

## Issues and Challenges of Local Governance in Afghanistan: A Critical Review of the 2001–2020 Period



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### Abstract

This study critically examines the structural, institutional, and operational challenges that have hindered the development of effective local governance in Afghanistan during the 2001–2020 period. The problem addressed is the persistent weakness of subnational governance despite extensive international and domestic efforts. The importance of this research lies in the vital role that local government plays in service delivery, accountability, and public trust—core elements for long-term stability. The study aims to identify and analyse key barriers to establishing accountable and functional local governance. The research questions focus on identifying the main obstacles to effective local government between 2001 and 2020. Methodologically, this is a qualitative, descriptive study based entirely on secondary sources such as academic literature, policy reports, and institutional assessments. The study is confined to the (2001–2020) period and examines local governance at the provincial, district, and community levels. Findings indicate that institutional fragmentation, political interference, weak capacity, and donor-driven policy inconsistency have critically undermined decentralization efforts. The study concludes that without strategic reforms and a genuine commitment to decentralization at a local governance level, Afghanistan's long-term local governance capacity will remain fragile.

**Keywords:** Local Government, Afghanistan, Governance, Decentralization, Corruption, Provincial Administration, State-building.

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## چالش‌ها و موانع حکومت‌داری محلی در افغانستان: بازنگری انتقادی دوره ۲۰۰۱ تا ۲۰۲۰ م

عبدالله حسینی<sup>۱</sup>

### چکیده

این پژوهش به گونه انتقادی به بررسی چالش‌های ساختاری، نهادی و اجرایی پی پرداخته، که در فاصله سال‌های ۲۰۰۱ تا ۲۰۲۰ م، مانع توسعه حکومت‌داری مؤثر محلی در افغانستان شده‌اند. مسأله اصلی این تحقیق، تداوم ضعف حکومت‌داری در سطوح محلی است؛ ضعفی که باوجود تلاش‌های گسترده داخلی و بین‌المللی همچنان پابرجا مانده است. اهمیت این پژوهش در نقش حیاتی حکومت‌های محلی در زمینه ارائه خدمات، پاسخ‌گویی و اعتماد عمومی نهفته است؛ اموری که عناصر بنیادین ثبات درازمدت به‌شمار می‌روند. هدف این مطالعه، شناسایی و تحلیل موانع اصلی در مسیر ایجاد حکومت‌داری محلی پاسخ‌گو و کارآمد است. پرسش‌های پژوهش بر شناسایی موانع اصلی در برابر حکومت‌داری مؤثر محلی در دوره پس از ۲۰۰۱ م تمرکز دارد. از لحاظ روش‌شناختی، این تحقیق کیفی و توصیفی است و به‌طور کامل بر منابع ثانوی مانند منابع علمی، گزارش‌های سیاستی و ارزیابی‌های نهادی تکیه دارد. محدوده زمانی تحقیق به سال‌های ۲۰۰۱ تا ۲۰۲۰ م. محدود می‌شود و حکومت‌داری محلی را در سطوح ولایتی، ولسوالی و جامعه‌محور بررسی می‌کند. یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهد که فروپاشی نهادی، مداخلات سیاسی، ضعف ظرفیت اجرایی و ناهماهنگی سیاست‌های مبتنی بر کمک‌های خارجی، تلاش‌ها برای تمرکززدایی را به شدت تضعیف کرده‌اند. نتیجه تحقیق آن است که بدون اصلاحات راهبردی و تعهد واقعی به تمرکززدایی در سطح حکومت‌داری محلی، ظرفیت حکومت‌داری محلی در افغانستان همچنان شکننده خواهد ماند.

**واژه‌گان کلیدی:** حکومت‌داری محلی، افغانستان، حکومت‌داری، تمرکززدایی، فساد، اداره

ولایتی، دولت‌سازی.

## 1. Introduction

The problem addressed in this study is the ongoing dysfunction of local government structures in Afghanistan, which was persisted in the last two decades of state-building efforts. Since 2001, the international community and Afghan government have aimed to establish legitimate and effective governance institutions. However, local governments remained structurally weak, under-resourced, and often symbolic in function. This problem deepened the disconnect between the central state and local populations.

The urgency and importance of this research stem from the recognition that sustainable governance cannot be achieved through centralization alone. Local governments serve as the frontline institutions for public service delivery, development planning, and citizen engagement. Their failure directly impacts the state's legitimacy and capacity to respond to localized needs and security concerns.

Previous studies have explored aspects of local governance in Afghanistan, including institutional frameworks, decentralization policy, and corruption risks. However, comprehensive assessments that integrate administrative, political, and operational dimensions across the 2001–2020 period remain limited. This research contributes to that gap.

The primary objective of this study is to critically assess the challenges that have prevented the successful establishment and functioning of local government in Afghanistan. It seeks to evaluate why repeated efforts—backed by both national reforms and international aid—have failed to produce lasting results in local governance.

The central research question is: What are the key challenges that have hindered the development of effective local governance in Afghanistan during the post-2001 period?

This research is qualitative and descriptive in nature. It relies exclusively on secondary data sources, including academic publications, government and donor reports, and policy analyses. The scope is limited to the period between 2001 and 2020, and the units of analysis are provincial, district, and community governance structures.

Key findings suggest that the persistence of centralized power, overlapping institutional mandates, weak administrative capacity, and inconsistent donor engagement have obstructed meaningful decentralization. These factors have collectively prevented the development of accountable and functional local government institutions.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform future governance reforms. By highlighting systemic issues and structural bottlenecks, the study provides insights that can guide the design of more inclusive, responsive, and locally grounded governance models in Afghanistan.

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## **2. Decentralization in Afghanistan (2001-2020)**

The 2001 Bonn Agreement laid the foundation for a centralized Afghan state grounded in democratic principles. It envisioned a phased approach toward decentralization, beginning with the establishment of a strong, centralized authority, which would subsequently devolve powers to subnational levels. The Afghan Constitution ratified in 2004, reflects this vision through a highly centralized system in which executive authority, led by the President, retains considerable control over governance (Afghanistan Constitution, 2004).

Historically, centralization has been a contentious issue in Afghanistan. Experiences from past decades, particularly during the monarchy and various regimes, have left deep-seated mistrust in Kabul's authority. Provinces often operated independently, with local power struggles weakening national unity (Barfield, 2010). The legacy of fragmented local governance has complicated efforts to build a cohesive and effective decentralization process.

Although the Afghan Constitution (2004) formally recognizes the separation of powers, it disproportionately empowers the executive branch, which encompasses the President, Cabinet, ministries, governors, and councils at the provincial and district levels. Articles 138 and 140 of the Constitution (2004) outline the formation of Provincial and District Councils to assist in development efforts and advise on local governance. However, their roles remain largely consultative and symbolic. The term "advice" in Article 138 underscores their limited authority in decision-making and resource allocation (Afghanistan Constitution, 2004).

Despite the constitutional provision, district councils—the smallest units intended to serve as forums for grassroots governance—have yet to be elected. This stagnation has hindered the realization of meaningful decentralization. Prior to the 2004 Provincial Council elections, a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) mission recommended a "gradualist" approach to local empowerment. Jean Arnault, then the UN Special Representative to Afghanistan, advised that councils initially assume an advisory role to the executive at the local level, reflecting concerns about capacity and political stability (UNDP, 2004). Further momentum emerged in 2006, when the International Crisis Group (ICG) called on the Afghan National Assembly to define administrative boundaries, legislate district and municipal elections, and form a commission on subnational governance to explore power and budget devolution (ICG, 2006).

In some instances, however, decentralization occurred outside formal governance structures. In 2006, NATO forces engaged in a controversial experiment in Helmand's Musa Qala district, an Islamic Emirate stronghold. Seeking to reduce NATO casualties and bolster local security, ISAF Commander General David Richards negotiated with tribal elders to take over local governance. While this approach temporarily reduced violence, it

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bypassed official institutions and was widely criticized as a setback for state-building and democratic consolidation (Giustozzi, 2009).

This case illustrates a critical challenge in Afghanistan's decentralization journey: externally imposed or militarily motivated devolution can undermine the long-term goals of institutional development and democratic legitimacy.

### **3. Status of Local Government in the Post-2001 Polity of Afghanistan**

Contemporary Afghanistan remains a highly complex and unstable environment, characterized by overlapping agendas, political turbulence, and persistent conflict. The political framework established after 2001 brought with it new governance structures, a new constitution, and substantial flows of international aid. However, this new era has also introduced a range of new challenges. Despite early optimism, much of the country has experienced increasing instability due to a resurgence of insurgent activity, particularly in rural and border regions. Civilian and military casualties have increased annually, undermining public confidence in the externally-supported Afghan government (Lister, 2005; Nixon, 2007).

Although the post-2001 era brought significant infrastructure development—including improved roads, communication systems, schools, and healthcare—the long-term sustainability of these achievements remained uncertain. Afghanistan still ranked among the poorest countries globally, standing 155th on the United Nations Human Development Index in 2011 (UNDP, 2011). Economic growth, largely dependent on foreign military expenditure and aid, has not translated into a self-sufficient economy. Beyond the illicit opium trade, the formal economy remains underdeveloped and dependent on international assistance (World Bank, 2012).

The Afghan state-building model has heavily emphasized centralized governance based in Kabul. Institutions at the national level have received considerable investment and technical support, whereas subnational governance has remained fragmented, under-resourced, and underdeveloped. This imbalance has hindered the development of effective and responsive local governance structures capable of meeting citizens' needs at the provincial and district levels (Lister & Nixon, 2006).

The **Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)** has produced substantial research on this issue. Their early collaboration with the World Bank in 2004 highlighted the weakness of provincial administration and recommended a clearer delineation of roles and improved support structures. Sarah Lister's subsequent studies analysed local governance functions, budgeting, and the progress of the Public Administration Reform (PAR) initiative, calling for greater transparency and decentralization (Lister, 2005; Lister & Nixon, 2006).

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A significant institutional milestone occurred in 2007 with the creation of the **Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG)**, tasked with overseeing subnational administration. This was followed by the **Subnational Governance Policy (SNGP)** in 2010, which aimed to clarify the structure, roles, and responsibilities of local government institutions. Complementary laws governing provincial, district, village, and municipal councils were also drafted during this time (IDLG, 2010).

However, the implementation of these frameworks has been inconsistent. Despite formal structures, the political environment has been marred by corruption, electoral fraud, and weak oversight mechanisms. The political process has often failed to ensure accountability or local ownership, particularly as donor coordination has fragmented and international attention has declined (Giustozzi, 2009; Rubin, 2013).

Moreover, the 2014 international military drawdown triggered a sharp reduction in foreign assistance, further weakening already fragile institutions. Local government, despite being the primary interface between citizens and the state—responsible for service delivery, development planning, justice, and security—has received inadequate support. Representative bodies such as **Provincial Councils** have played advisory rather than decision-making roles, and **District Councils** have remained largely non-functional due to delayed elections and lack of legal and administrative infrastructure (AREU, 2012).

Therefore, while Afghanistan has achieved notable progress in some areas, the imbalance between central and local governance posed a fundamental challenge to sustainable development. Strengthening local government capacity and enabling it to function as an accountable, transparent, and responsive institution is crucial for the future stability and legitimacy of the Afghan state.

#### 4. Territorial and Institutional Overview of Local Government in Afghanistan “during 2001-2020”

Afghanistan’s administrative structure is territorially and institutionally complex, reflecting both historical fragmentation and recent efforts toward centralization and state-building. As of 2020, the country is officially divided into **34 provinces**. Two of these provinces—**Daikundi** and **Panjshir**—were established by presidential decree under the Karzai administration just prior to the May 2004 presidential elections, reflecting both administrative and political considerations.

The precise number and delineation of **districts (wuluswali)** remained contested. Various government agencies, including the **Ministry of Interior (MoI)**, the **Central Statistics Office (CSO)**, and the **Afghanistan Geodesy and Cartography Head Office (AGCHO)**, provide differing figures and boundary definitions. As of April 2017, the CSO recognized **364 rural districts**

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in addition to **34 urban centers** (the capitals of each province). Many urban centers are further subdivided into **nahias** or **urban districts**, although standardization across agencies has not yet been achieved.

Similar inconsistencies exist with regard to **municipalities (shārwalī)**. While the exact number varies between institutions, the generally accepted figure is that there are **217 provincial and rural municipalities**, each with a population exceeding 5,000 residents. These municipalities are responsible for essential urban services but operate with limited authority and under tight central oversight.

Furthermore, Afghanistan's rural landscape is composed of an estimated **34,000 villages**, according to the **Afghanistan living condition** conducted between 2016 and 2017 (world bank, 2018). However, estimates vary significantly between ministries, again highlighting the absence of unified territorial governance and a coherent administrative database.

This fragmented and overlapping system of territorial classification underscores major institutional challenges for Afghanistan's local governance. The lack of clarity regarding administrative boundaries, inconsistent figures, and institutional rivalries hinder planning, service delivery, and the effective implementation of decentralization reforms. These discrepancies also complicate efforts to hold elections for district councils and create transparent and accountable governance structures at the local level.

## 5. Institutional Structure of Governance and Administration in Afghanistan (2001-2020)

The institutional structure of governance in Afghanistan operates through a multi-layered framework, comprising **four main administrative levels**: provincial, district, municipal, and village. Each level plays a distinct role in the delivery of services, governance, and political representation, though significant overlaps and ambiguities persist in roles and responsibilities.

### a. Provincial Level

At the provincial level, governance includes several key institutions:

- **Provincial Line Departments (PDs):** These are extensions of central government ministries responsible for service delivery in sectors such as health, education, agriculture, and rural development. Despite operating at the provincial level, they remain structurally and administratively accountable to their respective central ministries.
- **Provincial Governors (PGs):** Appointed directly by the President, governors wielded significant executive authority. They oversee provincial administration, control local expenditure approvals, participate in procurement decisions, and hold discretionary power over key appointments within the province.

- **Provincial Councils (PCs):** These are elected bodies intended to represent the population at the provincial level. Their roles are largely advisory, with additional responsibilities in monitoring, oversight, and mediating local disputes. However, their authority remains limited due to the dominance of the appointed executive.
- **Provincial Development Committees (PDCs):** These bodies are intended to serve coordination and development planning functions by bringing together representatives from line departments, NGOs, and donors. In practice, their influence has been constrained by weak mandates and limited enforcement capacity.

#### b. District Level

The district level mirrors many of the structures found at the provincial level, albeit with more restricted authority:

- **District Offices (DOs):** These represent the presence of some central ministries at the district level but typically possess limited capacity and operational scope.
- **District Governors (DGs):** Also appointed by the President, district governors serve more symbolic and coordination-focused roles. Their administrative and budgetary authority is minimal, which limits their ability to respond effectively to local needs.

#### c. Municipal Level

- **Municipal Administrations:** Municipalities are responsible for urban planning, sanitation, waste management, and other city-level services. Each municipality is headed by a **mayor**, who is appointed by the President. While municipalities have some fiscal authority (e.g., collecting taxes and fees), they remain heavily constrained by central oversight and limited technical capacity.

#### d. Village Level

- **Community Development Councils (CDCs):** These grassroots governance bodies emerged through the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) and currently exist in roughly two-thirds of Afghan villages. CDCs are generally elected, though the mechanisms vary by region. Their primary roles involve overseeing local infrastructure projects, coordinating development activities, and acting as intermediaries between communities and external actors.

### 6. Key Issues and Challenges of Local Government in Afghanistan (2001–2020)

Local governance in Afghanistan continues to face a myriad of structural, institutional, and operational challenges that hinder effective decentralization, service delivery, and citizen participation. The following outlines the major



issues undermining the functionality and legitimacy of local government in the country.

### **6-1. Lack of Human and Material Resources**

One of the most pressing challenges confronting local governments in Afghanistan was the acute shortage of qualified personnel and basic infrastructure. Local administrative units, particularly in rural and remote areas, often operate without adequate facilities, trained staff, or financial resources. Decentralization inherently demands not only the devolution of authority but also sufficient fiscal and administrative capacity to manage expanded responsibilities. In the Afghan context, the chronic resource gap significantly impeded efficient, transparent, and accountable governance.

### **6-2. Increased Vulnerability to Corruption**

Decentralization, while intended to bring governance closer to the people, has also exposed local institutions to new corruption risks. Local elites frequently dominate political and economic decision-making, capturing state functions for personal or factional gain. Local officials, with limited institutional safeguards and oversight, are particularly susceptible to influence from wealthy individuals, interest groups, and informal powerbrokers. The weak financial management capacity at the district and municipal levels further exacerbates the risk of misappropriation of public funds.

Empirical evidence highlights widespread corruption in key local governance areas, including:

- Public procurement
- Revenue collection and financial oversight
- Human resource management
- Land allocation and control

### **6-3. Opportunities for Corruption through Closer Networks**

The proximity of local officials to constituents fosters closer interactions between citizens and public servants. While potentially enhancing responsiveness, this closeness also facilitates the formation of corrupt networks. These informal relationships may circumvent formal processes, enabling favouritism, nepotism, and extortion. In areas where state institutions are weak or absent, these networks often become entrenched, rendering anti-corruption measures ineffective.

### **6-4. Weak Capacity at the District (Woluswali) Level**

The district level remained the most fragile tier of Afghan governance. An estimated 40% of district governors (Woluswals) have not completed elementary education, and many lack office buildings, operating budgets, or

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professional staff. The administrative presence of line ministries at this level is uneven and highly dependent on security and donor support. In many districts, health clinics and schools function independently or report directly to provincial authorities due to the absence of district-level representatives.

Despite their weak formal roles, district governors often exert disproportionate influence through personal networks and informal authority. In some cases, these positions have been 'sold' due to the potential for illicit gain. This dynamic undermines merit-based recruitment efforts and impedes reform.

### 6-5. Absence of District Councils and Institutional Framework

Although the Afghan Constitution (2004) mandated elected district councils, elections have been repeatedly postponed due to logistical, political, and financial constraints. As a result, there is no formal accountability mechanism at the district level. The institutional framework for district governance remains ambiguous, with limited consensus on:

- The number and boundaries of districts
- Functional roles and responsibilities
- Integration into broader provincial and national planning frameworks

There is growing debate about the sustainability and relevance of maintaining a separate district-level bureaucracy, especially given fiscal constraints. While some advocate for district consolidation, others view the district level as essential for aggregating local interests and mediating between village and provincial levels.

### 6-6. Uncertain Future of Community Development Councils (CDCs)

Community Development Councils (CDCs), established under the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), have emerged as effective mechanisms for rural development and participatory planning. However, their future is uncertain due to several unresolved issues:

- **Funding Fragility:** CDCs receive a one-time block grant under the NSP, with limited ongoing funding. Without sustained financial support, many CDCs risk dissolution, and the community trust and social capital they have generated could be lost.
- **Ambiguity of Roles:** While CDCs have proven efficient in delivering public goods such as infrastructure, their role in the provision of private goods, such as microfinance and livelihoods support, remains contested. Conflicts might arise between CDCs and other delivery actors like microfinance institutions, due to overlapping mandates and a lack of a unified policy framework.
- **Institutional Placement:** The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) has overseen CDCs as part of the NSP. However, as CDCs evolve beyond this programmatic origin and potentially become

permanent fixtures in local governance, questions emerge regarding which central body should oversee their coordination, funding, and regulation.

## 7. Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm and build upon the body of literature that highlights the deep structural and functional weaknesses of local governance in Afghanistan. Consistent with earlier analyses by Lister (2007) and Wilder (2015), this research confirms that the decentralization process in Afghanistan has been largely superficial, with limited devolution of power and resources to subnational levels. Despite formal mandates and constitutional provisions for local governance, practical implementation has been hindered by overlapping institutional mandates, unclear legal frameworks, and a lack of sustained political will.

One of the key contributions of this study is the detailed exploration of how the **absence of capacity and accountability mechanisms** at the district level has reinforced corruption and elite capture. Previous studies, such as those by Barakat and Larson (2011) and AREU (2016), acknowledged these vulnerabilities, but the current research further contextualizes them in light of failed reform initiatives, such as the 2006 attempt to introduce merit-based recruitment for district governors. The resistance by entrenched political networks to these reforms underscores a broader governance challenge: **the informal exercise of power often supersedes formal institutional authority**, resulting in administrative inertia and citizen distrust.

Moreover, this study emphasizes that **local governance has suffered from excessive dependence on donor-driven interventions**, especially through programs like the National Solidarity Programme (NSP). While these programs achieved some success in infrastructure and community engagement, their temporary nature and uncertain institutional integration (e.g., with CDCs) has made long-term sustainability elusive. This reflects the critical insights offered by OECD (2020) and SIGAR (2020), which have warned of Afghanistan's over-reliance on aid without building resilient state structures.

In addition, this research draws attention to the **lack of public understanding and engagement with formal governance systems**, a finding that resonates with Rubin's (2006) argument that Afghan citizens have traditionally relied on tribal, ethnic, and religious networks, often viewing the formal state with suspicion. This mistrust has been compounded by persistent corruption (UNAMA, 2021) and perceived foreign interference, thereby creating a governance vacuum that insurgent groups have exploited.

Critically evaluating the research, it is evident that while the use of secondary data provides a comprehensive overview, it also presents limitations.

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The reliance on existing literature, policy reports, and institutional assessments means that **the study may underrepresent more recent informal governance practices** that have evolved, particularly in areas under insurgent control or where alternative dispute resolution systems have filled the governance gap. Furthermore, **regional variations in local governance performance**—for example, differences between relatively stable provinces and insecure districts—were not extensively examined in this study due to data constraints (2001-2020).

Despite these limitations, the study contributes meaningfully by synthesizing a wide range of sources to present an integrated assessment of local governance challenges. It highlights how **the dysfunction at the local level is both a cause and consequence of national instability**, reinforcing the need for a renewed approach to decentralization, one that is context-sensitive, locally owned, and backed by consistent political and financial support.

In sum, this research aligns with the critical scholarship on Afghan governance while offering a more nuanced understanding of the district-level dynamics, particularly the role of informal power brokers, resource scarcity, and stalled reforms. It calls for a shift from fragmented, donor-led projects to **long-term, systemic strategies for empowering local institutions** within a coherent national framework.

## 8. Conclusion

This study aimed to critically assess the institutional, administrative, and political challenges that have hindered the development of effective local governance in Afghanistan during the post-2001 period. The central research question was: What are the key challenges that have prevented the successful establishment and functioning of local government in Afghanistan during the post-2001 period?

The research findings indicate that Afghanistan's local governance structures have faced significant challenges. The dissolution of Community Development Councils (CDCs) and the centralization of power have eroded mechanisms for community participation and oversight, leading to increased risks of corruption and mismanagement. The local governance, characterized by a lack of formal legal frameworks and centralized decision-making, has further marginalized local administrative capacities.

To address these issues, the study suggests a multifaceted approach: reinstating local governance structures like CDCs to enhance community engagement and accountability; shifting from a highly centralized system to a more flexible centralized model to improve responsiveness and service delivery; establishing transparent legal frameworks and strengthening institutions to mitigate corruption and build public trust; and encouraging international support and oversight to promote transparency and inclusivity in local governance.

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In conclusion, the successful establishment and functioning of local government in Afghanistan during (2001-2020) period have been hindered by institutional fragmentation, lack of coordination, unclear legal frameworks, weak accountability mechanisms, widespread corruption, persistent insecurity, and political interference. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms and sustained commitment to building effective, inclusive, and accountable local governance structures.

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