



**Ghalib**  
(International Journal of Law, Political Science and International Relations)

Journal Homepage: [www.ghalibqjournal.com](http://www.ghalibqjournal.com)

ISSN

P: 2788-4155

E: 2788-6441

OPEN ACCESS



Publisher: [Ghalib University-Herat](http://Ghalib University-Herat)

<https://doi.org/10.58342/ghalibqj.V.15.1.1.8>

## A Critical Structural-Analysis of Local Governments in Afghanistan from (2001-2020)

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### Article Info ABSTRACT

**Article type:**  
Research Article

PP: 197-214

**Received:**  
11/01/2026

**Accepted:**  
30/04/2026

**Published:**  
09/05/2026

**Background and Objective:** Effective local governance is considered a fundamental component of public service delivery, accountability, and state legitimacy, particularly in post-conflict and fragile societies such as Afghanistan. Despite extensive international assistance and domestic reform initiatives between 2001 and 2020, local government institutions in Afghanistan remained weak and ineffective. This study aims to critically examine the structural, institutional, and operational challenges that hindered the development of effective local governance during this period and to identify the main factors that obstructed decentralization and subnational governance reforms.

**Method:** This study employs a qualitative and descriptive research approach. Data were collected entirely through secondary sources, including academic articles, policy documents, governmental reports, and institutional evaluations related to local governance in Afghanistan. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and thematic analysis methods. The scope of the study is limited to the 2001–2020 period and focuses on provincial, district, and community levels of governance.

**Result:** The findings indicate that multiple interconnected factors undermined the effectiveness of local governance in Afghanistan. Institutional fragmentation, overlapping administrative mandates, political interference, weak administrative and professional capacity, corruption, and inconsistent donor policies significantly weakened decentralization efforts. Furthermore, the absence of coherent legal frameworks and insufficient coordination between central and local institutions contributed to ineffective governance structures and limited citizen participation.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that the failure of local governance reforms in Afghanistan was rooted in structural and institutional weaknesses as well as the absence of sustained political commitment to decentralization. Without comprehensive legal reforms, strengthened institutional capacity, and long-term governance strategies, local government institutions are unlikely to

effectively respond to citizen needs or contribute to sustainable stability and development.

**Keywords:** Administrative Capacity, Afghanistan, Corruption, Decentralization, Governance, Institutional Reform, Local Government.

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Cite this article: Hossieni, Abdullah; Jawad, Hafizullah. Modabber, Mohammad Firooz. (2026). A Critical Structural-Analysis of Local Governments in Afghanistan from (2001-2020). *Ghalib Journal*. 15(1). 197-214. <https://doi.org/10.58342/ghalibqj.V.15.I.1.8>

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**غالب**

(مجله بین المللی مطالعات حقوقی، سیاسی و روابط بین الملل)

صفحه اصلی مجله: [www.ghalibjournal.com](http://www.ghalibjournal.com)

ISSN  
P: 2788-4155  
E: 2788-6441

OPEN ACCESS



<https://doi.org/10.58342/ghalibqj.V.15.I.1.8>

ناشر: پوهنتون / دانش گاه غالب - هرات

## تحلیل انتقادی - ساختاری حکومت‌های محلی در افغانستان؛ بازه زمانی ۲۰۰۱-۲۰۲۰ م

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### چکیده

اطلاعات مقاله

**زمینه و هدف:** حکومت‌داری محلی به عنوان یکی از مؤلفه‌های اساسی ارائه خدمات عمومی، پاسخ‌گویی، و تقویت مشروعیت دولت، به‌ویژه در جوامع شکننده و پسمانزعه‌یی مانند افغانستان، اهمیت بنیادین دارد. با وجود کمک‌های گسترده بین‌المللی و برنامه‌های اصلاحی داخلی در فاصله سال‌های ۲۰۰۱ تا ۲۰۲۰، نهادهای حکومت محلی در افغانستان هم‌چنان ضعیف و ناکارآمد باقی ماندند. هدف این پژوهش، بررسی انتقادی چالش‌های ساختاری، نهادی و اجرایی فراروی توسعه حکومت‌داری محلی مؤثر در این دوره و شناسایی عوامل اصلی بازدارنده تمرکززدایی و اصلاحات حکومت‌داری محلی بوده است.

نوع مقاله:

علمی - پژوهشی

صص: ۱۹۷-۲۱۴

دریافت:

۱۴۰۴ / ۱۰ / ۲۳

پذیرش:

۱۴۰۵ / ۰۲ / ۱۰

نشر:

۱۴۰۵ / ۰۲ / ۱۹

**روش:** این پژوهش با رویکرد کیفی و روش توصیفی انجام شده است. داده‌ها به صورت کامل از منابع ثانویه، شامل مقالات علمی، اسناد سیاست‌گذاری، گزارش‌های دولتی و ارزیابی‌های نهادی مرتبط با حکومت‌داری محلی در افغانستان، گردآوری شده‌اند. داده‌های گردآوری شده با استفاده از روش تحلیل توصیفی و تحلیل مضمون بررسی گردیده‌اند. قلمرو زمانی پژوهش محدود به سال‌های ۲۰۰۱ تا ۲۰۲۰ بوده و تمرکز آن بر سطوح ولایتی، ولسوالی و حکومت‌داری است.

**یافته‌ها:** یافته‌های پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که مجموعه‌یی از عوامل به هم پیوسته، کارآمدی حکومت‌داری محلی در افغانستان را تضعیف کرده‌اند. پراکنده‌گی نهادی، تداخل صلاحیت‌های اداری، مداخلات سیاسی، ضعف ظرفیت اداری و تخصصی، فساد اداری، و ناهماهنگی در سیاست‌های کمک‌کننده‌گان بین‌المللی، به‌گونه‌یی جدی تلاش‌های تمرکززدایی را ناکام ساخته‌اند. افزون بر آن، نبود چارچوب‌های حقوقی منسجم و هماهنگی ناکافی میان نهادهای مرکزی و محلی، سبب ناکارآمدی ساختارهای حکومت‌داری و محدودشدن مشارکت شهروندان

گردیده است.

**نتیجه گیری:** پژوهش حاضر نتیجه می‌گیرد که ناکامی اصلاحات حکومت‌داری محلی در افغانستان، ریشه در ضعف‌های ساختاری و نهادی، و نیز نبود تعهد سیاسی پایدار نسبت به تمرکززدایی داشته است. بدون اصلاحات همه‌جانبه حقوقی، تقویت ظرفیت‌های نهادی، و تدوین راهبردهای درازمدت حکومت‌داری، نهادهای حکومت محلی نخواهند توانست به‌گونه‌ی مؤثر به نیازهای شهروندان پاسخ دهند یا در تأمین ثبات و توسعه پایدار نقش ایفا کنند.

**کلیدواژه‌گان:** افغانستان، اصلاحات نهادی، تمرکززدایی، حکومت محلی، حکومت‌داری، فساد اداری، ظرفیت اداری.

ارجاع به این مقاله: حسینی، عبدالله؛ جواد، حفیظ‌الله؛ مدبر، محمدفیروز. (۱۴۰۵). تحلیل انتقادی - ساختاری حکومت‌های محلی در افغانستان؛ بازه زمانی ۲۰۰۱-۲۰۲۰ م. فصل‌نامه علمی - پژوهشی غالب، ۱۵(۱)، ۱۹۷-۲۱۴. <https://doi.org/10.58342/ghalibqj.V.15.I.1.8>

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, efforts to build effective and legitimate governance structures in Afghanistan have fallen short, particularly at the local level. Since 2001, both the Afghan government and international partners have prioritized the development of local governance as a cornerstone of state-building and democratization. However, local government institutions have remained structurally weak, under-resourced, and frequently symbolic in function, lacking the authority, capacity, and legitimacy required to engage with citizens or deliver basic services. This persistent dysfunction has widened the gap between the central government and local populations, eroding public trust and contributing to long-term instability. The core problem addressed in this study is the enduring structural and functional failure of local governance in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2020. This issue implicitly raises a critical question: What are the key challenges that have hindered the development of effective local governance in Afghanistan during the 2001-2020 period?

The urgency and significance of this research are grounded in the recognition that sustainable governance cannot be achieved through centralization alone. Local governments are the primary interface between the state and its citizens; they play a pivotal role in development planning, conflict resolution, and service delivery. The failure to establish capable and accountable local institutions has had direct consequences on the state's ability to respond to local needs, enforce rule of law, and maintain legitimacy—particularly in fragile and insecure regions. This study is intended to inform policymakers, international donors, and governance practitioners seeking to design more effective subnational governance reforms in post-conflict or transitional contexts, especially in Afghanistan.

A growing body of research has analysed aspects of Afghanistan's local governance since 2001. Recent studies by the OECD (2020) and the Special

Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR, 2020) have documented how donor-driven models often led to short-term results without building sustainable local institutions. UNAMA (2021) has emphasized the corrosive effect of corruption and lack of transparency in subnational governance. Earlier works by Barakat and Larson (2011), and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU, 2016) examined the legal-institutional contradictions and the persistent absence of district-level accountability structures. Lister (2007) and Rubin (2006) have also explored the limitations of formal governance in a context dominated by informal and traditional power networks. However, despite the depth of these analyses, comprehensive studies that integrate administrative, political, and operational dimensions of local governance across the full 2001–2020 period remain scarce. This research seeks to fill that gap by offering a holistic structural critique of local government in Afghanistan during this period.

The main objective of this study is to critically assess the institutional, political, and administrative challenges that have obstructed the development and functionality of local governance structures in Afghanistan during 2001–2020 period. Specifically, the research aims to identify systemic weaknesses that have impeded decentralization, undermined service delivery, and limited citizen participation, despite extensive reform efforts and international support. This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design, relying exclusively on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed academic literature, official government reports, donor and NGO evaluations, and policy documents. The scope of the study is limited to the period between 2001 and 2020, covering local governance structures at the provincial, district, and community levels.

The research findings suggest that several interrelated factors—including centralized authority, overlapping institutional mandates, weak administrative capacity, absence of district councils, and inconsistent donor engagement—have collectively obstructed meaningful local governance reform. The analysis highlights how these structural impediments have perpetuated elite capture, weakened public service delivery, and undermined citizen trust in government institutions. This study contributes to the broader discourse on state-building by offering context-specific insights into the structural weaknesses of subnational governance in Afghanistan. By diagnosing the core challenges faced by local governments, the research aims to support the development of more inclusive, accountable, and contextually grounded governance models in Afghanistan and other fragile states.

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## **2. Theoretical Framework: Understanding Local Governance and Decentralization**

### **2.1 Conceptualizing Decentralization: Definitions and Models**

Decentralization refers to the transfer of authority and responsibility from central to subnational levels of government. It encompasses various forms, including political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization. (Faguet & Pal, 2023) highlight that effective decentralization can enhance democratic governance and service delivery when tailored to local contexts. However, challenges such as weak local capacities and potential elite capture can hinder its success (Suri, 2017).

### **2.2 Local Governance in Fragile States: Theoretical Perspectives**

In fragile states, local governance structures often operate under constraints such as limited resources, political instability, and weak institutions. (Suri, 2017) emphasizes that while decentralization can empower communities and rebuild trust, it may also entrench rent-seeking behaviours if not carefully implemented. Additionally, the interplay between formal and informal institutions becomes crucial in such contexts, as informal norms can either support or undermine formal governance structures (Restrepo-Mieth, 2023).

### **2.3 Hybrid Governance: The Interplay of Formal and Informal Institutions**

Hybrid governance involves the coexistence and interaction of formal (state-sanctioned) and informal (community-based or traditional) institutions. (Restrepo-Mieth, 2023) introduces the concept of "institutional compounding," where formal and informal institutions not only coexist but also reinforce each other, leading to more effective governance outcomes. In the context of water governance in Ethiopia's Central Rift Valley, the collaboration between formal laws and informal community norms has been shown to enhance resource management and compliance (Jibat et al., 2024).

## **3. Assessing the Structural Dimensions of Decentralization in Afghanistan (2001–2020)**

The 2001 Bonn Agreement laid the groundwork for reconstructing a centralized Afghan state with democratic aspirations, aiming for a phased decentralization process. The strategy envisioned establishing a robust central government, followed by the gradual devolution of powers to local levels. However, the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan enshrined a highly centralized framework in which executive power—vested in the presidency—retained predominant authority over subnational governance (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2004). Although the 2004 Constitution formally promotes the principle of local governance through Provincial and District Councils (Articles 138 and 140), their authority remained consultative and symbolic. The language used—particularly the emphasis on “advice”—reflects the limited devolution of

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decision-making power. Moreover, District Councils, envisioned as the closest governance body to citizens, have never been elected, obstructing grassroots participation and localized decision-making (Nixon & Ponzio, 2011).

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) advocated a "gradualist" approach to decentralization in early post-Islamic Emirates Afghanistan, citing concerns over administrative capacity and political fragility. In 2004, then-UN Special Representative Jean Arnault recommended that Provincial Councils play an advisory role before assuming any executive functions (UNDP, 2004). Similarly, in 2006, the International Crisis Group (ICG) urged the Afghan National Assembly to clarify administrative boundaries, legislate local elections, and establish a commission on subnational governance to promote transparency and devolve resources and responsibilities (ICG, 2006). Nevertheless, *de facto* decentralization sometimes occurred outside the formal state apparatus. A salient case occurred in Musa Qala, Helmand Province in 2006, where ISAF Commander General David Richards negotiated with tribal elders to assume control of local governance in exchange for NATO troop withdrawals. While violence temporarily declined, this arrangement sidestepped state institutions, undermining long-term goals of democratic state-building and eroding public trust in formal governance channels (Giustozzi, 2012; Jackson, 2014). The Afghan decentralization experience thus reflects a dual paradox: while constitutional provisions and international rhetoric advocate for devolution, practical governance remained centralized, fragmented, or externally imposed. The lack of elected district bodies, limited fiscal autonomy, and overlapping administrative structures inhibited the realization of meaningful decentralization. Additionally, externally driven models of local governance often prioritized short-term security gains over sustainable institutional development.

#### **4. Structural Status of Local Government in (2001-2020) Afghanistan**

The post-2001 political landscape in Afghanistan introduced a new constitutional order, international engagement, and large-scale aid interventions aimed at state-building. Despite these efforts, the structure and functionality of local governments remained weak, fragmented, and heavily centralized. The Bonn Agreement of 2001 and the 2004 Constitution envisioned a democratic Afghanistan, but in practice, power remained highly concentrated in Kabul (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2004; Rubin, 2015). The failure to establish robust, autonomous local governance institutions became a major impediment to responsive governance and sustainable development. Though Afghanistan saw considerable investments in infrastructure—such as roads, schools, healthcare, and communications—the institutional backbone of subnational governance remained underdeveloped (World Bank, 2012). The economy remained fragile and heavily reliant on foreign military spending and

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international aid. In 2011, Afghanistan ranked 155th out of 187 on the Human Development Index, reflecting deep structural challenges in health, education, and economic opportunity (UNDP, 2011). The centralized governance model received disproportionate attention from donors and policymakers, resulting in strong national institutions and weak provincial and district-level governance structures. While the President appointed provincial governors and other key local officials, local government bodies like Provincial and District Councils had minimal authority, budgets, or capacity for service delivery (Lister & Nixon, 2006). The persistent failure to hold district council elections further deepened the democratic deficit at the grassroots level (Nijay, 2014).

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and the World Bank raised early concerns over this imbalance. In a joint 2004 study, they identified the lack of clear legal mandates, fiscal authority, and trained personnel as key obstacles to effective local governance (World Bank & AREU, 2004). Sarah Lister's subsequent analyses underlined the limited progress in Public Administration Reform (PAR), noting that decentralization remained rhetorical rather than functional (Lister, 2005; Lister & Nixon, 2006). A structural turning point came with the establishment of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) in 2007, mandated to oversee subnational administration. The 2010 Subnational Governance Policy (SNGP) clarified the roles of various tiers of local government and initiated the drafting of laws governing local councils (Nixon, 2012). However, these reforms were often inconsistently implemented, and lacked effective accountability mechanisms. Local institutions continued to operate with limited autonomy and insufficient resources, and many positions were filled through patronage rather than merit (Giustozzi, 2012; Jackson, 2014). Compounding these issues, the 2014 withdrawal of NATO combat troops and the subsequent reduction in foreign aid significantly undermined local governance structures. As donor coordination weakened and international political attention shifted, the Afghan government struggled to maintain even basic administrative functions in many areas (Rubin, 2015). Local institutions, such as Provincial Councils, remained largely advisory, and District Councils never became operational, depriving citizens of a vital link to government services and accountability. In effect, the structural architecture of local government in Afghanistan post-2001 was defined by over-centralization, institutional ambiguity, and inadequate legal and fiscal frameworks. These conditions impeded service delivery, fostered corruption, and diminished public trust in state institutions, without meaningful devolution of authority, sustainable governance and local legitimacy remained elusive.

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## **5. Territorial and Institutional Structure of Local Government in Afghanistan (2001–2020)**

Afghanistan's territorial-administrative structure during the post-2001 period reflects a combination of historical fragmentation, evolving political calculations, and centralized state-building efforts. As of 2020, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was officially divided into 34 provinces, with Daikundi and Panjshir added by presidential decree in 2004 under President Hamid Karzai. These new provinces were created partly for administrative functionality but also as political gestures ahead of the presidential elections (Barfield, 2010; SIGAR, 2018). Beneath the provincial level, the delineation of districts (*wuluswali*) has remained inconsistent and contested. Key government agencies—including the Ministry of Interior (MoI), Central Statistics Organization (CSO), and the Afghanistan Geodesy and Cartography Head Office (AGCHO)—have provided differing figures regarding the total number of districts. As of 2017, the CSO recognized 364 rural districts, along with 34 urban centres that serve as provincial capitals (CSO, 2017). However, due to the lack of harmonized cartographic and administrative standards, these numbers vary across ministries, undermining reliable governance and development planning (World Bank, 2018). Urban centres are further subdivided into urban districts (*Nahias*), yet their classification also lacks standardization across national institutions. Municipalities (*Shārwālī*), which exist at the provincial, district, and city levels, face similar ambiguity. The generally accepted number is approximately 217 municipalities, each governing areas with populations exceeding 5,000 people (UN-Habitat, 2015). These entities are tasked with providing essential services such as waste management, water supply, and local infrastructure. However, their capacity is constrained by centralized control, limited fiscal autonomy, and outdated legal frameworks (IDLG, 2018; OECD, 2020).

Beyond formal administrative boundaries, Afghanistan's rural terrain includes approximately 34,000 villages, as estimated by the Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016–17. This rural sprawl is critical for understanding the local governance ecosystem, especially since village-level administration remains largely informal and governed by customary practices, community councils (*Shuras*), and traditional leadership structures (World Bank, 2018). These traditional mechanisms often fill the vacuum left by weak or absent state institutions. The fragmented territorial configuration and overlapping institutional mandates present serious structural obstacles to the decentralization of governance. Discrepancies in administrative boundaries hinder the establishment of district councils and complicate the implementation of policies related to security, development, and elections (Lister & Nixon, 2006). Furthermore, institutional rivalries among Afghan ministries—exacerbated by

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political appointments and lack of coordination—have blocked efforts to establish a unified and functional administrative database (AREU, 2011).

These structural inconsistencies also have implications for democratic governance. The inability to define and stabilize district boundaries has made it virtually impossible to conduct district council elections, a constitutional requirement that remains unfulfilled since 2004 (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2004). As a result, grassroots governance has lacked legitimacy, representation, and functional capacity, further widening the gap between state authority and local populations, particularly in rural areas (Jackson, 2014). In sum, the territorial-administrative structure of local government in Afghanistan during 2001–2020 was characterized by fragmentation, institutional overlap, and political interference. This lack of coherence not only weakened service delivery and planning but also undermined national efforts toward decentralization, inclusivity, and long-term state-building.

## **6. Institutional Structure of Governance and Administration in Afghanistan (2001–2020)**

The governance architecture of post-2001 Afghanistan was designed as a multi-tiered administrative framework, comprising four principal levels: provincial, district, municipal, and village. While each tier had a formally defined mandate, the reality was often marked by overlapping responsibilities, limited capacity, and dominance by the central government. These structural issues hindered the emergence of a coherent and responsive system of local governance (Lister & Nixon, 2006; World Bank, 2012).

### **a. Provincial Level**

The provincial level represented the highest subnational administrative unit and included several critical components:

- **Provincial Line Departments (PLDs):** Functioning as the operational arms of central ministries, these departments were responsible for service delivery in key sectors such as education, health, agriculture, and public works. Despite operating locally, PLDs were directly accountable to their parent ministries in Kabul rather than to local authorities, creating fragmentation in decision-making and weakening local ownership (World Bank, 2007; AREU, 2014).
  - **Provincial Governors (PGs):** Appointed by the President, governors held extensive executive authority. Their responsibilities included managing provincial budgets, approving procurement, overseeing security, and influencing personnel decisions. The top-down appointment mechanism limited democratic accountability and entrenched patronage networks (Giustozzi, 2017).
  - **Provincial Councils (PCs):** Introduced under Article 139 of the 2004 Constitution, these elected bodies were envisioned as public representatives with consultative and oversight roles. However, their legal authority remained minimal, often overshadowed by governors and central line ministries. PCs
-

lacked budgetary control and administrative leverage, limiting their impact on local governance (Afghanistan Constitution, 2004; Lister, 2007).

- **Provincial Development Committees (PDCs):** These were intended as planning and coordination forums, bringing together governors, line departments, NGOs, and donor agencies. In practice, PDCs struggled due to ambiguous mandates and the absence of enforceable decision-making power (UNDP, 2017).

#### **b. District Level**

Districts formed the next tier and reflected a similar institutional composition, albeit with even more constrained authority:

- **District Offices (DOs):** These entities were often under-resourced and lacked sufficient personnel or operational budgets. Their dependence on provincial administrations and Kabul-based ministries limited their effectiveness in service delivery (World Bank, 2007).
- **District Governors (DGs):** Appointed by the President, DGs were expected to coordinate development and governance at the local level. However, their role was largely symbolic, given their negligible control over resources or administrative decisions (AREU, 2008). The absence of elected district councils, as mandated by Article 140 of the Constitution, further eroded district-level accountability and responsiveness (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2004).

#### **c. Municipal Level**

Afghanistan's municipalities were governed under a separate legal framework and were primarily responsible for urban governance:

- **Municipal Administrations:** Municipalities handled services such as sanitation, infrastructure maintenance, and local market regulation. Each was led by a mayor appointed by the President, creating a democratic deficit in urban governance. Although municipalities had limited revenue-raising powers (e.g., taxes and service fees), they remained subject to tight financial oversight from the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Urban Development (UN-Habitat, 2015; OECD, 2020).
- Despite having legal recognition under the Municipal Law, most municipalities lacked strategic planning capacity, modern data systems, and skilled personnel. Their dependence on central transfers further diluted autonomy (IDLG, 2018).

#### **d. Village Level**

At the grassroots level, Community Development Councils (CDCs) emerged as the most functional and participatory element of local governance:

- **CDCs:** Introduced through the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) in 2003, CDCs were elected village-level bodies tasked with identifying and implementing community-driven development projects. By 2017, CDCs existed in over 60% of Afghan villages and were considered one of the most
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legitimate and trusted forms of local governance (Beath, Christia, & Enikolopov, 2017; World Bank, 2018).

- While the CDCs provided a bottom-up governance mechanism, their legal standing remained ambiguous. Efforts to integrate them into the Village Council framework envisioned under the Constitution were slow and politically fraught. Moreover, CDCs often operated parallel to traditional tribal structures, sometimes resulting in friction or duplication (Pain & Sturge, 2015).

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

Local governance in Afghanistan during the post-2001 period faced an array of entrenched structural, institutional, and operational challenges. These impediments severely undermined the objectives of decentralization, participatory governance, and efficient service delivery. This section critically analyses the major issues that constrained the functionality, accountability, and legitimacy of local government institutions.

### **7.1. Lack of Human and Material Resources**

One of the most persistent and debilitating challenges was the acute shortage of human capital and physical infrastructure across subnational units. Local administrative offices—particularly in rural and conflict-affected districts—lacked skilled personnel, office facilities, and operational budgets (World Bank, 2007; AREU, 2008). For instance, many district governors operated without functioning offices or reliable communications, while technical staff in municipal and provincial departments often lacked formal training or education. The decentralization envisioned under the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) implicitly assumed a capable subnational apparatus. However, without sufficient fiscal transfers, administrative training, or institutional autonomy, local governments remained dependent on Kabul-based ministries, undermining both effectiveness and citizen trust (Lister & Nixon, 2006).

### **7.2. Increased Vulnerability to Corruption**

While decentralization is often associated with improved governance, in Afghanistan it inadvertently multiplied opportunities for corruption. Local elites and powerbrokers frequently captured state resources and manipulated appointments for personal gain (Transparency International, 2013). The absence of institutional oversight mechanisms at the subnational level—combined with weak rule of law and politicized recruitment—fostered an environment conducive to misuse of public funds. Empirical studies and audit reports have identified endemic corruption across key governance functions:

- Public procurement and contracting;
  - Tax and fee collection;
  - Personnel appointments and promotions;
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- Land registration and allocation (Integrity Watch Afghanistan, 2020; SIGAR, 2020).

Moreover, municipal administrations often lacked transparent budgeting procedures, allowing mayors and department heads to divert revenues or exchange licenses and services for bribes (UN-Habitat, 2015).

### **7.3. Closer Proximity and Informal Corrupt Networks**

The geographic and social proximity of local officials to constituents—while potentially enhancing responsiveness—also facilitated informal patronage and rent-seeking networks. In many rural areas, where formal institutions were either weak or absent, governance was mediated through informal actors such as tribal elders, militia leaders, and ethnic leaders (Pain & Sturge, 2015). These localized networks often bypassed legal procedures, undermining accountability and formal dispute resolution mechanisms. Nepotism, favouritism, and extortion became common, especially in the allocation of public services or employment opportunities. The blurred boundaries between state and non-state actors further complicated efforts to enforce anti-corruption initiatives (Giustozzi, 2017).

### **7.4. Weak Capacity at the District (Woluswali) Level**

District-level governance remained the most structurally fragile tier. According to assessments by the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), many district governors (Woluswals) had limited educational backgrounds—some had not completed primary education—and lacked staff, vehicles, or consistent funding. The absence of sectoral representation at the district level—especially from key ministries such as health and education—meant that public services were either disconnected from local authority or managed directly from provincial centres (AREU, 2003). Despite their limited formal mandates, district governors frequently exercised informal authority through tribal ties or patronage networks. In some cases, appointments were allegedly “purchased”, turning the office into a platform for rent extraction rather than public service (World Bank, 2012). These dynamics deeply undermined meritocracy and public confidence in state institutions.

### **7.5. Absence of District Councils and Institutional Ambiguity**

Article 140 of the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan mandated the establishment of elected district councils. However, no elections were ever held, primarily due to security concerns, financial constraints, and disputes over the number and boundaries of districts (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2004; Lister, 2007). As a result, district-level governance operated without legislative oversight, creating a vacuum of horizontal accountability. The absence of an institutional framework left key questions unresolved: How should districts interface with provincial and village institutions? What are their developmental and fiscal

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mandates? Who represents citizens' voices at the district level? The lack of consensus about the role of districts in Afghanistan's broader administrative hierarchy has triggered debate. Some argue for district consolidation or elimination, citing inefficiency and redundancy, while others insist on their necessity as intermediary governance units (OECD, 2020).

### **7.6. Uncertain Future of Community Development Councils (CDCs)**

Among the few successful innovations in local governance was the establishment of Community Development Councils (CDCs) under the National Solidarity Programme (NSP). By 2020, thousands of CDCs were operational, facilitating rural infrastructure projects and participatory planning. However, their institutional future remains uncertain (Beath, Christia, & Enikolopov, 2015; Alemi, 2017).

Several unresolved issues cast doubt on their sustainability:

- **Funding Fragility:** NSP provided CDCs with a one-time block grant. Without institutionalized financing channels, many CDCs face collapse, threatening the loss of hard-won community trust and social capital (World Bank, 2018).
- **Ambiguity of Mandates:** Although CDCs are effective in delivering public goods (e.g., roads, water supply), their involvement in private sector activities—such as microfinance—has raised legal and operational conflicts with formal service providers (Pain & Sturge, 2015).
- **Institutional Placement:** While CDCs originated under the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), their expanding role raises questions about oversight, coordination, and integration into the national governance architecture. Proposals to formalize CDCs under a “Unified Local Governance Policy” have been discussed but not implemented (IDLG, 2018).

## **8. Discussion**

The findings of this study reaffirm the conclusions of prior scholarship that local governance in Afghanistan has remained structurally weak, institutionally fragmented, and functionally ineffective. While decentralization was formally endorsed in constitutional and strategic documents, its practical implementation has remained largely superficial, characterized by nominal devolution without genuine administrative, fiscal, or political empowerment at the subnational level (Lister, 2007; Wilder, 2015). Consistent with the critical insights of (Barakat and Larson, 2013). This study highlights that capacity deficits and weak accountability mechanisms at the district level have entrenched corruption and elite capture. The attempt to introduce merit-based recruitment for district governors in 2006—an initiative intended to professionalize local administration—ultimately failed due to resistance from entrenched patronage networks. These findings underscore the argument that informal political power often overrides formal institutional arrangements, producing a state of administrative inertia and widespread public distrust (Nijat, A., Gosztonyi, K., Feda, B., & Koehler, J, 2017).

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A key contribution of this research lies in its granular analysis of district-level dysfunction, which has received less attention in previous studies. While the formal architecture of local governance appears comprehensive, in practice, it has been undercut by unclear legal mandates, overlapping competencies, and the absence of elected district councils, as stipulated in Article 140 of the 2004 Constitution (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2004). These gaps have delegitimized local authority and disconnected governance from citizens' daily experiences. Moreover, this study critiques Afghanistan's overreliance on donor-driven programs, especially the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), which although successful in mobilizing community participation through Community Development Councils (CDCs), failed to institutionalize sustainable governance mechanisms. The ad hoc and project-based nature of such interventions—typically driven by donor timelines and interests—meant that institutional ownership and long-term policy coherence were never fully achieved (OECD, 2020; SIGAR, 2020). This critique aligns with growing academic and policy literature warning against technocratic governance models that operate in isolation from local political realities. However, a critical self-assessment of this research reveals certain limitations. The study's reliance on secondary data sources—including government policy reports, academic publications, and institutional assessments—limits its ability to fully capture the informal and adaptive governance arrangements that emerged in response to state failure, particularly in conflict-affected districts. Additionally, the study does not sufficiently address regional variation in governance performance. For instance, relatively stable provinces such as Bamiyan or Balkh demonstrated better coordination and citizen trust than volatile districts in Helmand or Kunduz—an important nuance constrained by data availability (2001–2020).

Despite these limitations, the research contributes a systematic and integrative account of local governance failures in Afghanistan, situating them within broader debates on state fragility, hybrid governance, and post-conflict institutional design. The analysis demonstrates how dysfunction at the local level is both a cause and consequence of national instability—a vicious cycle that undermines service delivery, citizen trust, and long-term development. In conclusion, this study calls for a recalibration of decentralization efforts in Afghanistan, moving beyond fragmented, donor-led projects toward systemic, long-term strategies that empower local institutions through:

- Clear legal and policy frameworks;
- Equitable resource allocation;
- Context-sensitive reforms;
- Genuine political support.

Such a shift requires a coherent national framework that recognizes the complex realities of local governance, including the role of informal actors, the diversity of regional conditions, and the need for locally owned solutions.

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Without addressing these foundational issues, future decentralization efforts are likely to reproduce the same patterns of failure that characterized the 2001–2020 period.

## **9. Conclusion**

This study set out to critically examine the structural, institutional, and political barriers that have hindered the establishment and effective functioning of local governments in Afghanistan during the (2001-2020) period. Guided by the central research question—What are the key challenges that have prevented the successful development of local governance in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2020? the study provides a comprehensive analysis of the country’s local governance landscape over two decades of state-building. The findings reveal that Afghanistan’s local governance structures were persistently undermined by a combination of institutional fragmentation, centralization of authority, and ambiguities in legal and administrative frameworks. The centralization of power within the executive branch severely constrained local autonomy, while the repeated postponement of district council elections, coupled with the dissolution or neglect of Community Development Councils (CDCs), significantly weakened mechanisms for citizen participation, accountability, and oversight.

Furthermore, the study shows that local governance actors often operated without the necessary financial, human, and material resources, leaving many subnational units unable to perform basic administrative and service delivery functions. Widespread corruption, driven by weak institutional safeguards, political interference, and elite capture, further eroded public trust. Insecurity and the parallel authority of informal actors, including insurgent groups and traditional networks, compounded these challenges and fostered a legitimacy crisis at the local level. To address these systemic challenges, the study proposes a multi-pronged reform agenda, which includes:

- **Revitalizing grassroots governance institutions**, such as CDCs, to strengthen community engagement, local accountability, and bottom-up planning;
- **Transitioning from a rigidly centralized model to a flexible and asymmetrical centralization**, allowing greater responsiveness to local needs without fragmenting state authority;
- **Clarifying and codifying the legal framework** governing local institutions to reduce administrative ambiguity and overlap;
- **Strengthening institutional capacity at the district and municipal levels**, particularly through merit-based recruitment, financial transparency, and digital governance tools;
- **Ensuring sustained international engagement and oversight**, not merely through aid delivery, but through technical assistance, policy coherence, and long-term institution-building support.

In conclusion, this study finds that the failure to establish effective local government in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2020 was not solely a product of resource scarcity or conflict, but rather a reflection of deeper structural

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deficiencies and policy inconsistencies. Without a clear, context-sensitive, and inclusive strategy for local governance reform, efforts to decentralize power or build state legitimacy are likely to remain fragmented and ineffective. Moving forward, any attempt to rebuild local government must address these foundational issues, with an emphasis on institutional resilience, citizen participation, and political commitment to decentralization as a long-term state-building strategy.

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