COMMUNITY ELECTIONS IN RURAL AFGHANISTAN

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Introduction

One of the major rural reconstruction and local governance capacity development initiatives of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is the National Solidarity Program (NSP). This community empowerment program, which receives financial support from the World Bank and several other international donors,[1] was initiated in 2002.

NSP is in essence a "community-driven" development program that distributes blockgrants for community-owned rehabilitation projects, and governance learning. One distinguishing feature of NSP is that communities interested in joining the program first must *elect* a Community Development Council (CDC), locally referred to as *shura*. Once the CDC is established, it is being entrusted by the Government to spearhead socioeconomic development initiatives at the community level.

[1] By February 2005, The World Bank had contributed or pledged to contribute $240 Million; in addition, the following Governments either contributed or pledged to contribute the following amounts of money: Denmark: $9 million; Germany: $6.1 million; Japan: $11 million; Norway: $1.1 million; United Kingdom: $5.7 million; and United States: $10 million.

Rarely before in the history of Afghanistan—where illiteracy is high—have rural Afghans (neither men nor certainly women) experienced or participated in secret ballot (one man/women, one vote) elections.[2] The Government's decision to include rural communities in the NSP project identification, planning and implementation process; and to finance village project proposals by entrusting considerable amounts of money into the hands of village institutions, is also something unheard of in the history of Afghanistan.

[2] See: I. Boesen, *From Subjects to Citizens: Local Participation in the National Solidarity Program,* Afghanistan Research & Evaluation Unit (AREU), Kabul, 2004 (see also: L. Duprée, *Afghanistan,* Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1980.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how the introduction of a secret ballot election process—that prohibits campaigning and electioneering tactics—has impacted the effectiveness of a major grassroots reconstruction effort in post-Taliban Afghanistan. The paper presents the history, goals and objectives of NSP; the NSP election process; and quantitative data from community elections held 1057 villages of 15 districts of the Afghan provinces of Bamyan, Farah, Herat, Kandahar, and Parwan. The paper also discusses the subjective dimensions of community members' NSP election experience; and concludes with an analysis how representative election processes can nurture and protect the integrity of grassroots-driven reconstruction efforts in post-conflict contexts such as rural Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program

Historical Antecedents

NSP has its roots in seven years of successful, Afghan-owned grassroots development action research facilitated by the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-HABITAT), prior to and during the Taliban years from 1995 and 2001. During these years, UN-HABITAT facilitated the establishment of urban "community forums". The forums originally consisted of men and women representatives nominated by urban communities. After the Taliban had taken power in 1995, the forums had to be segregated—at least on the surface—into men and women community forums. Through a process of regular community consultations, these forums would initiate small-scale self-initiative projects that addressed urgent urban community infrastructure maintenance and protection needs. After the fall of the Taliban, then-Interim-President Hamid Karzai, in his Tokyo Declaration of January 2002, expressed the need to launch an "emergency community empowerment program" to assist Afghanistan's ailing rural populations. Given UN-HABITAT's successful model of facilitating Afghan-owned grassroots development initiatives, and encouraged by evidence collected by the World Bank[3] regarding the social and economic feasibility of community-driven development projects in post-conflict and developing countries, UN-HABITAT Afghanistan was invited in June 2002 to design a program that later was given the name of *Hambastagie Millie Paiwastoon,* or National Solidarity Program.

NSP implementation was eventually initiated by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD)—with UN-HABITAT as its first "Facilitating Partner" Agency—in 15 districts

[3] See: Ph. Dongier, J. van Dumelen, E. Ostrom, A. Rizvi, W. Wakeman, A. Bebbington, S. Alkire, T. Esmail, M. Polski, "Community-Driven Development," in: *A Soucebook for Poverty Reduction Strategies,* ed. by J. Klugman, The World Bank, Washington, DC, 2002, pp. 303—331.

of the Provinces of Bamyan, Farah, Herat, Kandahar and Parwan (covering altogether 1,066 villages, which amounts to 240,000 families, or 1.3 million people). Between July and December 2003, MRRD contracted 21 additional national and international NGOs who started to implement NSP in an additional 73 districts, raising the number of participating communities to 6,130. In 2005, NSP expanded to cover 187 (out of 388 districts), expanding the number of villages (and thereby CDCs) up to 11,000. Further expansion is anticipated for 2006.

NSP Goals, Objectives and Community Mobilization Strategy

The goal of the NSP is to reduce poverty through community empowerment. NSP seeks to accomplish its goal by promoting—on the one hand—good grassroots governance and institutional capacity development, by enabling CDCs to plan and implement socioeconomic development initiatives. On the other hand, NSP seeks to rehabilitate Afghanistan's rural infrastructure through the disbursement of blockgrants and technical assistance to CDCs facilitating community-based reconstruction efforts.[4] By forming and actively engaging CDCs in the roll-out of the NSP project planning and implementation process (see Table 1), "on-the-job institutional capacity building" opportunities were to be created, which facilitate "conscientization" and "transformational learning."[5]

Depending on the number of families residing in a village, communities were entitled to receive funding, ranging from US$10,000 up to US$60,000, to implement infrastructure reconstruction projects identified as a priority need by the community. In order to become eligible for an NSP grant, communities first had to elect their CDC. This requirement was to ensure that village governance institutions were truly representative, and reflective of the diverse needs and aspirations of all population groups residing in a community. In contrast to Western election practices, however, the NSP Operations Manual mandates a registration and election process that is free from political propaganda, electioneering and campaigning processes. This was done in order to ensure that elections will not create division or elitist usurpation of election results: "Prohibition of candidature and electioneering is critical to reduce the likelihood of elite capture and intimidation, recognizing that it will not remove it."[6]

NSP and the Establishment of Community Development Councils

Effective and sustainable socioeconomic development requires institutions capable of mobilizing, nurturing, managing and maintaining community-owned development initiatives.[7] In Afghani-

[4] See: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), *NSP Operational Manual,* MRRD/World Bank, Kabul, 20 March, 2004.

[5] "Conscientization" describes a process "…in which men [sic!], not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality" (see: P. Freire, in: Sh.B. Merriam, R.S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide,* Second Edition, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1999, p. 325. Transformational Learning is a development and change process of personal perspectives used in the interpretation of the meaning of one's experience, in order to guide future action (see: J. Mezirow, in: Sh.B. Merriam, R.S. Caffarella, op. cit., p. 319).

[6] Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), p. 15.

[7] See: M. Gramberger, *Citizens as Partners: OECD Handbook on Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making,* Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Paris, 2001; N. Uphoff, *Local Institutional Development: An Analytical Sourcebook with Cases,* Kumarian Press, West Hartford, 1986.

Table 1

NSP Implementation Process Used by UN-HABITAT

Phase 1:
Raising Community Awareness
■ **Contacting Key Community Representatives**
■ **Small Group Meetings for Discussing Community Assets and Problems, and the Feasibility of a Community Development Council, thereby Generating Demand for a Large Community Gathering**
Phase 2:
Establishing the Community Development Council
■ **Holding a large community gathering for acknowledgement of community resources and problems, for the realization of the importance and need of CDCs to take charge of community project activities, and for agreement on the selection of a committee to supervise the CDC election process**
■ **Electing and registering the Community Development Council**
■ **CDC Mission Statement, and Endorsement of Mission Statement by Community Groups**
Phase 3:
Community Development Plan
■ **Preparing a Community Development Plan & Establishment of the Community Fund Box**
■ **Community Endorsement of the Development Plan**
■ **Community Self-Initiative Project**
Phase 4:
Project Design & Submission of Project Proposal
■ **Designing the Community Project(s)**
■ **Community Endorsement of Project Design(s)**
■ **Write-up of the Community Project Proposal(s)**
■ **Submission of Community Project Proposal(s) to Government authorities**
Phase 5:
Project Implementation, Monitoring & Evaluation
■ **Implementation, Monitoring & Reporting on NSP Project Progress**
■ **Final Project Evaluation & Handover of Project**
■ **Reflection on Project Learning Experience; Review of Community Development Plan.**

stan, the institution which best matches the definition of grassroots institutions is the "shura" which—in accordance with Islamic polity—is expected to practice *ijma* ("consensus seeking") and *shura* ("consultation") as preconditions for competent and fair governance performance.[8]

Yet, the traditional village shuras of post-Taliban Afghanistan frequently lacked the characteristics necessary for making them legitimate and effective NSP partner institutions. The traditional shuras' membership was often non-representative of its village constituency. Members happened to be appointees of commanders[9] or wealthy families, with a history of working for the interests of the powerful rather than the politically marginalized. Women were usually not shura members. Traditional shuras did not play a proactive development role in the community. During the past 22 years of war, they usually met to discuss emergencies, or they served traditional purposes such as funeral or wedding ceremonies, or reception of important guests. They lacked the mandate, as well as the capacity to design and carry out community project initiatives, or to facilitate village-wide community consultations.

The purpose of CDC elections was therefore to facilitate—by means of a secret-ballot election process—the emergence of a cadre of village representatives who had a majority-vote mandate. At the same time, a framework for village level consultative decision-making had to be introduced.

Introducing the concept of elections to Afghan rural communities was a challenge for multiple reasons: first of all, there was almost no precedent of holding elections in rural areas. Secondly, there is a high rate of illiteracy within Afghan communities.[10] Thirdly, the notion of women participating in the elections touched a sensitive nerve of Afghan men in many tribal areas. The fourth major challenge lay in the fact that the terms "elections" and "democracy" were deemed to be Western inventions; and therefore mistrusted by hard-core Islamists who suspected NSP to be part of a concerted Western attempt to undermine Afghan and Islamic values and culture. It was furthermore feared that local political parties ("tanzeems") could use NSP elections as a vehicle to bring divisive party politics to the village level; or that the government or commanders would use their political, military or financial means to influence the establishment of CDCs for their own political purposes.

Rather than mandating democratic elections, NSP "Social Organizers"—i.e. the field staff advising and coaching representatives of villages participating in NSP—first organized community-wide small-group gatherings where villagers would consult about their economic, social and organizational community problems. As a result, two proposals would emerge: one addressing the need and value of regular consultation on village development needs; and another one to have a smaller group of trustworthy and competent representatives who could make decisions on behalf of the community.

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[8] See: A.R. Moten, "Democracy as Development: Muslim Experience and Expectations," in: *Political Development: An Islamic Perspective,* ed. by Zeenath Kausar, The Other Press, Petaling Jaya, 2000, pp. 103—123.

[9] Commanders are military operators originally appointed by rural communities who wished to resist the Russian invasion. Afghans refer to this time as "Jihad Time." In order to be well-prepared for Jihad activities, commanders would—with community financial support—build and arm cadres of village soldiers who would fight under their command. Later, additional financial resources were obtained from Afghan political parties operating outside of Afghanistan (and which, in turn, would receive funds from international political interest groups) (see: A. Hyman, *Afghanistan under Soviet Domination, 1964-1991*, 3rd rev. edition, Pelgrave MacMillan Press, New York, 1992).

After the withdrawal of the Russians, in-fighting broke out in Afghanistan. As the Russians were gone, villagers were less inclined to sponsor military operations; in addition, the many years of war had already caused considerable material hardships. Whereas some wealthier commanders continued to secure financial support from abroad, less-fortunate commanders faced financial difficulties and began to claim village tax by force.

[10] According to UNICEF, Afghanistan's adult male population was—in 2000—51% literate, whereas female adults were 21% literate. Literacy in rural areas is obviously lower than in urban centers (see: United Nations Children's Fund, *The State of the World's Children 2005: Childhood under Threat*, UNICEF, New York, 2004, p. 132.

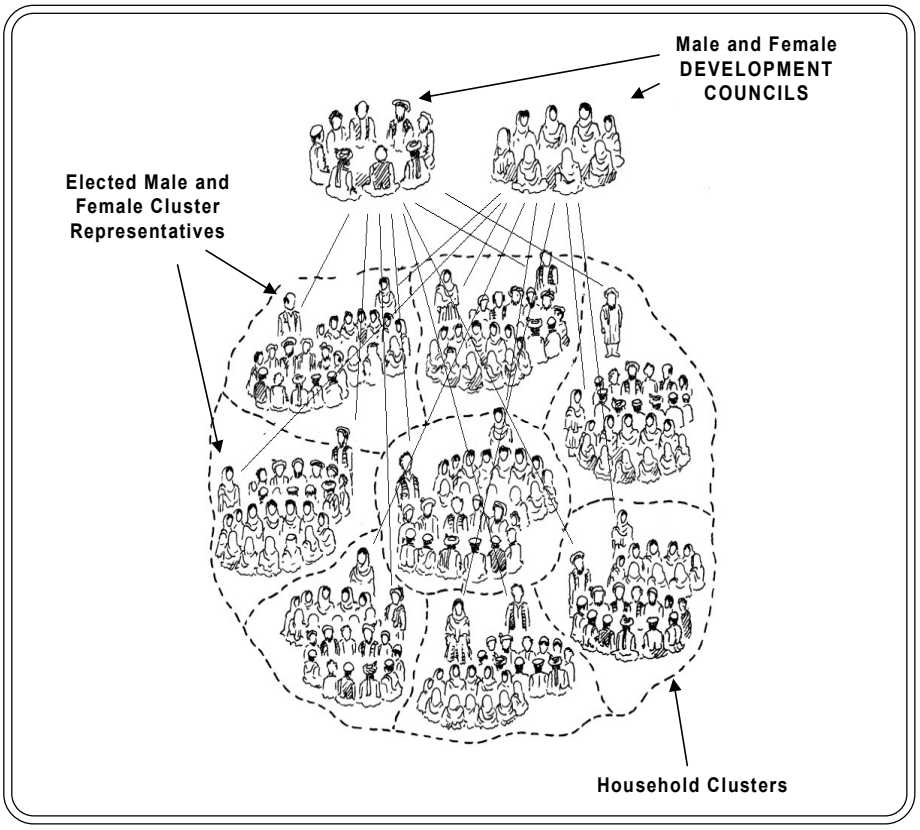
NSP Elections Process

In order to elect "cluster representatives," communities were divided into geographic clusters of 10-30 families, with an average of 6-8 persons per family (see Fig. 1). Any cluster member aged 18 or older was entitled to vote for one cluster representative, while serving as an eligible candidate at the same time.

Voting was done by casting stamped ballots, which were later counted by an appointed committee of tellers. Illiterate members would select a "secretary" of their choosing and dictate the name of their preferred candidate.[11] As the Religion of Islam emphasizes the importance of "just govern-

Figure 1

Development Council Elections



[11] In the Province of Kandahar, one community (where illiteracy was rampant) decided that the writing of the candidate's name on the ballot should happen outside the building where the vote was to be cast. After the ballot was prepared, the illiterate voter would enter the house where the ballot box was located. Next to the box, a child was seated which happened to know how to read and write. The child would then read the name of the ballot once again to the illiterate person casting the ballot so that the voter could be absolutely sure that the name written on the ballot by the "secretary" was indeed the name that had been dictated.

ance,"[12] and Islamic literature equally endorses the concept of just and service-oriented governance,[13] religious citations, poetry and proverbs were used to facilitate discussions about the importance of choosing reliable and competent CDC representatives.

The geographic (or spatial) cluster approach (see Fig. 1) helped to ensure that there was representation from each part of the community. Like almost everywhere in the world, settlements tend to be divided into "good" (e.g. "close to water") areas, and "not-so-good" areas (e.g. "far from water"). Elites (whether ethnic, political or religious) tend to accumulate and inhabit the "good" neighborhoods, rather than the "bad" ones. The purpose of electing council members on a cluster basis was to ensure that all cluster facets of the community were represented on the CDC.[14]

Notwithstanding the advice of political strategists who argued that campaigning and electioneering was necessary in order to introduce unknown candidates to the electorate (i.e., "people will not know who to vote for unless candidates campaign…"), it was assumed that in a cluster-based election, community members knew each other from a life-time of coexistence, and were therefore very well familiar with each others' personalities. Campaigning or electioneering was therefore discouraged and prohibited.

Prior to the elections, community members were asked to discuss character qualities and competencies considered crucial for CDC membership and a satisfactory CDC job performance. Usually,

Table 2

Examples of Desirable Characteristics & Competencies of CDC Representatives Commonly Identified by Communities

Characteristics:
■ Honesty
■ Likes the people
■ Open-mindedness
■ Fairness
■ Social sensitivity
Competencies:
■ Good communicator
■ Able to advocate
■ Able to mobilize the community
■ Able to take initiative
Source: Authors.

[12] See, for example: "Sura 57:25" in the *Holy Qur'ân—English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary*. Revised and edited by the Presidency of Islamic Researchers, IFTA, Call and Guidance (1413 H.). Al Madinah Al-Munawarah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Fahd Complex For the Printing of the Holy Qur'ân; see also *Hadith—Translation of Sahih Bukhari,* Transl. by M. Muhsin Khan, Vol.1, 3:56; Vol. 8, 78:619, available on [http://arthurwendover.com/arthurs/islam/].

[13] See, for example, *Nahjul Balaagha: Letters of Imam Alí b. Abi Taalib*, Chapter 18, available on [http://arthursclassicnovels.com/arthurs/islam/letrsnb10.html] (see also: Muslih-uddin Sheikh Sa'di Shirazi, *The Gulistan of Sa'di,* Transl. by Sir Edwin Arnold, 1899, Chapter 6, available on [http://www.intratext.com/X/ENG0160.HTM]).

[14] Whereas NSP originally mandated the establishment of one CDC per village, it was very soon recognized that women's voices were more likely to be surfacing in institutional settings where women were among themselves rather than together with men. MRRD therefore amended the one-CDC policy in 2004, in order to allow for women and men CDCs especially in those areas where the idea of mixed CDCs was unacceptable for cultural or religious reasons.

social organizers would recite a poem of Sa'di, or a verse from the Hadith that emphasized the importance of "good character," thereby jumpstarting brainstorming sessions about desirable "CDC Representative" characteristics (see Table 2 for an exemplary list). Immediately before casting their vote, social organizers and community activists assisting in the elections would remind voters once again to identify—in their "heart of hearts"—the individual that best matched the characteristics and competencies previously identified.

Data Collection Process

Throughout the 2003/2004 election activities, UN-HABITAT studied CDC election outcomes in the various provinces. In order to collect pertinent data, UN-HABITAT used questionnaires for verifying whether elections had been conducted in accordance with NSP principles. The questionnaires were distributed to NSP Social Organizers who would document election results during field visits carried out on a regular basis. The collected data was eventually entered into a database, and analyzed.

Election Results

In the following, information from 1,057 villages (out of 1,066 villages covered by UN-HABITAT) of 15 districts across five provinces will be presented. Since NSP outreach was organized in three subsequent implementation cycles lasting four months each, this data analysis also distinguishes between data collected during the different implementation cycles. Whenever villagers were not willing to disclose, for example, age and social status (this happened occasionally), percentages were calculated from the numbers available.

Election Statistics

By May 2004, a total of 1,774 CDCs had been elected. While 1,057 communities had elected male or mixed CDCs, 717 communities opted to elect female CDCs in addition to the male CDCs.

During the preparation for the election of the CDCs, 448,145 persons (approximately 42% of the total estimated population) were registered as eligible voters. Among them 59% were men and 41% women. As 57% of the Afghan rural population is estimated to be younger than 18,[15] a significant number of the village residents did not participate in the elections. Furthermore, particularly in the southern province of Kandahar—where cultural conservatism, and fear of Taliban retaliation are still very strong—women were not allowed to participate in the voting.

When the elections were conducted, 71% of the eligible voters actually voted, which is a significant turnout. More women (73% of eligible female voters) compared to 71% for men participated in the election. This was significantly higher than the minimum 40% participation mandated in the NSP Operational Manual.

A total of 15,365 persons were elected to the male and female CDCs, among whom 58% were men and 42% women. The percentage of female elected CDC members was just about equal to men in Herat and Farah (due to the fact that communities chose to elect male and female CDCs). In locations where only one CDC was established, male CDC members outweighed female CDC members.

[15] See: Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, *Afghanistan—Progress of Provinces: Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2003,* Central Office of Statistics, Kabul, 2003, p. 98.

The percentage of registered voters indicates that communities were open to support the CDC election process after having had the chance to discuss and endorse the rationale behind the CDC elections. In other words, it would have been impossible for such a large percentage of community members to register for elections, if the community as a whole was opposed to the process. The "surprisingly" strong participation of female voters is actually "not so surprising," if one considers that male registered voters often work outside the village and therefore may have been prevented from attending elections for work-related reasons. Women—on the other hand—could be contacted at their homes in order to request the casting of their ballots. Radio messages aired by the Government to prepare people for the October 2004 Presidential Election may have also helped to facilitate and enhance women's participation.

Literacy

On average, one in four elected members reported being able to read and write. Compared to only 19.9% reported as literate during the Cycle "1" village elections, the number of *literate* people being elected as CDC members holding a position of a CDC officer (chair, vice-chair, secretary or treasurer) increased to 35.8% in Cycle "3" (see Fig. 2). This is true for both male CDC members

Figure 2

Literacy within CDCs

		Number Literate				Percent Literate			
Position	Gender	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	TOTAL	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	TOTAL
Chair	Male	59	103	90	252				
	Female	13	17	38	68				
	TOTAL	**72**	**120**	**128**	320	**2.6**	**3.2**	**4.5**	3.4
Vice Chair	Male	47	105	80	232				
	Female	10	17	25	52				
	TOTAL	**57**	**122**	**105**	284	**2.1**	**3.3**	**3.7**	3.0
Treasurer	Male	45	97	114	256				
	Female	18	15	30	63				
	TOTAL	**63**	**112**	**144**	319	**2.3**	**3.0**	**5.1**	3.4
Secretary	Male	106	130	137	373				
	Female	65	66	98	229				
	TOTAL	**171**	**196**	**235**	602	**6.3**	**5.2**	**8.3**	6.5
Member	Male	164	237	340	741				
	Female	17	29	66	112				
	TOTAL	**181**	**266**	**406**	853	**6.6**	**7.1**	**14.3**	9.2
Total Literate	Male	421	672	761	1,854	*15.4*	*18.0*	*26.8*	*19.9*
	Female	123	144	257	524	*4.5*	*3.9*	*9.0*	*5.6*
	TOTAL	544	816	1,018	2,378	19.9	21.8	35.8	25.5
Total Count		**2,735**	**3,738**	**2,840**	**9,313**				

(with an increase from 15.4% to 28.8%), as well as female CDC members (with an increase of 4.5% to 9.0%).

It is noteworthy that rural communities in Afghanistan tend to elect capable elders as chairs (notwithstanding their illiteracy) because they are revered. Treasurers are being selected for their trustworthiness, which is appraised higher than literacy. Hence, if there is a lack of candidates who are trustworthy *as well as* numerate, then trustworthiness will be considered first when voting a CDC member into the CDC Treasurer's Office. As communities started to realize the responsibilities of these executive positions, more literate people were being elected as Secretary as Treasurers. Yet, the literacy level of treasurers continued to be lower than desirable.

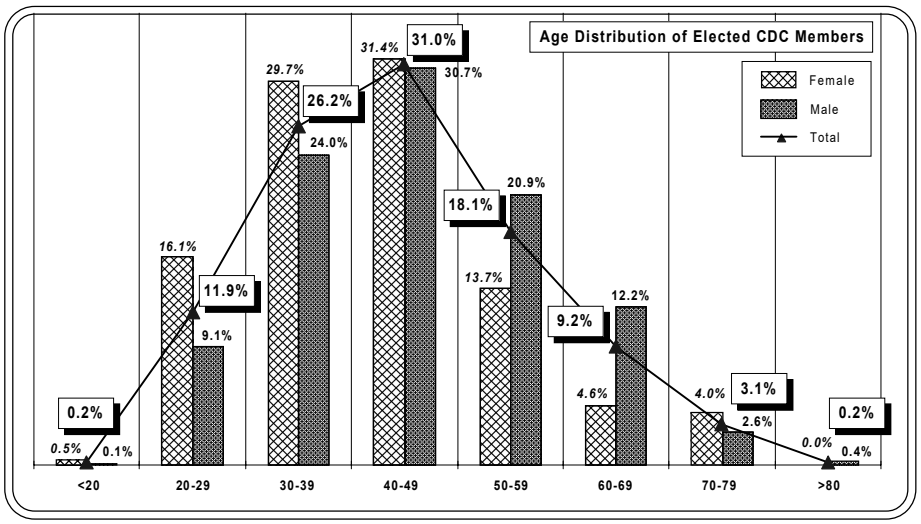
Age

While the majority of the elected members were below 50 years, female members elected to the CDCs were younger compared to male members. 66% of the male members elected were below the age of 50 while 78% of the female were less than 50 years old (see Fig. 3). This is significant for a culture where authority and competence is associated with a combination of personality and age, rather than education or skills. On the other hand, the need to elect literate community members onto CDCs, as well as the fact that only 8.6% of Afghanistan's rural population is estimated to be older than 50 years of age[16] indicates that the pool of eligible elders was already limited in size.

50% of the Secretaries and 46% of Treasurers were below 40 years of age. 60% of the chairpersons, 51% of the Vice Chair persons, and 50% of general members were between 40 and 60 years

Figure 3

Age Distribution of Elected CDC Members



[16] See: Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, *Afghanistan—Progress of Provinces: Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2003,* Central Office of Statistics, Kabul, 2003, p. 98.

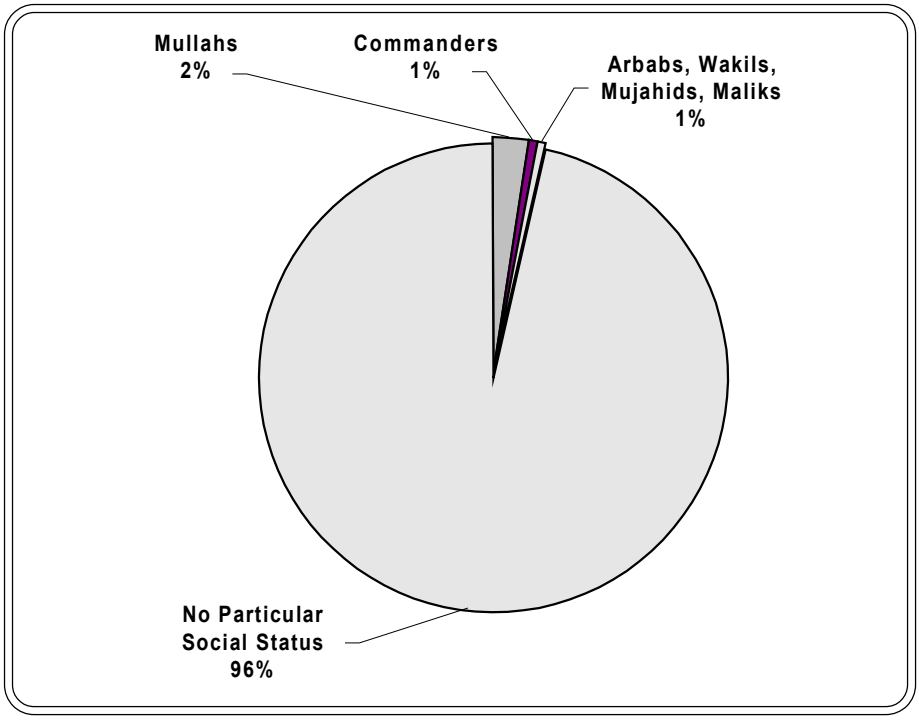
of age. During the first (Cycle "1") round of elections, there was a tendency amongst women and men CDCs to elect a younger person as Vice Chair and Secretary, while slightly older persons were elected as Chair, Treasurer or regular member. This pattern changed slightly by the third round of elections. One explanation for this phenomenon could be that—again—older people, while appreciated for their maturity, are less likely to be literate, and perhaps also less energetic than younger community members.

Social Status

Out of 13,684 total elected members for whom social status data was available, only 341 persons (2.5%) identified themselves as Mullahs and 73 (0.5%) as Commanders. Another 88 persons (0.6%) identified themselves as "Arbabs" (Landlord), "Wakils" (Neighborhood Representatives), "Mujahids" (Holy War Veterans), "Maliks" (Community Leaders), "Sayeds" (Descendants of the Prophet), or "Maolawees" (Preachers and Religious Scholars) (see also Fig. 4). Proportionately more Mullahs were being elected as CDC members than any other category. This may be due to the religious respect Mullahs enjoy, or demand, in rural communities; in addition, Mullahs are usually literate and effective communicators, and therefore very much wanted on a CDC.

Figure 4

Percentage of CDC Members of Special Social Status



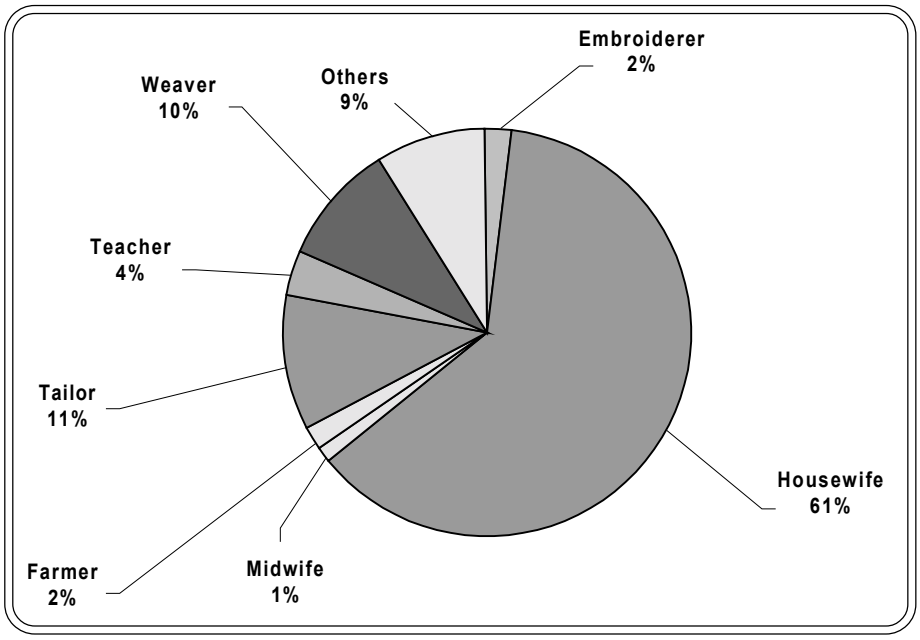
This low percentage of CDC members holding a socially significant rank is particularly interesting. Why is it—so one must ask oneself—that certain individuals treated in public with special respect and reverence—did not find themselves elected more frequently onto CDCs? Several answers are possible: Firstly, community members were initially very suspicious toward NSP and would not care to appoint traditional leadership figures to sit on an institution mandated by the only recently established Afghan Government. Secondly, the fact that voters could only vote for one member per community cluster automatically reduced the possibility of voting for more than one status person per cluster. Thirdly, secret ballot elections provided voters with the welcome opportunity to secretly express dissent with a traditional powerholder. Finally, both the Islamic admonition to not delegate authority to people of questionable character[17], as well as the "non-electioneering/non-campaigning" policy stated in the NSP Operational Manual may have resulted in fewer traditional powerholders ending up on the CDCs.

This notwithstanding, Cycle "3" election results indicate an increased number of commanders and mullahs being elected into CDCs. This increase is potentially worrying because it reverses a previous opening up of the traditional "power-grip" that allowed "regular" community members (such as ordinary farmers, women and younger people) to participate in local decision-making processes.

Various dynamics may have contributed to this phenomenon: Firstly, it may be possible that traditional powerholders were taken somewhat by surprise when NSP elections took place for the first

Figure 5

Professional Backgrounds of Female CDC Representatives



[17] See, for example: *Hadith of Bukhari*, Vol. 4, p. 56.

time. They did not anticipate the possibility that they might not be voted onto the CDC. Yet, observant powerholders of communities waiting to join NSP perhaps reflected, and then made sure to do whatever was deemed necessary in order to not suffer the same fate as their colleagues residing in Cycle "1" villages.

A second reason may be that UN-HABITAT staff—pressured by over-ambitious and unrealistic NSP project implementation time schedules—began to slacken in carefully discussing, facilitating and supervising CDC elections in the various Cycle "3" communities.

One can observe here a potential weakness in the overall NSP design. Unless community mobilization and election processes are allowed to take the time necessary for adequate training, frequent and regular visits, reflection and finally implementation, programs such as NSP will fail to produce the desired transformational impact.

Profession

63% of the male elected CDC members were farmers and ranchers, while 72% of the female CDC members were homemakers. The rest of the CDC members represented a very large range of professions.

Regarding women members, another 13% were either tailors, or silk-, wool-, or carpet weavers. The remaining 15% identified themselves either as teachers, quilt or embroidery producers, farmers, health workers (such as nurse or midwife), or students (see Fig. 5).

From the male CDC members not belonging to the farmer category, 11% identified themselves as teachers, 7% as shopkeepers, and 3% as businessmen. The remaining 16% of male elected members represented the following areas: civil service (nearly 6%), weavers (4%), traditional service providers such as drivers, technicians and mechanics (2%); landowners (2%); doctors, engineers or architects (1%); as well as students, laborers, retired or jobless members (less than 1%) (see Fig. 6).

Social and Emotional Dimensions of the NSP Election Experience

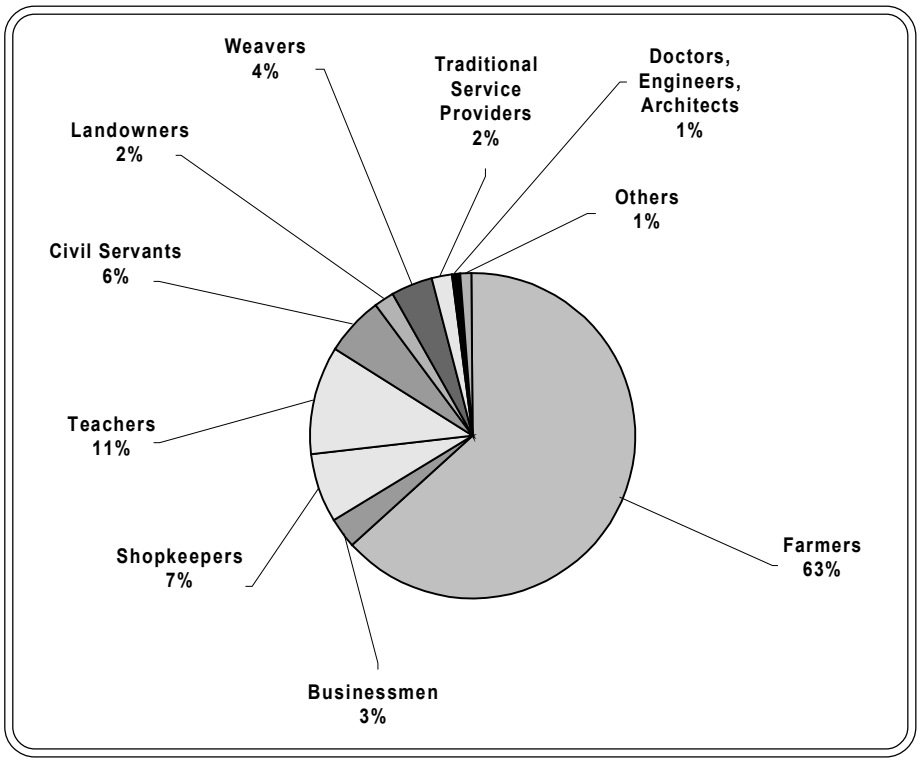
It is probably impossible for Western observers to ever appreciate deeply enough Afghan communities' bitter experiences of 20 years of war, humiliation, hardship material sacrifice, political betrayal and exploitation. Years of humanitarian and development aid have left people feeling marginalized and dependent on the decisions of foreign actors, and all too often prey to local elite capture.

It is therefore to the credit of the Government of Afghanistan and its Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development that NSP managed to build a new momentum of trust by recognizing villagers as deserving and equal partners in the process of a nationwide socioeconomic reconstruction effort. The CDC election component facilitated for most rural Afghans a first-time secret-ballot voting experience that indicated that their vote was valued, respected and appreciated.

The significance of NSP elections was probably felt even stronger amongst women, who—for cultural reasons—suffer an additional exclusion within the community context. In the words of one female Social Organizer: "NSP elections helped women rediscover their dignity of being a community member." At the same time, however, the inclusion of women into election processes created feel-

Figure 6

Professional Backgrounds of Male CDC Representatives



ings of anger and shame amongst the male population, which erroneously assumes that women's participation in public decision-making processes is anti-Islamic. [18]

Secret-ballot elections helped to take care of a significant *fear* factor prevalent in Afghan society, namely the threat of persecution, the risk of "loosing face," and social embarrassment. Secret-ballot elections enabled Afghans to vote for somebody else than the traditional powerholders, or "close relatives"—without having to lay open their real preferences, thereby avoiding to identify themselves in public (as it would be the case when leaders are appointed by the raising of hands). It has happened frequently that those publicly identified by community members as "their leaders" did only collect a handful of votes during the secret-ballot election process.[19] Secret-ballot elections effectively prevented

[18] Women's participation in building up social life of Muslim communities is a well-documented historic fact. The Prophet Muhammad used to consult on a regular basis with His wife Khadidja, a well-respected business woman. Women working outside their homes did so with the knowledge and approval of the Prophet; some women even participated in "Jihad'' (see: Mohammad Shabbir Khan, *Status of Women in Islam,* APH Publishing Cooperation, New Delhi, 2001, 110).

[19] In one instance, a community member who previously was employed by UN-HABITAT as a "Social Organizer," and who had been instrumental in setting up and facilitating NSP elections in his community, eventually found himself not elected onto the CDC. A subsequent attempt to declare himself "CDC President" was rejected by the CDC itself. He

disgruntled commanders from accusing CDC representatives to engage in a calculated attempt to depose the previous political establishment. This notwithstanding, NSP elections also provoked a backlash of aggressive responses from landlords who—realizing that NSP threatened the political status quo—began to attack or threaten CDCs.[20]

Conclusion

The National Solidarity Program has proven that secret-ballot elections—based on principles of universal suffrage and no-campaigning/electioneering policies—is a concept embraced by Afghan rural communities. Rural Afghans (women as much as men) certainly appreciate the privilege of having a say about who should represent their interests. They endorse the concept of elections not as a Western concept, but as a mechanism that facilitates the establishment of "just" governance structures, as mandated in Islam. The idea to prohibit campaigning or electioneering has added a special momentum to the NSP implementation process, in that it facilitated the emergence of a new cadre of community representatives that had previously been excluded from local decision-making processes.

Women's participation in NSP lags behind men's participation, due to cultural constraints, and an NSP policy that does not push boldly enough for women's participation and access to NSP blockgrants (out of fear of political repercussions). Women have nonetheless participated in elections even in conservative communities; men have consented to women participating in elections due to NSP policy pressure, or after men themselves had begun to appreciate the NSP elections experience.

The NSP elections process facilitated the establishment of Community Development Councils who effectively selected projects that addressed the socioeconomic needs of their communities. In addition, the cost-effectiveness of CDCs' overall project management performance was such that no outside contractor could have competed with the cost-efficiency demonstrated by the CDCs.

This notwithstanding, NSP is running the risk of loosing one of its major achievements, namely the emergence of a representative cadre of community representatives. NSP elections are based on a voluntary mutual consensus to abstain from manipulating other people's voting preferences, and by focusing on personal qualities and reputation rather than kinship ties, or political allegiances. But processes based on goodwill and spiritual exhortations—if not constantly re-visited and re-emphasized—can easily be jeopardized by powerholders choosing to impose themselves despite all odds. The perspective of a well-sized U.S. Dollar blockgrant—in a country exhausted from war, poverty, and oppressive social structures—makes it twice as difficult to stick to such principles.

There is also a clear danger that political pressure to quickly disburse large amounts of money, and to speedily rehabilitate community infrastructure will become an excuse for superficial, hurried, outsider-driven and exclusive decision-making and project implementation practices. The strengthening of local governance capacity at the community level requires just the opposite: extensive coaching, more "on-the-project" learning opportunities, and nurturance. This is the only way to cement NSP's "lessons-learned" in the minds and hearts of Afghan NSP community members.

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eventually turned to the Province Governor in an attempt to discredit the program as "anti-Islamic." The grievance was rejected.

In another instance, a community chose not to elect the Governor's father—who resided in the community—onto the CDC. When the election process had to be repeated three months later (due to a new influx of returning refugees) the Governor's father was elected onto the CDC; however, he was not voted into one of the four executive offices (chair, vice-chair, secretary or treasurer).

[20] In one instance, a local commander appeared with armed gunmen at a CDC/community gathering, demanding the CDC to dissolve and to turn over the NSP blockgrant money. Community members and CDC representatives refused to give in. An intense four-hour argument followed, at the end of which the commander decided to withdraw.

Another issue that requires urgent attention is the sustainability and future role of Community Development Councils in the administrative structure of the young Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. There are proponents which argue that CDCs—as local institutions with a popular mandate—deserve to be integrated into the new overall administrative structure of Afghanistan. Indeed, Afghanistan has seen little progress in the area of rural administrative structural development.[21] CDCs could close this gap by taking up local governance responsibilities (similar to the Panchayati Raj institutions in rural India), and by providing the electorate for outstanding District and Provincial Council elections.

Time will tell whether the Government of Afghanistan, NSP donors as well as implementing agencies are able to weather these challenges. For this paper's purpose it suffices to state, however, that Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program has been able to generate a *transformational "on-the-project" local governance learning process* that deserves the careful study of democracy scholars and development practitioners working worldwide.

[21] See: International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan Elections: Endgame or New Beginning," *Asia Report No. 101,* Kabul/Brussels, 21 July 2005, p. 25.