

POLICY BRIEF

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TAKE CONTEXT SERIOUSLY FOR VILLAGE-LEVEL GOVERNANCE?

Lessons from community development councils in Afghanistan

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Why it matters

Community development councils (CDCs) were the vehicle through which Afghanistan was supposed to be transformed through grassroots inclusive participation in governance. Billions of dollars were spent on this new organisational arrangement, which was the vehicle delivering the government's 'flagship' development programme. For entirely predictable reasons, CDCs had a mixed record as a conduit for funds for local projects. They failed totally to build a new, democratic Afghanistan or greater state legitimacy.

What the aid programmers got wrong

The CDC model was copied from another country. To believe that CDCs could fulfil their expected role in Afghanistan, it was necessary to assume that there were no previously existing local institutions and no unequal power relations in villages.

For one single institutional model to be appropriate for the whole country, one of two further assumptions were also necessary: either there were no significant social differences throughout the country; or any differences in the social structure and moral economy of a society are irrelevant to the institutions that emerge and can function in it.

The programme prescribed a version of how village leadership should be chosen and what they should do, which did not fit with the reality of how leaders were selected, what they were doing or, more crucially, with what villagers expected their leaders to do.

What was wrong with the assumptions?

The institutions and power relations that had existed before the creation of CDCs continued to operate. CDCs were set up without consideration of the interactions with existing arrangements, let alone a plan for dealing with that. There is huge social and political diversity in villages across the country and this affects how governance happens and in whose interests. Broadly speaking, where there are large areas of irrigated land, power tends to be concentrated in fewer hands and the elites have less interest in governing in the interests of all. Where land is less concentrated and village elites are only marginally better off than others, there is a greater interest in the collective good.

Village governance is integrated into wider networks of power. Leaders are expected to use their networks to secure resources, protection or assistance for the villages from sources of power outside. The model for ensuring good governance, i.e., the threat of losing a future election, did not fit how such leaders emerge.

The programme blueprint set a standard size of village grant for a standard size of village. To fit this, some communities had to be divided, others to be joined artificially. Reality was changed to fit programme design rather than vice versa.

Policy implications: getting it right

- CDCs will not all work in the same way. Their functioning needs to be monitored by looking at outcomes, e.g., how widely the benefits of their efforts are shared.
- Where it is seen that CDCs work well enough as a vehicle for service delivery, this should be harnessed but without expecting wider governance transformation. It should be accepted that other forms of village governance will continue and some CDCs will only be a committee for one project's funds.
- Implementing partners should be allowed to adapt processes in relation to CDCs. Rather than forcing them to hide deviations from 'the rules', learning from such adaptations should be facilitated.

Why context matters in reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan

One of the central pillars of the political and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan in 2001–2021 was the National Solidarity Programme (NSP). It was a vehicle for funding local development, with grants of tens of thousands of dollars for every village; a capacity-building programme to enable the management on a vast scale of small local projects; and also a state-building venture, creating local democratic and accountable institutions. NSP aimed to 'develop the ability of Afghan communities to identify, plan, manage and monitor their own development projects... to empower rural communities to make decisions affecting their own lives and livelihoods'.¹ It sought to create a village-level institution, the Community Development Council (CDC), to combine these functions and then to 'build, strengthen, and maintain CDCs as effective institutions for local governance and social-economic development'.² It cost around \$200 million per year from 2002 until 2016, funding projects in over 6,000 villages across the country.

The impact of NSP has been very mixed, at best. As would be expected, some of the village-level projects succeeded, whilst others did not. In some cases, their

benefits were shared more widely, whereas elite capture was a greater problem in others. However, the NSP did not succeed in its primary state-building objective of creating bottom-up, grassroots democratic institutions that would lead to a stronger, more responsive state with greater perceived legitimacy. This political failure was predictable, and indeed predicted, because the roots of its very limited success lay in a failure to understand how power and institutions functioned in Afghanistan at local level, or indeed to have any meaningful engagement with those processes and institutions.

The NSP's failure to take account of how villages were organising and managing their affairs before the intervention was *not* the result of ineffectual implementation: it was hard-wired into its institutional blueprint. This was drawn from international practice in relation to community-driven development. At best, the programme assumed that it was entering an institutional vacuum or *tabula rasa*, or a landscape of villages that were all sufficiently similar to permit a single governance solution, and where there were so few legacies from the past that they would easily be displaced by new interventions to reorder village government. A powerful case for taking context more seriously, and for showing what that would involve, is already made just in making explicit the assumptions that would have had to be true for the programme to have had a chance of success.

1 This phrase appears unchanged in many documents related to NSP, as an internet search quickly reveals. See Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (2002).

2 This was the official Project Development Objective of NSP for the 2010–2015 phase. See World Bank project documents for project P117103, such as World Bank (undated).

Understanding village context

Appreciating that village governance has a context would have led to an investigation of how relationships of responsibility and accountability were working between the existing customary village leadership, village elites and the other households in the village. Responsibility relates to the management of internal village affairs and the provision of basic public goods. Villages never exist in isolation. They are affected by a wider context of governance, relationships and accountability – in the case of Afghanistan, at district and province level. Appreciating that village governance contexts exist would therefore also have led to questions about the basis of expectations by village households and individuals on the role of village leadership in relation to the wider world. This includes how the institutions of governance secure resources and assistance for the village from outside and the obligations that fall on a village as a community to outside interests.

Three aspects of village context are particularly relevant to interventions on village governance: addressing village heterogeneity; the existing logic of customary practice; and the democratic model and understandings of leadership that a programme such as the NSP might seek to impose. These three critical dimensions affect the ability of CDCs to be inclusive, assess needs and to be effective in service delivery.

There is an enormous amount of heterogeneity between Afghan villages,³ and it is inevitable that this has led to significant differences in the ways in which villages are run and for whose benefit. It has also been well documented that these customary village-level organisations are both durable and also capable of adapting over time. These customary organisations have played an important role in the provision of public goods within the village, including in relation to dispute resolution and basic welfare provision, aspects central to the CDC model.

Some villages have more developmental governance than others. Much depends on the role and the relative numbers of their elite and the moral economy of the village. Broadly speaking, where land inequality is relatively low, the elite are likely to be less economically secure and also more numerous. As a result, there is

a shared interest in promoting social solidarity and ensuring the provision of public goods. Where land inequality is highest, the elite are few and economically secure. With large landholdings in a context of many landless households, the incentives to promote social solidarity and widen access to public good provision are more limited, and the elite are more likely to act in their own interests rather than those of the village as a community. This underlying logic is not changed by the creation of a new institution such as CDCs. Any attempt at reforming village governance has to have a plan on how to deal with it.⁴

In the case of the NSP and the introduction of CDCs in Afghanistan, engaging with the context would have meant understanding the logic and motivations driving village life and its leadership. Instead, there was an incoherence between the technocratic imperatives that drove the NSP design and implementation and how village governance actually worked. In Afghanistan (as elsewhere), there is a logic of networks of association and patron–client relationships both within the village and between the village and the wider world that was ignored by the NSP. The head of the CDC was expected, for example, to behave in a discipline-based manner for accountability within the CDC, between the CDC and NSP, and between the CDC and households. The expectation from households in the village was quite different. They looked for the leader to use his⁵ networks of access and discretion through patronage connections to secure resources or assistance. Addressing this incompatibility between real life and project logic is not a technical issue. Similar incoherence was seen in the project requirement that a standard village grant had to go to a standard size of village. Villages that were too small for a grant were combined under a single CDC: villages that were too large were split and more than one CDC was formed. None of this took account of how people related to each other, or what made sense for carrying out the necessary functions of village governance.

The NSP brought a particular model of democratic institutions that is a characteristic of western democracies. This attempts to ensure that the elected leaders act in the interests of the people through a sanctions model: if they don't, they are voted out.⁶ The model assumes autonomy by each voter in casting their vote in a secret ballot, so leading to accountability. The NSP simply recorded whether elections took place but

3 See accompanying paper: 'What does it mean to take context seriously for rural differentiation?' (Pain and Levine, 2024).

4 See the overview paper in this series, 'Ten traps to avoid if aid programming is serious about engaging with context: lessons from Afghanistan'. Particularly relevant here are trap #7, forgetting that context always bites back, and trap #2, avoiding social theory.

5 The masculine form is, of course, deliberate.

6 This is an example of a problem about which much has been written: the challenges of ensuring that a person put in charge (whether as a political leader or as the chief executive of a company) works in the interests of those who put them in charge (the electorate or the shareholders of the company). This is called 'the principal–agent problem'.

did not examine the committee turnover. Field evidence indicated little turnover in CDC membership and the persistence of the influential and landed people on the CDC, suggesting either that the elites had all suddenly decided to act in the interests of the majority or that the majority ('the principals') had difficulties in sanctioning the elites ('the agents').

What does 'taking context seriously' mean for working with village institutions of governance?

This question can be looked at specifically in relation to aid challenges in Afghanistan following the return of the Taliban government in 2021. International donors are giving renewed attention to the potential of working with CDCs for service delivery at village level to meet welfare needs. However, to function as a channel for aid resources to meet welfare needs, CDCs have to be able to assess needs effectively and equitably enough, and then to deliver services impartially and effectively enough.

Engaging with context means that it is impossible to imagine that all CDCs function to a similar level, or that all CDCs will be capable of reaching minimum standards on effectiveness, accountability and impartiality. Engaging with context thus means that rather than looking for a single answer to questions, ways have to be found to incorporate knowledge gained by the experience of those who have worked over the long term in villages (such as non-governmental organisations). Because there is such a heterogeneous landscape of villages, a system is then needed that can work differently in different villages.

Engaging with context also means understanding that CDCs operate within a context. It has to be accepted that CDCs must balance the demands of external aid actors with the realities of wider village life and also the networks of relationships inside and outside the village that persist under the Taliban. Many villages, though not all, have a moral economy that supports the poorer households, even if it does so on unequal terms (through informal credit relations that underpin

household survival). To some extent, this moral economy depends on the nature and degree of inequality of land ownership and this is partly, though not entirely, shaped by geography.

The following set of propositions offer an approach for working at scale with CDCs:

- For all their faults, the CDCs probably offer the most effective route for service delivery at the village level, but this should be very instrumental. It is probably not wise to add aspirations for institutional change.
- The relationship with CDCs must start with the recognition of their heterogeneity in terms of whose interest they serve. A rough rule of thumb would be that CDCs function with a stronger moral economy (i.e., more equitably) in villages at higher altitudes. These villages have higher and deeper levels of poverty and more limited irrigation. However, they also have lower levels of land concentration and fewer elites who are less secure. But this assumption should not be followed blindly: it can serve as a starting assumption that should be tested.
- CDCs do not replace all pre-existing customary structures in a village, but they can be strongly influenced by them. Some villages will only use CDCs instrumentally and specifically for engagement with external actors to receive grants. This should be accepted.
- Particular care is needed when CDCs are created by merging or splitting villages, or when CDCs are clustered for interventions. Understanding is then needed as to the extent to which the village-level customary leadership still holds authority.
- Implementing partners, such as non-governmental organisations, should be allowed to adapt processes in relation to CDCs where they feel this makes most sense. Rather than having to hide deviations from the rules, they should be asked to document carefully these adaptations. This should be a focus of monitoring so that more can be learned about how deviations affect interventions.

References

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Further reading

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- Pain, A. and Sturge, G. (2015) 'Taking village context into account in Afghanistan'. SLRC Briefing Paper 17. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (<https://securelivelihoods.org/publication/taking-village-context-into-account-in-afghanistan/>).

About this series

This paper is based on a briefing note written for the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and this version is published with their permission. It is one of series of five papers designed to help decision-makers to integrate a better understanding of Afghanistan into their work. The other papers in the series cover markets, informal credit, rural differentiation and post-harvest storage and processing.

Based on the analysis of these five papers, an overview paper examines why it has proved so hard for aid actors to take context seriously (Levine and Pain, 2024). It identifies 'Ten traps to avoid if aid programming is serious about engaging with context: lessons from Afghanistan'. Although based on a study of the failure to take context seriously in Afghanistan, the paper is written to be of wider relevance.

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