

FutureGenerations Graduate School

STATEBUILDING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITHOUT RECONCILIATION: A CASE STUDY OF AFGHANISTAN'S NATIONAL SOLIDARITY PROGRAM

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CDC	Community Development Council
CDP	Community Development Plans
FP	Facilitating Partner
FPRG	Facilitating Partners Representative Group
NSP	National Solidarity Program
NSP-1	First Phase of the NSP (2004-2006)
NSP-2	Second Phase of the NSP (2007-present)
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development

I. INTRODUCTION

The people of Afghanistan have endured nearly three decades of conflict and deprivation, and despite the current international statebuilding effort, insecurity and conflict remain a growing reality for many. Conflict took a horrific toll on human life and destroyed much of the country's social and economic infrastructure. Generations of children grew up in conditions of violence and insecurity, and communities were left to fend for themselves.

A recurring theme in Afghan history is the relationship between the center and periphery, the rural and urban, and the modern and traditional. At the level of villages and rural settlements where 80% of the Afghan populace resides, religious leaders and local councils of tribal elders (*jirgas* and *shuras*) have historically performed governance functions in the face of the absence, ineffectiveness, or domination of central government. Successive regimes – the communists, Soviets, mujahedeen, Taliban, and even the current administration – have systematically sought to co-opt local governance structures, at times replacing or killing traditional leaders to consolidate their power.

Afghan communities are recognized for their strong inclination toward self-sufficiency and independence. Recognizing the reality of strong tribal and clan loyalties and rivalries, many Afghans and scholars argue that a decentralized model of governance based on consensus, regionalism and a significant degree of local autonomy is the only way to keep the Afghan nation together. However, under significant external influences that were preoccupied with global terrorism, Afghanistan adopted a centralized constitutional model in 2004 seemingly ignoring lessons of its history.

At the same time the government launched a wide-ranging community-driven development and reconstruction program that today is helping to establish the beginnings of local democratic governance. The National Solidarity Program (NSP) is the government's flagship rural poverty reduction program and a central component of its state-building strategy. Widely recognized as a success on its own terms, the NSP was designed to enhance the capacity and legitimacy of the state to advance rural reconstruction and development while recognizing and respecting the autonomy of local communities. The program establishes democratically elected community councils that are given capacity building assistance and block grants for priority local projects, which are selected by the community through participatory community-wide meetings and planning facilitated by NGOs. The World Bank describes the project as “the government's most tangible intervention in rural areas” while one evaluation argues that the program “...has the potential to become a beacon of good practice among community-driven development programs” in post-conflict environments. (Barakat 2006)

As of the end of January 2009, 21,767 democratically-elected Community Development Councils (CDCs) are active across three quarters of the 28,000 communities nationwide. They exist in 359 (of 398) districts in all 34 provinces. To date a total of

24,989 projects have been completed by communities themselves, out of a total of 46,815 projects approved by the government. The program is estimated to have benefited approximately 13m Afghans (NSP 2009). However, notwithstanding its clear accomplishments and promise, the NSP is not immune from the contradictions of “statebuilding amidst war” and the “securitization of development” as well as declining public faith in the government, and the inadequacies of the international aid system.

This study represents an initial review of a growing body of literature, mostly in the form of external evaluations of the NSP by academics, think tanks and independent researchers, and an exploration of how the program is contributing to peacebuilding in Afghanistan. It is also informed by the experience of Future Generations as a Facilitating Partner of the NSP since 2007 and grows out of ongoing discussions with NSP officials on a possible research agenda. The study begins by looking at the statebuilding efforts of Afghan rulers since late 19th century and three decades of conflict in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on the complex challenges of peacebuilding and statebuilding in the midst of a growing insurgency today. This is followed by a description of the NSP according to its stated objectives and operational guidelines. The next section summarizes the analysis to date of the program's accomplishments against its aims of governance and statebuilding, community empowerment, and gender equity. The authors offer a concluding assessment of the NSP's contribution toward a more successful statebuilding approach against the contradictions of the post-Bonn peacebuilding process.

II. DESCRIPTION, NATURE, AND COURSE OF THE CONFLICT¹

Afghanistan's struggle with conflict and instability has roots in over a century of statebuilding policies. Various rulers and regimes imposed a unitary, centralized state that was controlled by a predominant clan or ethnic group and maintained by coercive means rather than by consent and power sharing. It is a history of tribal competition manipulated from the center, which militarized society and precipitated the rise of ethnically based mujahideen factionalism to the detriment of united nationalism. The domestic economy was always inadequate to sustain a coercive state, leading to dependence on external powers for regime sustenance. In such a context, modernization was doomed to exclude the masses and provoke backlash. Some use the nation's social and cultural diversity as a scapegoat for conflict and failed statebuilding, but blame is more accurately placed on the specific policies pursued throughout modern history rather than any intrinsic national characteristic.

¹ This section draws on a forthcoming essay by Hakimi “Violence As Nation Building” in *Himal Southasian Magazine*.

A. EARLY STATEBUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN

Centralized state control over the Afghan people and territory was developed substantially during the reign of Amir Abdu al-Rahman Khan, from 1880 until 1901. Known as the 'Iron Amir,' he single-handedly contributed more to piecing the country together than any ruler before or since. In his two decades of iron-fisted command, he built a strong, centralized state with a preponderance of coercive resources – all thanks to large subsidies from the British. The chaos following years of internal conflict and the havoc wreaked upon the country after the second Anglo-Afghan war (1878-1880) are said to have motivated the Amir to pacify the country and to strengthen its defenses against foreign invasion. In addition, having failed to bring Afghanistan under their direct rule, the British sought to stabilize their northwest frontier, and to keep Russia at bay, by supporting a ruler dependent on them for resources.

The Amir was the first central ruler to attempt to break the power of the tribes and local strongmen of Afghanistan. He put down many rebellions using a combination of government regular forces and tribal *lashkars* (tribal levies), the latter whipped into action by the rhetoric of *jihad* (holy war). Political opposition was defeated on the battlefield and, alternately, bribed and co-opted, fragmented or exiled; tribal and religious traditions were likewise co-opted to gain legitimacy (Rubin 2002; Kakar 1979).

Despite his efforts, however, the Iron Amir failed to destroy tribal power. Maintaining a large standing army necessitated the expansion of bureaucracy to extract wealth by taxing trade and agriculture. To feed, clothe, and pay his army, he also relied on external support, mainly from Britain. However, these resources were not sufficient to run the government nor to expand state structures. Afghanistan's agrarian economy suffered severely from the over-taxation, while the Amir's policy of isolation and overall economic policies condemned the country to impoverishment. In the end, the Amir left to his successors a consolidated if terrorized state. Those successors, meanwhile, continued his policies, gradually liberalizing them as they went along.

B. INSTABILITY, INVASION, AND DESCENT INTO CONFLICT

The genesis of the Afghanistan state and economy provided an unstable brew as it evolved into the modern era in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Growing vulnerability in terms of dependence on foreign aid and expertise, hostile foreign policies toward neighbors especially the newly-born Pakistan, massive spending on development and security projects, radicalization of the educated elites (a by-product of the modernization of the 1950s and 1960s), and the ill-fated liberalization of the 'New Democracy' era (1964-1973) – all combined to produce massive pressure on the Afghan state and society. Balancing these contradictory forces proved a handful for the royal governments, and subsequently dogged President Mohammed Daud Khan's regime of 1973-78. An 'autocratic nationalist,' Daud's response to the growing political unrest was extreme violence, unleashing the state's modern coercive means against his opponents.

Daud's oppressive regime was brought down by his one-time communist allies, when they succeeded in carrying out the Saur Revolution of 1978. The communists, eager to transform a conservative and backward society and accelerate the pace of change and development, embarked upon a radical, vertical reform program, which provoked countrywide-armed resistance. Modernization was an elite project. The masses were uninvolved and the idea was in direct conflict with the existing power structures, mostly religious and tribal, and the values embodied in them. Internal feuding between the Parcham and Khalq factions of the communist party – known as the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan – and the inability of the government to effectively deal with the local revolts, eventually invited the Soviet invasion of December 1979. President Daud's overthrow by a pro-Soviet communist clique, followed by the Soviet invasion, plunged the country into three decades of turmoil that continues to this day.

The fact is, the royal governments and President Daud's republic continued to privilege the country's largest ethnic group (the Pashtuns) at all levels of state policy. The nationalism adopted as state policy was no more than crude Pashtun chauvinism, and successive regimes in Kabul thus failed to develop a coherent national ideology. Official nationalism espoused the cause of 'freeing' the Pashtun tribes of Pakistan and uniting them with Afghanistan. No surprise, then, that Afghanistan's other communities showed little enthusiasm for the state's irredentist project. As in the past, any future moves to try and consolidate a cross-border Pashtun homeland would not only further deteriorate relations with Pakistan, but also potentially spark ethnic and sectarian tensions inside Afghanistan (Hyman 2002).

The war against the occupying Soviet forces lasted from 1978-1988. The war during this period destroyed much of the countryside and displaced millions into neighboring Iran, Pakistan, and beyond. The withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989 was followed by another period of intense conflict between the Afghan communist government and mujahideen factions. The Soviet-supported government of Dr. Najibullah officially espoused the concept of 'national reconciliation' and invited mujahideen factions to talks. This policy went in tandem with 'buying off' key mujahideen factional commanders to switch sides and join the government. However, the national reconciliation program of the government did not succeed because the Pakistan- and Iran-based factional mujahideen leaders, encouraged by their foreign allies, continued to fight to rid the country of the communist government by force.

Meanwhile, efforts were made to unite the mujahideen factions and to form a government of national unity. With pressure and bribes from neighboring powers, a government in exile was formed in Peshawar, Pakistan, and the military strategy of defeating the communist government was continued. Despite large-scale battles in the east in Khost and Nangarhar, the mujahideen factions, helped by their Pakistani sponsors and Arab Jihadists, could not defeat the Najibullah government. Under severe economic and military pressure after Gorbachev began to pursue his perestroika policy, Dr. Najibullah's government agreed to a UN-sponsored transition plan. The plan however failed because of inadequate support from the international community and internal rivalries between various competing forces within government, and lack of

support from mujahideen factions abroad. Eventually, Dr. Najibullah was forced to relinquish power according to the UN plan and was scheduled to leave the country. However, he was prevented from leaving and forced to take shelter in a UN compound in Kabul, and on the night of capture of Kabul by Taliban four years later, was dragged from the UN compound and brutally murdered.

In the end, different government power-holders formed alliances with ethnically oriented mujahideen and one-time rivals and began the conquest of Kabul. Following intense battles, the race for state capture was won by the Panjshiri-dominated Northern Alliance represented by Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massoud in alliance with the Uzbek militias of Rashid Dustum. A respected religious leader, Hazrat Subghatullah Mujaddidi, was appointed as interim president following a revolving power sharing agreement, agreed upon in Pakistan. A few months later, Mujaddidi was replaced by Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani. When Rabbani refused to relinquish power when his term ended, a brutal civil war ignited between the Pashtun-dominated Hizb-i-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Iran-supported Shia groups of ethnic Hazaras. During this period, Kabul, which had escaped destruction during the Soviet occupation, was severely damaged. The countryside fell to small and large commanders in alliance with the government in Kabul. By the late 1990s, Afghanistan had endured almost three decades of violent conflict, which cost the lives of one million people, created over five million refugees, and destroyed its infrastructure.

Factional fighting, the abuse of power, corruption, depredation, theft, murder, kidnapping, and sexual violence totally discredited these factions and prepared the scene for the emergence of the Taliban who in 1994 began the conquest of the country and in 1996 captured Kabul and declared Afghanistan an Islamic Emirate. The conquest of the lands to the north by the Taliban and their Arab allies continued. Just before the US invasion, the Taliban had succeeded in capturing more than 90 per cent of the country. The US invasion in late 2001, in response to the events of September 11, ended the Taliban regime and brought about the current political order.

C. SEPTEMBER 11 AND THE POST-TALIBAN ORDER

The events of 11 September 2001 and the overthrow of the Taliban gave Afghanistan a chance to start afresh. The initial engagement with Afghanistan was 'tactical' and 'limited' in its goals (removing the Taliban and depriving Al Qaeda of a support base), but the need to rebuild the state and reconstruct the country was soon realized. Having come in, the West could not easily walk out once its limited objectives had been met. In the immediate aftermath of initial victory over Al Qaeda and the Taliban, the questions of what was to be reconstructed and how were not subject to a national dialogue or consensus. The initial prescription was to quickly bring together remaining Afghan military and political forces to form a broad-based and multi-ethnic government.

The Bonn Agreement of December 2001, followed quickly by the Tokyo donor conference in January 2002, set the broad outlines for the peace-making and reconstruction process. Bonn brought together various anti-Taliban factions from

within and outside the country to agree on a power-sharing interim administration led by Hamid Karzai and a political transition process leading to an elected government under a new constitution. However, the Bonn Agreement was vague on the exact form of the state to be rebuilt. This was left to be hammered out by the Emergency *Loya Jirga* (grand council) of June 2002. The country's constitution, adopted in January 2004 by a subsequent Constitutional Loya Jirga, decided the final form of the state. A centralized presidential form of government with a bi-cameral parliament was adopted after weeks of debate. Federalism and decentralization of power were rejected in favor of centralism.

The Bonn process therefore, paved the way for an uncertain political transition and returned representative government to Afghanistan after almost three decades of war and chaos. The agreement required the disarming and demobilization of the various armed groups that had fought against the Soviet forces, among themselves during the civil war, and against the Taliban. In the place of these irregular armies, a national army and police force were created, something that continues with mixed results (and could be undermined by new efforts to arm militias). Women's rights were enshrined in the constitution and national law, and an attempt was made to disarm and demobilize militias, but the overall progress was unclear. Over four million refugees were repatriated from Pakistan and Iran, but most of them failed to be integrated into the urban economy while the agriculture sector was neglected. Significant increases in school enrollment and health care coverage have been achieved but the quality of education and health services still needs vast improvement. A national road infrastructure has been rebuilt, and modest economic growth (non-poppy) has occurred, mostly in the telecom sector.

Afghanistan faces daunting challenges from a renewed Taliban insurgency, which is funded largely by individuals and networks in Gulf countries and Pakistan, and a crisis of governance stemming from widespread corruption and inability to deliver services. This situation has its roots in several flaws in the Bonn era statebuilding process that have been highlighted in recent analyses: (a) absence of an inclusive national reconciliation process on which to base state-building, (b) adoption of a centralized governance model in the face of a tradition of decentralized power and authority, (c) inattention to the regional dynamics of the conflict, and (d) chronic underinvestment in establishing security.

- **Absence of national reconciliation**

While some argue that Afghanistan's transition framework was inclusive and locally owned, compared primarily with Iraq (Papagianni 2005), other long-time observers note more accurately that participation was in fact among a "diverse, yet unrepresentative" set of anti-Taliban groups (Rubin & Hmizada 2007). While at the time few in the international community could see any scope for engaging the Taliban in the Bonn process, it quickly became evident during the transition even to senior UN officials such as Lakdhar Brahimi that some type of engagement with a group with a strong local base in Pashtun areas was warranted (Ponzio 2007). Shortly after the Bonn Agreement, President Karzai offered conditional amnesty to

the Taliban (which was rejected); he has more recently renewed efforts at finding a negotiated settlement to the discomfort of several of his local and international constituencies (Mojumdar 2007). The late recognition that the Taliban (or elements of it) needs to be reconciled with in order to ensure stability was a strategic misstep of detriment to the Afghan statebuilding and peacebuilding effort.

- **Adoption of centralized governance model**

Some have questioned the choice of the centralized constitutional model adopted at the Constitutional Loya Jirga given strong regional tendencies and tradition of decentralized powers. Barnett Rubin calls this a central paradox of modern Afghanistan where, "...a country that needs decentralized governance to provide services to its scattered and ethnically diverse population has one of the world's most centralized governments" (Rubin 2007). This, coupled with the early lack of security in many parts of the country and the strategy of accommodation in which warlords and commanders were brought into the transition and electoral process (despite legal provisions to the contrary) as well as government administrative positions (from provincial and district chiefs to police commanders), has resulted in a precarious governance system that suffers from endemic corruption, penetration by criminal and narco-trafficking networks, and low levels of democratic participation at the local level.

- **Inattention to regional dynamics**

Although Afghanistan is clearly part of a "regional conflict complex," Bonn neglected the 'regional dimension' of the Afghanistan crisis. By failing to acknowledge the role of regional factors, Afghanistan's processes of state formation are divorced from statebuilding strategies of neighboring countries. The significance of this is that strategies adopted by states play themselves out beyond national borders. Nation- and state-building in one country, for instance Pakistan, may derive benefits from violence, economic interest, and state disarray in another, for example Afghanistan. Rubin has consistently argued that Afghanistan's 25-year conflict was "much more than a local or national power struggle and must be seen in its regional context". Several networks, including some states, link the conflict in Afghanistan to other conflicts in the region. Similarly, a robust region wide political economy involving the smuggling of weapons, transit goods, and narcotics perpetuates regional conflicts. In this respect certain types of commerce and conflict are deeply intertwined.

- **Chronic underinvestment in security**

In contrast to recent international peacebuilding operations in Kosovo and East Timor in which the UN took over transitional sovereignty and executive administration following cessation of hostilities, the Bonn Agreement embodied a more "risky" approach of "democratic peacebuilding" during a low-intensity conflict (Ponzio 2007). The "light footprint" model, which some claimed would allow for more local ownership of the political process, was driven to a large extent

by the U.S. government's early stated aversion to nation-building, its emphasis on counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda and Taliban remnants, and the aim not to become bogged down in what it envisaged as the first stop on a wider "war on terror" (Freeman 2007). This resulted in significant underinvestment in the reconstruction process and inadequate efforts to secure and stabilize the entire territory. In an oft-quoted analysis, Dobbins and colleagues point out that the United States and its allies invested much less in the reconstruction of Afghanistan on a per capita basis (\$57) during the first two critical years of intervention compared to peacebuilding operations in Bosnia (\$679), East Timor (\$233), and Iraq (\$206) (Dobbins et al. 2005) In terms of troop strength, Afghanistan fared poorly against its comparators. Bhatia estimated one soldier per 1,115 persons in Afghanistan compared to one per 66 in Bosnia, 111 in East Timor, 161 in Iraq, and 375 in Haiti. (Bhatia, Lanigan, & Wilkinson 2004)

D. THE TALIBAN RESURGENT

The emphasis by the U.S. on counterterrorism operations in 2002 and 2003 and the "light footprint" approach to territorial security, which limited a small International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) contingent to Kabul, effectively created a security vacuum that the Taliban was able to exploit. This was compounded by the disillusionment of communities with the slow pace of reconstruction and high incidence of government corruption. Sporadic Taliban attacks and intimidation continued from 2002 and 2004, but rose significantly in 2005 in a sign that the Taliban had reconstituted its fighting strength in the lawless borderlands in Pakistan to the east and south. Its influence quickly spread through the southeastern and south central provinces of Afghanistan. In September 2007, the International Committee of the Red Cross warned that "nearly half of the country is now affected by the Taliban insurgency" (Swisspeace 2007).

The Taliban has a strong presence in the Pashtun tribal belt of Pakistan, with the leadership said to be based in Quetta in Baluchistan. According to the UN, unemployed and indoctrinated young men from among Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan make up the mid-level tier of the movement, while the foot soldiers in the southern provinces of Afghanistan are locals who took up arms due to tribal grievances toward the government, economic necessity, or corruption. Recent reports suggest the insurgency is increasingly manned with hard-line foreign fighters who take a far more rigid stance than their Afghan comrades toward treatment of local communities and negotiation with the government. Some Western officials assert that the influx of foreigners to fill the ranks of the Taliban's mid-level command structure is a sign of recent military successes; nevertheless, the varied make-up of the Taliban makes it less than a monolithic force, a situation that will complicate efforts to defeat or negotiate with it. (Rohde 2007)

By late 2008 the Afghan government and its international allies accepted that the prevailing military and political strategies to that point had not produced the desired results. A new consensus began to emerge that a military solution was impossible. A

political solution would be necessary to end the conflict, an important element of which would be outreach and reconciliation with armed groups opposing the government.

So far the government has not engaged in strategic level discussions with insurgents. Its efforts have been clandestine in nature and tactical in purpose, with the main objective of stabilizing local conflicts. The offer of entry into the political arena, in return for respecting the constitution and laying down arms, is a familiar exit strategy from civil wars around the world. In principle, power-balancing and power-sharing are key factors in the quest for reconciliation and peace. Yet this is qualitatively different from the concept of reconciliation that asks individuals to give up fighting and integrate in the post-2001 political order in Afghanistan, as is the case today. (Indeed, some Taliban and several Hezb-e-Islami fighters have accepted. Many of them ran successfully for Parliament, and some have been rewarded with high administrative positions). In this scheme, however, the government sets the terms of integration, and the official expression captures its one-sided nature: these individuals are said to have 'reconciled' with the government. (Suhrke et al. 2009)

E. THE ROLE OF ETHNICITY, NATIONALISM, AND STATEBUILDING IN THE AFGHAN CONFLICT

It has been argued that the social and cultural diversity of Afghanistan per se is not the reason for the country's continued instability. Indeed, evidence refutes the explanation that Afghan governments failed to build a strong, centralized, and unified modern state due to geophysical problems, ethnolinguistic and religious-sectarian differences, and tribal organization. This view safely externalizes the problem of statebuilding by blaming what is alleged to be the inherently conflictive, fragmentary character of Afghan society, independent of the policies and practices of internal or external statebuilding agents. It is true that the geophysical characteristics of Afghanistan and the socio-cultural heterogeneity of Afghan society have played some part in affecting the processes of statebuilding. But more importantly, it has been the specific policies and practices of the central governments toward the various peoples of Afghanistan that have transformed existing socio-cultural pluralism into fragmentation and opposition to centralized power along ethnic, religious, sectarian, regional, and tribal lines. Such policies and practices have thereby produced a cumulatively negative impact on statebuilding efforts in the country.

The fact is that successive regimes in Kabul have misused and misdirected the existing demographic diversity as part of state policy. Being traditionally weak, the central governments manipulated various groups in order to fragment and weaken society, often playing one community against another. This policy of weakening society and discriminating against the country's minorities as a basis for consolidating a predominant state helps to explain Afghanistan's decidedly long and non-linear statebuilding trajectory. From 1880 until 1978, the Barakzai (a branch of the Durrani Pashtun) dominated rule in Afghanistan. This is a period that has been referred to as 'internal colonialism', which took place in tandem with neocolonial domination of Afghanistan first by Britain and later by the USSR. Contrary to some suggestions,

internal colonialism was not only directed against non-Pashtun minority groups. In fact, in the form of military pressure and coercion, such an approach was used also against certain Pashtun tribes.

Before the 1978 coup and years of ensuing conflict, the national or patriotic idea was underdeveloped. In this regard, one is forced to speak less of some hypothetical all-embracing Afghan nationalism, than of rival ideas of the nation held by the country's ethnic groups. Nationalism as such lacked broad appeal, except by the small and unrepresentative educated elite, mainly in Kabul. During the war against the Soviet forces and the factional fighting that followed their withdrawal, ethnic, tribal, and sectarian divisions worsened. It could be argued that during this period, Afghans were neither one people nor one political community.

Afghan nationalism remained an elite concept, and its development was deeply intertwined with the Mohammadzai family as amirs and kings of Afghanistan, with their Pashtun origins. In fact, evidence suggests an intimate link between modernization, nationalism, and the institution of monarchy in Afghanistan; the masses were largely un-involved. The lack of mass support for state-driven nationalism and the difficulty of non-Pashtun groups to identify with it subsequently ensured that it did not evolve into a national consciousness. Although the ideal of a unitary Afghan state has made some progress since the 1950s, much of this has been restricted to Kabul and its small circle of educated elites. Even this group was deeply divided along ethnic lines, with the Pashtun elites often claiming to represent the entire population, and the non-Pashtun bitterly resenting their virtual monopoly of power. Although there has been marked change during the last three decades, allowing non-Pashtun military and political groups (i.e. the predominantly Tajik ruling party) to control power today, the weakness of popular support for Afghan nationalism remains.

The only time the Afghan people as a whole have exhibited a sense of national feeling was in response to foreign invasion by British colonial forces in the 19th century and the Russian occupation in the 20th century. This took the form of national resistance, a duty to safeguard the independence of the homeland against foreign invasion. This harsh experience of civil war and exile contributed to territorial national identity, which promoted a sense of national belonging. This was the factor largely responsible for the emergence of a minimum national consensus on maintaining Afghanistan's territorial integrity. This was an interesting phenomenon, considering the deterioration of ethnic relations over the years of conflict. Despite the fact that the political and *jihadi* parties used ethnic references in their war propaganda, the Afghan population failed to let go of the nationalist idea throughout the decades of conflict.

The initial support given to the Taliban can partially be explained by the significance that the majority of the Afghan people attached to the national territory. The declared aim of the Taliban – to re-unite the country and disarm rival military actors – won it considerable sympathy and support. The Taliban utilized brutal measures for re-unification, but their rule made it clear that spatial integrity was one thing and national social integration quite another, particularly in the absence of a common ideology. Indeed, the Taliban's capture of the entire country held the possibility of destroying the

fragile balance of power between ethnic groups, and held the threat of undermining the very unity of Afghanistan as a multi-ethnic state.

Indeed, Taliban rule did deeply divide the Pashtun and non-Pashtun populations, who saw in the new rulers a repeat of the 19th-century Pashtun-driven internal colonialism, marked by massive violence and countless atrocities. Even today there are disagreements as to whether the Taliban pursued its military conquest of the whole of Afghanistan exclusively on the basis of Pashtun nationalism (reinstating the Pashtun monopoly of power), or as a conquest in the name of Islam. What is certain is that Taliban attempts to reconstitute a strong, highly centralized state driven by a harsh medievalist ideology failed in the face of resistance from the country's other politico-military power-holders, including Pashtun communities opposed to them.

The long years of conflict had two main consequences for Afghanistan. One was the unraveling of the political structure, the national framework, and the interactive relationship between central authority and peripheral forces. The second was the fragmentation of power and the emergence of various local and regional power-holders and warlords. In the end, although Taliban rule tore the national fabric, Afghanistan's various communities had enough reasons to remain within one country, and the tattered fabric managed to hold.

III. The National Solidarity Program

The aforementioned factors – the country's daunting geophysical characteristics and socio-cultural heterogeneity, the legacy of state policies of repression and ethno-tribal manipulation, and the general exclusion of the masses in the statebuilding and development process – helped to inform the design of one of the government's major "post-conflict" reconstruction programs: the National Solidarity Program (NSP).² Designed by the Afghan Minister of Finance³ during the transitional administration with the help of experts from the World Bank and NGOs with experience from the Afghanistan conflict, the program takes an inclusive approach to involving grassroots communities in reconstruction, development, and governance. This section describes the NSP and its implementation.

Since 2003, the National Solidarity Program has emerged as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's flagship rural poverty reduction program and a central component of the government's statebuilding strategy. It is known as "the largest people's project in the history of Afghanistan." The program was designed to enhance the capacity and legitimacy of the state to advance rural reconstruction and development while recognizing and respecting the autonomy of local communities. The program

² Other factors included strong international concerns over the status of women in Afghan culture and international "best practice" in community development and empowerment.

³ Interestingly, the minister had a background in social anthropology.

establishes democratically elected community councils which are given block grants for projects in locally generated community development plans. At its inception, the government's aim was to extend the reach of the program to all of the estimated 20,000 villages in the country over a four year period.

According to the founding documents of the NSP, it is based upon several Afghan traditions and principles, namely:

- “*Ashar*” – voluntary community labor to improve community infrastructure;
- “*Jirga*” – councils comprised of respected members of the community; and
- Islamic values of unity, equity, and justice.

The NSP is managed by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), and was introduced in 2002 as part of the Emergency Community Empowerment and Public Works Program. It is supported by multilateral and bilateral donors as well as the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund. The program utilizes partnerships with international and national NGOs and communities themselves. The first phase of the program (NSP I) took place from 2004-2006 and a second phase (NSP II) is underway from 2007-2009 with an additional extension phase expected to follow.

The NSP embodies a ‘community-driven development’ (CDD) approach intended to empower communities with decision making authority and control over resources. The CDD paradigm has evolved from international experience with community empowerment and is distinct from what is commonly referred to as ‘community-based development’ which involves consultation and information sharing with communities and usually limits community choice while most decision-making remains with the state, donor or sponsoring NGO.⁴ The NSP is organized around two objectives: (a) to lay the foundations for stronger community-level governance, and (b) to support community-managed sub-projects that improve the access of rural communities to social and productive infrastructure and services. These aims of enhancing local governance and local development are supported by an implementation strategy that consists of four core elements:

- (a) Facilitation of inclusive community institutions (Community Development Councils – CDCs) through democratic elections. Each CDC is registered with the state. These CDCs lead the process of reaching consensus on local development priorities and corresponding sub-projects, developing eligible sub-proposals that comply with NSP appraisal criteria, and implementing approved sub-projects;

⁴ The World Bank, *Community-Driven Development in the Context of Conflict-Affected Countries: Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2006).

- (b) A system of direct Block Grant transfers⁵ to community bank accounts to support rehabilitation and development activities (sub-projects) planned and implemented by the elected CDCs;
- (c) A series of capacity building activities to enhance the competence of members of CDCs (both men and women) in terms of financial management, procurement, technical skills, and transparency; and
- (d) Activities linking local institutions to government administration and aid agencies with available services and resources.

The NSP brings together several key partners for implementation: rural communities and their elected CDCs, Facilitating Partners (FPs), the program management units at central, regional, and provincial levels, the MRRD, and an inter-ministerial steering committee.⁶

The Facilitating Partners (FPs) play a key role in the program, constituting the link between provincial level officials of the NSP and communities. The FPs currently consist of 27 international and national NGOs and one UN agency (UN Habitat), which are contracted by the NSP to provide “support and guidance” to communities in fulfilling program activities and community development plans. Among the key functions of the FPs in the project cycle are:

- Work with local leaders to mobilize and inform the entire community
- Organize CDC elections according to the program's guidelines;
- Assist CDCs to hold inclusive consultations to produce Community Development Plans (CDPs) and sub-project proposals;
- Help communities procure goods and services in the market;
- Provide technical assistance;
- Provide training in book-keeping, procurement, and other skills; and
- Conduct monitoring and reporting.

An official Operational Manual provides FPs with specific guidance, procedures and targets on everything from gender policy, to elections, to how to handle refugees, internally displaced persons, and *kuchies* (nomadic populations) while leaving them latitude on methods for facilitating participation and community development planning according to their own expertise and experience.

The foundation of the NSP is the community. Decades of civil conflict, massive dislocation of population, and the inability of authorities to conduct a population census make the categorization of rural life at the sub-district or ‘village’ level a matter of educated guesswork. There is also considerable divergence between state and local perceptions of community and village which are often subjective and subject over time

⁵ The block grants are calculated at approximately \$200 per family with a cap of \$60,000 per community.

⁶ This structure reflects NSP-II.

to shifting clan and tribal relations (Mielke & Schetter 2007). The Central Statistics Office estimates that there are just over 40,000 rural settlements in the country, which the NSP has grouped into 28,500 “communities” for the purpose of electing CDCs. A community consists of a rural settlement of at least 25 families⁷ and up to a maximum of 300 families. FPs are responsible for identifying communities according to government lists such as the list of registered villages from the 1970s or the list prepared for the 2002 Loya Jirga which can be cross-checked with local community records. In those cases where social realities deviate significantly from what is documented, the FP consults with local authorities to define communities according to prevailing settlement patterns (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2007). Community lists are submitted (with GPS coordinates and family/population size) to the provincial office of the MRRD for approval.

The project cycle at the community level begins when a Facilitating Partner visits a community and with the assistance of community leaders organizes a community-wide meeting to present the program. It is at these meetings that the objectives, principles, and methods of the NSP are presented to the community, including the program's commitment to gender equity. A community is given the opportunity to confirm their interest in participating in the NSP at the meeting. If interested, the FP will help the community to complete a “community profile” that identifies demographic and socio-economic indicators of the community.

CDC elections are organized with the assistance of the FP according to well-defined guidelines. Voter eligibility is the same for national elections and standard features of democratic practice such as “one person, one vote” and the secrecy of the ballot are respected. In addition, both men and women are eligible to be CDC candidates. Predefined candidate lists and campaigning are not prohibited in order to reduce opportunities for intimidation. Individuals who would not accept an appointment to a CDC if elected are given the opportunity to declare so prior to voting. At least 60% of eligible voters must vote in order for the election to be considered valid. This threshold was increased from 40% during NSP-I when the government set the bar lower to ensure that “valid” elections would be able to take place in communities that would not permit women to vote. (Boesen 2004)

Elections are organized around “clusters” of approximately 20 families each, depending on the size of the community. Each cluster will elect one male and one female representative to the CDC for a three-year term that is renewable once. CDCs can range in size from 10 to 30 members and should be equally divided between men and women. (It should be noted that the rules for NSP-I permitted the election of separate male and female CDCs and also called for one candidate per cluster. The revised rules are much stronger in terms of gender representation and the result of learning experience during the course of NSP implementation.) Elections are organized by a community election commission with the assistance of the FP and supervised by district authorities from MRRD.

⁷ According to the Operational Manual – Version IV (p. 5): “A family is defined as consisting of a husband, his wife (or wives), and unmarried children; or a single head-of-household (male or female) and his/her unmarried children.”

Once elected, the CDC will select its chairperson, vice-chairperson, treasurer and secretary. CDC members do not receive a salary or stipend for their service. Project management committees are also elected in community-wide meetings with the responsibility to withdraw funds and procure goods and services on behalf of the community and to register a bank account in the community's name. Communities can also establish sectoral or topical committees to perform specific functions.

The question of gender equity is taken seriously by the NSP in light of the constraints to women's participation in public life conditioned by *pardah*.⁸ Explicit rules and procedures are in place on women's participation in elections, decision-making, project selection, access to information, and control of assets (See Table 1).

NSP-I permitted communities to elect separate men's and women's CDCs if local norms were hostile to integrated CDCs. Also, funding had to be allocated to at least one sub-project selected by women to ensure that women were not marginalized. However, because this practice often appeared to sanction a lower status for the women's CDC, the 'separate but equal' arrangement was eliminated in NSP-II. NSP-II allows for only one CDC per community, but separate men's and women's sub-committees are permitted where an integrated CDC is not possible. Male and female subcommittees can be formed for separate deliberations, each with their own four principal officers. An executive coordination committee, comprised of two officers from each of the subcommittees, then makes decisions endorsed by the whole. In highly orthodox communities where women are not permitted to vote, "women's working groups" can be formed.

Once councils are established, the FPs facilitate production of Community Development Plans (CDPs), and the communities identify priority sub-project proposals. The FPs are given latitude on the methods they will use with communities to ensure stakeholder inclusion and participatory planning. The NSP does require that separate women's meetings take place under conditions which allow them to freely express their views and register their priorities for sub-project proposals. Consistent with the idea that the CDC exists for a broader purpose than the NSP, communities are encouraged to include sub-project proposals in their CDP even if they will not be funded by the Block Grant so that they can be pursued by the community itself on the basis of local resources or can be presented to other government departments, donors, or NGOs for support.

Once the community has formed its CDP, the FPs help them develop one or more sub-project proposals for block grant funding with the stipulation of a community contribution of at least 10%. The NSP permits sub-projects for socio-economic infrastructure (e.g. water supply, sanitation, irrigation, transport infrastructure, schools/hospitals, power supply) or human capital development (e.g. general education/literacy/health and productive skills training). Most projects have no restrictions beyond technical appraisal criteria; FPs approve operation and

⁸ *Purdah* refers to the custom in some Muslim and Hindu cultures of keeping women separate from and unseen by men to whom they are not related.

maintenance plans. A few notable exceptions to this rule include line-ministry approval of school/hospital projects and a list of ineligible projects (e.g. those involving child labor, arms purchases, contested land, political campaign, mosque repair, etc.). A community-wide meeting is held to endorse priority proposals that the FP then submits for approval to the NSP provincial management unit. Rejected projects due to unmet criteria or incomplete applications may be revised and resubmitted. If approved, block grants are disbursed to community bank accounts (not to district government offices). CDCs establish a project management committee to supervise and ensure that criteria are met.

To ensure transparency, the CDC is required to post a notice board accessible to both men and women where project information, budgets, and actual expenditures are made available. Additional community-wide meetings are held during project execution to ensure that the community is aware of project developments against timetables established during the planning phase. Such reporting is done in a way that the information is effectively communicated to women and illiterate community members. Full files and record books are to be maintained by the CDCs for inspection by community members, FPs, and NSP/MRRD officials. Provisions for reporting, monitoring and evaluation are also explicitly spelled out for CDCs and FPs through the end of the project cycle.

A noteworthy but ad hoc development over the course of the NSP's existence was role of FPs in advocacy and networking. The FPs established a Facilitating Partners Representative Group (FPRG) as a sort of union for FPs to coordinate their positions and contribute to policy and programmatic changes in the NSP over the course of its evolution. In addition, on different occasions and issues the FPRG played a role in helping the CDCs to advocate a collective position to the government, especially on the crucial issue of formalizing the role of the CDC within the constitution. The FPRG pushed the government to adopt a by-law defining the CDCs as a legitimate organ of local democratic governance and a locus for state involvement with the community. This push from the CDCs was an outgrowth of a series of inter-community visits of CDC officials that were sponsored by FPs. These activities eventually got the attention of government authorities which sponsored a "national consultation" of CDCs in Kabul, where community representatives pushed for formal recognition.

Table 1. NSP Policies and Practices for Promoting Gender Equity⁹

Principle	NSP Policies and Practices
Gender equity in NSP participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain early agreement with community leaders about the ways in which women can participate in CDCs in a culturally acceptable manner. • Organize parallel meetings for men and women so that women do not need to mix publicly with men. Even if mixed meetings are acceptable, it may be better for women to hold separate meetings so they can feel free to participate and speak openly. • Maintain records of participants in events and meetings, disaggregated by gender (particularly those related to community development planning).
Gender equity in CDC representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize separate voting venues for men and women to encourage more women to vote • If there are culture constraints to holding mixed-gender meetings, have the communities elect a male and female representative from each cluster and organize male and female sub-committees. Explain that male and female sub-committees have equal standing under the CDC. • Help communities identify methods for sharing information and coordinating joint decision-making between sub-committees. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Officers of each sub-committee should serve on the CDC Executive Coordination Committee, which finalizes and approves (signs) all NSP forms; and • Minutes of all meetings should be shared between groups.
Gender equity in access to NSP information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that programme information such as the “public notice board” is posted in a public place that is easily accessible to men and women. If a mosque is chosen for posting information, another posting place accessible to women must also be chosen.
Gender equity in access to NSP training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure equitable delivery of training to male and female CDC members. At a minimum, all key officers of both sub-committees should be trained (Chairperson, Treasurer, and Secretary).
Gender equity in decision making and control of project assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inform community leaders that at least one NSP-funded subproject should be prioritized by women and managed by the women’s CDC sub-committee or by a project committee nominated/approved by the women’s CDC sub-committee. • Ensure that at least 2 male and 2 female officers sign all NSP forms.

⁹ From NSP Operational Manual Version IV, November 2007, p. 9.

driven by strong and vocal demand from communities that have seen their neighbors benefit from the program – the question of the re-election of CDCs following expiration of their three-year mandate and the provision of ongoing support have taken a back seat and seen uneven treatment.

Several evaluations and assessments of the NSP have been undertaken by independent analysts, think tanks, and NGOs or commissioned by the NSP and its financial supporters. Most of the studies focus on the impact of the NSP at the community level in areas such as governance, statebuilding, and women's participation. Some of the key findings from these studies are highlighted here.

Most analyses recognize that in the context of rural Afghanistan the NSP is a radical experiment. Its requirement of gender equity in governance and participation is at odds with traditional cultural norms and practices. The requirement of democratic elections is a direct challenge to many local power-holders, whether they are local militia commanders or community elders. Additionally, rural Afghans' historical experience with attempts at state penetration of the countryside was not felicitous and they harbored a deep suspicion of the new government, especially in Pashtun areas that felt marginalized from the Bonn process. There was a distinct possibility that communities from the start could have rejected the program, but this has not been the case:

"So far, the CDCs have overwhelmingly been accepted by the local population. These "new shuras" carry the promise of new modes of decision making and a strong orientation towards community-based needs. Moreover, their official status facilitating the interaction with government structures and aid agencies is appreciated...This seems to herald a departure from rural attitudes to government in earlier times, when the interventions by the Muhammadzai and Communist state were mostly seen as hostile acts best to be avoided. Nowadays there is a growing acceptance of and demand for government presence as an alternative and counterweight to the authority forcefully exercised by local commanders." (Noelle-Karimi 2006)

Boesen notes that the NSP has been "...a catalyst for learning about democratic processes" and that people have "embraced the concepts of democratic elections and representation, based on the principles of secret voting and the prohibition of electioneering or candidacy, with enthusiasm" and that the NSP held the potential to "...enable communities to establish more legitimate leadership that can interact with government authorities in a range of different tasks." (Boesen 2006)

While this general impression is widespread in the literature, it does not obscure the fact that CDC elections are not immune to the influence of traditional leaders and power-holders. This appears to vary by regional circumstance and to be influenced by the capacity and resources that were brought to bear by different FPs. For example, Care International estimated that the presence of local elites elected to CDCs in their districts was as high as 50-70% whereas for UN-Habitat in Herat the figure of commanders, mullahs, and landlords was 5.2% (Boesen 2006). The International

Rescue Committee's CDC profiles for Khost showed 3% commanders, 1% religious scholars, and less than 1% traditional leaders. Its figures in Logar were 1%, 5%, and less than 1%, respectively (Maynard 2007). The presence of traditional elites in the CDCs does not equate with a compromise of core principles, a judgment that would depend on other factors. Evidence, both survey and anecdotal, abounds both of attempts by elites to influence election outcomes as well as communities rejecting local power-holders who expected to control the structures and resources available to the community through the NSP. Another study, in a sample of districts representing a range of cultural and geographic areas, found that "...where previous governance structures were focused on one power-holder...CDCs have reoriented the sources of local authority through their collective and elected nature." (Nixon 2008)

In their overall impact on statebuilding objectives at the sub-national level, Nixon (2008) summarizes thus:

"The creation of the CDCs under the NSP has introduced a dramatic change in the development resources available to many communities in the country, and where these resources have been converted to successful sub-projects, the acceptance and legitimacy of the programme, and by extension the government, has been expanded. However, the relationship of CDCs as a newly introduced institution within the local governance system as a whole is complex and varied."

He found that the acceptance by communities of the CDC was conditioned by their previous experience with the state and NGOs and the quality of assistance provided by Facilitating Partners. Every aspect of the NSP, from elections to community planning to incorporation of women and more has been handled in differing ways, usually responding to local circumstances and negotiations between the Facilitating Partners, NSP officials, and communities on how to accommodate local norms and concerns. Many CDCs in his survey reported taking on functions outside the program, such as dispute resolution, community labor, and social protection, but this was "not universal" and "often carried out in combination with customary structures and individuals, forming a hybrid form of authority." (Nixon 2008)

Women's participation is perhaps the most difficult issue in the NSP. Many studies point to the severe challenges of engendering full participation of women in culturally conservative Afghanistan, but find progress nonetheless. As Boesen (2006) notes:

"The participation of women in democratic participation would need to occur in a dialogue with traditional local norms and values...However, just as culture constantly changes and evolves in the course of agency and social practice, it is possible that Afghan values and norms with regard to gender relations could also evolve in the context of NSP and community cooperation. There are signs that participation in the NSP has initiated such a process of changing attitudes toward women's participation."

Interviews with FPs during the early phase of the NSP indicated that many communities were not willing to comply with the rules for women's participation in

elections although often other ways of bringing about women's participation were found (Kakar 2005). Nixon (2008) found significant variations in voting arrangements as well as CDC types across the 30 districts in his study. In this group, 14 cases followed prescribed voting procedures while in eight men were only permitted to vote for men and women for women. CDCs conformed to four types: standard mixed, segregated elected male and female councils, segregated elected male and appointed female councils, and male-only councils. Often, appointment of female councils was in response to restrictive gender norms that did not allow women to vote or stand as candidates, or perhaps where electors only elected men.

FPs consulted in Boesen's (2006) study all agreed that the issue of women's participation was something that needed to gradually evolve as trust between community and FP was built, rather than be enforced. Several studies noted that where progress was reported, even in very conservative areas, a key factor was the quality of facilitation provided by the FP (See Boesen 2004; Kakar 2005; Maynard 2007). FPs that employed female social organizers and hired from within the program area fared better than those that did not although it is widely acknowledged that there is a severe shortage of women who could serve this function.

Another factor of growing salience to the success of the NSP is the security situation. Boesen (2006) pointed out as early as the spring of 2004 that a "steadily deteriorating" security environment was hampering the effectiveness of the NSP in some areas she studied:

"The government has not been able to do away with the abuses of local commanders denying villagers access to basic conditions necessary for their development and for making the use of block grants provided under the NSP (e.g. monopolizing irrigation water), with the intimidation of villagers in some areas by regime opponents resulting in fear of participating in the NSP, or with overall security that would permit FPs to operate more effectively than is the case at the present."

As 2006-2007 wore on, the NSP reported more incidents of FPs suspending operations in areas affected by the insurgency. As of early 2009, 15 FPs had suspended work in 1,110 communities across almost half the provinces nation-wide due to security concerns. This represents 5% of the communities involved in the program.

Some have criticized national programs like the NSP for exposing Afghan NGOs and civil society to a shrinking humanitarian space, one that integrates development, defense, and diplomatic functions, making them "legitimate" targets in the eyes of insurgents. The relationship between national programs like the NSP and the FPs is a case in point as the latter by their participation have become aligned with a contested central government. (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, Wardack, Zaman, & Taylor 2008)

The actual impact of the insurgency on community councils is ambiguous and not well researched. As a general matter, communities in areas affected by the insurgency, which are seen as collaborating with the government, have been threatened.

“Collaborators” - from aid workers to local teachers - are routinely targeted and the numbers killed have increased steadily over the last several years.

Interviews with Future Generations NSP staff in four districts of two insecure provinces (by no means a representative sample) present a nuanced picture of community strategies in the face of the insurgency. Staff report that generally the CDCs are viewed by insurgents as community organizations collaborating with the government, but not organs of the government itself. The distinction is important and affords communities some negotiating space in terms of protecting community infrastructure. More often than not, it was reported that insurgents would threaten individuals with links to the government as opposed to the entire community council itself.¹⁰ This experience is subject to regional variation. Much more systematic research in this area is needed in order to better understand how the principles behind the NSP, such as community ownership and legitimacy, interact with the specific dynamics of the insurgency.

V. Findings

This survey represents a preliminary review of the literature surrounding what is arguably the flagship reconstruction program of the Government of Afghanistan and the international community with an assessment of its place in the country's ongoing statebuilding and peacebuilding processes. While the NSP is just one component of the international effort, it is fair to consider its impact on “peace writ large” given the prominent level of resources it receives and its nationwide scope.¹¹ The evidence suggests that the NSP made clear contributions to reconstruction, resettlement, and establishment of local governance structures in the aftermath of the Taliban regime's overthrow, and that the design of the NSP was appropriate given historic grievances of toward heavy-handed central governments. However, as the insurgency heated up and the contradictions of the post-Bonn arrangements became more evident, the role and impact of the NSP became more ambiguous. Until the fundamental questions of a final peace process and the nature of local governance in the context of the Afghan state are addressed, the prospect for the NSP to have an enduring positive impact is unclear.

¹⁰ Interview with FG NSP Managers, Ghazni and Nangarhar Provinces, 11/10/2008.

¹¹ The concept of “peace writ large” comes from Mary Anderson and Lara Olsen in the seminal Reflecting on Peace Practice project to describe the experience of society-as-a-whole in both the direct and structural dimensions of peace.

A. EARLY POSITIVES (2003-2006)

By the sheer scale of its achievements, the NSP has undoubtedly contributed to local stability, community reconstruction, inclusive governance, and participatory development. In many areas of the country, the NSP is the people's only contact with the state in its role as service provider. During the decades of violent conflict, the state effectively collapsed and was not a major factor in people's lives. With the resources provided by the international community, it has proved a successful mechanism for local economic stimulus and rebuilding public infrastructure in long-neglected communities. NSP projects often provide tangible proof that the new Afghan state can be a positive force in community life.

The NSP has successfully established democratic community governance institutions at the sub-district level where none had existed in the past. It is reported that in many cases, these CDCs have successfully marginalized commanders and warlords while meeting the acceptance of communities and traditional institutions. They have also slowly advanced women's participation in development and governance – more the former than the latter - in the face of significant cultural obstacles. While the councils provide “governance for development” and not the administrative functions typically associated with local government (e.g. collecting taxes, registering births and deaths, etc.), they have also play roles in such areas as dispute resolution and community representation with government and other development actors. In the context of a complex environment of non-formal institutions, practices, and actors, CDCs coexist and maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the communities and the state.

With its emphasis on democratic local governance, community participation, and local priority in the choice of projects the NSP is designed to avoid some of the pitfalls of previous top-down behavior by the state. The broad parameters of the NSP have allowed the state to enter into a dialogue with local communities on whether to join the program or not. The CDC electoral process was deftly designed and implemented in a way to increase local legitimacy and minimize the unwanted capture of the program by warlords and commanders. Its gender provisions have been implemented flexibly. While they challenge local norms of exclusion of women from decision-making, they have found different ways of meeting the goal of women's participation and have not elicited a major backlash. The NSP approach avoids past experiences of manipulation and unwelcome intrusion in local affairs that have characterized the Afghan state and fed resentment.

Notwithstanding these positives, the NSP has come up short of several of its aims independent of those that have arisen as a result of the rising insurgency. The NSP has been hampered by long delays and shortfalls of donor funding, causing delayed disbursement of grants to approved community projects and increasing tensions with the facilitating NGOs. Also, notwithstanding the declared intent that the CDCs would link with other agencies of the government, inter-ministerial rivalries early on hampered effective cooperation and the potential leveraging of additional resources for communities. And finally, the long-term status of the CDCs as community governance

institutions remains an open question despite considerable advocacy on the part of CDC members and communities to see this position secured.

Nevertheless, most assessments of the NSP itself have given it high marks against its stated aims, especially considering the difficult environment and historical legacy. By extension, one could reasonably argue that the NSP has made a definite contribution to peace in Afghanistan, or at least helped blunt the population's receptivity to the insurgency. However, no studies have explicitly attempted to analyze or measure the cumulative impacts of the tens of thousands of communities and their elected councils on local security, conflict resolution, social cohesion, and the spread and influence of the insurgency.

B. TROUBLES AMIDST INSURGENCY (2007-2009)

The situation today is different; an insurgency is on the rise that has local support in some areas of the country. In the context of increased contestation with the state and growing armed conflict, it is fair to ask whether the NSP can continue its positive peacebuilding impact. From the perspective of conflict sensitivity, is it wise to continue to inject financial resources into what is contested territory? In doing so, does the NSP make communities safer or put them at risk? Is the NSP inevitably a part of the counterinsurgency "hearts and minds" campaign of the government and coalition forces, and thus clearly a tool of one side of the conflict?

The government has faced difficulty in extending the NSP into insecure areas. It has not been able to establish CDCs in many areas it deems "highly insecure" mostly because they are inaccessible even to NGOs. In many once secure areas in the south and east, councils and communities are threatened and attacked for collaborating with the government. In this context, the community acceptance and protection strategies employed by even the most deft and skilled NGOs are stretched to their limits. By this measure, the extension of the program into insecure areas provokes more conflict, as it is perceived as an attempt to extend the government's influence over territory.

Communities themselves are increasingly caught between the state and the insurgency and do their best to negotiate this difficult terrain. When confronted by insurgents, many CDCs emphasize their identity as community institutions but there have nevertheless been several instances of CDC members who have been threatened or killed for their collaboration with the state. Communities on the front lines are also the target of military "hearts and minds" efforts where civil-military Provincial Reconstruction Teams seek local cooperation in exchange for reconstruction assistance, again exposing the community to insurgent reprisals (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, Wardack, Zaman, & Taylor 2008). Additionally, a new donor-backed government effort through the Independent Directorate of Local Governance to extend the state's presence into insecure areas by appointing (loyal) district councils backed by local militias threatens to muddy local waters even further.

The reality is an increasingly deteriorating security environment in which the government responds to its loss of territorial control. As the Afghan government and

US military escalate the current fight while searching for the elusive combination of domestic and regional political strategies to drain the fuel from the insurgency, the political and humanitarian space for community self-governance is decreasing, and communities are forced to take sides in the conflict, putting them in peril with the other side. The NSP plays a role in this dynamic as one of the government's main tools of community engagement. This is the fundamental contradiction of statebuilding amidst war or statebuilding in the absence of reconciliation.

C. FUNDAMENTAL CONTRADICTIONS

While the NSP represents a positive change in the people's historical relationship with the state, expectations must be tempered within the current context. If Afghanistan were truly in a post-conflict period, as the architects of the NSP expected when they designed the program, the prognosis for the NSP as a peacebuilding tool might be much clearer and more positive. In historical terms, the NSP has gotten some elements right (decentralized decision-making, community participation, local control of block grants), but it exists within a flawed framework of a highly centralized state and incomplete peace process.

Afghanistan's historical experience suggests that the post-Bonn state does not represent an ideal model. When Afghanistan's rulers have adopted a centralized model in the past the result has been consistent: a weak state lacking consensus, prone to abuse of authority, maintained by military coercion, and propped up by levels of foreign financing that eventually prove unsustainable. Tragically, the Afghan state today increasingly looks like some of its predecessors. Even the level of decentralization called for in the new constitution has not been realized given the absence of local government elections since 2004. The state is likely to need fundamental reform to survive, and the current path of co-opting opponents in the name of "reconciliation" will not suffice. Ultimately, Afghanistan will be better served by a multi-layered state with greater devolution of authority and sub-regional political consensus. The NSP's "governance for development" model is not a replacement for a decentralized state where local authorities have political power and taxing and spending authority.¹²

It is widely accepted that a political solution is needed for the Afghan conflict, although this is belied by the actions of the international coalition, which seeks to weaken the insurgency so that negotiations may better preserve what Western blood and treasure have built. The current conceptualization of the conflict, as one being fought on the one hand by the West against global terrorism and extremism and on the other by the Taliban against foreign occupation and a puppet regime, masks the many and varied local conflicts that are central to the insurgency. These contradictions can only be resolved through a peace process and national dialogue about a more flexible state model that balances local and regional powers. In all likelihood the NSP would rest more comfortably within a more consensual model of the state that could result from such reform.

¹² A more decentralized state would not obviate the need for continued resource transfers from the center given the weak local economies of many rural areas.

VI. Conclusion

Does the NSP represent an example of an effective approach for reconciling top-down statebuilding with bottom-up community building on a large scale? As a national framework for partnership between the state, civil society actors, and communities, it has some attractive features and a record of accomplishment in difficult circumstances. It is probably too early to say one way or another, as both processes are complex, long-term ones. On the one hand, the NSP reflects principles that are sensitive to several of the factors that undermined previous statebuilding efforts and were sources of conflict. It has certainly not been rejected wholesale by communities or co-opted completely by local elites. Yet, the current dynamics of insurgency are driven by other factors: an exclusive national political arrangement born of a flawed settlement, geopolitical strategies of regional actors, and an ideologically driven jihadist movement. Looked at for its contributions to immediate peacebuilding, it may be that the NSP is fighting the previous war. Ultimately, however, the NSP is challenged by the flaws in the model of the state adopted at Bonn. Until these are rectified - in favor of a more decentralized, consensus-based model in which the state is a more flexible mediator of contenting interest groups and in which the NSP would be well situated as a tool for delivering development assistance to communities - the true peacebuilding potential for the NSP will be unrealized.

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