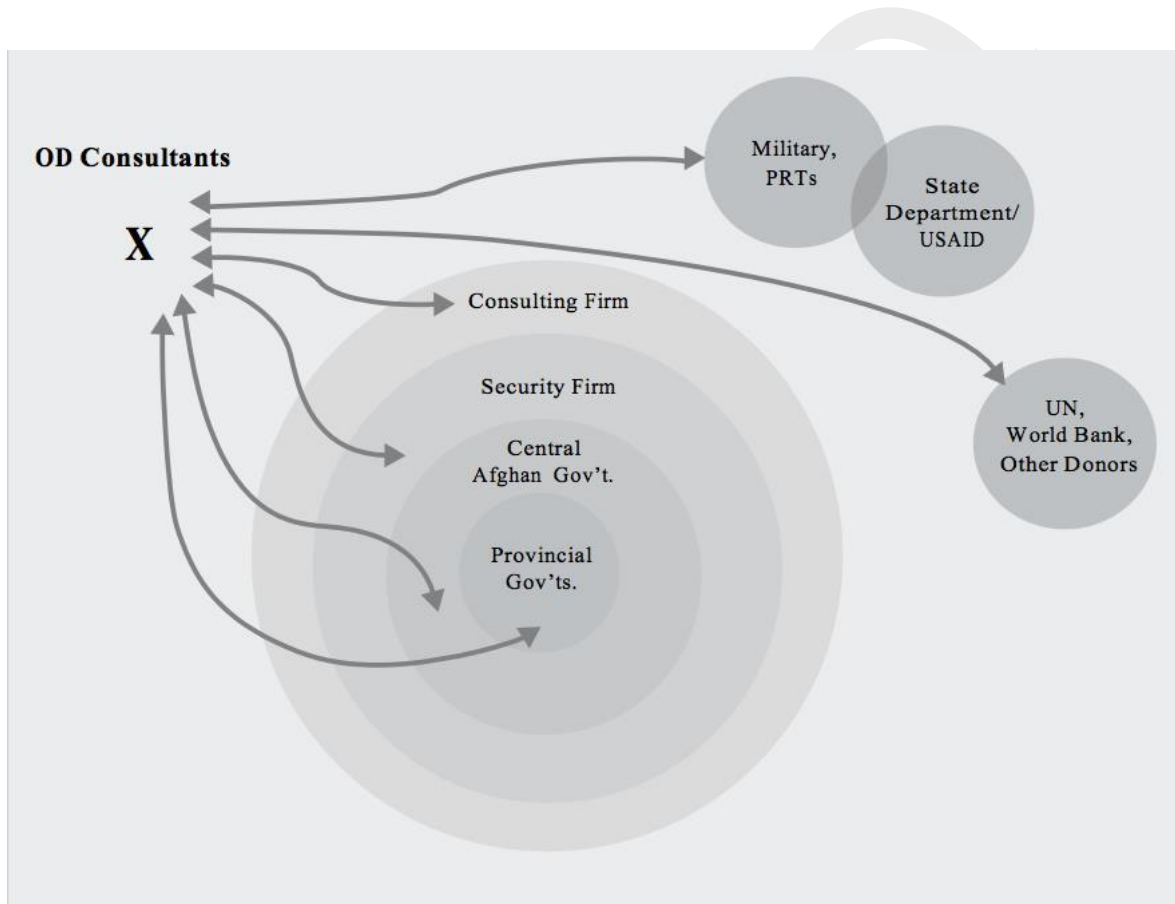


Figure 1. Stakeholders in the consulting project

Contracting began with the consulting firm before we left the United States and continued in Kabul as we sought to clarify the scope of the work. Our relationship to USAID, however, was distant. The consulting firm preferred to handle most contacts with USAID, which in turn assumed the role of auditor of the subcontracted projects. Our next level of contracting was more subtle—learning who the various stakeholders were in the private consulting firm, understanding their roles, gleaning their access to valuable information on how to surf the bureaucracy, and tapping into their network of connections to other donors as well as powerful people in the ministries. Our implied contract with them involved easing their concerns that we would impose ourselves too

much on their territory and in return, we would share information we learned along the way with them. (Figure 1)

Contracting continued with the most immediate stakeholders—the private security firm hired to protect us, who had the power to dictate our movements, including our ability to have meetings with government officials. On our first day in Kabul, they carried us in an armored vehicle to their walled compound where we sat through a two-hour briefing on how many ways we could be hurt in this environment—presented with bright, colorful PowerPoint slides. Their request of us—be vigilant, listen to them, and do what they say. We honored their request (with the exception of lugging around our Kevlar vests and helmets), and earned negotiating power with them by getting to know them, treating them with respect and entertaining the Afghan members of the team with our poor attempts at speaking Dari. We learned eventually that our ongoing negotiations allowed us greater flexibility in making meetings with government officials (without breaking strict security protocol).

We also made a concerted effort to identify other donor agencies operating in the public sector. We met with members of the UNDP, World Bank and other private consulting firms in order to learn what they had done so that our work would not duplicate their efforts.

Other stakeholders included PRTs (Provincial Reconstruction Teams) — military bases run by different foreign nations, who typically had development representatives living on the base whose goal was to help coordinate development aid with military activities. We met with a representative of USAID in Mazar-e-Sharif (at a PRT run by Sweden at the time) in order to understand their view of what the various donors were doing with the provincial government.

Eventually, after negotiating our way through the various foreign stakeholders, we were finally able to meet and contract with a member of the Afghan Civil Service Commission in Kabul. This introduction to a powerful player in the central government then led to introductions to the provincial governors, mayors, ministerial directors and their senior staff at the provincial level. This type of contracting and negotiation was the subtlest and the most delicate, and will be explored later in the article. Its importance towards the ability to carry out any further steps cannot be overemphasized.

### **OD and Capacity Building in Theory and in Practice**

The concept of capacity development in the international development community is strikingly similar to the aspect of OD that is process consulting. The UNDP (1997) defines capacity development as “the process by which individuals, organizations, institutions and societies develop abilities (individually and collectively) to perform functions, solve problems and set and achieve objectives.” Similarly, the intention of OD process consulting is to help the client create the conditions for success. As a helping methodology it concentrates not just on “what” is being done in the client system, but on “how”.

Like the business world, expert consulting dominates in the international development community. As successful as donors are at building a knowledge base among donor agencies, many have questioned the efficacy of a purely expert approach. Even capacity building, which hints at more of a process orientation, has not always been successfully implemented—the culture of expertise exerts a stronger influence than process and embodiment do. Expert consulting, which works supremely well when all of the variables are known, or controlled, is less effective, and even harmful, when the variables (such as culture, language, politics, covert processes, etc.) are not known and cannot be controlled.

Furthermore, we observed a disconnect between what was explicitly valued and what was actually happening. This disconnect seemed to occur with the larger donor system. Although the donor world overtly, and in my experience, authentically, recognizes the importance of capacity building and even organization development on paper, they tended neither to embody nor practice true process consulting due to their inexperience in using OD. Drawing from the work of Argyris and Schon (1974), the “espoused theory” or stated belief, of the donor system that we encountered is: Afghans should be empowered to lift themselves out of their oppressed state; outsiders should be partnering with Afghans; and development/military intervention holds the best interests of Afghanistan in mind. This belief was reflected in the contract, in literature, websites and was touted at meetings. The “theory-in-use,” however, reflects to my view, a deeper belief by the donor system that:

- 1) Afghanistan needs to be controlled by the outside, not empowered.

*The evidence:*

- The overwhelming presence of military bases (US and ISAF) concentrated in Kabul, surrounding the presidential palace
- The overwhelming presence of public sector aid organizations also concentrated in Kabul, often working at cross-purposes, and rarely coordinating amongst themselves (In one fact-finding meeting with a Deputy Minister in Kabul, we were told that the best contribution we could make in terms of capacity building would be to “herd” the various donors in the ministry.)

- 2) The Afghan public sector is backward and needs to benefit from modern institutions like government bureaucracy.

*The evidence:*

- Few donors recognize and build upon traditional, and to some extent democratic, tribal traditions of management and conflict facilitation (e.g. “jirgas” and “suras”) and instead focus on building a Kabul-centric bureaucracy
- The sub-national efforts by various donors often encourage the creation of layers of different governing bodies and committees from the top-down,

rather than bottom-up, or based on needs.

3) The Afghan government is understood by the larger donor system to be passive, blank-slate recipient of aid.

*The evidence:*

- A preponderance of expert consulting from donor agencies (sometimes under the guise of capacity development)
- Very little listening to Afghan people nor attempts to understand their world (aggravated by travel restrictions due to security concerns)

It must be emphasized that people with whom we worked (Afghan and foreign) were well intentioned, highly committed and felt equally frustrated by the system.

How did this affect our work? Bringing an OD/process-consulting orientation felt at times to be “counter-cultural” in the world of US-led international public sector development. Interestingly enough however, OD/process consulting seemed much more appropriate for working in Afghan culture and critical in an environment of so many different cultural layers. Furthermore, there was enormous bureaucratic pressure on us, and on our colleagues, to do what was measurable (e.g. providing workshops, writing papers, holding conferences), whether or not these actions led to results that would serve the client system well.

In addition, as consultants, we wondered to what extent we were colluding with the system. We ultimately decided that we would work conscientiously in areas over which we had control, such as our presence and the mindfulness of our approach, while being aware of influences beyond our control.

The following section describes our experience embodying this duality. It is intended to illustrate the importance of adapting to the cultural context in which we, as OD consultants, operate to achieve successful results.

### **Being vs. Doing**

My ability to add value increased as I released my attachment to a U.S./business accomplishment mindset. I arrived so wanting to have a helpful and immediate impact on the client that I spent two weeks in intense frustration. I was attached to an outcome. I had received advice from a wise consultant friend before I left—“the best thing you can do in a situation like Afghanistan is to be present.” After my initial adjustment, this was the orientation I took with me as my colleagues and I negotiated and contracted with the provincial Afghan government.

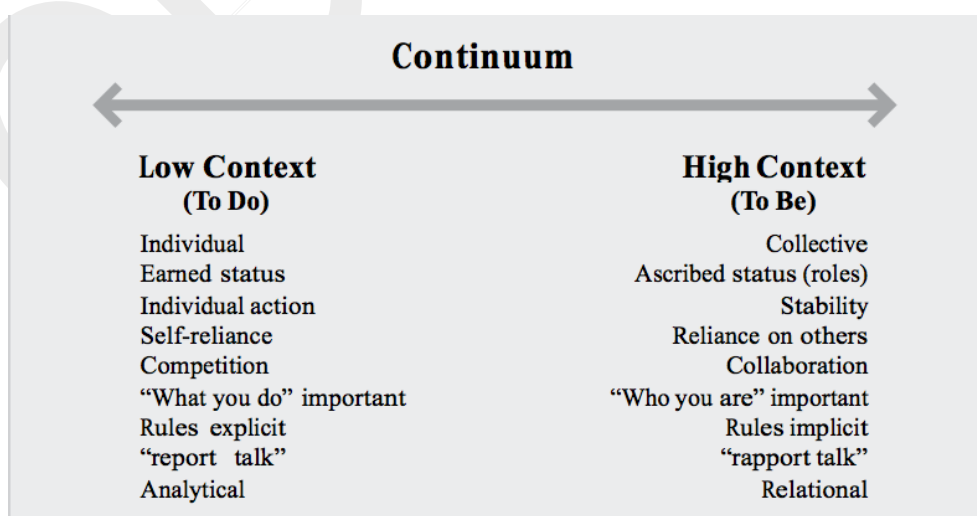
Our initial meetings with the governors were formal, ritualistic and basically diplomatic in nature. We sat in large, elegant offices, sometimes in gilt chairs, and were offered the traditional tea, candy, watermelon, grapes and figs. We watched our Afghan counterparts closely, and attended to our gestures. After stating our intention (which was further clarified in a number of pre-meeting meetings by our Afghan colleague), we

learned to listen—sometimes for hours, to a story—of the province, of the people, of what mattered to them—long before we approached the subject of needs.

If we listened long enough, and asked questions to further understand, we found that the conversation eventually evolved from formality to increased self-disclosure and warmth, providing the foundation for the discussion of issues later. This was especially true in subsequent meetings with senior advisors and line directors from various ministries. We knew that their level of comfort with us had shifted when they began to joke with us and even make fun of us (one politician reassured me that my name “Suzanne”, meant “purple flower” in Dari, not “Su-zann-e”, meaning “wedding night bed sheet”).

The increasing trust resulted in an invitation to the Independence Day celebration in Mazar-e-Sharif (Afghanistan gained independence from British influence in 1919), which was hosted by the Governor. The morning celebration involved speeches about rebuilding Afghanistan, strengthening women’s rights, and reclaiming pride in the country. Young boys from the various ethnic tribes sang together of unity and passionate poets revealed the power of Afghan oral tradition. We were also invited to an intimate dinner by Governor Ata, along with 60 of his closest allies, as well as some international and military dignitaries. They even invited us to attend the male side of a wedding (men and women celebrate separately in traditional Afghan weddings). Our foreign, female presence was unusual indeed.

We did manage to gather quite a bit of data about capacity development needs, attempting to manage expectations as we inquired. However, we began to realize that what really mattered was being present and respectful to our Afghan clients, listening to them, and learning more about who they were. Though results were expected to emerge from our meetings, we knew that we would only be able to provide results through relationships. And though relationship building is a general practice of OD practitioners, the timeline was much longer and more delicate than any previous contract in my experience.



*Figure 2. High Context/Low Context: A Model for Viewing Culture*

Weaver (1995), building on the work of Hall (1976), offers a model of understanding culture, understood as collectively shared values, which proved helpful in our engagement. Weaver proposes that cultures (ethnic, national, organizational, etc.) fall along a continuum of context (Figure 2). Those cultures whose “rules” are explicit and easily explained to outsiders are considered more low-context. Those cultures whose “rules” are implicit, and more difficult to understand by outsiders are considered more high-context.

Afghanistan is, in my experience, a very high-context culture, one in which one carries more value than what one does. In our meetings with the politicians, we earned credibility by who we were as people, rather than by our profession as consultants. It helped us tremendously to be working with a skillful, well-respected Afghan counterpart who “vouched” for us.

We also earned their trust by focusing on who they were, learning about their historic landmarks, being with them, and not launching prematurely into our low-context task of data gathering. One consultant, who had been working with the Governor over two years, remarked that he had never seen foreigners work their way so quickly into the inner circle of the Governor before. A provincial politician noted that his joking with us was what one does with family. We knew that being treated like family in a high-context culture was a particular honor and would serve the consulting process as a whole well in terms of building a foundation of trust for future work. It reminded me of what Schein (1997) observes: that “everything you do is an intervention.”

A clash between cultures can be an abrupt exposure to previously undetected, even covert information, requiring certain diplomatic skills to bridge. This was especially true in the contrasting blend of the high-context Afghan culture and the low-context culture of US-led international development. Part of our work, therefore, involved a diplomatic role of “shuttling” and attempting to translate these two worlds to each other. Many of our conversations with the politicians involved “low-contexting”—helping them to understand the values of the donor community (though they were already highly skillful in this area, often casting their requests in the language of capacity development). In fact, we submitted a proposal for several of the politicians to come to the US for participant training, a process of exposing them to US culture and thinking that would enable them to be more skillful in dealing with the culture of western type donor agencies in the future.

Back in Kabul, we emphasized the ongoing need for the consulting firm to use high-context diplomatic processes as a prerequisite to accomplishing the low-context goals spelled out in the contract. In addition, we considered it imperative to convey to the consulting firm and USAID what the provinces had accomplished already. For example, Governor Ata of Balkh Province spent his own money to support his staff in the building of a provincial development plan over eight months from the ground up, including participation and data gathering at the district level. The Provincial Development Council (a democratically elected body) in Herat had plans to do an informal audit of line ministries and hold a televised public meeting to reveal both



successes and failures in promised activities. We suggested that further consultation be built upon the work already happening in the provinces, rather than import low-context models, approaches and expertise that were uninformed by reality on the ground.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, we held a series of participative meetings in Kabul with members of the consulting firm to demonstrate and explore the current and desired approaches to consulting. The conversations raised awareness about assumptions regarding consulting, and resulted in the development of a new methodology of consulting that was much more respectful and sensitive to the high- context culture of Afghanistan.

### **Conclusion: Implications for OD and International Development**

This experience further convinced me that an OD orientation has much to offer the international development community and offers potential in addressing serious problems in the world today. There is a distinction between traditional OD methodologies and an OD orientation, the latter defined as more of an embodied discipline than a set of tools. In my experience, one can understand the theory of OD, but not embody or practice it well. An OD orientation is the essence of the practice that enables rigor around process consulting but allows the practitioner to contribute in environments beyond the relatively controlled environment of US businesses and organizations.

OD in practice is increasingly better able to handle the complexity of a cross-cultural world. Bushe and Marshak (2007) note that OD is evolving from a classical positivist practice, where one objective reality is assumed to exist, to a post- modern approach, which acknowledges multiple realities. In addition, many who have explored the implications of applying OD in non-western settings have suggested that while OD is a value- laden approach, heavily influenced by both the cultural and socio-economic environment in which it was developed, it is still useful if appropriately adapted to the surroundings of clients. I believe that while many tools and methodologies traditional to OD may or may not work in certain cultural settings, an OD orientation is often transferable to settings perhaps not imagined by the original founders of OD. The discipline allows OD practitioners to be rigorous and effective in a variety of settings (capacity development, training, coaching, conflict facilitation, etc.) even though they might not be practicing traditional OD. To illustrate, I have noted in Table 1 what some OD practices can offer in situations that are common in international development.

Table 1.

*Organization Development for International Development*

Common conditions in international development	What an OD orientation has to offer
Traumatized environments	An appreciative approach vs. a problem-solving orientation
Environments full of unknown variables, multiple languages/worldviews and shifting realities	Process orientation which invites discovery, learning and openness to the client environment
Working environments that frequently challenge the consultant's sense of identity, safety, and usefulness	A value of self-awareness on the part of the consultant which leads to resilience and more skillful consulting
Complex layers of stakeholders and contracts sometimes far removed from current reality	Rigorous contracting methodologies which encourage accountability and clear commitment on the part of consultant and client(s)
Rapidly changing environments	Action research, or some adaptation of it, which allows for ongoing evaluation rather than using only final evaluations, which limit a client's ability to adjust action mid-stream
Environments involving stakeholders of various ethnicities, classes, religions, identities, histories, world-orientations and values	A value of diversity and multiple world-views
Complex systems of donors and recipients layered with covert processes	A value of systems thinking and group dynamics which allow for greater understanding of, and skill intervening in, the dynamic layers of influences

Although many OD practitioners are active in a variety of settings, OD as a discipline is poised to make a very significant contribution beyond the western organizational context in terms of addressing serious issues in the world today. For example, Adam Kahane and his consulting group, Generon, have done some wonderful work around dialogue and problem solving in the developing world using consulting at a grass-roots level. University of Maryland's Center for International Development and Conflict Resolution is active in Second- track Diplomacy, an approach to conflict facilitation that uses action research. Arnold Mindell and his Process Work Institute have taken group facilitation to a whole new level by incorporating elements of Taoism, shamanism and physics to international group work and problem-solving.

In sum, OD, which grew up in academia, remains rigorous because of its scientific roots. And it remains relevant because of its ability to adapt in practice to a changing world. Having an OD orientation enabled me to be grounded, flexible, and effective in the complex environment of Afghanistan. It allowed me to see and work with what

emerged, rather than be limited by what was in my toolbox.

### References

- Argyris, C. & Schon, D. (1974). *Theory in practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Block, Peter. (1981). *Flawless consulting*. San Diego: Pfeiffer & Co.
- Bushe, G. & Marshak, R. (2007, April) Revisioning organization development: A post-modernist perspective. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Hall, E. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. New York: Doubleday.
- Mindell, Arnold. (1992). *The leader as martial artist*. San Francisco: Lao Tse Press, Ltd.
- Schein, Edgar H. The Concept of "Client" from a process consultation perspective: A guide for change agents. *Journal of Organizational Change*, Vol. 10 No. 3, 1997 p. 202-216.
- Weaver, G. (1995). *Cultural Context*. Unpublished lecture presented at American University, Washington, DC.
- United Nations Development Programme. (1997) *Capacity development*. <http://www.pogar.org/publications/other/undp/governance/cdrb97e.pdf>
- Zaldivar, S. (2008). International development through OD: my experience in Afghanistan. *OD Practitioner*, 40(I), 4-9.