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AHMAD IDREES RAHMANI

The Role of Religious Institutions in Community Governance Affairs: How are Communities Governed Beyond the District Level?

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Abstract:

The International Policy Fellowship Program of the Open Society Institute funded this research project in June of 2005 based on a proposal that was submitted by the researcher (author of this paper) in late 2004. After some revision to the proposal, it was mutually agreed that the project would focus on a comparative study of the role of Community Development Councils (CDCs) and Mosques in the socio-political life of Afghan rural communities. One of the main reasons for choosing this objective was the great need of the Afghan government and people for reform of their governance structure. The attempt to establish a modern and effective governance system in the country has been going for many years, particularly since the start up of the post 9/11 administration in Afghanistan, but due to some challenges it never yielded any tangible results.

The hypothesis of this project was that there is another governance structure established in the country by religious institutions that is very closely positioned at the village level. Therefore, it was the objective of this research to find out if the existence of such a secondary structure can create resistance against governance reform projects in the country. In order to assess the interaction of the two governance systems in the country the researcher and his advisors focused on a comparative study of the role that Community Development Councils (CDCs) play in the socio-political life of a village versus that of a mosque.

The establishment of Community Development Councils (CDCs) has been one of the most recent and creative approaches of the government and the international community, particularly the World Bank, to reform the governance structure of the country at the grassroots level. The program started with an overall goal of reducing poverty through empowering communities. The program assumes that communities are empowered through improvement of their governance system and an increase of human and economic capital. "The objectives of the program are to: (1) lay the foundations for a strengthening of community-level governance; and (2) support community-managed sub-projects comprising reconstruction and development that improve the access of rural communities to social and productive infrastructure and services." (Ministry of Rural Development Documents, National Solidarity Program, 2005)

In order to begin the comparison of the socio-political role of CDCs versus mosques in the village, we came up with some questions that served as a research guide throughout our fieldwork.

1. What is the existing vision of future governance in the country?
2. What are the politics of local governance and power?
3. What is a mosque and how does it function?
4. What services does a mosque provide to the people?
5. How is the power structure formed in a village?
6. Where does CDC fit in the hierarchy of the village power structure ?
7. Can CDCs take the lead in village governance ?

8. What other challenges exist?
9. What practical solutions are available?
10. What possible consequences are expected if no action is taken?

The answers to these questions would suggest a set of policy options that require immediate action. Based on those policy options, the author wrote a separate policy recommendation paper that will be submitted together with this report and will provide policy makers with a well thought-out course of policy action.

It is also important to note that the research project was implemented during a period of serious security and political challenges in the country, particularly concerning the dilemma of power sharing amongst different players of Afghanistan's recent politics. Those challenges impacted the overall outcome of the project since most people in the villages were very hesitant to comment on anything related to the power structure. Three decades of religiously motivated war has also radicalized people's attitude towards the role of religion in the power structure of an Islamic country. The weakening presence of government beyond the capital of the country created a suitable environment for other players, particularly religious leaders, to dominate the power structure in communities and become a very strong competitor for the central government.

The research project did not have the time and resources to look at the economic aspects of the power structure, which is another important piece of the puzzle because landlords, poppy growers, and wealthy tribal figures play as important a role in the game of power sharing as religious leaders do.

What is the existing vision of future governance in the country?

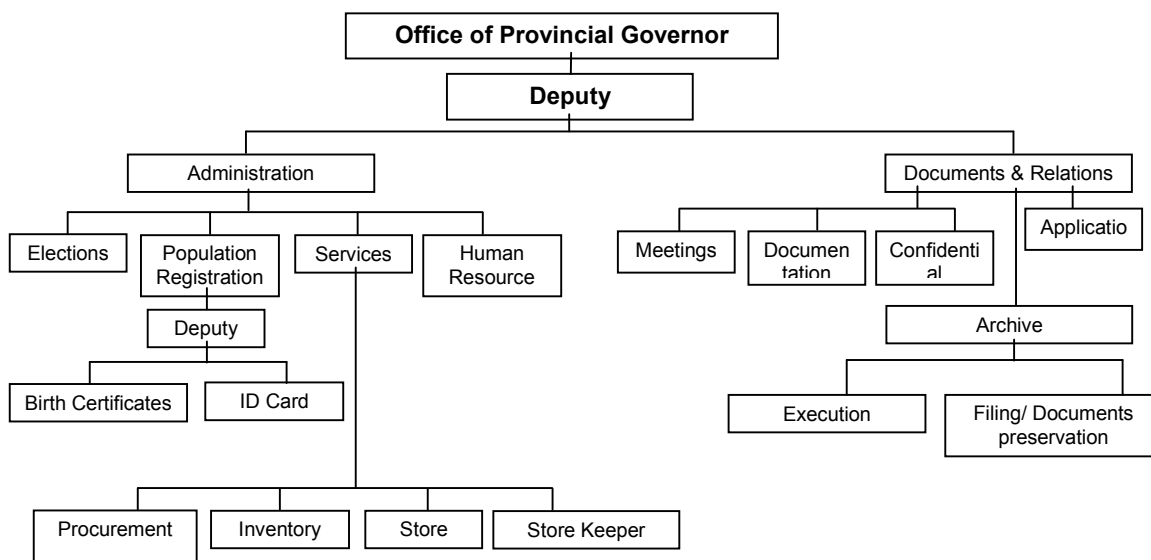
Because of the power-determining nature of the governance reform program, it is highly influenced by the politics of different institutions who are the stakeholders in the governance-reform program of Afghanistan. Some key players include the government institutions, international institutions (with the UN being on the driving seat) and political competitors of the government such as religious institutions, tribal institutions and many wealthy landlords who play a major role in the poppy business. Below is a brief description of the role that each institution plays:

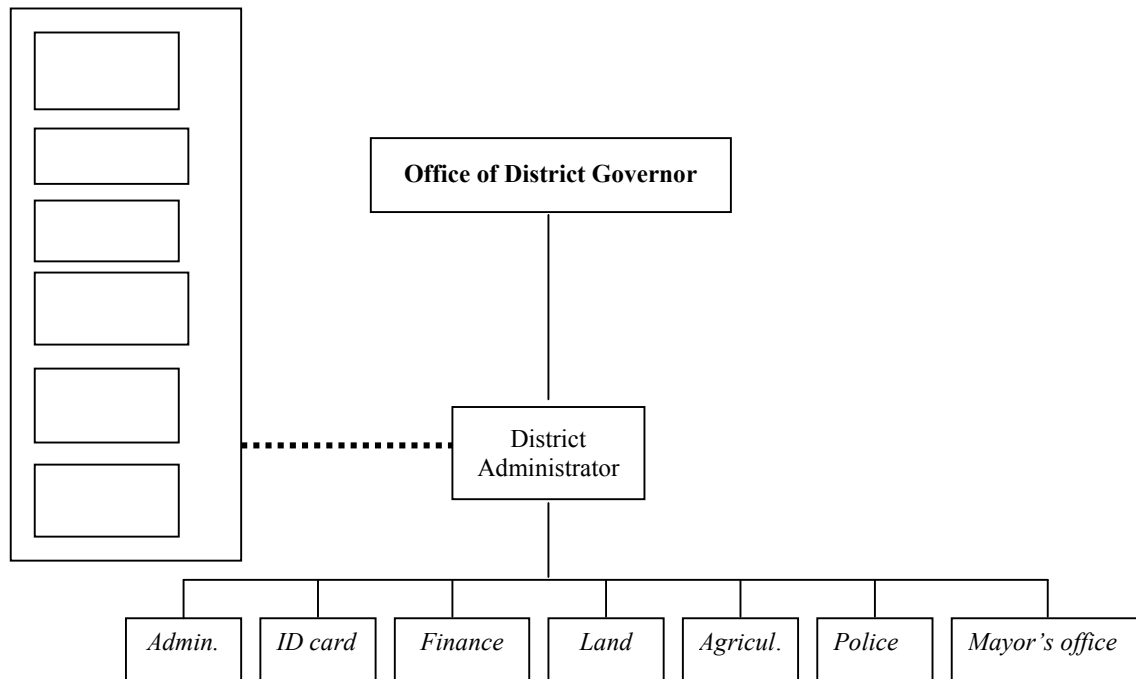
Government institutions:

Within the cabinet of Afghanistan's government, the Ministry of Interior has predominantly been in charge of local governance affairs in the country since it supervises all province and district governors and provides them with the required organizational and financial resources to do their job. The structure of the Ministry of Interior for local governance is mainly divided into two levels of administration; the office of the provincial governor and the office of the district governor. The ministry does not have any organizational structure for village level administration and therefore relies on the district level administration for management of the life of any

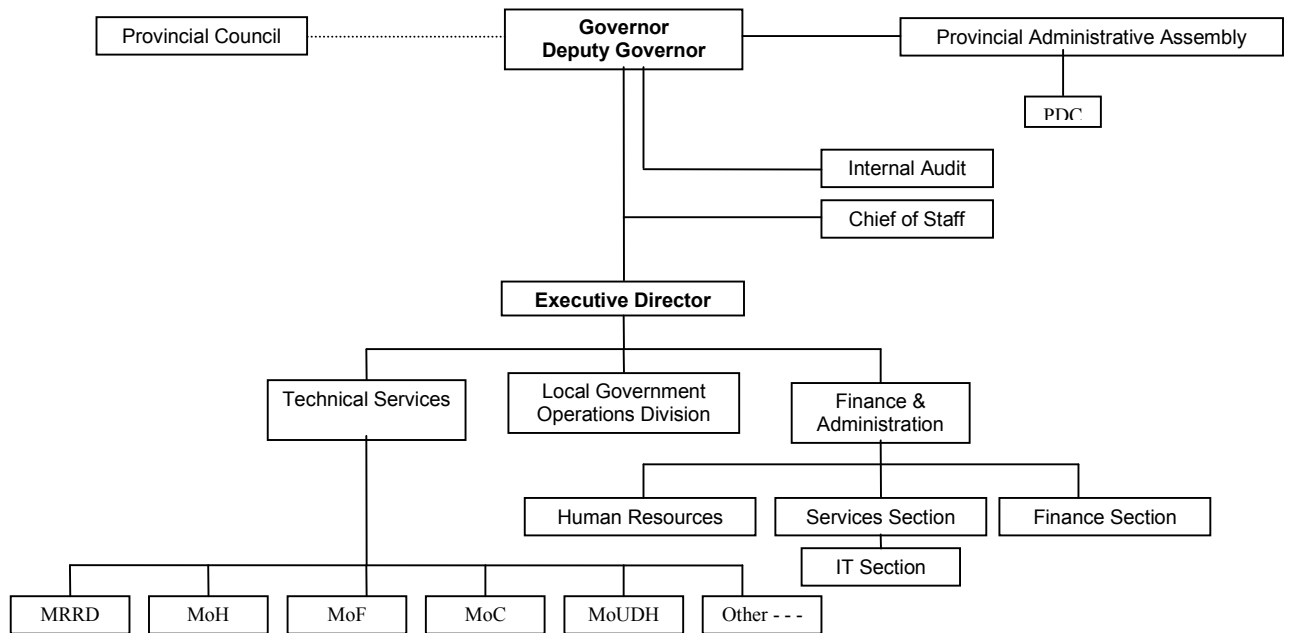
citizen of the country living beyond the level of districts administration. The two levels of organization are best described in the organizational charts below as:

1. Office of Provincial Governor and its functions, and
2. Office of District Governor and its functions





Recently, the United Nations and the rest of the international community, together with the Afghan government agreed upon a new organizational structure for the provincial level of administration, which is described below:



What are the politics of local governance and power?

Due to funding restrictions and priority of other projects as well as Afghanistan's politics of power sharing at different levels of administration, the district level organizational reform is not being considered at this point. This leaves the district level administration with its current structure and, again, no administrative structure for the village level. However, another ministry within the cabinet received substantial government and international assistance to establish a village level foundation for governance and development. The Ministry of Rural Development and Reconstruction, with generous international assistance, launched a program called National Solidarity Program that aimed towards empowering local communities through strengthening the governance structure at the community level. The program consists of three major steps; establishment of Community Development Councils (CDC) through direct election at the village level, training of CDC members through partner NGOs on the ground, and finally, implementation of small scale community project by CDCs. Because of the great needs of communities for economic improvement, the last part of NSP's strategy (small scale community project) has overshadowed the rest of the program. The International community is very much interested in this part of the program because they think this is the only mechanism available in the country that provides assistance to the villages by involving villagers in the process of problem identification as well as project implementation. This is the only mechanism in the country that has been able to engage women in the development process to some extent at the village level. In addition, the program has created a very good pool of capacity within the government by combining NGO capacity with the new government human resource capacity. This has also allowed donor organizations to spend their money through the program in a confident and timely manner. All of the above-mentioned facts motivated the Ministry of Rural

Development to spend more money on this program, which eventually created lots of jealousy and political in-fighting for the program. In fact, the program is currently under a tremendous amount of pressure from different ministries to cut down expenses because it is depleting Afghanistan's international assistance budget.

Major achievements of the program through the 3rd quarter of 2005 are listed below:

- 9,122 communities have been mobilized
- 8,351 communities have elected their Community Development Councils
- 5,616 villages have received funding for 9,340 subprojects
- US\$ 104,394,195 disbursed and \$152,091,354 committed in the form of block grants
- The project focuses on social and economic infrastructure: 2,102 drinking water, 1,940 irrigation, 1,906 transportation, and 1,808 energy projects have been set up. The remaining 1560 projects pertain to livelihood (including transfer of assets and income generation), education, sanitation, rural development, public building, health, shelter, and microfinance.
- Presently, 3,450 people employed by the Facilitating Partners (FP) are working exclusively as community organizers, monitors and engineers for NSP.
- 400 staff of the Oversight Consultants (OC) including over 100 civil servants of the MRRD are executing and supervising government funded development activities
- 600,000 members of rural communities have received preparations training in planning, accounting, and team-building as a solid basis for rural governance.

Although the program has created a very good mechanism that delivers assistance to the village level, there is very little agreement amongst donors and government officials that the governance aspect of the program has had any major achievements. Some even criticized that the governance aspect of the program is not clear and consistent with the country's constitution. The main question being asked in this regard is how CDCs relate to the Provincial and District Development Councils (PDCs and DDCs) that are defined in the constitution. It is important to note that there has not been any development whatsoever towards the establishment of provincial and district councils in the country to date, which leaves CDCs in the village with no connections to other governmental and/or none governmental bodies. Ministerial officials do not share the same vision for the future of CDCs. Some officials believe that CDCs should remain as representatives of civil society in the village, and others believe that they should be the official representatives of the government, while a third group -envisions a mixture of both.

Therefore, the Ministry initiated a series of actions that targeted twords dialogue between CDC members and senior government officials to define the future of CDCs within the country's constitution. The dialogue took a week in Kabul where all CDC representatives went through some exercises to define their views and then present them to the President of the country for approval. The exercise did not produce any

concrete results, as the President did not approve their main recommendation of legalizing CDCs as the official government representatives in the village.

The third major stakeholder of the governance affairs, though not officially recognized, is the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Haj, Ershad and Awqaf). Under different titles, the ministry has existed as part of the government for a long time. However, its main responsibilities have remained the same. These are:):

1. Supervision of all religious institutions, which includes a large number of mosques around the country
2. Coordination of government policies among the powerful groups of religious leaders in the country
3. Provision of religious services to the public including, but not limited to, the arrangements of Pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia.

This research project discusses only the mosque management department of the Ministry of Religious Affairs not the rest. Based on our random sampling data, on average, every district of Afghanistan has a minimum of 100 and a maximum of up to 2,500 mosques. For example in Kunduz province, the number of mosques per district registered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs is shown in the table below:

No	Districts (Woloswali)	Major	Junior	Total
1	Kunduz Center	128	747	875
2	Amam Sahib	94	456	550
3	Khan Abad	42	364	406
4	Ali Abad	24	126	150
5	Chahar Dara	28	202	230
6	Qala-e-Zal	20	174	194
7	Archi	14	156	170
	Total	350	2225	2575

There are also provinces and districts where the number of mosques is much higher than what is presented in the example of Kunduz Province. According to Mawlawee Abdul Bari Raashid, representative of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Takhar province, “We have districts with up to 2,500 mosques which were mostly built during Jihad.” Based on the sampling data we can easily round up the numbers to a total of 1,000 mosques per district for the whole country. It is important to note that in most parts of the country mosques that are newly built by people are not registered by the ministry of religious affairs. The officials of the ministry acknowledged that they do not have the whole information about the number of mosques in the villages of the country.

According to the Ministry of Interior and UN sources, the population of the country is estimated to be 25 million people (not officially verified), the total number of districts in the country is estimated to be around 400 (398 officially registered by the government), and the number of registered main villages by the government is roughly 31,230. Based on a simple calculation we are talking about a network of

mosques that, on average, places up to 12.7 mosques in each village of the country. Regardless of the fact whether they are registered by the government or not, they are all connected with each other for administrative and communication purposes. The only major difference between a registered mosque and a non-registered mosque is the source of the salary of the Imam (religious leaders responsible for a particularly mosque). The mosques are firmly integrated into a vast communication network by a very coherent organizational structure which is headed by the ministry of Religious Affairs. According to Mawlawee Saraj-ul-Din and Mawlawee Abdul Rahim, Head and Deputy Head of Irshad, Haj and Awqaf in Jawzjan province, every district of their province has a District Manager (Modeer), an Order Taker (Amer Bar), a Communication Officer (Tabliqh), and three to four Senior Religious Leaders (Khateeb).

What is a mosque, and how does it function?

Islamic leaders established the mosque as a center for governance during the early days of Islam's expansion. Today, in most Islamic countries, mosques perform certain functions that encroach on what is called modern governance. Particularly in Afghanistan, mosques have been playing a very critical role in the day-to-day lives of Afghan people. This is probably one of the reasons why the government presence was never considered a priority at the village level. In order to understand how a mosque fills the governance gap in a village we will review some basic functions of a mosque here:

Center for decision-making: This function of the mosque is unique because it applies to all parts of the country without any exception. Rural people consider mosques the only place where they can make important community decisions. People do get together in other places for decision-making purposes, but in most circumstances, those decisions are not considered public decisions until they are ratified by the mosque after brief discussion that normally takes place after prayer. This is probably why government and international organizations always seek religious leader's assistance in introducing new programs in rural communities. "It is next to impossible to get people's agreement on any CDC decision unless the decision is announced through the mosque by the religious leader of the village," says Tariq Osma, Head of National Solidarity Program of International Rescue Committee in Kabul. The United Nation's Children Fund Program has used the network of mosques for implementation of their mother-child health campaign around the country for a long time. According to UNICEF's press release in May 2003:

Afghanistan remains a traditional Islamic country where religious scholars and clergy play an important role in the day-to-day life of its citizens. In most communities, especially those in rural parts of the country, imams and mullahs are seen as both spiritual and religious leaders and also a trusted source of guidance and advice on issues of the day. The potential for the religious community in Afghanistan to assist in the promotion of

messages relating to children's rights has been taken up by UNICEF, which in May 2003, supported the first national workshop on children's issues for religious leaders from across the nation.

Not only because people trust their religious leader, but also because the building itself is considered a holy place and people are convinced that any decision made in the mosque will not have unholy consequences, motivate people to give special credit to the words that come from the mosque. Therefore, they always want to make their most important decisions inside the mosque. Dispute management is another interesting aspects of a mosque's job in villages. People do use other methods of dispute management (see above) in tribal areas of the country, but if no fair decision is reached then they automatically turn to the mosque. The Commission for Judiciary Reform recommended the local dispute management mechanism be legalized because it functions much more efficiently than the existing corrupt judiciary system, which is not even accessible to most people who live at the village level. Courts are not available beyond the district level, and what is available at the district level is highly inefficient and distrusted by people.

Center for provision of social services: This characteristic of the mosque differs from region to region and from village to village depending on the cultural set up of the community and/or access of the community to other sources that provide social services. In those villages where there are no other alternative sources of social services, the mosque is the only source that provides all kinds of assistance including education, health and public information. In villages where other governmental and/or non-governmental organization are available to provide these services mosques are not so much focused on provision of these assistances. However, they continue to be the secondary alternative even if the public services are available through other sources. Due to serious inefficiency within government organizations people mostly prefer mosque over government assistance. In those villages that the research team visited during this project, people gave both sources of assistance the same level of importance. For example, if the village had access to a school, they still wanted to send their kids to the mosque for education because they thought religious education is different from and more important than regular education.

Center for public administration: We decided to call this function of the mosque public administration because, according to the many books and experts on the mosque, this was the main reason why Prophet Mohammad established the first mosque after his trip to Medina. Islamic scholars who specialize in the Islamic methods of governance argue that it was not necessary to establish a building for prayer because, according to Islamic instructions, you can pray anywhere you want. It is mainly the public leadership tasks that required a building and a specific location to bring everyone together. There are many religious rules for the mosque and prayer that have administrative and political, rather than religious bases. For example, the obligation to offer Friday's midday prayer (Friday is the off day in the Islamic calendar) at a main mosque (Masjid-e-Jamae) is highly political and a governance related rule rather than a religious one. Main mosques are built only where the main market for several villages exists. You cannot build a main mosque wherever you want. It has to be a location where people from many different communities and villages come to exchange their goods. During Friday's prayer, unlike other prayers in normal mosques, Khotba is delivered (according to most Islamic specialists, Khotba refers to a political speech that every Muslim has to listen to). Khotba is also supposed to confirm who is the leader of the country. Before delivering Khotba, a religious leader has to do a quick analysis of the past week's life events throughout the country and, at the end, come up with certain conclusions that require people's action. In most cities, Friday day prayer attendance is not considered important by people who are highly educated and/or those who have a better understanding of the issues mentioned in the Khotba. However, in rural areas where the Imam (religious leader) is the only one who gets fresh news from the capital through Amer Bar and Tabligh officers of the Ministry, people follow his instructions and conclusion step by step. The ideas are then reinforced by junior religious leaders during regular prayers offered at smaller mosques. The main reason why the Ministry Haj-Irshad and Awqaf has these positions around the country is because they consider this task ministry's number one job. According to senior officials of the Ministry of Haj-Irshad and Awqaf, "We are controlling the minds and ears of the public and it is so important to do it properly, otherwise any enemy of the country can use this critical channel and destabilize the country." (Mr. Darwazi, Executive Secretary to the Minister, 2005)

How is the power structure formed in a village?

In general, power in a village rests with him, who has the final word in a dispute, which requires a public decision. It is only when the community faces a controversial issue that a power struggle surfaces and it becomes clear who is in charge. Otherwise, on a normal day, it is very hard to determine who is in charge in the village. It is important to note that the power structure of the village, like all other aspects of the country, has been affected by three decades of war. During the war power structure disrupted enormously, but recently it is moving back towards normalization. Although, certain challenges such as a weak government continues to impede normalization process in rural areas, still the overall picture shows a move towards reformation of the power structures.

For better understanding of the village power structure, we will review the following positions and personalities who play key roles in the formation of the village power structure:

Tribal leader: is a powerful position that is held by the chief of the tribe in some rural areas of Afghanistan, but it is not a village-based position because a tribe is normally larger than a single village. Tribes are settled beyond the boundaries of villages and districts, and therefore, tribal leaders are key players when decisions concern the whole tribe rather than a single village. It is also important to note that tribes inhabit only in southern and southeastern parts of the country and not the entire country. Thus, the tribal leader does not play a big role in the village level decision making process.

Village owner (Qarya Dar): has traditionally been the executive position in the village power structure, though the extent of power differs from village to village. If he is appointed by the district governor and happens to be a landlord, then he is going to be very powerful. A Qaryadar, first of all, as soon as he is appointed finds out whether the religious leader of the village is on his side or not. If the Qaryadar is also a Zamindar (landlord) and has the support of the district governor, then he is likely to buy the religious leader of the village. In some rare cases where the village religious leader is appointed by some other powerful people, serious competition is born in the village. The Qaryadar is normally expected to be the face of the district governor in the village and represents government in all decision making processes in the village, but in reality, people know that he is not hired by the government. Therefore, it is generally his secondary position that determines whether he is going to be effective or not. If he doesn't hold another important position in the village, then he is often considered a spy of the district governor and therefore wildly resented. In most cases, if the Qaryadar is not a Zamindar or religious leader at the same time, then he seeks support from a Zamindar or religious leader to maintain his effectiveness and credibility.

Village religious leader (Mullah Imam): is the spiritual leader of the village and traditionally plays the role of the judge, the teacher, and in the absence of a doctor, the role of the village doctor. The mullah's power is derived from his religious and judiciary role that he exercises on a daily basis. It is not easy for anyone, including other powerful people such as Zamindar and Qaryadar, to confront the Mullah in public. In cases where other power players want to criticize him, they do it in private and very carefully because these religious leaders (Mullahs) can easily undermine their influence in the village. They can simply say that a person's behavior is not consistent with Islamic rules, and that will badly damage a reputation. There are lots of sayings about dealing with religious leaders. For example, it is said, "Confront anyone you want, but never confront a Mullah.". There is a religious order called Fetwaa, which is considered much more serious than any law in the country. Once a Mullah issues a Fetwaa against someone, the person has to be taken to an Islamic court for settlement of that case. Therefore, we can say that religious leaders are the judiciary body in the village and every powerful person in the village wants and needs to secure their blessing before they exercise their power.

Village landlord (Arbab – Zamin Dar): is another powerful person in the village hierarchy. His source of power is his wealth, which is mostly land. Rural areas of Afghanistan are agriculturally productive and therefore, landlords are very important as they are the owners of the whole village economy. They are considered the main employers of most villagers and in some cases, they are the poppy producers which links them to the broader power structure of the country. Although a Zamindar is the employer of the whole village, he does not employ religious leaders directly. Sometimes he offers religious leaders extra incentives to stay on his side and to not announce Fetwa against what they are doing, particularly if they are in the poppy business. They become very powerful if they get appointed as the Qaryadar, and/or head of CDC, or as the elder of the village. In any case, they never confront religious leaders because that will damage their business and their relationship with their employees. They also play a key role in appointing Mirabs (water managers) and Chak Bashis (Agricultural Specialists).

Village water manager (Mirab): is powerful person because he is registered by the Ministry of Water and Agriculture, and this gives him some kind of governmental face. He has the sole authority to decide on how to distribute water to different farms based on the amount of water available in the canal. In general the Zamindar, the Mirab and the Chak Bashi work very closely to plan the agricultural economy of the village. Mirabs and Chack Bashis are heavily supported and backed by Zamindar. The Mirab's source of power is his total control over water distribution and the fact that he has this control he plays a major role in settlement of disputes among villagers during daily life clashes. He is always invited by other powerful people, such as the Qaryadar, Zamindar and the Mullah, to comment on who is right and who is wrong in water related disputes.

Village agricultural specialist (Chak Bashi): is mostly appointed by the Zamindar and works very closely with all farmers (villagers) to maximize profit for the Zamindar through coordination of agricultural activities and resources required for each season in a village. For example, the Chak Bashi has to decide what crop the village should grow during a certain season of the year based on variables such as water surplus or shortage, prevalence of new agricultural diseases, introduction of new seeds, etc. His decisions are key for the overall income of the village as well as the profit of the Zamindars. Like the Mirab, the source of power of the Chak Bashi also comes from the fact that when there is a conflict between two villagers over land, water, or the distribution of the harvest, he plays a key role in resolving the dispute. The Chak Bashi also represents the landlord in most public gatherings and/or executive meetings among power holders.

Village elder (Mohasen Safid): is a traditional position that is normally given to old men who are widely respected and trusted for their honesty and goodwill. Almost every village has at least a few of these men who are considered to be the legislative body of the village. They play a big role when conflicts arise among other power brokers. They are also the ones who appoint religious leaders for the village, and this is one of the most important roles because, later, the mullah of the village reports to these individuals for mosque related issues. Power brokers refer any legislative issue

that concern broader village interests to these elders. It is important to note that they are not considered to be executive people as they naturally tend to be kind and forgiving personalities.

Village head of CDC (Raees Shora-e-Enkeshafi): is a position that was created recently by the intervention of the international community and government through the National Solidarity Program. The position is considered to be powerful in some villages and not powerful in others, depending on who has occupies the post. According to a survey of NSP facilitating partners (NGOs) and our observations, in the majority of villages around the country the position is either taken by teachers (this is interestingly new development in the history of the village power structure since teachers were not so important before the war. They were mostly considered only as the clerk of the village) or by religious leaders. In some other cases, village elders, Zamindars, or Qaryadars have taken this position. CDCs are considered important for the time being because they receive money from the government, and they have the full support of the international community as well as government. Those who have become heads of CDCs are rarely called with their new title if they have a secondary title such as Zamindar, Mullah, Mirab, or Malem. People still consider and refer to them by the traditional name and consider them as their old role and responsibility. Leadership of CDCs has provided a very good secondary source of power to those who were already powerful, but not very much power to those who were not players in the village power game in the past. It is also important to note that people do not trust the position in the long run because they are not confident that the position and the program will continue long-term as they get the news from other power brokers that the program is being temporarily supported by the international community, and that will end very soon. Villagers also receive conflicting news from poppy business holders about what is going to happen next. Therefore, the power of this position depends very much on how the program and the CDC itself will develop in the near future.

Village commander (Qomandan): used to be a very important and powerful position during the war (1990s), and in a handful of villages are still the case. Commanders actually destroyed the whole power structure with their guns and enjoyed 10 to 15 years of kingdom rule in the village. In most cases, commanders were either sons or close relatives of key village power brokers. Their position was badly weakened after the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatant started by the government with immense support of international security forces. Today, this position is no longer considered as important as it used to be.

Village journalist (Dan Para): is another key position that is taken by some individuals mainly because of their unique ability. These are people who talk about realities in public, disregarding who is going to lose face as a result of their statements. This position is considered important because power brokers take journalists seriously as they don't want villagers to hear badly of them. However, the Dan Paras do not have any special source of power if they are not supported by one of the key leaders in the village.

Village teacher (Malem): is basically the village clerk who takes care of children's education as well as the paperwork of all other key players including the Zamindar and the Qaryadar. He is also expected to represent the village in highly important places because of his ability to talk about the wider aspects of the village interest. The source of power for these individuals is the level of people's trust in their knowledge and education. During the war they were considered the main enemy of the religious leaders as they were heavily supported by the communist government, while religious leaders were supported by the anti-government forces (Mojahideen). Therefore, schools and teachers were often targeted during the years of war. Even today, they are considered to be the main competitors of the village religious leaders because of their engagement in education and guidance, which is something that religious leaders want to preserve for themselves. The government and international community's support of the education sector has made religious leaders jealous and nervous; they believe that once kids are educated they rarely follow religious instructions. Development of relationships between teachers and religious leaders is important for the future of the country as they both guide people, and if they do not coordinate their efforts, they naturally create chaos and confusion.

In general, the power structure of the village is formed in such a manner that no one person exercises full power. It was only during the war that commanders enjoyed sole power. Since the establishment of the new administration, the system is returning to a balance of power. However, new challenges such as coalition building among district governors, Qaryadars, and Zamindars -in support of the poppy business has posed a new threat to the power structure of the village. Efforts are underway to motivate village religious leaders to join the coalition, but they haven't joined yet. It is hard to prevent such a critical change in the power structure of the village if proper attention is not paid to the governance reform programs beyond provinces.

Where CDC is located in the village power structure hierarchy?

It is very difficult for a CDC to stand against the new emerging form of power, particularly if poppy growers attract religious leaders. For the time being, CDCs seek the support of religious leaders to stand against pressure of other power brokers. In some villages where a teacher is elected as the head of CDC, religious leaders are already leaning towards the other power brokers since they are happy with teachers. Therefore, they are not very supportive of what CDC is doing in the village, and that creates lots of challenges for implementation of CDC projects. In villages where a religious leader is elected as the head of CDC (or as a member of CDC), the program is successfully implemented. This is mainly because CDCs are very much vulnerable against the recent rise of the power game. NSP partners have noticed this fact clearly in every part of the country and have adjusted their strategies accordingly. In southern parts of the country, NSP implementers noticed that it is almost impossible to implement any project without integrating religious leaders into the program. According to Eng. Osman Taruq, head of NSP program of International Rescue Committee, in Khost and Logar provinces, IRC has even hired religious leaders as their program staff to increase engagement of power brokers in the program. Plus,

they supported the establishment of an independent Council of Religious Leaders, which indirectly supports the program when it faces power challenges. The members of the Religious Leader Council are being supported indirectly by the NSP to keep them supportive of the program. These are practical indicators of what we described earlier as a secondary source of power to dominate the power structure of the village. NSP is creatively doing the same thing as Zamindars and Qaryadars have been doing to support poppy cultivation. They always need support from the judiciary body of the village to stand against the executive power of the village. One might ask why Zamindars and/or Qaryadars can not bypass the religious leader of the village. The answer to this question is a very important fact of the village context. Rural people of Afghanistan are predominantly religious, and three decades of religiously motivated war has further strengthened their religious motivations. Today, people do not listen to any other officials in the village as much as they listen to the religious leaders. Religious leaders know this fact and therefore, they struggle at higher levels of politics to maintain their power at all levels of the country's power structure.

Can CDCs take the lead in village governance?

Keeping in view all of the above realities, it is hard to imagine that CDCs can take the leadership position in the power hierarchy of the village, as the central government is currently hoping. They are facing strong competitors (Mullahs, Qaryadars, Zamindars, poppy growers, etc.) who are rich, powerful and influential. In order for the CDCs to dominate the power structure of the village, the councils are forced to bring these individuals inside. This is exactly what has been happening in all villages in Afghanistan. CDCs are always made up of these individuals, which raises a simple question: why is the government spending so much money to create what is already there in the village? During this research study, we could find barely any positive impact of the NSP program on reform of local governance structure in the village. The most important contribution of CDC to the village is its function as the mechanism that has provided villagers and power brokers access to the government and international assistance funding.

On the other hand, traditional power brokers of the village are very smart and creative in their interactions with the government reform programs. They have joined CDCs to have access to the government and international funding, but at the same time they have motivated the whole community to use CDC funding for projects that benefited the power brokers much more than ordinary villagers. For example, they pushed for approval of projects such as electric power in a village where drinking water was the priority of the villagers. In another village, a left irrigation project were proposed (for poppy cultivation purposes), while the priority of the village was a school and a clinic. In most cases we noticed that priorities were determined according to the needs of the power brokers rather than those of ordinary villagers. (photo of CDC head with poppy field)

Another reason that CDCs could hardly take the lead in the village power structure is their financial dependence on international assistance, which is considered

unsustainable in the long run. It is difficult to ensure survival of public institutions unless they are supported by public funding. Amongst the power brokers of the village, Mullahs and mosques are the only entities who enjoy support of public funding regularly. All expenses of mosques and Mullahs are paid by village contributions. When villagers were asked, “What motivates you to give your money to pay for the mosque but not for the school or road,” they responded, “We can live without education and without a road, but we can not live without our mosque.”

In order to understand the level of public support of the mosques, it would be helpful to review the table that reflects some useful facts about mosques in villages of the Dawlatabad district in Balkh province:

#	Description	Facts	Remarks
1	# of villages in the district	60	
2	# of mosques in the district	153	Average 2.55 per village
3	# of major mosques (Jame)	45	Located in market centers
4	# of junior mosques (Saghira)	108	In every village
5	# of mosques funded by villagers	153	
6	# of mosques funded by Gov.	0	
7	Average annual salary of Imam	55,000 Afg/year	In local currency
8	Average annual salary of Imam	12.6 Ton wheat/year	In kind
9	Who ensures funding?	Village elders	Legislative body

In some cases Imams are paid in both forms of kind and cash and in some other cases they are paid in mixed crops like half wheat and half barley-corn.

What other challenges exist?

Very recent history shows that the network of mosques were used by difference parties for mobilizing ordinary villagers of Afghanistan for different wars. In each of those cases the key role was played by the religious leaders who motivated people to stand up and go to the war. Given the existing challenges of Afghanistan and the region it is quite possible that the same technique be used once again by extremist to motivate people to destabilize the country. It is very important for the government to have a better engagement with such a vast and influential network of institutions that is deeply localized at the hearts of the villages. Disengagement and ignoring the network can cost the country a lot more than the cost of engaging them in the process of stabilization of Afghanistan.

What practical solutions are available?

Registration of all mosques around the country and establishment of a better governance structure that integrates religious institutions into the system can easily immune the country against any back-file of the system that has been experienced before. A complete set of recommendations are submitted separately for action. For further information please refer to the policy recommendation paper from this project.

What possible consequences are expected if no action is taken?

The following consequences are foreseen if no action is taken towards the recommendations of this paper:

1. Failure of CDCs in the village as soon as religious leaders decide to render their support towards their projects.
2. Sense of isolation and no importance can easily encourage highly influential religious leaders to lean towards incentives from other sources who might encourage them to take revenge by standing against the government and current process in the country.
3. Poppy business owners can easily buy the power of religious leaders and establish an other governance structure at the village that can further endanger future of the country once the seeds for proper poppy governance is planted.