



**LESSONS  
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# **Navigating local authority and community-driven development in Afghanistan**

A Lessons for Peace Literature Review

Sam Vincent

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## About this paper

This paper investigates the way in which a particular national programme has interacted with authority structures at the local level in Afghanistan. Understanding such interactions is important because relationships between the state and Afghanistan's 'micro-societies' influence the political stability of the country as a whole. Extending development assistance to the rural population of Afghanistan is difficult due to remote and harsh geography, violent conflict and the complexity of the social terrain. For donors and the Afghan government, a key challenge is to design and implement large-scale development programmes capable of operating effectively across a diversity of local public authority contexts. The experience of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) and its successor, the Citizen's Charter Afghanistan Project (CCAP) is one of mixed outcomes, and this note discusses possible ways of improving them.

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# 1 Introduction

Some 70% to 80% of Afghanistan's 31.6 million inhabitants live in the countryside.<sup>1</sup> This rural majority population presents enormous challenges, both for the Afghan state and for the international community of donors. These challenges are intimately connected to the country's geography: despite major investment in road construction, rehabilitation and improvement, much of the rural population remains physically hard to reach, especially during winter, with insecurity compounding the problem. The Afghanistan Analysts Network recently reported that 40% of the country lies beyond the reach of donor funds (Ruttig and Bjelica, 2018).

Physical access apart, Afghanistan's varied and complex social terrain also presents distinctive challenges. For the state, one of the most profound difficulties is establishing local governance institutions and relations with rural citizens amid dense local ecosystems of public authority. In the humanitarian and development spheres, this plays out through attempts to design and implement large national programmes that can operate with some predictability across a diversity of local public authority contexts. Reviews of a range of international interventions in Afghanistan's rural areas since 2002 paint a picture of mixed outcomes and unintended consequences. Schetter finds that interventions, whether security- or development-related, have been 'too often contradictory to the initial goal' and have 'often harmed rather than helped the beneficiaries by inducing an intensification of existing conflicts and social inequalities' (Schetter, 2013: 10–11).

Such dynamics, needless to say, are hardly unique to Afghanistan. Nonetheless, observers have argued that development interventions at the village level often ignored village context and existing structures, implicitly either treating the rural areas as a

blank space upon which new institutions could be established or assuming that existing institutions could be bypassed or overwritten. Pain and Kantor observe that:

More effort has gone into asserting what these villages should become—driven by efforts to transplant key institutional arrangements of the West such as democracy, markets and competition—than has gone into efforts to understand and build on existing structures.

—(Pain and Kantor, 2010)

Even programmes that have explicitly tried to take local authority structures seriously have proven problematic and controversial. To take an example from the security sector, the 'local' nature of Afghan politics was strongly emphasised in the design of the flagship Afghan Local Police (ALP) programme (Jones and Muñoz, 2010). However, there was a deep tension between ascribing power and agency to local actors and institutions and the underlying belief that local agency could be harnessed to serve external counterinsurgency objectives (Vincent et al., 2015: 3).

These observations are the departure point for this paper, which investigates the way in which the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) has interacted with authority structures at the local level in Afghanistan. Understanding this is important because the nature of the relationships between the state and Afghanistan's 'micro-societies' have affected state stability in the past and will likely continue to do so (Saikal, 2005).

In Section 1, I review recent literature on public authority in Afghanistan, looking at the academic debate on whether diverse and complex village-level decision-making structures can be adequately

<sup>1</sup> Bakhshi and Trani recently put the rural population at 80% (2018: 328). Such estimates entail inherent uncertainty since there has been no census of Afghanistan. A planned 2008 census was postponed to 2011, when it was again postponed indefinitely (Katz, 2017: 8). The National Statistics and Information Authority estimates the country population on the basis of a 2004 United Nations Population Fund household survey (Ruttig, 2018). According to published National Statistics and Information Authority data for 2018, of a total estimated population of 31,575,018, 22,567,065 (71%) were classified as 'rural', with a further estimated nomadic population of 1,500,000. If nomads are included in the rural population, rural populace would be 76% of total populace. See <http://stat.gov.af/dashboard/population>.

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captured using broad explanatory frameworks. Section 2 examines the largest programme through which the Afghan government and international donors have sought to deliver development assistance to the rural population – the NSP and its successor, the Citizens’ Charter, which operates through Community Development Councils (CDCs)

at the village level. Section 3 considers how donors and government might refine the Citizens’ Charter to better take account of local variation. This discussion draws attention to the World Bank’s Social Observatory and its efforts to embed research into project implementation and to create ‘adaptive capacity’.

# 2 Local public authority structures in Afghanistan

Researchers have increasingly used the term ‘public authority’ when considering how social and political life interact in zones of weak or contested state authority (Lund, 2006; Hoffman and Kirk, 2013). It is well-known that unease between different forms of authority is of particular salience in Afghanistan. An earlier generation of literature was preoccupied with the tension between ‘tribes’ and state (Tapper, 1983) – yet the ‘tribes’ at issue ‘conformed to no single pattern of organization,’ meaning that the term did little by itself to demystify the ways in which Afghans governed themselves (Tapper, 2009). Until the Soviet invasion at the end of the 1970s, the progressive displacement of tribe by state seemed inevitable. As a result of the decades of violent conflict that followed, research into the public authority landscape became more difficult and more limited, although it was widely suspected that the ‘traditional’ system had been deformed, fragmented, destroyed or perhaps transformed. As international forces drove the Taliban from power and set about constructing a new state in the early 2000s, the society it was asked to regulate was to a large extent an enigma.

In the course of the past 19 years, the variability and complexity of the local-level public authority environment has become apparent to those charged with implementing humanitarian, development and other interventions. Non-government organisation (NGO) and government field staff have frequently found that rural settlements across Afghanistan can vary ‘markedly over very short distances, in their socioeconomic characteristics and behaviour, even within culturally homogenous zones’ (Pain and Kantor, 2010). This insight helps to explain the fact that large-scale development and security programmes applied across the countryside

have tended to neither ‘succeed’ nor ‘fail’ in a straightforward way, but have instead produced mixed results. The constraints on research as a result of ongoing violent conflict and the complexity of micro-level politics and conflict dynamics have created obstacles to predicting the consequences of a given intervention in a given setting, let alone those of a single, large-scale programme applied in multiple locales.

Scholars disagree on the extent to which local dynamics can be captured by general theoretical framing. Schetter argues that the variety of local patterns means ‘it is nearly impossible to distill a generalised essence of how local politics works in Afghanistan’ (Schetter, 2013: 265). On other hand, Murtazashvili finds a high level of structural similarity in decision-making institutions, while also acknowledging important variations between them in the content and application of the rules and norms that they apply. According to Murtazashvili, ‘village authority is separated among three distinct bodies: customary leaders or representatives, deliberative bodies, and religious arbiters’ (Murtazashvili, 2016: 2). These roles are described using different terminology in different places but widely include the titles Malik, Shura/Jirga and Mullah respectively<sup>2</sup>.

Murtazashvili’s account of each institution acknowledges that supra-local actors including the state, international NGOs and the Taliban have variously tried to co-opt these village-level institutions. Nevertheless, she paints an essentially democratic picture in which the authority of each village institution derives from popular consensus (at least among male villagers). She also acknowledges that, far from being static, these customary authorities have changed under the pressure of ‘war, mass migration, and a series of governments

2 English language renditions of various terminology (Dari and Pashto) related to each of the three forms of authority of village governance as listed by Murtazashvili (2016): **village representative (Malik)** – Qaryadar, Khan, Qalantar, Wakil, Namayenda, Arbab, Mir, Rais; **village council (Shura)** – Jirga, (Shura-ye) Rish Safidan, Spingeri, Spinzheri, Meshrano Jirga, Mashran, Oq Soqol, Mu-ye Safidan, Majlis/Jalasa, Maraka; and **religious leader (Mullah)** – Imam, Ulama, Mawlawi, Pir, Syyed/Sadat/Eshan, Qazi, Haji (Bibi Haji), Karbalayi, Shaykh.

bent on tearing society apart in order to transform it in the name of modernization or religion' (2016). Rather than having been destroyed, as some believed, Murtazashvili found that these institutions have regenerated in the post-2001 period. She argues, then, that a generalised structure to village governance applies widely across Afghanistan. This structure has three poles of authority, each derived from a separate source, creating a 'polycentric' political order at the micro-level. In the ideal-typical Afghan village, Murtazashvili suggests, the authority of leaders empowered by one source is constrained by countervailing authority deriving from the other two sources, and each of these village institutions depends on popular consent. Not all authors agree with this view of village-level public authority in Afghanistan (see, e.g., Gardizi et al., 2010: 13–14). Moreover, Murtazashvili acknowledges that the informal constitution of village governance she depicts is an ideal and that in practice different villages achieve or depart from this ideal to different extents.

Pain and colleagues have also been developing a model of village-level governance in Afghanistan rooted in comparative village-level research. This research seeks to identify both a common structure to village governance around the country and the systemic, structural factors that might explain why some villages are 'better governed' or seem more 'developmentally minded' than others. They hope that such a model can help donors anticipate which villages might prove more difficult as operating environments. Pain suggests that the way a development programme plays out depends in large part on the attitudes of village elites, contrasting 'those with more of a developmental perspective and desire to build public goods provision ("good" elites) versus those where the elites act to limit access to such public goods and capture them for themselves ("bad" elites)' (Pain, 2015). Pain and Kantor suggest that structural factors may act as predictors of the kind of elite likely to be found in a given village.

Where land inequalities are low, the landed elite is likely not only to have marginally more land than poorer households and also be food-insecure but also to be more numerous. Its members are therefore likely to have a shared interest in promoting and supporting social solidarity and ensuring the provision of public goods. In such villages, relationships between the

better-off households and others may be more inclusive. Where the elite is relatively small in terms of numbers, and where they are economically secure, often as a result of large landholdings, incentives to promote social solidarity and widen access to public good provision are likely to be more limited. The elite is thus likely to act more in its own interests than in those of the village population. Relationships between poorer households and the elite are more likely to be more patron–client-based, with adverse terms of incorporation for the poor.

—(Pain and Sturge, 2015a)

Each of these attempts to model village-level governance has limitations. Pain is particularly cautious about generalising from the sample of villages he and his colleagues have studied. Perhaps reflecting the constraints on fieldwork in insecure areas in particular, this research does not offer much on the workings of public authority in areas where Taliban influence is strong. Similarly, in seeking to offer a corrective to a literature that she saw as over-emphasising the role of 'warlords' and other armed actors in local governance, Murtazashvili says little about how such actors influence the 'informal constitution' that she portrays. In practice, these institutions face constant pressure from a range of supra-local actors – the state and international donors, warlords and other armed groups, and the Taliban movement. Although useful research is being generated on Taliban engagement with customary authorities, local governance, and service delivery, this important field deserves further attention, particularly as intra-Afghan peace talks proceed (see Jackson and Amiri, 2019; Smith, 2020).

This section has looked at two approaches to understanding village-level authority structures in Afghanistan and pointed to some challenges in capturing adequately their complexity and diversity through a general model or set of organising concepts. The following section moves from the analytical level to the implementation level. It looks at efforts to deliver large-scale development assistance to the Afghan rural population through the country's NSP, focusing on its approach to accommodating local variation in authority and decision-making structures.

# 3 Local contexts and large-scale programming

Rural development initiatives in Afghanistan are difficult to map, in part because of the fragmentation associated with the considerable (although fluctuating) percentage of overall donor assistance that has been directed off-budget, a good deal of which has not been adequately recorded (Hogg et al., 2013; Ruttig and Bjelica, 2018; ATR, 2018). The Afghan government has long sought to coordinate donor assistance, and to articulate its development priorities through a limited number of large-scale national priority programmes. The NSP was among the national priority programmes of the Afghan Transitional Authority (2004–2006) and constituted the centrepiece of its rural development approach. The programme was based on the community-driven development (CDD) approach, a participatory initiative developed by the World Bank during the 1990s and today a major form of development assistance around the world, including in fragile and conflict-affected states (Wong and Guggenheim, 2018).

In establishing new decision-making processes at the local level, CDD approaches generally contain an implicit governance component. As one study explained of the Kecamatan Development Project in Indonesia (from which NSP drew considerable inspiration), the designers meant to do more than simply disburse resources on a large scale:

They also hoped. that, by changing the very processes and procedures by which decisions affecting everyday life were made, they could cultivate long-suppressed civic skills and instil new precedents regarding resource allocation mechanisms that, in time, would become a defining feature of transparent and accountable government... In short [it] would be a

democracy project disguised as — or at least as well as — a development project.

—(Barron et al., 2011: 4)

In other words, an implicit, overarching goal of the CDD approach is that communities will internalise certain decision-making processes and underlying principles. Whether this happens in practice remains one of the most contentious debates about the approach. Communities (or actors within a community) may respond to development interventions in a number of different ways beyond simply conforming to the aims of the programme designers. Possible responses include resisting (overtly or covertly), attempting to selectively admit or constrain a programme to their advantage, or seeking to harness or co-opt the intervention for their own ends (Hameiri and Jones, 2017: 63).

These are useful frames as we consider the implementation of CDD in Afghanistan through the NSP. Although the NSP was funded largely by the World Bank, Afghanistan's now-President Ghani was a driving force and it was overseen by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). Implementation was subcontracted to various facilitating partners — NGOs with established presence in different parts of the country and UN Habitat. The programme ran from 2003 until 2016, ultimately reaching 32,000 communities across 361 districts, with presence in all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, and financing 65,000 development projects through block grants to communities (Beath et al., 2013). Over its lifetime, it implemented projects to the value of \$2 billion, from micro-hydroelectricity to schools, roads and irrigation to drinking water.

Under the NSP model, communities determine their own development priorities — albeit within boundaries established by the programme<sup>3</sup>. Funds

<sup>3</sup> The NSP placed limits on the range of subprojects in the form of negative lists. Under the Citizens' Charter Afghanistan Project, MRRD engineers in the Provincial and District Management Units can veto community priority proposals on feasibility grounds and projects judged to advance national Minimum Service Standards can also trump priorities established by communities.



were contingent on communities establishing a Community Development Council (CDC), a new decision-making body whose members were to be selected by universal suffrage in secret ballot elections. In this way, while decision-rights about project priorities are delegated to the local level, programme design makes funding contingent on the community adopting a standardised decision-making institution.

The Afghan government has consistently seen the NSP as one of the post-2001 success stories and has lauded the CDCs as a rare win in building relations with Afghan citizens. Recent evaluations broadly accept that CDD has proven a relatively efficient and cost-effective instrument for designing and implementing large amounts of rural infrastructure (White et al., 2018; Wong and Guggenheim<sup>4</sup>, 2018). Yet critics have charged that there is little evidence that the programme changes the way that public authority is exercised (King, 2013; Bhatia et al., 2018). One recent evaluation of CDD found there ‘is no impact on social cohesion or governance’ (White et al., 2018).

Murtazashvili observed that Afghan villages were generally happy to receive funding to improve local infrastructure (2016). But rather than bringing the local governance rules into conformity with the democratic and participatory norms of CDD, the CDCs tended to end up mirroring local conditions. In particular, she found that the formal rules on electing CDC members and on inclusion of women were often subverted or bypassed (Murtazashvili, 2016: 93–94). Elite capture, especially in contexts characterised by high degrees of land inequality, is another obvious risk, despite the pains taken in the mobilisation phase to ensure that marginalised groups are represented. Another concern is that the intervention either triggers local-level conflict or becomes a flashpoint in ongoing conflict. A further important but under-researched issue concerns Taliban reception of the programme in areas where they have influence; a recent study notes ‘pressure was reported from the Taliban to divert the funding and adapt implementation modalities (particularly with regard to the social mobilisation exercises and full involvement of women)’ (Lillehaugen and Jasim-Falher, 2020).

Much of the NSP architecture was built into the ambitious Citizens’ Charter Afghanistan Project, a National Priority Programme in the 2016 Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF). MRRD describes the Citizens’ Charter as a 10-year ‘contract between the Government and its citizens over a basic set of Minimum Service Standards (MSS) that will be provided by the Government to all communities in the country’ — relating to health, education, irrigation, drinking water and energy<sup>5</sup>. The Citizens’ Charter builds on the NSP in several ways. It extends coverage to municipal areas (under Afghanistan’s Independent Directorate of Local Governance rather than the MRRD). It also represents an attempt to move beyond the inter-ministerial tensions that the NSP provoked towards a whole-of-government approach — in which the MRRD, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance and the Ministries of Health, Education, and Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock will all make use of the CDC system (Moayed and Rasouli, 2018). In this sense the Citizens’ Charter seeks to extend the scope of the CDCs, making them ‘whole-of-government platforms and then strengthen[ing] [them] so that they can support services and activities of the line ministries’ (Katz, 2017: 5).

The tasks of negotiating the existing public authority landscape and establishing a CDC that embodies in practice the processes stipulated on paper fall in large part to the facilitating partners. They recruit social organisers who undergo residential training organised by the Citizens’ Charter before being deployed to communities, where they explain the programme, seek community buy-in and then help establish a CDC and the decision-making processes associated with it. The training addresses village power dynamics and elite capture and seeks to provide students with skills to identify and better manage these dynamics (Bode, 2018). Mobilisation involves a number of participatory exercises intended to build ‘a diagnostic understanding of community heterogeneity’, including greater awareness of vulnerable groups, and relies on the facilitating partner to translate this understanding into an operational programme (Bode 2018). According to a recent review, the Citizens’ Charter features ‘a substantially larger social

4 It is worth noting that both Susan Wong and Scott Guggenheim have been actively involved in developing and implementing community-driven development in Afghanistan.

5 See <http://old.mrrd.gov.af/en/page/69/citizens-charter>.

mobilisation component than most comparable programmes', reflecting 'a serious attempt to address the social side of development' (Lillehaugen and Jasim-Fahler, 2020: 17). The community mobilisation process, based on extended contact by skilled organisers, invests time in understanding local context and seeks to furnish organisers with tools to mitigate issues such as elite capture. The model gives social organisers considerable power as brokers of local knowledge.

Even as the government plans to progressively expand the role of CDCs, their sustainability has been an ongoing source of concern. Under the NSP, due to inefficiencies in the processing of CDC grant paperwork and inconsistencies in funding of the programme, block grants were not allocated with anything like the frequency that the programme designers intended. The Indonesian Kecamatan Development Project envisaged regular grants to communities to ensure continuous engagement (ideally annual, but at minimum every three years).

In Afghanistan, however, the NSP managed only one block grant per community in 10 years (Majeed, 2014: 18). As a result, structures established through a lengthy process of mobilisation fell into disuse and atrophied rather than growing stronger. For the CDCs to become better embedded in communities, more continuous use seems vital.

Assuming that the CDCs are put to greater use as is intended under the Citizens' Charter, their influence at the village level might grow to the point that customary institutions begin to feel threatened and marginalised. Enhanced methods of monitoring social tensions and timely programme adaptation will therefore be important. The following section considers the approach and techniques that the World Bank's Social Observatory (SO) has taken to addressing the tensions in operating participatory development programmes at scale, and how this might inform or provide lessons for large-scale rural development programming in Afghanistan.

# 4 Lessons from the World Bank Social Observatory

The tension between local contexts and standard programme design is common to all large-scale participatory development programmes, of which CDD approaches are a subset. Effecting ‘change in the nature of social interactions and... modifying norms and local cultures... require a fundamentally different approach to development—one that is flexible, long term, self-critical, and strongly infused with the spirit of learning by doing’ (Mansuri and Rao, 2013). These insights, articulated in the World Bank research report ‘Localizing development: does participation work?’, led to the creation of a unit in the World Bank’s Development Research Group, the Social Observatory (SO).

The SO tries to address the challenges that macro programmes face in scaling across heterogeneous local contexts. Focused on participatory development programmes in India, the SO takes the view that contextual diversity is too great to be effectively handled at the programme design stage – particularly in programmatic interventions scaled ‘beyond what staff can know’, across hundreds, thousands or tens of thousands of villages. The SO is based on the idea that responding effectively to such complexity requires programmes that emphasise a range of capabilities, including nimbleness, adjusting in the field, learning by doing and willingness to experiment, all of which enable them to respond to issues encountered during implementation. The SO has identified three related sets of challenges:

1. seeing issues more clearly — meaning gathering more, better and different types of data;

2. learning lessons from this data; and
3. adapting in response. It calls the ability to learn and react during implementation ‘adaptive capacity’.

The SO suggests a number of ways to develop this kind of capacity. The heart of its approach involves changing the relationship between research and monitoring and evaluation on the one hand, and implementation on the other. It advocates deploying researchers alongside project implementers and combining quantitative evaluation studies with qualitative, sociological and ethnographic research that aims to explain the effects observed. The SO believes that improving the amount and quality of data, and seeking different kinds of data, are fundamental to understanding programme impacts more clearly. To this end the SO has been exploring ways to enable citizens and beneficiaries to provide feedback, and how to ‘infordemocratise’ this data by involving citizens in determining the questions to be asked and the data to be gathered. As part of this democratisation effort the SO has been developing systems to make data comprehensible, usable data available to citizens. While the SO suggests several potential innovation pathways for data generation, analysis and visualisation, perhaps the central challenge it has identified is how to reconfigure institutional incentives so that less palatable findings from research, monitoring and evaluation are more readily acknowledged and more forcefully addressed by implementers.

# 5 Conclusions

Afghanistan's rural areas are characterised by multiple public authorities, the complexion of which vary substantially from place to place. The security situation has constrained donor access and research to such an extent that after 19 years of international intervention this public authority landscape remains largely terra incognita. Development interventions, however, inevitably interact with these local landscapes, whether or not they are explicitly taken as a starting point by programme designers. Important and empirically grounded research in this direction has been taking place, but development actors would benefit from investing in new tools to analyse how customary local authorities interact with other public authority actors and networks. Doing so would enable them to better build variation into programming across the wide public authority landscape.

Many historians believe that Afghan state-building projects have been repeatedly swept aside by rural rebellions, sparked by various over-reaching modernisation agendas that sought to transform the fabric of rural society (Barfield, 1984; Shahrani, 2005; Suhrke, 2007; Jones and Muñoz, 2010; Giustozzi and Ibrahimi, 2012). One implication of this narrative is that the way in which the state goes about interfacing with Afghanistan's 'micro-societies' is essential to future stability, and that rural development is politically volatile and should be approached on the basis of local consent. Since 2003, CDCs have been a crucial part of the fledgling state's effort to address this fundamental issue. While hardly the kind of all-out assault on rural society mounted by the communist government in the late 1970s, CDCs constitute a novel, standardised institutional addition to the existing public authority environment, with rules and norms standing in varying degrees of tension to those of other authorities.

There is debate about whether or not the values embedded in the CDCs will diffuse into

local communities as they engage in the process. Historians amply demonstrate the extraordinary resilience of customary forms of authority in the face of sustained efforts to manipulate or replace them. As two prominent proponents of community-driven development point out, recent critiques of the NSP and the Citizens' Charter need to be set in the context of the other concrete programming options available to donors and governments, rather than some non-existent ideal (Wong and Guggenheim, 2018). For CDCs to become permanent parts of the public authority landscape they need to be kept in use. The government has expressed a clear intent to use CDCs as a continuous part of the subnational government architecture, and as they are assigned more tasks and proceed down the route towards firmer institutionalisation, they may well come into conflict with other public authorities — including customary structures. Recognising this possibility, development partners should recalibrate their expectations about the timescales over which change can be expected, and should review the methodologies used to measure progress.

Alongside further investment in knowledge production about context and contextual variation sits a set of questions about making practical improvements to programmes that address rural development needs. The Citizens' Charter has made investments, such as in social organiser training, which aim to address issues arising from friction with existing authorities. Such issues include elite capture and the possibility of sparking new conflicts, or being pulled into ongoing ones. Such challenges are common both to CDD and a wider class of large-scale participatory programmes being undertaken around the world. The example of the SO in this paper points to ways in which governments and donors can better understand such dynamics, and better adapt programme design to address them.

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