

Local Governance in Afghanistan: Six Months after the Taliban Takeover

Policy issue

Policymakers are struggling to deliver much-needed support to Afghans facing a dire humanitarian crisis. This case demonstrates the political implications of service delivery, which determines how and to whom aid is distributed for human development.

The context

It has been six months since American troops withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban took power. Information on the Taliban government concerning gender, security force amnesty, and foreign policy is [well documented](#). Less well known is how the Taliban will govern at the local level, as the Taliban's vision for stabilization, state-society relations, and incorporation of a highly fragmented subnational structure is unclear. Unfortunately, due to the Taliban [threatening journalists](#) in the provinces, a clearer understanding is currently unlikely.

GLD recently held a Policy Roundtable that brought together experts to discuss questions of local governance and development to assess the path forward. Participants included **Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili** from the University of Pittsburgh; **Khalid Fahim** of The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan; **Frances Brown** at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; and **Timor Sharan**, the former Senior Analyst for the International Crisis Group in Afghanistan. The panelists highlighted four insights critical for domestic and international policymakers who are trying to support Afghans amidst this humanitarian emergency.

1. Afghanistan faces a dire humanitarian crisis, but the Taliban does not "own it"

Afghanistan is experiencing the cumulative effects of conflict, internal displacement, COVID-19, drought, and economic

and political collapse. As a result, [24.4 million](#) people will require humanitarian assistance, a sharp increase from the [18.4 million](#) needing assistance in 2021. The crisis affects all sectors, especially women's health and girls' education and employment. The collapse of the ministry of women affairs and institutions devoted to women's justice has led to increased unaccounted violence against women.

However, according to Fahim, the Taliban is not "owning the crisis," instead attributing it to the previous government and the international community. There needs to be sustainable and long-term engagement with communities at the local level. This requires a response by the international community that addresses the political, humanitarian, and development aspects of the crisis in tandem.

2. Local government is broken – and always served different political purposes

The international community invested an estimated \$2 billion (USD) in local government assistance over the past twenty years, but there were key shortcomings in how this money was used. Frances Brown outlines the following lessons drawn from previous efforts:

Millions of dollars were spent on "fostering dialogue" between communities and the state. But Afghans did not need to learn "how to talk to each other;" the barriers to dialogue were due to political and human factors, not technical. Building trust and dialogue between community members and the state is not a technical matter, but a political one.

There were consistent efforts to build capacity in subnational consultative bodies—such as provincial or district-level councils, but most of this money was spent teaching people how to do jobs that were never defined. The authority and responsibilities of local councils were never made clear, and local councils had limited authority vis-à-vis the local executives (provincial or district governor). As a result, the international community largely supported "romantic capacity building" with no clear mandates.

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Donor programs often emphasized skills surrounding being a good aid recipient – what Westerners viewed as important skills for local government officials. However, they did not teach the skills more relevant to Afghan “real politics” – what was actually needed to be an effective local government official. Relatedly, many Afghans viewed any state incursion into the village level as predatory. Thus, there was a significant mismatch between program goals (to increase the state’s presence and capacity at the local level) and reality on the ground.

Donor assistance viewed local government programs as belonging to one “politics” category, and local service delivery assistance as belonging to another. Service delivery was viewed as a technical endeavor; however, service delivery is inherently about resource distribution, which is a political issue.

As Brown suggests, provincial and district administrations served different purposes for various actors. For example, as Sharan explains, the objective of subnational governance was never clear. The U.S. sought to use local administrations for their counterinsurgency and stabilization goals – bringing uniformity in operations and coordination. Afghan elites, especially in Kabul, were motivated to expand their patronage network, initially against the powerful regional powerbrokers in the provinces and districts, and ensure upward resource flow.

3. Inclusive and representative provincial appointments are key

The Taliban is making the same mistakes as the previous government by not incorporating locals from different groups into their ruling coalition. For this reason, many local communities are likely to reject Kabul as their voices are ignored. While decentralization is often hailed as bringing government to the people, equally as important – if not more – is incorporating local leaders into the central government. A diverse group of provincial representatives is especially important. But the new government in Afghanistan does not seem to be responsive to sensitivities in local society.

There are emerging tensions between the center and the periphery, manifesting in factional, tribal, regional, and religious conflicts. Sharan worries that the Taliban is repeating historical mistakes, including: **1)** Not giving voice and representation to communities, **2)** Failing to contain local conflicts, and **3)** Not bringing service delivery closer to the people. This could lead to further fragmentation and division between the group and the population. If inclusivity and diversity in governance are not addressed, civil war is a possibility.

4. The aid conundrum: Service delivery is state building

Foreign governments and international aid agencies face a conundrum: How to provide humanitarian assistance and support local communities without legitimizing the Taliban’s rule? Foreign governments would like to provide humanitarian aid but not support state building. However, lessons from the past twenty years in Afghanistan suggest that service delivery is an integral aspect of state building and, as such, has political implications.

Lessons

Building inclusive and representative local government is difficult. The Western-backed government built administrative units at the local level, but they are not fully represented in the central government. As a result, some people benefited, while others were left behind.

The question now becomes: How to engage local communities under Taliban rule? The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, for instance, has worked with Taliban Provincial administrations in some provinces to ensure that girls returned to school. This kind of collaboration indicates room for deliberation and dialogue if local communities are involved, and the international community can seek out positive windows to make progress.

However, it is important to step back and gather basic information first. *“It is amazing how little we know about what is going on in Afghanistan,”* Murtazashvili summarized.

Additional information

Frances Z. Brown,
[“Aiding Afghan Local Governance: What Went Wrong?”](#)

Podcast: Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili on
[“Local Politics and the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan.”](#)

Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili,
[“The Collapse of Afghanistan.”](#)

Full Policy Roundtable, Recorded via Zoom and published via YouTube, [watch here.](#)

About GLD

The Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD) is a research program based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Program Director, Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The program is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Program findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.



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