The experimented society: interventions, social science, and the failure of post-conflict reconstruction in Afghanistan

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the shortcomings of post-conflict reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, arguing that an overemphasis on measurable results and causal inference led to overly narrow, community-driven development interventions that failed to appreciate the complex political realities of the country. While these interventions espoused community control, they were in fact the result of a top-down approach reminiscent of earlier state-building efforts, neglected the importance of customary authority structures, and treated Afghanistan as a blank slate for experimentation. Such community-based programmes also lead to a myopic focus on quantifiable metrics at the expense of political considerations, reflecting a broader methodological bias in development studies exemplified by the popularity of randomized controlled trials. Drawing on extensive field observations, the paper contends that such programmes worked against the grain of Afghan society and paradoxically undermined the legitimacy and effectiveness of local governance institutions. The paper concludes by advocating a more holistic, adaptive, and politically informed approach to grassroots development in conflict-affected regions—one that empowers authentic local ownership, aligns with endogenous social and political structures, and grapples with the messy realities of fostering legitimate governance in fragile contexts. The hard-earned lessons from Afghanistan's recent past should prompt a fundamental rethinking of what constitutes effective development assistance in post-conflict environments.

Key words: post-conflict reconstruction, local governance, community-driven development, randomized controlled trials, Afghanistan, politics of development

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1   Introduction

The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan fell from power on 15 August 2021, when President Ashraf Ghani hopped on a helicopter in the middle of the day and flew away to neighbouring Uzbekistan, without telling even some of his closest aides or staff. Hours later, the Taliban, who had had fought a 20-year insurgency against this government, waltzed into the presidential palace and took over. Not a shot was fired.

This was not a failure of the Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF), as some military experts and strategic thinkers have suggested. Rather, politics undid the Republic. Public opinion in Afghanistan showed how the Afghan Army, which was leading the charge against the Taliban, was among the most trusted public institutions in the country (The Asia Foundation 2018, 2020). While the vast majority of the analysis on Afghanistan in Western media focused on the failure of the security forces to defend the capital and supply chain challenges, the collapse of the army was a consequence—not a cause—of political failures (Murtazashvili 2022).

The fundamental problem was that the Afghan government lost legitimacy in the eyes of its people (Bizhan 2022). The ANSF stopped fighting because soldiers no longer believed in their leaders. After decades of fighting hard—and losing tens of thousands of brothers-in-arms—they simply gave up. They saw a confused and isolated regime in Kabul that seemed more interested in preserving its control vis-à-vis rivals within the government than it was in fighting the insurgency (Murtazashvili 2021b).

In the wake of the Republic's calamitous fall to the Taliban in 2021, the world witnessed a flurry of academic and policy discussions regarding the effectiveness of post-conflict reconstruction efforts, particularly in Afghanistan. These debates also revealed a significant paradox in the literature on development. On the one hand was a vast body of literature that lauded reconstruction efforts and found many local-level interventions to be very successful and even sustainable. On the other hand were claims that the billions of dollars spent on these micro-level interventions did not yield a legitimate or sustainable government.

This paper critically explores this paradox. It argues that academic research focused on the intervention studied the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the intervention but failed to understand the broader political context in which these projects operated. Rather than support efforts to build the state, many of these projects undermined it. This is particularly the case for most of the local-level interventions that sought to strengthen communities and local-level development.

These conclusions are based on extensive field observations conducted in Afghanistan during the two decades of the US intervention to assess perceptions of aid as individuals and communities were coming to terms with the scope and scale of the international interventions in their country. The cumulative lesson from this evidence is that to come to terms with the outcomes and challenges of post-conflict reconstruction in Afghanistan, it is imperative to see the effectiveness of aid as a political project. What is necessary to improve prospects for post-conflict reconstruction is to more deeply integrate political considerations into grassroots development. A more nuanced and effective course for reconstruction, not only in Afghanistan but also in conflict-affected regions worldwide, can be made possible by shedding light on the overlooked complexities of local governance and politics.

For more than a decade, development practitioners have discussed the centrality of Political Economy Analysis and the importance of having a political lens on development (Denney 2016; Fritz et al. 2014). Yet so many interventions in Afghanistan failed to account for politics.

This paper joins an emergent literature that acknowledges the importance of a local lens—but also one that is politically attuned and astute—to approach the challenge of promoting development. We have witnessed a concerted call for micro-level analysis of violent conflict (Justino et al. 2013). As Justino (2018) explains, the idea is that international interventions should empower local governance and local opportunities for collective action, as well as improve state institutions and invest to change social norms.

Despite broad agreement on this approach, there appear to be flaws in its implementation. Ashley Jackson has detailed the challenges with international service delivery in Afghanistan and why individuals and communities were willing to turn to the Taliban as an alternative (Giustozzi and Jackson 2012; Jackson 2018; Jackson and Weigand 2020). I argue that one reason for this failing is that several of the key tools in the repertoire of micro-level analysis, including community-driven development (CDD) and randomized control trial (RCT) methods, are in many instances inappropriate to such analysis. This is because the methodological orientation they adopt—an emphasis on narrow interventions with a clean causal story—leads to certain blind spots. In this regard, what is necessary is to further reflect on the challenges and to criticize micro-level analysis, and to see whether it can be, in a sense, made more legitimately 'micro'. In the case of Afghanistan, there was a move towards interventions at the local level, but these activities were driven more by central actors, in response to external incentives, than local ones. Finally, many of these local-level approaches were paradoxically orthogonal to what was happening on the ground.

These failings occurred despite recent research highlighting the importance of a need for a 'local turn' in the study of peacebuilding (Hughes et al. 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). While a turn to local dynamics is key to counterinsurgency and building local peace, too often paradigms of international relations and international organization prioritize an examination of the role of international actors and their work at the local level, rather than the endogenous work of local actors. This is reflected in the work of Séverine Autesserre, for example, who has stressed the importance of international organizations engaging more effectively in local conflicts (Autesserre 2010). But this approach still prioritizes the importance and centrality of international actors. It is less a local turn than a causal inference turn, and the key players are not local but foreign. We are shown the world through their incentive structures and their lenses, without adequate attention to the degree to which such interventions are embedded in local institutions. Scholars and policy-makers impose blinkers on themselves when they prioritize the study of their own work rather than the centrality of local institutions, actors, and incentives. Studying global organizations at the local level is a very incomplete study of local peacebuilding. It may be the case that international actors and their interventions are in fact tangential to local politics. They may be effective to their bureaucratic stakeholders but make very little difference to the local communities they purport to be supporting.

2   The obsession with community in aid

The international donor community entered Afghanistan under the premise that the country was a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate without effective local governance structures following the fall of the Taliban. This led to a concentrated focus on community-level engagement, often overlooking the existence and efficacy of customary governance systems that had persisted and adapted over time. Without having to worry about pre-existing structures, the international community and some

Afghan politicians—like Ashraf Ghani, who had long been involved in such efforts during his tenure at the World Bank—pushed for CDD projects that could establish entirely new structures at the village level from scratch. Donors missed the fact that customary systems not only had survived decades of conflict but also continued to play a critical role in local governance, even after significant political upheaval (Murtazashvili 2021a).

In their pursuit of goals like gender equality and the Millennium Development Goals, international efforts at times promoted new forms of local governance that did not align with the customary practices embedded within rural Afghan society. This mismatch led to the creation of parallel structures and governance systems that were externally driven and often incongruent with the nuanced social and political fabric of rural Afghan communities (Sharan 2013). Furthermore, the donors' focus on community-level aid often led to the neglect of larger-scale public goods and services that communities needed but could not provide themselves. This approach also created distortions, as the introduction of aid projects sometimes led to cycles of corruption and unintended consequences (Murtazashvili 2016).

The most significant community-driven programme in Afghanistan during the era of post-conflict reconstruction was The National Solidarity Program (NSP). This programme was initiated by the Afghan government to provide support to around 15,000 villages in rural Afghanistan. Launched in 2003 with a budget of US$600 million, the NSP aimed to establish local, democratically elected institutions called Community Development Councils (CDCs) to lead reconstruction and development efforts. The programme drew inspiration from the Kecamatan Development Program in Indonesia and was implemented by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) with funding from various international sources including the World Bank and aid agencies from the UK, Denmark, Canada, and the US. The NSP intended to engage rural populations, which comprise around 80 per cent of Afghanistan's population, in development and to foster the rule of law and community-managed projects.

Rather than let it be implemented by the MRRD itself, however, the government and the World Bank chose to have international NGOs play the primary role facilitating the programme, providing technical support and managing the elections of CDC leadership councils. The programme unfolded in phases, with the objective of expanding CDCs to cover 80–90 per cent of Afghanistan's rural communities and improving the institutional quality, sustainability, and governance of these local bodies (MRRD 2006).

The NSP aimed to establish, strengthen, and maintain CDCs as effective institutions for local governance and socio-economic development, with an explicit goal of promoting gender equality as well (Beath et al. 2013a). The first phase in the NSP was community mobilization and training in inclusive and transparent decision-making, leading to the election of community councils. These councils were then tasked with creating local development plans.

The implementation phase involved block grants spent on sub-projects chosen by the community, consistent with their training and using the newly established institutions. The intention was that the participatory community processes would continue into other activities beyond the lifespan of the CDD programme, with the aim of institutionalizing norms of good governance and social cohesion (King and Samii 2014).

In conflict-affected areas like Afghanistan, the idea was that such CDD programmes could serve as a mechanism for service delivery where the state's administrative reach was limited. Donors and implementing agencies did not merely focus on immediate service delivery but also sought to build local governance capacity, fostering social cohesion, and creating stable communities capable of self-management and conflict resolution. The NSP's institutional outputs were designed to

encourage broad-based participation in the process, potentially altering existing power dynamics to be more inclusive, and giving community members a positive experience of collaboration. This was expected to foster a sense of ownership over local development activities, which would then act as an incentive for community members to hold implementers accountable (Goodhand and Sedra 2010).

The CDCs also sought to create an institutional infrastructure, such as development plans, community bank accounts, and local audits, that could make future collective actions less costly and more manageable after the project ended, thus seeking to have a lasting impact on community organization and governance.

A midline evaluation of the programme indicated a significant rise in women's participation in community councils and enhanced perceptions that community assemblies were providing services, thus indicating progress toward the programme's main goals during its term (Beath et al. 2013b). However, the NSP exhibited significant structural and operational shortcomings that revealed its true nature as a top-down initiative even though it was framed as a way to empower communities.

3   The illusion of a bottom-up approach

Ostensibly designed to empower local governance through the creation of CDCs, the NSP inadvertently mirrored earlier state-driven efforts, notably those from the communist era, thus perpetuating a legacy of centralization under the guise of localism.

Local perceptions of the NSP were shaped by historical experiences of state interventions. Afghans had witnessed a series of governance initiatives that, despite their varied ideological underpinnings, commonly sought to extend the reach of the central government into the rural fabric of the nation. During the communist period (1978–92), for instance, efforts to establish village-level councils were part of a broader agenda to consolidate state control and mobilize the rural populace in support of state policies (Edwards 2002).These councils, rather than acting as independent entities reflecting the will of the communities, functioned as conduits for central policy implementation, often disrupting traditional power structures and local autonomy.

The NSP's approach echoed these earlier interventions by promoting structures that, while nominally community-based, depended heavily on guidance and resources from the central government and international donors. The selection of projects, the allocation of funds, and the very design of the CDCs often followed a predetermined agenda set by external actors, leaving little room for genuine community initiative. In the eyes of many Afghans, the NSP was less about development and more about the government's desire to project its influence and authority into the rural hinterlands.

The programme was viewed through a political lens, with its evident continuity from past government initiatives, especially the communist policies. During the time I spent in rural Afghanistan working to understand community governance, I was surprised to hear complaints from residents that the programme was the work of 'communists'. It turns out that some of the key players implementing the project were communists (or 'former' communists). Many whom I interviewed suggested that the programme reminded them of similar programmes rolled out during the rule of Daoud Khan in the 1970s; others said that the communists during their rule sought to implement such councils as part of their attempts to rule the countryside in the 1990s. They saw the NSP as an extension of communist-backed approaches to link communities to the

state. Several residents mentioned that the Minister of Rehabilitation and Rural Development, Hanif Atmar, who played a major role in implementing the programme, was a 'communist' who was simply trying to control villages and tie them to the state. Atmar was a known agent of the Khad, the secret police of the Afghan communist party. In fact, Atmar lost one of his legs fighting with a Khad special-operations unit against mujahedeen fighters in the 1980s. When the communists lost control of Kabul, he left for the UK, where he earned a degree in post-conflict recovery (Burns 2008). In the minds of several of the people I spoke with, his efforts to promote community development councils were a natural outgrowth of his disdain for the countryside and a desire to centralize power.

The similarity of NSP to previous attempts to establish state-affiliated bodies within communities were again met with resistance or ambivalence by local populations wary of state intrusion into their customary systems of governance. By not adequately differentiating itself from the political strategies of previous regimes, the NSP struggled to gain the full trust and engagement of the communities it aimed to serve. This historical resonance highlighted the importance of understanding the intricate tapestry of local governance and the potential pitfalls of ignoring the lessons of the past when designing development interventions.

4   Afghanistan as a laboratory for experiments

Rather than a *tabula rasa*, rural Afghanistan at the time reconstruction began was rich in social capital, embodied in a complex and trusted system of customary governance (Miakhel 2006; Miakhel and Coburn 2010). For instance, customary assemblies like *jirgas* and *shuras* played a crucial role in maintaining order and resolving conflicts at the community level. These indigenous institutions, reflecting a robust system of social norms and collective action, were indicative of a society that was far from a blank slate. They highlighted the capacity for self-organization and mutual trust within communities, essential components of social capital that were unfortunately overlooked in the reconstruction process.

The execution of the NSP encapsulated this misjudgement. Rather than support existing community governance systems and their activities, funds were primarily used to support the implementation of the new project. It was reported that for every dollar spent directly on community projects, approximately another dollar was spent on facilitation, administration, and oversight, raising questions about the programme's balance between external control and community empowerment. The funnelling of funds to a new bureaucracy created locally was one of the reasons why these projects reminded so many of the earlier efforts by the communist governments to use development programmes as a political strategy to control communities rather than to empower them.

The shortcomings of international reconstruction efforts were not limited to programme design and implementation but also extended to their impact on community cohesion. The duplication of roles and creation of parallel structures often conflicted with existing traditional authority systems, resulting in community tensions. This disruption was exacerbated by the manipulation of project selections and aid distribution by local elites, leading to increased corruption and conflict— precisely the opposite of the intended objectives of fostering unity and development.

My reading of the local context was that the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, exemplified by the NSP, demonstrated a disconnect between the international community's assumptions and the on-the-ground realities of Afghan society. These efforts failed to build on a strong foundation of local governance but, in some cases, contributed to its erosion, inadvertently fuelling further

conflict and instability. My conclusion after assessing the NSP was that there was a need for reconstruction policies to be grounded in a nuanced understanding of local governance and social dynamics (Murtazashvili 2016).

The NSP could have empowered communities, for example by providing them with oversight over local projects and establishing opportunities for them to control their revenue sources. They had little input over spending and no authority to raise taxes of any sort.

The World Bank's evaluations of the projects hinted at the uneven and even negative impact of the programme. Despite some positive short-term impacts, the programme undermined perceptions of local governance in the country and the ability of communities to resolve disputes— thus undermining local social cohesion (Beath et al. 2013c). While the NSP initially appeared to enhance local governance through the creation of CDCs and increased participation, its long-term impacts were negligible or even negative (King and Samii 2014).

Some findings were more positive. For instance, the creation of CDCs more than doubled the proportion of local assemblies that included at least one female member. This was a significant development, especially considering the traditional male dominance in local governance structures in Afghanistan. Additionally, the CDCs increased the provision of local governance services, the activity level of customary authorities, and the role of representative assemblies in governance during the project's lifespan. These changes indicated a temporary shift towards more inclusive and active local governance. However, these improvements were fleeting. While there was a durable increase in the number of meetings held annually by representative assemblies, the overall quality of local governance as perceived by male villagers declined. At the endline of the study, the NSP was found to have negatively impacted the perceived quality of local governance, reducing satisfaction with the work of local leaders by 8 per cent and almost doubling dissatisfaction with recent decisions or actions of village leaders (Beath et al. 2015: 59). This outcome suggests that the NSP, despite its community-driven facade, did not fundamentally alter the existing power dynamics within villages. The CDCs, while initially increasing the provision of local governance services and participation in governance, failed to sustain these improvements in the long term (Beath et al. 2015: 61).

These findings indicate that the creation of new institutions in parallel to customary structures without well defined roles and sustained support may not achieve the desired effect in community-driven development initiatives, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts like Afghanistan. Billions of dollars were spent on a project that ultimately undermined local governance in Afghanistan, yet for years it was heralded as a great success by international NGOs implementing the programme and the politicians outside Afghanistan who funded it (Kerry 2010).

5   A case study of property rights 'reform'

Secure property rights are considered critical to economic development, as they encourage investment and the improvement of assets, rather than a focus on their protection. This principle is particularly pertinent in contexts like Afghanistan, where land ownership is often established but not legally recognized. Hernando de Soto's influential argument that unlocking economic potential lies in recognizing the de facto rights of individuals and communities to land has led to a focus on formalizing property rights in international development efforts (2003). Major organizations, including the World Bank and the United States Institute for Peace, have adopted this approach, supporting extensive legal titling projects in post-conflict areas like Afghanistan (Wily 2003, 2013).

The response to these initiatives in Afghanistan, especially from 2001 to 2021, was notably subdued. This lukewarm reaction can be attributed to the centralized nature of formalization efforts, which depend on government implementation and enforcement. In a country where the government and legal capacities are perceived as lacking, it is more practical for people to continue relying on their informal, traditional, and customary methods for property issues (Murtazashvili and Murtazashvili 2016; Murtazashvili and Murtazashvili 2021).

In Afghanistan, while legal title is rare, the majority of landowners have customary deeds (Murtazashvili 2012). These documents, not recognized in the legal property rights regime, are nevertheless signed by local administrators and function as proof of ownership. In the event of disputes, landowners turn to local *shuras* or *maliks*, indicating a robust system of community-based dispute resolution.

Legal titling projects were complementary to the NSP. Like the NSP, the legal titling projects were designed without sufficient consideration of the preexisting community structures that provided for conflict resolution, including conflicts over property rights. The legal titling projects were also like the NSP in that they operated through formal, higher-level administrative structures. In the case of property reforms, this involves a substantial role for the courts in the process of land registration. In Afghanistan, where courts are widely regarded as corrupt and government institutions ineffective, these assumptions were fundamentally flawed. The disconnection between the formal legal system and the customary practices prevalent in Afghan society further alienated communities from state-led initiatives.

An alternative approach, focusing on community-based land adjudication and recording, recognizes the existing local systems' strengths and legitimacy. This method seeks to empower and enhance community mechanisms for resolving land disputes, aligning more closely with the realities on the ground. This approach contrasts sharply with the failures of top-down initiatives, highlighting the importance of respecting and leveraging existing social capital and customary practices.

The experience in Afghanistan, particularly with legal titling and programmes like the NSP, underscores the importance of understanding and working within community governance structures—not replacing them with alternatives. These lessons emphasize the need for a genuinely bottom-up approach, one that respects and builds upon the existing social fabric or what development scholars call 'working with the grain' (Levy 2014), for future economic and developmental initiatives in Afghanistan and similar contexts. Only by recognizing and integrating the established customary systems can sustainable progress be achieved in areas where formal government structures are either weak or mistrusted.

6   The political failures of reconstruction

The centralization of development interventions was part of a more general emphasis on establishing a centralized state. The main reason for the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021 was the culmination of a series of failures rooted in the political strategies adopted by the international community and the state's own governance practices organized around a goal of establishing a highly centralized Afghan state. Contrary to the perception of Afghanistan as inherently ungovernable, it was the policy choices made by the United States and its partners over two decades that significantly contributed to a failed reconstruction project.

State-building efforts led by the international community were based on a series of flawed assumptions. The primary approach centred on establishing a Weberian state, which emphasized the consolidation of state power and the establishment of a monopoly on violence. This strategy involved the formation of a heavily centralized government system, which was contrary to Afghanistan's historical and cultural context of decentralized governance and initial distribution of power in 2001 (Barfield 2010, 2012).

The 2004 Constitution created a governance system that offered Afghan citizens limited participation and oversight, widening the gap between the rhetoric of the US intervention and the realities experienced by citizens. Additionally, the international coalition's focus on counter-insurgency and power consolidation often contradicted the goals of democracy-building. Vast resources were invested with minimal oversight, leading to the creation of parallel governance structures that further undermined state legitimacy (Noelle-Karimi 2013).

President Ashraf Ghani's rule from 2014 to 2021 hastened the state's collapse. His administration was marked by over-centralization, micromanagement, and discrimination against ethnic minorities. Ghani's authoritarian tendencies, coupled with his narrow base of support, alienated many, including those within his government. This alienation was compounded by Ghani's efforts to sideline regional powerbrokers and warlords, who were replaced by loyalists, often exacerbating regional tensions and violence (Murtazashvili 2022).

Moreover, the international community's interventions often directly undermined customary governance structures, which had historically provided public goods and services and served as forums for community deliberation. The implementation of programmes like the NSP, aimed at building local-governance structures, often led to increased disputes and undermined established social norms about community governance (Murtazashvili 2016, 2021c). By the end of Ghani's presidency, the Afghan government had lost much of its legitimacy, and the Taliban had made significant territorial gains. Ghani's focus on subduing internal opposition rather than addressing governance issues or combating the Taliban contributed to the rapid territorial losses to Taliban forces. By mid-2021, the government controlled only a fraction of Afghan territory, and many districts fell to the Taliban without resistance (Murtazashvili 2021b).

These approaches failed to acknowledge and integrate Afghanistan's historical context of decentralized governance and undermined existing social and political structures, ultimately contributing to the state's loss of legitimacy and effectiveness. Community-driven efforts not only failed to contribute to the stability of the state; they undermined them because they worked against the grain of society. These centralized CDD efforts also fit nicely with the international community's preoccupation with creating centralized structures and its willingness to work through the remnants of centralized structures as they went about implementing their preferred projects.

7   Letting tools of social science drive our lenses on development

Besides failing to appreciate the political challenge confronting development, the international aid and assessment community maintained an almost surgical focus on narrow interventions that they could assess using quantitative, causal methods. Afghanistan was a fertile ground for experiments for an academic community increasingly preoccupied with using RCTs to study community-level interventions in development.

The emphasis on controlled interventions such as RCTs constituted a methodological bias. One aspect of this bias is a myopic understanding of development processes. This bias is particularly evident in complex socio-political contexts like Afghanistan, where the nuances of local politics, power dynamics, and societal structures play a crucial role in shaping development outcomes (Pritchett 2023).

RCTs, with their controlled settings and emphasis on isolating variables, provide valuable insights into the specific impacts of interventions. However, this scientific precision comes at a cost. The inherently apolitical nature of RCTs means that they often fail to account for the broader political environment, which is a critical determinant of the success or failure of development efforts. By focusing on quantifiable outcomes within controlled community settings, RCTs overlook the larger political, cultural, and social factors that influence these outcomes (Spears et al. 2020).

In Afghanistan, for example, the focus on RCTs has led to an oversimplified understanding of the effectiveness of CDCs. While RCTs might show that CDCs are enduring or effective in certain specific metrics, this approach neglects how these councils are perceived and integrated within the wider political landscape. If CDCs are viewed as tools of external influence or as mechanisms of state control, their endurance, as measured by these evaluation tools, merely reflects the extent of their backing by international donors rather than genuine community acceptance or effectiveness. They also reflect the ability of donors to use them to measure and control.

This critical oversight is not just a matter of academic concern but also has real-world implications. Development programmes that are designed and evaluated primarily on the basis of RCT-driven findings can lead to interventions that are disconnected from the political, economic, and social realities and needs of the communities they aim to serve. Such programmes may persist not because they are effective or beneficial to the communities, but because they align with the interests and narratives of external donors and state actors. Furthermore, the RCT approach's detachment from political realities can inadvertently contribute to the reinforcement of existing power structures. By failing to consider how interventions might be co-opted by local elites or used as instruments of state control, RCTs can contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities and the undermining of genuine grassroots empowerment.

The reliance on RCTs in development studies therefore raises fundamental questions about the nature and objectives of development interventions. Are these interventions genuinely aimed at empowering communities and addressing their needs, or are they primarily designed to produce quantifiable outcomes that satisfy donor requirements and academic curiosity? The answer to this question has profound implications for the future of development practice, especially in politically complex environments like Afghanistan. While RCTs offer methodological rigour, their limited scope and apolitical nature render them insufficient for understanding the full spectrum of development challenges. To truly grasp the complexities of development, especially in contexts shaped by intricate political and social dynamics, a more holistic approach is required—one that integrates political analysis and considers the broader impacts of interventions beyond the immediate outcomes measured by RCTs.

Samii (2023) presents a positive evaluation of Community-Driven Reconstruction (CDR) in fragile states, emphasizing its efficiency, adaptability, and durability in comparison with other strategies. Samii argues that CDR has been successful in establishing localized networks for administering reconstruction aid and highlights the adaptability of CDR institutions in contexts like Afghanistan, where they have been able to take on new roles beyond their original scope.

However, a critical analysis of these findings raises concerns about the inherent nature of these 'successes'. In the context of Afghanistan, for instance, the persistence of CDR institutions, as

lauded in Samii (2023), is not necessarily a marker of their success or desirability from the community's perspective. While the NSP was not an especially robust institution, the analysis above demonstrates that it was not a good match for many communities.

Nonetheless, it was the case that the NSP stuck around even after the fall of the Republic of Afghanistan. The Taliban were more than happy to be handed keys to one of the most centralized states in the world along with a burgeoning infrastructure that provided the central government (not elected provincial or district governments) with the ability to link directly to communities. This is exactly what the NSP was intended to be: a mechanism to transfer funds directly to communities. While such a mechanism may have been efficient for donors and central authorities, such ties were never constrained by electoral politics or even other layers of subnational oversight.

There are risks of relying on RCTs to evaluate the impact of CDR interventions without a comprehensive political analysis or, at the very least, a basic political economy analysis. RCTs can provide valuable insights into specific, measurable outcomes of interventions, but they may not capture the broader political and social dynamics at play. In Afghanistan, CDR's impact on bottom-up collective action and social inclusiveness was limited, indicating a gap between the measured outcomes and the broader institutional and societal context. The endurance of CDR institutions, while noteworthy, is in many ways less significant than the extent to which the programmes are perceived and interact with existing power structures and community dynamics.

Despite these challenges, it is significant that such effort has been devoted to assessments of Afghanistan's projects—not only by the World Bank and other organizations (e.g. Crost et al. 2014), but also within more general meta studies of such projects, as noted above.

But there is always a limitation with these sorts of interventions and the ways that they are assessed. The RCTs can only speak to the specific intervention, with its specific design. They do not tell us what might have been tried, and do not necessarily offer insight into why the projects do not live up to expectations. In Afghanistan, a deeper appreciation for local contexts suggests the value of strengthening local autonomy by working with the enduring institutions of Afghan society, rather than experimenting with new institutions. There is a massive range of possibilities for institutional design. There are many more possible interventions to consider, and the focus on one approach, and on dozens of evaluations of those approaches, denies much of the creative imaginings of development policy.

8   Policy recommendations

Policy-makers and practitioners have many ways to incorporate lessons from the failings of Afghanistan and internalizing the false promise of community-driven development. One shift in orientation is to consider projects that tackle the biggest challenges (which are often unaddressed). In Afghanistan, the oft-unaddressed problem was fostering inter-communal cooperation. If communities are the most robust source of cooperation, we should find the places where community cooperation breaks down. This is often at the edges of communities. Donors can encourage initiatives that facilitate collaboration between different communities. This involves creating platforms for dialogue and joint projects that require cooperation across traditional community boundaries. By doing so, interventions can address more complex and contentious issues that are often avoided due to their difficulty.

Donors have spoken extensively about taking politics seriously in their work. By utilizing tools of political economy analysis to understand the broader political context in which development

interventions are implemented, well intentioned donors can take politics seriously and understand the environment in which their interventions operate. Too often, community interventions fail to address the political challenges of development. This approach can help identify potential political barriers and opportunities, ensuring that interventions are more politically informed and contextually appropriate.

Donors can also take local ownership seriously by promoting genuine local ownership. They can shift the focus from donor-driven, top-down approaches to strategies that genuinely empower local communities. This means not only involving communities in decision-making processes but also ensuring that they have the necessary resources and support to drive their own development agendas. It may be the case that communities never have the resources to fully own the kinds of interventions donors intend because they do not have the political means to do so. If communities cannot afford to sustain and support development interventions in the long-term and they cannot hold funders to account for their decisions, then donors may be wise to rethink the viability of such programmes.

Rather than seeing organizations rooted in custom and tradition as an obstacle to development, donors can leverage customary governance structures into their programmes. In Afghanistan, there was a desire to replace such structures with new bodies. This not only led to ineffective outcomes, but also undermined governance in communities where such programmes were implemented. It is vital to take politics seriously and recognize and integrate existing customary governance systems into development programmes. The challenge for donors is that the norms and values embedded in these organizations may be at odds with universal values promoted by external actors. This represents a serious challenge, but one that cannot be neglected. These traditional institutions have a deep-rooted legitimacy and can play a crucial role in maintaining order and resolving conflicts.

Finally, donors can adopt flexible and adaptive programming that can respond to changing political and social contexts (C. Andrews 2008; M. Andrews 2013; M. Andrews et al. 2013). This involves continuous monitoring and evaluation, allowing for adjustments to be made as needed to ensure the effectiveness and relevance of interventions.

9   Rethinking grassroots development

It is imperative to rethink our approach to external interventions in an era where conflict-affected regions continue to grapple with instability, development challenges, and the need for sustainable peace. Micro-level interventions, while well intentioned, often fall short of achieving their intended outcomes due to unintended consequences that undermine inter-communal cooperation and neglect the intricate political dynamics at the grassroots level. A holistic approach, integrating political considerations into grassroots development, is essential for forging a path toward lasting peace and prosperity. These well intentioned local interventions will continue to struggle without a more careful consideration of politics (Ferguson 1994). In Afghanistan, they did indeed struggle because of the lack of attention to the political context, but also because they were preoccupied with a specific type of intervention and ways of assessing it. Donors and scholars have been too ready to focus on form over function and to spend time gazing at their own work, thereby not seeing the wood for the trees. That is exactly what happened in Afghanistan.

The first pillar of this holistic approach emphasizes the need to delve deeply into the local political dynamics of conflict-affected regions. Communities in these areas are not isolated entities but are embedded within complex political landscapes. Recognizing this reality allows us to grasp the

nuances of power structures, historical context, traditional governance systems, informal institutions, and the often-overlooked influence of external actors. By understanding the intricate web of politics, we gain valuable insights that can inform development strategies.

The second pillar underscores the importance of conflict sensitivity in development interventions. This entails acknowledging existing tensions and actively working to mitigate potential conflicts. It involves a nuanced understanding of the root causes of conflicts and their interplay with development initiatives. By addressing conflicts at their core and adopting preventive measures, we can ensure that development efforts do not inadvertently exacerbate instability but, instead, contribute to its resolution.

At the heart of a holistic approach lies the empowerment of local communities. It recognizes that communities are not passive recipients of aid but active agents in their own development. Empowering these communities involves facilitating their participation in decision-making processes and equipping them with the tools and resources needed to address their unique challenges (Rostami Povey 2003). By fostering ownership and agency at the grassroots level, development interventions become more responsive and sustainable (Easterly 2006).

A central tenet of this approach is the promotion of political inclusivity and equity. This entails ensuring that marginalized groups and diverse voices are not only heard but also actively included in the development process. By focusing on political dynamics, we create interventions that are inclusive and do not inadvertently reinforce existing power imbalances. In doing so, we pave the way for more equitable and just societies (Ibrahimi 2019).

Looking ahead, the implications of embracing this holistic approach are profound. Development strategies in conflict-affected regions should adopt adaptive programming, recognizing the evolving political contexts and community needs. Local ownership should be prioritized, with communities taking the lead in shaping their development trajectories. But donors working locally and in communities is not the same as communities behind the wheel, driving their own development (Labonne and Chase 2009). By addressing political dynamics, we contribute to conflict prevention, identifying and resolving potential sources of tension before they escalate.

A holistic approach that integrates political considerations into grassroots development is not a mere shift in strategy but a fundamental reimagining of how we engage with conflict-affected regions. It holds the promise of promoting inter-communal cooperation, mitigating conflict, and empowering communities on their journey towards recovery and development. By recognizing and navigating the intricate tapestry of political dynamics at the grassroots level, we can collectively work towards a future where sustainable peace and prosperity thrive in even the most challenging of contexts.

10 Caveats and cautions

There is a tendency to group states into categories, such as 'fragile' or 'failed' state. The Afghan case illustrates that applying blueprints can be dangerous. The development community was content to try the sorts of interventions that had been tried many times before. Like those previous attempts, they did not dramatically improve development prospects but in some sense undermined them.

A better way may be to proceed by considering a strategy to empower local governance, and to promote local ownership of development policy. There are, of course, downsides to local

ownership. In economics, there is the idea of the Nirvana Fallacy, which is that we often compare a preferred alternative to an unrealistic standard. One might critique centralized interventions and then see local ownership as an idealized situation. The Nirvana Fallacy applies particularly to Afghanistan. Local ownership does not mean perfect governance, since governance institutions at any level can fail. Rather, as we have seen, to compare centralized and local ownership it is necessary to create space for local ownership to have something to compare it with. That aspect of creating local autonomy has been missing from development policy.

Relatedly, there is the meta-political question of the political feasibility of the reforms above. One argument is that the development community, by taking Afghanistan 'as it was', did what was politically feasible and pragmatically necessary. To some extent, pragmatism must inform development policy, though it is not clear that the donor community understood the country as it really was. Rather, it selectively focused on interventions because they were politically and bureaucratically attractive, rather than making a dispassionate calculation that those sorts of interventions were the best for that particular situation.

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