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EVALUATION REPORT



**UDF-AFG-09-316 - Citizens' Platform for Democratic Debates & Dialogues in
Afghanistan**

Date: 4 November 2013

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Errors and omissions are the responsibility of the authors.

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I. Executive Summary

i. Project data

Between November 1, 2010 and December 31, 2011, the Saba Media Organization (SMO) coordinated a 14-month (including a two month no cost extension) project called the “Citizens’ Platform for Democratic Debates and Dialogues in Afghanistan». The project aimed to address the misunderstanding of democratic values and human rights in the Afghan context. The project planned to clarify and deepen understanding of democratic values among Afghan people, especially among women and other marginalized or vulnerable groups and in rural areas, by conducting research on five pillars of democratic values in international and Afghan contexts, disseminating awareness-raising or educational programs, and establishing a media platform for debates.

Project efforts and activities encompassed initiatives across four areas intended to produce (i) action-oriented research, (ii) awareness-raising television and radio programs, (iii) a media platform for organizing debates on democracy and democratic values, and (iv) recommendations to initiate coordinated advocacy for democracy.

ii. Evaluation findings

Relevance

The choice of media dissemination and especially the use of radio in rural areas and remote districts were very relevant. Despite weak project design, the SMO’s strategy to directly target or reach people likely to be uninformed about or actively resistant to democratic ideas due to misconceptions was sound and pertinent.

The project raised awareness among people who already had a basic idea about democracy. SMO expected an increase in awareness of democratic issues to help change anti-Western or resistant minds but did not focus on reaching audiences needing this education most.

Many show interviewees, debate participants and audience participants participated in more than one show, indicating weak stakeholder mapping.

Some debate participants reported that the language used was too technical and theoretical for an ordinary person to understand. Analysis of SMO materials confirms that in some areas, Western-oriented democratic terminology and usage likely to be too abstract or insufficiently explained was used. The project did not sufficiently take into account that many targeted beneficiaries had little education and exposure to ideas beyond their culture, religion, or location. Although most SMO shows explained basic democratic issues fairly comprehensively, specialized language or reference terms limited audience impact to persons who may have had some knowledge already or perhaps an existing deep interest on democracy.

Effectiveness

SMO ambitiously combines social activism with media enterprise, and this project’s targets were ambitious for the time and resources of the grant. SMO took positive steps to engage viewers and listeners through polls, calls, and emails, and reported using audience feedback and suggestions to strengthen their programs and bridge the gap between media and viewers. Television and radio shows were broadcast according to the project plan and the platform for debates was to some extent executed. SMO efforts in this project helped enlarge democratic space for dialogue and exchange of opinion in Afghanistan. While effective in

some aspects SMO needs greater experience and capacity in order to meet the challenge of achieving social change through media.

Project implementation lacked adequate strategic perspective. Preparatory research related to the programs was superficial. Project staff realized the limitations of a small one-year project and confined themselves to reaching audience numbers. The project could have used better information to improve its effectiveness even over the short period.

Efficiency

The project was not costly. Thus, even considering limitations, its achievements were efficiently realized. Higher skill and experience levels, particularly more advanced program development and use of information could increase the efficiency of similar projects. Considering the interest of Afghan audiences in debates, better use of resources in stronger research and program development would increase audiences through stronger discussions and better moderators and debate participants. Stronger debates would disseminate more knowledge and potentially increase SMO advertising revenue. Strategically leveraging radio's lower cost and greater reach would enhance media project efficiency.

Impact

SMO has carved out its niche by frequently inviting civil society representatives to debates and targeting CSOs for poll or advocacy purposes, providing these actors a forum to express opinions and present positions. The project dedicated a few programs specifically to civil society's role in democracy. With diversification of the media sector since 2001, people are learning to compare and criticize different information sources and public policy.

Civic education has motivated some citizens to be more inquisitive, vocal, and willing to participate in the governance process. SMO materials increase awareness and education on certain democratic issues, which offer particular value for women who otherwise have limited access to education and the public sphere.

SMO used project funding to procure books and research materials and develop advocacy material but failed to have a strong strategy define impacts clearly in order to focus on them. Staff departures once the project ended drained away some of the capacity developed through the project cycle.

Sustainability

SMO is continuing to promote democracy and good governance but lacks capacity in key areas (analysis, research, and strategy). While trying to find innovative ways to continue and fund its efforts, SMO content shows little innovation or strategic coherence. Regular research and monitoring to ensure programs are having desired impacts toward organizational and social goals are essential for sustainable viability. Stronger internal processes would help SMO to grow beyond its experience, attract more viewers, and better respond to—and shape—audience demand.

iii. Conclusions

▪ ***The project was extremely relevant in the Afghan context; building a new media landscape and bringing civic education topics on screens,*** particularly on democratic values such as equality, justice and accountability. Although the majority of Afghans have heard of these terms, few understand how they fit into the larger

governance system and how they affect their everyday life. The use of media was relevant too, considering access to information for rural population.

- ***Project design and management implementation were severely hindered by strategic flaws and negligible research or evidence foundations.*** Limited hard evidence obtained from baseline research compromised the general objective of the project. The price of these flaws was apparent in poor understanding of the broad project context and landscape, missed learning opportunities, and failure to map stakeholders including target groups and strategic partners in order to allocate resources optimally. Duplication of others' efforts wasted SMO's opportunity to enhance other media democracy effects.

- ***Management strategy and coherent direction of the project were lacking.*** Mistakes or gaps were not corrected in the review step and gave evidence of poor organizational arrangements. Research materials of low quality were approved and therefore shaped all shows and debates, leading to suboptimal performance by moderators and participants, which reduced the efficiency and impact of the democratic debates. SMO has no internal control or assessment mechanisms to measure progress or impact on desired social change. Although the project used emails and phone calls from the audience, including suggestions for show material, these were not analyzed or incorporated into review of the programs' effectiveness with respect to organizational or project objectives.

- ***SMO has been successful in creating a space for civil society to express their position and opinion; however, Afghan media airs debates every week and a significant part of the evaluation stakeholders were not familiar with this particular project.*** Some of those who know SMO by name report they find their programs unappealing compared to other options. The shows tended to increase people's awareness and knowledge on democratic themes but limited market share and lack of strategic targeting or reporting suggest very little impact on hard-to-reach audiences or Afghans who misunderstand or resist democratic ideas.

iv. Recommendations

On the basis of the above findings and conclusions we recommend the following:

- SMO is recommended to reinforce its internal capacity and hire permanent key technical people that can advise on strategic thinking, modern media techniques, research, advocacy and social and governance issues.

- SMO needs to assure that all project managers know how to work through all of the steps in designing a project, including objective, mission, target groups, strategic partners, assumptions, risks and evaluation. Solid strategies and plans need to be in place in order to assure effective implementation. Clear criteria need to be established for stakeholders, activities and internal review or evaluation.

- SMO is recommended to hire competent researchers who can conduct surveys and research amongst the population to identify the challenges, problems and issues that can be addressed by SMO according to its organizational vision. In the case of limited funds, it is better to hire a fully competent researcher on temporary basis than to hire multiple short-contract researchers over several projects. By identifying the audience better, SMO can tailor its shows to their needs and increase its impact on them.

- SMO has a unique position between the media and the civil society sector, meaning that it has to master two specialties instead of one. If SMO wishes to remain

in this niche, it needs to increase its social and governance capacity in order to properly engage and use its civil society partners.

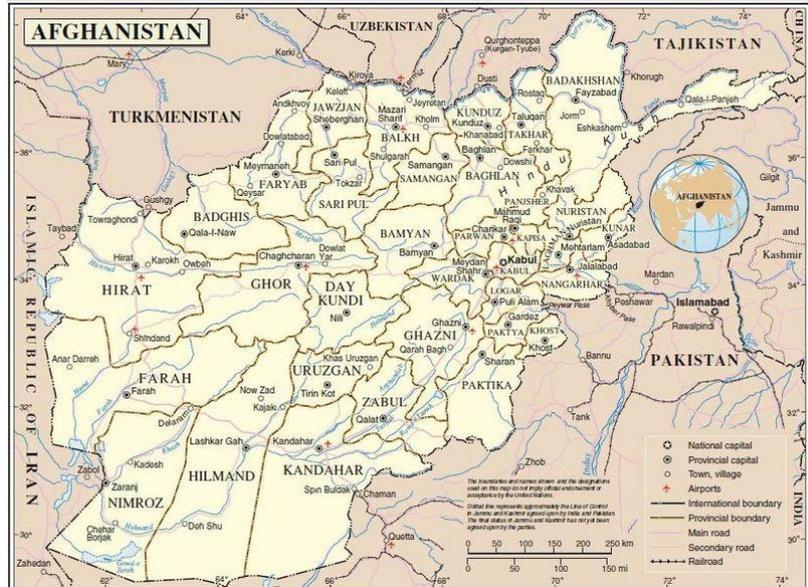
- Advocacy is a new concept in Afghanistan and is becoming faddishly popular; however, few people in the country actually understand what it means and how it can be implemented. It is to be welcomed that SMO is expanding its activities to include advocacy but it is recommended to develop a precise plan of action and potentially to hire a person who has the rights skills to carry out this activity to its fullest.

II. Introduction and Development Context

i. Project and evaluation objectives

This report contains the evaluation of the project entitled “Citizen’s Platform for Democratic Debates and Dialogues in Afghanistan” The project ran from 1 November 2010 to 31 December 2011 including two-month no cost extension, with a total grant of US\$135,000 (out of which US\$13,500 was retained for monitoring and evaluation activities).

The project was designed and implemented by the Afghan organization, Saba Media Organization (SMO). As defined in the Project Document, the overall objective was to deepen the understanding of democratic values among Afghan people and intends to conduct research on democratic norms in international as well as in Afghan contexts: disseminate awareness raising programs including vox pops, expert interviews and messages through radio and TV and establish a media platform through organizing live debates and providing a set of



Afghanistan map indicating the country provinces

recommendations for application of democratic values in Afghanistan. The target population consisted of 600,000 local viewers of Saba TV, one million listeners of Nawa radio (50% of total listeners) in 21 provinces of Afghanistan and 10,000. global audiences through the Saba website.

UNDEF and Transtec have an agreed framework governing the evaluation process, which is documented in the Operational Manual used for all grant evaluations. According to the Manual, the objective of the evaluation is to ‘undertake in-depth analysis of UNDEF-funded projects to gain a better understanding of what constitutes a successful project which will in turn help UNDEF devise future project strategies. Evaluations also assist stakeholders to determine whether projects have been implemented in accordance with the project document and whether anticipated project outputs have been achieved’.

(ii) Evaluation methodology

The methodology for this evaluation, agreed upon by Transtec and UNDEF, was detailed in a *Launch Note* UDF-AFG-09-316, and consisted of a two-phase procedure, conducted by a team leader, Mrs Catherine Elkins, and an international expert based in Kabul, Mrs. Karolina Oloffson. With remote guidance from the team leader, the Kabul-based expert visited the project from 02 to 08 July 2012. During the visit the international expert conducted interviews with grant stakeholders including project staff, debate participants, media representatives, donors, and civil society representatives. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, with recordings made for review to assure consistent understanding and accurate representation of varying views in developing this report.

The international expert also reviewed and analyzed a subset of documentation from the TV and radio shows produced by SMO under this grant, including recorded broadcasts, while in Kabul. Review included SMO research materials and advocacy recommendation documents. Review of the democratic debate radio and television programmes had been planned, for which SMO provided the international expert with materials that however turned out to be the wrong shows. SMO was unable to provide the correct recordings and could not resolve apparent mislabeling in their archives; within the evaluation timeframe they were unable to retrieve or deliver any DVD recordings of the democratic debates.

Interview protocols, strategy, and key issues to be probed during the site visit were determined by both experts in consultation with the Director of SMO prior to the site visit. A list of persons consulted is presented in Annex 3.

(iii) Development context

After 2001, international efforts first focused on eradicating terrorism and the narcotics trade, shifting in subsequent years to large reconstruction projects intended to provide basic public services. As this shift occurred, the Afghan non-governmental organization (NGO) and civil society organization (CSO) sector grew rapidly to facilitate or engage in local projects. From 2001 through 2008, for instance, the United States and the European Union provided most of the external funding for Afghan local media initiatives, designed to increase awareness among the population on political and social processes such as democratic values, election roles and responsibilities.

Besides insurgent operations, conservative forces in Afghan society also began speaking out to discourage new foreign ideas they felt could undermine their way of life. Especially in rural and less educated populations, popular understanding of democracy or democratic values was strongly affected by local leaders' antagonism against the West, resentment of ongoing war and hard economic times, and fear of immoral behavior and excessive liberty (especially for women and youth).

Even if now decreasing, major foreign and multilateral donors tend to fund media interventions intended to increase media sector skills and capacity; educate Afghan citizens on civic virtues or values; and/or communicate high-level messages promoting democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression.

The balance between freedom of expression and censorship in the Afghan media sector has varied over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Afghanistan's first newspaper began publishing in 1906, with subsequent growth in print, radio, and television media production. The Taliban enacted and enforced strict controls over publication and other forms of media, whether entertainment or reporting news. These rules were relaxed post-Taliban, although at the time of this report Reporters without Borders still categorizes Afghanistan as "difficult" and the 2011–2011 index places it in the bottom fifth of press repression (150 on a scale comparing 179 countries). Access to information remains contested by many segments of the population and political, social, and economic pressures and leaders shape media outlet philosophies and content.

Media variety has proliferated since 2001's regime change, and popular support for more free media has increased in the last ten years while outlets have become more independent and investigative. Since 2001, 55 TV stations (25 currently in operation), 736 print media companies, and 76 radio stations have been registered with the Ministry of Culture and Information. Television is a popular way to reach more affluent and urbanized population segments, but radio broadcasts reach greater numbers of people. Print media effectiveness can be limited by the extremely low literacy rates in the population, especially among women, the poor, in rural areas, and among ethnic and linguistic minorities. Outlets nonetheless

include traditional paper publications and more interactive new media (blogs, message boards, polls, email).

Most media organizations are not financially self-sufficient but depend on external funding, primarily from bilateral or multilateral foreign donors and/or Afghan religious or political groups. Many stakeholders perceive the media in very distinct segments, such as public, political, commercial, and social, although they may not all agree on the salient distinctions affecting themselves or others. All agree that some media represent the governmental view and interests; other media represent different splinter groups and their views and interests. These political perspectives outside government may be promoted directly or indirectly by political parties or their leaders, warlords or former warlords, or other people or organizations with their own political, social, or religious agenda. These two segments currently dominate the Afghan media sector.

A third segment of the media market is occupied by commercial media enterprises that finance themselves in private sector sales and marketing, but also by acquiring private donations and sponsorships. Some stakeholders also identify an independent media oriented primarily to social or civil society issues and promoting generally progressive views such as citizen participation, rule of law, or gender equality. SMO is generally understood by those who know it to be part of this last category, the smallest, with few programs supported by advertising.

III. Project Strategy

(i) Project approach and strategy

The Saba Media Organization (SMO) incorporates a media network including television, radio, and print. Its niche is to be one of the few organizations in Afghanistan at this time that primarily aims to produce content that enhances constructive dialogue between citizens and the Afghan government. SMO recently joined an Independent Media Consortium designed to strengthen the voice of Afghan media in a national dialogue.

The SMO “Citizen’s Platform for Democratic Debates and Dialogues in Afghanistan” project planned to generate shows and debates with content that would correct misunderstandings of democracy and democratic values prevailing among some segments of the population. The stated objective was to deepen the understanding of democratic values and identify a set of recommendations for the application of democracy in the Afghan context.

The project document proposed the following outcomes:

- Clear understanding of democratic values in international and Afghan contexts by Afghan people;
- Awareness raising of Afghans on democratic values achieved through awareness raising TV and radio programs;
- Deepen understanding of democratic values achieved through a media platform for organizing debates on democracy; and
- Application of democratic values in Afghanistan formulated and shared with concerned organizations and the general public.

Ultimately the project envisioned that it would involve and change perceptions of five pillars of democracy (freedom of speech; popular democratic inquiry; open, accountable, and diverse mass media; economic democracy; and equality under law) among target populations (600,000 active local viewers of Saba TV and one million Nawa radio listeners in 21 provinces of Afghanistan) through engaging them in debates on democratic values in the Afghan context. It also promised and delivered certain products of research and recommendations.

Activities included research, program design, logistics and program production (live and recorded), and feedback and analysis. Namely during the project duration, SMO produced and broadcast 20 shows on TV and radio. These shows covered five subjects: Freedoms, Elections, Legal equality, Afghanistan’s political system, and Participation. Subjects were selected so to address the five democracy pillars as quoted above.

The project team consisted of one person each in the following roles: project manager, legal researcher, debate organizer, production manager, TV manager, Radio manager, and head of finance and administration. Delivery of each of the shows followed a standard sequence: research, then production, TV broadcast, radio broadcast, debates, and finally advocacy recommendations. Research had two days to identify the specific topic material needed for the show and one day to read and document relevant findings. That document was peer-reviewed by additional experts from Kabul University. The production team and program team together identified the interviewees for the discussion show, the sequence of the show’s content, and question structures for each issue.

After all 20 shows had successfully been broadcast on TV and Radio, ten debates were filmed and broadcast through television and radio outlets. Most debates were held in schools with participation from members of parliament, activists, and civil society representatives.

The outcomes of the debates were summarized in an advocacy document, which was later circulated among SMO’s partners and civil society activists. SMO did not want to directly pursue advocacy so as to maintain objectivity as a media entity. Therefore, SMO provided materials for advocacy but planned them to encourage other people and organizations to carry out direct advocacy activities.

(ii) Logical framework

The project’s logic follows conventional theories of behavior change communications, anticipating that increased dissemination of accurate information on a topic (in this case, democratic values and pillars) will lead to increased knowledge (K), improved attitudes (A), and changed behavior or practices (P) among information recipients. More comprehensive behavior change theory often includes KAP mechanisms but also emphasizes other strong and often definitive factors including but not limited to individual and organizational capacity and the institutional (social, political, and economic) environment. Given the media context, the KAP approach is appropriate although its limited potential for creating sustainable change or development impact must be recognized.

Targeted outcomes, limited to knowledge and attitudes, are appropriate to the scale and time allocated to the project. However, two of the project’s “outcome” indicators are only project products (outputs) while two others do attempt to measure audience outcomes.

Project activities	Intended outcomes	Mid-term impacts	Long term development impacts
<i>Phase 1:</i> Orientation, coordination, research and production values	Increased research information and recommendations available for advocacy groups and activities (20 research produced)	Improved understanding of five democratic pillars	Strengthened participation in democratic processes
<i>Phase 2:</i> Awareness raising through dissemination of programs	Increased information on democratic pillars and values available to Afghan citizens, especially women and vulnerable or marginalized populations and especially in rural areas (20 TV/radio programs and 1- debates broadcasted)	Changed attitudes to democratic values and their application in Afghan society and culture	
<i>Phase 3:</i> Live debates and feedback collection	Increased capacity of viewers/listeners to engage constructively and effectively in democratic dialogues and processes (a website set-up, audiences’ views/opinions collected, a set of recommendations for application of democratic values formulated)		

IV. Evaluation Findings

This evaluation is based on a set of Evaluation Questions or EQs, designed to cover the Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability, and value added by UNDEF. The Evaluation Questions and related sub-questions are presented in Annex 1.

(i) Relevance

The project met needs of the Afghan population in the sense that many Afghans, even among CSOs and other activists, have misconceptions about democracy and its values. Media dissemination can be an excellent tool to raise people's awareness and spread messages cost-effectively especially to rural areas and remote or difficult-to-access districts.

The project's survey and reporting indicates that it raised awareness of those people who already had a basic idea about democracy. Its activities however did not focus on segments most in need of education on these issues, i.e. those likely to be against or unfamiliar with democratic norms. SMO hoped that an increase in awareness on democratic issues would indirectly change the minds of those that were resistant to democracy due to its perceived association with western values. Project staff who were interviewed mentioned greater misconceptions in Pashto communities, linked with a conservative view of women's rights, yet there was no show that tried to target either this group or the issue linkage.

Thus project relevance was to a certain extent weakened by incomplete stakeholders mapping. Many show interviewees, debate participants and audience participants participated in more than one show, indicating a weak mapping if drawn from a master list of partners or stakeholders used for various purposes. SMO staff participating in the evaluation also did not report effective strategic direction of this type or any stakeholder mapping activity.

In another strategic gap, noteworthy in a context of other media outlets undertaking similar discussion or debate initiatives, SMO research or project preparation strategy did not include assessment of SMO's position in this larger context of media competition or program supply. Relative to most other outlets, SMO has stronger particular interests and commitments on certain social issues but lesser resources and audience reach, thus can be most effective only through careful and well-informed strategy.

Some debate participants reported that the language used was too technical and theoretical for the common person. Analysis of SMO materials confirms that in some areas Western-oriented democratic terminology and usage likely to be too abstract or insufficiently deconstructed for people with relatively little education and exposure to ideas beyond their culture, religion, or location. Although most SMO shows explain basic democratic issues fairly comprehensively, specialized language or reference terms limit audience impact to those who may have had some knowledge already or perhaps an existing deep interest on democracy.

Aside from these stakeholder communications issues, the project purpose and activities are very relevant for Afghanistan's current situation.

(ii) Effectiveness

The Afghan media sector is large and varied, and commercial channels such as Tolo and Channel 1 enjoy the highest viewership. Radio stations such as Internews, Killid, BBC, and

VOA compete fiercely, with each media company or network trying to identify a distinct niche or project its unique character. SMO's identity combines social activism with media enterprise, which entails a double challenge to master effectiveness in media and in the social sector.

This project's targeted impact was ambitious for the time and resources of this grant. SMO aimed to (i) create clear understanding of democratic values amongst the Afghan population, (ii) increase awareness of democratic values through television and radio shows, (iii) deepen understanding of democratic values through a media platform for debates, and (iv) improve application of democratic values in Afghanistan.

The project design skipped a few valuable planning steps, including strategic direction and vision, stakeholder mapping, and monitoring impact-related feedback. The show and debate subjects were selected not based on analytical research or strategic criteria but according to SMO's understanding of Afghan society and perception of reality on the ground. Project staff realized the limitations of a one-year project, which alone could not change misconceptions of democracy. Although their project design therefore intended to contribute to social change through increased audience understanding, their measures stayed in the media realm of reaching audience numbers.

Staff interviewed considered the donor more responsible than themselves for measuring impact on audience perceptions, without considering that the project itself could have used better information on these issues to improve project impact in its activities as their shows progressed from one theme to the next.

Analysis and interviews revealed that research conducted for the shows and debates was extremely superficial. The research exercises lacked analytical structure and failed to link each topic to the others, to the overall democratic process, and to the overall objective of the project. The research papers did not present a full understanding of the topic but produced a limited manuscript or guideline that presenters then used as their preparation for the shows and debates. Unfortunately this result meant most presenters had only a shallow resource to inform their participation in the shows. Most debate participants reported dissatisfaction with their moderators' lack of knowledge. They reported conservative dynamics and structure that was more like roundtables than true debates.

The shows themselves often recycled messages, interviewees, and even footage from other shows, but provided basic structure and an educational presentation of the selected themes. They had a news-oriented structure, presenting the issues in light of the current situation in Afghanistan, and did not explain or link the themes more broadly in terms of the principles of democracy or the purpose, goal, or benefits of democratic processes. Since the research did not include analysis of Afghans' existing misconceptions about democracy, the shows gave instead general guidance around the selected topics. No airtime was given to address gender or minority group issues within the presented topics and most show interviewees and debate participants were male.

The project's advocacy component, however, is its weakest. Lacking stakeholder mapping to connect key advocacy actors and debate participants, and a strategy connecting project objective, advocacy messages, and desired changes in policy, procedures, or society, there was little potential for effective advocacy use to be made of the project recommendations. The project team did not assess which actors were essential for change and were not able to provide concrete messages or methods for their advocacy efforts. Furthermore, there was no common agreement or memorandum of understanding for their partners to take further action. Once the advocacy document had been distributed, SMO took no further action to determine whether or not the topics had been pursued.

SMO did take positive initiatives to engage viewers and listeners through polls, phone calls, and emails. With respect to polling, SMO posted six questions on their website and alerted people to answer them through their email mailing list (containing mostly CSOs and activists). Out of these six questions only three were relevant to the democratization process and on average every question received nearly 40 responses.

These tactics were used to solicit audience feedback and ideas. Project staff reported that most viewers were very appreciative of the shows and debates and engaged with SMO to express these sentiments. Unfortunately the emails were not stored in a database nor analyzed for the purpose of understanding the viewers' democratic views or perceptions but they were used for production purposes. SMO did report that they took many suggestions to strengthen their programs and work continuously to bridge the gap between media and viewers. This finding echoes to the project relevance.

Returning to the specific goals, the project was very successful in delivering Target (ii), increased awareness. Television and radio shows were broadcast according to the project design; despite the problems mentioned earlier (mapping, research quality, etc); and Target (iii), deeper democratic understanding through media platform for debates, was to some extent executed: ten debates were broadcast. Discussion of these debates does indicate that the democratic space in Afghanistan has grown, with stakeholders reporting that people have now become more comfortable with publicly questioning and criticizing political, cultural, and social issues and choices. SMO's efforts in this project have contributed to enlarge the democratic space for dialogue and exchange of opinion. This finding relates as much to relevance, effectiveness than impact.

The most challenging components of the project are (i) clarifying Afghans' understanding of democratic values and (ii) applying these values. The project had no concrete plan in these areas. Implementation demonstrates good intentions to contribute but lacking a strategy to achieve or assess progress, effectiveness was assumed and cannot be shown. Overall, half of this project had a level of effectiveness that the other half did not achieve.

(iii) Efficiency

The project cost was very reasonable, thus, even considering limitations its achievements the project can be considered efficient. Although skills and experience available in Kabul are limited, a project team with fewer members having more advanced media development experience could have increased efficiency.

Unsuitable personnel were hired for some positions compromising the quality of the project. Moreover there was no internal control or assessment mechanism to measure progress or impact, thus leaving the project static and unable to improve its impact levels. Although there were emails and phone calls from the audience with suggestions, these were taken for show material and not for project review.

Considering the interest of Afghan audiences in debates, better use of resources in stronger research and program development efforts would likely have enhanced efficiency through stronger discussions, better informed moderators, and targeted selection of most relevant debate participants. Stronger debates might have increased viewership and would certainly have increased impact on the knowledge and potentially the attitudes of the audience actually reached.

For educational shows, however, radio's advantages include lower production costs and direct access to population segments with limited or problematic understanding of democracy. Leveraging these advantages strategically could have enhanced project efficiency.

(iv) Impact

In general, stakeholders interviewed agree that people's attitudes and behavior in Afghanistan have changed, and attribute changes in part to activities like the SMO project, but no one would assert that SMO's shows contributed dramatically to the trend. With diversification of media, people are also learning to compare and question different information sources and to take a critical stance on public policy. Civic education has motivated some citizens to be more inquisitive, louder, and willing to participate in the governance process.

Debates are becoming quite popular in Afghanistan and people are increasingly interested in hearing different views and opinions. SMO's debates have a more conservative design as described earlier. Nevertheless all stakeholders interviewed felt SMO's initiative was positive for Afghanistan's democratization process. There is demand for more activity.

The project survey aimed to measure audience size rather than perception or understanding of content, as SMO did not retain post-show emails or other feedback records. The internet poll was disseminated to SMO partners and suggests basic understanding among a subset of those who participated or viewed programs. Regrettably, SMO did not advertise the internet poll during the shows or debates in order to gain feedback from a wider spectrum of its audiences. It constituted a miss-opportunity, a missed impact – that project strategy could have envisioned and secured.

Compared to previous similar SMO projects, its UNDEF project gathered more audience feedback, especially through phone calls to radio shows. Email feedback was less successful on this project than others, explained as due to the low literacy rates and limited internet access among rural residents especially. Feedback overall indicated that SMO viewers generally appreciated the kind of educational shows produced under the UNDEF grant. Project staff felt that the quality of questions from audience members increased over the different show themes as regular audience participants increased their knowledge on democracy. Debate participants indicated their interpretation that the questions showed the audience was trying to understand how democracy could be applied suitably in their personal environment or setting, indicating these listeners or viewers were considering some initial steps for social change.

Outlets such as Killid and Internews, which have successfully brought about change, state that a cornerstone of success is identifying key actors who can bring about the desired change. SMO through this project developed material for advocacy but undermined its potential for impact by failing to have a strong strategy to identify change agents and focus effort in well targeted and sustained campaigns.

We have no evidence, though, that dissemination of these materials affected people resistant to democracy.

(v) Sustainability

During the course of the project, SMO purchased books and research materials that remain available in the organization for future shows. The project tried new approaches, including email services and some steps toward advocacy. Capacity developed in these ways however tended to be lost with the departure of project staff once funded activities were completed.

SMO has continuously worked to promote democracy and good governance and will continue its efforts after this project. SMO management is still trying to find innovative ways to promote democracy and to find longer-term funding from donors and/or the private sector.

Educational shows and debates can continue if funding is found; however, SMO's content has not evolved and needs a strategic overhaul. Over the years the organization has addressed similar issues using set patterns. Reusing approaches that work is strength, but conducting regular research to ensure the desired impact toward organizational strategic goals that combine social and media success is achieved, is essential for sustainable accomplishments.

Similar to many Afghan civil society organizations, SMO suffers from lack of capacity, particularly in the areas of analysis, research, and strategy. Many people do not distinguish ad hoc versus systematic thinking or descriptive versus analytical. SMO's good intentions, dedication, and commitment are clear but the organization's vitality and opportunities are limited by these gaps in technical management expertise.

V. Conclusions

This section draws on evaluation data and findings to provide evidence-based and utilization-focused conclusions.

i. The project brought an appropriate response to a clear need in the Afghan Society; a need for civic education, particularly on democratic values such as equality, justice and accountability. Although the majority of Afghans have heard of these terms, few understand how they fit into the larger governance system and how it impacts their everyday life. The project was successful in answering this crucial need and provided good methods on how to address these issues through radio and TV shows and democratic debates. This conclusion derives from findings on relevance.

ii. The project design and management cycle had serious strategic flaws. Many activities relied on assumptions and hope lines that were based on personal perceptions and common understandings. Strategic flaws were particularly evident in the areas of contextualization, strategic vision, implementation sequencing and stakeholder mapping, including identification of target groups. The knowledge of the involved individuals was deemed enough, however ***the project severely needed a more factual and research based foundation. The lack of adequate information compromised the general objective of the project and hindered effective and efficient implementation of the entire project*** as stressed in the corresponding findings sections above. The biggest strategic flaw concerned the advocacy component of the project as it failed to actually carry out advocacy or disseminate the messages effectively.

iii. The research material was approved at all times by the project manager who should have prevented the use of poor quality work in developing any shows and debates. ***Project management quality challenged the project's success.*** Unfortunately, the weak research materials were instead used for all programs, yielding poorly informed moderators who ***reduced the efficiency and impact of the democratic debates,*** as evidenced in the related sections.

iv. Project impact is mitigated. On a global scale, the evaluators found that SMO initiatives were known by little. People would know the NGO by name. Thus, even if programs impacted on people attitude and education (to a limited extent as described under the effectiveness and efficiency sections), it seems that ***SMO' strongest impact was at the Civil society level, as it has been successful in creating a space for them to express their position and opinion.***

VI. Recommendations

i. While it is understandable that limited capacity in the labor pool, competitive employment markets, and limited funds create obstacles to hiring competent staff, ***SMO is recommended to hire permanent technical staff to advise on strategic thinking, modern media techniques, research and advocacy methods, and social and governance issues.*** Permanent technical staff will add ongoing value and strengthen SMO performance over time by helping ensure practical strategies and building competence areas and procedures that apply across multiple shows and projects. Improved quality and audience targeting will in turn increase the effectiveness of audience outreach thus build SMOs status in the sector, market share, and revenue. A comprehensive correction to internal capacity will help ensure SMO can always provide quality program products valuable for Afghan audiences. This recommendation derives from conclusion (iii).

ii. ***Professionalizing SMO's social sector approach to make a positive difference through its social and political activities requires organizational strategy.*** Strategic analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the Afghan media sector and public policy environment is prerequisite to designing efficient use of resources and feasible goals or supporting tactics. SMO impact will expand through strategic approaches to project design, multiplied through changing practices from using a generic master list for many projects, or relying on an individual's perspective, to tightly focused practices such as properly identifying the right stakeholders to achieve the results envisioned from each activity. Solid strategies and planned management tools contribute essential structure to assure effective implementation. Clear and transparent criteria need to be established for stakeholder or partner activities, audience engagement and feedback, and internal review or use of information about progress made or targets not yet reached. This recommendation follows conclusion (ii).

iii. ***We recommend SMO use competent researchers who can conduct meaningful research or population surveys to identify the challenges, problems, and issues that SMO can address within its organizational vision.*** With limited funds, SMO should consider hiring higher quality staff on a temporary basis over multiple lower quality researchers to span several projects piecemeal. By identifying the audience aligned with SMO's strategic goals, the organization would gain the ability to tailor shows to known audience needs to increase their impact. For democratic debates, stronger preparation in terms of material, moderator and debate participants would help ensure that audiences value their experience of the program and return for additional shows. The participants may be chosen to generate lively debate or even controversy but must be briefed and the shows well moderated toward the purpose of the best viewer experience. More challenging, dynamic, and fluid debates would mitigate audience decline in interest in predictable question and answer sessions. This recommendation derives from conclusion (ii).

iv. ***SMO has a unique position between the media and the civil society sector, which means, however, that surviving and thriving requires mastering two specialties instead of one.*** If SMO wishes to remain in this niche of the market, it needs to increase its social and governance capacity in order to properly engage and use its civil society partners. At least one key employee with an in-depth knowledge on these issues can expand and adjust shows to different levels of understanding among audience segments. This recommendation derives from conclusion (iv).

v. Advocacy is a new concept in Afghanistan and often poorly understood and poorly executed. As the social sector attempts to implement advocacy activities, even if few CSOs or other social leaders fully understand its meaning or requirements, skills and experience in this area stand in need of rapid and effective development. ***SMO must seek capacity enhancement or hire a competent person with the right skills to carry out these activities if it wishes to become credible in advocacy efforts.*** This recommendation derives from conclusion (ii).

Annexes

Annex 1: Evaluation questions

General evaluation question categories

DAC criterion	Evaluation Question	Related sub-questions
Relevance	To what extent was the project, as designed and implemented, suited to context and needs at the beneficiary, local, and national levels?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To what extent was the grant scope designed and implemented to reach people who are resistant to democratic ideals? ▪ To what extent were the products understood and appreciated by audiences unfamiliar with democratic norms, and/or resistant to them on cultural or anti-Western grounds? ▪ To what extent did audiences engage or provide feedback to products and programs? ▪ To what extent were languages and media outlets appropriate as methods to stimulate more open debate among the grant's target populations?
Effectiveness	To what extent was the project, as implemented, able to achieve objectives and goals?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Beyond the immediate outputs (programs developed using grant funding), what evidence can we ascertain regarding reach, influence, and/or impact of SMO's activities and other grant-funded efforts?
Efficiency	To what extent was there a reasonable relationship between resources expended and project impacts?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reviewing original intentions and real achievements, are there areas of effort where the original strategy allocated too few resources? Too many? ▪ Can we identify areas where different allocations based on progress toward goals could have improved efficiency?
Impact	To what extent has the project put in place processes and procedures supporting the role of civil society in contributing to democratization, or to direct promotion of democracy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Have the project's activities built individual or organizational capacity toward key UNDEF and civil society or democratization goals? ▪ Has new information provided to Afghans made a difference in their knowledge or attitudes toward democratic principles under the identified five pillars? ▪ Can we see any signs of audiences changing opinions or other effects on civil society through project products or activities?
Sustainability	To what extent has the project, as designed and implemented, created what is likely to be a continuing impetus towards democratic development?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can any incremental steps be identified toward any new or improved systems, behaviors, or institutional structures that have arguable potential to persist?
UNDEF value added	To what extent has the involvement of UNDEF catalyzed local or national efforts to focus constructively on democratization issues, and/or to strengthen the voice of civil society and ensure participation of all groups in democratic processes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How does SMO assess the value or significance of UNDEF support for its efforts? ▪ What has been the unique or exceptional value gained through this grant? ▪ Are there other resources they may be better able to access building on progress or achievements under this grant? ▪ Is there opportunity to build on results to multiply impact from the UNDEF investment? ▪ Should UNDEF media projects focus on production or dissemination?

Annex 2: Documents Reviewed

Project documents and references

Project Document, signed 11 January 2010

Mid-Term/Annual Progress Report, dated 28 Feb 2010

Milestone Verification Mission Report

Afghan Management and Marketing Consultants Report to SMO on a listener survey (three provinces)

<http://www.sabacent.org>

Additional documents and references

SMO Annual Reports from 2007 through 2010

SMO agenda from a television debate on 09 August 2011

Reporters without Border : <http://en.rsf.org/afghanistan.html>

United States institute of Peace "Afghanistan Media Assessment" :

http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/PW68_Afghanistan_Media_Assessment1.pdf

<http://www.world-newspapers.com/afghanistan.html>

Annex 3: Persons Interviewed

Activity	Dates
Preparatory phase start	May 2012
Travel to/from Afghanistan	01-07 July 2012
Effective mission dates	02-06 July 2012
Reporting	July/August 2012
02 July	
Mr Abdul Shakoor Nahzat, new Project Manager, Saba Media Organization	Interview
Mr Haroon Dehzad, Radio Manager, Nawa Radio	Interview
Mr Taj Mohammad Basiri, Production Manager, Gandaha Production	Interview
Mr Abdul Sami Zhman, previous Project Manager, Saba Media Organization	Interview
03 July	
Mr Abdul Mujeed Khalvatgar, Country Director, Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan	Interview
Mr Ali Midwayar, Communications Representative, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan	Interview
Mr Lotfulla Najafizada, Head of Current Affairs, Tolo	Interview
Mr Fahim Hakim, Debate Participant; Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission	Interview
04 July	
Ms Najiba Ayubi, Station Manager, Killid Radio	Interview
Mr Sadiquallah Tawhidi, Debate Participant; Media Watch Afghanistan	Interview
Ms Haseena Akseer, Attaché for Human Rights, European Union	Interview
05 July	
Review of program recordings and research materials	Local evaluator and translator
09 March	
Review of program recordings and research materials	Local evaluator and translator

Annex 4: Acronyms

AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
CSO	Civil society organization
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
GDP	Gross domestic product
NAI	Nai, Supporting open media in Afghanistan (http://www.nai.org.af/en)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SMO	Saba Media Organization
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDEF	United Nations Democracy Fund