

AFGHANISTAN LOOKING AHEAD

Challenges for Governance and Community Welfare

Research Briefs for the
2011 BONN CONFERENCE



Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
Research for a Better Afghanistan



December 2011

Dear Friends,

Greetings from the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.

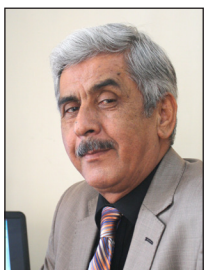
As this important gathering takes place in Bonn, it is my pleasure to send my regards as well as my hopes to the many Afghan and international delegates gathering to once again discuss the future path for Afghanistan.

Regardless of any political and military developments that may occur in coming years, it is certain that the great majority of Afghans will be focused on their desire to provide for their family's basic needs and to live in peaceful communities, while dreaming of a secure and prosperous future. In this spirit, AREU would like to present this selection of research summaries that address some important issues facing the country. They deliver key findings relating to governance and democracy as well as to the grassroots welfare of Afghan citizens. In this way, we hope to remind delegates of the importance of taking a coherent, long-term approach to the development of Afghanistan.

AREU has released over 200 reports since its establishment in late 2001, all of which are available on our website. The topics have been broad, but our consistent approach has been on rigorous, multi-site research programmes that deliver the depth of knowledge necessary to develop meaningful solutions for Afghanistan. Now, ten years on, we hope you agree that this mission and this goal remain as important as ever. Thus, I commend to you our hope that that the Bonn conference of 2011 proves to be an occasion that genuinely moves Afghanistan forward for the benefit of all.

It is with this in mind that I wish you the best of luck in your endeavours,

Sincerely,



M. A. Joyenda

Mir Ahmad Joyenda.

Deputy Director, Communications and Advocacy.

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Local Governance for Local Needs

Key Findings and Policy Options for Afghanistan

July 2011

Douglas Saltmarshe and Abhilash Medhi

This policy note presents key findings and policy options emerging from AREU's local governance research. Future Afghan governments will require structures that enable them to engage with and serve those whom they have the responsibility to govern. One of the most useful legacies of this present phase of international engagement with Afghanistan would be to assist its government develop robust, effective and accountable mechanisms for the operation of local government. However, while there has been heavy investment in building a strong centralised state, this has not been sufficiently matched by attention to local government at the provincial and district level.

2. Key Findings from AREU's Local Governance Research

Local Government Administration

- Provincial governors have an important coordinating role across the functions of administration, planning and security. However, the position is essentially political in nature. Governors operate through a network of informal actors who are often just as significant as formal office-holders. District governors have a similar coordinating role, but have seen their formal powers reduced in recent years, especially in the field of justice delivery.
- Development planning and budgeting at the provincial level is dysfunctional. This is largely a result of the highly centralised nature of these processes, which leaves provincial administrations unable to make development decisions in line with local needs. The planning functions of Provincial Development Committees' are largely being ignored or underused.
- The policies of the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC) provide a realistic framework for improving public administration through programmes that include recruitment, performance appraisal and supervision of training. However, its initiatives are under-resourced. Training of officials tends to be sporadic and lacks continuity of focus. High levels of malpractice related to the recruitment of civil servants remains the norm rather than the exception.
- The shift of responsibility for local government to the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) in 2007 has improved communication between the province and the centre and the speed of decision-making. IDLG has fulfilled a valuable role in developing policy, coordinating ministries and providing training. However, its reporting line directly to the president's office has rendered it a highly politicised institution, and its methods tend to reinforce rather than reduce central control.
- Corruption is an ever-present issue that extends throughout local government structures, often to the very highest positions. Rent-taking occurs at every opportunity, and the influence of powerholders and patronage networks remains pervasive.

Security and Justice

- There was no evidence of Afghanistan becoming a more peaceful state and large numbers of weapons remain in every province.
- The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are playing a role in improving Afghan National Army capability. However, coalition forces are viewed at best with ambivalence and often with palpable resentment by the local population, even in the more stable northern provinces.

About the Research

This policy note is drawn from AREU's June 2011 report *Local Governance in Afghanistan: A View from the Ground* (available at www.areu.org.af). The research was completed in December 2010 and covered 47 districts in Samangan, Jawzjan, Sar-i-Pul, Laghman, Wardak and Day Kundi Provinces, with additional time spent in two districts of Helmand.

- Considerable resources are being invested in boosting Afghan National Police numbers and in providing them with training. In most cases, however, the police are viewed as corrupt and were little trusted by the general population. That said, some of the more recently-appointed provincial chiefs of police displayed impressive professionalism.
- Formation of state-sponsored militias is reversing the disarmament process. In Wardak, they have improved daytime security on roads leading to the provincial centre, but were deeply resented by the Taliban and vulnerable to infiltration. This has implications for the ongoing formation of Afghan Local Police (ALP).
- Most disputes are being resolved at the community level, since doing so is cheaper, faster and more transparent than through government justice departments, which suffer widespread corruption. Community-based dispute resolution is based on customary law intermixed with Sharia law. While questions over human rights and the treatment of women remain, the use of more extreme customary practices, such as *baad*, is declining.
- However, in more stable areas, most of the serious crimes are being referred to the state, indicating that formal justice systems are starting to earn and retain a measure of legitimacy with the population.
- The shortcomings of the formal justice system (time taken, distance, complexity, expense and corruption) were major factors cited for the loss of trust in the government. Significantly, the Taliban seek to control justice mechanisms as their first priority after securing control of an area.

Service Delivery

- Dependence on donor funds is high across all sectors. Many health, education and rural development programmes may become unsustainable because a reduction in aid flows will likely accompany the military drawdown toward 2014. To complicate matters further, about half of all external assistance is currently provided outside government budgetary mechanisms.
- Government efficiency as measured by its capacity to disburse and use funds is exceedingly low and demonstrates the centralised system's failure to deliver. The development budget execution rate for 2010 was only 37 percent.
- The quality of service delivery in provinces and districts tends to decline in proportion to their remoteness and levels of lawlessness, highlighting the need for greater attention to be paid to peripheries.
- Most delivery processes are plagued by high levels of corruption, though health is generally the best administered. There were repeated reports of World Food Programme (WFP) inputs being diverted by local government, line ministries and police in each of the study provinces.
- Nongovernmental actors have made a substantial contribution to achievements in the health, education, rural development and infrastructure sectors. The commitment of international NGOs is impressive across all sectors, and they pay far greater attention than the government to employing and using the skills of women.
- The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) has achieved considerable success in bringing development to previously untouched areas. However, its inherent contradictions and weaknesses have left it vulnerable to politicisation and a source for extracting rents. The programme undermines local government by bypassing it. Fragmented and piecemeal development prevents achievement of the synergies that derive from coordinated district planning. Community Development Councils (CDCs) cannot be seen in isolation from the deeper village structures in which they are embedded.
- Although women have a role in the NSP process in respect of deciding on projects, they remain constrained by low literacy levels and their inability to network effectively.
- As development actors, PRTs operate under a number of constraints. While the military often plays an important humanitarian role, there is a fundamental tension between delivering militarised aid with the aim of winning loyalty and culturally appropriate efforts to deliver development, alleviate poverty and reduce social inequality.

Representation

- The electoral system lacks speed and transparency and has failed to inspire popular confidence. The single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system undermines the development of party politics and, by requiring relatively few votes to create winners, encourages vote-buying and bribery of election officials.
- The establishment of provincial councils in 2005 was a significant first step in building representative government at a local level. However, they have been set up as participatory institutions and have little scope to perform the vital tasks of representing their constituencies and holding the executive to account.
- While the resourcing of provincial councils is slowly improving, councillors still lack the means to travel and fulfil their responsibilities.

- There is a lack of clear policy on what district-level representation should look like and which authorities are responsible for it. Subsequently, there is a tension between IDLG and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), with each running parallel district-level representative bodies: District Community Councils (DCCs) and District Development Assemblies (DDAs), respectively. This failure to determine effective representative mechanisms at the district level is damaging all concerned. The situation is being further exacerbated by a mixture of uncoordinated and competing donor funding.
- The constituency-based model of district representation developed in Helmand—a DDA under IDLG’s Afghanistan Social Outreach Programme (ASOP)—lays out an interesting alternative model for local representation. It offers a workable and structured way to bridge the gap between formal government structures and communities.
- The *shura* is a common feature of most Afghan villages and is usually composed of traditional elites like *khans*, *maliks*, *arbabs*, *mullahs* and *jihadi* commanders. It embodies and upholds a village’s commonly-accepted set of norms and practices and, to varying degrees, deals with disputes and misdemeanours.
- Owing to the pace of social change, customary norms are gradually losing their influence. Increasingly, those with close links to government are commanding more respect than members of the traditional *shura*.
- For most villagers, the mosque and the congregation for prayer provide structured contact and a form of civic space to discuss and organise many joint activities. These include the operation of civil defence militias, CDCs, and school and health committees, along with other forms of collective action.
- Political affiliation is a way of linking to patronage networks rather than a matter of ideology. Though knowledge about the mandate of elected bodies is improving, representatives are still seen by some as direct service providers.

2. Summary of Policy Options for Improved Local Governance

While many shortcomings were identified through the research, the silver lining is that focus on local governance in Afghanistan is increasing. There is a growing recognition among national and international stakeholders of how vital it is for security and the enduring legitimacy of the Afghan state, particularly in the context of a gradual transition toward complete responsibility by Afghan authorities for all areas of the country.

There is an opportunity to be seized, and the *View from the Ground* report provides the following policy options. If addressed and enacted meaningfully, these measures would assist in the development of robust, effective and accountable mechanisms for the operation of local government in Afghanistan.

The Centralised State

- Modify the 2010 Draft Legislation on Local Government to provide meaningful powers to provincial and district representative bodies that give them clear authority to exercise scrutiny and sanction the executive, and identified powers to act within Provincial Development Committees.
- Define in the draft legislation the autonomy of the provincial council and its freedom to report directly to the Wolesi Jirga (the lower house of Afghanistan’s parliament).

Responsibility for Local Government

- Allocate responsibility to a single executive authority for the administration of all tiers of local government.

Planning

- Increase the powers of Provincial Development Committees.
- Provide each province with an allocation from the central budget to be used by Provincial Development Committees to meet locally defined needs.
- Draft legislation that will allow provincial authorities to raise and retain local taxes.

The District

- Consolidate all authority for district representation in a single body.
- Use consultative mechanisms to select district councillors—preferably those developed by ASOP in Helmand—until appropriate mechanisms exist and there are sufficient resources for district elections.
- Create and formalise appropriate linkages between district actors and provincial councils regarding planning and administrative matters.

The Village

- Modify the draft law on village councils to allow for their selection in a traditional, consultative manner.
- Consolidate administrative functions in a single village body, but reduce its statutory obligations.

Justice delivery

- Remove the obligations for justice delivery from the draft laws for provincial, district and village councils, as this would further confuse the appropriate separation of powers.
- Encourage the registration of locally made judgements as a step toward integrating community-based justice delivery into formal justice procedures.
- Reduce the number of non-state actors involved in justice delivery.

The Voting System

- Establish a joint government and international community commission to review the effectiveness of SNTV.
- Avoid any further extension of the use of SNTV.
- Allow civil society actors and international counterparts to join the government in a public debate on alternative voting systems.

Corruption

- Place High Office of Oversight representatives within provincial administrations to improve the redress of grievances.
- Give provincial and district councils sufficient and meaningful powers to hold provincial and district administrations and line ministries to account over implementation and resource application.
- Establish policies that will permit and encourage the involvement of civil society actors in processes of scrutiny and social audit.

Donors

- The Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB) should intensify its efforts to increase coordination between donors in providing support for the development of local government.
- Donors should adhere to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action and use them as a framework to improve alignment with government-led local government initiatives.
- Donors should jointly agree on a common strategy for local government and take the lead in encouraging the government and civil society to develop a clear, coherent and comprehensible approach on this subject.
- Place a great deal more emphasis on monitoring and evaluation, not only of process but of outcomes and impact.
- Allow for time and patience. If it is to happen, the transformation of local governance will not occur overnight. Crucially, nothing can be achieved at the pace currently being dictated by the West, which is pressing systems beyond their capacity to respond and deliver.

Service Delivery

- Devolve planning and budgetary functions to provincial line departments as a way to improve targeting.
- Address shortcomings in coordination among provincial and district line ministries through strengthening Provincial Development Committee functions.
- Consider establishing sector-specific partnerships at the provincial level.
- Reduce the extent of militarised development delivery.

Capacity Building

- Provide IARCSC with increased support to expand its provincial training facilities.
- Devise and fund a programme that improves capacity through a mentoring approach to provincial and district administrations and provincial and district councils.
- Re-evaluate training resources to make them more relevant and easily understood by the target audiences.
- Develop a standardised approach to civil service capacity development to be used by all training providers.



Rethinking Rural Poverty Reduction in Afghanistan

October 2011

Paula Kantor and Adam Pain

Introduction

Rural communities across large parts of Afghanistan are getting poorer. Despite years of development aid that have seen tangible improvements in education, healthcare and electricity, many rural households are still struggling to put food on the table and educate their children. This is especially true in the drought-hit North of the country, where the ban on opium poppy cultivation has coincided with prolonged and repeated droughts. The global financial crisis and volatile food and fuel markets have worsened the situation, pushing up prices of basic goods just when many families could least afford it. As a result, the livelihoods of many people in these areas are even less secure now than they were ten years ago.

Given the regional and international interest in Afghanistan's security and development, it is unsurprising that political expedience exerts a major influence on the country's policy agenda. In too many cases, this has led to programmes and strategies that are largely divorced from the interests and experiences of ordinary Afghans. One such example is how poverty reduction is losing ground to the promotion of economic growth in current policy agendas, such as the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS). As donor and government priorities shift in anticipation of the 2014 transition process, this policy note calls for a re-examination of poverty reduction strategy in Afghanistan. Drawing on AREU research, it argues for a revised understanding of poverty that goes beyond the issue of resource scarcity to address the social and economic structures that underpin it. Economic security for ordinary Afghans must be part of a responsible exit strategy, and can enhance stability. However, this will not happen without a guiding vision from the government and donor community that puts the Afghan people at its centre.

1. Addressing Rural Livelihood Security

There is little doubt that agriculture and the rural economy have a central role to play in promoting development in Afghanistan. However, market-oriented assistance to these sectors is unlikely to reach the substantial portion of rural households that are struggling to cope with high levels of uncertainty. Faced with the often cumulative effects of economic shocks and locked into dependent or unequal social relationships, these families are regularly forced into short-term coping strategies that threaten to undermine their long-term livelihood security. In such cases, diversification into nonfarm employment often does not represent a path out of poverty but a lack of alternative options. For these vulnerable groups, simply improving the availability of inputs or infrastructure—a major focus of many current interventions—will not suffice. Enabling them to make a lasting shift out of poverty will require a joined-up approach that stabilises livelihoods and ensures a basic level of food security, strengthens their capacity to improve their situation, and addresses the structural constraints and unequal social relations that limit their efforts to do so.

About the Research

This policy note is based on research conducted by AREU's "Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectories" project, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. The research was conducted in 2009-10 in 64 households in eight villages spread across Kandahar, Badakhshan and Sar-i-Pul Provinces, and also included supplementary data from Faryab Province. In revisiting households covered by previous AREU livelihoods research in 2003, the study aimed to track the course of rural livelihood security in these areas in the intervening years. For more information and a full list of papers, see the project's page on AREU's website.

Agricultural variability and viability

The challenges many rural households face in making even the most basic living off their land raise serious questions over the viability of agriculture as a primary route out of poverty. Inheritance practices that subdivide assets over generations mean that land sizes are declining, a particular problem in rainfed agricultural areas lacking adequate irrigation infrastructure (e.g. Sar-i-Pul, Badakhshan, Faryab). In areas of agricultural surplus (e.g. Kandahar), landholdings are often concentrated in the hands of wealthy and often predatory landlords, leading to a prevalence of unequal and insecure sharecropping arrangements. Other sources of risk to agricultural viability include pressures both natural, such as the frequent droughts besetting the country, and man-made, such as ongoing government attempts to curtail opium poppy production in the absence of comparable livelihood alternatives. In addition, access to agricultural inputs from state or NGO sources is often unreliable, not timed appropriately, and can be hijacked by local patronage networks. This leaves many households vulnerable in the face of plant diseases, pests, or livestock loss. Finally, an increasing need to engage with markets is causing considerable strain among many households without connections or market power. A deep distrust of often volatile markets means that many farm households are prioritising subsistence production to avoid relying on them to meet basic food requirements. Farm households ultimately need a secure base from which to make the risky move of intensifying market production.

Limits of diversification into nonfarm employment

The limited quantity and quality of job opportunities often constrains the effectiveness of nonfarm employment as a route out of poverty. Lack of resources and poor access to input and product markets mean that the basis for a strong nonfarm economy is particularly weak in remote areas, pushing many men to migrate for work. While many rural households are already highly diversified, diversification does not guarantee livelihood security. In many instances, households are driven to seek nonfarm employment by circumstances such as drought or landlessness. In this process of “distress diversification,” workers are often prepared to take higher risks or submit themselves to dependent relations to secure a source of income. In an often saturated labour market, this can drive down wages and reduce employment security. While limited options exist in urban and international labour markets, these are beset with their own challenges, highlighting the need to extend the horizons of rural development and labour protection to areas well beyond the village. While women’s contributions to household livelihoods are often vital in times of economic decline, gender norms continue to constrain the aspirations and abilities of women, negatively impacting household livelihood security and economic potential.

Understanding context and social hierarchies

Most programmatic interventions to address livelihood insecurity at the village level take little account of context: how villages are organised and the ways in which prevailing economic, political and social systems contribute to that organisation. In Afghanistan, regional identities and social orders have deep historical roots, which have proved highly durable and remain relevant to understanding Afghanistan’s political landscape. Within and across the country’s four main regions—focused around the historical centres of Herat, Balkh, Kandahar and Kabul—there are persistent contrasts between the relatively non-hierarchical subsistence social orders of the mountains and the more hierarchical social arrangements of the surplus-generating irrigated plains.

In most cases, the prevailing social order of a given village has a decisive impact on its capacity to produce and access public goods. For individual households, the nature and quality of village social relations, and their position within them, can determine whether they improve their conditions, cope with crises, or remain locked in poverty. Patronage and charitable relationships are important ways for some households to maintain livelihood security, while others invest heavily in maintaining informal networks of mutual support that offer access to interest-free credit. However, all of these safety nets are variable and can weaken in the face of economic decline. Poor households least endowed with able-bodied male labour are often particularly vulnerable, forced to invest in precarious forms of dependent relationships with local elites in order to survive. Currently, the ability of poor Afghans to mobilise collectively against the systemic insecurities they face remains minimal, since doing so runs the risk of social exclusion and curtailed access to vital resources obtained through social connections.

Further Reading

All available from www.areu.org.af

- Running out of Options: Tracing Rural Afghan Livelihoods
- Understanding and Addressing Context in Afghanistan: How Villages Differ and Why
- Securing Life and Livelihoods in Rural Afghanistan: The Role of Social Relationships
- Poverty in Afghan Policy: Enhancing Solutions through Better Defining the Problem

While existing forms of social assistance provided by the state, NGOs and communities themselves can offer a valuable source of respite for struggling households, prevailing social hierarchies put up obstacles that limit their accessibility or availability, especially for the poorest households. While charity is a commonly accepted way for communities to help their poorest households, donations are highly variable and individualised, and recipients often feel pressured to demonstrate their “worthiness” (e.g. poverty, willingness to serve) in order to ensure continued receipt. Cash-for-work programmes can guarantee several months of food security among poorer households. However, they are often unable to

reach households without adequate male labour, while their short-term and ad-hoc nature limits their potential to provide a base of security from which recipients can improve in the long run. And although limited sources of state social protection exist, labyrinthine application processes mean access is often limited to those with the requisite social connections. In all cases, there is a risk that capture or co-opting of aid by village elites—sometimes acting through the National Solidarity Programme’s Community Development Councils—can severely impede its ability to help the most vulnerable households.

2. Ways Forward

Improving rural livelihood security in Afghanistan requires an integrated programmatic approach that addresses agricultural risks, weakens existing supply- and demand-side constraints within nonfarm labour markets, and works both within and against the local social hierarchies that affect who benefits from aid. Informed by AREU’s evidence of the struggles that rural Afghans regularly engage in to achieve security, a range of broad recommendations in different intervention areas is provided below.

- **Recognise village preconditions:** Development actors in the field need to take more account of village variability in programme design, implementation and evaluation. This would include an assessment of how far village preconditions have contributed to programme impacts, as well as a more careful understanding of how interventions interact with what already exists, such as informal credit structures and local social inequalities. Donor encouragement of more context-sensitive programming allowing for more flexible implementation processes and assessment outcomes will be critical in driving this process.
- **Develop strategies to engage with elites:** It is particularly important to understand that political elites at both regional and village levels often maintain their positions by restricting access to resources through personal relations. Until such individuals are willing to allow more open competition, village social orders have no imperative to change. In some cases, there may be opportunities for programmes to build on elites’ existing philanthropic roles; in others, their potential to capture programme control and benefits needs to be neutralised, potentially entailing longer-term engagements in communities with the aim of creating alternative power centres.
- **Identify ways to provide access to resources that challenge existing inequalities:** Although approaches to agricultural growth that prioritise access to inputs or services may have immediate practical benefits, these are not guaranteed to be evenly distributed. Programme benefits can often be expropriated by existing patronage systems to serve alternative ends, such as the strengthening of social networks. Such efforts may thus end up supporting existing inequalities instead of challenging them, leaving the poor trapped in dependent relationships in order to secure access. There is a strong need for more rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, along with greater and more accessible information about the availability of state or NGO assistance and their qualifying criteria.

- **Harness the strength of collective organisations:** Collective organisations may provide an important means to challenge local social orders and improve livelihood security for poor rural residents, including women. Supporting the formation and strengthening of organisations of sharecroppers, agricultural workers or farmers producing for markets can be a way to improve bargaining power and market access. Organisations can also become a conduit for promoting joint production of small plots or sharing of assets such as draught animals to improve security of access. Separate organisations for women farmers or workers are needed to ensure they have space to define and act on their own interests.
- **Improve the outreach and effectiveness of programmes delivering agriculture inputs and credit:** Agricultural development programmes need to be geared toward the wide range of interests and goals rural Afghans prioritise. They must be more accessible to poorer farmers and sharecroppers and oriented to subsistence producer needs as well as those producing for markets. They must reflect the complementary nature of farm inputs and be delivered in coordinated ways, in line with seasonal calendars and with credit products designed to suit agricultural cash flows.
- **Provide a stable base from which farmers can take growth-oriented risks:** Farmers make rational decisions to produce for their own food needs in the face of a highly risky environment. Interventions need to be sequenced to first enhance food and basic livelihood security before supporting farmers to produce for markets or invest in new enterprises. This involves expanding provision of economic infrastructure (roads, communications, electricity) to both low- and high-potential areas, regularising and expanding work days available through food-for-work programmes, and ensuring social assistance reaches households lacking able-bodied male labour. Identifying ways to institutionalise traditional forms of charitable giving to make it less individualised and variable; enhancing saving opportunities and developing micro-insurance products are also ways to provide a base of security.
- **Improve the quality and quantity of nonfarm labour opportunities and rural residents' readiness for opportunities:** Efforts are needed to enhance job creation in rural and urban areas and in neighbouring countries. This involves improving infrastructure in rural areas to enhance investment potential, investing in urban development to ensure jobs and services are available to accommodate rising numbers of rural-urban migrants, and continuing efforts to gain bilateral labour migration agreements with Iran and Pakistan to manage flows and protect migrants. Other actions include advocating for minimum wage legislation and an informal sector labour code to document and protect worker rights; such efforts need to involve workers to build cohesion and organising skills. Finally, workers need the right skills to match demand from existing and new opportunities, such as in the extractive industries. The ability of the National Skills Development Program (a National Priority Program under the ANDS) to reach poorer clients, including women, needs to be improved to ensure these groups do not lose out.

About AREU

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice through conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning. To achieve its mission AREU engages with policymakers, civil society, researchers and students to promote their use of AREU's research and its library, to strengthen their research capacity, and to create opportunities for analysis, reflection and debate.

AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations. AREU receives core funds from the governments of Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. Specific projects in 2011 have been funded by the European Commission (EC), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Humanitarian Aid Department of the European Commission (ECHO), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), and UN Women.

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Practicing Democracy in Afghanistan

Key Findings on Perceptions, Parliament and Elections

May 2011

Oliver Lough

Introduction

This policy note draws on over three years of AREU research into the dynamics of representative governance in Afghanistan at local and national levels (see box below for details). It is intended to be an introductory guide for donors, programme implementers, educators, capacity-builders and others interested in politics in Afghanistan, and identifies relevant AREU reports for further reading, depending on specific fields of interest. The paper is divided into three interconnecting themes:

- **Perceptions among the Electorate**, exploring voters' views on "democracy" and elections, opinions on consensus politics and its relationship to stability, notions of equality, and expectations of MPs.
- **Electoral Dynamics**, examining how people vote and why, and strategies candidates and voters use to negotiate power during and after elections.
- **Parliamentary Politics**, outlining how MPs interact with their constituents and the executive, political dynamics within parliament, and how MPs manage the costs associated with their positions.

1. Perceptions among the Electorate

Afghans generally have a strong interest in how their country is and should be governed. While their views vary, there are some identifiable trends, often widely divergent from Western ideals of democracy.

Elections versus "democracy": There is strong support among many Afghans for people's right to select their representatives through elections. In many people's minds, these desirable aspects of representation are separated from wider connotations of the English word "democracy," which is often seen as an imported system of Western social values and ideals that threatens people's identities as both Afghans and Muslims. Afghans often said that democratisation should take place within an "Islamic framework," where people's behaviour conforms with an acceptable—though rarely defined—set of Islamic norms and values.

Consensus and stability: Many Afghans stress the importance of consensus when describing what politics should ideally look like. Citing local methods of community governance such as *shuras* or *jirgas*, people see consensus-building as a more predictable, stable and inclusive way to make decisions than the competitive individualism typical in the West. Similarly, political parties are often viewed as potentially destructive forces that exacerbate divisions and heighten the risk of conflict, due in part to their destructive role during the jihad and civil war periods and the violent competition between different groups they are seen to represent. Especially in less secure areas, many people ultimately prize a basic level of security above all else and are reluctant to involve themselves in politics of any kind should it threaten to disrupt this.

About the Research

This summary draws on a series of papers by Anna Larson, Noah Coburn and Mohammad Hasan Wafaey that outline the findings of AREU's three-year research project exploring issues of representative governance. Part-funded by the Foundation for the Open Society Institute of Afghanistan (FOSIA), fieldwork took place in Balkh, Kabul, Ghazni and Nangarhar (in coordination with OSDR), Nimroz (in coordination with Relief International) and Paktia Provinces. It was conducted by AREU governance researchers Farid Ahmad Bayat, Parween Gezabi, Najia Hajizada, Sameera Ibrahimi, Mohammad Asif Karimi, Anisa Nuzhat, Yahya Rahimi, Maryam Safi, Muneer Salamzai, Sediq Seddiqqi and Zahir Seddiqqi under the management of Noah Coburn, Anna Larson and Mohammad Hassan Wafaey. For more information and a full list of papers, see the project's page on AREU's website (www.areu.org.af).

Questions of equality: There is a general demand for equal access to political influence and economic resources. In this respect, many see Afghanistan’s current system as little more than a front for existing powerholders to enrich themselves at the expense of the population at large. However, there is a lack of consensus over exactly how representation should work in Afghanistan and views often differ according to people’s backgrounds. For example, there is often a sense that the right to represent should somehow be tied to a person’s level of education or capacity, and there are competing opinions on whether and how power should be allocated among Afghanistan’s different population groups.

Further Reading on Voter Perceptions

- Deconstructing “Democracy” in Afghanistan (2011).
- Losing Legitimacy? (2009).

Expectations of MPs: In many instances, voters equate MPs with other community leaders such as *maliks*, who have traditionally served as a point of contact with the state. This can lead to the view that they are thus bound by similar norms of reciprocal obligation; rather than serving as representatives, they are expected to provide services and political connections in exchange for community support. In a similar vein, there is a sense that only someone familiar with a given community can represent it and be held to account if promises of service provision go unmet. These factors can ultimately lead to the expectation that MPs will primarily represent communities with which they are associated (rather than the entire population of their home province, which is their actual electorate). These understandings can lead to disillusionment when people’s high expectations of service provision are not met by MPs, as well as feelings of disenfranchisement among communities without “their own” parliamentarian.

2. Electoral Dynamics

Since 2009’s presidential poll, elections in Afghanistan have become the subject of increasing public scepticism and are widely viewed as fraud-tainted, lacking in procedural transparency and controlled by powerful national leaders or foreign actors. However, despite this perception, the process can still provide an important opportunity for communities and candidates to demonstrate strength, renegotiate power and secure resources. This section explores a number of general features that characterise electoral participation in Afghanistan.

Localism: Elections in Afghanistan tend to play out in a highly localised fashion, even when it comes to parliamentary or presidential polls. In general, the paramount importance of solidarity groups (often referred to as *qawms* or *khels*) and reciprocal patronage networks in Afghan society means that elections revolve around competing local interests rather than cross-cutting issues or ideologies. Prioritisation of local interests is further reinforced by the tendency to see MPs as direct service providers, since by this calculation a community’s support at an election should translate into concrete rewards if its candidate is successful.

Bloc voting: Collective voting is a regular feature of Afghan elections, though the precise size of blocs can vary depending on local conditions. While the idea of collective voting may seem at odds with the one-person-one-vote mentality of Western electoral politics, it is a system that offers Afghan communities and individuals better scope to address their own political concerns. In general, this approach is coherent with the general preference for consensus-based politics mentioned above. In addition, appearing to mobilise a large bloc vote is a way for communities to demonstrate their political clout, as well as extract resources in the aftermath of elections from candidates they claim to have supported.

The voting system: Bloc voting is also encouraged by Afghanistan’s single non-transferrable vote (SNTV) electoral system, where provinces are allocated a given number of MPs who are elected based on the number of direct votes they win. This means that the last few successful candidates in each province can win with a relatively small number of votes. There is thus a concrete motivation for communities to vote unanimously in order to increase the likelihood of a candidate with which they are connected being elected. However, this practice can create problems when scaled up to a provincial or national level given its potential to skew election results in favour of communities best able to mobilise collectively and turn out to vote (which can be highly dependent on local security conditions). A recent example is the parliamentary election results in Ghazni, where far greater voter turnout among the Hazaras contributed to the election of a highly disproportionate number of Hazara

MPs relative to the ethnic composition of the province (which also has a large Pashtun community). This led to high-level political tensions and increased instability in the area.

Election strategies: Elections in Afghanistan are where relationships of patronage and reciprocity meet the secrecy of the ballot box; they also take place in a context of uncertain security and widespread perceptions of fraud. Out of these circumstances have emerged a number of election strategies that candidates and communities rely on to secure maximum political capital:

- *Exploiting uncertainty:* The practice of concealing one's true actions from friends and enemies alike is pervasive across all levels of Afghan politics. In elections, this manifests itself in a variety of ways. Secret ballots allow voters to claim to have supported a winning candidate when it comes to the distribution of post-election political favour. For individuals, they can also open a way to vote against the preference of their broader bloc when doing so openly would attract community censure. Candidates also have much to gain by concealing their motives and allegiances. By keeping party affiliation informal, for example, they can gain political or economic support from more powerful actors while minimising voter suspicion. Meanwhile, fuelling or manipulating local rumours can help inflate their perceived role in bringing development projects or other benefits to a given area.
- *Accusations of fraud:* Crying foul allows losing candidates and their supporters to undermine the legitimacy of their opponents. Regardless of how true such claims are, the general belief that elections are rife with fraud means that simply alleging illegitimate use of influence can be an effective political tool. Actors with a large power base can thus demand a proportionate role in post-election politics regardless of their actual vote tallies.
- *Violence:* The threat or use of violence can be an extremely effective political strategy in Afghanistan. During campaign season, various actors may covertly or explicitly deploy violence to sway voters by raising doubts over the stability of the status quo or by inhibiting the ability of opponents or electoral agencies to operate in certain areas. After the results are in, losing candidates can also threaten to take up arms against the government as a way to extract concessions despite their defeat. In insecure areas, a candidate's ability to wield military force can thus have a strong bearing on voter preference, since their influence over security looms larger than others' promises to provide more material services.

Further Reading on Electoral Dynamics

- Voting Together (2009).
- Connecting With Kabul (2010).
- Undermining Representative Governance (2011).

3. Parliamentary Politics

The Wolesi Jirga (lower house of parliament) is the focal point of representative governance in Afghanistan because it is often the primary link between communities and the central government in Kabul. This section details some of the body's political dynamics, which in some respects mirror those seen in local communities across the country.

Relations with constituents: How MPs relate to voters is highly dependent on the political landscape of a given area. As discussed, MPs tend (and are expected) to behave in the mould of existing local community leaders, whose scope of representation is limited. They may serve the interests of a specific community (or *qawm* or *khel*) and in doing so are often deeply intertwined in the networks of patronage and reciprocity that characterise them. In some cases, close ties between MPs and powerful local actors allow the latter to act as gatekeepers, controlling constituents' access to their representatives.

Relations with the executive: There is a strong incentive for MPs to forge links with members of the executive (such as line ministries or the president's office). Doing so can open access to a range of resources and services that can benefit both their communities and their own personal interests. However, maintaining these relationships can prove difficult given the shifting nature of political allegiance within the parliament. Unrecorded voting in the Wolesi Jirga allows MPs to vote on most issues without the pressure of public scrutiny, and changing positions on an issue is thus commonplace.

In this way, plenary votes are used as bargaining chips to secure patronage in a manner that can be detached from the public interest.

Organisational capacity: In general, MPs' ability to organise as long-term interest groups is weak. As in communities, there is little initial tendency for groups to form on the basis of issues or ideology, despite provisions in the Parliamentary rules of procedure to encourage this. Instead, MPs are more likely to rally around the immediate concerns of patronage networks or ethnic/solidarity groups. In addition, the potentially lucrative sources of patronage offered by powerful parliamentarians and members of the executive mean that many MPs are reluctant to adopt a consistent political stance or forge lasting alliances for fear of closing off their options. This also acts as a disincentive for MPs to tie themselves too closely to political parties, leaving the latter generally incapable of mobilising consistent support. While some groups have been able to form, they have nevertheless tended to fragment quickly due to a lack of funds, arguments over leadership, and the competing pull of other interests on their individual members. Significantly, these factors have also contributed to a noticeable lack of organisation around women's interests on the part of female MPs.

Further Reading on Parliamentary Politics

- A Matter of Interests (2007).
- Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties (2009).
- The Wolesi Jirga in Flux (2010).
- Political Economy in the Wolesi Jirga (2011).

Expenses: Becoming (and being) an MP is expensive. An election campaign can easily cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, to which is added the high day-to-day expenses of office if the campaign is a success. MPs draw on a diverse array of funding sources for support. In many cases they rely heavily on the communities they represent, which may help strengthen their sense of accountability toward them. However, MPs may also take advantage of larger—and potentially less legal—external sources of funding. These may take the form of business interests, gaining access to lucrative government contracts, or forming patronage relations with powerful figures. In bypassing the need for community support, such ties threaten to fundamentally reshape MPs' priorities away from the needs of their constituents.

4. Conclusion

Afghanistan's post-2001 democratic experiment has combined imported democratic institutions with a range of other power structures, networks of allegiance and methods of negotiating power. Some of these are rooted in tradition, while others have emerged as a result of conflict dynamics and new opportunities. Representative governance in the country is thus an evolving hybrid of democratic procedures and existing practices that interact in diverse and at times unexpected ways. It is unlikely to resemble Western-style, liberal democracy with its attendant social freedoms in the near future, nor is there much local desire for it to do so. However, if supporters of democratisation continue their efforts based on a realistic understanding of how representation functions in practice, there is still space for the emergence of a durable political system that Afghans can trust to respond to their needs.

About AREU

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice through conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning.

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PAINFUL STEPS

Justice, Forgiveness and Compromise in Afghanistan's Peace Process

November 2011

Jay Lamey with Emily Winterbotham

Introduction

Peace in Afghanistan is frequently discussed but remains only a faint hope. As we move from meetings in Kabul to Bonn, and as strategies for the future are made and revised, it is vital that the voices of those who have suffered during Afghanistan's conflicts are heard and understood. An arrangement that respects their hopes and concerns stands the best chance of delivering a just and durable peace in the country.

Legacies of conflict are deeply felt by many Afghans, who report that psychological suffering is affecting their ability to cope with daily life. This is generally worst for those who have experienced the death or disappearance of close family members or been exposed to acts of violence—something experienced by many Afghans. Against this backdrop, there has been no comprehensive program to provide justice or compensation, and the desire for some form of “closure” remains strong.

Meanwhile, as the nation struggles with ongoing conflict, new suffering occurs on a daily basis. Communities in contested areas report feeling trapped between insurgents and the allied government and international forces, which can result in intimidation, deaths and displacement. Afghans who are not directly exposed to the continuing violence report being unable to feel “at peace” due to the presence of conflict in their country, which is widely seen as inhibiting national progress.

These findings are from an AREU research project that has focussed on the legacies of conflict in Afghanistan. It explored local perspectives on peace, justice and reconciliation, with a specific focus on gathering Afghan experiences, opinions and desires that could inform the quest for peace. People often expressed themselves through Dari and Pashto phrases that convey a need to “cool” or “calm” people's hearts and heal “*oqda*,” which was often used to indicate hatred, hostility or obsessive feelings stemming from conflict.

The research was designed to reach communities with different ethnic compositions and differing exposure to conflict phases. The qualitative format allowed for the in-depth exploration of complex issues and histories, and provided space for people to reflect on some of the true hardships of war and the difficult challenges confronting the nation. Patterns are identifiable across, between and within the communities studied, and these are presented here in the context of national peace efforts and their implications for justice and long-term stability.

1. A Desire to Move Forward

Balancing demands for peace and justice is difficult. Many people expressed a desire for punishment or revenge against individuals or groups perceived to have committed serious crimes during Afghanistan's conflicts, particularly leaders who were identified as primarily responsible. This was often seen through an Islamic framework, which outlines specific punishments for certain crimes. However, many of these same people frequently also expressed a pragmatic capacity to forego these rights to retaliation in the interests of security and the long-term stability of Afghanistan. This is significant given that the principle of *huqooq-ul-ibad* was understood to confer the power to forgive on the victims of crimes only. Serious barriers to peace, reconciliation and justice were widely recognised, embodied in an ongoing insurgency as well as a government interwoven with wartime players. Although prospects were perceived as dim, a negotiated settlement was ultimately seen as vital. Afghan customs based on inclusive discussion and dispute resolution were seen as providing a platform on which this could take place.

Ethnicity and other forms of group identity have been used to mobilise people during Afghanistan's conflicts, particularly during the 1990s. Subsequently, ethnic tensions and rivalries remain in many areas, and are visible in or between local communities as well as at regional and national levels. However, people lamented this state of affairs and largely blamed conflict leaders for creating rifts between groups. Many people emphasised the need for reinforcing a broader Afghan identity, which has already been strengthened by wartime migration from and back to the "homeland." This desire and ability to transcend internal rivalries in search of national cohesion and progress is a positive trend for the future.

This did not mean simply forgetting the past. Instead, education programs and approaches that allowed for society and its future generations to learn from the past were favoured. Subsequently, there was considerable support for some combination of truth-seeking, apologies, forgiveness and compensation, although some feared these measures could undermine fragile stability. While such processes do not appear likely given the political and security context of Afghanistan today, they should not be pushed off the agenda. In fact, they could potentially serve a measure of justice while also fostering an environment more conducive to peace. Meanwhile, respondents believed that building legitimate government, which is a fundamental component of peace, requires limiting the power of those guilty of wartime violations. Overall, people who have suffered during wartime feel that their experiences have been ignored, and if opportunities arise in future to provide some form of acknowledgement, these are likely to be well received.

2. Afghan perspectives and ongoing peace efforts

The current peace initiative, launched in early 2010, is two-track: seeking "reintegration" of lower-level fighters into their communities while high-level talks aim at reaching a peace deal or "reconciliation" with the Taliban. The approach is underpinned by military force—insurgents have been the targets of increased attacks, particularly by special operations forces, that aim to force them to the table.

The clear distinction found in the research between "leaders" and "followers" and the belief that in most cases followers did not deserve punishment provides some support to the reintegration element. Afghans across the country are likely to be supportive of junior fighters rejoining their communities. This process has begun, administered by the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme secretariat and its provincial offices, in coordination with the International Security Assistance Force. According to programme documents, around 2,500 fighters had officially entered the program by October.¹ Some currently live in government safe houses and others have re-entered their communities of origin, which are expected to support them and prevent their return to the battlefield.

However, the clear distinction between the high and low-level processes was criticised as the plan emerged in 2010, including by an AREU study.² It pointed out that the reconciliation and reintegration processes needed to be understood as part of a single strategy, and that their prospects were dependant on each other. The inherent difficulty of luring committed fighters away from the insurgency when its leaders have not entered negotiations and while underlying grievances are unaddressed was highlighted during the legacies of conflict research.

The Pashtun study community in rural Ghazni were generally supportive of the Taliban (although most community members still professed a strong desire for peace) and it was clear that some had joined their ranks. While it was identified as a factor, money did not appear to be the primary motivator. Instead, there was support for the Taliban's vision of an "Islamic state." While the very presence of the Taliban may have influenced respondents toward a more favourable appraisal, the consistency of supportive statements show a base of ideological agreement that cannot be ignored. People fighting on this basis and those who support them are less likely to be induced by cash payments and employment programs. In such cases, a political settlement would probably be necessary for large-scale reintegration to occur, and this community was still supportive of a negotiated approach to the conflict. In fact, communities like it are potentially highly supportive of a negotiated settlement that provides a share of power to the insurgency, because they believe that if Taliban individuals and ideas are integrated into the government, it will become more legitimate.

¹ ISAF Force Reintegration Cell, "ISAF-FRIC Reintegration Update" (Kabul: October 2011).

² Tazreena Sajjad, "Peace at all Costs? Reintegration and Reconciliation in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2010).

However, as a community they were alone in offering this degree of support. In other study sites, sentiment generally ranged from a grudging acceptance that the Taliban may need to be offered some official positions for the sake of peace (rural Kabul) to outright opposition to any role for them in a future government (Bamiyan). For some, memories of Taliban violations were still fresh and their return was feared, particularly among Hazaras who felt they had been ethnically targeted, although this did not necessarily mean negotiations were opposed—only that acceptable outcomes were more constrained. When contrasted with the recognition that some communities are generally supportive of the Taliban, this implies that any settlement would need a good deal of local flexibility to be workable.

Hopes for peace were generally not high among respondents, who criticised the composition of the High Peace Council as unrepresentative and doubted the Taliban's desire to participate in talks. In 2011, after some false starts, it was reported that secret talks did finally take place and for a time it was even mooted that the Taliban might send an envoy to Bonn in December 2011 or open an “embassy” in Qatar.³ But the killing of ex-president Burhanuddin Rabbani by a supposed Taliban negotiator dealt a severe blow to the nascent process, with President Karzai subsequently shelving the idea of direct talks, saying he will focus instead on Pakistan.⁴ While a settlement remains a remote possibility, the process thus far has clearly not yielded the desired results and its future looks bleak, an unfortunate justification of the pessimism felt by respondents.

About the Research

AREU's legacies of conflict research was conducted in urban and rural areas of Ghazni, Bamiyan and Kabul Provinces. It included 321 respondent interviews, 70 focus groups and additional key-informant interviews in Kabul. Case studies for each province as well as a report detailing patterns of wartime violations are available from www.areu.org.af and a final report is due at the end of 2011. This policy note draws on the findings presented in these papers. The research was funded by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, and partly as a result, the implementation of the reintegration component has been patchy.⁵ Its results have been mostly in the north and west, and media reports showed disappointment among some fighters who had joined, with promised benefits not materialising.⁶ International and government expectations of the APRP have always been high, perhaps unreasonably so given the lack of high-level talks, but the program infrastructure is now in place, including a donor-supported fund for its activities. Shortly before Rabbani's death, a conference took place in Kandahar between peace council members and local leaders with the goal of expanding the program into the key southern areas. As they push forward, some APRP officials now hope that progress on reintegration can provide a shot of momentum to the troubled high-level track. Delegates to the recent Loya Jirga supported continuing attempts at reconciliation if insurgents entered openly into negotiations with the Afghan government.⁷

It should not come as a surprise that a peace process implemented alongside an international military surge has not proved effective. Many respondents to the AREU research blamed the presence of international military forces for prolonging the conflict. They were looked upon with deep suspicion, even in areas where their activities are minimal. For example, some respondents in Bamiyan and rural Kabul believed that international forces were in fact collaborating with the Taliban to extend their stay in Afghanistan for selfish reasons, such as economic exploitation and as a base for regional influence. Respondents also pointed out the obvious problem of the Taliban refusing to talk while international forces remain in the country, and the likelihood that their presence would continue (the Loya Jirga conditionally supported a strategic pact that would extend US military presence beyond 2014). They questioned how effective peace talks could possibly take place under these conditions.

Subsequently, it was widely felt that any reconciliation process should be genuinely Afghan. It should be coordinated by a strong Afghan government and involve traditional mechanisms such as the jirga system,

³ Catherine Philp, “Taliban office in Qatar approved by US,” *The Times*, 13 September 2011.

⁴ Jonathon Burch and Myra MacDonald, “Karzai Rules out Early Resumption of Taliban Talks,” *Reuters*, 1 November 2011.

⁵ For a sober appraisal of the APRP, see Deedee Derksen, “Impact or Illusion? Reintegration under the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program” (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2011).

⁶ Julius Cavendish, “Luring Fighters Away from the Taliban: Why an Afghan Plan Is Floundering,” *TIME*, 27 September 2011.

⁷ See Kate Clark, “Traditional Loya Jirga 4: lacklustre political theatre” (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 19 November 2011), <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2259> (accessed 20 November 2011).

which provide a cultural template for negotiation and compromise. Some respondents did envisage a supporting role for international actors, such as the United Nations. The largest such group was younger urban women, who fear for the rights they have gained since 2001.

However, a major obstacle is government capacity and legitimacy. Many people questioned whether *this* government could deliver a just and enduring resolution to the conflict. Weaknesses in the justice sector were often singled out. If the government cannot handle common crimes, how could it handle the complexities of conflict-related issues? Likewise, respondents noted a lack of government presence and programs in rural areas where the Taliban reigned, or a lack of development activity and infrastructure in secure areas. Some communities also identified the presence of wartime actors in key official positions as undermining government legitimacy, and electoral sagas have done nothing to reduce this negative image.

3. Looking Ahead

It appears unlikely that conflict will end in Afghanistan in the next few years. The Taliban are entrenched and have shown their capacity to endure. International focus has shifted to damaging their military capability, securing population centres, and handing over responsibility for the conflict to boosted Afghan forces and administrators. In the meantime, the Afghan government faces internal and external constraints and does not have the ability or the political latitude necessary to strike an enduring settlement.

However, the lack of a quick solution does not mean the current approach is the wrong one. Strengthening the government's ability to provide services and security is a key to establishing its legitimacy. The handover of responsibility should continue, albeit at a sensible and manageable pace. Elections coinciding with the 2014 target for completing the transition must also be supported because they provide an opportunity for Afghan people to shape the composition of their government into something they can trust. When a legitimate government is in place and in charge, with international forces largely withdrawn, the conditions necessary for genuine negotiations—as identified by research respondents and reflected in statements by the insurgent leadership—will be in place.

As this process continues, steps can be taken to meet widespread demands for the recognition of people's suffering. One simple and immediate measure would be for the government to publicly embrace the official national Victims' Day on December 10. Small acts like this can contribute to government legitimacy and help pave the way for a broader reconciliation process in the future. Likewise, keeping local voices in the debate is necessary to guide any process in a direction that respects the wishes of ordinary Afghans and thus gains their support. At a minimum this would probably involve excluding or at least limiting the power of the worst wartime violators and some form of justice, however broadly understood. Nascent peace-building activities should also continue. Anti-government fighters should be helped off the battlefield if they wish and channels of communication should remain open to insurgent leaders in case unforeseen opportunities emerge for engagement. Even as fighting continues, any measure that builds a modicum of trust and goodwill can be considered an investment for the future.

Negotiations will not be easy when the time comes. There are competing ideas and visions for the country, entrenched power dynamics, and valuable resources at stake. These are set against a complex wartime history that has built deep mistrust and continues to involve significant external powers. However, the AREU research has shown that Afghans are willing to compromise for the sake of peace. "Revenge is a right but forgiveness is more valuable," said one. Leaders on all sides of the conflict must follow suit. This does not mean peace at any cost. It means placing Afghan desires at the centre of the negotiating table and working genuinely toward them. A peaceful and united country may be difficult to achieve, but it is not too much to ask.

About AREU

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice through conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning. AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations.

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Information Sheet

Who We Are

AREU is an independent research organisation based in Kabul. It aims to provide a firm basis for policy and practice in the country's rapidly changing environment by conducting in-depth, on-the-ground research. Funding is provided by a variety of governments and agencies.

www.areu.org.af

AREU launched an advanced new website in 2011. Visitors can download any AREU publication, listen to podcasts, view the blog and project information, register for publication announcements, and search the library catalogue.

The AREU Library

The AREU library holds over 14,000 Afghanistan-specific titles in a variety of languages. The library is a public facility used by local and international researchers. It is located in the AREU office, open from 9am-12.30pm and 1-4pm, Sun-Thurs.

The A to Z Guide to Afghanistan Assistance

Published annually since 2002, the guide is AREU's best-known publication. It provides essential details of national events and programmes, the government, maps, key documents, and an extensive contacts directory. It is in English, Dari and Pashto.

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About Our Work

AREU's research addresses the complete spectrum of actors in Afghanistan, from remote communities to officials at the highest levels of government.

Involving rigorous, qualitative fieldwork across a range of provinces, it provides a unique insight into many of the social, economic and political dynamics at work in the country today. Projects range from multi-year investigations of national development issues to short-term responses to priority topics as they arise.

Sample of Recent Projects

A View from the Ground (2010-11): A detailed study from 46 districts of 8 provinces, providing a clear appraisal of the complex and confusing dynamics of local government.

Legacies of Conflict (2009-11): Examining how wartime experiences have shaped Afghan desires for justice, peace and reconciliation, with a view to moving forwards.

Representative Governance (2009-11): Asking what Afghans want from "democracy" and how political participation is changing over the course of elections.

Natural Resource Management (2010-13): An integrated project on rural water management and opium poppy that builds on AREU's many years of experience in these fields.



Communicating our Research

AREU actively disseminates its research, which is always made publicly available and free of charge.

Publications: These range from in-depth provincial case studies to policy briefs and peer-reviewed, professionally published reports. Publications are available online and in hardcopy, with many translated into Dari and Pashto.

Events and briefings: AREU regularly convenes events such as public seminars, roundtable discussions and press conferences. Meanwhile, staff frequently provide private briefings to Afghan and international policymakers.

"If the international community listens as much as it speaks, and if it responds genuinely to Afghan needs and priorities, then the shoots of hope, already present, can grow."

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Cover photos (clockwise from top, all by AREU research teams in 2011): Community members take an AREU researcher on a tour of their land; An AREU interview with the head of a municipal trade association; Highway 1 running through Nangarhar Province.