



# Aiding Afghan Local Governance: What Went Wrong?

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After twenty years of an ambitious, costly international state-building effort, the government of Afghanistan collapsed in the summer of 2021 in a matter of weeks. The Afghan security forces' remarkably rapid defeat earned significant attention, but the Taliban victory over the internationally backed Afghan republic stemmed equally from deep-seated political and governance factors. Across all the facets of the Western state-building endeavor in Afghanistan, there is now an enormous need to assess how the international project fell so far short of its aims.

One major pillar of the international community's diplomatic and development engagement in Afghanistan over the past two decades centered on strengthening subnational governance. Western officials asserted that improving Afghan local governance was a critical prerequisite to consolidating a stable, legitimate state; as a result, they launched numerous projects to bolster subnational governments' capacity, accountability, and responsiveness. Even though the size of the

overall international footprint varied greatly over the years, donor support for local governance programs remained substantial throughout this period, totaling well over \$2 billion since 2002.<sup>1</sup> As donors grew frustrated with Kabul-based political leaders, channeling significant aid to local governance projects seemed like an almost commonsensical decision in a country in which the majority of Afghans interact with local officials more than national ones.

Yet local governance aid from Western donors was marked by several persistent shortcomings over all these years. First, assistance programs often aimed to “build trust,” “foster dialogue,” and strengthen linkages between the state and citizenry<sup>2</sup>—in essence, to teach Afghans to talk to one another—but they failed to acknowledge that the primary barriers to communication between the governed and governors were often political, not technical. Second, they aimed to build the capacity of district- and provincial-level councils, but these training efforts were perennially stymied by these



bodies' lack of clear authorities or roles. Third, donor programs often emphasized the cultivation of skills that were more relevant to being a good aid recipient than they were to navigating the real politics of the local Afghan order—an order in which citizens had long viewed the state's village-level penetration as predatory or unwelcome.<sup>3</sup> More broadly, meaningful decentralization of authority and power away from Kabul could have yielded more promising governance arrangements for Afghanistan in the long term. But partly because of these persistent flaws, donor engagement fell short of midwifing this type of change.

In short, multiple generations of international programs focused on subnational governance failed to incorporate some essential lessons. This problem is not unique to Afghanistan: around the world, donors' institution-building aid in the democracy domain has often been used to try to solve political problems through technical means, and these efforts usually have failed.<sup>4</sup> The experience of local government assistance in Afghanistan has added one more painful chapter to a familiar story. But the case of Afghanistan also reflects the immense challenge of working in an environment that is often beyond Western interveners' control: for nearly twenty years, Afghan local governance structures were “caught in confusion,” and for many Afghan players, this ambiguity was useful.<sup>5</sup>

Looking back at the long international state-building project in Afghanistan, subnational governance aid was only one part of a vast undertaking. But these programs were nevertheless important in their own right—and also for the broader problematic patterns in Western intervention that they reveal. Looking ahead to future engagements, the time is ripe for the international community to incorporate lessons from Afghanistan.

## TRACING DONORS' ENGAGEMENT ON LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The international community's approach to subnational governance in Afghanistan went through multiple iterations over the past twenty years. In the period immediately after the 2001 Bonn Agreement—established to set up provisional government arrangements in the country—the foreign interveners largely concentrated on central ministries and institutions rather than local politics. They also assisted in drafting Afghanistan's 2004 constitution, which took a notably vague approach on key questions of subnational governance: the document endorsed “centralism” while in the same breath also leaving theoretical room for decentralization or devolution.<sup>6</sup> It provided for provincial, district, municipal, and village councils, but the authorities and responsibilities for them, particularly the district and village councils, were left vague.<sup>7</sup>

By 2005, the international community began to focus on subnational issues both as they grappled with the burgeoning poppy crop across rural Afghanistan and its connection to local political economies and as they recognized the need to clarify the roles of the provincial councils that were elected that autumn.<sup>8</sup> Starting at the January 2006 London Conference, Western officials warned with increasing fervor that local governance-related confusion was impeding the consolidation of gains in democratic state building. Donors noted that the roles and responsibilities of subnational councils in particular needed elaboration.<sup>9</sup>

Though these officials directed their complaints to then Afghan president Hamid Karzai's government, in truth, they shared the blame: even as Westerners increasingly emphasized the importance of local governance, their approach to improving

it was ill-defined in both conceptualization and implementation. Even a well-regarded initiative such as the National Solidarity Programme, which set up community-driven development projects at the village level, made scant reference to how its local participatory processes were meant to fit into any broader system.<sup>10</sup> Donor training programs for provincial councils largely “worked around or avoided solid definition of the crucial relationships that normally should link representative bodies with legislative functions, access to resources, and representative accountability.”<sup>11</sup> As provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) expanded their operations across most of the country, their disparate modes of engagement with local government counterparts further fragmented the donor community’s approach to subnational governance.

To rectify the ambient confusion on local governance, international officials increasingly pressured the Karzai administration to make two primary technical innovations. First, they called for the creation of a central bureaucratic focal point to take the lead on subnational governance matters. Second, they clamored for the drafting of an official subnational governance policy that would elaborate the roles of local councils and specify the relationships between these bodies and line ministries, financial conduits, and local executives.

In 2007, the donors’ first wish was granted: Karzai established the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), a quasi-ministerial body formally charged with coordination and policy development for all subnational governance issues. Yet the IDLG’s birth fit a familiar pattern in exogenous state-building interventions: the creation of a new bureaucratic organization intended to solve a largely political problem.

As such, the new IDLG did little to clarify the local governance situation; the directorate had a muddled mandate and limited authority and was saddled with a competing, overly broad array of expectations from various stakeholders.<sup>12</sup> Further compounding the challenge, the lack of clarity on local governance matters had become *beneficial* for many elite domestic stakeholders. The ambiguity allowed patronage opportunities, and the influx of donor money intended to improve local governance represented a vast resource stream ripe for capture.

As for a codified subnational governance policy, donors sponsored a lengthy consultative process to develop this document. The resultant 415-page opus was finally released in 2010 but did not clarify the essential questions around the roles, relationships, and responsibilities of Afghan local administrations. For years afterward, donors, the IDLG, and a revolving cast of foreign consultants repeatedly attempted to rectify the situation by layering on additional (donor-underwritten) documents such as the 2012 Subnational Governance Implementation Framework, whose provisions remained unimplemented in subsequent years.<sup>13</sup> In 2018, Afghan president Ashraf Ghani’s administration finally released a Roadmap for Subnational Reform, but the document deferred many essential questions until a revised local administrative law, provincial council law, and municipality law were passed.<sup>14</sup> The document had little discernable impact on the functioning of local governance, and the promise of revised laws or further clarification remained unfulfilled up to the day Ghani’s government fell.

Alongside Westerners’ role in these policy-related developments, their local governance aid programs expanded greatly after 2009 in tandem with the military surge. The international community’s



counterinsurgency strategy framed the conflict as a struggle for the support of the population—one between the insurgent Taliban on one side and the Afghan government on the other.

To strengthen the Afghan government's hand in this contest, Western policymakers focused more intensely on local governance initiatives. An influx of civilian and uniformed foreign personnel deployed overwhelmingly to areas outside Kabul, greatly expanding the number of civilians on PRTs and adding a new layer of civil-military units at the district level, namely district stability teams. Civilian stabilization programs explicitly aimed to build more “responsive, capable, and accountable governance” at the local levels by lavishing unprecedented attention and financial resources on district officials and government entities.<sup>15</sup> Yet these initiatives often undercut their own long-term goals. The huge injection of external money undermined any accountability between the state and citizens, effectively turning district-level administrations into rentier mini-states. Meanwhile, the deluge of Western-led “quick impact” projects drew attention away from strengthening the line ministries' capacity, and their incentives, to deliver local services in the long term.<sup>16</sup>

After the surge gave way to a (putative) transition period in 2014, Western assistance efforts steadily rolled back their programmatic ambition and geographic writ. District stability teams and then PRTs gradually shut down across the country, effectively limiting donors' direct engagement with local governments and reflecting a dramatic cut in aid budgets overall. Hence, well before the Afghan government fell in 2021, the Western diplomatic presence returned to being largely confined to Kabul; local governance aid programs continued, but they were primarily focused on provincial and municipal administrations as well as on associated Kabul-based entities. An exception was the

Citizens' Charter program, a rural development program that engaged local communities as an heir to the National Solidarity Programme.

### THREE KEY SHORTCOMINGS

Despite the many changes in the international community's efforts in Afghanistan over time, local governance aid featured several shortcomings that remained remarkably consistent. Although the international community aimed to use subnational governance aid to help decentralize authority to local communities, these efforts fell short of that ambition.

#### False Assumptions About Communication and Linkages

Throughout the years, foreign aid programs constantly emphasized the objectives of “building trust,” “fostering dialogue,” and strengthening linkages between and among Afghan government officials and the Afghan population.<sup>17</sup> During the surge era, this reflected the overarching counterinsurgency framing, in which extending the reach of government to unstable areas was seen as essential to state consolidation. In practice, fostering linkages between Kabul-based officials and rural citizens during that period often entailed carting Kabul-based IDLG officials into outlying districts in U.S. military transport. Many programs also aimed to augment communications between locally based Afghan officials and their own citizens, cajoling both sides to interact at district centers. Donors launched what were termed service provider fairs, during which subnational officials were volunteered to explain government offerings to their constituents. Local officials were further prodded to participate in the opening ceremonies for donor-funded projects to show their engagement.<sup>18</sup> Even in very recent years, donor programs have included an Ask Your Governor

media project “to enable citizens to communicate their needs and concerns directly to their governors” as well as Art of Communication trainings to “help provincial governors develop communication plans to better engage with constituents.”<sup>19</sup>

These recurrent program features had evident flaws. They framed the lack of government-citizen communication and linkages as technical shortcomings of Afghan capacity and knowledge: put bluntly, these approaches assumed that Afghans needed to be taught how to talk to one another. But evidence and logic reveal the faultiness of this assumption.<sup>20</sup> The entire system of patronage, petitioning, and “government of relationships” in the country has for centuries hinged on Afghans’ (estimable) ability to locate and talk to one another.<sup>21</sup> A similar critique extends to other donor capacity-building projects too: foreign interveners labored to teach various *shuras* how to consult with one another about collective problems, as if Afghans had not been exercising negotiation and conflict management skills from time immemorial.<sup>22</sup>

Western aid workers on the ground were not blind to these flaws: in interviews, multiple donor officials observed that Afghan citizens and government officials could be extremely resourceful at communicating when the stakes warranted them doing so and when the power dynamics in question allowed it.<sup>23</sup> Still, despite misgivings among some aid practitioners, policies launched in Washington or Kabul replicated this faulty logic repeatedly over the years. Program design continually failed to acknowledge that any missing connection or linkage was not due to inadequate communication facilitation or the result of Afghans not knowing how to talk to one another—instead, the lack of connection often reflected deeper political obstacles. In some instances, as Noah Coburn’s notion of “masterly inactivity” in local politics has shown, silences

were strategic.<sup>24</sup> In others, citizens at the local level lacked interest in being connected to the central state, which they viewed as extortionate and corrupt, and the state was disinclined to bolster its communication with a periphery demanding more authority or resources.

### **Building Capacity Without Defined Roles or Authorities**

A second recurrent flaw was that foreign aid programs aimed to build the capacity of district and provincial councils even though these bodies lacked defined authorities. Since their first election in 2005, provincial councils’ ill-defined oversight mandate meant they lacked a codified way to meaningfully influence service delivery, resource allocation, or the provincial governor’s agenda.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, from early on in the intervention, PRT personnel “advised” their provincial council counterparts on their aspirational rather than actual jobs. The subsequent surge years witnessed a proliferation of international local governance experts cajoling provincial officials through exercises on citizen consultation and project prioritization to improve the responsiveness of local government officials.<sup>26</sup> Yet these councils still lacked budgetary oversight and had only indirect means of affecting executive policies or line ministry service delivery.<sup>27</sup> Foreign interveners also created a number of parallel provincial councils without any reference to permanent structures: a recent example was the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) creation of “provincial advocacy committees,” which were “trained on advocacy best practices such as messaging and stakeholder mapping.”<sup>28</sup>

The situation at the district level evolved into an even more acute problem. Despite being mandated in the 2004 constitution, district councils were never elected due to various political, logistical, financial, and security challenges. Yet Western





officials felt an imperative to install *some* district-level consultative bodies, ostensibly to improve local accountability and to check the power of the Kabul-appointed district governors. Thus, the international community set up two major constellations of quasi-district councils—both without any formal legal mandate. Under the National Area-Based Development Programme, donors funded district development assemblies associated with the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, and under the Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP), during the surge, foreigners funded what became known as ASOP *shuras* associated with the IDLG.

This proliferation of district-level councils, however, did not result in an expansion of accountability; instead, it led to various ills related to “institutional multiplicity” in state-building contexts.<sup>29</sup> The parallel district bodies produced a puzzling picture for citizens, many of whom concluded they now had to contend with twice the number of local councilors seeking graft.<sup>30</sup> The competing district bodies also did not offer a pathway to constitutionally mandated district councils. A World Bank assessment was candid about the problem: “The two councils are an almost perfect case study of the fragmented, inconsistent and donor-driven nature of subnational governance in the country. . . . They are delivered through programmes that create temporary structures, rather than achieving their results through real institutional development and reform.”<sup>31</sup> Adding to the confusion, donors launched a plethora of other kinds of district councils over the years including “security shuras,” “peace shuras,” “education shuras,” and “stability working groups.”<sup>32</sup>

Notably, many Western aid practitioners on the ground recognized the problems with capacity-building efforts that lacked any reference to councils’

real-life authorities and incentives. As one noted in frustration, “Practices get built up by doing, but also by doing things that *actually matter*”<sup>33</sup>—an assessment echoing scholars who study how to build state capability.<sup>34</sup> Yet most local council advisory programs thrust citizens and officials through exercises that *didn’t* actually matter; they launched councils that had no standing authorities and offered no route to permanent institutions.<sup>35</sup> The National Area-Based Development Programme could have potentially been an exception: its district development assemblies had access to a standing budget, making them meaningful fora for negotiation, and in many places they evolved into the preeminent district councils on the ground. For years, various notions of how to convert district development assemblies into official district councils were discussed.<sup>36</sup> Had such a proposal come to fruition, it could have leveraged all the previous years of capacity-building exercises to make some actual progress on institution building. But ultimately the idea did not take root: the Ghani administration insisted that district council elections would be held soon after its inauguration in 2014. By the time that government fled in 2021, the wait was still ongoing.<sup>37</sup>

### **Misplaced Goals of Making Afghans “Good” Donor Beneficiaries**

Finally, Western efforts seemed to principally concentrate on enhancing skills that would make Afghans ideal recipients of donor aid rather than on strengthening capabilities more relevant to local Afghan political life. For example, one USAID program’s final list of accomplishments included local government officials’ learning “how to file, keep records, keep time, and manage meetings during their daily office operations.”<sup>38</sup> Other programs aimed to teach Afghans to apply for grants. In more recent years, another donor program focused

on “developing training curricula for monitoring and evaluation, reporting templates, training of trainers, [and] developing performance indicators,” while also listing among its achievements multiple trainings on “public administration concepts and best practices.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite the objective of building capacity, donor projects seemed to focus more on replicating Western constructs—thus potentially compounding and perpetuating dependency. This tension echoed what Astri Suhrke described years earlier—the “contradictory project” of building an Afghan-owned state via intrusive, maximalist external aid.<sup>40</sup> Yet in the design of many foreign assistance programs, this dilemma was rarely acknowledged. More broadly, these programs’ underlying assumption—that Western governance models are the superior modes of doing politics and generating public goods—features a clear neoimperialist tone; but, again, the irony of this mindset underpinning Westerners’ local grassroots programming was seldom acknowledged.<sup>41</sup>

On a related note, some stabilization programs also aimed to teach Afghan government representatives to analyze local “sources of instability.”<sup>42</sup> The logic was that if Afghan officials could understand the factors driving local conflict—by working their way through an immensely complex contractor-designed Stability Assessment Methodology or District Stability Framework—they would set about fixing them. And accordingly, as project documents claimed, the program would help build up citizens’ confidence in their state.<sup>43</sup> For many Afghan interviewees, this logic was laughable: if the source of local conflict was government corruption, how could such a matrix help?

## TAKING STOCK

In the immediate term, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has deluged the international community with urgent priorities. Policymakers are rightly focused on concerns about the ongoing humanitarian crisis, the evacuation of at-risk Afghan partners, counterterrorism, the country’s economic collapse, the protection of women’s and minorities’ rights, and the prevention of atrocities under the new government.

But alongside addressing these urgent concerns, the international community must also take stock of the decades-long transformational agenda it pursued in Afghanistan. It should reap some lessons learned as well—and to this end, the story of subnational governance aid is one part of a broader tale. Programs repeatedly fell back on a familiar collection of “theories of change” that did not comport with conditions on the ground—despite the expressed misgivings of some Westerners closest to the actual situation.<sup>44</sup> Donors launched a remarkable number of reform and rationalization efforts that lost steam in subsequent rotations of diplomats. Foreigners’ aid programs and policy debates on local governance in 2018 bore a striking resemblance to those of 2008, but the revolving door of the international presence meant that few on the donor side noticed.

Further, looking beyond Afghanistan, the international community will likely continue to turn to local governance initiatives as part of stabilization efforts in conflict-affected and fragile states. So-called grassroots, bottom-up governance programs are often seen as a panacea to minimize the influence of problematic central governments or as a much-needed antidote to top-down



solutions in fragmented, pluralistic societies. Many current local governance programs elsewhere bear striking resemblance to the program templates used in Afghanistan.

Yet the Afghanistan experience suggests that modesty is in order—now more than ever. Local governance aid can do little to alter the fundamental dynamics of center-periphery relations unless it affects the broader authorities and incentives that drive centralization or decentralization. Elite capture can occur on the local level just as it can at the national level. Without affecting the “rules of the game” of local governance, episodic, externally driven efforts are unlikely to durably alter government-society power relations.<sup>45</sup> Donors would do well to recognize the limited hand they have and focus on shaping incentives for all involved—rather than hope that one more training module might finally do the trick.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOS

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## NOTES

- 1 Based on public records, the United States and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) alone spent over \$2 billion in aid programs focused on local governance or governance-related stabilization in Afghanistan since 2001. Adding in contributions from other Western donors—including the EU and UK—would bring the total to considerably more, but precise figures for these donors’ programs are not available. See “Stabilization: Lessons From the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan,” Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, May 2018, 220–230, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-18-48-LL.pdf>; “Quarterly Report to the United States Congress,” Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 92; “USAID Spent Almost \$400 Million on an Afghan Stabilization Project Despite Uncertain Results, but Has Taken Steps to Better Assess Similar Efforts,” Office of the Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, April 25, 2012, 2, <https://www.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/oig-reports/2012-04-25audit-12-08Revised.pdf>; “Afghanistan Subnational Governance Program: 2015 First Quarterly Progress Report,” UNDP; “Afghanistan Subnational Governance Program II: Annual Progress Report - 2011,” UNDP; and “Local Governance Project – Afghanistan: 2016 2nd Quarterly Project Progress Report,” UNDP.
- 2 For example, see U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), “USAID Afghanistan Stabilization Fact Sheet,” USAID, June 2011; U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), “Support to Sub-National Governance Structure,” last updated May 7, 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/support-sub-national-governance-structure>.
- 3 For example, see Noah Coburn, *Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011, first edition); Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Frances Z. Brown, “The U.S. Surge and Afghan Local Governance,” U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report 316, September 12, 2012, <http://www.usip.org/publications/the-us-surge-and-afghan-local-governance>; and Thomas Barfield, “Weak Links on a Rusty Chain: Structural Weaknesses in Afghanistan’s Provincial Government Administration” in *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by M. Nazif Shahrani and Robert Leroy Canfield (Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1984).
- 4 Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont characterize this recurrent pattern among donors as “the temptation of the technical.” See Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 26–29.



- 5 The phrase coined by Sarah Lister is still remarkably pertinent today. Sarah Lister, “Caught in Confusion: Local Governance Structures in Afghanistan,” Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, March 2, 2005.
- 6 “The government, in preserving the principles of centralism, shall transfer necessary powers, in accordance with the law, to local administrations.” See Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, “The Constitution of Afghanistan,” article 137.
- 7 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, “The Constitution of Afghanistan,” articles 138 through 141, 2004, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Afghanistan\\_2004.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Afghanistan_2004.pdf?lang=en). On the specific duties of district and village councils being left vague, see Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, “The Constitution of Afghanistan,” article 140: “Councils shall be established to organize activities as well as attain active participation of the people in provincial administrations in districts and in villages.”
- 8 Sarah Lister, “Changing the Rules? State-Building and Local Government in Afghanistan,” *Journal of Development Studies* 45, no. 6 (2009): 990–1009. On opium’s effect on local political economies, see, for example, Jonathan Goodhand, “Frontiers and Wars: The Opium Economy in Afghanistan,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 5, no. 2 (2005): 191–216; Jonathan Goodhand, “Corrupting or Consolidating the Peace? The Drugs Economy and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in Afghanistan,” *International Peacekeeping* 15 (2008): 405–423; and David Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 9 As a comprehensive assessment of subnational governance prepared for USAID underscored, “Although the legal framework for sub-national governance has been established by the Constitution and other key documents, and efforts have been made to put in place the structures called for at the local level, the fundamental challenge to reform is the lack of a coherent vision that addresses: (a) the roles, authority, and functions of sub-national governance institutions, (b) how sub-national government institutions relate to other local institutions and processes, and (c) how sub-national government agencies coordinate with and reinforce governance institutions at the national level.” See Asia Foundation, “An Assessment of Sub-National Governance in Afghanistan,” Asia Foundation, May 2007, 38; and Hamish Nixon, “Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan,” Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, April 2008, 16.
- 10 The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) was a World Bank–sponsored community development program implemented in partnership with the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. Launched in 2003, the program eventually achieved near-nationwide reach over multiple phases and enjoyed a high, and generally favorable, public profile.
- 11 Nixon, “Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan,” 55.
- 12 Hamish Nixon, “The ‘Subnational Governance’ Challenge and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance,” in *Snapshots of an Intervention: The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan’s Decade of Assistance*, edited by Martine van Bijlert and Sari Kouvo (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2012).
- 13 Independent Directorate of Local Governance, “Revised Implementation Framework of the Subnational Governance Policy,” Independent Directorate of Local Governance, 2012.
- 14 For a participant-observer account of the politics surrounding the subnational governance policy in the Ghani administration, see Peter Blunt, Farid Mamundzay, and Muqtader Nasary, “The Long and the Short of Policy Pantomime in Afghanistan,” *Progress in Development Studies* 17, no. 1 (2017): 67–88.
- 15 U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan and U.S. Forces, Afghanistan, “US Government Integrated Civil-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan,” U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan and U.S. Forces, Afghanistan, August 10, 2009, 8, <https://www.comw.org/qdfr/fulltext/0908eikenberryandmccrystal.pdf>.
- 16 Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012); Scott Dempsey, “Is Spending the Strategy?,” *Small Wars Journal*, May 4, 2011, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/is-spending-the-strategy>; and Frances Z. Brown, “Bureaucracy Does Its Thing, Again,” *American Interest*, October 9, 2012, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/articles/2012/10/09/bureaucracy-does-its-thing-again>.
- 17 U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), “USAID Afghanistan Stabilization Fact Sheet,” USAID, June 2011; U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Support to Sub-National Governance Structure, last updated May 7, 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/support-sub-national-governance-structure>
- 18 Management Systems International, “Stability in Key Areas: Final Performance Evaluation,” USAID, September 2015, 19.
- 19 USAID, “Support to Sub-national Governance Structure Fact Sheet,” USAID, last updated May 7, 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/support-sub-national-governance-structure>; and USAID Afghanistan, “USAID Initiative to Strengthen Local Administrations (ISLA): Annual Report, FY 2017, October 2016–September 2017,” USAID, October 2017, 26.
- 20 See Ashley Jackson and Orzala Nemat, “Politics Over Evidence: Questioning the Link Between Service Delivery and State Legitimacy in Afghanistan,” Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, August 28, 2018, <https://securelivelihoods.org/publication/politics-over-evidence-questioning-the-link-between-service-delivery-and-state-legitimacy-in-afghanistan>.
- 21 On the “government of relationships,” see Nixon, “Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan.”



- 22 As Orzala Ashraf Nemat illustrates, the injection of foreign funding into the equation had other perverse effects. She quotes a citizen of Nangarhar Province who said that before foreign democracy-promotion intervention, “it was not difficult for us to gather a group of people in one house and discuss our problems and issues, but now if you aim to do so, everyone expects you to pay something. We were regularly meeting with no expectation for return, but that culture no longer exists . . . now every time you speak of *shura*, elections, or gathering people, they think they must be paid.” See Orzala Ashraf Nemat, “Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan,” doctor of philosophy thesis, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, Department of Development Studies, September 2014, [https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/23663/1/Nemat\\_4163.pdf](https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/23663/1/Nemat_4163.pdf).
- 23 This point is introduced in Frances Z. Brown, “Rethinking Afghan Local Governance Aid After Transition,” U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report 349, August 2014, [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR349\\_Rethinking-Afghan-Local-Governance-Aid-After-Transition.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR349_Rethinking-Afghan-Local-Governance-Aid-After-Transition.pdf). It is based on the author’s in-country research, including interviews with multiple Western officials based in Kabul and Kandahar.
- 24 Coburn, *Bazaar Politics*, 145–179.
- 25 A 2006 law gave provincial councils the role of monitoring the provincial governor but no formal agenda-setting or veto power. Subsequent years saw more contestation of an updated provincial council law. See Jennifer Murtazashvili, “Subnational Governance in Afghanistan: Back to the Future,” in *State Strengthening in Afghanistan: Lessons Learned, 2001–14*, edited by Scott Smith and Colin Cookman, U.S. Institute of Peace, May 2016, [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW116-State-Strengthening-in-Afghanistan-Lessons-Learned-2001-14\\_0.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW116-State-Strengthening-in-Afghanistan-Lessons-Learned-2001-14_0.pdf); and Ehsan Qaane and Thomas Ruttig, “A Half-Solution: Provincial Councils Get Oversight Authority Back—For the Time Being,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 12, 2015, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/a-half-solution-provincial-councils-get-oversight-authority-back-for-the-time-being>.
- 26 Insights gleaned from the author’s stint as one of these foreign local governance experts, based in Kandahar, are found in Brown, “Bureaucracy Does Its Thing.”
- 27 Murtazashvili. “Subnational Governance in Afghanistan,” 56.
- 28 USAID Afghanistan, “USAID Initiative to Strengthen Local Administrations (ISLA),” 6.
- 29 Institutional multiplicity can be understood as “the multiple ‘rule systems’ that confront economic and political actors providing distinct and different normative frameworks and incentive structures in which they act.” See Gabi Hesselbein, Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, and James Putzel, “Economic and Political Foundations of State-Making in Africa: Understanding State Reconstruction,” London School of Economics, Crisis States Research Centre, Crisis States Working Papers Series, 2006.
- 30 The foreign interveners’ explanation that the National Area-Based Development Programme’s councils focused on development projects while the ASOP shuras focused on local governance did not hold up in the rural Afghan context, where questions of local politics and resource distribution are tightly intertwined.
- 31 World Bank, “District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs—Policy Issues and Challenges,” World Bank, World Bank Discussion Paper, March 29, 2011, 7.
- 32 For further discussion of this phenomenon, see Noah Coburn and Shahm Mahmood Miakhel, “Many Shuras Do Not a Government Make: International Community Engagement with Local Councils in Afghanistan,” U.S. Institute of Peace, September 7, 2010, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/pb50.pdf>.
- 33 Nixon, “Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan.”
- 34 Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock, *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017, first edition); and Lant Pritchett, Matt Andrews, and Michael Woolcock, “Escaping Capability Traps Through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA),” Center for Global Development, Working Paper 299, June 2012.
- 35 Even the community-level councils sponsored by the National Solidarity Programme—a program widely heralded as a success—left little durable institutional residue in their wake. See Andrew Beath, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov, “Randomized Impact Evaluation of Afghanistan’s National Solidarity Programme: Final Report,” World Bank, July 1, 2013, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2013/07/18273450/randomized-impact-evaluation-afghanistans-national-solidarity-programme>.
- 36 In related policy discussions, in 2012 and 2013, a plan to rationalize the ASOP shuras and district development assemblies was negotiated between the IDLG and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. The road map intended to launch “new” and uniform district-level councils, drawing largely from National Solidarity Programme’s community development councils, which would have largely formalized district development assemblies. However, this initiative never gained steam. See also Murtazashvili, “Subnational Governance in Afghanistan.”
- 37 In the most recent episode of this recurring saga, the Ghani government claimed in January 2021 that district council elections would be held that summer. See S. Mudassar Ali Shah, “Parliamentary, PC Polls to Be Held in Summer,” *Pajhwok News*, January 19, 2021, <https://pajhwok.com/2021/01/19/parliamentary-pc-polls-to-be-held-in-summer>.

- 38 Management Systems International, “Stability in Key Areas,” 25.
- 39 USAID Afghanistan, “USAID Initiative to Strengthen Local Administrations (ISLA),” 28.
- 40 Astri Suhrke, *When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 15.
- 41 The author is grateful to Dipali Mukhopadhyay for introducing part of this point.
- 42 Management Systems International, “Stability in Key Areas,” 8–9.
- 43 USAID, “Stabilization in Key Areas—South (SIKA-South Program) Contract Document,” USAID, March 4, 2013, 7.
- 44 This phenomenon is not limited to the international intervention in Afghanistan; it bedevils many internationally sponsored peacebuilding missions around the world. For examinations and considerations of why, see, for example, Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Susanna P. Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace: Accountability and Performance in International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- 45 On rules of the game in governance reform efforts, see Rachel Kleinfeld, “In Development Work, Plan for Sailboats, Not Trains,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, December 2, 2015, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/in\\_development\\_work\\_plan\\_for\\_sailboats\\_not\\_trains](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/in_development_work_plan_for_sailboats_not_trains).

