Statebuilding from the Bottom Up: Foreign Interveners, Local Governance, and Stabilisation

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ABSTRACT

This thesis interrogates an increasingly prevalent narrative regarding international statebuilding interventions. A growing policy consensus, as well as an incipient body of academic literature, contends that "bottom-up statebuilding" presents a viable alternative to the international community's traditional liberal statebuilding models, focused on top-down approaches and national-level institutions and actors. In practice, bottom-up statebuilding interventions often take the form of localised civilian "stabilisation" programmes that, it is hoped, will serve as the building blocks of effective subnational governance structures.

Yet the concept of bottom-up statebuilding remains under-theorised, and its outcomes under-examined. Further, the mechanisms through which foreign donors' local stabilisation programmes will actually lead to durable, "better" statebuilding outcomes are largely unspecified.

This study aims to empirically examine the underlying processes and outcomes of bottom-up statebuilding interventions. Its central research question asks: Under what conditions have donor-backed civilian stabilisation programmes advanced *effective* and *durable* decentralised local governance structures in the midst of conflict, thereby successfully promoting bottom-up statebuilding?

To undertake this evaluation, this thesis conducts a structured, focused comparison of three civilian stabilisation programmes. For reasons of comparability and maturity, all were based in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2014; each explicitly aimed to improve local government functions. The evaluative framework assesses each programme upon whether it bolstered *capacity, accountability, authority and autonomy* at subnational levels of government, and whether these effects endured beyond the lifetime of the programme.

The emergent theory is that bottom-up statebuilding programmes in Afghanistan were more likely to achieve effective, durable local governance when, first, the programme enjoyed a *strong partnership with its host government ministerial counterpart*, and second, when the programme achieved *"local embeddedness"* within Afghan vertical and local political economy. The thesis demonstrates that bottom-up statebuilding interventions are far from the panacea sometimes imagined; yet it also contributes a fine-grained picture of how and why one bottom-up initiative did achieve modest success in the otherwise bleak Afghan context. The thesis concludes by considering broader implications for the exogenous statebuilding literature, including the primacy of national actors' agency in affecting outcomes, and the flaws of service delivery and capacity building as two twin orthodoxies of the donor-backed statebuilding interventions.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AECOM An American international development and engineering firm

ALP Afghan Local Police, a US Special forces-led civil-military programme

AQI Al-Qaeda in Iraq

ASOP Afghanistan Social Outreach Programme

CDCs Community Development Councils, councils set up under NSP

CDD Community-Driven Development

CFSOCC Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command

DCs District Councils, elected councils at the district level called for in the 2004 Afghan constitution but never set up

DDAs District Development Assemblies, district-level councils set up under NABDP

DCCs District Consultation Committees, district-level councils introduced on paper by President Karzai's subnational governance decree of 2013 but never implemented

GDLCA General Directorate for Local Council Affairs, part of IDLG

GIROA Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

I-ANDS Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy

IARCSC Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission

IDLG Independent Directorate of Local Governance

ISAF International Security Assistance Forces, NATO-led coalition

MOIFAR Ministry of Interior, Federal Affairs and Reconciliation in Somalia

MRRD Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development

NABDP National Area-Based Development Programme

NSP National Solidarity Programme

PC Provincial Council

PRTs Provincial Reconstruction Teams

SAM Stability Analysis Methodology, an exercise introduced by SIKA

SIKA Stability in Key Areas programme

SNGP Subnational Governance Policy

SOIs Source of Instability

SWGs Stability Working Groups, councils set up by SIKA

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

USAID US Agency for International Development

VSO Village Stability Operations, a US Special forces-led civil-military programme

WJ Wolesi Jirga, lower chamber of Afghan parliament

Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Prologue

The challenges posed by post-conflict, weak or failed states have long stood near the top of the international relations agenda. Yet Western nations' interventions to (re)build states in the midst or wake of conflict have yielded decidedly mixed results. Critics have questioned the international community's dominant liberal statebuilding model on normative, conceptual, strategic and implementation-related grounds. Still, despite the obstacles, most observers agree with Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk that the exogenous statebuilding endeavour remains "too important to abandon."[1]

As the international community's track record of statebuilding interventions has grown longer – but not more successful – critics frequently lament these interventions' overly "top-down" focus on central institutions, capital-based elites, and universal templates. As a potential antidote, the notion of "bottom-up statebuilding" has received an increasingly wide rhetorical embrace. Though "bottom-up statebuilding" lacks an agreed-upon definition, in practice, foreign interveners frequently invoke the term when supporting local governance institutions and processes in contested areas—as part of a suite of initiatives often known as *civilian stabilisation initiatives*. Advocates hope that these stabilisation programmes will cultivate more responsive, accountable and capable subnational institutions; in turn, they argue these nascent local

[1] Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations* (Taylor & Francis, 2008), 14.

governance structures will serve as the building blocks of the longer-term inclusive, peaceful statebuilding project.

The notion of "bottom-up statebuilding" interventions through civilian stabilisation programmes holds apparent appeal from multiple perspectives. In policy circles, it corresponds to the attractive ideals of "grassroots" efforts and "local ownership." As we will see below, policymakers' discourse often signals their assumption that bottom-up programmes will eventually lead almost organically into broader good governance and state consolidation. In academic circles, focus on bottom-up statebuilding through stabilisation programmes is less abundant; however, a bottom-up strategy would seem to respond to two prevalent criticisms of exogenous statebuilding efforts within the literature. First, it would operationalise the necessity to build upon fragile states' organic capabilities, and second, it would address the frequent call for external statebuilders to launch programmes that are better tailored to the local context. Parallel to factors driving the "local turn" in peacebuilding scholarship and practice, at first blush, bottom-up statebuilding initiatives would seem to hold both emancipatory potential and greater prospective effectiveness.

Yet despite this recent widespread embrace of bottom-up statebuilding interventions, the concept remains under-theorised and its underlying processes under-examined. Further, beyond the bumper-sticker appeal of the "local", the mechanisms of how foreign interveners' local stabilisation programmes may actually lead to durable, better statebuilding outcomes are largely unspecified. Local stabilisation initiatives are often framed as the stepping stones toward permanent subnational governance structures that will decentralise government functions away from a problematic central government. Yet few studies have interrogated whether these

programmes have indeed measurably improved local governance functions, or whether these improvements were permanent.

This thesis makes a preliminary step in empirically examining this increasingly pervasive approach to exogenous statebuilding interventions. It aims to contribute toward answering one large question: does the bottom-up statebuilding model truly represent a more promising paradigm from top-down exogenous statebuilding interventions? More specifically, it asks: under what conditions do externally backed bottom-up stabilisation programmes advance effective, durable local governance in the midst of conflict?

1.1 Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Interventions: Setting the Scene

Since the end of the Cold War, international relations scholars and policymakers alike have often argued that fragile, failing, or weak states represent "the source of many of the world's most serious problems."[2] In a threat environment that is increasingly transnational in nature, many contend the international system is "only as strong as its weakest link."[3] In this vein, fragile states present a challenge that transcends their boundaries, "imperilling their own citizens and threatening their neighbours through refugee flows, political instability, and random warfare."[4] In turn, fragile states that do succumb to warfare (random or otherwise) face conflicts

[2] Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Cornell University Press, 2004), ix.

[3] Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*, 1 edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 22.

[4] Gerald B. Helman and Steven R. Ratner, "Saving Failed States," *Foreign Policy*, no. 89 (1992): 3.

which have steadily increased in duration over time: according to James Fearon, in 2010, the average length of civil wars was a remarkable 19 years.[5]

The post-Cold War era ushered in a galvanized international response to the challenges of weak states. The early 1990s onwards witnessed a host of new United Nations-led peacebuilding operations aiming to consolidate the peaceful settlement of civil wars in places ranging from Namibia to Cambodia. These early peace operations were intended to assist postwar states in transitioning toward liberal democracy and free-market economies over the span of just a few years. Yet by the early 2000s, this first generation of peacebuilding missions had yielded decidedly mixed results. Roland Paris argued that the rush to liberalisation of countries – before development of state institutions—needed to be rethought.[6] Francis Fukuyama added that international interveners should focus on the "problem of weak governance and missing or inadequate institutions at the nation-state level."[7]

Consequently, by the mid 2000s, scholarship and policy to address post-conflict states had increasingly shifted toward *statebuilding*—what Paris and Sisk term "the construction or strengthening of legitimate government institutions."[8] Paris and Sisk view statebuilding interventions as a subset of the broader category of the international community's *peacebuilding*

[5] By 2014, the average length of civil war had fallen to 14 years, but Fearon finds that this ostensible decrease in average length is almost entirely due to new conflicts that emerged in the Arab uprisings of 2011 onwards. See James Fearon, "Civil War & the Current International System," *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (October 1, 2017): 18–32.

[6] Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict*, 2004.

[7] Fukuyama, *State-Building*, 92.

[8] Paris and Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding*, 1.

endeavours.[9] Charles T. Call and Elizabeth M. Cousens have a slightly different emphasis, defining statebuilding as "actions undertaken by international or national actors to establish, reform, or strengthen the institutions of the state, which may or may not contribute to peacebuilding."[10] Fukuyama describes statebuilding as "the creation of new government institutions and the strengthening of existing ones,"[11] without directly weighing in on the relationship to peacebuilding. Regardless of specific definition, some scholars have argued that statebuilding has become one of the "critical all-consuming strategic and moral imperatives of our terrorized time"[12] – and many policymakers echo the sentiment. Strengthening and "fixing" failed or fragile states has been increasingly viewed as a strategic and security imperative as well as a moral one: as the United States 2002 National Security Strategy famously noted, "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones."[13]

Yet the conceptualisation and implementation of externally-assisted statebuilding interventions still are bedevilled by deep challenges. Scholars have abundantly documented the normative and practical tensions exogenous statebuilding efforts often encounter.[14] Even worse,

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[9] Thus terms "statebuilding" and "peacebuilding" overlap but are not synonymous, "Premised on the recognition that achieving security and development in societies emerging from civil war partly depends on the existence of capable, autonomous and legitimate institutions." Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, Ed, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations,* 1-2.

[10] Charles T. Call and Elizabeth M. Cousens, "Ending Wars and Building Peace: International Responses to War-Torn Societies," *International Studies Perspectives* 9, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 4.

[11] Fukuyama, *State-Building*, ix.

[12] Robert I. Rotberg, *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 42.

[13] The White House, "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," 2002, 1.

[14] Paris and Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding*.

as Call and Vanessa Wyeth note, these endeavours are often "fraught with problems that leave war-torn countries vulnerable to renewed or intensified conflict."[15] Though a wide range of critiques of exogenous statebuilding interventions has emerged over the past two decades, most observers agree on one point: the international community's track record of building durable, peaceful, inclusive and functional states is ambiguous at best, and perhaps outright poor.[16]

Since the 2000s, one increasingly prominent criticism of the international community's peacebuilding and statebuilding initiatives in civil wars has been that such interventions are overly "top-down", focused on national institutions and stakeholders rather than local actors and drivers of conflict.[17] As a potential corrective, the idea of building governance institutions "from the bottom up," engaging grassroots communities rather than national elites and centralised institutions, has begun to emerge in policy and academic discourse. The approach holds intuitive appeal: it inverts liberal statebuilders' more traditional—and problematised—means of attempting to alter the state-society transaction of "good governance." Seen in one light, bottom-up approaches offer the potential for donors to augment the population's *demand* for accountability and services, rather than attempting to increase the host government's supply—

[15] Charles T. Call and Vanessa Wyeth, *Building States to Build Peace* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 2008), 365.

[16] As David Lake sums it up, "The record of statebuilding is grim and offers few reasons for optimism." David A. Lake, *The Statebuilder's Dilemma: On the Limits of Foreign Intervention*, 1 edition (Ithaca ; London: Cornell University Press, 2016).

[17] For example, see Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

thereby transforming the relationship between governed and governors.[18]

Yet even as "bottom-up statebuilding" has been invoked with increasing frequency, it has lacked an agreed-upon definition. Some scholars such as William Reno have employed the term in studying organic non-state or sub-state armed groups, and how they may be incorporated into post-conflict security and governance arrangements.[19] But as we will see below, policymakers and donors have more often equated "bottom-up statebuilding" with their own efforts to launch *new local civilian governance* institutions. Starting in roughly 2007, U.S. and U.K. policymakers also employed the term in the context of their countries' burgeoning orientation toward counterinsurgency policy. According to counterinsurgency doctrine, donors' missions in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan were to help the host government earn the local popular support by providing key goods, services and security across the country-- thus aligning with the peacebuilders' notion of bottom-up statebuilding in keyways.[20]

In subsequent years, U.S. policy discourse also frequently framed the counterinsurgency

[18] On the "demand for good governance", see Thomas Carothers and Diane De Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution (Paperback) - Common* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013).

[19] Indeed, the term "bottom-up statebuilding" has been invoked in literature on international engagement with local non-state or non-state armed groups. This work offers important insights into questions that are relevant to this thesis-- such as the sources of local legitimacy and parallel service provision. But this work's focus on pre-existing, non-state armed groups is fundamentally distinct from this thesis's focus, which examines donor sponsorship of (new) local institutions to serve as administrative governance structures. For more on this other use of the term, see William Reno, "Bottom Up Statebuilding?" in Call and Wyeth, *Building States to Build Peace,* 143-161*;* Sukanya Podder, "Non-State Armed Groups and Stability: Reconsidering Legitimacy and Inclusion," *Contemporary Security Policy* 34, no. 1 (2013); Sukanya Podder, "Mainstreaming the Non-State in Bottom-up State-Building: Linkages between Rebel Governance and Post-Conflict Legitimacy," *Conflict, Security & Development* 14, no. 2 (March 10, 2014): 213–43.

[20] See U. S. Army, Lt General David Petraeus, and Lt General James F. Amos, *Counterinsurgency: FM 3-24* (Boulder, Colo.; Newbury: Paladin Press, 2007); this framing was not without detractors: for example, see Jacqueline Hazelton, "The 'Hearts and Minds' Fallacy: Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare," *International Security* 42, no. 1 (2017): 80–113.

agenda as tightly linked to "stabilisation" initiatives.[21] The term "stabilisation" itself has also been variously defined—even as it has been invoked with increasing frequency over the past decade. Scholarly examination of stabilisation interventions (at least under that term) was largely absent until the past five years,[22] which have witnessed slightly more attention to the concept.[23] Stabilisation was earliest defined in the realm of practice: in the Afghan and Iraqi surge contexts, American and allied officials used the term to denote inter-linked foreign civilian and military initiatives to establish local security, governance and development in contested areas. This often entailed rapid creation of local governance structures and processes, with the objective of decentralising key government functions away from the central government, and eventually using these local structures as the building blocks for permanent subnational governance institutions.[24] When the United States finally settled on its official government policy on stabilisation in 2018, its definition echoed this approach: stabilisation is "a political endeavor to

[21] For an overview of this evolution in U.S. policy discourse in Afghanistan, see Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization: Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," Lessons Learned Program (Washington, May 2018).

[22] As Christian Dennys noted in his path-breaking 2014 study of stabilisation interventions, "There are almost no academic debates on what stability is in the context of violent conflict." Christian Dennys, *Military Intervention, Stabilisation and Peace: The Search for Stability*, 1 edition (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 1.

[23] With the advent of *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* have academic debates begun to focus on stabilisation*;* a related volume edited by Robert Muggah also began to interrogate the concepts and outcomes of stabilisation interventions, though largely from a practitioner orientation. Robert Muggah, ed., *Stabilization Operations, Security and Development : States of Fragility* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014).

[24] During the timeframe of the thesis, there was no agreed-upon definition of "stabilisation." Only in 2018 did the U.S. government adopt an official definition. This thesis adopts its contemporaneous use by the US government in Afghanistan: "Efforts to establish stable environment at the provincial and district level by: 1) engaging/supporting at-risk populations, 2) extending the reach of the government to unstable areas, 3) providing social and economic assistance and income-generation opportunities, 4) building trust between citizens and government, and 5) encouraging local populations to take an active role in their development." USAID, "USAID Afghanistan Stabilization Fact Sheet," June 2011.

create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict."[25] (Earlier United Kingdom stabilisation doctrine mirrored these themes. The U.K. updated its guidance in 2019; its newest guidance still partially overlaps with the U.S. definition, but places a greater emphasis on political deal-making among elites.[26])

Given this progression of terminology, *civilian local stabilisation programmes can be understood to be a key manifestation of donors' bottom-up statebuilding interventions*. Far from a niche topic, "stabilisation" has become a major policy tool: since 2008, the United States has sponsored stabilisation programmes, focused on creating local governance institutions and processes, in Afghanistan, Libya, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, Mali, Somalia and Syria, while the United Kingdom has undertaken analogous initiatives in many of the same countries. Stabilisation endeavours also represent a major foreign affairs budget item: according to the U.S. government, the U.S. government spent $4.7 billion on stabilisation in Afghanistan alone.[27]

[25] U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of State, and US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas" (Washington, 2018), 1.

[26] "Stabilisation is an activity undertaken as an initial response to violence or the immediate threat of violence… Therefore, when undertaking stabilisation interventions, the UK seeks to protect the means of survival and restore basic security, promote and support a political process to reduce violence as well as prepare a foundation for longer term stability.... The UK puts engagement with the politics of conflict at the heart of its stabilisation activity. The UK seeks to help local partners restore security and create political opportunities and openings, such that a locally-determined path out of conflict can be found. Stabilisation should be seen as a process designed to facilitate this political objective, which needs to be managed flexibly with the understanding that any progress can easily be reversed." UK Stabilisation Unit, "The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners," March 2019, 13–14.

[27] Not all of this was civilian stabilisation programmes; this figure also includes Defense Department stabilisation activities. For full attribution, See Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization: Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," Lessons Learned Program (Washington, May 2018), 1.

1.2 Policymakers' Attraction to the "Bottom-Up"

The notion of "bottom-up statebuilding", often through local civilian stabilisation programmes, has gained significant purchase over the past decade. In this section, I synopsise the concept's many attractions within policy circles; in the next section I review its appeal in the context of academic literature.

First and foremost, "bottom-up statebuilding" offers intuitive attraction to policymakers. By 2008, Western officials readily admitted that the prior decade of statebuilding interventions had often been marked by overreach. By contrast, localised stabilisation projects appeared measured. Where international programmes have been afflicted by the well-documented problems of coordination and sequencing, cultivating local structures appeared simple(r). Particularly in societies beset by fragmentation or violence, international programmes that emphasize the preferences of "local communities" intuitively seem more equitable or inclusive than solely supporting capital-based institutions.

In addition, the contemporaneous period frequently witnessed international (post)conflict interventions in which donors' relationships with the host country central government were marked by tumult. As two prominent examples, U.S. policymakers viewed their interactions with Afghan Hamid President Karzai and Iraqi Premier Nouri al-Maliki as deeply frustrating, stymied by these host government executives' unwillingness to reform. Chastened by these experiences, many diplomats concluded that promoting connections between the rural population and locally based state representatives, without concentrating leverage exclusively in the hands of the central executive, offered a potentially more expedient and auspicious alternative.

Policymakers' recent appetite for bottom-up civilian stabilisation programmes also echoed—and was partially fuelled by— the (perceived) success of localised approaches in the security sector. American political consciousness, in particular, was attuned to the recent experience in Iraq, where sectarian strife and the rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) led to unprecedented levels of violence in 2006 and 2007. By mid-2008, violence levels had dropped dramatically, a trend generally attributed to a "surge" of U.S. troops, the so-called "Anbar Awakening" in which Sunni tribes rejected AQI, and the aggregation of local factional ceasefires and deals.[28] The U.S. played a key role in triggering this improvement, President George W. Bush argued, by enacting a population-based, grassroots counterinsurgency strategy.[29] The approach started with local level security progress and, it was claimed, would eventually lead to national-level turnaround.[30] As Bush noted in his 2008 State of the Union address: "At the local level, Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds are beginning to come together to reclaim their communities and rebuild their lives. Progress in the provinces must be matched by progress in Baghdad."[31] In 2008 testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—entitled, notably, "Stabilising Iraq from the Bottom Up"— political scientist Stephen Biddle summarised Washington's received

[28] For accounts from key US military architects of the efforts, see Peter Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey With General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (My journey with General David Petraeus and the remaking of the Iraq War: Yale University Press, 2014); David H. Petraeus, "How We Won in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, October 29, 2013; Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013); General Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task* (New York: Portfolio Penguin, 2013); Robert Gates, *Duty* (WH Allen, 2014).

[29] The doctrinal basis for this strategy was the newly-revised U. S. Army Counterinsurgency Manual: Lt General David Petraeus and Lt General James F. Amos, *Counterinsurgency: FM 3-24*.

[30] By 2014, Iraq's security progress in the 2007-2008 era was largely overturned by recent advances by the group known as ISIS/ISIL and sectarian conflict. The perceived local-level advances did not lead to durable national-level progress, at least in the current timeframe.

[31] George W Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union" (2008).

wisdom on the Iraqi turnaround: "The violence reduction of 2007 was obtained from the bottom up, not from the top down. Instead of a national political deal…violence fell because most of the former combatants reached separate, local, voluntary agreements to stop fighting."[32]

More recently, the Obama administration's public communication about its Syria policy vividly illustrated how it viewed the promise of supporting bottom-up statebuilding initiatives. After the uprising against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad began in early 2011, American policymakers argued intensely about the appropriate U.S. response, with deep disagreements on whether or not to provide military assistance to the opposition, appropriate reaction to chemical weapons use, and many other issues.[33] Over the years of these serious policy disputes, however, the idea of providing "non-lethal" assistance to opposition local councils emerged as perhaps the one sole point of unanimous agreement. Obama-administration policymakers framed local stabilisation support as an almost obviously useful move paving the way toward an eventual post-Assad democratic transition. As the U.S. State Department's official Syria policy press release noted: "Through a series of small cash and in-kind grants, the U.S. is helping to strengthen grassroots organizations and local administrative bodies– a foundation of democratic governance – as they step in to fill the void left by the regime and provide basic services*."*[34] A

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[32] Stephen D. Biddle, "Stabilizing Iraq from the Bottom Up" (2008).

[33] For accounts of U.S. policy debates on Syria between 2011 and 2017, see, among others, Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, Reprint edition (PublicAffairs, 2017); Mona Yacoubian, "Critical Junctures in United States Policy toward Syria: An Assessment of the Counterfactuals," Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide Series of Occasional Papers (U.S. Holocaust Museum, August 2017); Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (New York: Random House, 2018).

[34] Bureau of Public Affairs, "The Syrian Crisis: US Assistance and Support for the Transition," Fact Sheet, U.S. Department of State, (January 17, 2014).

senior Obama administration official echoed this premise, noting that the U.S. was promoting a "bottom-up process" to provide "the goods and services and support and training that those at the local level in the political opposition … need to demonstrate to the people in their neighbourhood, the people in their towns, the people in their villages, that a better day is coming.[35]

Elsewhere, the creation of a new Federal Government of Somalia spurred a comparable donor strategy for supporting local governance in the wake of extremist militancy. In 2013 and 2014, the donor community and the Somali Ministry of Interior and Federalism jointly declared that utilising "bottom up approaches" would be one of the central "principles of operation" of their statebuilding strategy. Policy documents framed this plan as crucial to the viability of administrative structures: "Bottom-up approaches support local administrations and communities to own and drive their own agenda. In line with the Government's policy the bottom-up approach narrows the social divide in Somali communities."[36] As the international community has repeatedly revised its strategy in post-Qaddafi Libya, its framing has echoed this approach, with a heavy emphasis of stabilisation programmes supporting local and municipal councils.[37]

[35] Senior Official, Department Of State, "Background Briefing on Additional Nonlethal Assistance to Syria," Press Release, U.S. Department of State, (February 28, 2013).

[36] Federal Government of Somalia, Ministry of Interior and Federalism, "Stabilization through Community Peace Dividends: A Pathway to Local Governance." March 2014. Although the document is nominally authored by the Somali government, multiple observers report that it was drafted with heavy (predominant) international donor involvement, so still can be seen as a manifestation of donor community strategy for statebuilding in Somalia.

[37] International Republican Institute, "Libyan Municipal Council Research" (Washington, D.C, n.d.); Jed Meline, "Strengthening Grassroots Democracy in Libya | USAID Impact," *USAID Impact Blog* (blog), April 7, 2016.

A few years earlier, the newly-minted Obama administration announced a revised U.S. military and civilian strategy to stabilise Afghanistan.[38] The refrain was similar: against a backdrop of insurgency, bottom-up initiatives would foster accountable local governance and promote stability. In the words of Obama's official announcement on the new approach: "To advance security, opportunity and justice -- not just in Kabul, but from the bottom-up in the provinces -- we need agricultural specialists and educators, engineers and lawyers. That's how we can help the Afghan government serve its people."[39]

The resultant "civilian surge" to Afghanistan and local stabilisation programmes arguably constituted the largest donor experiment in bottom-up statebuilding to date. It is this crucial case of Afghanistan that this thesis will examine.

1.3 The Promise of the Bottom-Up: Nascent Scholarly Examination

The heavy policy interest in "bottom-up statebuilding" emerged long before any underpinning scholarly evidence base or consensus. Deliberate academic inquiry into bottom-up statebuilding, as defined as external support of new local governance institutions, remains nascent—a key motivation behind this thesis.

[38] See, for example, Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*; Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, First Edition (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

[39] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," March 29, 2009.

One of the rare scholarly treatments of the broader concept of bottom-up statebuilding comes from Achim Wennman, who argues for the model's promise. Wennman contends that the model represents a pragmatic approach for foreign interveners:

> The notion of 'bottom-up' statebuilding is based on a transitional pact between local stakeholders and communities, central governments, and the international community, with the aim of nurturing the fusion of traditional, informal, and new state components through a progressive transformation process. Such a context-sensitive statebuilding strategy focuses more on already established government capacity at the municipal and district level, and recognises that informal governance arrangements may also provide 'classic' state services such as protection, justice, or welfare – sometimes even more effectively than the state itself. 'Bottom-up' statebuilding, therefore, lies between the utopianism of quick-fix solutions advocated by top-down approaches, and the impracticalities of a violent, century-long state formation process.[40]

Though Wennman is one of the few scholars to directly engage with the concept of externally-driven bottom-up statebuilding *per se*,[41] several strands of the exogenous statebuilding literature seem to suggest that the bottom-up model holds promise. In specific, the bottom-up approach would appear to address several recurrent critiques of statebuilding interventions.

First, statebuilding from the bottom up seems to espouse a more measured, context-appropriate approach than previous, overly ambitious statebuilding interventions. Mats Berdal captures the chorus of scholars arguing that aspirations of early peacebuilding endeavours verged on the fantastical: "The sheer level of ambition here—specifically the *transformative*

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[40] Achim Wennmann, "Aid Effectiveness Between 'Top-down' and 'Bottom-up' Statebuilding" (The Graduate Institute Geneva Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding, 2010), 2.

[41] As described above, the related, but distinct, question of engagement of pre-existing non-state or sub-state armed groups into postconflict security and governance arrangements has received greater academic examination. See William Reno, "Bottom Up Statebuilding?" in Call and Wyeth, ed, *Building States to Build Peace,* 143-161*;* Podder, "Non-State Armed Groups and Stability: Reconsidering Legitimacy and Inclusion"; Podder, "Mainstreaming the Non-State in Bottom-up State-Building: Linkages between Rebel Governance and Post-Conflict Legitimacy."

commitment on the part of external actors—is striking."[42] Bottom-up statebuilding seems to respond to the persistent argument that in donor-led statebuilding initiatives, one size or approach does not fit all, and local politics must be taken into account.[43] Charles Call underscores the need for "smarter, better resourced, more strategic, and more context-sensitive efforts by outsiders;"[44] engagement efforts focused on the subnational level, rather than the national one, may be more likely to strategically fit the specific context. Other scholars emphasise the importance of adhering to the principle of "local ownership" in peacebuilding endeavours, though acknowledge the normative and operational complexities of this concept.[45] David A. Lake, while demonstrating the deep challenges of the "statebuilder's dilemma", argues that counterinsurgency approaches, related to bottom-up statebuilding, correctly focus on state legitimacy and thus are a "step in the right direction."[46]

Second, a locally-grounded approach to statebuilding could address some prominent implementation challenges of international interventions. Scholars have abundantly chronicled the obstacles to successful coordination when international bilateral donors, international

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[42] Mats Berdal, *Building Peace After War*, 1 edition (Abingdon England ; New York : London: Routledge, 2009), 13.

[43] For example, Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont demonstrate extensively why development interventions should incorporate local politics as much as technical approaches in order to be effective. Carothers and De Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution.*

[44] Charles T. Call, "Building States to Build Peace?," Call and Wyeth, *Building States to Build Peace*, 365.

[45] This invocation for "local ownership" is particularly though not exclusively prevalent in UN peacebuilding literature. See, for example United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, "Capstone Doctrine: United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines," January 18, 2008; for a critical analysis of the concept and operationalisation of "local ownership" in UN operations, see Sarah B. K. von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace?: Local Ownership and United Nations Peacekeeping* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[46] Lake, *The Statebuilder's Dilemma*, 6.

organisations, host government, and civil society all work together (or against each other) on sizable statebuilding initiatives.[47] As Stephen D. Krasner and Thomas Risse demonstrate, these challenges grow more numerous and intractable the greater the number of players, vertical lines of operation, and horizontal levels of engagement.[48] On an intuitive level, programmes that focus locally would seem to permit simpler, easier harmonisation among all stakeholders.

Third, a bottom-up conceptualisation of statebuilding may allow for better utilisation of the strengths and capacities that already exist in many so-called fragile states. Observers note that "top down" ideals do not actually reflect the historic process of state formation in areas such as early modern Europe. Bottom-up programmes could leverage the fact that in many places, local actors are already the ones who represent "the most legitimate political authority in areas that they control."[49] Some scholars argue that the empirical record of state consolidation in places such as East Africa has been most effective through a process of "integrating local, 'organic' sources of governance with top-down, "inorganic" statebuilding processes."[50] Boege,

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[47] For a review and analysis of the myriad aspects of the "coordination problem," see Roland Paris, "Understanding the Coordination Problem in Postwar Statebuilding," in Paris and Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding*.

[48] Krasner and Risse usefully measure complexity of coordination of statebuilding assistance through "task properties", and argue that the amount of coordination required is one of three primary explanatory factors that determine state capacity and provision of collective goods in areas of limited statehood: "Tasks can be distinguished along two dimensions: the number of interventions that must be undertaken to successfully enhance state capacity or deliver a service, and the number of organizations or entities that must be coordinated. The most simple task is one requiring a single intervention by one organization. Smallpox immunization would be an example. The simpler the task, the more likely it is to be provided. More complex tasks, all tasks associated with state-building, and some associated with service provision, are more difficult to provide, especially in failed states, where indigenous state capacity hardly exists, as opposed to polities with areas of limited statehood." See Stephen D. Krasner and Thomas Risse, "External Actors, State-Building, and Service Provision in Areas of Limited Statehood: Introduction," *Governance* 27, no. 4 (2014): 547.

[49] Reno argues this is particularly salient in the provision of security services. See William Reno, "Bottom-Up Statebuilding?" In Call and Wyeth, ed *Building States to Build Peace*, 143.

[50] Ken Menkhaus, "Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping," *International Security* 31, no. 3 (January 1, 2007): 77.

Brown and Clements add that interveners should tap into the potential of what they call "hybrid political orders" rather than fragile states, focusing on "the strength and resilience of sociopolitical formations that are present on the ground, that work, and that provide public goods for people and communities."[51] Ken Menkhaus notes that in conflict-affected places like Somalia, "demand for good governance is greatest and spoilers fewest" at the community level, creating more auspicious conditions for success of statebuilding interventions.[52] Indeed, some purportedly failed states already harbour "pocket of effectiveness" or "pockets of productivity" upon which a locally-based approach could build.[53] Thomas Risse argues that areas he terms "areas of limited statehood" are not fully devoid of governance, nor is it necessarily the case that the international community has no role to play in strengthening them.[54] The notion of bottom-up statebuilding further acknowledges that statebuilding processes can often be advanced most effectively through collaboration with civil society, or through other ways of "promoting

[51] Volker Boege, M. Anne Brown, and Kevin P. Clements, "Hybrid Political Orders, Not Fragile States," *Peace Review* 21, no. 1 (February 27, 2009): 13; see also Boege et al., "States Emerging from Hybrid Political Orders."

[52] Ken Menkhaus, *Aid and Institution-Building in Fragile States the Case of Somali-Inhabited Eastern Horn of Africa* (Helsinki: WIDER, 2014), 14.

[53] In traditional framing, these "pockets" are generally defined functionally or vertically: high-performing agencies or programs surrounded by less-effective other governmental structures. However, here I extend the concept geographically, to encompass effective local administrations within a less-functional overall government structure. Robert T. Daland, *Exploring Brazilian Bureaucracy: Performance and Pathology* (University Press of America, 1981); Norman Thomas Uphoff, *Learning from Gal Oya: Possibilities for Participatory Development and Post-Newtonian Social Science* (IT Publications, 1996); David K. Leonard, "'Pockets' of Effective Agencies in Weak Governance States: Where Are They Likely and Why Does It Matter?," *Public Administration and Development* 30, no. 2 (March 16, 2010): 91–101; Norman Uphoff, *Puzzles of Productivity in Public Organizations* (Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1994).

[54] Thomas Risse, *Governance Without a State: Policies and Politics in Areas of Limited Statehood* (Columbia University Press, 2013).

measures to facilitate the accountability of state structures to their societies."[55]

Conceptually, the notion of bottom-up statebuilding also builds upon scholarship on the potential for "local-liberal hybrid" peacebuilding and statebuilding interventions.[56] Recent years have marked an emergence of interest in traditional or indigenous forms of peacebuilding and their potential complementarity to standard Western "liberal peace" models of intervention. Richmond and Mitchell note that when international interveners and local interests meet in a statebuilding project, "a unique range of practices, responses and agencies… emerges and 'hybridises' the 'blueprints' for peace advanced by international actors."[57] However, as Mac Ginty acknowledges, further conceptualisation is needed to understand how the hybridity of the "liberal" and "local" approaches can achieve complementarity.[58] Bottom-up governance building represents a related aspect of this hybridity, and one even less fully addressed in current literature: rather than focusing on the interaction between "locals" on one hand and liberal interveners on the other, it illuminates the contact between agents (both indigenous to the host country, and foreign) working to build governance structures from the top level downwards, and

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[55] Indeed, Paris and Sisk specifically note that "Statebuilding is not limited to "top-down" approaches of institution-strengthening (i.e. those focused on national elites), nor does it preclude "bottom-up" approaches (i.e., working through civil-society groups, or promoting measures to facilitate the accountability of state structures to their societies." Paris and Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding*, 14; Oliver P. Richmond, "The Problem of Peace: Understanding the 'Liberal Peace,'" *Conflict, Security & Development* 6, no. 3 (October 1, 2006): 291–314.

[56] Oliver P Richmond, "Becoming Liberal, Unbecoming Liberalism: Liberal-Local Hybridity via the Everyday as a Response to the Paradoxes of Liberal Peacebuilding," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 3, no. 3 (2009): 324–344; Oliver P. Richmond, "The Romanticisation of the Local: Welfare, Culture and Peacebuilding," *The International Spectator* 44, no. 1 (2009): 149–169.

[57] Oliver P. Richmond and Audra Mitchell, *Hybrid Forms of Peace : From Everyday Agency to Post-Liberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[58] R. Mac Ginty, "Indigenous Peace-Making Versus the Liberal Peace," *Cooperation and Conflict* 43, no. 2 (2008): 139–163.

those working from the grassroots level upwards.

In addition, bottom-up statebuilding may hold promise if it mirrors the purported benefits of the "local turn" in peacebuilding, which moves our understanding of peacebuilding interventions beyond a focus on national-level actors and institutions.[59] Some scholars argue for the "local turn" in normative terms, understanding it as a "means of emancipation and inclusion of local agency."[60] The local turn is seen as holding potential in fostering a "peace" that is just and relevant from the everyday experiences of local citizens, rather than the problematised templates of many liberal peacebuilding interventions.[61] Scholars such as David Roberts argue for "beginning with, and hearing, the everyday", as a crucial "opportunity to refocus orthodox peacebuilding in ways that address the existing lacuna in legitimacy, sustain the development of local peace and theoretically support the liberal peace more broadly."[62]

On a different note, other international relations scholars advocate for local peacebuilding on pragmatic grounds: they argue it is more effective than alternatives.[63] In her influential study

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[59] For a succinct summary of both the attraction and criticisms of the "local turn" in peacebuilding interventions, see Giulia Piccolino, "Local Peacebuilding in a Victor's Peace. Why Local Peace Fails Without National Reconciliation," *International Peacekeeping* 0, no. 0 (March 1, 2019): 1–26.

[60] Hanna Leonardsson and Gustav Rudd, "The 'Local Turn' in Peacebuilding: A Literature Review of Effective and Emancipatory Local Peacebuilding," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 825–839.

[61] For example, see Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P Richmond, "The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (June 1, 2013): 763–83; Oliver P. Richmond, "The Problem of Peace: Understanding the 'Liberal Peace,'" *Conflict, Security & Development* 6, no. 3 (October 1, 2006): 291–314.

[62] David Roberts, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding, Liberal Irrelevance and the Locus of Legitimacy," *International Peacekeeping* 18, no. 4 (2011): 423.

[63] For an overview of emancipatory versus effectiveness arguments for local peacebuilding, see Hanna Leonardsson and Gustav Rudd, "The 'Local Turn' in Peacebuilding: A Literature Review of Effective and Emancipatory Local Peacebuilding," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 825–839.

of the international peacebuilding mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Séverine Autesserre argues that the intervention failed because it exclusively focused on capital-level peace processes and elections, based on the faulty assumption that peace would organically trickle down to resolve the local micro-conflicts that plagued most of the population.[64] Extending this work in her forthcoming book, Autesserre argues that the failures of U.N peacekeeping operations come stem from its faulty strategic choice "to work with national elites to stop violence from the top down" and advocates that the U.N reorient resources and emphasis toward "bottom up peacebuilding."[65] Other scholars have chronicled, with varying emphasis, the pragmatic value of grassroots and localized conflict resolution in post-conflict contexts.[66]

Finally, donors' technical literature builds upon much of this academic research, and echoes that the bottom-up approach holds promise. These arguments are largely linked to an emphasis on local context and local ownership. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, in its 2007 communique on "Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations", declares that donor states should both "take context as a starting

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[64] Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo*.

[65] As quoted from Séverine Autesserre, "The Crisis of Peacekeeping," January 29, 2019; see also Séverine Autesserre, "There's Another Way to Build Peace. And It Doesn't Come from the Top down.," *Washington Post*, October 23, 2018. Autesserre notes in these two articles that the research is based upon her forthcoming book (out in 2021): "On the Frontlines of Peace," *Séverine Autesserre* (blog), accessed July 19, 2019.

[66] For example, see overviews of these arguments in Hanna Leonardsson and Gustav Rudd, "The 'Local Turn' in Peacebuilding: A Literature Review of Effective and Emancipatory Local Peacebuilding," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 825–839; Giulia Piccolino, "Local Peacebuilding in a Victor's Peace. Why Local Peace Fails Without National Reconciliation," *International Peacekeeping* 0, no. 0 (March 1, 2019): 1–26; Séverine Autesserre, "International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 114–32; Mary B. Anderson and Marshall Wallace, *Opting Out of War: Strategies to Prevent Violent Conflict* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2012).

point" and "align with local priorities in different ways and in different contexts."[67] The World Bank's seminal 2011 *World Development Report* on conflict, security and development recommends "programmes that support bottom-up state-society relations in insecure areas", including such sectors as "community-based programs for violence prevention, employment, and associated service delivery, and access to local justice and dispute resolution" for conflict affected states.[68]

1.4 Bottom-Up Statebuilding Interventions: A Less Auspicious Picture?

As noted above, deliberate academic interrogation of the concept bottom-up statebuilding is sparse—and scholarly investigation of the empirical record of civilian stabilisation programmes is even sparser. However, studies of other, related forms of foreign intervention—participatory development programmes and localised peacebuilding projects-- suggest worrying potential implications for bottom-up statebuilding.

First, the generalised principles and operational approaches of many bottom-up statebuilding or stabilisation programmes are remarkably reminiscent of a half-century of local participatory development or community-driven development (CDD) programmes. Stabilisation initiatives echo these earlier programmes in their modalities of engagement—in each case marked by local community empowerment, deliberative processes, and group decision-making.[69]

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[67] These are Principles 1 and 7 respectively. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations," April 2007.

[68] World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development* (World Bank, 2011), 18.

[69] CDD is defined as an "approach that empowers local community groups, including local government, by giving direct control to the community over planning decisions and investment resources through a process that emphasizes

CDD and stabilisation initiatives also share common objectives—social cohesion, bolstering the local demand for governance and service delivery, and inclusion of marginalised actors. In parallel to stabilisation programme goals, building equitable, inclusive local governance is one of the key "underlying paradigms" of CDD.[70]

The similarities between the logic underlying civilian stabilisation programmes, and the logic behind earlier participatory development interventions, have not yet been fully explored in policy or academic literature. More importantly, viewing contemporary bottom-up stabilisation programmes in the context of a half-century of CDD initiatives predicts that they will fall short of their aims.

When understood in the context of the participatory development literature, donor-sponsored local stabilisation programmes appear unlikely to achieve success, at least by the lofty terms laid out by their sponsors. In Elizabeth King's rigorous study of the outcomes of CDD in fragile states, she concludes that "the record of CDD/R in conflict-affected contexts is mixed and, overall, disappointing."[71] Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao examine 500 studies of participatory development programmes and chronicle three principal shortcomings of CDD outcomes that have relevance for the stated objectives of stabilisation. [72] First, elite capture still

participatory planning and accountability." Social Development Department, "Community-Driven Development in the Context of Conflict-Affected Countries: Challenges and Opportunities" (The World Bank, June 2006), 6.

[70] As the World Bank explains, "CDD promotes a more inclusive voice for the poor, builds linkages with local governments, and increases access of the poor to governance processes. Social Development Department, 6.

[71] Elisabeth King, "A Critical Review of Community-Driven Development Programmes in Conflict-Affected Contexts" (International Rescue Committee, March 2013), 3.

[72] Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?*, 1 edition (Washington, D.C: World Bank Publications, 2012), 3–12.

matters at the local level: beneficiaries of CDD tend to be the better-off members of their communities, thus undermining policymakers' hopes that these programmes will level the playing field for marginalised stakeholders. Second, "induced participation" in CDD programs does not build social cohesion as hoped. Third, such programmes work best when supported by a central government and state that is *already* relatively effective and responsive. Thus CDD's strengths are not compatible with international statebuilders' hopes that stabilisation programmes will *promote* the statebuilding process. Moreover, multiple scholars find that CDD yields even less effective outcomes when implemented on short time horizons, against the backdrop of conflict, or in remote locations with limited social capital—all conditions inherent in international community efforts to employ bottom-up stabilisation.[73]

There is also considerable scholarly criticism of the "local turn" in peacebuilding-- in addition to the plaudits outlined in the previous section-- that may also have implications for bottom-up statebuilding interventions. To start, the "local turn" is, in itself, a contested concept despite its recent popularity in scholarship and practice.[74] Further, an emerging generation of empirical studies in places ranging from Cambodia to Cote d'Ivoire show that in practice, the local turn's implementation can generate contradictions and deficiencies.[75] Some scholars argue

[73] King, "A Critical Review of Community-Driven Development Programmes in Conflict-Affected Contexts"; Andrew Beath, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov, "Randomized Impact Evaluation of Afghanistan's National Solidarity Programme" (The World Bank, July 1, 2013).

[74] Caroline Hughes, Joakim Öjendal, and Isabell Schierenbeck, "The Struggle versus the Song – the Local Turn in Peacebuilding: An Introduction," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 817–824.

[75] For example, see Giulia Piccolino, "Local Peacebuilding in a Victor's Peace. Why Local Peace Fails Without National Reconciliation," *International Peacekeeping* 0, no. 0 (March 1, 2019): 1–26; Joakim Öjendal and Sivhouch Ou, "The 'Local Turn' Saving Liberal Peacebuilding? Unpacking Virtual Peace in Cambodia," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (May 2015): 929–49.

that in practical terms, the local turn's apparent assumption that accountable, effective governance will "trickle up" is just as tenuous as the notion embedded in the top-down approach, that good governance will "trickle down."[76] Further, some critiques underscore that interventions that sidestep issues of elite level reconciliation generate limited effectiveness in promoting local "social cohesion."[77]

1.5 Research Question and Preview of the Argument

The concept of bottom-up statebuilding interventions has received progressively more widespread interest. For policymakers, the idea holds intuitive, almost common-sensical appeal. In academic circles, bottom-up statebuilding it would appear to partially address prominent criticisms of recent international statebuilding interventions.

Yet despite recent widespread embrace of bottom-up statebuilding, the concept remains under-theorised and its underlying processes under-examined. The mechanisms of how foreign interveners' local stabilisation programmes may actually lead to durable, "better" statebuilding outcomes are largely unspecified. As noted above, stabilisation programmes often emphasise rapid establishment of local governance structures and processes, with the objective of shifting key government functions away from the central government, as part of, in the U.S. government's official guidance, "a political endeavor to create conditions where locally

[76] Anita Ernstorfer, Diana Chigas, and Hannah Vaughan-Lee, "From Little to Large: When Does Peacebuilding Add Up?," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 10, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 72–77; Ernstorfer, Chigas, and Vaughan-Lee.

[77] See Giulia Piccolino, "Local Peacebuilding in a Victor's Peace. Why Local Peace Fails Without National Reconciliation," *International Peacekeeping* 0, no. 0 (March 1, 2019): 1–26.

legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict."[78] Stabilisation initiatives are often framed as the pathway toward effective, permanent local governance structures.[79] After these better subnational governance institutions have taken root, stabilisation policies and discourse usually indicate an assumption that there will be a second step: this local progress will somehow be met by top-down reforms and accrue into larger, national-level governance transformation.[80]

Yet few studies have investigated whether stabilisation programmes have indeed noticeably improve local governance, and whether these changes did indeed endure. Further, little scholarship connects research on participatory development and local peacebuilding with the current practice of stabilisation programmes; this obscures potentially relevant insights into challenges that bottom-up statebuilding project will encounter.

A closer empirical examination of bottom-up statebuilding is thus warranted. This thesis aims to start to fill this gap. It addresses one large question: *does the bottom-up exogenous statebuilding model represent a viable alternative to top-down statebuilding interventions?* To

[78] U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of State, and US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas," 1.

[79] As noted above, the focus on rapidly building up local governance institutions and decentralising functions away from a central government has been a consistent hallmark of the US government's approach to stabilisation. The UK took a similar approach in early stabilisation initiatives, but has within the past three years moved toward a focus on political dealmaking among elites. See UK Stabilisation Unit, "The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners," March 2019.

[80] Specific to Afghanistan, see discussion of the assumption that bottom up governance improvement would meet top-down reform in Frances Z. Brown, "The U.S. Surge and Afghan Local Governance" (U.S. Institute of Peace, September 2012), http://www.usip.org/publications/the-us-surge-and-afghan-local-governance.

shed light on this, it investigates one more specific question: *Under what conditions have externally-backed stabilisation programmes promoted effective and durable decentralised subnational governance structures in the midst of conflict, thereby successfully promoting bottom-up statebuilding?*

This theory-generating study examines three donor-funded stabilisation programmes in Afghanistan: the National Area-Based Development Programme (NABDP), the Afghanistan Social Outreach Programme (ASOP), and the Stability in Key Areas (SIKA) programme. All three programmes took place in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2014. They have been selected for reasons of comparability, maturity, and because of Afghanistan's unique status as a "critical case"[81] in which the U.S. spent uniquely high levels of resources on stabilisation programmes.[82] I discuss the case selection, analytic framework, and research design in greater detail in Chapter 2.

All three programmes can be understood as an effort at bottom-up statebuilding: each programme was an externally-backed stabilisation initiative that explicitly aimed to improve decentralised governance, by advancing local capacity, accountability, authority and autonomy at subnational levels of government. This comparative study will seek to uncover which factors explain each programme's relative success or failure in achieving this goal of ***effective*** and ***durable*** decentralised subnational governance.

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[81] John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*, 1st edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 213.

[82] The U.S. spent $4.7 billion on stabilisation in Afghanistan. Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization: Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan."

The first component of the dependent variable, ***effectiveness*****,** examines whether each programme resulted in its desired changes to pre-existing local governance and processes by promoting good decentralised local governance.[83] In order to operationalise "good decentralised local governance", my analytic framework disaggregates three key elements of decentralisation: *authority and autonomy; accountability,* and *capacity.* The second component of the dependent variable, ***durability*****,** examines whether the changes in subnational governance, captured under "effectiveness" above, continued to endure after the programme's foreign sponsorship ended. External statebuilders pursued stabilisation programmes with the objective not of merely improving subnational governance for the lifetime of the project; naturally, they aimed to foster longer-term improvement in local governance in service of a statebuilding objective.

To make this assessment, this thesis undertakes structured, focused analysis backed by empirical data drawn from extensive fieldwork-based interviews, primary documents, technical literature, and secondary sources.[84] According to the assessment criteria, it finds that the outcomes of the three programmes diverged considerably: NABDP was a modest success, while SIKA and ASOP were both failures, for different reasons. The programmes were comparable in terms of many variables (including time, geographic reach, security levels in areas of operation, budget, and project type).

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[83] As detailed in Chapter Two, I follow Boex and Yilmaz in understanding decentralisation as "the empowerment of people through the empowerment of local governments Jameson Boex and Serdar Yilmaz, "An Analytical Framework for Assessing Decentralized Local Governance and the Local Public Sector," December 27, 2010, 1.

[84] My approach of structured, focused comparison relies upon Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Fourth Printing edition (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2005).

Thus, through process tracing and with an emphasis on identifying causal mechanisms, this thesis unpacks what factors may account for each programme's success or failure. It identifies two primary factors as shaping the outcome of each programme. I summarise these two independent variables here, with further elaboration in Chapter 2:

1. ***Strength of Host Government Partnership:*** Although each programme was funded by a foreign donor and implemented by a non-governmental organization, each programme relied upon an Afghan government ministry as its primary partner in execution. This host government partner provided the institutional backing and personal connections to ensure the foreign-sponsored programme took root in the Afghan government context. The strength of this partnership varied widely between the three cases, depending upon not just the calibre of the Afghan government ministry, but also how robustly the foreign donor collaborated with this bureaucracy.
2. ***Local Embeddedness:*** The three programmes varied considerably in the degree to which they "worked with the grain" of pre-existing Afghan social and political order, or the degree to which they aligned with underlying political settlements in Afghanistan. One programme successfully harnessed the incentives, informal networks, and patronage relationships that underpin contemporary Afghan political interactions, while two others operated in contradiction to these norms, in varying ways.

The emergent contingent theory is that bottom-up statebuilding programmes in Afghanistan were more likely to contribute to effective, durable decentralised governance when, ***first, the programme enjoyed a strong partnership with its host government counterpart, and***

second, when the programme achieved "local embeddedness" within Afghan vertical and local political economy. The one modest success case, the NABDP programme, benefitted from strong collaboration with the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). The ministry itself proved an unusually capable one. But just as importantly, the NABDP effectively harnessed the capacities of the MRRD—in contrast to the SIKA programme, which partnered with the same ministry, but quickly alienated ministry leadership and thus saw its efforts backfire. Second, the NABDP programme achieved "local embeddedness" because it both bolstered, and benefitted from, pre-existing patronage networks. It (inadvertently) proved a useful rent-distribution mechanism for Afghanistan's newly-minted class of Parliamentarians, and for local-level elites. Both local and national-level stakeholders were thus incentivised to support the programme's effectiveness and had a stake in the programme's durability.

1.6 Contributions to Theory and Situation of the Thesis

This thesis makes several contributions to scholarly debate on the liberal peacebuilding and statebuilding interventions pursued by bilateral donors and international organizations. After the empirical chapters, Chapter 7 elaborates upon these contributions; I provide an overview here.

First, and most fundamentally, it interrogates a concept that is increasingly frequently invoked, yet remains remarkably undertheorised. To date, scholarship has rarely probed the processes and mechanisms by which bottom-up statebuilding interventions are assumed to advance an exogenous statebuilding project. It has also rarely examined stabilisation programmes as a key operationalisation of this approach. This study begins to fill this empirical

gap. The thesis represents a refinement of earlier literature that proposes a bottom-up approach. For example, Autesserre describes a "workable bottom-up strategy" that she argues foreign peacebuilders in the Congo should have operationalised between 2003 and 2006, and outlines a basket of initiatives that strongly resembles the stabilisation programmes examined in this thesis.[85] The programmes studied here occurred years later, representing a shift in donor strategy (in part because of the knowledge imparted by Autesserre's and others' critiques).[86] Although this thesis examines a very different context of Afghanistan, it helps us to empirically understand the actual outcomes when foreign interveners try to comply with the recommendations of a "bottom-up" approach.

To that end, the thesis demonstrates vividly that the bottom-up approach is far from a panacea. If the top-down paradigm of statebuilding interventions can be problematic, the bottom-up model is equally so. In fact, many of the same contradictions scholars have chronicled in national-level interventions were evident in bottom-up stabilisation programmes. Bottom-up statebuilding appears equally likely to be beset by the "coordination problem", dependency dilemmas, and clashes between short-term and long-term imperatives.[87] Local-level programmes

[85] Autesserre provides "the outlines of a workable bottom-up solution" that that would have included more resources, local conflict resolution projects around land disputes, "organizing meetings" and supporting "traditional councils" to help "communities manage future antagonisms", and engaging small, mobile special operations forces from the UN peacekeeping force in conjunction with these projects—a suite of initiatives that greatly resembles the stabilisation programmes featured here. Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo*, 184–86.

[86] On Autesserre's book being "widely read and discussed" within the practitioner community, see Giulia Piccolino, "Local Peacebuilding in a Victor's Peace. Why Local Peace Fails Without National Reconciliation," *International Peacekeeping* (March 1, 2019): 1–26.

[87] Paris and Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding*; Michael Barnett and Christoph Zurcher, "The Peacebuilder's Contract: How External Statebuilding Reinforces Weak Statehood," in *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); Astri Suhrke, *When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Miles Kahler, "State-

face trade-offs between capacity and legitimacy in design of national state institutions, and tensions between transitional delivery structures and support for more permanent institutions—just as top-down interventions do.[88] Bottom-up efforts attempt statebuilding on an impossibly compressed timeframe, just as scholars have argued national-level interventions do.[89]

Moreover, despite foreigners' idealisation of local governance as more "organic" than other levels of government,[90] this thesis demonstrates that building inclusive, stable states from the bottom up is not simple or straightforward. The empirical chapters provide rich evidence for just how much international interveners' idealisation of the "simplicity" of the local were not borne out in reality.

Second, despite this sobering overall picture, this thesis also contributes a fine-grained study of how and why one bottom-up effort did achieve some success in the Afghan context. This achievement, however modest, has important implications for the literature: against the famously bleak track record of external statebuilding interventions, some scholars have noted that the most puzzling question is why some actually do not fail.[91] *Contra* academics who reject

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Building After Afghanistan and Iraq," in *The Dilemmas of State-Building: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations*, ed. Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk (London: Routledge, 2009).

[88] Sarah Cliffe and Nick Manning, "Practical Approaches to Building State Institutions," in Call and Wyeth, ed, *Building States to Build Peace;* Charles T. Call, "Conclusion," in Call and Wyeth, *Building States to Build Peace*.

[89] Among many others on this point, see Mats Berdal, *Building Peace After War*. 1 edition. Abingdon England; New York: London: Routledge, 2009.

[90] Schetter convincingly criticises this assumption. See Conrad Schetter, ed., *Local Politics in Afghanistan: A Century of Intervention in the Social Order* (S.l.: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[91] For these arguments in the related peacebuilding and peacekeeping fields, see Séverine Autesserre, "International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (March 1,

the entire statebuilding premise, the thesis provides a modest corrective in demonstrating that under some conditions, some bottom-up statebuilding programmes can advance a constructive statebuilding outcome. By tracing the success case of the NABDP programme, it demonstrates what factors enabled the programme to advance durable, effective decentralised local governance: it leveraged a strong host government partnership, and it ended up (inadvertently) aligning with local political economy and patronage networks.

Directly related, the thesis's explanation of (modest) "success" contributes to a nascent body of work on the significance of elite bargains in stabilisation interventions. The findings build upon Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, Steven B. Webb, and Barry R. Weingast's notion of limited access orders, in which "rent-creation provides the glue"-- access to political benefits and economic opportunities -- that holds political and elite coalitions together.[92] As we will see, NABDP's rents generated just such a "glue" to convince a range of Afghan elites that they had an interest in ensuring the programme gained acceptance and achieved durability. In their own recent work on stabilisation, Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand, and Patrick Meehan anticipate a similar type of deal: "These rent-sharing arrangements can stabilise violent

2017): 114–32; Virginia Page Fortna and Lise Morje Howard, "Pitfalls and Prospects in the Peacekeeping Literature" 11, no. 1 (2008): 283–301; Susanna P. Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace: Accountability and Performance in International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[92] Douglass C North et al., "Limited Access Orders In The Developing World: A New Approach To The Problems Of Development," *Policy Research Working Papers*, 8, accessed May 30, 2019.

conflict by providing a mechanism through which powerful challengers to state authority are co-opted into stable coalitions."[93]

For a would-be liberal statebuilder, this finding provokes deep normative unease: the programme that drew upon, and perpetuated, Afghan patronage flows is the most likely, given time, to promote a (more) liberal statebuilding outcome. Cheng, Goodhand and Meehan predict these contradictions, noting that political stability based upon the rent-sharing arrangements they describe "may create baleful legacies" in the effort to advance "good governance."[94] This conclusion also advances the arguments of Dipali Mukhopadhyay, who documents how state consolidation in Afghanistan hinges upon "the inextricability of the personal and the political, the informal and the formal" and adds that "that logic, although a far cry from the Weberian ideal, has the potential to generate productive outcomes just the same. In Afghanistan and elsewhere, there were moments when greed and nepotism actually advanced the construction of political authority, even governing capacity."[95] A key question going forward will be how to leverage such programmes for further entry points to reform.

Third, the thesis demonstrates, in vivid detail, Afghan actors' primary agency in shaping statebuilding outcomes. Earlier generations of statebuilding literature often

[93] Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand, and Patrick Meehan, "Synthesis Paper: Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains That Reduce Violent Conflict," Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project (London: U.K. Stabilisation Unit, April 2018), 2.

[94] Cheng, Goodhand, and Meehan, 2.

[95] Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 361.

(over)emphasized the roles of foreign actors in "fixing failed states."[96] And to be sure, foreigners played an essential role in this thesis: they designed, implemented, and (crucially) bankrolled the three programmes examined. Yet in all three cases, it was Afghan protagonists whose choices and actions determined whether the programme proved effective or durable.

The newly-elected Afghan Parliament was an especially consequential player in this story, and one that is under-examined in most other accounts of the international project in Afghanistan.[97] Parliamentarians' eagerness to deliver projects for their constituents, assert their relevance vis-à-vis President Karzai, and capture resource streams were factors that influenced the fates of both the NABDP and ASOP programmes. Separately, some key Afghan ministers also had determinative impact on outcomes. Some leaders advocated effectively for their institutions and programmes within Kabul's vigorous inter-ministerial competition. Yet these same dynamic Afghan power-brokers could also act as spoilers when they decided they did not like a donor programme, as the SIKA case study illustrates. Other senior officials were less capable in extending the reach of their ministry's programmes. In short, this thesis provides a

[96] For example, the current Afghan President's work argues along this vein, as well as others. See Ghani and Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*; Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*.

[97] Though some scholars have rightly documented Parliament's crucial role in Kabul-periphery patronage networks, most investigations of the Afghan statebuilding project have tended to treat the legislature as a discrete, and often less consequential, body compared with executive branch machinations. An important exception is political anthropologist Noah Coburn, whose fieldwork has documented how Parliamentarians are "important members of local patronage networks who provide some of the few real opportunities for communities to connect with the funding opportunities available in Kabul," Noah Coburn, "Connecting with Kabul: The Importance of the Wolesi Jirga Election and Local Political Networks in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, May 2010).

further, fine-grained response to scholars' arguments for greater appreciation for the role of national, rather than international, actors' choices in statebuilding endeavours.[98]

Fourth, the thesis contributes to our understanding of the increasingly hybridised forms of power and identity in contemporary Afghanistan, and implications for the foreign-backed statebuilding project there and beyond. The empirical chapters trace two distinct ways in which international interveners failed to fully grasp the new hybridity of Afghan political dynamics. First, in designing their stabilisation programmes, donors often clung to a framing of the population that marked a simple delineation between "traditional leaders" versus "young people," or a clean division between "formal power holders" versus "informal power brokers." Yet socio-political power in post-Bonn Afghanistan does not comport to these delineations-- and this fact had a considerable impact on the outcomes of programmatic interventions.[99] Second, donors also missed another form of hybridity in the new Afghan context: the fully blurred line between local *politics* and local *development projects*. Foreigners sponsored two competing councils at the district level, and argued that they were different because the ASOP councils would be "focused on governance" while NABDP councils would "oversee development." But as this thesis demonstrates, this delineation didn't match the lived experience of rural Afghans,

[98] Charles T. Call demonstrates the central role played by local actors in determining whether a postwar peace holds or deteriorates; see Charles T. Call, *Why Peace Fails: The Causes and Prevention of Civil War Recurrence* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012); see also Oisín Tansey, "Evaluating the Legacies of State-Building: Success, Failure, and the Role of Responsibility," *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (March 1, 2014): 174–86; and specific to the Afghan case, Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[99] As Mukhopadhyay further argues, "The inextricability of the personal and the political, the informal and the formal, was at the very heart of the logic driving modern state construction in Afghanistan." Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*, 361.

for whom questions of sectoral services, development resources, politics, and justice are often interwoven. The resultant "institutional multiplicity" of overlapping councils ended up undermining, rather than promoting, the goal of improving government accountability that lay at the heart of the international statebuilding project in Afghanistan.

Fifth, this thesis further problematises two separate orthodoxies of the literature on statebuilding interventions: the emphases on service delivery and "capacity building." Bolstering service delivery has long been a central tenet of international statebuilding efforts, and more recently of stabilisation and counterinsurgency doctrine. This approach has rested on a formal Weberian logic of rational legitimacy: by assisting fragile states in their ability to fulfil key functions, these states would achieve greater state legitimacy (or specifically "performance legitimacy") in the eyes of their populace.[100] Yet the empirical cases add to recent scholarship that problematises these assumptions.[101] The cases demonstrate several ways in which international interveners' service delivery projects were often a poor fit for the Afghan context. The programmes dispensed maximalist, large projects rather than the modest, predictable offerings communities actually desired, and usually provided episodic project delivery rather than recurrent service availability. Further, programmes promoted a notion of "service delivery" that was linked to the imperative of extending the writ of the state. Yet for many civilians in the remote areas targeted by stabilisation programmes, the entrance the Afghan government was

[100] Ghani and Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States*; Fukuyama, *State-Building*.

[101] For example, see Ashley Jackson and Orzala Nemat, "Politics over Evidence: Questioning the Link between Service Delivery and State Legitimacy in Afghanistan" (London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, August 28, 2018); Hamish Nixon and Richard Mallett, "Service Delivery, Public Perceptions and State Legitimacy: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium" (London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, June 2017).

viewed as predatory and unwelcome, regardless of the services offered.

In parallel, this thesis adds to recent scholarship that has challenged statebuilding approaches that focus overly on building state capacity. The empirical cases demonstrate the heavily political, rather than technical, nature of obstacles to Afghan state consolidation, and the often ill-fitting nature of donors' "capacity building" efforts.[102] In particular, many capacity building projects examined here focused on teaching Afghan officials and citizens how to "communicate" and "link up" with each other. Yet, the cases show vividly that both citizens and government officials proved extremely innovative and capable at connecting with each other, when the stakes incentivised them to do so. Since the cases demonstrate vividly that there was abundant capacity already present in local Afghan politics, it echoes arguments from Boege et al on the strengths of "hybrid orders", and by Cliffe and Manning on the "fallacy of *terra nullis*."[103] By extension, it also echoes Call's argument that statebuilding agenda has remained overly preoccupied with building state capacity, at the expense of focusing on state legitimacy.[104] Further, the thesis injects nuance into an understanding "capacity building" as primarily a technical exercise to "fix" deficiencies in failed states.[105]

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[102] Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, *Building State Capability*; Denney, Mallett, and Benson, "Service Delivery and State Capacity: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium."

[103] Boege, Brown, and Clements, "Hybrid Political Orders, Not Fragile States;" Cliffe and Manning, "Practical Approaches to Building State Institutions", in Call and Wyeth, ed., *Building States to Build Peace*, 164-6.

[104] Call, *Why Peace Fails*.

[105] For example, see Lisa Denney, Richard Mallett, and Matthew Sterling Benson, "Service Delivery and State Capacity: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium." (London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, June 2017); Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock, *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); Lant Pritchett, Matt Andrews, and Michael Woolcock, "Escaping Capability Traps through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) - Working

Separately, other types of capacity building initiatives profiled here seemed principally to focus on making Afghans ideal recipients of donor aid, rather than imparting skills relevant to local Afghan political life. For all of donors' putative focus on "building capacity", paradoxically, in practice their projects seemed to be aimed at compounding dependency.[106]

1.7 Caveats and What is Not Included

I offer below several caveats and clarifications on what this thesis does, and does not, encompass.

First, this is an International Relations study, examining how strong Western countries intervened in Afghanistan with the aim of shaping the emergent Afghan state. It takes as a starting point that a key component of this international intervention was the goal to improve Afghan local government through a bottom-up strategy (a point further traced in Chapter 3). This inquiry is not an original analysis of the Afghan constitutional design, and does not make new arguments about whether the structure of post-Taliban Afghanistan laid out in the Bonn 2002 was "too" formally centralised. The thesis simply proceeds from the starting point that, in later years, foreigners aimed to promote decentralisation and local governance.

Paper 299," accessed October 27, 2014; Volker Boege et al., "States Emerging from Hybrid Political Orders: Pacific Experiences The Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies Occasional Papers Series.," *Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies. The Occasional Papers* x, no. 11 (September 1, 2008): 1–41; Krasner and Risse, "External Actors, State-Building, and Service Provision in Areas of Limited Statehood: Introduction"; Shahar Hameiri, "Failed States or a Failed Paradigm? State Capacity and the Limits of Institutionalism," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 10, no. 2 (2007): 122–49.

[106] This paradox mirrors some tensions described in Astri Suhrke, "Statebuilding in Afghanistan: A Contradictory Engagement," *Central Asian Survey*, 2013, 1–16.

Second, this thesis also takes as its point of departure that the international statebuilding project in Afghanistan, particularly during the "surge" period this thesis examines, was heavily ambitious (another point traced further in Chapter 3). Each programme investigated as a primary case study was unapologetically transformative in its aims. Many observers have thus argued that each such programme—and the broader project—was doomed from the start.[107]

There is merit to these arguments. But this thesis, rather than aiming to re-assert that these programmes' goals were unrealistic, proceeds in the spirit of nuanced, detailed inquiry into the ways in which *modest* local governance progress may have occurred—perhaps in ways that were unanticipated by interveners. It thus takes a decidedly pragmatic stance in its examination into exogenous statebuilding, mindful that such projects are rife with unintended consequences and missed goalposts.

Third, this study is focused on *observable manifestations of the effectiveness and durability* of the bottom-up stabilisation programmes, according to the U.S. government's own terms. It does not attempt an ethnographic or localised political economy comparison of the approximately 400 districts of Afghanistan in which stabilisation programmes were launched. The focus is on how Afghan elites, stabilisation practitioners, and independent observers perceived the effects of these programmes. As discussed further in Chapter 2, I draw from a range of sources in identifying observable implications of perceptions of these programmes'

[107] A partial selection of this long list would include Suhrke, *When More Is Less*; Todd Greentree, "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: U.S. Performance and the Institutional Dimension of Strategy in Afghanistan," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013): 325–356; Frances Z. Brown, "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing, Again," *The American Interest*, November 2012; Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

goals: an array of Afghanistan-based primary interviews, policy statements, programme documents and evaluations, independent assessments, and journalistic accounts. Still, there may well be exceptions.

Fourth, as regards parameters of the research, the primary focus of analysis is on *U.S.* strategy, policy, and implementation. This scoping is necessary for reasons of comparability of cases, and also feasibility of research. Even the UNDP-sponsored programme had central U.S. leadership and backing, and the size of U.S. diplomatic, military and financial investment made the U.S. the predominant player in shaping this programme. At the same time, as traced above, the notion of "bottom-up statebuilding" has been invoked by donors beyond the United States, so it is hoped that the thesis offers broader implications. Similarly, "stabilisation" is a key programmatic tool now deployed by several donors beyond the U.S., to also include the United Kingdom, Denmark, France and Germany. The study makes reference to some U.K policy documents when especially germane, but does not aim to summarise all donors' related policy and programme efforts.

Finally, a note on spelling. As a thesis submitted at a U.K institution, this thesis uses U.K. spellings, except when quoting directly from U.S. primary documents which utilised U.S spellings. Harmonising multi-national spelling conventions, like harmonising multi-national statebuilding efforts, inevitably involves some friction. As a result, the words "stabilisation" and "stabilization" both appear throughout, as do the words "programme" and "program."

1.8 Outline of the DPhil Thesis

The remainder of the DPhil thesis proceeds as follows. **Chapter 2** provides a more in-depth justification of the primary cases and explains the research design and analytic framework. It further elaborates upon the independent and dependent variables, discusses measurement and data collection, and overviews the sources utilised.

Chapter 3 situates the empirical chapters within the context of the international intervention in Afghanistan. I provide an overview of Western donors' statebuilding efforts from the fall of the Taliban in 2001 until the end of the thesis timeframe in 2014, with a particular focus on foreign-backed initiatives to reform local governance.

Chapters 4 through 6 contain the three primary case studies, the National Area-Based Development Programme, the Stability in Key Areas programme, and the Afghan Social Outreach Programme. This theory-generating portion of the thesis aims to identify which independent variables are most important in explaining success of these bottom-up stabilisation initiatives.

Chapter 7 further elaborates upon the theory generated by the empirical chapters, explaining why some bottom-up statebuilding programmes promote effective, durable subnational governance in the wartime Afghanistan context, while others did not. This chapter also synthesises other insights generated by a structured, focussed comparison of the empirical cases, and points to their broader implications for literature on international statebuilding interventions in conflict.

Chapter 8 briefly recaps the ground covered in the thesis; reflects upon the limitations and generalisability of the findings beyond Afghanistan; considers policy implications; and indicates areas for further research.

Chapter Two: Research Design and Methodology

1.0 Overview

This thesis interrogates an increasingly prevalent narrative regarding statebuilding interventions: that "bottom-up statebuilding" presents a viable, and perhaps preferable, alternative to the international community's traditional statebuilding interventions after or during conflict. In particular, policymakers and (some) academics increasingly advocate for *localised civilian stabilisation programmes* that, they hope, will serve as the building blocks for local structures and processes, that will ultimately improve subnational-level governance. This study aims to empirically examine the assumed processes and outcomes of bottom-up statebuilding. Its central research question asks, *Under what conditions have externally-backed stabilisation programmes advanced durable and effective decentralised subnational governance structures in the midst of conflict, thereby successfully promoting bottom-up statebuilding?* This chapter elaborates upon my methodology and research design.

To undertake this analysis, this theory-building study utilises qualitative analysis, drawing upon George and Bennett's method of "structured, focused comparison."[108] As George and Bennett note, the method of structured, focused comparison is particularly valuable for studies hoping to "yield useful generic knowledge of important foreign policy problems."[109] Broadly speaking, this thesis contributes to understanding the broad *class of events* within

[108] Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Fourth Printing edition (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2005).

[109] Alexander L. George and Bennett, 67.

international relations that comprises exogenous statebuilding interventions in conflict-affected countries.[110] To do so, it relies upon case studies, defined by Gerring as "the intensive study of a single unit or a small number of units (the cases), for the purpose of understanding a larger class of similar units (a population of cases)."[111] The thesis's subclass—Gerring's "population of cases" for which this thesis aims to generate knowledge-- includes donor-backed localised stabilisation programmes with the stated objective of improving decentralised subnational governance structures.

In selecting which cases from the broader population to study, I chose cases with an eye toward maximising causal leverage and controlling comparisons. In recent years, donors have sponsored stabilisation programmes, focused on local governance processes and structures, in countries ranging from Libya to Syria to northwest Pakistan. Though I originally considered a study comparing these interventions across countries, I ultimately opted to select all three cases based in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2014, the era of the "surge." This choice allowed me to maximise comparability and maturity; it thus enabled me to identify tentative independent variables that may explain the programmes' divergent outcomes. As all three cases are based within the same country, I make limited claims to the theory's generalisability beyond Afghanistan, although in Chapter 8, I point to potential areas for further examination of the contingent generalisability of my findings beyond Afghanistan.

[110] Alexander L. George and Bennett, 77.

[111] Gerring, 2007, *Case Study Research*, 37.

This study aims to disentangle the complicated interaction between international sponsors, central government, and local populations—all played out over a matter of years. To do so, it employs process tracing, widely viewed as the most appropriate method to discover causal mechanisms and processes, make within-case inferences, and explore complex decision-making.[112]

Bennett and George identify five distinct tasks for within the research design phase for within "systematic, theory-oriented research": identification of the problem and research objective; identification of the variables or explanatory factors to be explored; selection of cases; description of variation in variables; and the formulation of data requirements.[113] Below, I describe how I undertake each of these in formulation of the research design.

2.0 Identification of the Problem and Research Objective

Most broadly, this theory-building thesis aims to systematically interrogate "bottom-up statebuilding": a concept that is increasingly invoked, yet notably under-examined. The class of events it investigates is international community interventions in civil wars; the subclass of events it examines is civilian *localised stabilisation programmes* in order to improve longer-term local governance.[114] Of the various types of theory-building research objectives identified by Ljiphart , Eckstein and George and Bennett, this thesis employs the category of heuristic, or

[112] Oisn Tansey, "Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing: A Case for Non-Probability Sampling," *PS: Political Science Politics* 40, no. 4 (2007): 675; Derek Beach, *Process-Tracing Methods [Electronic Resource] : Foundations and Guidelines* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 2.

[113] Alexander L. George and Bennett, 72–88.

[114] See George and Bennett, 77.

theory building cases studies, suitable especially for uncovering new causal paths or mechanisms or hypotheses.[115]

Some definitions are in order, as "stabilisation" is a term that is widely cited by donor governments and practitioners, yet has not been uniformly defined over the years. The study's operationalisation of "stabilisation" corresponds to the U.S. government's most widely-used definition of the word at the time of the case studies. This definition, developed jointly by the U.S. Institute of Peace and the U.S. Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, describes stabilisation as "Ending or preventing the recurrence of violent conflict and creating the conditions for normal economic activity and nonviolent politics."[116] In more recent years, the U.S. government promulgated an updated, more specific definition of stabilisation which is also broadly consistent with the approach studied here: "Stabilization is an inherently political endeavour that requires aligning U.S. Government efforts —diplomatic engagement, foreign assistance, and defence —toward supporting locally legitimate authorities and systems to peaceably manage conflict and prevent violence."[117] Earlier United Kingdom stabilisation doctrine mirrored this definition. The U.K. updated its guidance in 2019; its newest guidance still

[115] See Arend Lijphart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method," *The American Political Science Review* 65, no. 3 (September 1, 1971): 682–93; Harry Eckstein, *Case Study and Theory in Political Science*, George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*.

[116] United States Institute of Peace and United States Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction* (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace, 2009).

[117] U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Defense, and US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas" (Washington, D.C, 2018).

partially overlaps with the U.S. definition, but places a greater emphasis on political deal-making among elites.[118]

Narrowing the focus still further, I have identified the subclass of events to be investigated as one increasingly prevalent manifestation of the concept of stabilisation: donor-backed *civilian localised stabilisation programmes* with the stated objective of launching local governance processes and institutions, in order to foster longer-term inclusive political arrangements "from the bottom up." Several points are worth highlighting here. First, stabilisation is generally a joint civilian-military endeavour, and both components are essential. But this thesis situates its primary analysis on the *civilian* aspects of stabilisation, while acknowledging that the complementary military element provides crucial undergirding for these projects; in the empirical cases, there is some examination of how various military factors influenced the outcomes of specific civilian programmes. Second, "localised stabilisation programmes" among civilian actors can take a wide array of forms, but this thesis examines the type that has proven overwhelmingly common: building up local governance structures and institutions in contested areas, with an objective of setting the conditions for longer-term political

[118] "Stabilisation is an activity undertaken as an initial response to violence or the immediate threat of violence… Therefore, when undertaking stabilisation interventions, the UK seeks to protect the means of survival and restore basic security, promote and support a political process to reduce violence as well as prepare a foundation for longer term stability.... The UK puts engagement with the politics of conflict at the heart of its stabilisation activity. The UK seeks to help local partners restore security and create political opportunities and openings, such that a locally-determined path out of conflict can be found. Stabilisation should be seen as a process designed to facilitate this political objective, which needs to be managed flexibly with the understanding that any progress can easily be reversed." UK Stabilisation Unit, "The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners," March 2019, 13–14.

arrangements. This bounding of "localised stabilisation programmes" also corresponds to the predominant civilian usage in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2014 specifically.

In determining that Afghanistan-based civilian stabilisation programmes were the appropriate unit of analysis for my research, I adhered to George and Bennett's advice that moving "down the ladder of generality" often yields better analytic results, because "most successful studies, in fact, have worked with a well-defined, smaller-scope *subclass* of the general phenomenon."[119] Choices between more general or more specific groupings of phenomena inevitably yield tradeoffs; however, as they note, this choice will yield contingent generalisations and "the identification of more circumscribed scope conditions of a theory, rather than up toward broader but more precise generalisations."[120] This study specifically examines subnational governance *structures and processes* built by stabilisation programmes. At first, this focus on local governance structures and processes may seem narrow. Yet the approach is being utilised by the United States and other donors in a wide array of conflict-affected countries, and thus represents an important emerging model in international interventions.

The primary research question of the study is to investigate *when and how donor support for localised stabilisation programmes can successfully improve decentralised subnational governance, thus advancing a bottom-up statebuilding project in the context of conflict.* We will return to this research question below.

[119] Alexander L. George and Bennett, 77.

[120] Ibid.

3.0 Case Studies

The use of case studies in international relations scholarship has been the topic of considerable debate, from Zeev Maoz's argument that a case study is "a synonym for freeform research where everything goes,"[121] to Achen and Snidal's memorable suggestion of "inferential felonies."[122] Other scholars argue that many of the approaches "amount to a collection of unconnected, atheoretical, and idiographic case studies."[123] As George and Bennett admit, the proliferation of case studies in political science in the early post-World War II era yielded a situation in which "although individual case studies were often instructive, they did not lend themselves readily to strict comparison or to orderly cumulation."[124] Even the term "case study" itself is the subject of considerable definitional dispute.[125]

However, for this research question and available data, several factors make the case study the most appropriate methodological approach. I follow Gerring in that a case study can be particularly useful for yielding knowledge that is hypothesis generating, demonstrates internal

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[121] Zeev Maoz, "Case Study Methodology in International Studies: From Storytelling to Hypothesis Testing." In Michael Brecher and Frank P. Harvey, *Evaluating Methodology in International Studies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

[122] Christopher H. Achen and Duncan Snidal, "Rational Deterrence Theory and Comparative Case Studies," *World Politics* 41, no. 2 (January 1, 1989): 143–69.

[123] This phrase is Bennett and Elman's, summarising a viewpoint with which they disagree. Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, "Case Study Methods in the International Relations Subfield," *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (February 1, 2007): 170–95.

[124] George and Bennett, 68.

[125] John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*, 1 edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 19.

validity, and provides insight into causal mechanisms rather than effects.[126] In situations in which data availability is, in his terms, concentrated rather than dispersed, the case study may be more effective than a large cross-case study.[127] Afghan subnational governance is clearly one such situation. Further, as Bennett and Elman note, case study methods hold comparative advantage over other approaches in "developing internally valid and context-sensitive measures of concepts, heuristically identifying new variables through within-case analysis of deviant or other cases, providing a potential check on spuriousness and endogeneity through within-case analysis, and testing and elaborating theories of path dependency and other types of complexity."[128] These advantages are all highly relevant for this study, which aims to disentangle the complicated interaction of international statebuilding policies, programme implementation, central host government elites, and local communities. Finally, as Robert K. Yin argues, case study methods are especially suited to exploring "a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context… and in which multiple sources of evidence are used."[129] This study triangulates multiple types of material to understand the murky, complex reality of international interventions in conflict-affected countries rather than in a more abstract or tidy environment.

[126] Gerring, 37–48.

[127] Gerring, 57–61.

[128] Bennett and Elman, "Case Study Methods in the International Relations Subfield": 473.

[129] Robert K. (Robert Kuo-Zuir) Yin, *Case Study Research : Design and Methods*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif ; London: Sage, 1994), 23.

3.1 Case Selection

To investigate my research question of when and why international sponsorship of localised stabilisation programmes yields success in improving decentralised subnational governance, I qualitatively examine three cases, each programmes based in Afghanistan during the surge: the "National Area-Based Development Programme" (NABDP), the "Afghanistan Social Outreach Programme" (ASOP), and the "Stability in Key Areas" (SIKA) programme. Following Bennett and Elman, I have selected these cases "self-consciously and with a view to maximizing inferential leverage."[130] The cases align with Gerring's most-similar design, in which the chosen cases are similar "in all respects except the variable(s) of interest."[131] Key commonalities exist between the cases, thus serving as a control. In each of the three cases, the international community created and cultivated governance structures and processes at the district level, with the stated intent of improving effective durable "bottom up" governance structures.

After undertaking the data collection and analysis, my assessment is that the programmes vary in outcome: one of these programmes, the National Area-Based Development Programme, achieved modest success in promoting durable and effective decentralised local governance, while the other two did not.[132] Thus, the programmes differ with regard to the dependent

[130] Bennett and Elman, "Case Study Methods in the International Relations Subfield":172.

[131] Gerring, *Case Study Research*, 131.

[132] A fuller description of the definition of "success" for the purposes of this study follows below; further evaluation of the relative "success" of each programme follows within succeeding chapters.

variable, whether they achieved "success." My task, through process tracing, it to identify which independent variables, or explanatory factors, led to these divergent outcomes.

This thesis's unit of analysis—the subclass of events it investigates-- is *programmes* that created local structures with the objective that those structures would lead to *durable processes and units of government*. Thus, although each of these three programmes occurred in Afghanistan during a similar time period, each programme is, for the purposes of this study, a distinct case. As Gerring notes, often for political scientists, "The archetypal case is the dominant political unit of our time, the nation-state. However, this is a matter of convention…. A case may be created out of any phenomenon so long as it has identifiable boundaries and comprises the primary object of inference."[133] A single country, Afghanistan, hosted multiple simultaneous bottom-up governance building programmes, and each achieved a varying degree of success. Variation thus existed at the level of the programme; accordingly, this study must clearly bound the cases as distinct programmes, rather than entire countries, in order to disentangle causation.

The three cases can be characterised as "most similar" due to their notable commonalities in several key factors relevant to the study. Most fundamentally, each was an effort at bottom-up statebuilding operating at the district level in Afghanistan, in which international community representatives sponsored specific local governance processes and structures that they hoped would endure beyond the lifetime of the programme. As a first step, in each programme, donors facilitated the development of local governance structures and processes that would, it was hoped, be representative of the broader "community's" wishes and priorities. In the short-term,

[133] Gerring, *Case Study Research*, 19.

these local structures were given authority for making decisions over the allocation of resources and implementation of small-scale development projects, such as digging a well, building a road, or refurbishing a boundary wall. Donors hoped these structures and processes would improve subnational governance. In the longer term, donors hoped that by empowering these local structures and processes, they would become established components of subnational governance, from the perspective of the local community *and* from the perspective of the government in Kabul. They would then serve as the building blocks of decentralised subnational governance, even beyond the life of the programme.

Notably, the stated purpose of each of the three programmes thus went beyond simple development or humanitarian relief benefits of a discrete development project, and was framed in terms of a *governance and statebuilding objective*. For example, the international implementers would not describe a given project's goal as digging a well so that the village could have increased water supply; instead, the decision-making and implementation process around the well-digging was meant to build local trust that the government would respond to community priorities and enable local governance structures.[134]

Importantly, the cases share abundant operational and contextual factors, thus acting as a control for my central research question of what accounts for success. Each was operational between 2009 and 2014, the timeframe of the inquiry based in "surge"-era Afghanistan. Each

[134] This point will be illustrated in greater detail in subsequent chapters on each case, but I offer an illustrative quote about the intention of the programmes here. As programme documents for ASOP notes, "The Program was designed to create the councils as a means to strengthen security and peace, improve service delivery and build local governance. This was accomplished by reviving traditional practices of collective decision making and community solidarity and the promotion of cooperation and partnership between communities and the government." Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Final Report," 1, accessed September 16, 2014.

was active in varied districts throughout all regions of Afghanistan, with a particular emphasis on the country's restive southern and eastern regions.[135] Each received a similar amount of resources and undertook similar size and type of projects. The timeframe for each programme to undertake one full engagement cycle with a community, leading to the completion of a discrete project, was comparable.

Of course, as Bennett and Elman admit, in the real world "it is never possible to find perfectly matched cases, which would require that the cases would be matched vis-à-vis both known and unknown rival hypotheses."[136] The three cases in my thesis were created in wartime Afghanistan, and not in a laboratory—and thus are not perfectly comparable. Most notably, each had a different arrangement for donor sponsorship, ranging from a UN agency (with U.S. backing), to a primarily U.S. endeavour with secondary U.K. involvement, to a solely U.S.-sponsored programme. In addition, though all three programmes operated at the district level, two of them generated district-level councils, whereas the third established other district-level governance processes and structures.

Accordingly, what Bennet and Elman term "the second challenge" (and my challenge in this thesis) is "to demonstrate that the difference in the value of the independent variable of interest between the two cases, rather than the residual differences between the two cases identified by rival hypotheses, accounts for the difference in outcomes."[137] Following their

[135] The National Solidarity Programme, in its initial phases, focused largely on more stable areas. However, the focus of this inquiry coincides with NSP's expansion into the more volatile areas of the country.

[136] Bennett and Elman, "Case Study Methods in the International Relations Subfield."

[137] Ibid.

advice, my research design mitigates this challenge in two ways. First, each programme was implemented by an "implementing partner" or non-governmental organisation, rather than being directly implemented by the donor sponsor itself. Thus, the programmes are largely comparable with respect to the type of actors who were actually executing the programmes on the ground and interacting with Afghan counterparts. In some cases, the same organisations served as implementers for more than one of the programmes, providing useful cross-case points of comparison and causal leverage.

Second, I capture the *implications* of these different foreign sponsors throughout my process-tracing. At various points, the choices of the different foreign sponsors affected the independent variables, which in turn shaped each case's outcomes. I aim to robustly demonstrate these causal mechanisms and effects within my analysis. In short, my analysis rejects the simplistic explanation that "UNDP-sponsored programmes have better outcomes than U.S.-sponsored ones." Instead, through fine-grained process tracing, I aim to uncover what particular aspects of the UNDP-backed programme yielded better outcomes in this particular case, and what lessons may be generalisable.[138]

This is a theory-generating thesis that aims to produce contingent, generalisable knowledge regarding when donor sponsorship of localised governance-oriented stabilisation programmes may be a successful means of bottom-up statebuilding. For reasons of comparability

[138] Thus I will argue that the difference between outcomes cannot be distilled into a simple question of whether community development programmes are "best" sponsored by a multilateral financial institution, a bilateral donor agency, or a military unit. It is possible that the particular nature of each sponsoring entity was reflected in the way in which each of the programmes developed or was viewed by the Afghan government. However, I will focus this analysis on how it was manifested in each programme's independent variables.

and maturity, all three primary cases are based in Afghanistan; thus Afghan-based programmes constitute what Gerring calls the "manifest scope" of the inquiry, and I make limited claims to the theory's generalisability beyond Afghanistan.[139] However, in the final chapter, I also suggest the applicability of the findings beyond Afghanistan into programmes and countries that share some background characteristics, and point to areas for future research. Thus, using Gerring's framing, the "potential scope" of this inquiry is *other donor-sponsored stabilisation programmes: other attempts to create local governance structures and processes to serve as durable, effective local governance institutions, against a backdrop of conflict.*

3.2 Excluded Cases and Generalisability

The options for case selection were limited because the empirical universe of cases suitable for study is small. This study's parameters encompass donor creation of district-level governance bodies and processes through stabilisation programmes for an explicit decentralisation objective in the context of conflict. In each instance, the international interveners sponsored local governance structures not solely to provide discrete development benefits or humanitarian relief for the lifetime of the project, but also to serve as durable administrative units that would serve as the basis for local governance beyond the timeframe of foreign sponsorship.

This subclass of events—civilian "stabilisation programmes"-- represents a model that is currently employed with increasing frequency by the U.S. and other Western nations—and thus

[139] Gerring, *Case Study Research*, 83.

is one critical to study.[140] However, most such efforts were launched within the past seven years, rendering them too contemporary to examine here. This thesis examines the durability of the councils these programmes create *after* the foreign sponsor has departed, so it is too soon to draw conclusions about the success of these efforts or the factors explaining their outcomes.

Afghanistan, though still a significant recipient of international aid, is currently at a juncture amenable to retrospective study focused on my time period of 2008 to 2014. The programmes examined in this study have concluded; the degree to which they have yielded effective and durable subnational governance can be reasonably evaluated. Further, 2014 represented a break with previous international assistance strategies in Afghanistan: a historic change of Afghan presidential administration, a foreign troop drawdown, the shift of international troops from a combat mandate to an "advise and assist" role, and a diminished foreign aid budget all mean that the period from 2014 onwards can be characterised as analytically distinct from the previous, now-concluded era. The Afghan government also underwent a critical transition in 2014 from the Karzai administration to the Ghani presidency and "National Unity Government" coalition; it is thus conducive to study governance changes that occurred under the now-historic Karzai administration. Finally, the United States has also undergone a leadership change from the Obama administration to the Trump administration, thus allowing me to examine Obama-era policies with some distance.

[140] As noted previously, the U.S. alone has launched programmes in this model in Kenya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and Mali.

Opting for three Afghan primary cases was also a vital decision to enable the thesis to identify and isolate explanatory factors shaping the outcome of interest. Afghanistan during the time period of the inquiry of 2009 to 2014 represents to a large degree a *sui generis* situation in terms of several factors that influence foreign aid effectiveness. International troop levels "surged" to an all-time high level relative to the population and an exceptional one in multinational combat situations. Foreign aid levels also achieved unprecedented heights: the U.S. government more than tripled its assistance to Afghanistan between 2009 and 2010, the USAID budget alone grew from $470 million in fiscal year 2009 to over $1.4 billion in fiscal year 2010.[141] Indeed, of $56 billion the United States allocated toward Afghan reconstruction for the years 2002 through 2010, nearly half were allocated in the fiscal years 2009 and 2010 alone.[142] Meanwhile, the anti-government insurgency reached new levels of intensity and violence. Given this unusual historic context, holding the backdrop country constant enabled me to isolate which variables explain relative success in the programmes' shared stated objective of decentralisation.

Further, a deep examination of three Afghanistan-based programmes is appropriate because the scope and historic significance of the international statebuilding project in surge-era Afghanistan represents a ***crucial case*** for contemporary statebuilding interventions.[143] Since 2001, Western nations have increasingly launched statebuilding (or "statebuilding light") interventions motivated by concerns of transnational terrorist threats, rather than by the

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[141] United States Government Accountability Office, "Afghanistan: Actions Needed to Improve Accountability of U.S. Assistance," Report to Congressional Addressees, July 2011, 3.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Harry Eckstein, "Case Studies in Political Science," in *Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 118; George and Bennett, 120–21.

aspirations that characterised peace operations immediately after the Cold War. Afghanistan is the original exemplar of a country where a terrorist association prompted a foreign statebuilding intervention: the international project there was precipitated by the September 2001 attacks on the United States. As noted above, the number of foreign military and civilian personnel and amount of financial resources deployed from 2009 to 2014 represented a significantly larger effort than similar efforts elsewhere, or during the previous and subsequent years of international engagement in Afghanistan. In total, the U.S. spent a staggering $4.7 billion on stabilisation in Afghanistan, further demonstrating the importance of studying the case.[144]

The geographic dispersal of local stabilisation programmes also offers particular significance for this examination of exogenous efforts to improve local governance. The period studied witnessed a vast expansion of international resources and personnel to the provincial, municipal, and district levels—Afghanistan's lowest formal units of government-- that was unparalleled in contemporary statebuilding interventions.[145]

In addition, these stabilisation programmes that aimed to build local-level government in Afghanistan's most volatile regions can be viewed as a ***least likely case*** for success.[146] As noted

[144] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization: Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," Lessons Learned Program (Washington, May 2018), vi.

[145] The augmentation of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and the introduction of their even more devolved counterparts, District Stabilisation Teams (DSTs), was a crucial development. PRTs had been operational in Afghanistan since 2003, and were also utilised in a similar form in Iraq. But the 2008-9 period increased their PRTs' personnel and overall numbers greatly, and established DSTs for the first time. The significant focus on PRTs and DSTs was a striking break from the normally capital-centric international footprint of statebuilding interventions. For more on historic international statebuilding approaches, see James Dobbins et al., *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007).

[146] Gerring, *Case Study Research*, 213.

in Chapter 1, given the famously poor track record of external statebuilding efforts, some scholars have noted that the most puzzling question is why some interventions actually do *not* fail.[147] Further, existing literature and theory in the participatory development field would predict that the very violent nature of the areas targeted by these stabilisation programmes, their remoteness, their low human capital, and the absence of a functional, responsive central government all would work against the success of local-level institution.[148] Thus the modest success achieved by one case examined here, the National Area-Based Development Programme (NABDP), generates important knowledge.

Finally, it is worth explaining why the case selection excluded the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), perhaps the best-known local governance and development programme in Afghanistan. First, all three selected case studies operated at the district level, whereas NSP operated at the village or community level. There are roughly 400 districts in Afghanistan, each nominally headed by a district governor. By contrast, Afghanistan has over 30,000 communities, without a parallel official government representative; thus it is not appropriate to compare governance interventions at the district level with interventions at the community level. In addition, NSP lasted for several times longer, and operated with a much larger budget, than the programmes studied here. Finally, NSP was never characterised as a stabilisation programme by

[147] For these arguments in the related peacebuilding and peacekeeping fields, see Séverine Autesserre, "International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 114–32; Virginia Page Fortna and Lise Morje Howard, "Pitfalls and Prospects in the Peacekeeping Literature" 11, no. 1 (2008): 283–301; Susanna P. Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace: Accountability and Performance in International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[148] Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?*, 1 edition (Washington, D.C: World Bank Publications, 2012); Elisabeth King, "A Critical Review of Community-Driven Development Programmes in Conflict-Affected Contexts" (International Rescue Committee, March 2013).

its sponsors, instead emphasising poverty-reduction and development goals (as well as participatory governance objectives that did align with stabilisation programmes). Despite the fact that NSP was not a case study itself, the programme does emerge as an important factor in shaping the fortunes of the NABDP, profiled in Chapter 6.

4.0 Variables and Hypotheses

4.1 Dependent Variable: Specification, Justification, and Measurement

The outcome of interest, or dependent variable, in this study is whether internationally-sponsored local stabilisation programmes achieved a modest threshold of "success." Success of each programme is here is as defined first, by the *effectiveness of each programme improving decentralised local governance*, and second, by the *durability of the changes that each programme effected beyond the timeframe of international sponsorship*. I detail measurement and justification of these two components below.

4.2 Promotion of Good Decentralised Local Governance

As the first component of analysis of "success", this study analyses whether each programme was *effective* in *promoting good decentralised local governance* during its lifetime. I choose to assess each programme's outcome based upon decentralised subnational governance because, firstly, promotion of good local governance was an explicitly stated objective of the U.S.-led effort in Afghanistan during the surge. This goal aligned with predominant counterinsurgency doctrine, which states that more responsive, accountable local government

would earn popular support for the government over the insurgency.[149] In addition, each case study programme unequivocally aimed to transform Afghan government structures and processes toward greater responsiveness, accountability and capacity at the local level, per each programme's official documentation.[150]

Donors in Afghanistan viewed good decentralised subnational governance as an important goal for a variety of reasons. On the most basic level, the international community shared a broad consensus that since most Afghans encounter their government representatives at local levels rather than in Kabul, greater decentralisation would better serve Afghanistan's diverse, dispersed population.[151] More broadly, the aid community's thinking on decentralisation has evolved considerably from its first wave in the 1970s, and has increasingly focused on weak states.[152] Donors now promote decentralisation programmes for a range of objectives, including to spur economic growth; to improve service delivery in the context of an unaccountable central bureaucracy; to promote democracy through expansion of electoral mandates; or to "appease

[149] U. S. Army, Lt General David Petraeus, and Lt General James F. Amos, *Counterinsurgency: FM 3-24*.

[150] See official programme documents: AECOM International Development, "ASOP Implementation Strategy," Undated; United Nations Development Programme, "National Area-Based Development Programme Annual Report 2011," April 2011; US Agency for International Development, "Fact Sheet: Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP)," July 2010; AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Final Report," January 2012; US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization in Key Areas- South (SIKA-South Program) Contract Document," March 4, 2013; AECOM International Development, "Stability in Key Areas (SIKA)-East in Inteqal: Support to Good Governance," Report prepared for USAID (Kabul, May 27, 2014).

[151] For example, see Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, "Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy" (U.S. Department of State, February 2010), i.

[152] G. Shabbir Cheema and Dennis A. Rondinelli, eds., *Decentralizing Governance: Emerging Concepts and Practices* (Cambridge, Mass. : Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press/Ash Center, 2007).

centrifugal forces" in hopes of preserving the state.[153] As Chapter 3 traces, several of these rationales were at play in foreigners' push for subnational governance reform and greater decentralisation in Afghanistan.

To be sure, recent scholarship has demonstrated that decentralisation is far from a panacea.[154] Scholars have contested the assumed benefits of decentralisation, demonstrating that it can be associated with increased local corruption, elite capture, and even exacerbate—rather than mitigate – conflict.[155] Yet since each programme studied in this explicitly pursued the goal of improved decentralised local governance, it is appropriate to measure "effectiveness" based upon success in achieving this objective.

I next turn to *conceptualisation, operationalisation* and *measurement* of the variable of improved decentralised local governance.

In conceptualising "decentralisation" and "good decentralised local governance" for purposes of this assessment, I follow Boex and Yilmaz, building upon Bahl:

> Decentralistion is about more than merely shifting power and resources away from the central level or strengthening the administrative capacity of local governments. Instead, decentralisation is increasingly defined as the empowerment of people through the empowerment of their local governments. In this light, decentralisation is about more than providing resources to the local government level and strengthening human resource

[153] Summarized in Jameson Boex and Serdar Yilmaz, "An Analytical Framework for Assessing Decentralized Local Governance and the Local Public Sector," December 27, 2010, 5.

[154] See useful summary in G. Shabbir Cheema and Dennis A. Rondinelli, eds., *Decentralizing Governance: Emerging Concepts and Practices* (Cambridge, Mass. : Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press/Ash Center, 2007), 8–10.

[155] See summary of current scholarship in Hanna Leonardsson and Gustav Rudd, "The 'Local Turn' in Peacebuilding: A Literature Review of Effective and Emancipatory Local Peacebuilding," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 825–839.

> capacity at the local level…. Under the new definition, decentralisation should be considered unsuccessful unless local officials translate their enhanced mandate and greater financial resources into more efficient, responsive, and accountable public services.[156]

Boex and Yilmaz also emphasize the importance of local participation in decentralisation, an emphasis that aligns with this thesis's predominant focus on local structures and processes: "Decentralisation requires mechanisms to be in place that allow local communities to participate in local decision-making processes and allow them to hold their local officials accountable for the delivery of local government services in accordance with local priorities."[157]

Turning to operationalisation and measurement, the diffuse theoretical and scholarly literature on decentralisation is resoundingly clear on one point: measuring the transfers of resources and power implied by decentralisation is very difficult.[158] As Boex and Yilmaz note, "the conclusions by the empirical literature about the effectiveness of decentralisation are hampered by a combination of major weaknesses in how decentralisation has been measured."[159] Most scholars divide assessments of decentralisation into fiscal, political, and administrative elements. Among these three dimensions, Jonathan Rodden notes that attempts to measure decentralisation have largely focused on fiscal elements, which generally examines the "balance

[156] Boex and Yilmaz, "An Analytical Framework for Assessing Decentralized Local Governance and the Local Public Sector," 1.

[157] Boex and Yilmaz, 2.

[158] Cheema and Rondinelli, *Decentralizing Governance*; Leonardsson and Rudd, "The 'Local Turn' in Peacebuilding."

[159] Ibid.

of expenditures and revenues between [different layers of] governments."[160] Unfortunately for these purposes, this thesis does not primarily aim to measure the fiscal dimension of decentralisation, since the Afghan government has made almost no steps toward transferring fiscal authority to subnational units of government, despite statements of intention by the Karzai and subsequent Ghani administrations.[161] (Even if these promises for fiscal transfer were realized, the Afghan government has only stated the intention to transfer budget authority to the *provincial* level; our study is concerned with the *district* level, one tier lower.) Regarding other forms of decentralisation, Rodden notes that "the decentralisation of policy autonomy is rarely addressed by empirical scholars because it is difficult to measure,"[162] while political decentralisation is generally only captured by examining the percentage of local governments in a sample that were popularly elected over time—an indicator that is inappropriate to the Afghan context, as all provincial and district governors are appointed, not elected.

In short, this thesis faced considerable challenges in developing a measurement strategy of decentralisation from the scholarly literature. Thus, I operationalise my outcome of interest as "promotion of good decentralised subnational governance," in other words, rigorously assessing the *effectiveness* of any resultant decentralisation in terms of the quality of governance at the local level.

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[160] Jonathan Rodden, "Comparative Federalism and Decentralization: On Meaning and Measurement," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 4 (2004): 482.

[161] On the Ghani administration's promises to transfer a proportion of budgets to the provincial level, see Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Realizing Self-Reliance: Commitments to Reforms and Renewed Partnership," December 2014.

[162] Rodden, "Comparative Federalism and Decentralization," 486.

To determine the observable implications of this goal of good local governance, I turned to donors' technical literature. This choice is consistent with the focus of the dissertation: it examines donor success in sponsoring programmes that achieve donors' stated objectives (support for statebuilding), so it is appropriate to evaluate programmes on donors' own terms. Specifically, I develop my analytic framework based upon the U.S. government's grey literature on decentralisation and local governance. It recommends that designers of decentralisation programmes should aim to improve four key characteristics of **effective decentralised local governance:** local *autonomy*, local *authority*, local *accountability*, and local *capacity*. As the handbook notes, "No matter what form decentralisation takes, toward what goal it is intended, or in what arena it is adopted, all decentralising changes must embody certain key characteristics in order to succeed… authority, autonomy, accountability, and capacity provide analytical coherence to what is empirically a complicated and often incoherent phenomenon."[163]

In my empirical chapters, I thus trace observable indications of how each programme promoted good local governance, disaggregated into the elements of components of **local *authority; local autonomy; accountability; and capacity***. Here, I provide further specification on the criteria by which I evaluate these four characteristics, based upon the U.S. government's own definitions and framework:

> **Authority.** For decentralization to be meaningful, subnational administrative units or governments must do something to benefit their citizen-residents, who must know what local administrators or councilors

[163] USAID, "Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook," June 2009, 7.

are authorized to do in order to interact with them effectively. Authority, which can be mandatory or permissive, can be enshrined in a constitution or outlined in laws, or can be decreed administratively. In subnational governance, authority may be conferred through subnational democratic elections or delegated to local officials from national hierarchical superiors. An important requirement is that authority must be rule based so as to limit self- interested manipulation by politicians and central bureaucrats.[164]

Autonomy. Decentralization requires that subnational administrative units or governments be given some degree of autonomy over functions they now have the authority to undertake. Autonomy provides subnational officials with flexibility to respond more effectively to local conditions and the specific needs of local people. Of course, autonomy has a different quality when exercised by appointed administrators than it does when exercised by elected officials, but the former can often productively be given an element of managerial discretion to better meet local requirements.[165]

Accountability. Decentralization must create a degree of accountability to empowered local citizens, who know what to hold subnational public officials accountable for by virtue of the specific authorities allowed to them. Of course, accountability is more powerful in cases where voters

[164] USAID, 7.

[165] Ibid.

> can replace elected officials if they do not adequately respond to local needs. But, even if subnational officials are appointed, a range of mechanisms can help to improve accountability. The critical concern is that accountability mechanisms provide a central link between formal decentralized institutions and citizens, the core relationship in democratic local governance. Without these accountability mechanisms, subnational officials with strong authority and autonomy are the functional equivalent of autocrats. At the same time, an element of vertical accountability to the center is almost invariably required.[166]
>
> **Capacity.** Effective decentralization requires that subnational administrative units or governments have adequate capacity to use their authority and autonomy to be responsive to local people. If subnational officials are unable to deliver functions that local residents expect from them, the potential benefits of decentralization are unlikely to be realized. At the same time, civil society must have sufficient capacity to hold local administrations and governments accountable if decentralization and democratic local governance are to take root and flourish.[167]

Because the observable implications of "local authority" and "local autonomy" at district-level Afghanistan overlap significantly, I choose to combine these two elements in my assessment framework.

[166] USAID, 7–8.

[167] USAID, 8.

Armed with this framework, I turn to identifying and verifying the observable indications of effective decentralised local governance achieved by each programme. I draw from a range of sources in identifying observable indications of this goal: over one hundred interviews, including Afghanistan-based primary interviews, interviews conducted elsewhere, policy statements, programme documents and evaluations, independent assessments, and journalistic accounts.

Amassing and corroborating this evidence of effective decentralised local governance is a primary challenge of my project. Even in data-rich contexts, Yilmaz, Beris and Serrano-Berthet note that "implementation of these [decentralisation] reforms is always partial, based on the political context of a country; any illustration is therefore selective and incomplete."[168] These data challenges are compounded by the wartime context of Afghanistan, where subnational information is particularly hard to verify, and where questions of governance-- by extension power relations-- are often sensitive. As I discuss further below in Section 5, I mitigate these data-analysis challenges by triangulating reported information extensively. For example, Afghan government officials, Afghan non-government officials, international officials, international observers and official programme documentation often have very different perspectives on Afghan local governance issues. Wherever possible, I compare these perspectives when drawing my conclusions in the empirical chapters.

[168] Serdar Yilmaz, Yakup Beris, and Rodrigo Serrano-Berthet, "Linking Local Government Discretion and Accountability in Decentralisation," *Development Policy Review* 28, no. 3 (2010): 260.

4.3 Durability of Programme Effects

As the second component of the dependent variable of "success", this study examines whether the governance changes or structures promoted by each programme were *durable* after the conclusion of the project. Why is durability of local stabilisation programmes a component of "success" in outcomes? First, this measure corresponds to the programmes' own stated goals. Per their own programme documents, all three programmes aimed to launch local structures and processes that would alter local citizens' views of their government, and would serve as the building block for future subnational governance efforts. Donors did not intend for these local structures and processes to cease operation as soon as the foreign sponsorship ended; instead, they hoped that these programmes would serve as a pathway towards broader subnational governance improvements.

Second, durability of the structures and processes set up by stabilisation programmes has key implications for Afghanistan's statebuilding and reform agendas. Although the simple continuation of these local structures and processes may seem a modest benchmark, it represents a *sine qua non* of the success of further subnational statebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. The launch of recognized district-level councils was a key administrative innovation introduced in Afghanistan's post-Bonn constitution that had, to date, been unrealised.[169] Permanent

[169] The Afghan constitution is vague beyond the point that provincial, district, and village-level councils *should* be established, and the subsequent Subnational Governance Policy of 2010 reiterates this objective but does not clarify the specifics. Provincial Councils were elected in 2005 and again in 2009, but the specifics of district and village councils is a subject of ongoing contestation. "Councils shall be established to organize activities as well as attain active participation of the people in provincial administrations, district, and in villages, in accordance with law." Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "The Constitution of Afghanistan," January 3, 2004, Article 140.

consolidation of local structures would thus bring Afghanistan's reality into alignment with its 2004 constitution. Local councils also represent an important enabler for Afghanistan's local governance reform agenda as they could pave the way for systematising distribution of fiscal resources and political administration at the subnational level, an important benchmark given Afghanistan's extremely centralised structure.

Third, the permanent establishment of stabilisation programmes' local structures corresponds to several dominant streams of statebuilding theory. Statebuilding is, in Francis Fukuyama's words, "the creation of new governmental institutions and the strengthening of existing ones."[170] Permanent local structures are a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for recurring provision of local services to outlying populations. Reflecting social contract theory that lies at the heart of what David Lake calls "Statebuilding 3.0", local administrative structures should increase the legitimacy of the state by facilitating its means to address the citizenry's basic needs.[171] The durability of local administrative structures sponsored by donors thus illuminates an important element of the effectiveness of the international statebuilding project.[172]

My operationalisation of "durability" of local structures represents an intentionally modest interpretation of the broader imperative for *institutionalisation* in the statebuilding project. Charles T. Call explains that the significance of institutionalisation in statebuilding

[170] Francis Fukuyama, "The Imperative of State-Building," *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 2 (2004): 17.

[171] David Lake, "The Practice and Theory of US Statebuilding," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 4, no. 3 (September 1, 2010): 257–84.

[172] The case for local-level councils as a key component of Afghan statebuilding will be discussed further in Chapter Three in the context of Afghan's governmental structures and decentralization challenge.

contexts is that it "means that sustainability does not depend on any single individual but on a shared commitment to the principles, procedures, and goals of the institution."[173] I rely upon Robert Keohane's guidance that in order to determine whether an entity has become institutionalised, "we ask whether we can identify persistent sets of rules that constrain activity, shape expectations, and prescribe roles."[174] Donors created community councils with the stated objective not of having them participate for the sake of participation for the duration of the project, but rather in order to cultivate subnational governance units that would shape district-level expectations and interactions.

Measurement of this component of the variable is a simple binary, indicating whether, at the end of the Karzai administration, relevant Afghan government entities and independent observers cited the stabilisation-backed structures and processes as still active. For programmes that successfully met this test, I also explore whether they continued into the successor administration of Ashraf Ghani.

In collecting and verifying this data on durability, I again drew from a range of qualitative sources, including a wide array of primary interviews, policy statements, programme documents and evaluations, independent assessments, and journalistic accounts. I also drew upon large-scale surveys conducted by USAID and The Asia Foundation. Regrettably, in the murky and contested context of wartime Afghanistan, there exists no central Afghan government entity

[173] Charles T. Call, "Ending Wars, Building States," in Charles T. Call and Vanessa Wyeth, ed., *Building States to Build Peace* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 2008), 8.

[174] Robert O. Keohane, "International Institutions: Two Approaches," *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (December 1, 1988): 384.

with whom I could verify whether local processes and structures were still operational. I mitigated these challenges by triangulating reported information extensively. I discuss data sources further below in Section 5 of this chapter.

4.4 Building a Theory of Bottom-up Statebuilding

4.5 Independent Variables: Specification, Justification and Measurement

George and Bennett advise that during the formulation of a research strategy, the researcher must identify which variables vary between cases, and which will be held constant.[175] My data analysis indicates that one programme, the National Area-Based Development Programme, was a success in the terms laid out for the dependent variable, whereas the other two cases, the Stability in Key Areas Programme and the Afghanistan Social Outreach Programme were failures. I have identified three primary cases that are comparable in terms of geographic area within Afghanistan, resource level, time frame, and project type. Thus, these factors act as controls and do not explain the divergent outcomes.

What variables do explain the divergent outcomes of each of the three programmes? As I analysed my data, I identified two factors that explain whether the programme was effective and

[175] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 77.

durable in the Afghan conflict context. These two independent variables are a strong partnership with the host government (or lack thereof), and "local embeddedness" (or lack thereof).

Independent Variable 1: Strong Partnership with Host Government

Although each programme was funded by a foreign donor and implemented by a non-governmental organization, each programme relied upon an Afghan government ministry as its primary partner in execution. This host government partner provided the institutional backing and personal connections to ensure that the foreign-sponsored programme took root in the Afghan government context. The strength of this partnership varied widely between the three cases. Ministries varied in terms of leadership capability and personal connections, staff capacity, vertical reach into the periphery, and clarity of mission. But having a strong host government partner was not enough: equally important to the strength of partnership was how collegially and robustly the foreign donor interacted with this bureaucracy in order to leverage it for the effectiveness and durability of the stabilisation programme. This variable captures both aspects of the strength of partnership. I utilise a dichotomous variable here: the programme either enjoyed a strong partnership with its host government counterpart, or it did not.

I evaluate whether a programme enjoyed a strong partnership with the host government largely through fine-grained process tracing, drawing upon elite interviews with Afghan government officials, independent analysts, donor officials, and implementing staff based within Afghan government ministries. These interview inputs were complemented by policy and programme documents, press reports, and secondary analyses of Afghan subnational governance

developments. It was only possible to disentangle this type of sensitive information through an abundance of primary data and triangulation of multiple sources. Though other forms of measurement of bureaucratic and institutional capacity exist within political science literature, I opted for this approach for two reasons. First, during the time period investigated by this thesis, Afghan ministries in their post-Taliban iterations were so new, and their organizational development so fluid, that data was not available to support other forms of measurement of bureaucratic capacity. Second, as we will see, a key determinant of this partnership strength rested upon the personal relationships between the ministry leadership and donor—a factor that is most readily assessed by deep qualitative elite interviews.

Independent Variable 2: Local Embeddedness

The three programmes varied widely in the degree to which their operations aligned, or clashed, with pre-existing contemporary Afghan socioeconomic, political and power relationships. Some programmes operated in contradiction to longstanding patronage flows and district-level political-economic networks. Some programmes were overly associated with short-term, exogenously-supported agendas. By contrast, one programme successfully harnessed-- and bolstered-- the incentives, relationships and authorities that govern Afghan state-society interactions.

My conceptualisation of "local embeddedness" builds upon two related streams in governance reform, development, and political science literature. First, it harnesses an emergent body of work on "working with the grain" in governance reform interventions. This scholarship

notes that governance reform efforts, in order to succeed, "cannot be reengineered from scratch but need to be aligned" with the realities of a country's complex political, social and economic interdependencies.[176] Advocates for this approach note the particular significance of these approaches for neopatrimonial and rent-seeking contexts.[177] They also chart the failures of "best practice" interventions, and advocate for the utility of interventions that "by design or otherwise, have a local problem-solving character and build upon relevant components of the available cultural repertoire."[178] David Booth also lays out the importance of programmes that adhere to "widely recognised behavioural templates."[179]

Brian Levy proposes that the "aim is to find feasible entry points—seemingly modest changes in one part of the system that can evoke adaptations in other parts, in an ongoing, cumulative process" toward better governance.[180] Levy constructs a typology of four different types of countries (putatively) moving from conflict to "sustainable democracy", based upon regime type ("dominant" or "competitive"), and institutional complexity ("personalized elite

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[176] Brian Levy, *Working with the Grain: Integrating Governance and Growth in Development Strategies [Electronic Resource]*, Oxford Scholarship Online (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), xiii.

[177] Levy, *Working with the Grain*; Tim Kelsall, "Neo-Patrimonialism, Rent-Seeking and Development: Going with the Grain?," *New Political Economy* 17, no. 5 (November 1, 2012): 677–82; "Going with the Grain in African Development? - Kelsall - 2011 - Development Policy Review - Wiley Online Library," accessed March 18, 2018; David Booth, "Working with the Grain and Swimming against the Tide," *Public Management Review* 14, no. 2 (February 1, 2012): 163–80.

[178] David Booth, "Introduction: Working with the Grain? The Africa Power and Politics Programme," *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (March 1, 2011): 7.

[179] Ibid.

[180] Levy, *Working with the Grain*, 9.

bargain" or "impersonality").[181] He then offers a theory of how potential governance reform likely occurs within each ideal type. Post-Taliban Afghanistan falls into Levy's typology of a "personalized competitive" system. Tim Kelsall, for his part, emphasizes the importance that programmes align with "extant notions of moral obligation and interpersonal accountability in the region."[182]

Second, my conceptualisation of "local embeddedness" also overlaps significantly with the concept of political settlements, a term "used to define the distribution of power on which a society is based. It results from processes of interaction – including both conflict and coalition – between various contending elites, and underpins the formal and informal institutional arrangements through which resources (political, economic and social) are distributed."[183]

Accordingly, "local embeddedness" leverages a broader political economy lens to understand how power relationships and political interests are organized in Afghan society, and how programmes did or did not align with them. I find that in the Afghan stabilisation context, whether each programme engaged with "feasible entry points" within the pre-existing Afghan political economy had significant impact on its durability and effectiveness. In deriving this assessment of "local embeddedness", I largely provide descriptive assessments of each

[181] Levy, 15–20.

[182] Kelsall, "Going with the Grain in African Development?", 223.

[183] Definition from Patrick Meehan, "What Are the Key Factors That Affect the Securing and Sustaining of an Initial Deal to Reduce Levels of Armed Conflict?: A Literature Review," Monographs and Working Papers (London: U.K. Stabilisation Unit, August 2018); in developing his definition, Meehan draws from Jonathan Di John, "Conceptualising the Causes and Consequences of Failed States: A Critical Review of the Literature," Working Paper, Crisis States Research Centre (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 2008); Khan, Mushtaq Husain, "Political Settlements and the Governance of Growth-Enhancing Institutions" (2010: Unpublished paper, n.d.); Putzel, James and Jonathan Di John, "Meeting the Challenges of Crisis States" (London: Crisis States Research Centre, 2012).

programme's approach, again based upon a wide range of interlocutors, from international observers to Afghan parliamentary officials, to Afghan ministry officials. I triangulate these accounts heavily with independent analyses and programme documents.

4.6 Argument

To review, I have identified the following variables:

Dependent Variable: **Success of the programme,** comprising:

a) *Effectiveness* of the programme in promoting good decentralised subnational governance, defined by constituent elements of improved local authority and autonomy; improved local capacity; and improved local accountability.
b) *Durability* of the local governance institutions and processes instated by each stabilisation programme, after the foreign sponsorship ceases, pegged to the end of the Karzai administration in 2014.

In evaluating the outcomes, my data analysis yields the following values for each programme:

Chapter 4: Afghanistan Social Outreach Programme: Failure.

a) *Effectiveness:* Promoted local autonomy and authority at a moderately low level, local accountability at a low level, and local capacity at a low level.
b) *Durability:* Not durable.

Chapter 5: National Area-Based Development Programme: Success.

a) Effectiveness: Instated local authority and autonomy at a high level, local accountability at a moderately high level, and local capacity at a moderately high level.
b) Durability: Durable.

Chapter 6: Stability in Key Areas Programme: Failure.

a) Effectiveness: Instated local authority and autonomy at a low level, local accountability at a low level, and local capacity at a moderately low level.
b) Durability: Not Durable.

Independent Variables: I have identified the following dichotomous independent variables as explaining divergent outcomes: *a strong host government partnership* (or not*)*, and *local embeddedness* (or not). The emergent theory suggests that in order to be durable and effective, donor stabilisation programmes aimed at "bottom-up statebuilding" in Afghanistan needed to meet both conditions. The NABDP programme, the sole success, enjoyed a strong partnership with a host government counterpart, and had programming that was locally embedded into pre-existing social and political processes.

The other two programmes were failures; however, as I undertook my research, I remained mindful that a simple coding of "success" or "failure" may prove to be insufficient to generate meaningful knowledge. Indeed, as George and Bennett note, it is possible that examining *types of failures* will be a more informative and appropriate form of analysis. (George and Bennett cite the research design of George and Smoke, who offer a detailed typology of

failures in their study of deterrence.)[184] Though three cases is not sufficient to generate a detailed typology of failures in this situation, in the empirical cases, I do examine in detail the various different ways in which the other two programmes failed.

Specifically, both NABDP and SIKA had the same host government partner, the strong Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). Yet only NABDP enjoyed a *strong host government partnership,* because the programme managed to successfully harness the capabilities of the ministry. By contrast, the sponsors of the SIKA alienated the formidable MRRD leadership. Thus the partnership was weak, and the strength of the ministry ended up being focused on the objective of ensuring that the SIKA programme was a failure. The ASOP programme also lacked a strong host government partnership, but for an entirely different reason: its partner was the problematic Independent Directorate of Local Governance.

Similarly, of the three programmes, only NABDP managed to achieve *local embeddedness.* As I trace in detail in Chapter 5, the programme managed (largely inadvertently) to tap into pre-existing Afghan social and political networks and to form a rent creation mechanism that held together local elites. These, in turn, enhanced its durability and effectiveness in the shape of Afghan local governance landscape. By contrast, both ASOP and SIKA worked "against the grain" of local Afghan politics, but in very different ways. The empirical cases trace these variations in detail.

[184] George and Bennett specifically cite Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (Columbia University Press, 1974).

4.7 Alternative Explanations

I have sought my parsimony in my explanation for statebuilding outcomes in Afghanistan. Yet the programmes operated in a complex, interdependent context, and there are undoubtedly additional factors influencing the success or failure of each programme. I here briefly consider whether potential alternative explanations could have been determinative ones; I also weigh these considerations throughout the empirical chapters.

Geography did not make a difference: all three of the programmes operated nationwide, and my analysis largely focused on the programming in the more restive southern and eastern regions. Related to this, the security situation *per se* did not determine outcomes: all of three programmes worked in comparably challenging, volatile districts. Among the many insecure districts in Afghanistan, some districts were still more conducive to effective programming than others: for example, some had a local district governor who was a more capable partner. As detailed in the SIKA and ASOP chapters, these programmes could not incorporate these considerations into their selection of districts; they instead had to rely entirely onto the military's prioritization of districts based upon military factors. The NABDP programme, though also operating in districts of comparable levels of violence, was able to select among volatile districts for ones that would be more conducive to local governance programmes. These divergent factors between the programmes, which contributed toward the programmes' divergent outcomes, is incorporated into Independent Variable 2, "local embeddedness." For both SIKA and ASOP, it is described in the sub-section on "association with short-term agendas: foreign military counterinsurgency campaign." For NABDP, the fact that it did not have to incorporate these

military preferences into its district selection is covered in section 4.4, "Disassociation from short term military and political agendas."

Contrary to those who argue for more investment in statebuilding efforts, resource levels did not determine outcomes. [185] The most expensive programme, SIKA, was among the least successful; meanwhile, NABDP's funding for each of its councils was, according to the World Bank, "surprisingly small" compared to the ASOP programme.[186]

Another potential alternative explanation is that the donor partner made a difference: ASOP and SIKA were both sponsored by USAID, whereas NABDP was funded by the US government and other partners, but via the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Was UNDP simply a "better" host government partner? As the empirical chapters demonstrate, the choices of each sponsor did shape outcomes, but there are three reasons why this explanation of a "better" sponsor is not the primary one. First, all three programmes were implemented by implementing partners (NGOs or development contractors), meaning that local communities affected by the programmes did not interface directly with the donor, but rather with an intermediate organisation; in some cases, the same NGO implemented more than one of these programmes, which provides a useful control. Second, because NABDP was partly funded by the US government (during the phase studied), along with other partners, American policy preferences were channelled into the programme in similar ways to how they were on the other

[185] See the discussion of "counsel of reinvestment" in Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations* (Taylor & Francis, 2008), 12-13.

[186] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 13.

programmes. Third, UNDP implements analogous programmes all over the world, often to very mixed reviews. Thus it is not appropriate to conclude that UNDP was simply a "better" donor.

However, there are key ways in which the sponsor influenced outcomes, which is integrated into my model. The way in which USAID interacted with the MRRD in the implementation of SIKA served to alienate the ministry and ultimately undermine the programme's effectiveness and durability. In other words, USAID's stance was one causal mechanism undermining the *strength of the host government partnership*. Notably, however, USAID's interactions with the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, the parent ministry to the ASOP programme, were not particularly problematic.

5.0 Undertaking the Research

5.1 Research Design, Data, Sources, Fieldwork

The research design allows me to achieve significant causal leverage through a cross-case comparison of three fieldwork-based case studies, each subjected to robust process tracing and a multiplicity of data sources. The comparative case study method is particularly suited for macro-causal analysis when the universe of potential cases is limited in number, but represents sufficient variation to present potential alternative casual explanations.[187] In particular, for the primary case studies, I utilise what Beach and Pedersen identify as theory-building process tracing, which "seeks to build a generalisable theoretical explanation from empirical evidence,

[187] Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers, "The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 2 (1980): 174–197.

inferring that a more general causal mechanism exists from the facts of a particular case."[188] The primary case studies allow for a fine-grained examination of causal mechanisms, in order to generate variables that explain my outcome of interest ("success" comprising effectiveness and durability) within a controlled framework.

Determining the value of each variable for the three primary cases demanded robust inputs of data generated by elite interviewing, extensive fieldwork and document review. Elite interviews in particular offer several advantages for my interest in Kabul's often opaque political decision-making processes and international community actions. As Tansey argues, the method allows the researcher to uncover deliberations that lay behind more public occurrences: "Elite interviews can shed light on the hidden elements of political action that are not clear from an analysis of political outcomes or other primary sources. By interviewing key participants in the political process, analysts can gain data about the political debates and deliberations that preceded decision making and action taking, and supplement official accounts with first-hand testimony."[189] It proved particularly useful to triangulate with official policy statements and programme documents that form an additional basis of my analysis. Anthropologist Cris Shore adds, "The study of elites provides a useful focus for addressing a range of core anthropological and sociological concerns including language and power; leadership and authority; … power

[188] Derek Beach, *Process-Tracing Methods [Electronic Resource] : Foundations and Guidelines* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 2

[189] Tansey, "Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing: A Case for Non-Probability Sampling,": 766–67.

relations, social structure and social change."[190] All these concerns prove to be key to my investigation.

I undertook over 100 semi-structured interviews for each of the primary three cases following the logic of structured, focused comparison, aiming to generate comparable insights across each of the three cases.[191] Because my research question focuses on international statebuilders' strategies and implementation, a high volume of interviews with international civilian policymakers and practitioners was required. I conducted extensive interviews with international officials who witnessed or implemented the programmes first-hand. I remained mindful that those who worked on the programmes may have had their own agendas or biases, so worked to triangulate their perspectives with others. I also mitigated the potential bias by conducting most of these interviews after the conclusion of the programmes.

I also interviewed a large number of Afghan nationals, both inside and outside of the Afghan government. The Afghanistan portions of the research principally focused on examining various Afghan perspectives on my research question: in what ways did these locally-based statebuilding programmes relate to Kabul-level political institutions? How did the Kabul-based line ministries perceive each programme? What observable indicators of improved local governance did local communities report? My primary focus was on interviewing officials from the Kabul-based ministries whose administrative structures were affected by international

[190] Cris Shore, Stephen (Stephen L.) Nugent, and Inc NetLibrary, *Elite Cultures [Electronic Resource] : Anthropological Perspectives* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 9.

[191] Though these interviews were primarily in-person, in some cases exchanges happened via Skype, phone, or email.

bottom-up programmes: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (the parent ministry of the NABDP and SIKA), and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance and Development (the Kabul-based sponsor of the Afghan Social Outreach Programme and the SIKA programme). In addition, Afghan government officials from the Ministry of Finance, the Wolesi Jirga (Parliament), and the previous (Karzai) Presidential administration provided key insights into these programmes' impact at the national level.

Beyond officials from both donor countries or the Afghan government, I interviewed a wide array of independent experts with significant time on the ground in Afghanistan. I interviewed local and international analysts, scholars, and implementers of the stabilisation programmes.

I undertook chain-referral or snowball sampling of key informants around particular issues, which is most useful for process tracing that attempts to reconstruct an event.[192] Mindful that interviewees may suggest other interlocutors who share a similar view as their own, I was purposeful in drawing from a wide range of original interlocutors. Because of the sensitivity of discussing Afghan governance matters and donor strategies, particularly for interviewees still based in Afghanistan or still based within donor governments, upon agreement with interviewees, all interviews are presented as anonymous. (An annotated list of interviewees, including titles, was made available at viva.) Within the text of the thesis, I provide contextual

[192] Tansey, "Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing," 770.

information about each interviewee's identity (e.g., "Afghan Parliamentarian"; "international stabilisation programme manager") to help the reader situate this interviewee's viewpoint.

The thesis also draws heavily upon written sources. Scholarly literature provides the backbone of the theoretical argument; a combination of academic scholarship and policy-related reportage sets up the primary puzzle for empirical analysis. Historic and recent accounts of Afghan government structures and politics provide context for the investigation. As I unpacked each of my three primary case studies, international statebuilders' policy documents, "grey literature," programmatic records, independent evaluations of the programmes, and written memoirs and essays provide valuable insights. Unquestionably, international interveners bring their own slants to their recollections of their work, but these accounts are useful data points for that reason: they reveal much about foreign conceptualisation of the state-building enterprise and priorities in implementation.

Finally, though conducting a large-scale survey of local governance conditions was beyond my resourcing level as a DPhil student, I took advantage of several external resources that shed light on my topic. In particular, USAID commissioned its largest, most comprehensive independent evaluation of stabilisation interventions between 2012 and 2014, capturing governance perception indicators from interviews of over 190,000 people across 130 districts in Afghanistan. The Asia Foundation also conducts nationwide annual survey of Afghans' views. These and other surveys were useful in underpinning my analysis of local trends.

I have also drawn extensively on the burgeoning body of academic work produced by young Afghan scholars, many of whom received graduate training in the United Kingdom and

the United States. These accounts (largely PhD dissertations) provide invaluable counterpoints to Western analyses of the international intervention in Afghanistan, and a very useful supplement to the information that I, as a Westerner, was able to ascertain in my own interviews. On some of the most sensitive issues—such as "local embeddedness" of specific programmes—I particularly strived to see whether my data collection aligned with perspectives of Afghan academics.

Every aspect of this research is underpinned and bolstered by my lengthy history of engagement in Afghanistan. I first arrived as an NGO worker in Kabul in 2004, and have subsequently worked in and on the country in multiple capacities-- non-governmental organization worker, think tank analyst, U.S. government stabilisation programme manager—before commencing my doctoral work. I do not directly cite the conversations undertaken over these years when I worked as a practitioner -- instead for academic integrity reasons limiting my interviews conducted during intentionally-designed fieldwork. But my years of work on Afghanistan have undoubtedly deepened my analysis: in particular, they enable me to take the long view of the international project there, and to critically assess the many stages of foreigners' "new" approaches to Afghan governance, from "light footprint" to "bottom-up" to "transition."

I undertook fieldwork in multiple countries. I was able to interview a significant number of informants in-person in the United States, the United Kingdom and remotely. International community members based in Afghanistan—particularly those under diplomatic or military assignments— generally are based in-country for only one to two years at a time. Thus, many of my principal informants were no longer based within Afghanistan at the time of interviews, and I sought to interview them in person, or remotely, wherever they were based for their follow-on assignments. As my primary case studies were sponsored by the UNDP, the U.S., and the UK,

considerable time in Washington, New York, and London facilitated many of these conversations. For those programme implementers now spread throughout the world, if an in-person conversation proved impossible, I utilised phone conversations, Skype, or, in a limited number of cases, emails. A primary focus was on those international officials who were "embedded" within the Afghan ministries of interest some length of time; these individuals provided valuable insights into the "host government partnership" aspect of my research. Finally, a striking number of Afghan-national professionals who had previously worked on these stabilisation programmes were based in the U.S. or Europe by the time of my research. Security threats to Afghans who worked with the international community has prompted an exodus to Western countries by way of programmes such as the U.S.' Special Immigrant Visa Programme.[193] Importantly for this study of how local governance programmes played out, many of these individuals, both international and Afghan, had previously been based at the district level in Afghanistan. Thus I was able to capture insights on the programmes' observable impacts on local governance from an array of districts and provinces without traveling to them.

The fieldwork also demanded considerable time in Kabul, mainly to speak with ministry officials, Afghan parliamentarians, Afghan NGO personnel, independent Kabul-based observers and analysts of all nationalities, and international officials. As described above, large component of my analysis focuses on the "host government partnership," the relationship between each stabilisation programme, and the Afghan line ministry charged with hosting the programme. Thus Kabul-based line ministry officials and consultants were a key source of information. In

[193] Ernesto Londoño, "State Department Approves More Visas for Afghan Interpreters," *The Washington Post*, May 7, 2014.

addition, many individuals whom I interviewed in Kabul had previously worked for substantial periods outside of Kabul, viewing these programmes as they operated at the district level, and providing important information on how decentralisation efforts played out in practice.

Although I was able to gain substantial insights into the local-level impacts of these programmes by interviewing personnel who had *previously* been based at the district level, I also needed to round out my research with firsthand understanding of the district level. With appropriate permissions from Oxford's Department of Politics and International Relations, I drew upon interview records from my own primary fieldwork on district-level donor programmes conducted in 2012 in Kandahar and Nangarhar provinces while a Council on Foreign Relations fellow.[194] These interviews comprise a minority of overall fieldwork for the project, but provide valuable context and data from areas of Afghanistan that have proven inaccessible in more recent years. [195] When I returned to Afghanistan for fieldwork in 2014 and 2016, security conditions, the drawdown of international presence, and academic risk management guidance made travel to these areas impossible for me. However, from my vantage point in Kabul, I leveraged existing relationships to interview, remotely but from within-country, Afghans and international observers based in these areas.

[194] Per the guidance stipulated in the DPhil Handbook of the Department of Politics and International Relations, these interviews and this work have not been previously submitted in support of any other degree programme. Permission was sought and granted from the Director of Graduate Studies, Professor Yuen Foong Kong, March 2014, via electronic correspondence.

[195] This fieldwork was in support of the following two primary publications: Frances Z. Brown, "Rethinking Afghan Local Governance Aid After Transition," August 2014; Frances Z. Brown, "The U.S. Surge and Afghan Local Governance" (U.S. Institute of Peace, September 2012).

My long history of work on the ground in Afghanistan equipped me well for field research. In developing contacts, I leveraged my network from my previous affiliations in Afghanistan, spanning back to 2004, with other institutions including The Asia Foundation, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, the US Institute of Peace, and USAID. My familiarity with the country and access to different networks were vital for both data-collection and security purposes. In conducting my fieldwork in 2012, 2014 and 2016 in Afghanistan, I relied upon transportation and accommodation through arrangements similar to my previous research work in country, through the American Institute of Afghan Studies and the U.S. Institute of Peace. Even Kabul-based research posed significant risks, so I was intentional and efficient about the amount of fieldwork time I spent in-country.

In terms of language of research, Dari and Pashto are the official languages of Afghanistan; Dari (a form of Persian) is more prevalent in Kabul, and English is widely spoken among international-facing Afghan government officials in Kabul. I speak and read some Dari through my years working in Afghanistan and previous knowledge of Arabic, which proved useful for general mobility, situational awareness, and pleasantries in-country. As most of my interlocutors were either international civilian or military officials, foreign development programme implementers, or Afghans who work with the international community, most of my interviews were conducted in English. However, for those Afghan interlocutors for whom an English-language interview was not possible, and for review of documents written in Dari language beyond my language skills, I arranged translation services through my previous work with the U.S. Institute of Peace.

6.0 Challenges to the Research Plan and Mitigation

This study interrogates both the efficacy, and desirability, of the bottom-up statebuilding enterprise and international aid apparatus. Almost inevitably, access, sensitivity, and measurement represent key methodological challenges for this project.

Questions of international interventions are often highly contested in both the intervening and intervened-upon countries; with regards to contemporary Afghanistan, this is particularly the case. From the local Afghan perspective, analysing community-level aid interventions often prompts controversy and strong feelings.

From the central Afghan government perspective, my interest in the Karzai administration's power projection invites obvious defensiveness. From the international community's viewpoint, debates about whether the Afghan campaign was "worth it"-- especially in an age of ambiguous results and fiscal austerity-- rage on.

Accordingly, given the sensitivity around discussions of political power and my identity as (somewhat) an outsider, I remained mindful that Afghan and international elites alike may tend to withhold access or opinions. Tansey notes that it is possible that "interviewees misrepresent their own positions in ways that raise questions over the reliability of their statements. In particular, politicians may attempt to slant their accounts and inflate or minimize their own role in an event or process."[196] Further, as Mark Kramer et al explain, memory lapses

[196] Tansey, "Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing."

and ulterior motives almost inevitably were present. [197] More broadly, as Shore reminds us, "most military, economic, and political elites are unlikely to permit open and uncensored access to their internal organization."[198] Finally, social science phenomena are subject to a wide range of measurement challenges, and capturing the intrinsically murky world of Afghan subnational governance, centre-periphery relations, and donor-host nation interactions may be particularly thorny.

While acknowledging these significant challenges, I aimed to mitigate them through the depth and breadth of my contacts and background in Afghanistan, which I translated into a wide range or perspectives from which to pursue my research and from which to commence snowball sampling.

I have worked on the ground in Afghanistan for over 15 years; importantly, my roles in the country have included significant time both outside of and inside the U.S. government, as well as research, policy, and programme management capacities.

My background as a non-governmental organisation worker (2004-2006; 2011-12) provided me deep contacts and context "outside the wire" and allowed me to travel all over the country. My career as a U.S. Agency for International Development official (2009-11; 2012-13)—much of it spent on the ground in Afghanistan-- provided me a community within official US civilian and military channels and an instinct for decisions made within that setting. Contacts

[197] Mark Kramer et al., "Remembering the Cuban Missile Crisis: Should We Swallow Oral History?," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (July 1, 1990): 212–18.

[198] Cris Shore, 2002, "Introduction: Towards and Anthropology of Elites," in Cris Shore and Stephen Nugent (eds.) *Elite Cultures: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Routledge): 11.

from my stints "downrange" at Forward Operating Bases, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and District Stabilisation Teams embedded along with the US military proved useful in investigating the counterinsurgency elements of the programmes. Though none of my source materials are classified, my background as a former U.S. official increased the likelihood that individuals would choose to share with me written materials that are not widely available. In both my government and non-government capacities, as well as my previous field-based research for the U.S. Institute for Peace, I gained a network of Afghan government officials and non-governmental contacts as well.

At the same time, my access is not *too* close to be a rigorous, objective researcher of the three primary case study programmes. Though I worked in close proximity to all three programmes, I never worked directly on any of them, and I have long ago ended my work for the US government on Afghanistan. When I took an 18-month leave of absence from my DPhil to take a role as director on the U.S. National Security Council staff, in 2016-2017, my job there did not focus on Afghanistan. Finally, my research challenges were mitigated by the fact that my project is investigating a historic, rather than current, Afghan government—as well as a historic, rather than incumbent, U.S. administration.

The Karzai administration left office in 2014, the year my study concludes. Afghan and international interlocutors have likely been more candid in their assessments of both Afghan and American programmes and policies now that these administrations are out of power. Indeed, the "heavy footprint" period seems like a long time ago. From the vantage point of 2019, where U.S. negotiations with the Taliban are underway, the maximalist approach and aspirations of bottom-up statebuilding seems to be a relic from a bygone era.

Chapter Three: Country Context: International Intervention and Afghan Local Order

This chapter situates the empirical chapters within the context of the broader international intervention in Afghanistan. I provide a chronological and analytic overview of Western donors' statebuilding efforts from the fall of the Taliban in 2001 until the end of the thesis timeframe in 2014, with a particular focus on foreign initiatives to reform local governance. The aim is to position the three programmes examined as case studies within the wider trajectory of the exogenous statebuilding project in Afghanistan.

Beyond orienting the reader, this chapter's second aim is to demonstrate that given the context, the bottom-up statebuilding programmes that began around 2009, and examined in the empirical cases, represented a strikingly high level of ambition. I show that these programmes' focus on *promoting and improving decentralised local governance* marked a dramatic shift from the historic baseline in Afghanistan, from the Afghan Constitution's provisions, from the Karzai government's preferences, and from early years of donor engagement. Against this backdrop, the one modest success case study identified in this thesis is a more puzzling result than the two failures.

Finally, this chapter reminds us that as the foreign statebuilders rolled out their statebuilding agenda and associated subnational governance projects, they were not painting on an empty canvas. Their programmes were grafted onto the already complex ecosystem of Afghan local political order. Accordingly, the final portion of this chapter provides a brief overview of two salient features of Afghan subnational governance. This review seeks to underpin this

thesis's exploration of how, and why, some case study programmes achieved "local embeddedness"—and how this factor affected outcomes in bottom-up statebuilding.

1.0 Tracing Foreign Interveners' Statebuilding Strategies Post-2001

Foreign intervention in Afghanistan did not begin in 2001. Afghanistan alternatively served as a locus of geopolitical competition and geographical buffering, first between imperial Britain and Russia in the 19th century, and then between the United States and the Soviet Union in the 20th. Extending state authority throughout the country has long posed a challenge for Kabul and its foreign backers; the centre has often tried to pursue this objective through mediated alliances. Exogenous interventions during these periods had their own complex implications for Afghanistan's central elites, peripheral power brokers, and the contestation between the two.

Especially after the Soviet invasion of 1979, regional power-brokers, bolstered by foreign funds and weapons, gained ascendency, further complicating any effort to extend state authority over the rural periphery. The United States augmented its own involvement during the 1980s by supporting the *mujahidin* forces arrayed against Afghan and Soviet communists, in collaboration with Pakistani intelligence. The U.S. pulled back markedly from Afghanistan in the 1990s after the Soviet withdrawal, collapse of the Soviet Union, and eventual fall of the government of Afghan President Najibullah. By the time internecine civil war among former *mujahidin* factions was raging in the mid-1990s, the U.S. had long since fixated elsewhere. The Taliban movement, which rapidly consolidated control of Kandahar in 1994 and seized Kabul in 1996, was

internationally isolated for its hosting of al-Qaeda and human rights violations.[199] But otherwise, Afghanistan was not a focus of Western foreign policy.

The Al Qaeda attack on the American homeland in September 2001 altered this situation irrevocably. It prompted a wholly new chapter of foreign engagement in Afghanistan in terms of scale, normative framework, and objectives. After the initial counterterrorism campaign achieved its aims, the international community's agenda shifted— and expanded— in the intervening months and years to encompass statebuilding, democratization, and governance objectives. These shifts, in turn, prompted an approach to subnational governance from the international community that varied over time.

Below, I trace the key junctures in the international community's statebuilding project in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014, with a particular focus on the foreigners' objectives for subnational governance reform. The international community entered Afghanistan in 2001 with a "light footprint" approach, which featured limited focus on governance beyond Kabul. It then began a shift toward greater subnational presence from 2005 through 2008. With the advent of the "surge" and full counterinsurgency era in 2009, the foreign interveners opted for a much more robust engagement with subnational actors and structures. Finally, from 2012 to 2014, dominant rhetoric changed from "stabilisation" to a more modestly resourced "transition" and withdrawal from peripheral areas.

[199] See United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Resolution 1267: The Situation In Afghanistan" (1999).

1.1 2001 to 2005: Light Footprint Era

Immediately after the attacks of September 2001, the U.S. government demanded that the Taliban government expel al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. When the Taliban did not, the U.S. launched a military intervention, in partnership with NATO and other allies, to oust the Taliban and eliminate al-Qaeda. The NATO intervention was initially framed in minimalist counter-terrorism terms and led by military tools of coercion. US Special Operations Forces and air power combined with ground partners from the Northern Alliance, a coalition comprising Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, and some Pashtun components, who had previously formed the anti-Taliban resistance within and outside the country.[200]

After the military defeat of the Taliban, foreign interveners and Northern Alliance leaders met in Bonn, Germany, to establish a roadmap for a successor regime. The Bonn Agreement of December 2001 laid out the establishment of an Interim Administration; a roadmap for a democratically elected presidency and Parliament over the next three years; a constitution-drafting and ratification process; and the establishment of other ancillary support and institutions.[201]

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[200] For useful, and often critical firsthand accounts of these early years of intervention see James F. Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation-Building in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C: Potomac Books, 2008); Aaron B. O'Connell, ed., *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, 1 edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, 1 edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009); James Dobbins, *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003); Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, First Edition edition (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

[201] United Nations, "Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions ('Bonn Agreement')," December 5, 2001.

Bonn was not without controversy. With the benefit of hindsight, it now seems clear that the Bonn arrangement did not reflect the underlying distribution of power in Afghanistan among ethnic constituencies—an imbalance that would prove destabilising in subsequent years.[202] Taliban elements were excluded; further, many other ethnic Pashtuns, who comprised Afghanistan's largest group but a small part of the Northern Alliance, felt underrepresented in the transitional arrangement. To many observers, the composition of the interim administration represented a political pact that overly favoured the Northern Alliance leading players, especially because it provided for Tajik control of the three key "power ministries": Defence, Interior, and Foreign Affairs.[203] Nonetheless, Bonn's sponsors emphasized the temporary nature of the arrangement; the communique stressed that "these interim arrangements are intended as a first step toward the establishment of a broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government, and are not intended to remain in place beyond a specified period of time."[204] Lakhdar Brahimi, who served as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy in the negotiations, "stressed that even if the Afghan negotiators in Bonn were unrepresentative, the process agreed upon could lead to a legitimate and representative government."[205]

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[202] On the connection between political deals and underlying political settlements and impact on conflict, see Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand, and Patrick Meehan, "Synthesis Paper: Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains That Reduce Violent Conflict," Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project (London: U.K. Stabilisation Unit, April 2018).

[203] See, for example, discussion in *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq: James Dobbins, Rollie Lal: 9780833034601: Amazon.Com: Books*, 130, accessed January 31, 2019.

[204] United Nations, "Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions ('Bonn Agreement')."

[205] Hamish Nixon and Richard Ponzio, "Building Democracy in Afghanistan: The Statebuilding Agenda and International Engagement," *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 27.

Per the framework set out in Bonn, the international community supported the convening of an Emergency *Loya Jirga* (grand council) in June 2002, bringing together a wide range of stakeholders from across Afghanistan to choose a transitional administration. Hamid Karzai was selected as president; he would then be elected for a full presidential term in Afghanistan's first presidential elections in October 2004. In retrospect, the compressed timeline appears to violate Roland Paris's well-founded argument for the importance of "institutionalisation before liberalisation" and the perils of rushing elections.[206] But Paris only published his book in 2004, and so optimism and urgency, rather than scholarly evidence, shaped interveners' plans instead.

From the start, the U.N., the U.S., and other international actors took a "light footprint" approach to the post-Bonn era. (The primary international troop presence would be formalized under the moniker International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which was formally transitioned to NATO leadership in January 2003.[207]) External forces included a peacekeeping force of 5,000 in Kabul and a NATO mission of roughly 8,000 troops to pursue continued counterterrorism operations; relative to the population, this ratio of troops was significantly smaller than any other analogous U.S.-led nation-building effort from World War II onward.[208] Governance and civilian lines of effort were marked by similar modesty, focused on the capital and central ministries and institutions.

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[206] Paris, Roland. *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

[207] NATO, "ISAF's Mission in Afghanistan (2001-2014) (Archived)," NATO, accessed May 8, 2019.

[208] Dobbins, *America's Role in Nation-Building*, 136.

There were several reasons why the international community was explicitly *not* focused on support for subnational statebuilding and local governance immediately after Bonn. For one, the U.S. administration of George W. Bush had come into office less than a year earlier, plainly rejecting the overly ambitious nation-building endeavours of yesteryear. Senior American policymakers also professed concern that the arrival of large numbers of foreign troops into the rural parts of the country would trigger local resistance, as it had throughout Afghan history.[209] UN actors such as Brahimi, for their part, similarly believed that Afghan mission should be more circumscribed than recent UN-run transitional administrations in East Timor and Kosovo, due to the presence of a recognized Afghan interim government, geographic remoteness of many parts of the country, and the foreboding security context.[210] Foreign statebuilders across the board were concerned about Afghanistan's potential for fragmentation under regional power-brokers and warlords. Further, after years without direct presence in Afghanistan under wartime conditions and Taliban rule, most donors did not have a means of projecting assistance throughout the country. Finally, as Jake Sherman recounts, an increasingly influential bloc of Pashtuns, led by Karzai, asserted that a strong, empowered head of state was vital because that official "would be vested with the authority to stand up to the warlords and would not be subject to the fractious challenges from within the government that might render it ineffective."[211]

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[209] Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, xxvii.

[210] Jake Sherman, "Afghanistan: Nationally Led Statebuilding," in Charles T. Call and Vanessa Wyeth, ed., *Building States to Build Peace* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 2008).

[211] Sherman, "Afghanistan: Nationally Led Statebuilding," 309.

As a result, the early years and founding documents of the Afghan statebuilding effort are marked by an emphasis on heavy centralisation of governance institutions and authorities.[212] The Afghan Constitution, ratified by Constitutional *Loya Jirga* in January 2004, compounded this centralised focus. The document stressed the Afghan State's "unitary and indivisible" nature[213] and emphasizes the "principles of centralism,"[214] mirroring key features of the country's 1964 constitution. The arrangement meant that, on paper, Afghanistan has one of the most highly centralised executives in the world.[215] The Constitution grants vast authorities to the president; meanwhile, the Bonn process left Parliamentary authorities weak and divided (a point that will become highly relevant in the empirical chapters). The president also appoints all ministers, who in turn oversee Kabul-based line ministries that deliver services, with virtually no input from lower tiers of governance.[216] The president further appoints one-third of the members of the upper house of parliament, the *Meshrano Jirga*.[217] An additional one-third of the *Meshrano Jirga* members are meant to be elected from district councils, but in absence of these district councils for the past 18 years, the president has also appointed an additional one-third of this chamber, rendering the upper house of parliament heavily shaped by the Presidential Palace.

[212] Nixon and Ponzio, "Building Democracy in Afghanistan," 28.

[213] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "The Constitution of Afghanistan," January 3, 2004, Article 1.

[214] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "The Constitution of Afghanistan," Article 1.

[215] Sarah Lister, "Caught in Confusion: Local Governance Structures in Afghanistan," March 2005, 3.

[216] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, article 64.

[217] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 84.

The Constitution sowed the seeds of a paradox that would bedevil the international project in Afghanistan: the ambition to cultivate a highly centralised, technocratic Afghan state in tension with the fragmented, neopatrimonial, and "polycentric"[218] nature of the Afghan political order and power structures.

The vagueness of the Constitution on key questions of local governance compounds this tension. In a remarkable example of ambiguity (strategic or otherwise), the document endorses centralism, while in the same breath leaving theoretical room for decentralisation or devolution: "The government, in preserving the principles of centralism, shall transfer necessary powers, in accordance with the law, to local administrations in order to accelerate and improve economic, social as well as cultural matters, and foster peoples' participation in developing national life."[219] The Constitution does provide for provincial-level councils[220] and district- and village-level councils[221] but the authorities and responsibilities of the district and village councils, in particular, are left undefined and synoptic ("councils shall be established to organize activities as well as attain active participation of the people").[222] As we will see, in the intervening decade,

[218] Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016)., 3.

[219] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "The Constitution of Afghanistan," 137.

[220] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "The Constitution of Afghanistan," article 138.

[221] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, article 140.

[222] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "The Constitution of Afghanistan," article 140.

this vagueness would pose a notable challenge to efforts to meaningfully advance subnational statebuilding, and prompt externally-funded work-around measures.[223]

From the start, many scholars argued that the constitutional goal of promoting centralisation was a poor fit for the Afghan context. Anthropologist Thomas Barfield argues the document "is ill adapted to the realities of today's Afghanistan."[224] Afghan political analyst Aarya Nijat similarly attests to the "dichotomous nature" of Afghan governance, and adds: "On paper, the Afghan government has the appearance of a developed, centralised state, but in reality it has a stronger core of patrimonial customary governance."[225] Barfield and Neamatullah Nojumi underscore that historically, the central Afghan government has not actually provided what Western analysts would consider governance; instead, total "communities regulate themselves to preserve social order and maintain their security."[226]

In sum, the early years of the intervention can be described, as Hamish Nixon and Richard Ponzio do, as one in which various Afghan and international prerogatives converged "to create an ambitious, centralising statebuilding agenda under a 'light footprint' international

[223] To be sure, this constitutional vagueness is not unique to the Afghan case, and could potentially be clarified by legislation or policy directive: as we will see, over the subsequent fifteen years, the international community made multiple efforts to encourage this clarification through the promulgation of a subnational governance policy.

[224] Thomas J. Barfield, "Continuities and Changes in Local Politics in Northern Afghanistan," in Conrad Schetter, ed., *Local Politics in Afghanistan: A Century of Intervention in the Social Order* (S.l.: Oxford University Press, 2013), 143.

[225] Aarya Nijat, "Governance in Afghanistan An Introduction" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, March 2014), 9.

[226] Thomas Barfield and Neamatollah Nojumi, "Bringing More Effective Governance to Afghanistan: 10 Pathways to Stability," *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 4 (December 1, 2010): 40.

presence."[227] Unsurprisingly, the combination of increasingly maximalist objectives with still-modest international support achieved suboptimal results.[228] As Nixon and Ponzio continue: "The divergence of agreement on one common political strategy resulted in the privileging of elections and new institutions – however fragile and ill-prepared – over a coherent and complete vision for statebuilding and democratization." [229]

1.2 2005 to 2008: Greater Subnational Focus; Greater Confusion

In 2005 and 2006, circumstances prompted the international community to expand its focus beyond central government institutions. Sarah Lister explains that policymakers "belatedly" began to emphasize subnational political-economy issues as they grappled with the burgeoning poppy crop across rural Afghanistan, and as they recognized the need to clarify roles of the constitutionally-mandated provincial councils that had been elected in October 2005.[230] Nixon adds that donors began discussing decentralisation because of its potential benefits in improving government effectiveness and legitimacy at a local level, though readily acknowledged challenges for decentralisation in the Afghan context.[231] However, in the

[227] Nixon and Ponzio, "Building Democracy in Afghanistan," 27.

[228] See also Astri Suhrke, *When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

[229] Nixon and Ponzio.

[230] Sarah Lister, "Changing the Rules? State-Building and Local Government in Afghanistan," *The Journal of Development Studies* 45, no. 6 (2009): 1001.

[231] Hamish Nixon, *Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008), 4.

subsequent years, this new recognition of the *importance* of improving local governance and promoting decentralisation did little to resolve the confusion surrounding these issues.

At the January 2006 London Conference on Afghanistan, the Afghan government introduced its Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy (known as the "I-ANDS"), a much-anticipated document intended to supersede the 2001 Bonn transitional framework. Donors broadly welcomed the I-ANDS's aspiration to shift toward a longer-term strategic vision, but in the realm of local governance, they voiced concern that the document did not adequately clarify the way forward. The I-ANDS "Governance Pillar" described an ambitious goal of "establish[ing] the basic institutions and practice of democratic governance at the national, provincial, district, and village levels for enhanced human development, by the end of the current Presidency and National Assembly terms"—with an equally ambitious deadline of 2009.[232] However, the strategy lacked any detail on how these institutions would be established. Instead, the governance programs described in detail pertained to other areas, such as the Parliament, the Independent Electoral Commission, judicial matters, and public administration. Several key aspects of local governance reform were laid at the feet of the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC).[233] Yet the IARCSC was a small institution,

[232] Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan National Development Strategy: An Interim Strategy for Security, Governance, Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction," March 18, 2006, 122.

[233] To wit: "The IARCSC will assist line ministries and decision-making bodies with reforms of sub-national administration and also monitor and evaluate the process. Government will work through line ministries and decision-making bodies to strengthen coordination and improve service delivery through improved sub-national administration, beginning with revenue and service delivery ministries." Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 127.

and the 200-plus-page I-ANDS document provides almost no description of when, and how, these reforms were to occur.

In the year after the London Conference, the international community warned with increasing vociferousness that local governance-related confusion was impeding consolidation of security and democratic state-building gains in Afghanistan. As a comprehensive assessment of subnational governance prepared for USAID underscored: "Although the legal framework for sub-national governance has been established by the Constitution and other key documents, and efforts have been made to put in place the structures called for at the local level, the fundamental challenge to reform is the lack of a coherent vision that addresses: *(a)* the roles, authority, and functions of sub-national governance institutions, *(b)* how sub-national government institutions relate to other local institutions and processes, and *(c)* how sub-national government agencies coordinate with and reinforce governance institutions at the national level."[234] A 2007 paper from the influential donor-funded Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit argued that the I-ANDS's "Subnational strategy requires elaboration…. The new framework pays increased attention to the subnational levels, but the long-term role of provinces and other units in the state's fiscal and administrative structures is far from clear. Moving to a full strategy will require a more detailed subnational vision, incorporating institutional goals and concrete plans to reach them."[235] In particular, the report foreshadowed the future confusion surrounding donor-funded

[234] The Asia Foundation, "An Assessment of Sub-National Governance in Afghanistan," Report for USAID (Kabul, May 2007), 38.

[235] Hamish Nixon, "Aiding the State? International Assistance and the Statebuilding Paradox in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, April 2007), 13.

local councils: "The creation of local representative bodies and development plans, whether at provincial, district, municipal, or village level, should take place within a framework that considers what resources and responsibilities exist to make those bodies and plans legitimate."[236] Meanwhile, the above-noted USAID report made development of a comprehensive subnational governance policy its most urgent recommendation for the Afghan government.[237]

Though donors directed these demands to the Karzai administration, the international community shared the blame for the disjointed reality of subnational governance. Even well-regarded programmes such as the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), which set up community-driven development projects at the village level, made scant reference to how their local participatory processes were meant to fit into any broader system.[238] Donor training programmes for provincial councils largely "worked around or avoided solid definition of the crucial relationships that normally should link representative bodies with legislative functions, access to resources, and representative accountability."[239] As civil-military bases known as Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) expanded across most of the country during this period, their presence inadvertently further fragmented the foreigners' approach to subnational governance. PRT personnel interacted with their corresponding provincial governors and

[236] Nixon, 16.

[237] The Asia Foundation, "An Assessment of Sub-National Governance in Afghanistan."

[238] National Solidarity Programme (NSP) was a World Bank-sponsored community development programme implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. Launched in 2003, the programme eventually achieved near-nationwide reach over multiple phases and enjoyed a high, and generally positive, public profile. The programme will be discussed further in Chapter 5 on the National Area-Based Development Programme.

[239] Nixon, *Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan*, 55.

councils, implemented development projects, and housed a wide array of disparate governance-oriented donor initiatives. Reflecting the diversity of ISAF troop-contributing nations, the teams varied widely in composition, leadership and priorities, and forged varying relationships with local power brokers and political orders.

In aggregate, these various efforts encapsulated the international community's approach to subnational statebuilding in this period: marked by an increased recognition of the importance of the "local", but disjointed and ill-defined in both conceptualization and implementation. As Nixon argued at the time, "Governance policy, and the state-building initiatives that can be loosely said to form its operational basis, have been introduced and implemented in a piecemeal fashion, often driven by factors external to the search for the most appropriate and sustainable institutions for the Afghan context…. Disparate initiatives have been introduced in response to pressures related to the political transition, but without sufficient reference to their relation to the whole."[240] Local governance was, as one analysis of the time dubbed it, "Caught in the Confusion."[241]

To rectify this confusion, foreigners increasingly advocated for two primary technical innovations. First, they called for the creation of a bureaucratic "focal point" charged with "leading" within the Afghan government on local governance. Second, they clamoured for the drafting of an official subnational governance policy. In donors' views, such a document would expand upon and clarify the 2004 constitution, which called for provincial, district and village

[240] Nixon, 55.

[241] Lister, "Caught in Confusion: Local Governance Structures in Afghanistan."

councils, but failed to define their roles or authorities. The policy would further specify relationships between line ministries, financial conduits, local executives, and these local councils.

In 2007, donors' first wish was granted with Karzai's announcement of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), a quasi-ministerial body formally charged with coordination and policy development for all subnational governance and administration issues. In retrospect, the IDLG's birth fits a familiar pattern in exogenous state-building interventions: creation of a new bureaucratic organization intended to solve a largely political problem.

In actuality, the new directorate did little to rectify the subnational governance confusion.[242] Instead, as we shall see further in Chapter 4, it reflected a muddled mandate and was saddled with a competing, overly broad array of expectations from various stakeholders.[243] Donors hoped the IDLG would mitigate the challenges caused by extreme centralisation, advance a coherent subnational governance agenda, and also divert power away from the Ministry of Interior, widely viewed as a vessel of patronage and corruption.[244] By contrast, Karzai, who promptly appointed his ally Jelani Popal to lead the organization, viewed the IDLG

[242] See Chapter 4, which details the creation and trajectory of the IDLG.

[243] Hamish Nixon, "The 'Subnational Governance' Challenge and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance," in *Snapshots of an Intervention: The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance*, 2012, Chapter 18.

[244] Nixon, "The Subnational Governance Challenge", 2.

as a useful new political mechanism for *distributing* patronage and influencing the upcoming elections of 2009 and 2010.[245]

As per usual, Karzai's political agenda won out over the foreigners' liberal statebuilding aspirations. The creation of a bureaucratic "focal point" for local governance was hoped to be a landmark achievement within the liberal state-consolidation template. Yet in truth, the establishment of the IDLG proved to be another example of a broader pattern in the Afghanistan statebuilding project in which, as Timor Sharan and John Heathershaw demonstrate, "rather than formal institutions providing incentives and shaping preferences of factions, the reverse has occurred: the dynamics of factionalism have shaped the process of institution-building."[246] Furthermore, the IDLG immediately became an institutional rival of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), which had until that point been the *de facto* primary governance actor at the local level. The inter-ministerial competition translated into jockeying for resources with little improvement in subnational governance effectiveness.

The second technical innovation for which the foreigners advocated, a codified subnational governance policy, proved a longer time coming. The international expert class called for (and generously under-wrote) a broad consultative process to develop this policy, an exercise that would end up consuming three years. The resultant document would finally be

[245] Orzala Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015), 100.

[246] Timor Sharan and John Heathershaw, "Identity Politics and Statebuilding in Post-Bonn Afghanistan: The 2009 Presidential Election," *Ethnopolitics* 10, no. 3–4 (2011): 297.

released in 2010, when donor involvement in Afghanistan was at its apex. Yet the resultant document still failed to resolve any key questions—a story we will pick up further below.

1.3 2009 to 2011: Surge, Counterinsurgency, and "Bottom-up" Ascendant

Upon taking office in January 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama turned to his campaign promise of getting the "good war" in Afghanistan right. A key component of this was more proverbial boots on the ground: Obama authorized sending 51,000 additional troops to Afghanistan within his first year under ISAF Commander General Stanley McChrystal, while a smaller "civilian uplift" tripled the number of US diplomats and development practitioners to one thousand.[247] The troops were intended to reverse the Taliban's military momentum and protect the Afghan population, while both military and civilian officials aimed to extend the writ and legitimacy of the Afghan state. Some other key ISAF partners followed suit, to a lesser degree, in increasing their military and civilian commitments.

Central to the Obama administration's Afghanistan strategy was a counterinsurgency framing, which viewed the conflict as a struggle between the insurgent Taliban on one side, and the Afghan government on the other, for the support and trust of the Afghan population. In order to bolster the Afghan government's side in this contest, U.S. civilian and military personnel underscored that providing development aid and governance support as essential to the counterinsurgency campaign. Security forces were to "clear" areas of militants, and then

[247] The military numbers include 17,000 authorized in February 2009, and an additional 30,000 authorized in December 2009 with the official announcement of the "surge" with Obama's speech at West Point. An additional 7,000 were sent in other instalments. In practice, the number of civilian officials were augmented greatly by contractors and implementing partners, who did not count toward official US diplomatic totals.

governance and development programmes were intended to "hold" and "build" state reach and service delivery.

More broadly, the U.S. counterinsurgency emphasis reflected recent shifts in the tides of U.S. national security doctrine and dogma. With the Vietnam experience seemingly ancient history, counterinsurgency strategy was at its apex of popularity as the Obama administration took office. The U.S. Army and Marine Corps had published their new *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* at the end of 2006, and in the subsequent years it had gone on to a become an Amazon best-seller.[248] The congressionally-mandated and closely-watched Quadrennial Defense Review report, released in Obama's first year in office, cites as a key objective that the U.S. must "rebalance the force" to "succeed in counterinsurgency, stability and counterterrorism operations."[249] Counterinsurgency strategy was— at that juncture—also seen to have achieved success in Iraq, where the United States had deployed a military surge and population-centric security strategy under celebrity scholar-warrior General David Petraeus.[250] As Astri Suhrke points out, this "new" comprehensive counterinsurgency approach was not actually totally novel in Afghanistan: earlier NATO operations had already introduced the concepts of population-centric struggle, and previous U.S. commanders had also requested more troops, just with less success in having their requests met.[251] Nonetheless, the high-level support for

[248] U. S. Army, Lt General David Petraeus, and Lt General James F. Amos, *Counterinsurgency: FM 3-24* (Boulder, Colo.; Newbury: Paladin Press, 2007).

[249] US Department of Defense, "Quadennial Defense Review Report," February 2010, 20.

[250] The legacy of the "surge" in Iraq would unravel a few years later.

[251] Suhrke, *When More Is Less*, 62.

counterinsurgency, combined with the clean slate attendant to most new U.S. presidencies, channelled a new level of optimism for the approach.[252]

With the new emphasis on counterinsurgency came an intensified focus on localised or bottom-up military and governance initiatives, increasingly also termed "stabilisation."[253] The influx of U.S. civilian and uniformed personnel deployed overwhelmingly to areas outside of Kabul, greatly augmenting the number of U.S. civilians at PRTs, and adding a new layer of civil-military units at the district level, District Stability Teams. In terms of strategic guidance, U.S. leadership in Kabul released the "Joint Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan," laying out the goal that "from the bottom up" the U.S. effort should cultivate "increasingly responsive, capable, and accountable governance at all levels, reinforcing . . . connection and legitimacy."[254] In Washington, the office of Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke distributed its own "Afghanistan Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy," which instructed U.S. representatives to "increase our focus" on local institutions and officials with the "goal of making local government more visible,

[252] Suhrke notes that when McChrystal briefed his approach to other NATO defence allies, he received "almost a hallelujah response." Quoted in Suhrke, *When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan*, 64.

[253] "Stabilisation" had not yet been defined across the US government or ISAF partners at this juncture, but in Afghanistan policy documents was utilised interchangeably with counterinsurgency tenets. For example, see Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, "Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy" (U.S. Department of State, February 2010).

[254] Embassy of the United States of America, Kabul and U.S. Forces, Afghanistan, "US Government Integrated Civil-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan," August 10, 2009, ii, 8.

accountable, and capable."[255] Notably for purposes of this thesis, these official objectives also echoed the tenets of decentralisation.[256]

Underlying the foreigners' turn toward "the local" were two assumptions. First, there was the belief that the heavily centralised Afghan government was ineffective at best and predatory at worst, thus fuelling rather than ameliorating the insurgency, which in turn was seen as "out-governing" the official government in many places.[257] Second, and flowing from the first, was the belief that local (often "traditional" and "tribal") solutions were more appropriate means to provide governance and security.

An influential May 2010 essay in *Foreign Affairs* by RAND Corporation political scientist Seth Jones encapsulated both strands of this logic: "[Previous] top-down strategies reflect the conventional wisdom among many policymakers and academics, but this consensus view is misinformed. Current international efforts to establish security and stability from the center are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Afghanistan's culture and social structure."[258] Jones went on to lay out his prescriptions: "The current top-down state-building

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[255] Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, "Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy," 7.

[256] Specifically, augmenting local capacity, accountability, authority, and autonomy. See Jameson Boex and Serdar Yilmaz, "An Analytical Framework for Assessing Decentralized Local Governance and the Local Public Sector," December 27, 2010; Ed Connerley, Kent Eaton, and Paul Smoke, eds., *Making Decentralization Work: Democracy, Development, and Security* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 2010); Paul Smoke, "Decentralisation," GSDRC Professional Development Reading Pack (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, March 2015).

[257] See Thomas J. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010); Barfield and Nojumi, "Bringing More Effective Governance to Afghanistan"; David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[258] Emphasis added. Seth G. Jones, "It Takes the Villages," May 2010.

and counterinsurgency efforts must take place alongside *bottom-up programs, such as reaching out to legitimate local leaders to enlist them in providing security and services at the village and district levels*.... Afghanistan is, and always has been, a quintessentially decentralized society, making it necessary to build local institutions to create security and stability."[259]

Within months of publishing the article, Jones had taken a job in Afghanistan advising General Petraeus – he of Iraq surge and counterinsurgency manual fame-- who had become ISAF Commander mid-2010.[260] Jones helped Petraeus launch what would be known as the Village Stability Operations programme and affiliated Afghan Local Police initiative, both part of a military tribal engagement strategy aimed at establishing security and governance in rural parts of Afghanistan in which U.S. special operations forces operated.[261] (In so doing, Jones served as a prime example of one notable feature of the American counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq: the revolving door between influential research institutes such as RAND, media "thought leaders", and military generals' "advisory teams."[262])

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[259] Ibid; emphasis added.

[260] Petraeus replaced General Stanley McChrystal, who has been relieved of his command by President Obama in June after a *Rolling Stone* magazine article attributed to him disrespectful remarks about Vice President Joe Biden and other administration officials.

[261] For critical US government analysis of the Village Stability Operations programme and its associated Afghan Local Police initiative, see Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization: Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," Lessons Learned Program (Washington, May 2018), 107–11.

[262] This phenomenon and its implications for the international statebuilding project will be examined further in Chapter 7 and 8. See the discussion of the "warrior intellectual" and affiliated research organizations in David Miller and Tom Mills, "Counterinsurgency and Terror Expertise: The Integration of Social Scientists into the War Effort," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2010): 203–221; specific to the imperative to "go local" in Afghanistan, see Goodhand, Jonathan and Aziz A. Hakimi, "Counterinsurgency, Local Militias, and Statebuilding in Afghanistan" (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, January 2014), 9.

More broadly, Jones's arguments on the merits of "bottom-up" reflected a wider trend in the U.S.-led campaign during this era, what Jonathan Goodhand and Mark Sedra characterise as a "valorization of local traditions and the recognition of more hybrid and pluralized forms of authority."[263] A surge-era public statement from General Donald Bolduc, a special operations officer known as the "godfather of the Afghan Local Police", exemplified this ideational stance:

> What inspired me was my first rotation here into Afghanistan, where I learned how to use the tribes and other ethnic groups to secure local and rural areas with small numbers of people.... I saw the power of this culture in protecting itself at the local level, which I believe is the secret to security in Afghanistan – at the district level and below. You can be very effective, but in a way that is traditional, and congruent with how they have protected themselves for hundreds of years.[264]

As Goodhand and Sedra, and (separately) Aziz Hakimi note-- and as we shall see abundantly in the empirical chapters – the realities of local political order rarely matched these idealised notions of the "traditional" and "local".[265] Yet on the heels of the apparent success of localised approach in Iraq, and when advocated by the charismatic warrior-scholar and counterinsurgency evangelist Petraeus, the appeal of these localised efforts was widespread in 2010.[266]

This military turn toward the local was mirrored by a proliferation of civilian stabilisation programmes focused on subnational governance, the focus of this thesis. These civilian

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[263] Jonathan Goodhand and Mark Sedra, "Rethinking Liberal Peacebuilding, Statebuilding and Transition in Afghanistan: An Introduction," *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 3 (2013): 243.

[264] Thom Shanker, "Applying Early Lessons to Build Afghan Security," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2013, sec. Asia Pacific.

[265] Aziz A. Hakimi, "Getting Savages to Fight Barbarians: Counterinsurgency and the Remaking of Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 2013, 1–18; Goodhand and Sedra, "Rethinking Liberal Peacebuilding, Statebuilding and Transition in Afghanistan: An Introduction."

[266] See Miller and Mills, "Counterinsurgency and Terror Expertise."

programmes explicitly aimed to transform Afghan structures and processes toward greater decentralisation and to build the state from the "bottom up." Underlying these goals was the assumption that after local governance was improved, this subnational progress would somehow be met by top-down reforms and accrue into larger, national-level governance transformation.

Notably, the U.S.'s articulated goal to build more "responsive, capable, and accountable governance" at the district level[267] aligned with an objective of decentralisation, which aims to support greater accountability, authority, and capability at the local level.[268]

This objective also clashed starkly with Afghan historic precedent.[269] Throughout the surge time period, the Obama administration insisted its objectives for Afghan statebuilding were still modest: Defence Secretary Robert Gates testified to Congress that the administration recognized the need to have "modest, realistic goals" and did not aspire to create a "Central Asian Valhalla."[270] Yet in actuality, the Westerners' stated governance aims had expanded far beyond their original narrowly-framed terms.[271]

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[267] Embassy of the United States of America, Kabul and U.S. Forces, Afghanistan, "US Government Integrated Civil-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan," 8.

[268] Boex and Yilmaz, "An Analytical Framework for Assessing Decentralized Local Governance and the Local Public Sector"; Connerley, Eaton, and Smoke, *Making Decentralization Work*; Pierre Salmon, "Daniel Treisman: The Architecture of Government: Rethinking Political Decentralization," *Public Choice* 142, no. 1 (2010): 257–259; USAID, "Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook," June 2009.

[269] See Nixon, *Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan*; Douglas Saltmarshe and Abhilash Mehdi, "Afghan Local Governance: A View from The Ground" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, June 2011).

[270] "With New Boss, Gates Shifts Focus To Afghanistan," NPR.org, January 27, 2009.

[271] See Suhrke, *When More Is Less*.

In particular, donor ambitions to transform local governance went well beyond what the recent record suggested was possible. Provincial-level administrations had made negligible process towards responsiveness and capacity despite having had provincial councils in place since 2005. At the district level, one further layer removed from Kabul, the challenge in reforming governance was even steeper. Most notably, the goal to increase "accountability" of district administrations to local citizens contrasted glaringly with the actual incentive structures at play.[272] District governors are appointed by Kabul, not elected by their constituencies; as we will see subsequently, American emphasis on local government "accountability" did little to augment their downward answerability to their population. In addition, increasing district-level "responsiveness" was also a tall order. As Jennifer Murtazashvili explains, "District governments had no incentive to horizontally integrate ministerial activity. Absence of such integration was also a function of the Soviet bureaucratic legacy, which intentionally weakened governors."[273] Service delivery remained centralised in Kabul-based line ministries, rather than under the purview of lower-level administrations, thus making any locally-based efforts to increase local-level responsiveness indirect at best.[274]

Finally, there was the sheer scale of the challenge to improve district-level governance. Afghanistan has between 364 and 402 districts (even that number is disputed).[275] From an

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[272] Frances Z. Brown, "The U.S. Surge and Afghan Local Governance" (U.S. Institute of Peace, September 2012), 4.

[273] Jennifer Murtazashvili, "Subnational Governance in Afghanistan: Back to the Future," in *State Strengthening in Afghanistan: Lessons Learned, 2001- 2014*, 2016, 56.

[274] Ibid.

[275] Afghan government entities do not agree on the "official" number of districts—a case in point of the challenge of any serious local governance reform effort. After the fall of the Taliban, 364 had been one oft-cited number, reflected in various donor documents from the early years of the engagement. In 2005, the Ministry of Interior officially

implementation standpoint, for an international community that had not even engaged effectively or consistently with the country's 34 provinces, the sheer number of districts presented huge obstacle for any serious reform effort.

In spring 2010, the Karzai administration released the Subnational Governance Policy (SNGP) for which the donor class had been clamouring these many years. Yet the foreigners' prayers for clarity went unanswered. The 415-page document—in some places lifted verbatim from other external analyses-- did not respond to the essential questions around roles, relationships and responsibilities of Afghan provincial, district, and municipal administrations. Instead, it amounted to a spectacularly aspirational wish-list. According to one analysis, "At once internally contradictory and internally redundant, the SNGP's prescriptions for government initiatives—ranging from the "Human Rights Based Approach in Sub-National Governance" to "Community Scorecard Accountability," from the "Right to Information Act" to "Customer Service Orientation in Public Service"—bordered on the fantastical (and suggested a heavy donor influence in preparation and audience)."[276]

Another longtime international observer of Afghan politics argued that the document was "400 pages written to avoid making a decision."[277] There was deep truth in this observation: clearly defining subnational roles and authorities would have been a politically significant move

recognized 398 districts, potentially reflecting the opportunity for distributing patronage that creation of a new district represents. During the time period this thesis examines, three further districts were reportedly created by Karzai's decree, to bring the total to 401. The MRRD has at various points also cited 402 districts.

[276] Brown, "The U.S. Surge and Afghan Local Governance," 4.

[277] Interview with International Afghan governance expert 9, September 2012.

that would have created winners and losers. It would further have overturned the ambiguity and contestability that constitute Afghan political order and allows for rent-creation and the enrichment of many. Instead, the Karzai administration dodged—a flaw from the viewpoint of donors, but a victory from the standpoint for the Afghan political class.[278]

Nonetheless, internationals attempted to rectify the situation, mostly by layering on additional (donor-underwritten) documents such as the "Subnational Governance Implementation Framework" in subsequent years, which gained almost no traction.[279] The IDLG and its revolving band of foreign governance consultants continued to revise and iterate on new versions of a Subnational Governance Policy for years afterwards (and to this day, after more machinations in the Ghani administration, no codified policy exists).[280]

As in earlier periods, donors were partly to blame for the confused subnational governance landscape. PRTs continued to engage with provincial authorities in widely disparate ways. Multiple international efforts to "build capacity" of provincial councils still did not address the central challenge of these bodies' weak formal authority.[281] At the district level, the picture

[278] In author interviews, one longtime international observer of Afghan politics has deemed this the imperative of "strategic ambiguity."

[279] Independent Directorate of Local Governance, "Revised Implementation Framework of the Subnational Governance Policy" (Kabul: Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, July 2012).

[280] For an account of politics surrounding the Subnational Governance Policy in the subsequent Ghani administration, see Peter Blunt, Farid Mamundzay, and Muqtader Nasary, "The Long and the Short of Policy Pantomime in Afghanistan," *Progress in Development Studies* 17, no. 1 (2017): 67–88.

[281] Murtazashvili, "Subnational Governance in Afghanistan: Back to the Future," 56.

became even more jumbled as foreign civilians focused on "governance" arrived in droves after 2009, embedded within a ballooning civil-military architecture.

A key dilemma for these district-focused foreigners was what to do in the absence of formal district councils. District councils, although mandated by the 2004 constitution, still had never been elected due to the political, logistical, financial, and security challenges related to defining district boundaries and holding elections. Instead, based on the imperative to install *some* kind of district-level consultative body to improve local accountability, to "check" the power of the Kabul-appointed district governor and extend the reach of the state, the international community opted to set up quasi-district-councils. Under the National Area-Based Development Programme, donors funded District Development Assemblies, associated with the MRRD; under the Afghan Social Outreach Programme, foreigners funded "ASOP *shuras*", associated with the IDLG. In the upcoming chapters, the empirical cases will examine the effectiveness and durability of these two sets of councils in achieving their objectives.

In the immediate term, the result was a confusing district-level picture from the perspective of citizens, competition between the two ministerial factions, and a variation on the ills of "institutional multiplicity" in statebuilding contexts examined elsewhere.[282] As Murtazashvili notes, the two sets of councils "sought to draw on distinct constituents, but both

[282] Institutional multiplicity can be understood as "the multiple 'rule systems' that confront economic and political actors providing distinct and different normative frameworks and incentive structures in which they act." See Gabi Hesselbein, Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, and James Putzel, "Economic and Political Foundations of State-Making in Africa: Understanding State Reconstruction," Crisis States Working Papers Series (London: Crisis States Research Centre, 2006).

sought to serve as *de facto* district councils called for in the constitution."[283] A World Bank assessment was candid about internationals' role in creating the problem: "The presence and overlap between the two councils is also symptomatic of the dysfunctional subnational governance landscape….. The two councils are an almost perfect case study of the fragmented, inconsistent and donor-driven nature of subnational governance in the country. First, the two councils represent the two competing visions of subnational governance championed by MRRD and IDLG. Second, they are delivered through programmes that create temporary structures, rather than achieving their results through real institutional development and reform."[284]

1.4 2011 to 2014: From Stabilisation to (Purported) Transition

Almost as quickly as the US had pivoted to a civil-military surge in late 2009, it swivelled to drawdown in 2011. In parallel, U.S. Afghanistan policy shifted from a stabilisation framing to a rhetorical emphasis on "transition – in plainspeak, a move from the previous maximalist approach to a (putatively) more modest focus on handing over the war to Afghan leadership. As President Obama in 2011 described the coming shift: "Our mission will change from combat to support. By 2014, this process of transition will be complete, and the Afghan people will be responsible for their own security."[285] For a U.S. president up for re-election, who had just overseen the successful killing of September 11 architect Osama bin Laden, this distinction signalled that American financial largesse and military commitment in Afghanistan

[283] Murtazashvili, "Subnational Governance in Afghanistan: Back to the Future," 56.

[284] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 7.

[285] "Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan," whitehouse.gov, June 22, 2011.

were not open-ended. In parallel, ISAF partners, also more than willing to decrease their Afghan engagement, prepared commensurate drawdowns of their own forces.

The departure of surge troops would represent a major downsizing of the extensive military architecture that had facilitated civilian stabilisation and governance programs at the district level. Across the country, district stability teams closed up; most PRTs followed suit. An official US government analysis describes the importance of a new lexicon focused on "transition" rather than "stabilisation": "This shift in terminology translated into a shift from the coalition delivering services directly to trying to build the capacity of Afghan government ministries and provincial administrations so they could do so."[286] Further terminological changes included an increasing focus on "Afghan-led", "Afghan-first", and "Afghan owned", echoing the buzzwords of many international statebuilding or peacekeeping interventions.[287]

Despite the rhetorical and substantive changes in overarching U.S. policy, several stabilisation programmes, such as the Stability in Key Areas programme examined in Chapter 6, continued through 2014 or early 2015. Stabilisation programs maintained their same objectives: linking population to the government, increasing local-level responsiveness, accountability,

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[286] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization: Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," 70.

[287] See, for example, Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations* (Taylor & Francis, 2008); Sarah B. K. von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace?: Local Ownership and United Nations Peacekeeping* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); R. Mac Ginty, "Where Is the Local? Critical Localism and Peacebuilding," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 840–856; R. Mac Ginty and Oliver P Richmond, "The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013): 763–83; Roger Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace*, Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Michael Aaronson et al., "The Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding Ten Years on: Critical Reflections and Stimulating Ideas on an Evolving Scholarship," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 10, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 3–24.

authority and capacity, and connecting local officials to higher tiers of government. Foreigners maintained their objectives of improving Afghan local governance, even as their tools decreased.

Specific to district-level councils, this time period witnessed the negotiation of a resolution to the longstanding competition between ASOP *shuras* and NABDP's DDAs. By early 2012, donors had expressed a "red line" in further local governance funds until the Afghan government presented a plan for streamlining these multiple district bodies.[288] (The donors' demands seemed to ignore the fact that donor programmes had spawned this institutional multiplicity in the first place.) In response, in July 2012, Karzai issued his Presidential Decree Number 45, tasking multiple components of his administration to enact reforms and improve governance.[289] Article 28 of the decree required the MRRD to "Present a specific plan to the Cabinet within three months about utilizing the provincial and district level developmental councils as unified councils, replacing multiple councils."[290] Embedded in this seemingly bureaucratic tasking was a crucial choice on power distribution: Karzai was giving MRRD agency over determining how the "multiple councils" at the district level would be "replaced."[291] MRRD led the subsequent consultation process, though it allowed IDLG to participate.

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[288] Interview with USAID Official 4.

[289] English translation of the decree available at Hamid Karzai, "The Office of the President of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Decree No. 45," (English Translation, July 26, 2012); original Dari version at Hamid Karzai, "Decree On the Execution of Content of the Historical Speech of June 21, 2012 in the Special Session of National Assembly," accessed January 10, 2019.

[290] Article 28, part 3, Hamid Karzai, "The Office of the President of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Decree No. 45," (English Translation, July 26, 2012).

[291] Bureaucrats globally understand the power of "holding the pen" in sensitive negotiations. For a discussion of this phenomenon in the U.S. context, see David Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-Policy Guru," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016.

As a result of this consultation process, President Karzai's cabinet in 2013 approved an executive decree entitled "Policy for Improving Governance and Developments *[sic]* in District and Villages." As we will trace in Chapter 5, the diktat was presented as a compromise, but in practice, handed formal district-level primacy to the MRRD structures.[292] However, this policy barely made it into the pilot phase of implementation, because Karzai's second and final presidential term ended shortly thereafter and the political headwinds changed again.

The Afghan presidential election of 2014 was fiercely disputed, with widespread credible accusations of fraud.[293] After heavy mediation by the United States, the eventual outcome was the birth of a "National Unity Government": Ashraf Ghani, a former World Bank executive and Minister of Finance was named president, and his primary competitor, Abdullah Abdullah, was installed in a new (and extra-constitutional) role as "Chief Executive Officer." After Ghani and Abdullah took office, there would prove to be several more abortive attempts at developing a new subnational governance policy.[294] The Ghani team also walked back plans to promote the new policy's district-level councils, instead insisting that actual, constitutionally-legitimated

[292] The policy's stated way of forming district-level consultative bodies would have, in actual implementation, drawn overwhelmingly from NABDP's DDAs. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Independent Directorate of Local Governance and Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "Policy for Improving Governance and Developments in Districts and Villages," May 2013.

[293] For analysis of the disputed 2014 election, see Colin Cookman and Scott Smith, eds., *State Strengthening in Afghanistan: Lessons Learned, 2001-2014* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2016).

[294] For an account of one round, see Blunt, Mamundzay, and Nasary, "The Long and the Short of Policy Pantomime in Afghanistan."

district council elections would be held soon.[295] (At time of writing in 2020, these elections still have not been held and are not scheduled.[296])

In the five years of the National Unity Government, many further dramas have unfolded within international community's Sisyphean efforts to reform subnational governance. None have proved transformative; indeed, for the long-term observer of local governance policy and programming in Afghanistan, the strongest reaction is an intense sense of *déjà vu*. However, for clarity of analysis, the empirical chapters focus on the period of the Karzai administration, when the bottom-up statebuilding agenda was ascendant, and when the stabilisation programmes that comprised these efforts were most active. We end the fine-grained tracing of the story in 2014.

1.5 International Intervention meets Local Afghan Real Politics

Above, we have sketched external interveners' statebuilding project in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014. But the foreigners were not painting Afghan subnational statebuilding onto a blank state. Despite donors sometimes falling victim to what Sarah Cliffe and Nick Manning call the "fallacy of *terra nullis*", their programmes intersected with the already complex ecosystem of Afghan politics.[297] Against the backdrop of the ambitious international intervention, Afghan local governance exemplifies Joel Migdal's descriptions of "the *real*

[295] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, "UNAMA Welcomes Announcement of Date for Parliamentary and District Council Elections | UNAMA," June 22, 2017.

[296] Ali Yawar Adili, "Afghanistan Election Conundrum (10): Failure to Hold the First Ever District Council Elections? | Afghanistan Analysts Network," accessed April 2, 2019.

[297] Sarah Cliffe and Nick Manning, "Practical Approaches to Building State Institutions", in Charles T. Call and Vanessa Wyeth, ed., *Building States to Build Peace* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 2008), 164-6.

politics of many Third World societies": a political order in which "struggles over the state's desire for predominance, the accommodations between states and others, and the manoeuvres to gain the best deal possible" shape outcomes, rather than the formal structures.[298]

Below, I highlight two particularly salient features of Afghan local governance during the time period studied in this thesis. An exhaustive account of scholarly debates on local order in Afghanistan is beyond the scope of this chapter; instead, this sketch serves as preliminary groundwork for the forthcoming chapters. In particular, these observations will underpin the empirical cases' exploration of how, and why, some programmes achieved "local embeddedness", and how this factor affected outcomes in bottom-up statebuilding.

1.6 Transformation, Disruption and Heterogeneity

By 2009, Afghan local political order had undergone significant change due to the preceding nearly forty years of conflict. Despite some notable ways in which contemporary Afghan local governance echoed historic antecedents, subnational politics were deeply altered by modernizing rulers, the Soviet invasion, civil war, Taliban occupation, large-scale migration, and finally by the international military intervention.[299] The protracted years of violence particularly disrupted local political economies. As a bloated war economy surfaced, so too emerged new powerbrokers. In 2010, Afghan analyst Haseeb Humayoon described a "transformed nature of

[298] Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 32.

[299] Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism," 54–59; Conrad Schetter, "Introduction," in *Local Politics in Afghanistan: A Century of Intervention in the Social Order*, 2013.

politics" in the country that hinges upon a "growing marriage of business with politics."[300] Some such changes were normatively troubling: analyst Sarah Chayes traces how the increasingly kleptocratic nature of the Afghan government was a key driver of the insurgency.[301]

The resurrection of electoral politics post-Bonn spurred other changes. A notable proportion of citizens, in spite of deep security and legitimacy concerns, exercised their right to vote over multiple election cycles in post-2001 Afghanistan. Afghans also remained remarkably optimistic about democracy during the time period profiled in this thesis: in 2014, over 73% of Afghans were "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with democracy.[302] Still, as Goodhand, Suhrke and Srinjoy Bose note, the advent of elections also served to drive instability in Afghanistan, as they shortened elites' timeframes of relevance, thus making them "unwilling to credibly commit to political settlements and therefore constantly 'hedge.'"[303]

Demographic transformation constituted another component of the changing landscape of Afghan local order: in 2017, a striking 78.2% of the Afghan population was under age 35.[304] As elsewhere globally, the penetration of new technology, combined with the flourishing Afghan

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[300] Haseeb Humayoon, "The Re-Election of Hamid Karzai" (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, January 2010), 58.

[301] Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security*, 1 edition (W. W. Norton & Company, 2016).

[302] The Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2014: A Survey of the Afghan People" (Kabul, November 18, 2014), 10.

[303] Jonathan Goodhand, Astri Suhrke, and Srinjoy Bose, "Flooding the Lake? International Democracy Promotion and the Political Economy of the 2014 Presidential Election in Afghanistan," *Conflict, Security & Development* 16, no. 6 (2016): 491.

[304] Of these, a reported 46.2% were age 15 and younger in 2017, and an additional 32 % between ages of 15 and 34. Statistic from Afghanistan's Central Statistics Office. CSO's website is faulty, but data cited by the UN Fund for Population Activities in "Afghan Youth Has the Potential to Lift the Country out of Poverty," accessed April 10, 2019.

independent media sector, offered many of this new generation unprecedented levels of connectivity and information about their government. In particular, the influx of international engagement and the return of a diaspora helped spur the emergence of a young, educated technocratic class that changed the makeup of many government entities with a stake in subnational governance—as we will study further in the empirical chapters.

Taken together, these economic, conflict-related, democratic, and demographic changes all converged to irrevocably shift Afghan local politics over the period examined here. Afghan localities had evolved considerably from Louis Dupree's notion of the "inward-looking society" developed in the 1970s.[305] Foreigners' conceptions of the country did not always keep pace with the changes: when the international community "rediscovered" Afghanistan in 2001 after over twenty years of war, the most recent Western field-researched scholarship on Afghan governance was reportedly a book chronicling local rebellions against the communist government in 1978-1979—a remarkable chronological gap in knowledge production.[306] Nemat underscores that "the cliché of the 'inward-looking' village is no longer a helpful way of understanding the power dynamics and bargaining positions" of the many actors now shaping Afghan local governance, but in many internationals' perspective this cliché still predominated.[307]

[305] See Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton University Press, 2014), originally published in 1973.

[306] This was a book published in 1984 but based upon fieldwork in 1978-9: M. Nazif Shahrani, *Revolutions & Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Robert L. Canfield (Berkeley: Univ of California Inst of, 1984).

[307] Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism," 72.

A related feature of contemporary Afghan local politics is, simply put, wide heterogeneity and complexity. The tremendous variety of actors, institutions and identities shaping localities renders it particularly difficult to generalise about "the local."[308] Conrad Schetter warns that "when the local level is discovered as the key to understand Afghan society, it fails to take the plurality of local politics into consideration."[309]

In sum, this variation and disruption of local governance would present a salient challenge during the surge era, when policy diagnoses for Afghanistan often emphasised the imperative to "go local." As we will see in the empirical chapters, foreign statebuilders produced frequent prescriptions to return to "traditional" and antiquated modes of governance. Yet the resultant programmes were often a poor fit. Underlying the "local turn" was a faulty assumption that local governance was somehow easier to positively reform than national-level politics. Further, as Goodhand notes, "Calls to re-create the status quo ante based on communitarian principles and a limited, mediating state fail sufficiently to recognise that these 'traditions' belonged to a different epoch, and provided answers to problems that no longer exist in their current form. The structures, networks and leadership that emerged in wartime were never going to simply dissolve back into the Afghan socio-political landscape after 2002."[310] As the empirical

[308] As Afghan political ethnographer Nemat warns, "because of the extreme variability of the Afghan social-political context, generalization should be treated with caution." Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015), 67.

[309] Schetter, "Introduction," 3.

[310] Goodhand, Jonathan, "Getting the Politics Right: Beyond 'Good Governance' in Afghanistan," in Srinjoy Bose, Nishank Motwani, and William Maley, *Afghanistan – Challenges and Prospects: 1st Edition (Hardback) - Routledge* (Routledge, 2017).

chapters will demonstrate, the programmes that were most successful were those that leveraged, rather than denied, those transformations and complexity.

1.7 Patronage, Petitioning, Networks and Neopatrimonialism

A second constellation of themes relates to patronage, networks and neopatrimonialism in Afghan political life. Despite internationals' hopes for the post-Bonn statebuilding process, Afghan politics hinges on personalities rather than institutions. Afghan systems generally manifest Fukuyama's description of neopatrimonialism, which "can coexist with democracy, producing widespread patronage and clientelism in which politicians share state resources with networks of political supporters."[311] Afghanistan has long featured a "government of relationships" between the players in the capital and those in outlying regions.[312] Through longstanding networks, resources and political access have historically been transferred between centre and rural areas. The resultant arrangement, marked by personalistic leadership, fluid pact-making, and privileged access to economic rents, corresponds closely to the concept of a fragile limited access order.[313] Trust among parties stems from ethnic ties, kinship, friendship, "positive outcomes from ongoing relationships", and other factors.[314] Kabul-based rulers have long sought

[311] Francis Fukuyama, "Why Is Democracy Performing So Poorly?," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 13.

[312] Nixon, *Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan*. Nixon quotes a provincial official in Paktia as first introducing the phrase, 33.

[313] Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History*, Reprint edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[314] Barfield and Nojumi, 43, see also Monsutti Alessandro, "Trust, Friendship and Transversal Ties of Cooperation among Afghans," in Conrad Schetter, ed., *Local Politics in Afghanistan: A Century of Intervention in the Social Order* (S.l.: Oxford University Press, 2013).

to control or at least influence the rural periphery by imposition of intermediaries, with varying success. Schetter writes that Kabul has historically not shown interest in "permeating local politics", but instead in "using local politics for the purposes of extracting resources or exercising political control."[315] The post-2011 era with its injections of military and financial resources precipitated a changing role for local power brokers; notably, Mukhopadhyay argues that under some conditions, "warlords as bureaucrats" counterintuitively become important actors in expanding the Afghan state's writ to the periphery.[316]

Afghan citizens have long viewed petitioning government representatives as a key forum for their interactions with the state. As one longtime analyst of Afghan politics noted, "the conception of people is that—at its minimalistic-form—the government is the place you go to petition."[317] Not surprisingly, this dynamic encourages the "squeaky wheel" rather than leading toward a government that provides recurrent, reliable services.[318] Even beyond questions of service delivery, norms of petitioning and patronage help shape the broader political context. As Timor Sharan demonstrates, "local political-economic and identity networks that have come to underpin and constitute" the Afghan state over the course of the post-2001 international intervention.[319] As Sharan and John Heathershaw acknowledge, there is a long lineage to this

[315] Schetter, "Introduction," 6.

[316] Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[317] Martine van Bijlert, Interview with International Analyst, Kabul, February 28, 2012.

[318] van Bijlert.

[319] Timor Sharan, "The Dynamics of Elite Networks and Patron–Client Relations in Afghanistan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 6 (August 1, 2011): 1109–27; Timor Sharan, "The Network Politics of International Statebuilding: Intervention and Statehood in Post-2001 Afghanistan" (PhD Thesis, University of Exeter, 2013), The Network Politics of

pattern: post-2001 Afghanistan was "only the most recent example" of an internationally-mediated political pact proving unable to "overcome the logics of ethno-regional solidarity and patronage relations in Afghanistan."[320] Longtime analyst of Afghan affairs Martine Van Bijlert further describes the nature of Afghan patronage politics:

> Seeming opponents share tribal ties, years in the trenches, histories as former classmates, neighbors, business partners, brothers in arms. There is always a backlog of favors that can be called in or mutual friends that can be brought to bear when you want to mediate, petition, or persuade.... petitioners will go as high up the chain as they possibly can—on both sides—to get their requests granted and to establish contacts that may prove useful. This means that even relatively minor issues can involve quite high-level contacts.[321]

Implicating senior contacts to address "relatively minor issues" has obvious downsides for the efficiency of Afghan government operations. However, some point out that for all the patronage system's faults in undermining accountable, responsible governance, it does offer some benefits to stability. Afghan analyst Humayoon, writing during the Karzai administration, argued that the patronage system "works against the eruption of an all-out civil war", because "the liquidity of these patronage networks at least ensure that interests get negotiated and clashes get averted."[322]

International Statebuilding: Intervention and ...; Timor Sharan and Srinjoy Bose, "Political Networks and the 2014 Afghan Presidential Election: Power Restructuring, Ethnicity and State Stability," *Conflict, Security & Development: CSD* 16, no. 6 (2016): pp613–633.

[320] Sharan and Heathershaw, 298.

[321] Martine van Bijlert, "Talks With Taliban Ongoing, but Are Being Overstated," *Newsweek* (blog), October 21, 2010.

[322] Haseeb Humayoon, "Afghanistan's Gray Future," *Foreign Policy*, October 18, 2012.

In sum, these features of patronage and neopatrimonialism also had deep implications for technocratic assumptions of service delivery as a means of state consolidation. This premise was an essential tenet of many stabilisation programmes, so had a crucial impact on their outcomes.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter first offered an overview of the international community's statebuilding project from the fall of the Taliban until 2014, with a focus on its engagement and objectives on subnational governance matters. It then briefly surveyed key features of Afghan local governance upon which their programmes and policies were projected: a local order marked by disruption, heterogeneity, patronage networks, and neopatrimonialism.

Even from this brief overview, it is clear that these two narratives—that of the international project on one side, and that of Afghan "real politics" on the other—unfolded in parallel and with considerable disconnect. As Goodhand and Sedra point out, post-Taliban Afghanistan mirrors many features of Bayart's conception of the "rhizome state", in which the formal trappings of state institutions co-exist with parallel or "shadow" power structures; thus any analysis of Afghan governance must go "beyond a singular focus on formal institutions and towards looking at underlying configurations of power and interest, which were transformed through various phases of the war."[323]

How did these two sides of the story interact? Under what conditions did foreigners' statebuilding projects align with local Afghan political incentives? This will be our focus for the rest of our study.

[323] Jonathan Goodhand and Mark Sedra, "Rethinking Liberal Peacebuilding, Statebuilding and Transition in Afghanistan: An Introduction," 239–54, 243; for the notion of the "rhizome state", see Jean-Francois Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, 2 edition (Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), 218.

Chapter Four: Case Study of Afghanistan Social Outreach Programme

1.0 Overview

This chapter examines the Afghanistan Social Outreach Programme (ASOP) as the first of three case studies of bottom up state-building. Like the other two empirical cases assessed in this thesis, ASOP was an externally-funded stabilisation programme that aimed to bolster decentralised local governance. The U.S. government and (to a lesser degree) the UK government sponsored the programme, implemented in partnership with an Afghan (quasi)ministry, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG).[324] With a $34.5 budget million for two-and-a-half years of implementation, the programme stood among donors' best-funded governance or stabilisation programmes in Afghanistan. ASOP's foreign and Afghan sponsors emphasized that the programme would enable the institutionalisation of durable, effective subnational governance, forming the basis of administration at the district level. Official documentation claimed that ASOP's councils would "serve as incubators"[325] for the next stage of decentralisation and governance reform, to include the Constitutionally-mandated district councils.

[324] The UK government sponsored the programme in Helmand province only, whereas the US government sponsored it in twenty other provinces.

[325] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Final Report," January 2012, 1.

In tracing the outcome of this case, I classify ASOP as a failure according to my assessment criteria, despite the considerable resources and sky-high optimism associated with it. Specifically, I find the programme had minimal positive impact in *advancing decentralised subnational governance effectiveness* as described in the framework in Chapter 2, comprising elements of local accountability and autonomy; authority; and capacity. I also find that ASOP's impact was *not durable*. Follow-on subnational governance policies promulgated by the Afghan government demonstrate that the programme left almost no institutional residue in its wake.

This study argues that two principal independent variables explain ASOP's lack of durability and effectiveness. First, ASOP had a *weak host government partnership* with the IDLG. As detailed below, the IDLG enjoyed tremendous financial backing and high donor expectations, but proved to be a feeble player within the inter-ministerial competition that marks Afghan state consolidation. I disaggregate several elements of IDLG's weakness, to include its inauspicious beginnings; its contested mandate; its uneven leadership; and its limited vertical reach from Kabul into the periphery.

The second principal factor explaining ASOP's failure was that the programme did not achieve *local embeddedness* within pre-existing Afghan social and political order.[326] This chapter traces a number of ways in which ASOP fit poorly into both Afghan political economy

[326] This concept, developed in Chapter 2, and applied further below, builds upon David Booth, "Introduction: Working with the Grain? The Africa Power and Politics Programme," *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (March 1, 2011): 1–10; "Going with the Grain in African Development? - Kelsall - 2011 - Development Policy Review - Wiley Online Library," accessed March 18, 2018; Brian Levy, *Working with the Grain: Integrating Governance and Growth in Development Strategies [Electronic Resource]*, Oxford Scholarship Online (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

and what David Booth calls "widely recognised behavioural templates",[327] including its failure to integrate into Parliamentary patronage networks and align with district-level power structures. In addition, ASOP also became inexorably associated with two time-limited agendas-- the re-election of Hamid Karzai, and the International Security Assistance Forces' (ISAF) counter-insurgency campaign—rather than integrating into the enduring fabric of Afghan local order. When these external agendas were well-supported, ASOP had momentum; but after they concluded, it stumbled.

This empirical chapter concludes with preliminary reflections of the other theoretical implications of this case for my inquiry into externally-backed statebuilding interventions more broadly. These emergent themes include the primacy of *national* rather than international actors in statebuilding outcomes; the central importance of *predictability and legibility*, in the population's eyes, in forming new rules of the game in conflict contexts; and shortcomings of donors' conceptualisation of technical capacity building in their statebuilding projects.

1.1 Brief History of ASOP

ASOP sat squarely within the broader context of the US-led military and civilian surge described in Chapter 3. Focused on Afghanistan's most volatile areas, the surge employed what the commander of U.S. forces described as "a bottom-up approach to security and progress in this country, as well as a top-down central government approach."[328] According to official

[327] Booth, "Introduction," 7.

[328] Mulrine, "U.S. Military to Launch Pilot Program to Recruit New Local Afghan Militias," *US News & World Report*, accessed November 7, 2015.

documents, civilian stabilisation programmes like ASOP aimed to help the Afghan government "extend its reach into unstable areas, develop sound relationships with communities by responding to constituents' needs, and build local governance capacity through basic management training to local government officials."[329] Between 2008 and 2011, the programme created "ASOP *shuras*" in 131 districts across Afghanistan.

ASOP was launched on a pilot basis in early 2008 in Wardak province,[330] and later that year by the UK into Helmand province.[331] Early in 2009, the US government agreed to underwrite a major expansion of the programme, contracting the effort to implementer AECOM International Development (AECOM). ASOP's primary activity in each district of operation was to constitute a district-level "*shura*" or council of 30 to 50 "traditional elders" through a putatively inclusive, consensus-based process. These councils were intended to create a district-level "platform to communicate views about local needs such as security, development, and community concerns" to formal government officials.[332] Programme documents described its overarching end-goals as:

> [Facilitate] communication, coordination, and cooperation between the government and communities, increasing the level of trust and confidence between the government and the people thus building a strong base for democratic governance; enhance community conflict resolution and disaster response skills and expertise; increase efficiency and transparency in the use of development resources at the district level; presence of a

[329] US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization," accessed October 21, 2014.

[330] The Wardak pilot was implemented by international non-governmental organization The Asia Foundation; the subsequent expansion of ASOP was contracted to AECOM International Development.

[331] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011.

[332] US Agency for International Development, "Fact Sheet: Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP)," July 2010.

> community grievance system with effective community based support for public service delivery.[333]

ASOP councils were obliged to meet two times a month, facilitated by implementing partner staff. A notable feature of the ASOP programme was that each council member was paid a stipend of $125 per month simply for attending these meetings. As will be examined further below, this stipend represented a break with customary Afghan governance, wherein *shuras* traditionally met without pay and only as needed.

ASOP's development was marked by two key institutional relationships, one with the command structure of ISAF, and the other with the Afghan ministry the IDLG. As time went on, ASOP's association with foreign military counterparts became increasingly close; eventually all district selection for the programme became tied to U.S. Special Forces' "Afghan Local Police" initiative. ASOP was also intended to pave the way for the IDLG, nominally the lead local governance entity in Afghanistan, to ultimately oversee and administer District Councils.[334] ASOP management was embedded within IDLG, and the programme claimed another of its objectives was to "strengthen the capability of the IDLG central office to uniformly support district councils."[335]

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[333] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program Annual Report July 2009 - June 2010" (US Agency for International Development, July 2010), 4.

[334] As discussed in Chapter 3, Afghanistan's constitution calls for district councils, and over the course of ASOP's tenure the election date for these bodies was slated for 2010, then 2011, then 2012. To date, district council elections still have not occurred.

[335] AECOM International Development, 4.

In the first years of the programme, American and British officials professed tremendous optimism about its potentially transformative effects on the counterinsurgency fight. In a promotional video from the UK-led Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team, the governance lead described the programme in glowing terms: ASOP *shuras* "have really sunk in and become the hub of what happens in the district."[336] The programme also continued expanding at a fast clip; by 2011, it created five new councils each month, ultimately creating ASOP councils in 131 of Afghanistan's roughly 400 districts.[337] As the programme neared the end of its first contract, official US government instructions told personnel to assure Afghan counterparts that the councils would indeed continue on into the future. However, by early 2012, the programme and its councils had evaporated.

2.0 Evaluating the Outcome

To review, the primary research question is: *Under what conditions have stabilisation programs advanced* ***durable*** *and* ***effective*** *decentralised subnational governance structures in the midst of conflict, thereby successfully promoting bottom-up statebuilding?* Accordingly, I evaluate ASOP against both components of the dependent variable. First, I assess the programme's *effectiveness* at improving decentralised subnational governance through the analytic framework developed in Chapter 2, measuring the degree to which the programme helped to advance decentralised local *authority and autonomy; accountability,* and *capacity*.[338]

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[336] Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team, *Governance and Democracy in Afghanistan Provincial Reconstruction Team*, 2013.

[337] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Final Report," 6.

[338] USAID, "Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook," June 2009.

Second, I assess whether the programme's achievements were *durable* beyond the lifetime of the program. The US pursued stabilisation programmes like ASOP with the objective not of merely providing improved subnational governance for the short lifetime of the project. Instead, it aimed to foster local administrative units upon which permanent vertical governance structures would be built, and to which the Kabul-based government would cede more political authority.

According to my evaluation criteria, ASOP did not achieve its goals of effectiveness or durability. It advanced a *moderately low* level of subnational authority and autonomy; a *low* level of accountability, and a *low* level of subnational capacity. Equally important, the changes it did effect at the local level were not durable after the conclusion of the programme.

2.1 Evaluating Effectiveness

Below, I assess evidence that ASOP promoted good decentralised subnational *authority and autonomy; accountability;* and *capacity*. As explained in Chapter 2, my evaluative approach incorporates, as its starting point, the significant challenges in the conceptualisation and measurement of decentralization and subnational governance. These challenges are compounded by the wartime context of Afghanistan, in which subnational data is particularly hard to ascertain, and where issues of governance-- by extension power relations-- are fraught and sensitive. I mitigate these data-analysis challenges by triangulating reported information extensively. For example, Afghan government officials, Afghan non-governmental observers, international officials, international observers and official programme documents often offer very different viewpoints on Afghan local governance issues. Wherever possible, I compare these perspectives when drawing my conclusions below.

2.2 Authority and Autonomy

I evaluate that ASOP achieved **moderately low levels of good decentralised subnational authority and autonomy.** In making my assessment, I follow the US government's own framework for defining "authority" within the context of subnational governance: "For decentralisation to be meaningful, units should be able to do something for their citizens. Authority can be mandatory or permissive, and can be enshrined in a constitution or outlined in law, or can be decreed administratively. May be conferred through elections, or delegated to subnational officials. Authority must be rule based so as to limit self-interested manipulations."[339] My evaluation of "autonomy" also hinges on the official U.S. definition of the term, that in order to promote good decentralised subnational governance, local councils should have "some degree of autonomy over functions they now have authority to undertake. Autonomy gives subnational officials the flexibility to respond."[340]

Even with a wide range of possible manifestations of "authority," ASOP failed to achieve much traction at the district level. Most importantly, it was unable to affect the major priority of the local communities it was meant to serve: service delivery, a function owned by line ministries' local representatives. One IDLG official himself noted that on the district level, "ASOP councils also did not have any teeth. They were not part of the administrative weekly meeting. The local service directors did not answer with them; they didn't have the authority to

[339] USAID, 17.

[340] USAID, 7.

do this."[341] Episodically, ASOP communicated service delivery requests to its own Kabul-based ministry headquarters, the IDLG. But the IDLG had no independent budget, no independent implementation capability, and no leverage to compel other ministries to actually deliver the services requested. As an Afghan former NGO staffer for ASOP recalled, "The [ASOP] councils were a way for us to convey community grievances up to IDLG—but after that, there was no way for the IDLG to do anything about it."[342] Afghan scholar Orzala Nemat quotes a district governor explaining just how ineffectual the council was in its role of monitoring: "ASOP was a failed experiment… No one knew what their role was and what they should do. One day they would come and sit in my office or in another office saying we 'monitor' your work! (...)"[343]

ASOP councils' other potential way to affect local service delivery was a circuitous one: they could ask their counterpart District Governor to, in turn, request that the local line ministry directors to, in turn, ask their own Kabul-based headquarters to request a project by inserting it into their annual planning and budgeting process. Evidence indicates that this roundabout procedure was, unsurprisingly, ineffective. For example, a monthly report produced by ASOP local staff describes the proceedings of an emblematic ASOP council meeting in Tany district Khost province from November 2010. The meeting was called to order to discuss "the sub road in Bandekahil area; health clinic in the area of Bandikhail; building a girls primary school; some

[341] Interview with Former IDLG Official 7, Washington, December 4, 2015.

[342] Interview with former senior ASOP staffer 2, Kabul, January 27, 2016.

[343] District governor of Behsud quoted in Orzala Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015), 153.

conflict resolution."[344] After discussion, the ASOP shura members agreed on the rationale behind each of the worthy projects, including a philosophical conversation about women's equality ("the constitution has also given the rights to female to have similar opportunitiyes *[sic]* for learning as boys have"[345]). However, in response, the most the council could do was to ask the District Governor to promise to bring the issue to the attention of "donors and relevant departments"; no subsequent action on the matter is documented.[346]

In addition to their inability to influence service delivery, ASOP councils also lacked authority to enforce another of their putative mandates, enhancing local security. A former IDLG staffer recalled conveying to the Ministry of Interior a letter about an ASOP council's concerns over district security, only to receive a response from the Ministry of Interior that IDLG had "no authority over us." He continued, "IDLG can only request but not actually enforce…..The ministry can then respond that they will take an action according to rules and regulations." He noted that Afghan citizens referred to these circuitous transmittals of letters as "kite flying…. months pass and no action comes from the government."[347]

The one realm in which ASOP *shuras* did evidentially achieve some level of subnational authority was in dispute resolution. The seminal "Lessons Learned" review of stabilisation programmes report from the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction cites

[344] Nawab Nasrat, "Khost Province Afghan Social Outreach Program Monthly Report" (Kabul, November 30, 2010), 5.

[345] Nasrat, 6.

[346] Ibid.

[347] Interview with Former IDLG Official 7, Washington, December 4, 2015.

ASOP's "transparent and participatory" dispute resolution as an unusual area of programme success.[348] As a more granular example, a report on the proceedings of the Jaji Maidan shura, also in Khost province, provides a lengthy account of two reportedly successful conflict resolution missions the council undertook in the previous few weeks.[349] A separate account, from the Tany district, describes an ASOP *shura* meeting where no fewer than four separate conflicts were discussed, all related to land or water rights. In each case, the council weighed in on the fair resolution for the conflict, and—at least according to the documentation—the decision was accepted by all parties.[350] ASOP's own final report details a wide array of disputes resolved, including over land, water, property, and family matters.[351]

Conflict resolution likely was a point of relative ASOP success because it was resource-neutral from the perspective of the council and required no other government stakeholder participation. Unlike building infrastructure, or providing other development projects, no donor or government interventions needed to be requested. From the primary data sources, it appears that the population generally accepted the authority of the ASOP council members to make

[348] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization: Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," Lessons Learned Program (Washington, May 2018), 79.

[349] An emblematic illustration (all errors as in the original): "The conflict resolution between Bad Shah Khan brothers and Eidullah a resident of Jaji Maidan district, The conflict occurred while Eidullah wanted to give water to his field but Eidullah was keeping him…a fight occurred the fight was serious Mr Sinokai was injured, The Shura decided as follow, Mr Eidullah will give 35000 Rupees to Sinokee family for treatment of wound, if any party attack again on each other they will pay 1000000/Afs to Shura as nagha (condolence), the both parties were agreed on the decision of Shura.*"* Nasrat, "Khost Province Afghan Social Outreach Program Monthly Report," 3.

[350] Again, all errors in the original: "Conflict between Zabet Khan and Sardar Ali ,the conflict party Sardar Ali refered the conflict to shura, Zabet Khan wanted to give water to his field but Sardar Ali didn't give the water he stressed it is my turn, conflict occurred, the shura decided and gave the water turn to Sardar Ali the conflict solved." Nasrat, 6.

[351] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Final Report," 23–24.

decisions on conflict resolution.

However, there are some caveats to this assessment of ASOP's effectiveness in conflict resolution. It is unclear whether ASOP actually represented an *increase* or simply a continuation of conflict resolution authority for its members, who were generally drawn from prominent members of the community. Conflict resolution was an activity which council members might have undertaken in any case, and in which other formal government actors had less of a historic role. Hamish Nixon, building on Christine Noelle-Karimi's work, notes that informal deliberative bodies have long held conflict resolution authority in Afghanistan: "In practice, district authorities, both governors and court officials, do not attempt to extend formal government authority too far into communities. Instead, they refer disputes to communities, and rely on advisory structures to influence through informal means the decisions in those settings."[352]

As for autonomy, the evidence also demonstrates that ASOP councils lacked autonomy from the capital. In the words of one IDLG staffer, the councils were "prone to interference from government officials in Kabul. This was a problem. The government officials in Kabul think that they know everything and the people on the ground know nothing." [353] ASOP councils and their IDLG counterparts also lacked autonomy from its US government sponsor. As one Afghan recalled, "USAID came with the attitude that government officials are corrupt and not trying to

[352] Hamish Nixon, *Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008), 32.

[353] Interview with Former IDLG Official 6, Washington.

do to the right thing," leading to a paternalistic implementation of ASOP and, in their view, micromanagement.[354]

Further, rather than assert their own autonomy, ASOP councils were sometimes instrumentalised to serve other political actors' ends. One international official relayed a story from the Kandahar district of Panjwayii, where the District Governor had wanted to remove the local education line ministry official.[355] The decision to remove a line ministry representative is not technically within the purview of the District Governor; ministry officials report up their chain to their own ministries in Kabul. However, in this instance, the District Governor "was willing to go to bat to get this education rep removed," and brought the issue to the ASOP council.[356] The council also had no official authority on hiring-and-firing of line ministry representatives.[357] Still, the ASOP council assented to the governor, the governor conveyed his grievance to the Education Ministry headquarters, and the education representative was removed. This anecdote reveals the complex, and often unintended, ways in which donor-funded bodies altered the landscape of Afghan local political order, an argument deeply chronicled by Afghan scholar Orzala Nemat.[358] However, its key lesson here is that an opportunistic Afghan executive

[354] Interview with former IDLG official 4, Kabul.

[355] Interview with USAID Health and Education Advisor, Kandahar Airfield, February 2012.

[356] Ibid.

[357] Afghanistan's constitution does not stipulate the authorities of the as-yet-unelected district councils. However, Provincial councils have been seated since 2005 and do not enjoy oversight over provincial-level line department representatives, and this oversight function has never been discussed in the many versions of the subnational governance policy documents over the years. Thus it is highly unlikely district councils would have this role at the district level.

[358] For example, see Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan."

(the district governor) was able to utilize ASOP to advance his own agenda, the removal of other personnel. The agenda did not emanate from the ASOP council itself.

ASOP's lack of autonomy was also apparent in its inability to fulfil its mandate of vetting potential members of the Afghan Local Police. In principle, this was to be one of the council's main expressions of autonomy, and a "service" it could provide to communities even without the budget to execute programmes. But the reality of muscle-based Afghan political order won out instead. As one Afghan implementer recalled, "On paper, any person who was rejected by ASOP council could not be in ALP. In practice, a lot of big guys saw the potential for their guys receiving salaries [through ALP] and figured out a way around this."[359] Two other functions listed in ASOP's programming documents are disaster management and expanding economic opportunity.[360] In both cases, no evidence surfaced in primary documents or interviews that any ASOP councils demonstrated the autonomy to affect issues that fell under the Ministry of Interior's and the Ministry of Economy's purviews.

2.3 Accountability

I assess that ASOP's **promotion of good decentralised subnational accountability was low**. First, the way in which councils were selected did not involve downward accountability to the citizens they were meant to represent. Instead, councils were selected through a process heavily mediated by Kabul appointees and Western donor officials, typically yielding a *shura* of

[359] Interview with former senior ASOP staffer 1, Kabul.

[360] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program Annual Report July 2009 - June 2010," 9.

"usual suspects." The US embassy described the council process as according to a "traditional, consensus based approach": names of potential participants were identified from discussions with "provincial and district governor's officers, provincial councils, international and Afghan NGOs active in the district."[361] This so-called "selection *Jirga*" would then be convened to select the actual 30 to 45 ASOP council members through "consensus." Both stages of ASOP's selection mechanisms were thus defined by Kabuli and foreigner preferences rather than grassroots voice. The first phase, the selection *Jirga,* comprised individuals preferred by the (Kabul-appointed) district and provincial governors, as well as the gatekeepers of foreign-supported development programs. This larger group then selected a smaller group, the ultimate ASOP council, from within its own ranks. For brief comparison, this process was almost diametrically opposed to the procedures for the District Development Assemblies (DDAs) formed under NABDP programme (the case study in Chapter 5), which gathered district representatives in a genuine bottom-up process from each community-level council. Further, some close observers of Afghan politics reported that the Karzai family had a strong Karzai hand in selecting the ASOP councils.[362]

Beyond citizens' ability to select representatives for their councils, programmes can conceivably bolster subnational accountability in other ways. For instance, ASOP could have improved other mechanisms through which citizen voice could be expressed in government

[361] Robert Hellyer, "Addressing Concerns about Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP) Councils and District Development Assemblies (DDA)" (Unclassified information memorandum, Embassy of the United States of America, Kabul, Afghanistan, February 21, 2011), 1.

[362] Interview with former US official 1, November 1, 2017.

policy or programmatic decisions. Here too, ASOP fell short. The programme developed a range of spectacularly technical, complicated mechanisms to channel local priorities into government planning. One emblematic example lies within ASOP's 61-page training manual for council members to assess service delivery in their districts; in theory, after assessing local service delivery, council members could lobby for improvements. Yet the section on "water supply indicators and assessment methodology" alone vastly exceeds the likely education level of Afghan elders in highly rural, unstable areas. ASOP council members are counselled to learn average water availability per day per person; variance based upon distance from water source to dwelling; calculations for necessity of water source; and to calculate average queueing times.[363] After a lengthy discussion of best practice in water tables, ASOP *shura* members are instructed to fill out a "scorecard" calculating water supply adequacy, answering questions such as:

> What is the current water supply source and who are the present users; How much water is available per person per day? Average water availability for drinking, cooking and personal hygiene in any house hold is at least 15 liters per person per day. (20 Liters is fair and 25 liters and above is good service). Is the water source contaminated or at risk of contamination (microbiological or chemical)?[364]

The manual employs a similar "scorecard" approach in its intensive modules on solid waste management, health services, sanitation (to include a lengthy discussion of defecation habits), education, electricity, irrigation, justice, and security.[365]

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[363] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Assessing Government Services at the District Level- A Training Manual for District Community Councils," August 2011.

[364] AECOM International Development, 11–12.

[365] For example, ASOP council members are intended to grasp a highly technical (and idealised) setup of solid waste management: "All households have access to refuse containers which are emptied twice a week at minimum and are no

In short, the ASOP training manual curriculum demonstrates a broader point: the subnational "accountability" that ASOP aimed for was highly unrealistic in the context of rural Afghanistan, and consequently its results fell short. (Indeed, most city councils in the United States would struggle to implement the vast array of requirements and technical jargon mandated by the curriculum.) Further, this and other trainings miss a key point: even if ASOP members were able to successfully complete these many "scorecards" and "indicators", they would have no means to affect service delivery of line ministries.

Finally, accountability can also be measured by linkages upwards: how district-level structures are able to express and advocate for their priorities to higher-level government entities. But here too, ASOP had limited traction. A case in point are reflections by one senior IDLG official, who was the director of the organization's General Directorate for Local Council Administration, ostensibly the primary IDLG management body of ASOP councils. He recalled that when he arrived to his role in early 2011, as ASOP was fully mature, "even I, as the relevant director, was not aware what was going on with ASOP, not in terms of activities, finances, reports."[366]

more than 100 meters from each house. At least one 100-litre refuse container is available per 10 households. The holding capacity of each refuse container should be 100 liters to serve 10 households."

[366] Interview with Senior IDLG Official 2, Kabul, January 23, 2016.

2.4 Capacity

Finally, I assess ASOP's achievements in **promoting good decentralised subnational capacity to be low.** According to the framework devised in Chapter 2, improving decentralised subnational capacity "requires that subnational units have adequate capacity to use their authority and autonomy to be responsive to local people."[367] Yet the evidence indicates that ASOP's highly technical, complex and input-oriented operationalisation of "capacity" was misaligned with skills relevant to Afghan political life.

ASOP's champions identified "capacity development" as a key objective for the programme. The project final report described "capacity building" as a key accomplishment, citing elements of this as "on the job training for potential new staff before assuming roles in provinces and districts; a Capacity Development Unit to enhance capacity of counterparts and council members; and development of capacity building programs for IDLG.[368] ASOP project documents link this improved capacity to the durability and effectiveness of ASOP, intended to serve as a stepping-stone to longer-term local governance structures.[369]

However, the actual evidence indicates that ASOP fell short of these ambitions, largely because its sponsors' conceptualisation of building capacity was oriented almost entirely toward inputs and donor-facing outputs. The programme annual report from 2010 exemplifies this pattern. It identifies programme's "performance indicators" for capacity building to be trainings

[367] USAID, "Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook," 7.

[368] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Final Report."

[369] US Agency for International Development, "Fact Sheet: Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP)."

received, rather than skills imparted, including "Number of individuals who receive USAID assisted training in direct support of program objectives; Number of community councilors who receive training in conflict resolution and mediation, disaggregated by gender and district; and number of ASOP *shuras* created and put through an orientation curriculum."[370] The programme's trainings for "monitoring and evaluation of service delivery"—the 61-page manual discussed in the preceding section on accountability—is another example of just how starkly the programme missed the mark on building *relevant* local capacity.[371] The technical sectoral skills being taught would have been far beyond the grasp of most Afghan rural residents.

Finally, ASOP's capacity building approach was modular and disparate, rather than systemic. Capacity is a notoriously difficult concept to measure in fragile states,[372] and ASOP's lack of an external evaluation further renders its claims of "capacity building" hard to verify. However, even evaluating ASOP's capacity building efforts on their own terms, it is clear they focused not actual relevant functional skills imparted. Instead, its capacity building efforts emphasized one-off, discrete trainings rather than courses that helped show how ASOP integrated into the broader system of governance—a common flaw in externally-assisted

[370] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program Annual Report July 2009 - June 2010," 8–16.

[371] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Assessing Government Services at the District Level- A Training Manual for District Community Councils."

[372] Lisa Denney, Richard Mallett, and Matthew Sterling Benson, "Service Delivery and State Capacity: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium." (London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, June 2017).

statebuilding efforts.[373] It is little wonder Afghan interviewees mainly viewed capacity building sessions as an opportunity for free lunch.

2.5 Evaluating Durability

As the second component of the dependent variable, this study also evaluates the ***durability*** of ASOP's efforts to advance decentralised subnational governance. I assess that ASOP did not achieve durability of effects. For purposes of bounding this thesis, I principally evaluate "durability" through the end of the Karzai administration in 2014; in cases where the programme's impacts did endure until that point, I also investigate its impacts in the post-2014 Ashraf Ghani administration. Here again, I mitigate the data challenges inherent to analysing Afghan subnational governance by triangulating inputs from a wide array of perspectives, both Afghan and donor, interview and written.

The U.S. government claimed that the ASOP programme would serve as an enduring component of district level governance: "until District-level elections are held (or if they are not), the District Councils created under ASOP are intended to be the key governing bodies at the district level that will facilitate interaction between communities and government across the full range of sectors, services and activities."[374] In early 2011, US official communication projected that as many as 160 ASOP councils would be operational by the end of the year; as late as autumn 2011, the US embassy underscored that its staff should reassure local-level

[373] For example, see Denney, Mallett, and Benson, "Service Delivery and State Capacity: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium."

[374] US Agency for International Development, "Fact Sheet: Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP)."

counterparts that ASOP would continue past the end of the year, and that IDLG was planning a successor programme.[375]

Despite these aspirations, overwhelming evidence indicates ASOP's effects did not endure past the end of the programme. Its councils were not still meeting a few months after the programme's conclusion, much less through the end of the Karzai administration. An Afghan ASOP implementer recalled that at the end of 2011, "We provided a list of all the [ASOP]councils" to a key deputy of the IDLG with hopes that the IDLG would carry the programme forward, but instead, that no further action was taken by that official.[376] From the perspective of that same IDLG deputy, he said in an interview years later that ASOP "did good things, but it's over," and that a new (donor-funded) programme was needed.[377]

Tellingly, IDLG staff who arrived at the Directorate after the programme conclusion professed limited knowledge of its impact. One noted in 2014 that she was curious about the programme as it sounded promising, and wondered about reviving it.[378] Two other IDLG advisors arriving in 2014 acknowledged that they had never heard about the programme, despite

[375] Hellyer, "Addressing Concerns about Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP) Councils and District Development Assemblies (DDA)."

[376] Interview with former ASOP staffer 1, Kabul, January 2016.

[377] Interview with Senior IDLG Official 3, Kabul, May 2015.

[378] Interview with international advisor to IDLG 3, by Phone, October 2015.

each of their duties relating to local councils.[379] IDLG annual reports make no mention of the programme or its councils after 2011.[380]

Notably, the US government soon was under no illusion that the councils would continue to function after their stipends ended. One USAID representative overseeing the local governance portfolio said that after the stipends terminated in October 2011, "we heard anecdotal reports that the councils continued to meet after… whether they are still meeting in February [2012], that's hard to say."[381] The official continued, "We have encouraged the IDLG to communicate that these councils should continue to meet. The guidance should be coming from IDLG."[382]

Additional evidence on ASOP's lack of durability comes from the Karzai administration's own documented policy on the way forward on district-level bodies. As described in Chapter 3, by 2011, donors were clamouring for a rationalisation of the multiple district-level consultative bodies, principally the ASOP *shuras* and the DDA councils (created under the NABDP programme discussed in Chapter 5). Donors and Afghans agreed that the largely overlapping mandates of these two councils were counterproductive and inefficient, a

[379] Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015; Interview with former International Advisor to IDLG 4, Oxford, July 2015.

[380] Independent Directorate of Local Governance, "Independent Directorate of Local Governance Annual Report 2012," January 2013.

[381] Interview with USAID governance official 8, Kabul, February 2012.

[382] Ibid.

classic example of what John di John describes as "institutional multiplicity."[383] The World Bank country office argued, "The presence and overlap between the two councils is also symptomatic of the dysfunctional subnational governance landscape."[384] However, rationalising these two sets of councils presented challenges because each extended the reach of a parent ministry: the IDLG in the case of ASOP, and the MRRD in the case of NABDP.

President Karzai called for Cabinet-level negotiations, ultimately leading to a proposal on a new way forward on district-level bodies, which was released in 2013.[385] The policy called for a *new* set of district councils, "District Consultation Committees."[386] Although the document was framed as a compromise between MRRD and IDLG, in actuality, it codified the NABDP's primacy at the district level. The conditions it laid out for how the new DCCs would be constituted largely tracked with conditions that NABDP councils (DDAs) could meet, and ASOP councils would not. As one analyst remarked afterwards, "In practice, it would be mostly DDAs [the NABDP councils] for DCCS if the policy were implemented."[387]

Eventually, even this new policy was not fully implemented. It soon got held up in the jockeying for the next round of presidential elections, and aspirations that actual district council

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[383] "Often the interventions of the international community simply add a new layer of rules, without overriding the others." Jonathan Di John, "Conceptualising the Causes and Consequences of Failed States: A Critical Review of the Literature," 33–34.

[384] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," 7.

[385] Interview with MRRD official 5, Kabul, January 2016.

[386] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Independent Directorate of Local Governance and Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "Policy for Improving Governance and Developments in Districts and Villages," May 2013.

[387] Interview with MRRD official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

elections would finally be held after a new government was inaugurated. (They were not.) However, the legacy of the ASOP versus NABDP competition continued after President Ghani's administration took office in 2014. When his flagship local development and governance programme, the Citizens' Charter, was unveiled in 2015, it gave total authority to MRRD for overseeing governance structures at the district level and below. IDLG was formally relegated to a role of only managing *municipal* administrations.[388] By 2014, all trace of ASOP's legacy appears to have been extinguished.

3.1 Explaining Why, Part One: Host Government Partner Weakness

Thus far, this chapter has examined ASOP's outcomes and argued that it achieved a low degree of effectiveness, and no durability, in improving decentralised subnational governance. The remainder of this chapter now turns to unpacking why, with so many resources and a mandate to integrate into permanent Afghan government structures, the programme's results fell well short of success.

The first independent variable explaining ASOP's outcome was a *weak host government partnership* with the Independent Directorate of Local Governance. Like the other two stabilisation programmes investigated here, ASOP depended upon a collaboration with a ministerial-level entity within the Afghan government, intended to provide the institutional backing and personal connections to ensure the foreign-sponsored programme took root in the

[388] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Finance, "Concept Note: Citizens' Charter" (Kabul: Directorate General for Policy and Program Implementation, April 17, 2015); Independent Directorate of Local Governance Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "Operational Manual for the Field Implementation of the First Phase of the Citizens' Charter National Priority Program (CCNPP) and the Citizens' Charter Afghanistan Project (CCAP)," December 2016.

Afghan government context. ASOP's partnership with the IDLG seemed auspicious, as the Directorate was designated as the key Afghan government entity for subnational governance and decentralisation. However, as I trace in this section, ASOP was ultimately undermined by IDLG's relative weakness in several domains: IDLG's contradictory founding rationale; its contested mandate; its uneven leadership; and finally, its lack of vertical reach to project influence into Afghanistan's periphery.

3.2 Contradictory Rationale for Founding

IDLG official communications described the Directorate as Afghanistan's ministerial entity charged with "strengthening good governance, provision of services, consolidating stability, accountability and transparency in local levels through strong and capable sub national government administrations".[389] Thus it would appear to represent an ideal partner for a programme advancing decentralised local governance. Yet IDLG's weakness within the inter-ministerial competition of Kabuli politics began as early as its origins, marked by contradictory prerogatives.

As traced in Chapter 3, President Karzai announced the creation of the Directorate in 2007. Scholars argue his decision came in response to three distinct, and somewhat contradictory, imperatives: donor demand for a more coherent local governance policy, donor desire to limit the Ministry of Interior's political role, and Karzai's own desire to consolidate

[389] "IDLG History," Independent Directorate of Local Governance, Government of Afghanistan, n.d.

more power within the Presidential Palace.[390] As traced in Chapter 3, internationals did not direct concerted attention to local governance issues in the years immediately after the Bonn Agreement, but after 2005 donors began seriously focusing on the need to clarify the tremendous confusion surrounding subnational governance.[391] Though internationals welcomed the Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy (known as the "I-ANDS") in 2006, seen as a step forward in articulating the Afghan government's more comprehensive, long-term planning, they voiced concern that the document did little to clarify how constitutionally-mandated subnational governance institutions would be established, or in the case of those that had already been set up, to articulate their roles and authorities.[392]

In response to this lack of coherent local governance policy, the foreigners took a familiar approach: they advocated for a bureaucratic entity to resolve a fundamentally political problem. They pushed the Karzai administration to create (with generous donor funding) a bureaucratic "focal point"—a local governance directorate—which they hoped would resolve the confusion.

Donors' second reason for pushing for the IDLG's creation was to marginalise the Ministry of Interior, which they increasingly viewed as too powerful, and too corrupt to reform. The ministry controlled the internal security service, oversaw the police force, and wielded

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[390] Hamish Nixon, "The 'Subnational Governance' Challenge and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance," in *Snapshots of an Intervention :The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance*, 2012, Chapter 18.

[391] Sarah Lister, "Changing the Rules? State-Building and Local Government in Afghanistan," *The Journal of Development Studies* 45, no. 6 (2009): 1001.

[392] See Hamish Nixon, "Aiding the State? International Assistance and the Statebuilding Paradox in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, April 2007), 13. And The Asia Foundation, "An Assessment of Sub-National Governance in Afghanistan," Report for USAID (Kabul, May 2007).

power of making subnational appointments, including provincial and district governors. In early post-Bonn years, donors had largely hesitated to advocate for large reforms within the ministry, concerned that such efforts could destabilize Afghan politics by upsetting Karzai's "big tent" approach to accommodating adversaries.[393] But by late 2006, internationals had come to see the Ministry's corruption as too severe to ignore. They feared the Ministry's appointment authority amounted to a "shop for selling jobs," with heavy linkages to revenue streams from the metastasizing drug trade, all while the security situation deteriorated at an alarming rate.[394] Concerned that the Karzai administration was unable-- or unwilling—to remedy the ministry's patronage structures, donors ultimately advocated for divorcing the gubernatorial chain of command from the Ministry structure.[395]

The third reason for the IDLG's creation—ironically given the preceding point—was that President Karzai viewed the creation of a new local governance body as in his own interests. His rationale was diametrically opposed to donors' "good governance" logic for creating the IDLG. Multiple observers recounted that Karzai and his allies saw creating IDLG as a means to project more authority within Afghanistan's complicated ethnic and inter-ministerial politics. For one thing, it represented a chance to wrest more power away from the Ministry of Interior: Karzai, a Pashtun from Kandahar, had long struggled to exert leadership over a ministry predominantly led

[393] Andrew Wilder, "Cops or Robbers? The Struggle to Reform the Afghan National Police |" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, July 2007), 56.

[394] Quoted in Wilder, "Cops or Robbers?", 52.

[395] Hamish Nixon, "The 'Subnational Governance' Challenge and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance," in *Snapshots of an Intervention: The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance*, 2012, 3.

by ethnic Tajiks from Parwan province.[396] One former Afghan official recalled, "MoI was a Panjshiri mafia basically. Creating IDLG provided an opportunity to cleave off the political function and get it closer to the president."[397] Though other Afghan observers dispute the observation that the Interior Ministry was a wholesale Panjshiri domain,[398] it is clear that IDLG would represent a much more open playing field for the Presidential Palace to exert influence. Afghan scholar Orzala Nemat relays a story in which a confidante to the first IDLG director, Jelani Popal, promised Karzai that the IDLG would represent "an army of forty thousand men" in support of the President. This so-called army was not understood to be literal, but rather a representation of the possibility of an enhanced patronage network throughout the country.[399]

Furthermore, creating IDLG also provided Karzai with the opportunity to siphon off financial resources from the ascendant Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). An international official recalled that by 2007, it had become clear that foreigners increasingly wanted to support local governance, so that still more foreign resources were likely to be directed toward the early donor darling MRRD: "The Karzais were doing whatever they could to prevent any meaningful local autonomy and local control over resources. So they deliberately created IDLG to compete with MRRD for donor resources."[400] Separately, a former

[396] Wilder, "Cops or Robbers?," 54.

[397] Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 2017.

[398] Interview with Former NGO Executive, Washington, October 2017.

[399] Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism," 100.

[400] Interview with former US government official and international expert on Afghan governance 4, Washington, November 2017.

IDLG advisor recalled that the Directorate provided Karzai with an opportunity to rise above all the inter-ministerial squabbling for subnational governance resources: By early 2007, "there was a big turf war between the Ministry of Interior which was very powerful, and MRRD, which was also powerful, and the Ministry of Economy, which had a purview dealing with NGOs. All these parties saw an opportunity to get a whackload of cash from the international community to use toward subnational governance. And so Karzai was ultimately like, screw you, and created IDLG as a way to get around the internal fights."[401]

With the benefit of hindsight, it is apparent that the IDLG's contradictory founding principles bedevilled it from the start. It was an agency created to bring coherence to a scattered subnational governance picture—yet in so doing, it added yet another player into the melee. From donors' perspective, it represented hopes for the technical "good governance" agenda by sidelining a corrupt Interior Ministry-- while from Karzai's perspective, it offered a chance to extend his own reach over peripheral patronage structures. As we will see further, the IDLG's confused creation rationale would ultimately undermine its own flagship programme, ASOP. The programme's own identity was caught between the donor ambitions of a technical good governance enterprise, and the instrumental political vision of the Karzais—and ended up succeeding at neither.

[401] Interview with former International Advisor to IDLG 4, Oxford, July 2015.

3.3 Contested Makeup and Mandate

In the years following the IDLG launch, as ASOP got underway, the directorate's contested mandate and staff makeup posed further challenges for its programmes. This confusion surrounding IDLG's mission, in turn, weakened its position vis-à-vis other ministries in competition for resources and impact, ultimately undermining ASOP's durability and effectiveness.

Much of IDLG's weakness was a function of its relative youth compared with other ministries. A former advisor to the IDLG during the period of ASOP described the Directorate as the "new kid on the block trying to stake his claim on the playground with all the other bigger, older kids."[402] Bureaucratic competition is a common theme of government operations worldwide-- and was particularly pronounced in post-Taliban Afghanistan, with a new government machinery almost entirely underwritten by donors. An international advisor reflected that, "Afghan ministries are like spoiled schoolchildren, and if someone else gets money they get jealous, especially with this new upstart ministry."[403]

IDLG's staff composition also weakened its position in Kabul's inter-ministerial scrimmage. As a newly-created body, the directorate's first cohort of hires were almost entirely funded by Western aid agencies under consulting contracts. The resultant staff were largely young, technocratic and urbane—a mixed blessing in a seniority-conscious society. In one

[402] Email Correspondence with International Advisor to IDLG 4, August 2014.

[403] Interview with former International Advisor to IDLG 4, Oxford, July 2015.

Afghan observer's words, the new office was filled with "advisors with pointy shoes;"[404] as an international advisor added, the bulk of the Afghan staff were "young hipster guys who got paid a lot."[405] Even relatively more senior Afghan staffers were seen as out of step with the rest of the civil service: staff at other ministries commented that the Directorate's management level comprised almost fully "Afghans who spent more of the past thirty years outside of the country."[406] Afghanistan's so-called "second civil service" had long been a source of tension within government ranks, as the post-Taliban state grappled with both inflated staff rolls resulting from Soviet times, and the need to quickly enter the computer age.[407] Thus, since 2002, nearly every ministry had hosted a cadre of consultants who served alongside their less-well-compensated, often less-technically-skilled counterparts. But IDLG's central office appeared almost wholly made up of this consultant class—and thus IDLG as an entity lost out on the unmistakable benefits of having long-serving, older employees to lend it gravitas.

The IDLG's challenges of newness and youthfulness were further compounded by its own murky mandate. The Directorate claimed its *raison d'être* to be "strengthening good governance, provision of services, consolidating stability, accountability and transparency in

[404] Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 2017.

[405] Interview with former International Advisor to IDLG 4, Oxford, July 2015.

[406] Michael Leach, "Whither the Sub-National Governance Policy?," Unpublished report for GIZ, January 31, 2011, 87.

[407] Sarah Lister, "Moving Forward? Assessing Public Administration Reform in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, September 2006); Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Sector Unit World Bank, "Afghanistan: Building an Effective State: Priorities for Public Administration Reform" (Kabul, January 23, 2008).

local levels through strong and capable subnational government administrations."[408] But in practice, this mission of service provision and stabilisation clashed with the reality that all service delivery and security initiatives remained in the hands of other ministries or foreign actors.

More broadly, the IDLG's mandate for "providing good governance" encapsulated a recurrent flaw in the broader externally-driven statebuilding project in Afghanistan. Donors continually framed "governance" as a sector of project activity; but in the lived experience of most rural Afghans, questions of local politics, resources, security and development projects are completely interlinked.[409] The IDLG's "good local governance" programmes such as ASOP did not come with any resources or activities; meanwhile, other programmes—like the MRRD's more longstanding community council programs-- offered *de facto* governance elements of "participation" and "accountability" in addition to providing much-needed services. As one long-time international observer of Afghan politics noted,

> By comparison [to IDLG], the other ministries are well structured --they each have a mission and are at least spending some of their budgets on the mission. But when you are look at IDLG, their mission is looking at politics and elections and power. [In] the IDLG … it's pandemonium—you don't know who is what, who will be paid, who is your boss, everyone is fighting, it's ridiculous. Ministries *are* their programmes. It's quite simple at the ministry level—they have a mission-- while the IDLG is purely political.[410]

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[408] "IDLG History."

[409] Frances Z. Brown, "Local Governance Reform in Afghanistan and the 2018 Elections," November 2017; Frances Z. Brown, "Rethinking Afghan Local Governance Aid After Transition," August 2014.

[410] Interview with former SIKA programme staffer 3, by phone, July 2017.

Donors' imprecise visions for what IDLG would and should do didn't help. Hamish Nixon notes that foreigners wanted the IDLG to embody three "conflicting imperatives."[411] First, it suddenly had responsibility for the ten thousand civil servants previously under the structure of the Ministry of Interior, with all the attendant challenges of management and patronage described above. Second, the Directorate became the government focal point for donor programs aiming to extend the writ of the state under the increasingly-urgent counterinsurgency agenda. And thirdly, it was charged with development of the still-elusive subnational governance policy. From the start, the IDLG was charged with devising a policy without actual authority to do so.

The IDLG also embodied a further inherent tension: it was assigned to serve as a mediator aiming to bring coherence to the multiple-player struggle of Afghan local governance, yet at the same time given a mandate that made it a protagonist in this competition. As one donor analysis summed up the dilemma, the IDLG was born out of a desire "to avoid an internecine conflict between existing ministries over how responsibility for subnational governance would be allocated. However, by creating a new directorate to take on this responsibility, the Afghan government merely created a new focus for inter-ministerial rivalry."[412] Further, the IDLG's mandate was to lead other stakeholders in "cooperation" on subnational governance issues, which left the directorate in the "unenviable task of seeking a high level of cooperation from ministries that are institutionally prone to be defensive and hostile."[413] Coordination of the many

[411] Nixon, "The 'Subnational Governance' Challenge and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance," 3.

[412] Leach, "Whither the Sub-National Governance Policy?"

[413] Leach, 87.

Afghan bureaucratic actors with a hand in local governance would have been a heavy lift in the best of times. But as a former advisor recalled, the IDLG had a particular struggle to meet its mandate for "cooperation, cooperation, cooperation. It's an organization that has a mandate to cooperate with everybody, and no one wants to cooperate with it."[414]

As time wore on, IDLG's confused mandate and donor-linked identity weakened its stance in inter-ministerial competition, and ultimately contributed to the undermining of its flagship programme ASOP. Because of its IDLG affiliation, ASOP was not viewed to have the permanence or internal weight needed to affect durable, effective changes in subnational politics. IDLG was an entity born out of donor pressure, and perpetuated by donor funding. As political anthropologist Thomas Barfield notes, over centuries of history, Afghans' conceptions of other Afghans' legitimacy have hinged upon whether they were perceived to be beholden to external influence and support.[415] Astri Suhrke similarly contends that in Afghanistan, legitimacy derives from Islam and nationalism—concepts which stand in contrast to the highly technocratic, Western notion of "good governance" promulgated by the IDLG and its benefactors.[416]

3.4 Uneven IDLG leadership

In addition to its inauspicious start and contested mandate, the IDLG's uneven leadership also weakened the ministry, ultimately undermining the durability and effectiveness of ASOP.

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[414] Interview with former International Advisor to IDLG 4, Oxford, July 2015.

[415] Thomas J. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 341–42.

[416] Astri Suhrke, *When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 191.

IDLG top leadership was inconsistent in its first years of existence, and even the most charismatic and well-meaning managers were not always able to convert their talents into ministerial strength. The agency largely benefited from capable, well-connected leaders during its first years of operation. But then, just as negotiations around ASOP's extension began, IDLG leadership changed and ASOP's durability suffered.

Against the backdrop of the neopatrimonial system described in Chapter 3, particularly in the first decade after Bonn, Afghan ministries often directly depended upon the strength of their leadership. Ministers were crucial both in negotiating the dynamic domestic political landscape and engaging foreign interlocutors.

IDLG inaugural leadership was capable and well-connected. Its founding director, Jelani Popal, was a Karzai ally—or in the words of one observer "Karzai stalking horse"[417]-- and fellow Pashtun. Hailing from a background as a non-governmental organization executive with years running Afghan relief efforts from Pakistan, Popal brought a strong national network of rural development practitioners to his job of increasing Kabul's connections to the periphery. Afghan observers describe Popal as charismatic, articulate, and particularly well-versed at liaising with donors. He was soon joined by deputy Barna Karimi, an Afghan-American technocrat described by Afghan observers as skilful in both programme management and *kharajii* (foreigner) relations.[418]

[417] Interview with former US government official and international expert on Afghan governance 4, Washington, November 1, 2017.

[418] Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism," 101.

Popal played an essential role in getting ASOP funded and launched: in the words of one former IDLG official, the programme was "Popal's baby."[419] ASOP was (non-coincidentally) first piloted in Popal's home province of Wardak,[420] and its subsequent rapid expansion (first in neighbouring provinces) also reflected Popal's advocacy. More broadly, as one Afghan former colleague reflected: "ASOP reflected the vision of Popal. Before the Soviet invasion, we had strong structure of tribal elders. They resolved conflicts. They were the link between formal and informal institutions."[421]

However firmly Popal believed in the ASOP model, the programme's fortunes proved to be largely tied to his own magnetism and skill negotiating Kabul politics. He departed the IDLG in December 2010, leaving the advocacy for ASOP to his successors. Popal's deputy, Karimi – who hailed from the oft-persecuted Hazara minority-- took on the acting director role for nearly a year thereafter. Karimi was widely described as an able successor, but according to some observers, ethnic tensions undermined his ability to bolster IDLG's status. One advisor noted that Karimi was a "technocrat, great at his job, but because of his Hazara status he had challenges" in championing IDLG equities in the broader Afghan political arena.[422]

In late 2011, Karzai appointed a new permanent director of the IDLG, Abdul Khaliq Farahi. Farahi proved a much less assertive champion for the directorate's interests within Kabuli

[419] Interview with IDLG Official 5, Kabul, January 2016.

[420] The assertion ASOP's location was "non-coincidental" comes from interview with former US government official and international expert on Afghan governance 4, Washington, November 2017.

[421] Interview with IDLG Official 5, Kabul, January 2016.

[422] Interview with Ministry of Finance advisor 3, Kabul, February 2012.

ministerial turf wars. An international advisor within IDLG summed up Farahi as "not outspoken, not necessarily a strong advocate" for the directorate.[423] A former Afghan official at the IDLG connected Farahi's painful recent history as a Taliban kidnapping survivor to his lack of engagement in the inter-ministerial boxing ring:

> Farahi was kidnapped by insurgents and never came out of that trauma. He didn't believe that [IDLG's] whole system was working….The trauma worked badly on both sides—he didn't trust the system, and the other ministries thought he was a spy for Taliban and other intelligence. He is [from] a strong political family so I don't question his loyalty. It was an issue of mental health. [424]

Karimi departed from the deputy role soon thereafter. Public assessments of the ASOP programme underscore the view that in losing both Popal and Karimi in short succession, the directorate lost "two influential figures" from were important to the success of the programme.[425]

ASOP's durability also suffered from Farahi's ability to navigate the political economy of donor relations. As one official recalled, "personalities matter" in *kharajii* relations, "so Popal and Karimi got preferential treatment. They gave off a very non-corrupt picture." As for Farahi, by contrast, "the donors believed he was here to make money."[426]

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[423] Ibid.

[424] Interview with Former Senior IDLG Official 2, Washington, December 2015.

[425] Checchi and Company Consulting, "Performance Evaluation: District Delivery Program (DDP)" (U.S. Agency for International Development, April 9, 2012), 22.

[426] Interview with Former Senior IDLG Official 2, Washington, December 2015.

In retrospect, some argue that President Karzai decided that after his loyal ally Popal departed, he intentionally wanted a weak IDLG leader, in order to better control the agency in the longstanding centre-periphery tussle. One Afghan observer recalled, "Why did Karzai want to keep Farahi in this position? Because Karzai wanted to bypass IDLG and directly influence provincial governors. [Farahi] felt that he was important, Karzai gave him the royal treatment, and as a result he was pliant."[427] One close confidante of the Karzai family shares the view, and argues that Karzai saw all the donor momentum towards increasing "local governance" and decided he could best co-opt it by controlling the IDLG.[428]

Whatever the backstory, after Farahi took the reins, IDLG advocacy for ASOP among Kabuli stakeholders diminished, just as negotiations around an extension of ASOP, or a formalisation of its councils as *de facto* District Councils, were gaining steam. Primary source evidence shows that during Popal's tenure and Karimi's acting leadership, robust discussions were underway within the US government and within the IDLG on how to extend ASOP beyond its scheduled closure at the end of 2011.[429] But when IDLG leadership changed, the IDLG side of this discussion vanished. "The program wasn't so important to [Farahi]," an Afghan official recalled. Another former IDLG official directly attributed Farahi's poor advocacy and lack of sophistication to the end of ASOP: "Farahi didn't know anything, and he just let anything

[427] Ibid.

[428] Interview with former US government official and international expert on Afghan governance 4, Washington, November 1, 2017.

[429] Anonymous US government official, "Updated ASOP Guidance for the Field," October 2011.

happen. He didn't argue, he didn't lobby for IDLG."[430] U.S. embassy contacts were left to wonder what the Afghan government position on ASOP councils actually was, and were careful to not "get out ahead" of their host government counterparts. A third observer, an Afghan who worked on the ASOP programme, noted that "Farahi didn't seem interested. I'm not sure what he was interested in, actually. And we could not convince the other people higher than him to continue [the programme]."[431]

3.5 Limited Subnational Presence

Finally, IDLG's weakness can also be traced to its very limited vertical reach downward from Kabul to the Afghan periphery. Inaugural director Popal had a strong personal network of rural contacts from his NGO days, but overall, for a directorate charged with overseeing subnational governance, the IDLG suffered from an unusually Kabul-centric approach. This weakness then transferred into its inability to project its programmes in a way that would render them durable and effective at the outlying tiers of government.

Staff structure and oversight were central to IDLG's vertical weakness. Upon its founding in 2007, IDLG nominally inherited the thousands of civil servants on the books in Afghanistan's 34 provinces and their associated resources: one governance expert estimates that the official staff slots (*tashkeels*) numbered between eighty and two thousand people per

[430] Interview with Former Senior IDLG Official 2, Washington, December 2015.

[431] Interview with former senior ASOP staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016. Notably, one of the "people higher than Farahi" who might have weighed in was Hamid Karzai, an early supporter of the ASOP programme. But by late 2011, ASOP had already served a primary purpose from his perspective—assistance on his re-election campaign. This theme will be discussed in a subsequent section below.

province, including each district governor's office.[432] However, IDLG proved unable to connect and leverage this "infrastructural power" in the way that other ministries did.[433] Independent evaluations confirmed that the IDLG was unable to mitigate absenteeism or even monitor which *tashkeels* were filled.[434] One international expert on Afghan governance reflected that for years after its founding, the extent of IDLG's subnational reach was of "a bunch of guys flying around in [foreign military] helicopters."[435]

After this rough start, IDLG continued to struggle to set up vertical management systems. One longtime international advisor embedded in the agency noted that for all the donor community's efforts on building the capacity of the IDLG, "Very little of the last few years has helped set vertical systems."[436] Financial management capabilities were a key problem. Independent monitoring reports show that IDLG's financial oversight systems were profoundly lacking and often likely corrupt, with obvious consequences for the ministry's ability to perpetuate subnational programmes like ASOP.[437]

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[432] Interview with International Advisor to IDLG 5, Kabul, March 2014.

[433] The phrase "infrastructural power" comes from Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results," *European Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 02 (November 1984): 185.

[434] Checchi and Company Consulting, "Performance Evaluation: District Delivery Program (DDP)."

[435] Interview with international expert on Afghan governance, by phone, August 2015.

[436] Interview with International Advisor to IDLG 5, Kabul, March 2014.

[437] Beyond ASOP, the IDLG did little to improve financial management overall—one international staffer reflected that some foreign programs to assist the organization had actually backfired. One example flagship program, the Performance Based Governor's Fund, had aimed to pave the way for the IDLG's fiscal decentralization process by providing select provincial governors a pot of resources to manage. But counterintuitively, "the PGBF made PGs less interested in the budget process [which includes complexities of operations and maintenance lines], and we are still seeing this profound effect." Interview with International Advisor to IDLG 5, Kabul, March 2014. In another example, a programme evaluation from the District Delivery

To compound IDLG's overall weak vertical reach, the specific component of the IDLG responsible for ASOP, the General Directorate for Local Council Affairs (GDLCA), proved particularly feeble. A different IDLG advisor recalled that during his tenure in the directorate, the GDLCA was "struggling to even keep in touch with the provincial councils. The Provincial Councils were not even getting responses to their letters [to the GDLCA]."[438] He further speculated that the GDLCA was being marginalized within the already-marginal IDLG: the office was not even located with the rest of the IDLG, but "out in Sherpur, with no heat."[439] Specific to ASOP, the IDLG senior official who eventually took over the GDLCA midway through ASOP's term attested that when he arrived on the job, he was given no visibility on ASOP's activities in the districts.[440]

As another aspect of IDLG's weak vertical reach, the agency also proved particularly ill-suited to remote project management—a central component of enabling a programme like ASOP to take hold and be effective. Its staff cadre—the aforementioned "guys with pointy shoes"---often had more experience liaising with donors than with the meticulous, tedious work of running programmes. Reflecting on a separate IDLG initiative, one former IDLG official noted that that programme's leaders within the IDLG were two people whom the U.S. Embassy liked—"two people who had been working in shoe shops and didn't know how to implement

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Program, another IDLG-affiliated project, describes some of IDLG's shortcomings, including liquidating $840,000 without any accounting for the funds. Checchi and Company Consulting, "Performance Evaluation: District Delivery programme(DDP)," 1.

[438] Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 5, Washington, July 2015.

[439] Ibid.

[440] Interview with Senior IDLG Official 1, Kabul, January 2016.

programmes."[441] A different, senior level IDLG official bluntly described how this lack of programme management experience undermined IDLG's ability to project its policies throughout the periphery: "I cannot point to one piece of work [policy] that IDLG does that has started at Kabul, gone down to the province, gone down to the district, and made its way back up."[442]

The IDLG's weak vertical reach further deteriorated as ASOP was being discussed for renewal. The Popal to Farahi leadership transition precipitated the loss of key institutional staff within IDLG who—according to some—might have helped keep the ASOP train moving forward. One Afghan observer recalls, "All this institutional capacity left. If Popal had stayed in IDLG he would have made sure that the procedures were in place [to continue ASOP]. The skilled guys left, a PhD from Malaysia, who knew a lot. When the new people came, they didn't want to learn. The new crew never showed up at the office before eleven."[443]

According to some interviews, ASOP particularly suffered from this deterioration of project management capacity. ASOP's principal manager and counterpart within the IDLG structure, Hedayat Baba Karkhel, reportedly "didn't have the capacity to drive the programme," to be extended, according to one Afghan insider: "He added value in terms of relations with governors, but he didn't have the decision-making" muscle.[444] A separate interviewee added that the IDLG Deputy who oversaw ASOP at the highest level was unskilled at overseeing project

[441] Interview with Former Senior IDLG Official 2, Washington, December 2015.

[442] Interview with Senior IDLG Official 2, Kabul, March 2014.

[443] Ibid.

[444] Interview with former senior ASOP staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

implementation.[445] ASOP's own final report echoes this sentiment, and alludes to ASOP's ultimately losing battle against the MRRD's DDAs: "The ASOP/AECOM leadership team made little progress in advocating for the importance of the ASOP program to the IDLG upper management, to ensure the sustainability of the program. Nor did IDLG leadership make attempts at the ministerial level to resolve problems that emerged between DDAs and ASOP councils."[446] In short, the IDLG's weak vertical reach, deteriorating staff programme management capacity, and logistical challenges all added up to a ministry that was unable project infrastructural power into the periphery, especially at key moments for ASOP.

To sum up: to paraphrase the old joke about the Holy Roman Empire, the IDLG was neither independent, nor particularly good at directing anything, nor actually able to provide a "local governance" presence. It directly follows that IDLG would be unable to lead, much less institutionalise, an effective, durable local governance programme. Unquestionably, the donor community deserves much blame for the mismatch between the expectations and reality of IDLG capacity. Institution-building is a decades-long endeavour—a lesson constantly (re)learned in external statebuilding interventions writ large. As one evaluation for a separate IDLG programme concedes: "It is good development practice to begin … a programme with a capacity analysis and a small pilot to identify weaknesses in the system before scaling it up. It is

[445] Interview with Former Senior IDLG Official 2, Washington, December 2015.

[446] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Final Report," 10.

unreasonable to expect performance from a system that has not acquired the capacity to demonstrate that performance."[447] ASOP under the IDLG was a case in point.

4.1 Explaining Why, Part Two: Lack of Local Embeddedness

The second key factor explaining ASOP's lack of durability and effectiveness is that the programme did not achieve "local embeddedness" into the broader contemporary Afghan social and political order. As detailed in Chapter 2, my conceptualisation of "local embeddedness" builds upon, among others, Brian Levy's and David Booth's respective developments of related terms.[448] Levy argues that in crafting programmes to reform governance, such as to enact decentralisation, the "aim is to find feasible entry points" that can lead to further ongoing, cumulative changes, requiring that programmes have a "good fit" with the pre-existing political system.[449] As this section shows, ASOP did not adhere to Levy's framework for "good fit" within the "personalized competitive system" of post-Bonn Afghanistan.[450] Booth underscores that programs and initiatives that work best are "ones that, by design or otherwise, have a local problem-solving character *and* build on relevant components of the available cultural repertoire, whether in the form of extant beliefs or values or in the form of widely recognised behavioural templates."[451] By contrast, ASOP clashed sharply with "available cultural repertoire." My notion

[447] Checchi and Company Consulting, "Performance Evaluation: District Delivery Program (DDP)," 35–36.

[448] Booth, "Introduction," 6.

[449] Levy, *Working with the Grain*, 9.

[450] Levy, 15–20.

[451] Booth, "Introduction," 7.

of local embeddedness also builds upon literature on political settlements, hinging on "the distribution of power on which a society is based."[452] Here, ASOP did not align with "the formal and informal institutional arrangements through which resources (political, economic and social) are distributed."[453]

I identify four principal ways in which ASOP failed to achieve local embeddedness. First, ASOP's operational approach failed to complement the underlying incentives, relationships and authorities that govern Afghan state-society interactions. In particular, ASOP and IDLG antagonised, rather than engaged, Afghanistan's newly-assertive Parliament; in addition, the programme's technocratic approach to engaging district-level elites clashed with extant power relationships and failed to build a broader constituency for its operations. Further, ASOP's prestige was closely linked to two time-limited agendas, which peaked in succession: first President Karzai's re-election campaign, and then, the foreign-led counterinsurgency campaign. The programme enjoyed early growth as it was instrumentalised to suit these two objectives, but after these two external agendas waned, so too did ASOP's momentum.

[452] Definition from Patrick Meehan, "What Are the Key Factors That Affect the Securing and Sustaining of an Initial Deal to Reduce Levels of Armed Conflict?: A Literature Review," Monographs and Working Papers (London: U.K. Stabilisation Unit, August 2018); in developing his definition, Meehan draws from Di John, "Conceptualising the Causes and Consequences of Failed States: A Critical Review of the Literature," Working Paper, Crisis States Research Centre; Khan, Mushtaq Husain, "Political Settlements and the Governance of Growth-Enhancing Institutions" (2010: Unpublished paper, n.d.); Putzel, James and Jonathan Di John, "Meeting the Challenges of Crisis States" (London: Crisis States Research Centre, 2012).

[453] Ibid.

4.2 Working against the Grain: Parliament

From the start, ASOP worked against the grain of contemporary Afghan political order, defying or denying the "government of relationships" that has largely defined subnational governance and centre-periphery relations in the country for centuries.[454] ASOP's and IDLG's approach to avoiding, rather than engaging, Afghanistan's assertive legislative branch of government stands out as a key factor contributing to its weak outcomes.

At the time of ASOP's 2008 launch, the Afghan Parliament was only three years old and intent on asserting its power vis-à-vis Hamid Karzai's executive branch. As described in Chapter 3, formal Afghan government structures offer minimal political linkages between the Kabul and the provincial and district tiers of government: no formal reporting relationship exists between the subnational units and Kabul except for the President's authority to appoint provincial and district governors.[455] As a result, Afghan members of Parliament, hailing from all thirty-four provinces, represented important connections between Kabul and outlying districts, often in ways that superseded their official mandate. As we shall see in the forthcoming case study on NABDP, Parliamentarians assertively made use of their de facto roles as relationship-brokers and gatekeepers to influence political-economic affairs in their home provinces. At the subnational level, the "government of relationships" often hinged on their participation.

[454] For extensive examination of the Afghan "government of relationships" at all levels of subnational governance drafted in 2008, see Nixon, *Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan*.

[455] Martine van Bijlert, "Between Discipline and Discretion: Policies Surrounding Senior Subnational Appointments" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, May 2009); Jennifer Murtazashvili, "Subnational Governance in Afghanistan: Back to the Future," in *State Strengthening in Afghanistan: Lessons Learned, 2001- 2014*, 2016.

Against this backdrop, Karzai and IDLG founding director Jelani Popal created the IDLG with almost none of the legislative-branch consultation typical for creation of a new ministry-level structure. The agency was set up by presidential decree in August 2007; its delegated authorities, set out by the same decree, were comparable to those of a ministry.[456] A longtime Afghan government official recalled the process was "out of nowhere… Popal put together an idea on paper, and then eight months later the president mentioned it in a speech."[457] A former Member of Parliament who served in office at the time recalled that "I was not happy with the establishment of the IDLG. The IDLG was a way for Karzai to take power away from other bodies."[458] Another Afghan observer recalled that there had been some—but highly perfunctory—legislative consultation: "There was a subcommittee formed by Karzai's own people, who just said that they were developing this office under the auspices of the president." Still, he continued that overall, "Parliament never saw it coming and didn't realize the ramification."[459]

Parliamentarians' objections to a new local governance ministry did not solely stem from their philosophical concerns about executive branch overreach. The financial stakes were large. As donor resources were increasingly directed to subnational tiers of government, creation of a new local governance player had significant implications for the actors who had long had their nose in the trough of subnational governance programs: the MRRD, the Ministry of Interior, and

[456] "IDLG History."

[457] Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 2017.

[458] Interview with Former Member of Afghan Parliament 1, Kabul, January 2016.

[459] Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 2017.

Parliamentarians who had integrated their own financial interests into these resource flows. As Afghan analyst Haseeb Humayoon has written, "The growing marriage of business with politics is central to understanding Afghanistan's traditional and newly rising, ambitious and impactful political personalities."[460]

However (im)pure the motivations of Parliament and other ministries, IDLG and its flagship programme ASOP would suffer long-standing consequences from their lack of buy-in. As one former MRRD advisor noted, in the newly-minted IDLG director Polpal, "We were confronted with someone who had all the executive structures and portfolios of a minister, but it wasn't a ministry with those checks."[461]

The longer-standing institutions decided to resist. As one advisor to the IDLG recalled, in the subsequent years, ASOP tried to introduce procedural changes that affected these other stakeholders' turf. In response, "Line ministries basically schooled the IDLG in reforms. [We returned] back to the normal of Members of Parliament trying to get more authority, plus the line departments often saying [to IDLG] 'You're amateurs.'"[462] The fact that ASOP lacked an independent project budget compounded the challenge: the programme didn't have money to spread around through development projects throughout the country, which could have incentivised members of parliament, local-level officials, and communities to align their interests toward executing activities (with distribution of rents that would have naturally ensued). As we

[460] Haseeb Humayoon, "The Re-Election of Hamid Karzai" (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, January 2010).

[461] Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 2017.

[462] Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015.

will see in Chapter 5, this contrasts with NAPDP, which managed to structure its projects so that many government stakeholders had vested interests in its success.

To conclude this section, ASOP did not prove to be durable or effective because, in part, it did not integrate into the Parliament's accepted notion of centre-periphery patronage flows. Its critics were partially motivated by institutional concerns— the newly-elected Parliament, charged with oversight of the executive branch, was understandably offended that a quasi-ministry was created without their assent. ASOP's detractors were also no doubt partly driven by financial reasons: the programme failed to align with the rent creation and distribution mechanisms that were previously monopolized by other Afghan government stakeholders.

From a normative standpoint, this second conclusion raises obvious concerns. After all, the goal of liberal statebuilding is to move countries *away* from neopatrimonial institutions and patronage networks. But from an analytic standpoint, this study simply notes that because the only people with a direct financial stake in ASOP were its own council members, ASOP's strategic goal of building a constituency for its programme became unenviably more difficult. ASOP rejected what Tim Kelsall describes as "extant notions of moral obligation and interpersonal accountability in the region," and its durability and effectiveness suffered as a result. [463]

4.3 Working Against the Grain: District-Level Politics

At the district level, too, ASOP was launched without any reference to the pre-existing

[463] Kelsall, "Going with the Grain in African Development?" *Development Policy Review* (2011), 223.

underlying political settlements. As one US government official acknowledged, "ASOP was just sort of *plopped* into the district."[464] In contrast with local political and social order– marked by personal rule and neo-patrimonialism— ASOP represented an effort to redefine formal institutions and processes in local politics consistent with a "good governance" paradigm of liberal statebuilding interventions.[465] While this goal was laudable (and mirrors those of donor statebuilding efforts worldwide), the programme execution fell flat because it was in such deep tension with local norms.

A key example of ASOP's clash with Afghan "extant notions of interpersonal accountability" was its stipend payment. The programme paid $125 per month to each council member to attend two monthly meetings-- amounting to an hourly rate that would be the envy of many Afghan (or international) public servants. The practice was alien to Afghan tradition: the programmeaimed to tap into "traditional authority-figures"[466] for decision-making and conflict-resolution, essentially paying them to perform a duty they would generally do for free from a sense of "interpersonal accountability." As Orzala Nemat chronicles, rural interviewees argued that in earlier years, their communities were accustomed to gathering of their own accord to

[464] Interview with former US government official and international expert on Afghan governance 4, Washington, November 2017.

[465] For example, in a document analysing the competing district-level councils of ASOP and the MRRD's NABDP, the World Bank country office noted that the two parent ministries "have historically operated with different philosophies and approaches to sub-national governance. IDLG seeks to develop the capacity and status of the formal structures of subnational governance such as District Governors' Offices." World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges."

[466] World Bank, 6.

discuss problems, "but now if you aim to do so, everyone expects you to pay something…. Now every time you speak of *shura*, elections, or gathering people, they think they must be paid."[467]

The stipend had another perverse, unintended effect: it ensured that ASOP council members were the programme's primary enthusiastic constituency. ASOP had no budget for actual development projects or improving service delivery, so despite its stated objective of "development", it was unclear how it could tangibly improve the population's daily lives. As another district officer told Nemat, "Members of the ASOP council came on the recommendations of the old district governor; they were paid a salary and they were here more for their own purposes of using district resources rather than being helpful to the government's work in their areas."[468] Further, payment of stipends prompted obvious questions of sustainability, underscoring just how at odds with local political economy the programme was. ASOP official documents claimed that the programme was a stepping stone to formalised District Councils, yet there was no Afghan budgetary item to pay these future DC members' salaries.

In addition, ASOP's member selection process also worked against the grain of local politics. As noted above, the programme implementer, AECOM International Development, selected the councils through first inquiring for nominations from the Provincial Governor,

[467] This particular quote does not stipulate whether the interviewee had ASOP specifically in mind. Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan," 145.

[468] Nemat, 154.

District Governor, local police chief, and NGOs present in the district.[469] The process raised risk that the resultant council would not be a genuinely grassroots selection, but instead overly representative of Karzai administration favourites (governors and police chiefs are appointed by Kabul) and the international aid-industrial complex's preferred intermediaries. A close confidante of the Karzai family recalled, as ASOP was formulated, "What I saw was a very concerted Karzai effort to interfere with the real bottom-up-ness [of the program]. When Karzai saw he couldn't stop local councils, he was bound and determined to get his people on these local councils."[470] As one Afghan observer recalled, the result was that less Kabul-connected, yet important, community figures were excluded: "If you are a school teacher, you can be a member of a DDA [the NABDP councils], but not an ASOP council."[471]

A former IDLG official agreed that Kabuli preferences, rather than local political settlements, defined the selection of ASOP council members. "[IDLG leadership] in Kabul lobbied for checking in with NDS [National Directorate of Security, the internal security agency]" in the formation of councils. As a result, "We got people in these councils who were already sympathizers and who already wanted to come to the government centre," rather than individuals who might represent a broader, and more sceptical, constituency.[472]

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[469] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," 11; also discussed in AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Final Report."

[470] Interview with former US government official and international expert on Afghan governance 4, Washington, November 2017.

[471] Interview with MRRD Official 6, Kabul, January 2016.

[472] Interview with Former Senior IDLG Official 2, Washington, December 2015.

Once the councils were formed, the programme promoted an almost farcically technocratic, Westernised approach to governance that was also at odds with local norms. ASOP's 61-page primer "Assessing Government Services at the District Level: A Training Manual for District Community Councils" provides a stark illustration of this pattern. The manual provides a minute-by-minute prescription for ASOP councils' training, with a heavy reliance on flip charts, white boards, and Powerpoint projections. As described above, new council members are to learn about using "indicators, questionnaire and methodology" for evaluating each of ten service sectors (water supply, sanitation services, solid waste management services, health services, education services, roads/transport services, electricity services, irrigation services, security and justice services), and then spend the remainder of the workshop "mapping the services using results from the field assessment."[473]

As noted previously, this array of requirements for ASOP council members borders on the fantastical: local levels of literacy and technical familiarity would prevent most council members from even understanding these lesson plans. But moreover, ASOP's expectations of its council members contrast sharply with the historic role of Afghan local consultative bodies: consensus based, deliberative bodies rather than technical accounting mechanisms.[474] Unsurprisingly, the direct result of these ill-fitting trainings was that the council members were not able to perform their stipulated roles. The World Bank country office reported that, "Despite

[473] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Assessing Government Services at the District Level- A Training Manual for District Community Councils," 3.

[474] Conrad Schetter, ed., *Local Politics in Afghanistan: A Century of Intervention in the Social Order* (S.l.: Oxford University Press, 2013).

the variety of monitoring tasks being executed by the ASOP councils, the monitoring they conduct does not seem to be systematic or comprehensive."[475]

In addition, ASOP's efforts to communicate about its councils also represented a break with established local information-sharing practices. The 164-page "Communications Strategy and Plan" for the programme indicated that newly-formed councils should be distilled into a variety of "value propositions" for a local Afghan audience. According to the plan, ASOP's "Products Cluster" should include "basic project promotions and information packages," "core information materials," "core reporting products and spin-offs" and "regular project promotion and visibility."[476] In short, communications about the programme is viewed as a "package of products" rather than an interactive process, a tremendous contrast to traditional forms of interpersonal information-sharing in Afghan rural society.

Overall, the picture that emerges of ASOP is an attempt to superimpose a complicated, Western-projected initiative onto local political order, thus clashing with Kelsall's "extant notions of interpersonal accountability." The ironic result: for all ASOP's attempt to inject new rules of the game into local politics on everything from council composition to "monitoring results" to "communications products", locals were largely just left confused. As one IDLG

[475] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges", 15.

[476] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Communications Strategy and Plan," May 2011, 10.

officer recalled, "Afghanistan has had councils for years—but they did not have a TOR [terms of reference] or a website."[477] As another former IDLG official recollected,

> [Did we instate] predictability? IDLG really did try. But IDLG got more consumed in administrative process than actual governance…. people were more from an NGO background. They were more familiar with the "Five Principles of Management"—budgeting, organizing, etc—whereas district government does jobs that are not that—they have to do the communicating with people.[478]

As ASOP tried to overlay new rules onto pre-existing community political life, Afghan citizens saw these new practices as unreliable, and distrusted the programme as a result. Scholars have argued for the importance of predictability within fluid conflict environments, so that populations understand how to stay safe. [479] This case suggests an extension of the importance of the "rules of the game" to all aspects of life during wartime—and shows why ASOP fell short in achieving effectiveness and durability.

4.4 Association with Short-term Agendas: Karzai Re-election Campaign

Another realm in which ASOP lacked local embeddedness into the broader Afghan political economy was that it was overtly tied to the time-limited agenda of President Hamid Karzai's 2009 re-election campaign. The programme faced both substantive problems and perception challenges as a result. On the substance side, Karzai threw his considerable machinery behind galvanizing the programme for its first two years--- but only until the election

[477] Interview with IDLG Official 6, Kabul, January 2016.

[478] Interview with Former Senior IDLG Official 2, Washington, December 2015.

[479] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 67.

season (including the key Parliamentary election in 2010) was over. In terms of perception, citizens widely understood ASOP as a short-term political initiative rather than a serious institution that aimed to integrate meaningful changes into local political order. The programme was never viewed as durable by its population; the prophecy became self-fulfilling.

Karzai was a public advocate for ASOP from the start. Several interviewees tied this to a *quid pro quo* arrangement between him and IDLG director Jelani Popal: the progamme would help Karzai get re-elected, and he would subsequently open up political opportunities for Popal. One former senior Afghan government official reported that as the 2009 election approached, "Popal said to Karzai, let's have all these *shuras* and it will help you win."[480] A close observer of the Karzai family recalled that in 2006 and 2007, Karzai realised that with donors increasingly focused on local governance, their revenue would follow. "There are two massive revenue streams in Afghanistan: one is drugs, the other is donor money. So [Karzai] needs to keep on top of those two revenue streams.... It was crystal clear to me that the whole ASOP idea was rigged by him."[481]

An international analyst similarly relayed rumours that Karzai's handing of IDLG to Popal was a transaction linked to the upcoming election: Popal himself had wanted to run for president in 2009. He agreed to accept the increasingly-well-funded IDLG instead, and pledged its assistance in mobilizing voters, in exchange for Karzai's support in the next election in

[480] Interview with Former Cabinet-level Afghan Government Official 1, Jalalabad, January 2016.

[481] Interview with former US government official and international expert on Afghan governance 4, Washington, November 1, 2017.

2014.[482] Though it is impossible to verify this accusation, it would go far in explaining an otherwise surprising event in the pre-election season. Former Afghan Finance Minister Anwar ul-Haq Ahady, the head of Popal's *Mellat* party, had announced his own Presidential candidacy. *Mellat* was well-organised and mobilised, so Ahady was presumed to be a formidable challenger to Karzai. Because Popal was the Mellat deputy, observers presumed that Popal would enthusiastically back the Ahady ticket. Instead, Popal publicly proclaimed that the entire *Mellat* party—the party of which Ahady was the head—wouldn't support the candidacy. According to one account of the election, "It was a blow from which Ahady failed to recover" in his candidacy.[483]

In the course of my fieldwork, Afghan officials who served *within* IDLG spoke openly about ASOP's instrumentalisation by the Karzai campaign. One such official, while stressing he himself had no role in ASOP, admitted that the programme was "Politically initiated… I don't know why [ASOP councils] were created, except for political reasons."[484] One Afghan scholar relays a story shared by IDLG staff on how actual ballot-stuffing occurred under IDLG auspices, through district governors.[485] Another, writing a retrospective of the 2009 election, argues that Karzai's re-election demonstrates that "The access of politicians to areas beyond Kabul is much greater than recognized. Afghan politicians' reach beyond the capital exists through personal,

[482] Interview with Former Kabul-based NGO executive, Washington, October 2017.

[483] Humayoon, "The Re-Election of Hamid Karzai," 10.

[484] Interview with IDLG Official 5, Kabul, January 24, 2016.

[485] Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism," 109.

commercial, family, and political networks, rather than through official institutions that are easily recognizable to the international community."[486]

ASOP's international backers were not blind to these risks. A 2011 World Bank memo noted that the ASOP stipend "was originally strongly resisted by donors who feared that ASOP councils were in effect patronage networks being used to influence the outcome of the 2009 Presidential election."[487] Still, donors carried on with the programme. In time, Karzai lobbied personally—and successfully-- for the expansion of ASOP.

ASOP's tight association to the Karzai re-election campaign eroded any public sense that the programme was meant to be longstanding. Once Karzai had won re-election, and had influenced the Parliamentary and Provincial Council elections in 2010 through his IDLG networks, ASOP received much less support from the top. As an Afghan former IDLG official recalled, it "was established by Karzai as a political mechanism to reach out into the provinces…. Every time it got close to an election, the political machinery for which it was actually formed was activated. The rest of the time, [IDLG] goes back to all the other stuff, subnational governance reform, technical issues, but that's not why it really exists."[488] In addition, ASOP's affiliation with Karzai embodied a sort of original sin in the programme, further undermining the programme's credibility. It was meant to devolve power to the

[486] Humayoon, "The Re-Election of Hamid Karzai," 35.

[487] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges."

[488] Interview with Former IDLG Official 6, Kabul, January 2016.

grassroots. Yet for all his professions of interest in decentralisation, Karzai himself was deeply resistant to actually devolving power—a fact not lost on Afghan citizens themselves.[489]

4.5 Association with Short-term Agendas: Foreign Counterinsurgency Campaign

By late 2010, ASOP's momentum from its association with the Karzai campaign had waned. But the programme gained a renewed burst of support through a new partnership, this time with a U.S. Special Forces programme embedded within the ISAF counterinsurgency campaign. As this counterinsurgency effort "surged" to unprecedented resource and manpower levels, ASOP gained steam. However, the surge had receded by late 2011, as ASOP was being discussed for continuation. Ultimately, ASOP's close association with the Special Forces effort undermined its local embeddedness and weakened its durability.

ASOP councils' primary formal association with the U.S. Special Forces was through the Afghan Local Police (ALP) initiative. The U.S. military launched ALP, along with the associated Village Stability Operations programme, in 2010 to establish community defence forces in particularly contested areas, thus addressing deficiencies in the Afghan National Army's and Afghan National Police's abilities to "hold" recently-cleared areas. As described in Chapter 3, the Western military emphasis on building up local defence forces has a long lineage, in

[489] Interview with former US government official and international expert on Afghan governance 4, Washington, November 2017.

Afghanistan, in the other major U.S. military project of the time, Iraq, and beyond.[490] US military leaders connected ALP to a longer tradition of Afghan tribal self-defence and militias and hoped that it could be a "game changer."[491]

Afghan officials report that IDLG director Popal pushed from the start to affiliate ASOP with ALP.[492] According to his negotiations, the ASOP councils were to review prospective ALP members in their districts to ensure they were suitable. After a few months of operation, the institutional relationship expanded further: IDLG signed a Memorandum of Understanding for ASOP to rely upon logistical and transportation support from the Special Forces unit overseeing ALP (Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command, or CFSOCC). ASOP's implementer noted that "Supporting these additional activities were part of the CFSOCC agreement with ASOP; they often were requested to provide helicopter transport to enable ASOP staff to visit the councils."[493]

As the ALP programme gained steam and Special Forces resources were seemingly bottomless, ASOP's presence in contested districts grew quickly. The programme was able to operate widely and actively, using CFSOCC air support, security umbrella, and ground transport,

[490] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization: Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," 108–9.

[491] For example, General Don Bolduc, the deputy commander of US Special Operations forces, claimed that he was "inspired" on a previous rotation in Afghanistan because "I learned how to use the tribes and other ethnic groups to secure local and rural areas with small numbers of people." Quoted in Thom Shanker, "Applying Early Lessons to Build Afghan Security," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2013, sec. Asia Pacific.

[492] Interview with MRRD official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

[493] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Final Report," 5.

allowing it to both set up councils speedily and return to remote sites for stipend delivery and training.

As time went on, ASOP grew tightly tied to the military campaign in additional ways. The districts in which it was launched were directly determined by ISAF's list of "Key Terrain Districts."[494] By the programme's final year, fully one hundred percent of ASOP's councils were selected based upon military criteria rather than requests from civilian Afghan government officials.[495] More generally, Nemat argues that "the international military's COIN strategy found a common interest with the IDLG" in projecting its own version of rule over the periphery.[496]

How did this association with the Special Forces undermine ASOP's durability and effectiveness? For one, the mode of district selection presented multiple challenges. Key Terrain Districts were generally the most volatile areas of the country; as comparative and quantitative research has confirmed, highly insecure areas are the least auspicious for instantiating durable community-driven development programmes or development projects.[497] Second, even apart from violence levels, the terrain deemed "key" to the military did not mean, from a civilian perspective, that the district offered auspicious conditions for a governance programme to take root—a capable district governor or a receptive citizenry, for example. Indeed, the NABDP

[494] AECOM International Development, 3.

[495] AECOM International Development, 30–31.

[496] Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism," 105.

[497] Eli Berman and Aila M. Matanock, "The Empiricists' Insurgency," *Annual Review of Political Science* 18, no. 1 (2015): 443–64; Eli Berman et al., "Modest, Secure, and Informed: Successful Development in Conflict Zones," *American Economic Review* 103, no. 3 (2013): 512–517.

programme operated in many comparably unstable districts, but was able to select among these districts for those that might offer the best hope of viable programming. Even ASOP's own final report acknowledged in retrospect that "military cooperation" was a double-edged sword for the programme: "Continued close cooperation with military organizations such as ISAF and ALP should be reexamined. Working too closely with the military, while strengthening the security objectives, may undermine the governance objectives."[498]

More broadly, the association with a military campaign presented further drawbacks to ASOP's durability and effectiveness. First, many Afghan observers argue that the romanticised, slightly Orientalist notion of "tribal militia" was largely outdated or too simplistic in its application. As Aziz Hakimi writes, "These notions of the tribal traditions of local governance and self-defence have been invoked as part of the US counterinsurgency's tribal engagement strategy by selectively piggybacking on nineteenth-century colonial ethnography and subsequent anthropological and historical accounts of Afghanistan."[499] Conrad Schetter describes this recurrent "tribal turn" as one which failed to encompass the more contemporary, sophisticated linkages of Afghan society.[500] Foreigners were not alone in this slightly obsolete conceptualisation of Afghan social order: one Afghan IDLG official himself relayed that Popal

[498] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Final Report," 6.

[499] Aziz A. Hakimi, "Getting Savages to Fight Barbarians: Counterinsurgency and the Remaking of Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 2013, 1–18.

[500] Schetter, *Local Politics in Afghanistan*, 3.

was enamoured of the grassroots idea of ASOP, based upon his rose-colored vison of a pre-Soviet version of Afghanistan.[501]

In addition, the close association with the external military campaign meant ASOP was rarely viewed as integrated into Afghan underlying political settlements. When military largess dried up, so too did ASOP's ability to implement its programme, since it had developed no other ways of doing business. As ASOP's own final report acknowledged, "As the [ASOP] program evolved and grew, CFSOCC ability to commit these valuable resources to ASOP diminished and reduced ASOP's ability to train and deliver stipends to DCC members."[502]

5.0 Conclusion

This chapter has traced how, despite ASOP's considerable resources and high early expectations, it failed to instate decentralised subnational governance that was durable or effective. Multiple, often inter-related factors explain why, but they fall into two overarching categories: the weakness of IDLG as a host government partner, and ASOP's lack of local embeddedness: its tendency to work against the grain, clash with underlying political settlements, and associate with short-term agendas that were extraneous to the programme. Here, I offer some preliminary conclusions about the additional theoretical implications of this case for my broader inquiry into bottom-up statebuilding interventions. These will be revisited in comparison with other empirical cases in Chapter 7.

[501] Interview with Senior IDLG Official 5, Kabul, January 2016.

[502] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Final Report," 5.

First, against a literature that has often emphasized the strategies of international interveners in "fixing failed states",[503] the ASOP case underscores the primacy *of Afghan actors and agency* in shaping outcomes. The Afghan Parliament was a key spoiler to the success of the ASOP programme. Popal of the IDLG made several consequential choices: to develop IDLG as an overtly political exponent of Hamid Karzai's election machinery, and then later to lead the ministry into collaboration with foreign military forces. His successor Farahi proved consequential in his own way, as he was a much less assertive champion for the directorate's interests within Kabuli turf battles; at the key moment when ASOP could have been institutionalised, he failed to advocate effectively on its behalf.

Second, the empirical story demonstrates the central role that *legibility and predictability*, in the eyes of the population, play in statebuilding interventions.[504] David Kilcullen notes that in wartime, people seek "survival through certainty" and defer to actors who can enforce a consistent system of rules and sanctions."[505] In contrast, ASOP tried to introduce new, often confusing, sets of rules to a rural Afghan populace already worn out by decades of upheaval. From highly technocratic, complex "capacities" required of council members, to its defiance of Booth's "available cultural repertoire", ASOP added unwelcome ambiguity into local politics.

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[503] For example, the current Afghan President's work argues along this vein, as well as others. See Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*, 1 edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Cornell University Press, 2014).

[504] Stathis Kalyvas demonstrates the importance of predictability in a related vein, arguing that military control usually supersedes any popular pre-existing preferences or support won through "hearts and minds" strategies. Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[505] Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, 67.

As an Afghan official noted to Nemat, "No one knew what [the ASOP Council]'s role was and what they should do… I think finally this confusion resulted in their full closure of the programme."[506] Using Kilcullen's framing, the programme did not provide "the order and predictability [the population] craves in the deeply threatening, uncertain environment of insurgency."[507] Afghan citizens chose to respond to the programme by hedging, and its durability and effectiveness suffered.

Third, the case study further problematises the (already-problematised) notion of "capacity building" in statebuilding interventions. Some ASOP projects aimed to teach the councils how to negotiate with one another about common problems-- but Afghans had been exercising these skills for centuries. Other ASOP initiatives seemed principally to focus on teaching Afghans to be ideal recipients of donor aid—learning to take meeting notes and file reports-- rather than imparting skills relevant to local Afghan political life. For all of donors' putative focus on "building capacity", such projects seemed to be compounding dependency. Other ASOP training initiatives lectured on an almost laughably technical list of skills, from calculating water tables to monitoring solid waste. Finally, most capacity building projects seemed to be untethered to the ASOP councils' actual or future authorities and incentives. As one disillusioned interviewee noted, "Practices get built up by doing, but also by doing things that actually matter."[508] Yet ASOP largely pushed Afghans through various activities that *didn't*

[506] Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism," 153.

[507] Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, 67–68.

[508] Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 5, by phone, August 2015.

really matter—their councils had no standing budget, and offered no pathway to permanent structures, had no real oversight, and were instructed on skills that they would never be able to apply in real life. In tracing this point, this case adds to recent scholarship that has challenged an earlier statebuilding literature that conceived of capacity building as primarily a technical exercise to fix weaknesses in fragile states.[509]

Finally, the ASOP case demonstrates what is at stake in the agenda for "thinking and working politically" in statebuilding and conflict interventions.[510] The programme alienated Parliamentarians and local elites, and offered marginal utility for actual citizens, so the only constituency with a stake in the programmes were IDLG staff and ASOP council members themselves. North et al argue that "rent creation is the glue" that keeps elite coalitions together; this case demonstrates what happens without such rent creation. When viewed in light of the good governance agenda underpinning most liberal statebuilding interventions, this conclusion is normatively troubling: without patronage flows and economic rents, the programme failed to get traction or durability. Our next case study, NABDP, provides a striking counterpoint.

[509] For example, see Lisa Denney, Richard Mallett, and Matthew Sterling Benson, "Service Delivery and State Capacity: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium." (London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, June 2017); Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock, *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); Lant Pritchett, Matt Andrews, and Michael Woolcock, "Escaping Capability Traps through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) - Working Paper 299," accessed October 27, 2014; Volker Boege et al., "States Emerging from Hybrid Political Orders: Pacific Experiences The Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies Occasional Papers Series.," *Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies. The Occasional Papers* x, no. 11 (September 1, 2008): 1–41; Stephen D. Krasner and Thomas Risse, "External Actors, State-Building, and Service Provision in Areas of Limited Statehood: Introduction," *Governance* 27, no. 4 (2014): 545–567; Shahar Hameiri, "Failed States or a Failed Paradigm? State Capacity and the Limits of Institutionalism," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 10, no. 2 (2007): 122–49.

[510] For a review of the "almost revolution" of the insertion of political analysis into development assistance, see Carothers and Diane De Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution*.

Chapter Five: Case Study of National Area-Based Development Programme

1.0 Overview

This chapter examines the National Area-Based Development Programme (NABDP) as the second case study of bottom-up statebuilding interventions in Afghanistan. Like the other two cases in this thesis, NABDP was a donor-backed stabilisation programme that aimed to bolster Afghan local governance. Similar to the Afghan Social Outreach Programme (ASOP) profiled in the previous chapter, a major focus of NABDP was creating district-level local councils given the absence of the constitutionally-mandated District Councils. These councils, known as District Development Assemblies (DDAs), initially focused on providing development projects. However, as this chapter shows, the DDAs gradually came to assume governance functions in many parts of the country, until they became the *de facto* governance actors at the district level.

In tracing the outcome of this case, I conclude that NABDP was a (modest) success according to my assessment criteria developed in Chapter 2. In particular, I find the programme had a modest but notable impact in *advancing decentralised subnational governance effectiveness* as defined in my analytic framework. I also find that NABDP's impact was *durable* until the termination point of this study, the end of the Karzai administration in 2014. Its councils' *de facto* predominance continued on past the lifetime of the programme, and Karzai

administration policy decisions codified its DDAs into quasi-formal units of Afghan subnational governance.

Against the famously bleak track record of external statebuilding interventions, some scholars have convincingly argued that the most puzzling question is why some actually do *not* fail.[511] More specifically, the record of Afghan stabilisation and counterinsurgency is replete with unmet expectations.[512] Thus NABDP's success, however modest, is worthy of examination. I find that that two principal independent variables explain NABDP's surprising effectiveness and durability. First, NABDP enjoyed a strong *host government partnership* with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, which allowed the programme to embed its activities into the Afghan administrative and political infrastructure. The MRRD developed into a formidable player within Kabul's competitive inter-ministerial context, due to the personal acumen of ministry leadership, ministry institutional culture, and subnational reach; equally importantly, the programme was able to effectively leverage these strengths.

The second primary factor explaining the success of NABDP was that the programme *achieved local embeddedness* within local Afghan social and political order.[513] This chapter

[511] For these arguments in the related peacebuilding and peacekeeping fields, see Séverine Autesserre, "International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 114–32; Virginia Page Fortna and Lise Morje Howard, "Pitfalls and Prospects in the Peacekeeping Literature" 11, no. 1 (2008): 283–301; Susanna P. Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace: Accountability and Performance in International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[512] For an in-depth depiction of this phenomenon, see the "Afghanistan Papers": Craig Whitlock, "Confidential Documents Reveal U.S. Officials Failed to Tell the Truth about the War in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.

[513] This concept, developed in Chapter 2, and applied further below, builds upon David Booth, "Introduction: Working with the Grain? The Africa Power and Politics Programme." *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (March 1, 2011): 1-10; Tim Kelsall, "Going with the Grain in African Development? *Development Policy Review* 26, no. 6 (December 3, 2010): 627-55; Brian Levy, *Working with the*

traces a number of ways in which NABDP fit into the Afghan political settlements, and mirrored what David Booth calls "widely recognised behavioural templates" in the country.[514] The programme aligned with patronage relationships of the newly-elected class of Parliamentarians; it also integrated into district-level politics in a way that benefited local powerbrokers' networks. Further, in contrast to ASOP, which became closely associated with the time-limited initiatives of the international counterinsurgency "surge" and the re-election of Hamid Karzai, NABDP's sponsors ensured that the programme stayed at a distance from these external agendas. The programme thus proved durable beyond the rise and fall of these initiatives.

This chapter concludes with preliminary reflections of the theoretical implications of this case for my inquiry into external bottom-up statebuilding interventions more broadly. Most notably, although NABDP proved successful in improving local governance in key ways, it did so in a way that is in deep tension with the normative tenets of liberal statebuilding—it was instrumentalised by elites as a rent creation and distribution mechanism. We will grapple with this insight further in Chapter 7. Other conclusions include, once again, the primacy of Afghan agency in shaping outcomes of NABDP; the vital importance of predictability and legibility, in the eyes of the populace, to the success of statebuilding interventions; and further insights into the rapidly evolving nature of hybridised power in the Afghan context, of which foreign statebuilders must take better account.

Grain: Integrating Governance and Growth in Development Strategies [Electronic Resource], Oxford Scholarship Online (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[514] Booth, "Introduction," 7.

1.1 Brief History of NABDP

This case study examines what is technically "Phase III" of NABDP; however, the three phases of the programme are distinct enough from each other, in terms of geography, objectives and operations, that each can be conceived of as a separate programme. Early phases of the programme focused on poverty reduction and "economic regeneration;"[515] critiques of these initial projects were lackluster, noting their limited connections to the broader Afghan government development agenda.[516] The third phase of the programme commenced in 2009, coinciding with the expansion of the Afghan stabilisation agenda and the U.S.-led "surge." Importantly for this comparative study of stabilisation programmes, an explicit stabilisation mandate was added to the programme objectives during this phase, and the programme added a focus on more volatile districts.[517] From the start, the programme partnered directly with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development.

The programme encompassed three main areas of focus. The first was bolstering local governance and the institutionalisation of District Development Assemblies (DDAs), which, similar to the ASOP councils, were consultative bodies at the district level intended to serve functions that should have been conducted by the constitutionally-mandated, yet still non-

[515] UN Development Programme, "Afghanistan: UNDP and MRRD to Start the Third Phase of the National Area Based Development Programme - Afghanistan," ReliefWeb, May 4, 2009.

[516] Samuel Hall Consulting, "National Area Based Development Programme (NABDP) Beneficiary Assessment" (Kabul, October 2012).

[517] According to the official press release marking its commencement, in launching this third phase of the programme, "UNDP reaffirms its continued commitment and support to MRRD to insure rural development progress in the area of community empowerment, sustainable livelihoods through rural infrastructure and stabilization." UN Development Programme, "Afghanistan"

existent, District Councils. The other objectives were sustainable livelihoods through rural infrastructure services; and "stabilisation through economic regeneration."[518] Programme materials described stabilisation in the NABDP context as: "contribut[ing] towards a more holistic resolution, which would address problems of operating in conflict and post-conflict environments. … all of which should have a stabilising influence on local communities."[519]

The programme budget, $28.5 million annually,[520] was comparable to ASOP and significantly less than the Stability in Key Areas (SIKA) programme investigated in the next chapter.[521] The programme's operations drew down in 2015, later than ASOP and in the same timeline as SIKA.

2.0 Evaluating the Outcome

To review, each case study programme aimed to foster structures and processes at the district level that would serve as a durable, effective basis for decentralised subnational governance. The primary research question is: *Under what conditions have externally-backed stabilisation programs advanced* ***durable*** *and* ***effective*** *subnational governance structures in the context of conflict, thereby successfully promoting bottom-up statebuilding?*

[518] United Nations Development Programme and Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "National Area-Based Development Programme: Projects Across Afghanistan," May 2015.

[519] UN Development Programme, "Afghanistan."

[520] United Nations Development Programme and Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "National Area-Based Development Programme Annual Report 2015," 2015, 2.

[521] ASOP's budget was $34.5 million over two and a half years, but spread across fewer than half the number of districts as NABDP, making its per-district budget comparable or less than NABDP. SIKA's budget was an enormous $300 million.

In evaluating the outcome of the NABDP case, I again operationalise two elements of the dependent variable. First, I assess the programme's *effectiveness* at promoting good decentralised subnational governance, evaluating whether the programme helped to promote good local *authority and autonomy, accountability,* and *capacity*.[522] Second, I evaluate the programme's *durability* of effects past the lifespan of the programme.

According to these evaluation criteria, NABDP achieved a (modest) level of success. It achieved high levels of local authority and autonomy; moderately high levels of local accountability, and moderate levels of local capacity. Its changes were also institutionalised to the end of the Karzai administration.

2.1 Evaluating Effectiveness

I assess below the extent to which NABDP advanced effective decentralised subnational *authority and autonomy; accountability;* and *capacity*. As described in Chapter 2, my research design acknowledges the significant challenges in the conceptualisation and measurement of decentralisation and subnational governance, especially in the Afghan wartime context. I mitigate these challenges through extensive triangulation of my qualitative inputs; in particular, I sought out a wide array of perspectives, including Afghan government officials, Afghan non-governmental observers, international officials, international analysts, programme managers, and official programme documents in making my assessments. Building upon Michael Mann's notion of "intrastructural power," the state's ability "to implement logistically political decisions

[522] USAID, "Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook," June 2009.

throughout the realm"—including the provision of public goods,[523] I assess programme effectiveness by evaluating evidence that the programme's subnational governance reforms were observed in practice by citizenry or officials, rather than solely advanced on paper.

2.2 Authority and Autonomy

I evaluate that the NABDP achieved **good decentralised subnational authority and autonomy at a high level.** In making this determination, as in the previous case study, I rely upon the US government's own guidance defining "authority" and "autonomy" within the context of subnational governance and decentralisation.[524] DDAs enjoyed several forms of official authority and autonomy, but even more notably, as time went on, they garnered additional symbolic and *de facto* authorities and forms of autonomy.

The *de jure* authority and autonomy of DDAs was considerable from the start. Primarily, they had official authority and responsibility to select small rural development projects to be carried out by MRRD and implementing partners. DDAs enjoyed a dedicated budget into which they could tap, an essential component in advancing this authority and autonomy. DDAs regularly oversaw community mobilization processes, developed district development plans,

[523] Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results," *European Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 02 (November 1984): 189.

[524] Regarding authority, it is: "For decentralisation to be meaningful, units should be able to do something for their citizens. Authority can be mandatory or permissive, and can be enshrined in a constitution or outlined in law, or can be decreed administratively. [It] may be conferred through elections, or delegated to subnational officials." Regarding autonomy, the definition hinges upon the presumption that in order to improve decentralised subnational governance, local bodies should have "some degree of autonomy over functions they now have authority to undertake. Autonomy gives subnational officials the flexibility to respond." USAID, "Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook," 17.

prioritised projects, and oversaw project launches.[525] This stands in direct contrast to the circuitous means by which ASOP *shuras* had to request projects described in the previous chapter, in which ASOP councils were required to send every project request via the district governor to the line ministry headquarters, or via IDLG headquarters. The result was that DDAs oversaw a much greater volume of local projects than ASOP, even in insecure provinces: for example, as of 2015, NABDP had undertaken a remarkable 486 projects in Baghdis province; 299 in Helmand; 588 in Kandahar, and 265 in Uruzgan.[526]

DDAs' ability to select the projects undertaken in their district was the most potent means of exerting authority in the rural Afghan context. As one locally-based USAID staffer explained, the lack of other project resources flowing to the district level provided a clear advantage to NABDP, which established a clear track record of project delivery.[527] DDAs also inputted into development plans at the provincial level, directly influencing projects that spanned more than one district.[528] Though in practice the strength of this input varied from place to place,

[525] For a detailed description of this process, see United Nations Development Programme and Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "National Area-Based Development Programme Annual Report 2015," 2015.

[526] The figures for these four provinces are notable because they were central to the US-led surge and the ASOP programme as well. Some other provinces had smaller numbers of projects, due to their smaller populations and lesser focus from the donor community. Figures from United Nations Development Programme and Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "National Area-Based Development Programme: Projects Across Afghanistan," May 2015.

[527] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

[528] For discussion of this input, see World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011.

contingent upon the DDA's prestige and membership, this input still represented a key means for these bodies to exert authority.[529]

DDAs also enjoyed oversight authority as projects were implemented. In contrast to the ASOP *shuras* profiled in the previous chapter, which were charged with monitoring projects but enjoyed no enforcement capability or means to execute this mandate, a World Bank assessment found that DDAs were "certainly engaged" in oversight.[530] As time went on, DDAs gained additional official authorities, such as one connected to a Disarmament of Illegal Armed Groups program. DDAs were given the authority to verify weapons disarmament, a key pathway to unlocking further donor resources.[531]

In addition to these official mandates, as the years went by, DDAs assumed further forms of *de facto* and symbolic authority. Multiple interviewees explained that DDAs evolved well beyond their original development and poverty reduction mandate to local politics and dispute resolution. As one Afghan staffer recalled, "We formed DDAs for one objective but their use got much broader. NABDP started as a quick fix, [as a] quick infrastructure programme. But then, DDAs became a real gateway. People rushed toward DDAs when they had a conflict" [to resolve]."[532] Speaking from a very different perspective, U.S. State Department official based in the Arghandab district of Kandahar came to the same conclusion: "The DDA basically became

[529] Interview with MRRD official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

[530] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 15.

[531] Interview with former MRRD staffer 1, London, October 2018.

[532] Interview with MRRD Official 6, Kabul, January 2016.

the main forum of governance in Arghandab where everything came up—security, education, ALP [Afghan Local Police], corruption, complaints."[533] An independent World Bank analysis echoed that DDAs' *de facto* authority had expanded into a conflict resolution role: "Although DDAs are not intended to play this role, it seems that they are carrying it out in some cases…. Specifically, the DDA seems to have become a 'third tier' for dispute resolution, receiving disputes after they have failed to be resolved first at family/tribal level and then at the level of the mosque or 'Elder Shura'."[534]

Citizen perceptions in the fluid wartime environment were a key factor in allowing DDAs to extend their *de facto* local authority and autonomy. An international official who had worked in the competitor programme of ASOP in eastern Afghanistan recalled that there were an array of donor-driven local councils in his region, but only the DDA enjoyed prestige: "There was a security *shura*, a reconciliation *shura*, etc. But the DDAs were not just development. They were the most prestigious *shura* you could get onto, in the four provinces in which I worked."[535]

DDA members often took it upon themselves to add to their purported authorities, an effective tactic in the ambiguous and contested Afghan subnational governance context. One international governance advisor based in rural Kandahar reflected, "DDAs sometimes think they are bigger than their job."[536] Evidence also suggests that the councils sometimes received credit

[533] Interview with Department of State official 5, Kandahar, March 2012.

[534] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 17.

[535] Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015.

[536] Interview with State Department official 3, Kandahar, March 2012.

for achievements that were not actually theirs. As one locally-based World Bank advisor recalled that the governance system in his area "…was a complete mess. There was confusion. Things [improvements] might have been the doing of ASOP shuras", but the population assumed it was the DDAs.[537] Similarly, one large-scale qualitative and quantitative survey of the population in northeastern Afghanistan found that NABDP and National Solidarity Programme had local legitimacy and were seized with more issues than rural development.[538] The study found that DDAs, in the way that they integrated with community-development councils, were a mechanism that did change "popular perceptions of Afghan-government provided governance."[539]

Although DDAs' first authorities were administrative in nature, many of their membership were motivated to acquire the symbolic trappings of political authority. As one independent evaluation of local governance structures noted, "Many DDA members expressed a desire to be integrated into the formal political system and the MRRD has begun issuing DDA identification cards with a ministerial logo."[540] Eventually, these efforts paid off, as DDAs were tagged by donors and Afghans alike as the local-level body that was a catch-all for various governance and coordination functions. A 2012 document laying out the United Nations' future Afghan Food Security and Nutrition Agenda provides an illustrative example of how this worked

[537] Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015.

[538] Aarya Nijat et al., "Subnational Governance in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, July 2016), 3–4.

[539] Nijat et al., 3.

[540] Samuel Hall Consulting, "National Area Based Development Programme (NABDP) Beneficiary Assessment," 9.

in practice, in the realm of food security, which lay far beyond DDAs' initial writ. The document notes:

> "A similar interim arrangement will also be put in place to ensure that District Development Assemblies (DDAs) …are charged to coordinate [the Afghan Food Security and Nutrition Agenda] at their respective governance levels. It is critical that DDAs and CDCs be capacitated with sensitization materials and techniques to enable them to play significant mobilization roles until permanent institutions are established."[541]

DDAs' expanding authority and autonomy led many observers, Afghan and international alike, to support the idea of formalising their roles. In stakeholder interviews conducted by Afghan scholar Aarya Nijat, "A number of the interviewees seemed willing to explore ways to change the legal status of CDCs and DDAs by allowing them to legally and constitutionally fulfil the roles of Village and District Councils."[542] One U.S. official agreed, noting that in the complicated acronym-soup of Afghan initiatives, citizens actually understood what DDAs were, unlike many other initiatives. "So at that point, why would you want to duplicate or replicate? To confuse the hell out of all of them?"[543]

[541] United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, "Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition Agenda: A Policy and Strategic Framework," December 2012, 29.

[542] Nijat et al., "Subnational Governance in Afghanistan," 22.

[543] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

2.3 Accountability

I assess that NABDP achieved **levels of good decentralised accountability that were moderately high** to local constituents, according to my evaluation framework.[544] The programme constituted DDAs in a way that ensured a baseline level of accountability; further, though DDA performance varied across time and space, most of them also undertook a public grievance function that advanced accountability.

First, NABDP constructed the composition of DDAs in a way that built in downward accountability. DDA membership was drawn from representatives of the *shura* structure one administrative level lower than the district level: each village-level Community Development Council (CDC) within the district nominated two of its members to be its representatives at the DDA level. Thus, as a World Bank assessment noted, "The permanent DDA… arguably therefore inherits some of the representativeness of the CDCs."[545] An international official described the NABDP process as closer to the bottom-up ideal: "It was a truly local selection process. Every mosque sends a person to the next level."[546] This composition process allowed for greater representativeness of DDAs compared with ASOP's councils; as related in the previous chapter, one Afghan observer reflected that a school teacher could be a member of a DDA but

[544] Accountability can be upward (accountability to Kabul-based entities) or downward (to citizens). As discussed in chapter 2, since the stated objective of stabilisation programmes was to devolve power away from Kabul, this section investigates downward accountability.

[545] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 11.

[546] Interview with former US government official and international expert on Afghan governance 4, Washington, November 1, 2017.

not an ASOP *shura*.[547] Another international official reflected that in comparison to ASOP, "NABDP's elections were more bottom up, more participatory."[548]

Once projects were underway, DDAs' connections to the National Solidarity Programme's (NSP) Community Development Councils also increased accountability. As one Afghan government official noted, with these programmes, "We asked for reports, we asked for accountability.[549] A different Afghan observer added, "Before this [programme], people did not know about the central government, and did not know about accountability."[550]

NABDP also promoted accountability through advancing public voice, helping to channel priorities and grievances of DDAs to higher level officials. The World Bank conducted a case study of several DDAs across Afghanistan and concluded that airing this public voice was "a common activity" and "primary function" among councils.[551] The World Bank assessment included a case study of one district in Balkh, where "the District Governor has stated that the DDA's execution of this [public voice] function makes it an important representative institution, and that as a consequence he is accountable to it. While it does seem that different councils [in other districts] put slightly different levels of emphasis on other aspects of their roles, the passing

[547] Interview with MRRD Official 6, Kabul, January 2016.

[548] Interview with MRRD Official 7, Kabul, January 2016.

[549] Interview with MRRD Official 4, London, October 2017.

[550] Interview with MRRD Official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

[551] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 16.

on of requests, issues and complaints to public officials is very common."[552] In an interview, an Afghan official similarly reflected on the importance of NABDP's public hearings: "Public hearings is what they [DDAs] do on a monthly basis. They are self-sustaining in that sense."[553]

More broadly, DDAs seemed to instate a greater—though still nascent-- sense of accountability feedback loops between governors and governed. As one international advisor who was not involved with the programme observed, "What DDAs did is …create that habitual pattern [of feedback] and a real sense of accountability—not just sending your emissary to the provincial level. [It created] the aura of government and the *inevitability of governance*, rather than the ad hoc."[554] An Afghan observer echoed the theme: "DDAs evolved to get involved in the governance side of things: conflict resolution, public hearings, holding people accountable, making sure their constituencies got their fair share of development funds. [This was] 50% of their role."[555] To be sure, this function varied between from DDA to DDA—rendering my overall assent of accountability "moderately high" rather than "high"-- but does appear to constitute a pattern across most districts.

[552] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 16.

[553] Interview with MRRD Official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

[554] Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015.

[555] Interview with MRRD Official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

2.4 Capacity

I assess that NABDP achieved **good decentralised subnational governance capacity at moderate levels,** mainly through advancing the capacity of DDAs.

NABDP's capacity development got off to a slow start. According to Frauke de Weijer, a participant-observer within MRRD, "In the early days, the programme suffered from severe management challenges and a lack of focus, but it slowly took off once it started to connect grassroots level planning capability with subnational planning."[556] From that point forward, DDAs rapidly gained capacity in the essential functions of district-level planning and mobilisation. According to an independent World Bank assessment, NABDP and its DDAs were generally "successful in producing District Development Plans" through a consultative process, and in submitting these to the provincial level for incorporation into provincial development plans.[557] Echoing this assessment, an international governance expert who did not work for NABDP noted within the overall statebuilding project in Afghanistan, little progress had been made in instating vertical systems. But he continued that by contrast, NABDP "actually got its hands into the vertical structures. NABDP is more plugged into the budget process."[558]

Unlike other stabilisation programmes, NABDP's capacity building featured an intentional theory of how the bottom level of governance should connect upward to the top tier.

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[556] Frauke de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," in *Snapshots of an Intervention:The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance*, 2012, 2.

[557] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 13.

[558] Interview with International Advisor to IDLG 5, Kabul, March 2014.

As one account of the MRRD's structures described it, "Connecting the outputs from these two programs [National Solidarity Programme (NSP), and NABDP), as the NABDP has been doing in recent years, was a way to stretch capacity building all the way from grassroots to the centre."[559] The World Bank noted that, "The DDA organizational structure is striking... The DDA structure is evidently more sophisticated [than ASOP councils], with more explicitly defined sub-committee functions and the potentially useful advisory council." [560]

NABDP also demonstrated capacity in that it enjoyed a reach that exceeded its formal mandate of development planning and extended into other governance functions. As one international analyst recalled, "The NABDP office [at the district level] was really impressive. I would argue that it wasn't just about NABDP, it was what NABDP helped these district officials connect to. NABDP helped them develop their capacity. Anything from accounting, to human rights, to governance." [561]

As NABDP approached its final year of operation, MRRD leadership explicitly pivoted to focus further on capacity building of DDAs at the local level, according to staffers embedded in the ministry.[562] The ministry also emphasized independence of the councils: NABDP "gradually withdrew resources from the field, while focusing on building the capacity of re-

[559] de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," 2.

[560] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 12.

[561] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

[562] Interview with former MRRD staffer 1, London, October 2018.

elected DDAs. Equipped with the skills to identify needs, mobilize resources, and manage and monitor projects, they are better able to secure funds and implement projects independently."[563]

The best indication of the capacity that DDAs achieved may come from reflections of observers who arrived *after* the programme concluded. As one international advisor who analysed local governance structures in southern Afghanistan recalled, "What we realized is that the planning process with regards to development [through MRRD] was already here. [So was] communication between population and government."[564]

Despite these accomplishments, NABDP did not achieve universally high subnational governance capacity. Unsurprisingly, DDA capacity varied significantly based upon location; highly remote or insecure districts, or ones with less-developed community-level structures through the related National Solidarity Programme, generally featured DDAs with less developed capacity. Further, though many DDAs oversaw dozens of projects annually, a small number of less-active DDAs only identified roughly two projects a year,[565] meaning they did not gain from the iterative learning-by-doing essential to building up state capacity.[566] For these reasons, my assessment is "moderate" rather than higher.

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[563] United Nations Development Programme and Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "National Area-Based Development Programme Annual Report 2015."

[564] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

[565] Ibid.

[566] Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock, *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

2.5 Evaluating Durability

I assess that NABDP **achieved durability** through the end of the Karzai administration. DDAs were *de facto* codified by Karzai political decrees and by Afghan and donor government policy documents. DDAs also continued to enjoy *de facto* primacy on the ground.

Assessing durability of NABDP requires a brief review of the alphabet-soup of Afghan local governance structures and initiatives. As noted in previous chapters, NABDP's DDAs were viewed as a direct district-level competitor to the ASOP *shuras*. At the national level, a parallel competition existed between the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), the sponsor of NABDP, and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), the sponsor of ASOP. Especially by 2010, with an ever-increasing amount of donor financial resources directed towards local governance matters, the rivalry between the two parallel structures had material stakes for both sides.

By 2012, this inter-ministerial competition came to a head regarding the question of which district-level consultative structure would endure into Afghanistan's (hypothesised) permanent subnational governance framework, since the (long-anticipated) district council elections did not appear to be forthcoming. IDLG claimed that its ASOP *shuras* had a formal governance mandate and should endure as the district-level consultative bodies, while MRRD argued that its DDAs, under NABDP, already were predominant and should be formally blessed.

Donors demanded that Karzai administration resolve the impasse before more funds would flow.[567]

Karzai ultimately paved the way for the MRRD's DDAs to prevail in this dispute. In July 2012, Karzai issued his Presidential Decree Number 45, laying out requirements for multiple components of his administration to enact governance reforms.[568] Article 28 of the decree tasked the MRRD to present a plan to the Cabinet to resolve the problem of transitioning the multiple councils at the district level into "unified" ones.[569] Embedded in this bureaucratic tasking was a crucial choice on power distribution at the district level: Karzai was giving MRRD agency over determining how the "multiple councils" at the district level would be "replaced."[570]

Through one consequential presidential decree, IDLG's argument that it owned the district-level councils was overturned. As one Afghan former official described this event, it was "a famous decree…. there were a lot of *shuras* at the district level, and [the decree was] giving MRRD the responsibility to find the solution to this problem.[571] Decree Number 45 also contained tasks for IDLG, but these focus exclusively on IDLG's purview in defining the role of

[567] Interview with USAID governance official 8, Kabul, February 2012.

[568] English translation of the decree available at Hamid Karzai, "The Office of the President of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Decree No. 45," (English Translation, July 26, 2012); original Dari version at Hamid Karzai, "Decree On the Execution of Content of the Historical Speech of June 21, 2012 in the Special Session of National Assembly," accessed January 10, 2019.

[569] Article 28, part 3, Karzai, "The Office of the President of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Decree No. 45," (English Translation, July 26, 2012).

[570] Bureaucrats globally understand the power of "holding the pen" in sensitive negotiations. For a discussion of this phenomenon in the U.S. context, see David Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-Policy Guru," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016.

[571] Interview with MRRD official 5, Kabul, January 2016.

district and provincial governors, assessing their qualifications, preparing municipalities-oriented legislation, and interfacing with other ministries.[572]

In late 2012 and 2013, Afghan bureaucrats moved to operationalise the "famous decree." Notably, MRRD's Tariq Ismati, the senior official tasked with identifying an approach for "unified" district-level councils, invited IDLG representatives, led by Deputy Director General Farid Mahmundzay, to take part in its policy development process. In interviews, both MRRD and IDLG participants in this process described it as a surprisingly positive collaboration given the previous institutional competition between the two ministries.[573] Still, the underlying power dynamics in these consultations were lost on no one: MRRD had been officially tasked with leading the policy development, and by inviting IDLG to participate, it was underscoring, rather than ceding, its leadership role.[574]

After nearly a year of negotiation, MRRD produced the "Policy for Improving Governance and Developments *[sic]* in Districts and Villages" in May 2013.[575] Cabinet ministers issued formal approval in December 2013, leading Karzai to release it as an executive decree.

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[572] See article 8, parts 1 through 6, Karzai, "The Office of the President of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Decree No. 45," (English Translation, July 26, 2012).

[573] Interview with international advisor to IDLG 2, Kabul, March 2014; Interview with MRRD official 5, Kabul, January 2016; Interview with MRRD official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

[574] Interview with MRRD official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

[575] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Independent Directorate of Local Governance and Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "Policy for Improving Governance and Developments in Districts and Villages," May 2013.

2.6 **Durability in the Policy Sphere: A de facto win for NABDP structures**

The text of "Policy for Improving Governance and Development" established DDAs' primacy and thus their durability, even though both MRRD and IDLG aimed to present the document as a compromise. The policy introduced yet another new district-level body-- "District Coordination Councils" (DCCs)-- and delineated how these councils would be developed, either by recognizing an existing council, combining existing bodies into one, or forming a new one through an election.

Though the language of the document is heavy on "cooperation", in essence, these operational instructions serve to codify MRRD structures. As one international observer recalled, "What happened is that MRRD won with their approach. MRRD said, "What we will do is keep the DDA and call it a DCC.'"[576] The official continued, "DCC is DDA rebranded. It's a nice way to say that to the IDLG." A former Afghan government official concurred, "In practice, it would be mostly [rebranded] DDAs for DCCs."[577] Even in instances in which new elections would be held, the operational guidelines for these elections heavily favored MRRD structures. As an Afghan observer noted, "They are smart in MRRD because they sold the process for organizing new elections as the same as the DDA process. [In] two parts, [first to] gather CDC members, then to make an election."[578] An Afghan political ethnographer, writing while the policy was still in implementation phase, assessed the compromise: "As DDAs are more established and

[576] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[577] Interview with MRRD official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

[578] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

systematic, there is a better chance that the MRRD will lead these councils rather than sharing with the IDLG.[579]

The Afghan government itself codified the durability of the DDAs in one of its many versions of the subnational governance policy: As one analysis of the contemporaneous round of subnational governance policy noted, "DDAs will perform the planning function of District Councils till constitutionally-mandated District Councils come into existence."[580]

2.7 Durability on the Ground

Beyond the realm of Kabuli political jockeying, NABDP also proved durable on the ground. This was not solely the result of inter-ministerial competition, but also reflected the simple predominance of NABDP structures. DDAs were more numerous throughout the country than ASOP *shuras* (388 versus roughly 130), but also were more widely understood and recognised. As one international observer recalled, "I didn't go to a district where I couldn't find a DDA member."[581]

Moreover, DDAs had been concretised in most areas, echoing the theme of "inevitability of governance" described above. As one international who had worked with IDLG reflected, in the provinces in which he worked, even as NABDP formally had concluded, "DDAs are alive

[579] Orzala Nemat, "Development, Patronage and Politics: The Prospects for Afghanistan" (March 12, 2014), 111.

[580] Nijat et al., "Subnational Governance in Afghanistan."

[581] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

and well. DDAs have been institutionalised. They continue to meet even in the absence of funding. There was a core group who still meet, every month or so."[582]

Another longtime international expert concurred, "[NABDP] was interesting because it brought a semi-institutionalised idea of governance. DDAs… become political beast, but it wasn't their initial mandate. They came out of their box because they had space for that. They survived because there wasn't really any alternative. It's easier to deal with them than other entities—all donors thought it was easier to deal with the DDAs."[583] Another international observer who arrived years after NABDP officially closed noted that other donor-sponsored *shuras* were not legitimate in the eyes of the population, but that the DDAs were, even though "some of the DDAs hadn't been funded for years, and we the donors had forgotten about them."[584]

Afghan observers concurred. As one recalled, "DDAs have become their own thing. They are owned by the people."[585] Another Afghan official noted, "If I were to put my finger one on NABDP success, it is DDAs. I personally think [the program] has continued to improve governance legitimacy. Legitimacy as a fancy word aside, it has served as a bridge between the people and the government.[586]

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[582] Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015.

[583] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[584] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 27, 2017.

[585] Interview with Former MRRD Official 6, Kabul, January 2016.

[586] Interview with MRRD Official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

3.0 Explaining Why, Part One: Host Government Partner Strength

Thus far, this chapter has examined NABDP's outcomes and argued that it achieved a moderately high degree of effectiveness, and a moderately high level of durability, in improving decentralised subnational governance.

The remainder of this chapter now turns to explanations. NABDP's mandate did not even initially include formal governance, and it competed against a district-level body, the ASOP *shuras*, that were officially advertised as the incubators for permanent Afghan subnational government structures. Why and how did NABDP achieve these surprisingly successful results?

The first independent variable explaining the outcome of the NABDP programme was the *strength of its host government partnership*, with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. MRRD's official mandate was the relatively technocratic writ of rural development, making it an unlikely prospect to generate a powerhouse governance and decentralisation programme. However, as I trace in this section, the ministry demonstrated strength in a few key domains: ministerial leadership, institutional culture, and subnational reach. MRRD's prowess as a ministry was not only important on its own terms. At several junctures, its strength directly translated into advancing NABDP's decentralisation agenda or durability. At key junctures, MRRD leadership personally championed NABDP and dedicated their staffing and intellectual resources to ensuring its success. Thus there was a direct causal link between the strength of MRRD and NABDP's durability and effectiveness, our outcome of interest.

The fact that MRRD was not only a strong ministry, but it also leveraged this strength on behalf of NADBP, will become particularly important in comparison to SIKA, the next and final case study programme. SIKA also partnered with MRRD, but instead of benefitting from the ministry's strength, the way in which the programme was designed alienated ministry leadership, to ill effect.

3.1 Strong Ministry Leadership

Strong leadership at MRRD throughout most of the NABDP timeframe benefitted the programme. The ministry largely drew its senior executives from the ranks of non-governmental organization (NGO) managers who had worked on Afghan development assistance throughout the 1990s, based across the border in Pakistan; these men managed to project credibility both to Afghan interlocutors and foreign donors, and advocate effectively for the ministry.

MRRD was fortunate from the start in its leadership. After the ministry's founding post-Bonn, its first leader was Hanif Atmar, a young Pashtun technocrat who had served as an intelligence officer at the very end of the Soviet-back administration in the late 1980s, then managed Norwegian Refugee Council programmes serving Afghans in Peshawar for much of the 1990s. This background proved useful training for implementing a complex nationwide programme with limited access to remote areas. Atmar managed to strike a delicate balance between Afghan *bona fides* and Western-oriented credentials in Afghanistan's donor-driven environment. Observers based within the ministry described Atmar as a "strong visionary leader"

who, in an early foreign intervention period marked by unrealistic expectations, "recognised that institutional capacity takes a long time to build."[587]

Atmar maintained good relations with Karzai, and at the same time parlayed his strong contacts with donors into maintaining the space to develop the ministry according to his own vision. As one early advisor to MRRD noted, Atmar "kept firm hold of the reins, fought many a fight with UN agencies that didn't want to lose control, and did not engage with those donors who did not adhere to his vision."[588] Afghan scholar Orzala Nemat further chronicles Atmar's "exemplary role" in attracting donor funds and cultivating MRRD capacity.[589] Unlike the IDLG, which fell victim to the conflicting donor imperatives being played out in its ministry, Atmar made a virtue out of the vice of ill-coordinated mandates: as de Weijer chronicles:

> Atmar made clever use of the mandates of the different donors and put together a portfolio of assistance that suited his tiered strategy. The fact that the donors themselves had not managed to harmonise and streamline their approaches allowed the MRRD to pick and choose according to its needs in a way that resulted in a relatively coherent package of programs and assistance… In a situation with strong donor fragmentation he used his leadership to turn these disparate forces in one direction. Leadership was essential in the positive outcome of this process.[590]

In Kabul's heavily personality-based politics, Atmar's leadership allowed MRRD to accrue considerable "*wasta*" in the Kabuli inter-ministerial competition. Interviews confirmed the sense

[587] de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," 1.

[588] de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," 2.

[589] Orzala Ashraf Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan" (Ph.D., University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (United Kingdom), 2015), 80–81.

[590] de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," 3.

that the MRRD became a prohibitively strong "power ministry" in Afghanistan. Even as one IDLG advisor described his work to advance the ministry's own agenda, he emphasized, "We [IDLG] have tried not to antagonize the MRRD."[591] Another former Afghan official said simply, "MRRD was dominant."[592]

Atmar was succeeded in 2006 by his deputy, Ehsan Zia, who shared Atmar's rural development background—he was also a former NGO executive. Zia also had formerly overseen MRRD's flagship National Solidarity Programme and brought a passion for grassroots development to his role running the ministry. He too garnered positive reviews. One international staffer embedded in NABDP during the Zia era confirmed that he personally had "a great deal of confidence" in all the Afghan leadership.[593] As another international observer noted, "It was never a huge bureaucracy. Hanif Atmar, Ehsan Zia did a lot of good things in setting up this culture."[594]

As Zia prepared to step down in 2010, he and President Karzai agreed on transferring the ministry to Zia's deputy, a Tajik named Mirwais Barmak. Barmak had overseen NABDP as well as the NSP, and also was well-regarded by Western donors. Parliament initially rejected this nomination, reportedly for political reasons.[595] Jarullah Mansouri then held the job for just under

[591] Interview with International Advisor to the IDLG 1, Kabul, January 2016.

[592] Interview with MRRD official 5, Kabul, January 2016.

[593] Interview with former MRRD staffer 1, London, October 2018.

[594] Interview with former MRRD Staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[595] These were rumored to be Barmak's associations with Marshall Fahim and that he was Panjshiri.

two years. Afghan and international observers alike generally agree on Mansouri's weakness as a minster and personal corruption (discussed further below).

Yet perhaps the most prominent indication of MRRD's strength is that by 2010, it was established enough that it could withstand a brief stint of poor top-level leadership, mitigated with strong deputies. NABDP continued to operate effectively during this period, demonstrating institutionalization. As one international observer recalled, "Even with MRRD having leadership who wasn't strong [NABDP moved ahead]. Mansouri dropped the ball significantly."[596]

Eventually, Parliament approved Barmak's nomination, and the ministry continued its progress in the height of NABDP. In addition to Barmak's technocratic background, observers based inside the ministry described him as a collegial leader who was effective at building relationships to get things done: "Barmak was always looking to make friends. His team is this way too."[597]

Importantly for this explanation of why NABDP achieved relative success and durability, Barmak leveraged his own personal advocacy and relationships to push NABDP forward and to assure that the DDAs, rather than the ASOP shuras, came out ahead in the policy negotiations. As described above, Barmak and his deputy, Tariq Ismati, the senior official tasked with identifying an approach for "unified" district-level councils, led the policy development process on DCCs. As one Afghan staffer involved in the DCC formulation process noted, the terms of

[596] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

[597] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

reference for the DCCs were more aligned with MRRD simply "because Mirwais Barmak was a champion in the process."[598]

3.2 Afghan-led Institutional Development

The second aspect of MRRD prowess that benefitted NABDP was strong institutional development. Against the famously challenging landscape of institution-building in Afghanistan, MRRD is "often mentioned as a success story, a poster child of rapid transformation of institutional capacity."[599] Notably, and in contrast to the IDLG, this transformation was largely driven by the ministry's Afghan leadership, which proved more effectual than donor-driven efforts at ministerial capacity building.

MRRD was launched as a new ministry in 2002, rather than inheriting a bureaucratic template from a Soviet-era artifact, as many other ministries in the post-Taliban era did. This proved beneficial, in ways that contrast with IDLG's own experience of being the "new kid on the block" a few years later. MRRD's leadership—Atmar and his deputies—enjoyed the freedom to shape the ministry and its staff cohort according to their vision. As one longtime senior Afghan employee of MRRD reflected, "Why was MRRD more effective? MRRD was a brand new ministry….. All the other ministries had a traditional civil service structure, all had had Soviet training. Whereas MRRD had men and women who were quadrilingual and computer

[598] de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story."

[599] de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," 1.

literate. It was in a league of its own because it had architecture so it could deliver."[600] An international recalled, "It was quite an amazing ministry. MRRD was a new ministry, relatively speaking. It was full of reformers."[601]

Still, similar to the IDLG profiled in the previous chapter, MRRD faced early challenges in defining its mandate. As de Weijer notes, the ministry had multiple constituencies, who each had their own demands for its mission: "Donors wanted comprehensive strategic approaches based on principles of non-discrimination, inclusiveness and equal access, which take time to roll out. Citizens, often represented by visiting delegations from the provinces, came to have their problems fixed, preferably yesterday."[602] Further, even though the ministry didn't directly inherit a Soviet bureaucratic structure, it, like all Afghan government, still had to contend with a legacy of Communist governance philosophy.[603]

The key difference between MRRD and IDLG was how their leadership responded to these institutional development challenges. From the early days, Minister Atmar directly tackled the problem of MRRD's contested mandate by constituting a senior level core team, comprising both Afghan and international members, to refine a strategic vision for the ministry. One former staffer observed that under both Atmar and Zia, the Afghan leadership, rather than foreign

[600] Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 2017.

[601] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[602] de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," 1–2.

[603] Specifically, that "Communist notions of direct and free delivery of services by the government remained strong and are inconsistent with the revised role of the government as facilitator and monitor rather than direct service provider." de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," 2.

consultants, drove institutional development: "MRRD was the only Afghan ministry in which change management is fully led by the ministry, without support from an external private company. All decisions on the reform implementation are taken by Afghan staff and all steps of the reform are utilised to build capacity of civil servants."[604] Over the years, Atmar ensured that this complement of senior staff became proportionally more Afghan, identifying and promoting the most capable civil servants, thus encouraging the sustainability of the institution-building effort.[605] The upper management was described by one observer as having "complete diversity of background, [all] technocrats."[606]

As years went on, in contrast to heavy staff turnover at the IDLG, the MRRD workforce stayed fairly constant, allowing institutional capacity to be built up.[607] As one international observer who witnessed an MRRD strategic planning process recalled, the staff had "all the ideas. They were able to debate: what should be the future of MRRD? They had a vision for the ministry, which was, 'It has to survive for something great.'"[608] MRRD also derived institutional capacity from its implementation of the large National Solidarity Programme (NSP), which then transferred directly back to into its ability to effectively manage NABDP.[609] Meanwhile, foreign

[604] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[605] de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," 2.

[606] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[607] de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," 2.

[608] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[609] de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," 2.

staffers who worked on NABDP were explicitly told their job was to work themselves out of a job, and be replaced by an Afghan who would carry the work forward. [610]

MRRD's institutional capacity development was not perfect. As one former staff member recalled, the fact that the ministry was a "project based ministry" presented challenges.[611] One of its implementation units was outsourced, which translated into lost opportunities for institutional learning.[612] Some weaknesses would come back to haunt the ministry a decade later, during the Ghani administration. But during the Karzai administration, the ministry was largely an institutional development success, which directly facilitated NABDP's durability and effectiveness.

3.3 Subnational Reach

MRRD also enjoyed significant vertical reach into the periphery. This network enabled it to project its "infrastructural power" well beyond Kabul, and ultimately allowed NABDP to achieve greater effectiveness in promoting local governance.

Most fundamentally, MRRD, as a service-delivery ministry, had actual project offerings to bring to district-based citizens. This was a crucial distinction for much of the rural Afghan population, who had long perceived the central government as purely extractive. As one longtime governance professional noted, MRRD enjoyed attractive power from its ability to

[610] Interview with former MRRD staffer 1, London, October 2018.

[611] Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 2017.

[612] de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story."

materially assist district administrations and communities. This stood in contrast to IDLG, which seemed only to "boss around" local-government officials: "IDLG is not liked by provinces. IDLG put together an evaluation [process] of governors—then used it to extract further resources."[613]

NABDP itself benefitted from robust vertical connections between headquarters and the district level, making its service-delivery tangible to local populations. The programme had seven regional offices with a multi-province oversight mandate, and smaller offices in nearly all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.[614] As one international observer noted, NABDP was "the only legitimately well-run programme that has its tentacles in every province."[615]

MRRD also benefitted from vertical connections from the district level downward, thanks to the network of community-level structures instated by NSP. A World Bank analysis cited this as a key factor in the effectiveness of DDAs.[616] A key element was simply that CDCs and DDAs were visible and comprehensible to Afghan citizenry. As one international advisor who served in rural Kandahar, working for neither NABDP or ASOP, recalled, ""If you went to a village and said, 'CDC members', they actually knew what that meant. If you talked about DDA, they knew what it meant. They talked about the DDA."[617] In short, MRRD's "tentacles" vastly exceeded

[613] Interview with United Nations Development Programme official, Kabul, March 2014.

[614] Interview with MRRD official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

[615] Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015.

[616] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 5.

[617] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

anything the IDLG could offer—despite the IDLG's putative "local" identity. This community-level network proved an asset to NABDP in both its consultation and distribution functions, allowing the programme to increase its effectiveness.

Importantly, MRRD placed very highly qualified staff at the local level, allowing its subnational reach to be meaningful rather than merely cosmetic. One USAID official based in southern Afghanistan, who had never worked directly on an MRRD program, noted, "They have done a really good job with MRRD. The MRRD guys [at the district level] are almost annoyingly informed."[618] Headquarters-based MRRD staffers confirmed that prioritizing qualified locally-based personnel was a deliberate decision by ministry leadership.[619]

4.0 Explaining Why, Part Two: Local Embeddedness

The second key factor explaining NABDP's durability and effectiveness is that the programme largely achieved "local embeddedness" in broader contemporary Afghan social and political order and networks. As detailed in Chapter 2, in shaping my understanding of "local embeddedness", I build upon the concepts of "working with the grain" and "political settlements." Below, I trace how the NABDP intervention took advantage of "feasible entry points" for advancing effective subnational governance, rather than harboring high, technocratic expectations "conjured out of thin air."[620] Most notably, NABDP aligned with, rather than

[618] Interview with USAID stabilisation official 10, by phone, March 18, 2014.

[619] Interview with former MRRD staffer 1, London, October 2018.

[620] Levy, *Working with the Grain*.

clashed with, "available cultural repertoire" around petitioning and patronage.[621] As described previously, for many Afghans, the absence of consistent service delivery gave rise to the sense that "at its minimalistic form—the government is the place you go to petition."[622] NABDP aligned usefully with this expectation.

In this section, I detail four primary ways in which NABDP achieved local embeddedness. First, its rent distribution mechanisms integrated into the patronage relationships of the newly-elected class of Afghan Parliamentarians. Second, at the district level, NABDP emerged as a useful tool to bolster the political-economic interests of the "empowered network" of local elites. Third, and related, NABDP aligned with the increasingly hybridised forms of political power in the contemporary Afghan context. Fourth, and in direct contrast to ASOP, MRRD leadership ensured that the programme did not become associated with two exogenous, time-limited agendas: the re-election campaign of Hamid Karzai, or the foreign military effort. Ultimately, this enabled the durability and effectiveness of the programme to outlast these other initiatives.

4.1 Working with the Grain of Parliament

The first way in which NABDP achieved local embeddedness was that it both benefitted from, and bolstered, the patronage relationships of the newly-elected class of Afghan Parliamentarians.

[621] Booth, "Introduction."

[622] Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 3, Kabul, February 2012.

Some history is in order here. In December 2005, Afghanistan inaugurated its first Parliament in the post-Taliban era. As noted in Chapter 3, the milestone came after considerable deliberation on the legislature's relative powers vis-à-vis the presidency, and on the authorized strength of political parties within the chamber.[623] Decisionmakers ultimately settled on a weaker parliament, persuaded that a strong presidency was required to rein in regional warlords, armed factions, and other centrifugal forces. In particular, the seemingly technical choice to elect parliamentarians via the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system had outsize impact: in practice, it meant that many parliamentarians would be answerable to a relatively limited number of voters, and also undermined the potential for issue-based caucuses.[624] Analysing the implications at the time, Hamish Nixon and Richard Ponzio correctly assessed that "efforts were undertaken from the start to keep parliament-- a technically and politically central aspect of democratisation – weak, at least in the short term.... The choice of SNTV has created a weak and fragmented parliament that will struggle to assert itself vis-à-vis the presidency."[625]

Thus, Parliament's *de jure* authority was highly limited-- yet popular expectations for the new body were sky-high. For many invested citizens, the assembly was expected to "give the Afghan people a direct channel to national policy makers."[626] In his exhaustive fieldwork on

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[623] For full discussion of debates on Parliamentary authority, see Hamish Nixon and Richard Ponzio, "Building Democracy in Afghanistan: The Statebuilding Agenda and International Engagement," *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 26–40.

[624] Marvin G Weinbaum, "Toward a More Effective Parliament? The UNDP/SEAL Project," in Martine van Bijlert and Sari Kouvo, eds., *Snapshots of an Intervention: The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001-2011)* (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2012), 4.

[625] Nixon and Ponzio, "Building Democracy in Afghanistan," 30.

[626] Weinbaum, "Toward a More Effective Parliament? The UNDP/SEAL Project," 1.

Afghan voter perceptions during that first parliamentary election, Andrew Wilder found that citizens were unaware of the limitations in the National Assembly's role. Voters downplayed lawmakers' legislative duties, and instead focused on their hopes that the parliamentarians would shower their home districts with projects and services:

> Afghan voters have very high expectations – perhaps unrealistically high – of what their newly elected Wolesi Jirga (WJ) and Provincial Council (PC) representatives can do for them. They also have very little understanding of the role of the [National Assembly]. The expectations of voters can be summed up by the word *khidmat* or "service", which was used repeatedly in interviews to describe what voters wanted from the WJ and PC members…to refer to representatives using their influence to deliver infrastructure and jobs to their constituents.[627]

In short, the 249 new members of the lower house of Parliament faced a strong imperative to deliver for their constituents, most of whom were not well-versed in the finer points of how legislative branch power was technically limited. The absence of platform-based political parties within the chamber—though hardly unusual in a transitional democracy—further entrenched the "prevalence of patronage and parochialism" that shaped parliamentarians' approach to their new positions.[628]

Enter NABDP, which proved to be an invaluable patronage tool for the lawmakers. The programme emerged into parliamentarians' consciousness at the exact time in which "voters would look to those they elected to attract resources."[629] As one advisor to NABDP recalled,

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[627] Wilder, Andrew, "A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, December 2005).

[628] Nixon and Ponzio, "Building Democracy in Afghanistan," 31.

[629] Weinbaum, "Toward a More Effective Parliament? The UNDP/SEAL Project," 2.

parliamentarians were deeply involved in planning for DDA elections: "We had a subcommittee with parliament" weighing in on the specifics.[630] This contrasts with the ASOP rollout, where parliamentary members complained they were not consulted when the IDLG determined by executive decree—and consequently decided to actively undermine its flagship new programme.[631]

As NABDP gained steam, its well-honed *shuras* proved a remarkably handy mechanism for lawmakers. One longtime international analyst noted that generally speaking, from the point of view of a patron, "*Shuras* are a great distribution mechanism, a patronage mechanism in times of election, useful for information gathering, prone to instrumentalisation."[632] And NABDP's painstaking methods of constituting its DDAs—for example, the bottom-up assembly methods so praised by the World Bank—had the unintended consequence of ensuring that this patronage could be distributed as thoroughly as possible within an MP's given province.

The nexus between parliamentary pet projects and NABDP became most salient under Minister Mansouri (2010-2012). As described above, in contrast to the development-executive orientation of previous MRRD leaders, Mansouri was seen to be a political choice and was widely described by Afghans and internationals alike as corrupt. Moreover, both official programme reports and fieldwork interviews reflect a resounding sense that Mansouri saw NABDP as a tool for his own bargaining and favor-swapping with parliamentarians. NABDP's

[630] Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 2017.

[631] Interview with Former Member of Afghan Parliament 1, Kabul, January 2016.

[632] Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 3, Kabul, February 2012.

own programme reports acknowledged that "some projects were chosen by DDA under the direction of the District Governor, under the influence of political leaders (Members of Parliament)", though it added that the programme was taking steps to address this issue.[633] An official external evaluation of NABDP was more pessimistic about the prospects for addressing the problem:

> The system of awarding projects through petitions by Members of Parliament and influential strongmen has become increasingly unmanageable during Phase 3 [of NABDP]. When petitions are made to the Minister [Mansouri], promises are made that the request will be assessed. Some are refused because they are not feasible either technically or financially, or because they benefit the petitioner personally. But the majority of projects are designed and are placed in the District Development Plan. This provides short term satisfaction for the petitioner.[634]

Fieldwork interviews echo this description. One former MRRD staffer recalled, "Mansouri was super corrupt. He was trying to get lots of money from all these different projects, including NABDP."[635] Another former MRRD official described the programmeas being used as a "slush fund" by particular members of parliament.[636] An international advisor embedded within the ministry described the process under Minister Mansouri: "Funding was not

[633] United Nations Development Programme, "National Area-Based Development Programme Annual Report 2011," April 2011, 5.

[634] Sue Emmott and Abdul Moien Jawhary, "Evaluation of the National Area-Based Development Programme (NABDP) in Afghanistan," Norad Collected Reviews (Kabul, July 1, 2014), 21.

[635] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[636] Interview with MRRD official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

based on the priorities of the DDA, it was the parliamentarians. Where was the decision resting? Between the minister and the parliamentarians, in terms of deciding what projects got funded."[637]

One USAID advisor described NABDP's instrumentalisation as an open secret, and not shocking to anyone familiar with the American Congress's appetite for "pork" legislation: "I remember hearing about this. Surprise, politicians advocate for their districts." Still, he viewed this as potentially constructive in Afghanistan's political development: "In and of itself, that [advocacy] process, could have led to a political process. Rather than us seeing it as a very siloed effort, to bring a road, and then separately they will learn about parliamentary budget and planning. In actuality they are tied together. [This is a way to] use the MRRD programs to build up the political process."[638]

Inevitably, there was wide variation among different constituencies, reflecting the different power relations within each district. As one Afghan official recalled, "Some DDAs were very functional, and were able to mobilize resources on their own. Otherwise, they would get projects that their representatives in the parliament wanted."[639] Still, on balance, one evaluation found that "members of parliament have exercised far more influence over how the shares of NABDP are distributed than MRRD or UNDP."[640]

[637] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[638] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

[639] Interview with MRRD official 3, Kabul, January 2016.

[640] Emmott and Jawhary, "Evaluation of the National Area-Based Development Programme (NABDP) in Afghanistan", 25.

This parliamentary patronage trend was exacerbated by the broader backdrop: most Afghan government ministries continued to struggle to deliver projects and services to the remote parts of the country-- the *khidmat* discussed above, that Afghan citizens hoped their newly-minted parliamentarians would bring raining down on their districts. In contrast, as one US government official recalled, "What MRRD had, that was efficient, was a national to village level link that could slowly tie these entities."[641] Features particular to NABDP's implementing partner UNDP also seem to have played a key role in this. One Afghan official, who served in MRRD in early years under the better ministry leadership, noted that UNDP's procedures made it possible for NABDP to execute projects in short order: "As a partner, UNDP was tremendously appealing. You could get money immediately from UNDP. Very different from a World Bank procurement, [which took] 23 signatures-- I was often sitting outside offices [getting them]."[642] Of course, under Minister Mansouri, this very flexibility proved a flaw from an ethical standpoint: a different Afghan advisor, serving later, noted that "Lack of oversight from UNDP was a weakness."[643] A US government advisor echoed: "Why were DDAs so good at getting their money? The systems." [644]

In short, there emerged a convergence between parliamentarians' eagerness to deliver projects for their districts, their close knowledge of the systems and personnel overseeing NABDP, and the eagerness of rurally-based stakeholders to finally receive projects. The end

[641] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

[642] Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 2017.

[643] Interview with MRRD official 3, Kabul, January 28, 2016.

[644] Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015.

result was that lawmakers quickly latched onto NABDP as a way to distribute rents to their constituencies. As one evaluation noted, "Parliamentarians and strongmen are not formal stakeholders in NABDP but have exerted considerable influence over the allocation of resources."[645] Crucially for our study, though these individuals were not "formal stakeholders" in the eyes of the donor community, they were invested actors who had a keen interest in continuing the programme. The programme's manifestly available "slush fund" incentivised lawmakers, local officials, "strongmen" and communities to align themselves toward executing NABDP activities (allowing for the distribution of money naturally ensued). And all were invested in the programme's durability. Inadvertently-- and perniciously from a "good governance" perspective-- NABDP was able to work with the grain of Parliamentary patronage.

4.2 District-level Rent Distribution

At the district level, too, NABDP embedded into local political and social order. NABDP—largely by happenstance—emerged as a useful tool to align the interests of the "empowered network" at the district level and to provide rent creation and distribution.

To begin, the actual members of District Development assemblies tended to be the locally powerful: in most districts, the DDAs' bottom-up selection processes was a power-confirming process, not a power-creation exercise.[646] Though a complete generalisation is impossible, given

[645] Samuel Hall Consulting, "National Area Based Development Programme (NABDP) Beneficiary Assessment."

[646] A notable exception was that gender quotas within NSP, which then ended up influencing the composition of many DDAs, created space for new configurations of power. See Andrew Beath, Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov, "Winning Hearts and Minds through Development: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Afghanistan," *Social Science Research Network*, April 13, 2012; Orzala Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015).

the large number of DDAs, several studies give indications of patterns. At the country-wide level, as one MRRD advisor who analyzed all DDAs noted, "The first thing I saw with DDAs was that there was still elite capture."[647] This tracks with findings on community-driven development programs globally: in Mansuri and Rao's definitive review of over 500 studies of participatory development programs, they find that participants in decision-making councils tend to be "wealthier, more educated, of higher social status, male, and more politically connected than nonparticipants."[648] They add that this elite capture phenomenon is most pronounced in places that are remote and with low literacy and high poverty levels[649]--- of which Afghanistan is a textbook case. Echoing this in the Afghan context, an international interviewee who assessed local governance in southern Afghanistan in preparation for designing a subsequent development programme noted, "DDAs were part of the problem, they already had the power, all over the south. It was all about access to power."[650]

The combination of authority, access to rents, and ambiguous broader rules of the game made an affiliation with NABDP an appealing prospect for local power-brokers. One international official based in Arghandab district of Kandahar recalled during my fieldwork that the district governor—the "gatekeeper" of the district—and the local DDA chair established a close, symbiotic relationship: "The DDA chairperson is the righthand person of the district

[647] Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 2017.

[648] Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?*, 1 edition (Washington, D.C: World Bank Publications, 2012), 5.

[649] Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*, 5.

[650] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

governor. He acts in the name of the DG."[651] Drawing on fieldwork from the Behsud district of Nangarhar, Afghan scholar Orzala Nemat also documented this pattern of elite dominance of DDAs. She describes the potency of pre-existing patronage networks in an election for the head of a DDA, and notes that the eventual winner, a *malik* and longtime CDC chief in his village, won 29 out of 30 votes in the leadership election. As Nemat comments, "The fact that one candidate won 29 out of 30 votes indicates a pre-election consensus on who should lead the DDA"—this was not a level playing field for the election.[652] Similarly, researcher Ashley Jackson, who conducted fieldwork in Dari Noor district in Nangarhar in 2013, described a head of DDA who was a former jihadi commander with previous work affiliations with the National Directorate of Security, with US troops based on Jalalabad Airfield, and as the district chief of police. Given his multiple affiliations, she writes, "Decisions appear to be made and disputes resolved not through formal institutions, but through informal power structures (which, as in the case of the DDA may overlap in membership with formal institutions)."[653] More broadly, these findings also track with Mansuri and Rao's argument that there is a higher entry cost for the poor and less-powerful to participate in participatory development processes, and that "resource allocation processes typically reflect the preferences of the powerful."[654] As NABDP became

[651] Interview with Department of State official 5, Kandahar, March 2012.

[652] Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism," 2015, 152.

[653] Ashley Jackson, "Politics and Governance in Afghanistan: The Case of Nangarhar Province" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, June 2014), 33.

[654] Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*, 5.

still more interconnected with other manifestations of subnational power, the programme was able to work "with the grain" of local political and social order.

In particular, DDA members were already adept at the patronage and petitioning that marks Afghan local governance. As one international advisor to NABDP recalled, "DDA members, they know what they are talking about. They know better than we do all the organizations. They know who in the donor community to ask for what."[655] The picture that emerges of DDA members is that they were connected and savvy-- a description that contrasts highly with the assumptions underlying the ASOP programme, that ASOP *shura* members needed to be "taught" how to advocate and petition.

For local powerbrokers, the primary attraction for being part of a DDA was the DDAs' influence on what projects would come to the district, and where they would be located. As one Afghan staffer on the programme remarked, "The [project] prioritisation process—that we would trumpet – I would hear that the process was very rudimentary….especially strong people and village elders were pushing their own."[656] Interviewees charged with developing a follow-on development programme undertook a robust geographic analysis of where previous MRRD projects had been located, in multiple districts, and reported that the physical location of projects had a very high correlation with office bearers within community development councils.[657] As

[655] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[656] Interview with MRRD official 3, Kabul, January 28, 2016.Interview with MRRD Official, Kabul.

[657] Interview with Ministry of Finance staffer 2, Washington, June 2018; Interview with Ministry of Finance staffer 5, Washington, June 2018.

one international official who had been based in eastern Afghanistan observed, "If you were on a DDA you could guarantee your village would get stuff."[658]

Unsurprisingly, accusations that the subcontracting process benefitted DDA members abounded; more surprisingly, many such accusations are documented in donor-commissioned evaluations. An independent assessment of NABDP acknowledges that "Beneficiary accusations of embezzlement were high, with male and female beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries often claiming that DDA members were using project funds often for their own purposes."[659] A USAID-commissioned evaluation of another programme noted in passing that, "In Kandahar, respondents noted that DDA members and even district governors got contracts.[660] Another evaluation reported that "it has been rumored that DDA members receive "pay" by skimming proceeds from DDA grants and projects."[661] Elsewhere, the report noted, "An incident in Spin Boldak province of Kandahar illustrates why commonplace corruption is so difficult to prevent. The head of the Spin Boldak DDA, the body charged with monitoring development projects in the district, demanded that the [implementing NGO] engineer give him money from the Community Development Program [CDP] project budgets, according to some accounts, through

[658] Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015.

[659] Samuel Hall Consulting, "National Area Based Development Programme (NABDP) Beneficiary Assessment," 20.

[660] Management Systems International, "Community Development Program - Final Performance Evaluation," February 12, 2014, 18.

[661] AECOM International Development, "Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP): Final Report," January 2012, 12.

the registering of ghost workers. When the engineer refused, the DDA head physically assaulted him."[662]

For all their opportunities for rent and influence, DDAs also received plenty of pressure. In her study of DDAs in Nangarhar, Jackson notes that "DDAs face interference and challenges to their authority, compounded by the fact that they have no 'official' status within government. DDA members regularly reported interference or pressure from Provincial Council members, district governors and other government officials to change their budget allocations and planned projects."[663] DDAs were integrated into ongoing power contestation in the district.

In sum, if rents are the glue that hold elites together, then NABDP provided plenty: from opportunities for graft, to influence on development project locations, to subcontracting kickbacks, to access to political and economic opportunities. Clearly, these patterns are in deep contradiction to the ethos of participatory development programmes like NABDP--- yet they almost certainly helped the programme gain local traction and support.

4.3 Embeddedness in Hybrid Forms of Local Power

Directly related, another way in which NABDP achieved local embeddedness was that its programme mechanisms aligned with the increasingly hybridised forms of local power in the contemporary Afghan context. In rural Afghanistan's limited access order, the links between local politics, rent creation and distribution (through donor-funded development projects), justice

[662] Management Systems International, "Community Development Program - Final Performance Evaluation," 23.

[663] Jackson, "Politics and Governance in Afghanistan," 28.

and security are deeply interdependent.[664] In contrast to ASOP, which was given a "local governance" official mandate, but no means of influencing these issues that underpin actual local governance authority, NABDP managed to embed itself within these hybridised forms of local power.

Reviewing some background is helpful in explaining this point. As described in Chapter 3, foreign officials long underscored that NABDP had a purportedly limited "development" mandate, in contrast to ASOP's mission of "governance" and "local politics." According to a 2011 US Embassy unclassified memorandum, ASOP *shuras* and DDAs "have been created for explicit and distinct purposes. Broadly, the ASOP councils are focused on governance and the DDAs on development….DDAs serve as the gateway for all development activities at the district level. ASOP councils' primary roles are to promote peace and security, conflict mitigation."[665] A longtime international advisor insisted in interviews that, "The DDA profile is more development based."[666] At a US civil-military conference in Kandahar, according to notes, "this issue [of ASOP versus DDAs] was widely discussed and it became clear to those present that the roles of these two distinct entities are different, and should not interfere with one another."[667] (Notably, "all those present" included only ISAF foreign military and civilian officials, rather than the rural Afghans these programmes served.) Consequently, foreign donors assigned their

[664] See Frances Z. Brown, "Rethinking Afghan Local Governance Aid After Transition," August 2014; Brown, Frances Z., "Local Governance Reform in Afghanistan and the 2018 Elections," November 2017.

[665] Robert Hellyer, "Addressing Concerns about Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP) Councils and District Development Assemblies (DDA)" (Embassy of the United States of America, Kabul, Afghanistan, February 21, 2011), 4–5.

[666] Interview with MRRD official 7, Kabul, January 2016.

[667] Hellyer, 5.

development agencies to interface with NABDP, and their rural development professionals to interface with DDAs, while their embassy political officers reported on the progress of ASOP.

But the foreigners' description of NABDP as "just" a development programme—a red-headed step-child compared with the more prestigious "governance" efforts tracked by their embassies' political sections—meant they underestimated NABDP's potency as a resource-distributing actor. At the local level, Afghan politics essentially boils down to rent creation, resource distribution, very basic public goods projects, and dispute resolution—and the MRRD structures were the locus for all of these functions. It was this rent-creation mechanism which allowed NABDP to become a durable force shaping local socio-political order and an independent patronage network, without depending on the presidential palace to gain access. In the quickly-evolving Afghan context, donors missed a newly hybridised form of power.

Fieldwork provided multiple illustrations of how, in practice, DDAs effectively leveraged this hybrid power. In one interview, one long-serving US government representative reflected that there were concrete benefits that would accrue to DDA members, while in contrast, no immediate benefits would come to an Afghan who requested a project through ASOP's circuitous process, since there was no budget directly attached to it: "As farmer Joe, what am I getting out of this system? I have to fill out paperwork, etc. Whereas NABDP, I know that they have provided these roads, these wells. I have an incentive to be part of that [NABDP] political process."[668] MRRD leadership also intentionally designed other ministry programmes so that

[668] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

NABDP could harness service-delivery offerings from those programmes as well, allowing the programme to extend its writ still further.[669] As one international advisor recalled, "What NABDP had to leverage included, I think, five other MRRD programmes, which really started to answer the mail on service delivery. The roads programme, the agriculture programme, the wat-san [water-sanitation] program, that's consequential."[670]

As described above, the DDAs' legibility to local Afghans allowed the programme to expand from a development role to other *de facto* authorities – recall the interviewee who reported that, in his district, the DDA was "the main forum of governance in Arghandab where everything came up."[671] In turn, this further consolidated this hybrid power and contributed to NABDP's ultimate durability. As one former MRRD staffer recalled, "When I was at the MRRD, we were spending a lot of time thinking, 'How can we institutionalize the [MRRD structures]?' But the end of the day, that was a stupid question – we didn't need to worry. You ask a man how to distribute fertilizers, you ask how to raise awareness" at the local level, and it would always be the DDA structures that would be asked to do so.[672]

As time went on, NABDP's prowess in development resource distribution made it a formidable political force, whatever the moniker Western donors gave the programme. As Afghan scholar Nemat chronicled in her fieldwork, "The DDAs have been received by the

[669] Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 2017.

[670] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

[671] Interview with Department of State official 5, Kandahar, March 2012.

[672] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

district and village elites and *de facto* governance institutions and actors as an important source of resource distribution; hence the leadership and its activities were practically taken over by key district level elites or those loyal to them."[673] Indeed, DDA members proved more able to integrate with the new nature of Afghan socio-political networks—and as Afghan scholar Timor Sharan has argued, in contemporary Afghanistan, "the empowered network masquerades as the state." As Sharan continues: "A new political order is emerging in post-2001 Afghanistan where political stability is a function of patron-client relations, opportunistic practices of bargaining and expropriation of public resources for political network gain as well as the instrumentalisation of identities."[674] NABDP built upon how Afghans already knew how to operate—distributing patronage, petitioning, developing among themselves—the "cultural repertoire" Booth describes. As one analyst noted, Afghan local centre-periphery networks were "an increasingly sophisticated hybrid system."[675]

Nonetheless, donors continued to insist that DDAs were composed of qualitatively different "types of people" from ASOP *shuras*: as the World Bank country office put it, "The two councils draw on strongly different membership, with NABDP drawing on younger, more modern and better educated, development-oriented individuals and ASOP drawing on older, traditional authorities."[676] But these foreigners' conceptualisation of "young, modern" DDA

[673] Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism," 2015, 95–96.

[674] Timor Sharan, "The Network Politics of International Statebuilding: Intervention and Statehood in Post-2001 Afghanistan" (PhD Thesis, University of Exeter, 2013), 2, The Network Politics of International Statebuilding: Intervention and ...

[675] Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 3, Kabul, February 2012.

[676] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 11.

members, in binary contrast to the "older, traditional" authorities of ASOP, missed another, related frontier in hybridity in the rapidly-evolving nature of Afghan socio-political order. Donors assumed that these younger players would have limited influence in a seniority-conscious society. But they (ironically) underestimated the degree to which cosmopolitanism, facility in interfacing with Western donors, and business orientation was a new manifestation of political-economic power in Afghanistan. As one interviewee described this misunderstanding:

> There is a generation of Afghans in their 20s and 30s, and the assumption is because they are young and savvy, they will be politically unconnected and not into the old way. That assumption is totally false. Economics is an increasingly important part of the equation. Even old commanders have their own foundations and businesses. It's much more complex than the simplistic notion of "formal power" versus "informal power"—everyone is hybridised.[677]

In short, NABDP managed to develop a political and resource-distribution function that was independent of the "democracy pantomime" occurring in Kabul, allowing the programme managed to become an important form of power in its own right. It tapped into the newly hybridized forms of power and connection in Afghanistan, and through this aspect of its local embeddedness, it achieved effectiveness and durability.

4.4 Disassociation from Short-term Military and Political Agendas

The final way that NABDP achieved local embeddedness stemmed from the fact that the programme's leadership consistently rejected close association with the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) and, separately, also distanced the programme from the presidential

[677] Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 3, Kabul, February 2012.

palace. Although the programme was classified as a stabilisation effort and worked in insecure areas, its managers made considerable efforts to separate it from the burgeoning foreign military footprint in Afghanistan. As a consequence, citizens viewed it as an autonomous entity, which allowed the programme to integrate more into the grain of local Afghan order, and ultimately achieve greater durability.

NABDP was originally conceived as a rural development-oriented programme; even as its activities began to extend into the political and governance realm, and took on a formal "stabilisation" mandate, it maintained this fundamental identity. MRRD leadership, who hailed from development and NGO backgrounds, strongly influenced this bureaucratic identity. As one internal advisor to the ministry recalled of Barmak, "Barmak is a pure product of the World Bank vision of the world, and his team is this way too. His team are pure" development professionals."[678] Unlike IDLG leader Popal, who as described in Chapter 4 embraced associations with ISAF, MRRD leadership-- mirroring many development professionals globally-- were committed to distancing their programmes from foreign military actors.

In comparison to ASOP, NABDP managers also took the long view on the military campaign. One MRRD staffer reflected: "The MRRD perspective was that ASOP was a security-based program, but there was the depth and breadth of issues on political and development side, and these [MRRD] programs would take over from ASOP. The security element would have served its purpose."[679] Many international staff who worked on NABDP, hailing from a more

[678] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[679] Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 2017.

traditional development backgrounds than those working in the IDLG, shared the passionate view on the importance of maintaining separation from the military. One recalled, "ISAF were always calling us for meetings, and we said, 'No, stay the F--- away from us. We will tell your PRTs what we are doing, but we do not want to be part of ISAF's governance plans or whatever.'"[680]

As the US-led surge accelerated in the winter of 2009-2010, many Afghan and foreign NABDP staffers argued that there was an even greater need to keep boundaries between their programme and what they viewed as the problematic counterinsurgency campaign. As one Afghan working on NABDP recalled described the onslaught of new programmes under the accelerated "clear-hold-build" paradigm, "Everything was extremely short term and up front, just a handshake, so the village remembers we are friends in the future. Instead, we in MRRD are looking for sustainability and meritocracy."[681] Though NABDP operated in several districts that were just as insecure as those where ASOP operated, NABDP was able to select even among those districts for those that had other factors that would make programming viable, such as a competent district governor or receptive population.

NABDP leadership particularly resisted collaboration with the military with regards to the Afghan Local Police (ALP) programme. As explained in Chapter 4, ASOP leadership embraced association with ALP and its U.S. military sponsors. But as one Afghan NABDP official explained, DDAs were not ASOP *shuras*: "The mandate of DDAs was different—they

[680] Interview with former MRRD staffer 1, London, October 2018

[681] Merchant, Interview with MRRD Official 2.

were not working with the ALP. The DDAs did not have the relationship with the military."[682] An international MRRD staffer echoed the view that ASOP *shuras* were instrumentalised for military imperatives, saying that ISAF "Used them for God knows what, JPEL targeting or whatever. That's exactly what we were afraid of."[683] (JPEL, the "Joint Prioritized Effects List", was the US government's "kill or capture" roster.[684]) My own research found no confirmation that the information shared by ASOP was indeed utilised by the JPEL. But the existence of this rumour demonstrates how inextricably linked ASOP's reputation was to the agenda of external military interveners.

In the short-term, maintaining distance between NABDP and the "surging" foreign military forces put considerable strain on MRRD leadership and staff; meanwhile, as described in the previous chapter, ASOP was showered with financial largesse and logistical support. But when the military bubble popped eighteen months later, NABDP was able to carry on unaffected. In humanitarian and development circles and scholarship, collaboration with military actors is often contested on normative and ethical grounds. But the NABDP and ASOP cases demonstrate a very different, more pragmatic reason why such collaboration can be problematic: close military association may constrain development programmes' effectiveness or durability.

Finally, though less prominently, NABDP also appeared to keep a distance from the time-limited political agendas of Hamid Karzai's presidential administration; this had the

[682] Interview with former senior ASOP staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[683] Interview with former MRRD staffer 1, London, October 2018.

[684] *What Is the Secretive U.S. "Kill/Capture" Campaign?*, Frontline (PBS), accessed January 14, 2019.

ultimate effect of broadening its political infrastructure and increasing its local embeddedness. In contrast to ASOP, which was transparently instrumentalised toward helping Karzai win elections, NABDP largely maintained independence from the presidential palace. Notably, this does not mean that NABDP was a neutral, apolitical entity. As discussed above, NABDP focused on development project delivery, and through those means, managed to become a formidable political-economic actor in its own right.

But these political activities were not tied to Karzai's political star—and ultimately, this contributed to NABDP's durability and effectiveness. No interviews surfaced reports of DDA instrumentalization for the Karzai re-election campaign. Further, one Afghan MRRD staffer described an election process for a DDA in Kandahar, the stomping grounds of President Karzai's strongman brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai. Ahmed Wali had a clear choice for DDA chief, whom he backed; "he told people to support his candidate. But the DDA defied him, because it was a secret ballot."[685] Just as NABDP's identity as "just" a rural development programme and MRRD's identity as "just" a technical rural development ministry allowed foreign embassies to underestimate their potency, it seems that these identities allowed them to stay somewhat off the radar screen of Karzai, or at least to not face huge consequences when they defied his wishes.

5.0 Conclusion

To sum up, this case study was a modest success in the narrowly defined terms of this thesis. NABDP was an exogenously-backed stabilisation programme that demonstrated modest,

[685] Interview with MRRD Official 6, Kabul, January 2016.

yet observable, success in improving decentralised subnational governance. Its effects were also durable through the end of the Karzai administration.

In the notoriously challenging Afghan statebuilding landscape, even a modest success is worthy of examination. I find two factors primarily account for this outcome. First, the NABDP partnership with the strong Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development was a necessary condition for its success. The personal prestige and skill of early MRRD leadership, the ministry's remarkable and largely Afghan-led institutional development, and the ministry's subnational reach all combined in enabling the programme to project its objectives onto the periphery. These factors also ensured that the programme would be durable, as senior MRRD leadership personally championed NABDP at key junctures and the programme became deeply engrained in ministry structures. Second, NABDP worked "with the grain" of Afghan political-economic networks and patronage ties. Afghan parliamentarians and local-level elites all had an interest in the programme's success and its perpetuation.[686] It achieved local embeddedness in the newly hybridised forms of power in local Afghanistan, and maintained a distance from short-term military and political agendas, ultimately to its benefit.

I provide here some brief conclusions about the theoretical implications of this case for my broader inquiry into bottom-up statebuilding, to be elaborated upon in Chapter 7. First, and most strikingly, this reasons for this successful outcome invite clear normative concerns: NABDP's durability and effectiveness were largely a function of its instrumentalisation by

[686] We can also accept the possibility that, as years went on, the causal links went both ways: the programme was successful because it worked with the grain and had strong ministry leadership, but local political orders were also shaped to incorporate this strong programme.

power brokers. After all, the goal of liberal statebuilding is to move countries *away* from neopatrimonial institutions and toward good governance; no best practice manual for statebuilding interventions will include a recommendation to "integrate into local patronage flows." NABDP was able to decentralise key governance functions, and do so in an enduring way, largely because it created and distributed rents—an echo of North et al's argument that in limited-access orders, "rent creation provides the glue that holds the coalition together."[687] More recently, Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand and Patrick Meehan note that in conflict contexts, "These rent-sharing arrangements can stabilise violent conflict by providing a mechanism through which powerful challengers to state authority are co-opted into stable coalitions."[688] The authors acknowledge the "baleful legacies" of such bargains vis-à-vis other objectives associated with the liberal statebuilding model.[689] We will investigate these legacies further in the final chapters of the thesis.

The second notable conclusion is, once again, the marginal role of international actors in influencing the case study outcome. Certainly, foreign donors sponsored the programme and installed its management systems. But what separated NABDP from the other two case studies was almost entirely shaped by national and local elites, who determined how to leverage the programme to meet their own agendas. Parliamentarians, who lacked other means to meet their constituents' sky-high expectations for patronage, determined the project could be

[687] Douglass C North et al., "Limited Access Orders In The Developing World :A New Approach To The Problems Of Development," *Policy Research Working Papers*, 8, accessed May 30, 2019.

[688] Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand, and Patrick Meehan, "Synthesis Paper: Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains That Reduce Violent Conflict," Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project (London: U.K. Stabilisation Unit, April 2018), 2.

[689] Cheng, Goodhand, and Meehan, "Synthesis Paper," 2.

instrumentalised to suit their priorities; district-based power brokers figured out the programme could be useful for their own resource distribution objectives. At the level of the Ministry, MRRD leadership played an essential role in ensuring the programme did not become too closely associated with the time-limited foreign military campaign or Karzai's own agenda, and for advocating for the programme at key junctures.

Third, this case again underscores the vital importance of predictability and recognisability, in the eyes of the populace, to the success of statebuilding interventions. As years went on, DDAs became a "legible" institution to Afghan villagers; recall the interviewee who observed, "If you went to a village and talked about DDA, *they knew what it meant. They talked about the DDA."*[690] Against the alphabet-soup of the international project in Afghanistan, knowing what an acronym meant was no small feat. This legibility, in turn, allowed DDAs to slowly expand their purview from their initial mandate, development, into local politics, conflict resolution, justice and governance. Given the complexity of the donor jungle, NABDP effectively established—and then benefitted from—a recognisable brand.

Finally, NABDP expands our appreciation of the newly hybridised forms of power in contemporary Afghanistan (and potentially other fragile states), and shows why foreign interveners should take better account of them. The programme was successful because it was valued by a combination of both "new" and "old" power structures: local elites, business interests, parliamentarians, and development-oriented subcontractors all cooperated to advance their own interests and, incidentally, make the programme successful and durable. As Dipali

[690] Interview with former US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

Mukhopadhyay finds in her work, power in post-Bonn Afghanistan does not comport with the clear-cut distinction between "formal power" versus "informal power."[691] NABDP also demonstrated a related strand of hybridity: that the simple distinction between "development" initiatives and "governance", as conceptualised by most international statebuilders, was wholly ill-suited to the Afghan context, in which matters of resource distribution, politics, justice and security all overlap. Thus MRRD, skilled in the seemingly "soft" domain of development projects, ended up wielding more political power than the IDLG leadership with a "governance" mandate.

However, for foreign statebuilders, this didn't mean that simply choosing to partner with the formidable MRRD would guarantee that a stabilisation programme would succeed. We will examine that exact story in the next chapter.

[691] "The inextricability of the personal and the political, the informal and the formal, was at the very heart of the logic driving modern state construction in Afghanistan." Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 361.

Chapter Six: Case Study of Stability in Key Areas (SIKA) programme

1.0 Overview

This chapter investigates the Stability in Key Areas (SIKA) programme as the third of three case studies of bottom up state-building interventions. Like the previous two empirical cases, SIKA was an externally-funded stabilisation programme that aimed to build the Afghan state from the local level upwards. Unlike the other two cases, it did not establish district-level councils *per se*; instead, it launched a handful of other district-level processes and structures. SIKA was managed in partnership with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, the same ministry that implemented the previous case, the National Area-Based Development Programme; the programme's primary donor was the US Agency for International Development, which also sponsored the Afghanistan Social Outreach Programme. As will be described further below, USAID representatives voiced notably more ambitious aims for SIKA than the other programmes profiled: it involved an eye-poppingly large budget of over $300 million, a nationwide reach, and a mandate to fill all donors' district-level stabilisation and local governance objectives after 2012.[692]

I classify SIKA as a failure according to my assessment criteria, despite its vast budget and ambitious objectives. I assess the programme had minimal positive impact in *advancing*

[692] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization: Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," Lessons Learned Program (Washington, May 2018), 231.

decentralised subnational governance effectiveness as described in the framework in Chapter 2. Further, I find that SIKA's impact was *not durable*. Its effects diminished as soon as the programme ended, and follow-on subnational governance policies promulgated by the Afghan government demonstrate that the programmeleft almost no institutional residue in its wake.

This thesis argues that two principal factors explain outcomes in bottom-up statebuilding in Afghanistan: the strength of host government partnership, and local embeddedness. Notably, SIKA partnered with a formidable, capable host government entity, the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. However, I find that USAID's design and implementation of the programme served to undermine (and even clash with) the MRRD's strength. In other words, though SIKA had a strong host government *partner* in MRRD, the resultant collaboration was not a strong *partnership*. This constrained the programme's effectiveness and durability.

Further, SIKA's operations worked against, rather than aligning with, local political-economic incentives.[693] The ways in which SIKA lacked local embeddedness included its embrace of technical, complex means to combat fundamentally political problems; its focus on generating a maximalist number of projects that weren't the highest priority of communities. In addition, similar to the ASOP programme studied in Chapter 4, SIKA was first buoyed, but ultimately undermined, by its association with the short-term US military counterinsurgency campaign.

[693] As discussed in previous chapters, this concept, developed in Chapter 2 and applied further below, builds upon David Booth, "Introduction: Working with the Grain? The Africa Power and Politics Programme," *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (March 1, 2011): 1–10; "Going with the Grain in African Development? - Kelsall - 2011 - Development Policy Review - Wiley Online Library," accessed March 18, 2018; Brian Levy, *Working with the Grain: Integrating Governance and Growth in Development Strategies [Electronic Resource]*, Oxford Scholarship Online (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

The chapter ends with a brief review of SIKA's other implications for exogenous statebuilding endeavours. First, the story of SIKA again compels us to rethink the focus on "capacity building" in statebuilding endeavours; second, the case again underscores the importance of Afghan national and local elites' agency in shaping outcomes. Third, SIKA provides a rich example of what could be called *performative statebuilding*: Afghan stakeholders acting out the ceremonial aspects of a "responsive, accountable" local government in order to placate their foreign benefactors. And finally, the SIKA case adds to the debate on the conceptualisation and implementation of service delivery as a key tenet of statebuilding interventions.

1.1 Brief History of SIKA

SIKA was launched in December 2011 and closed out in mid-2015, making it roughly contemporaneous to the other two programmes studied here, though slightly longer and later in timeframe than ASOP. Its advent was marked by a nationwide mandate, sky-high ambitions, and a budget to match. In early periods of design, US policymakers voiced hopes that SIKA would inherit and take forward all of the US government's disparate stabilisation and district-level governance efforts. The overall SIKA comprised four constituent programmes, one for each region of Afghanistan; a senior USAID official noted that the budget for *each* of the four SIKA programs was larger than most USAID mission budgets around the world.[694]

[694] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization," 57.

For American officials, an important feature of the SIKA design was that the programme was to be managed in full collaboration with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, which, as described in the previous chapter, had earned donor acclaim for its prowess and capacity. USAID officials hoped this ministerial partnership would ensure the programme integrated fully into Afghan government institutions, and would transition smoothly into Afghan-led processes after the formal programme concluded.

The US government articulated a logic for SIKA that mirrored its predominant conceptualisation of stabilisation: bolstering government legitimacy through participation, capacity building, and service delivery. Official documents argued that the programme was intended to "build confidence"[695] of the population in the government and "extend the reach of government to unstable areas."[696] Echoing a familiar pattern, programme documents frame these challenges as technical obstacles of Afghan capacity and knowledge, rather than rather than inherently political ones. Objectives centred on the need to help different Afghan government officials understand their roles; the imperative to help Afghan citizens communicate with their government; service delivery; the need to work with provincial-level Afghan authorities to "improve their ability to communicate with district entities;" and the requirement to help the Afghan government understand and ameliorate "sources of instability" at the local level.[697] SIKA official documents emphasise that the programme was intended to integrate fully and

[695] US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization in Key Areas- South (SIKA-South Program) Contract Document," March 4, 2013, 7.

[696] US Agency for International Development, "USAID Afghanistan Stabilization Fact Sheet," June 2011.

[697] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas: Final Performance Evaluation" (Prepared for U.S. Agency for International Development, September 2015), 8–9.

durably into Afghan government structures. They promise that the programme would bolster "existing GIRoA [Afghan government] institutions and not result in parallel institutions or processes"; and claimed that SIKA would "not only have a stabilization impact in the short term, but it will help assist the transition to more sustainable longer-term development."[698]

As 2014 approached, as described in Chapter 3, U.S. government rhetoric shifted from a stabilisation framing to a "transition/*Inteqal*" moniker, emphasizing that hefty American financial and military investments in Afghanistan were not open-ended. Yet despite this rhetorical shift, at the level of programme implementation, SIKA of the "transition" era looked comparable to earlier programmes in the "stabilisation" heyday. The specific activities SIKA undertook, similar to those implemented by the other programmes studied, included "hard projects" (small infrastructure, including roads, culverts, and refurbishment of public spaces), and "soft projects" (e.g. trainings, capacity building activities, "service fairs", and conflict resolution processes).[699]

Unlike the other two programmes examined in this thesis, SIKA did not launch its own district-level councils. However, it did focus on improving district-level governance structures and processes, by aiming to transfer authority, accountability, autonomy and capacity at the

[698] US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization in Key Areas- South (SIKA-South Program) Contract Document," 20.

[699] A more comprehensive description of the activities involved, captured by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, includes, for soft projects: "Agriculture, capacity building, conflict resolution, education and youth, election-related, gender and human rights, general public engagement, governance and anti-corruption, sports promotion and development, non-specific infrastructure, and other. We categorized hard projects in the infrastructure category into five subcategories. These include: walls, roads, culverts, mixed projects, which consist of more than one infrastructure project, and other." Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Information on USAID's Stability in Key Areas Program-Southern Region, Afghanistan" (Washington, D.C: Office of Special Projects, June 2018), 8.

district level.[700] It aimed to achieve these results by setting up a new process, the Stability Analysis Methodology (SAM), and new district-level institutions, Stability Working Groups (SWGs).[701] SAM was a consultative process intended to harness input from local communities (represented by SWGs) to identify "sources of instability" that stabilisation projects could ameliorate. In an idealised example, if a community identified through SAM that a lack of water in a specific part of the district was leading to conflict, the SIKA programme could then dig a well in this area. Reality rarely corresponded to this idealised example—as we will investigate further below.

2.0 Evaluating the Outcome

SIKA, like the two other programmes investigated in this study, aimed to foster local institutions and processes that would serve as the basis for durable, effective subnational governance structures. The primary research question is: *Under what conditions have externally-backed stabilisation programs advanced **durable** and **effective** decentralised subnational governance structures in the context of conflict?*

This section examines the local-level institutions and processes that SIKA generated, to assess whether they improved decentralised subnational governance in a way that was *effective*

[700] See the "intermediate results required to achieve the strategic objectives" of the programme identified by USAID in Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 8–9.

[701] SAM was a simplified version of the District Stability Framework analytic tool utilised by US government personnel from approximately 2009 through 2010, which in turn was a revised version of the Tactical Conflict Assessment Planning Framework tool piloted by USAID's Office of Civil Military Affairs. For an overview of these various tools and the (idealised) way in which the SAM was intended to identify and mitigate "sources of instability", see Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization."

and *durable*. SIKA did not launch its own district-level councils as the first two case studies in this thesis did. Bennett and Elman's guidance is that in the real world, "It is never possible to find perfectly matched cases, which would require that the cases would be matched vis-à-vis both known and unknown rival hypotheses."[702] I have classified SIKA as comparable to the other two case studies in that the programme was 1) an exogenously-supported civilian stabilisation programme working at the district level in Afghanistan, and 2) a programme for which the stated objective was to improve district-level decentralised governance and establish authority, accountability, autonomy and capacity at the district level.[703] I will be focusing on the two primary subnational governance structures and processes that SIKA launched, the Stability Analysis Methodology and Stability Working Groups. As appropriate, I will also assess other processes and institutions that SIKA instituted in some places, such as "service fairs" and various capacity building efforts. Although the programme operated nationally, for consistency of comparison with the other two case studies, this case study only examines SIKA's operations in the east and south of the country, the primary focus of the U.S.-backed surge and counterinsurgency campaign.

2.1 Evaluating Effectiveness

Below, I examine the first component of my dependent variable, effectiveness. I assess evidence that SIKA advanced good decentralised subnational authority and autonomy;

[702] A. Bennett and C. Elman, "Case Study Methods in the International Relations Subfield," *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (February 1, 2007): 170–95.

[703] See the "intermediate results required to achieve the strategic objectives" of the programme identified by USAID in Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 8–9.

accountability; and capacity.[704] As detailed in Chapter 2, my methodology incorporates, as its starting point, the considerable challenges in the conceptualisation and measurement of decentralisation and subnational governance, compounded by the wartime context of Afghanistan, and compounded still further by the challenge of data collection on subnational issues. I mitigate these challenges by triangulating reported information extensively, aiming for a variety of viewpoints including Afghan government officials, Afghan non-governmental observers, international officials, international observers, Afghan scholars, and official programme documents.

2.2 Autonomy and Authority

I observe that SIKA promoted good **decentralised local autonomy and authority at low leverls**. According to my framework, which draws upon the U.S. government's own subnational governance guidance, authority in the political arena hinges on the fact that "For decentralisation to be meaningful, units should be able to do something for their citizens. Authority must be rule based so as to limit self-interested manipulations."[705] In the administrative sphere, authority implies that that "subnational officials have the authority to plan and manage the provision of an expanded range of services."[706]

[704] See Chapter 2 for full definition of how I operationalise local "authority and autonomy", "accountability", and "capacity". See also Jameson Boex and Serdar Yilmaz, "An Analytical Framework for Assessing Decentralized Local Governance and the Local Public Sector," December 27, 2010; USAID, "Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook," June 2009.

[705] USAID, "Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook," 17.

[706] Ibid, 17.

First, SIKA failed to advance subnational authority and autonomy because its efforts were designed in reference to foreigners' aspirations for Afghan governance, rather than actual realities. The programme led Stability Working Groups through elaborate and complicated efforts to "better understand their operating environment and the challenges to stability they face." Then, programme managers offered SWGs the opportunity to suggest projects to (putatively) address these "sources of instability." Yet these exercises were never mapped onto real-life conditions: absent donor involvement, what would a "Stability Working Group" be able to accomplish in the Afghan government framework? To which Afghan official would an SWG appeal to meet its demands? USAID officials asserted that they hoped SWGs would be institutionalised locally, but given how much donor prodding and contractor support was required to convene each meeting of an SWG, this goal was never realistic.

This challenge was exacerbated by the fact that SIKA emerged at a time featuring even more confusion around Afghan subnational governance than usual. As discussed in Chapter 3, the 2010 "Subnational Governance Policy" document was manifestly unclear about what resources, authorities and autonomy district-level actors could expect to have.[707] As a result of donor pressure, the Afghan government (with hefty international contractor support) released in 2012 a "Revised Implementation Framework" as an addendum to the policy,[708] and some SIKA projects made an effort to connect their activities, at least rhetorically, to the roles set out in these

[707] At over 500 pages, the policy also would have exceeded the word limit for an Oxford DPhil dissertation-- but would not have met the DPhil standards for "clarity of argument." Independent Directorate of Local Governance, "Policy on Subnational Governance" (Kabul: Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Spring 2010).

[708] Independent Directorate of Local Governance, "Revised Implementation Framework of the Subnational Governance Policy" (Kabul: Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, July 2012).

areas.[709] But crucially, it was never clear whether this "implementation framework" carried any stature within the Afghan political arena beyond that of yet another donor-drafted document, intended to placate a donor audience. So any effort to align SIKA with actual conditions was deeply constrained.

SIKA also aimed to increase Afghan citizens' *perception* of their district government's authority or autonomy. By encouraging citizens to request projects from district officials, it was hoped, those officials would be seen to have more authority. But this hope was largely futile. One US official working in Helmand offered a stark assessment: "I don't for a second think that anyone was fooled into thinking that the Afghan government provided the funds [for a SIKA infrastructure project]. But what I do think we accomplished is that we convinced tribal leaders to go to DGs [district governors] or PGs [provincial governors] and that person lobbied for it, and got it done. So, there is a connection. But what will happen when that [money] dries up?"[710] One Afghan observer who worked on SIKA noted that, "We provided resources for the district governors to reach out to communities" as a large focus of the programme. But in the long run, he conceded, "We raised the profile of district governors, and suddenly [after the programme ended] these guys have nothing."[711]

[709] See, for example, discussion of "dissemination of the Revised Implementation Framework" in AECOM International Development, "Stability in Key Areas (SIKA)- East in Inteqal: Support to Good Governance," Report prepared for USAID (Kabul, May 27, 2014), 2.

[710] Interview with USAID stabilisation official 10, by phone, March 2014.

[711] Interview with former Afghan member of Parliament 2, Kabul, March 2014.

2.3 Accountability

SIKA promoted **good decentralised local accountability at a low level**, and in some ways undermined accountability relationships at the local level. Local accountability here is defined by the US government as "subnational officials become accountable to local constituents via elections and civil society forums."[712] SIKA primarily focused on engendering this sense of accountability via "civil society forums"—namely, its Stability Working Groups. The other two case study programmes investigated here, each formed directly or indirectly elected councils, despite the mixed long-term prospects of these councils. In contrast, SIKA formed "Stability Working Groups" without any electoral process, mainly comprising local stakeholders with whom US military and civilians had previously worked.

These SWGs, and their utilisation of the Stability Analysis Methodology, led a pantomime of accountability among Afghans on all sides. SIKA staffers led SWGs through an elaborate process to identify "local sources of instability" and to identify potential activities to mitigate these sources of instability. SIKA then steered the SWGs through a moderated discussion with local Afghan government officials on the "sources of instability" and the proposed solutions. The government officials unsurprisingly agreed to the proposal of spending money in their district, and then the SIKA implementing partners executed these projects.

But these efforts fell short or even backfired in their aim to bolster true local accountability. The accountability measures the programme launched existed in parallel to actual Afghan government accountability structures, such as the district governor, (still not elected)

[712] USAID, "Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook," 17.

district councils, or provincial councils. As one international advisor observed, it was "unlikely" that the programme was successful at instating any actual accountability procedures, because "it needs to be made clear to people [government officials] what their job is," and the programme did not clarify these questions.[713]

In addition, SIKA's massive injection of resources into local political economies often served as a way for Afghan district government officials to circumvent, rather than embrace, accountability mechanisms. SIKA provided so much money that governors often didn't know what projects were being implemented in their area. As one Afghan described the problem, "At the provincial level, governors don't know how many programs were operating, why they were spending it."[714] In addition, SIKA's large amounts of money with a proclaimed short timeframe, unsurprisingly, led to hoarding of resources on the part of both communities and government officials, rather than building up any virtuous accountability relationships.[715]

2.4 Capacity

SIKA promoted food **decentralised subnational governance capacity at moderately low levels**. Improving district government capacity was a primary objective of the programme;

[713] Interview with International Advisor to IDLG 5, Kabul, March 2014.

[714] Interview with former Afghan member of Parliament 2, Kabul, March 2014.

[715] Interview with Afghan-national researcher 1, Kabul, March 2014; Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization," 160.

according to the US government, SIKA was even more focused on capacity building than previous stabilisation programmes, because it was intended to facilitate *Inteqal* or transition.[716]

Yet overwhelmingly, SIKA aimed to build a form of "capacity" that reflected abstract Western notions of governance and leadership skills, and offered limited relevance to Afghan local politics. As one evaluation of the programme candidly admitted, "Unfortunately, SIKA East did not do well in good governance, leadership and management … District governments in particular saw the governance trainings as much too theoretical and impractical. These government officials were keen to learn governance from senior government officials in a practical environment rather than through theoretical workshops by inexperienced SIKA staff."[717] As a senior-level Afghan staffer recalled, "What was actually taught at these capacity building trainings? We had to tell the District Governors to make them attend."[718] The programme's heavy focus on "teaching" Afghans conflict resolution skills was a particularly poor fit for communities who had weathered thirty years of war. As one evaluation conceded, "Elders who received conflict resolution training did not learn anything new as many of these elders have been involved in practical conflict resolution for several decades."[719]

The programme also devoted considerable effort to providing training in the Stability Assessment Methodology, intended to teach communities to identify "sources of instability" in

[716] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Information on USAID's Stability in Key Areas Program- Southern Region, Afghanistan," 3.

[717] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 25–26.

[718] Interview with former Afghan member of Parliament 2, Kabul, March 2014.

[719] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 25–26.

their districts, and recommend how (donors could pay) to resolve them through discrete projects. But notably, the primary skill imparted to communities seemed to be how to reverse engineer the SAM. Multiple Afghan and international interlocutors acknowledged that in practice, communities often "performed" the SAM process to identify "sources of instability" that would correspond to an infrastructure project they already had on their wish list.[720]

As with ASOP, SIKA's other capacity building efforts focused predominantly on teaching Afghans how to implement donor projects and operate in a Western office- in essence, how to be good aid recipients. Official SIKA reports evoke a slightly colonialist tone in describing programme accomplishments: "District and provincial entities also learned how to file, keep records, keep time, and manage meetings during their daily office operations."[721] Another report described "project management cycle trainings, grants implementation training, communications trainings, and administrative and office management trainings" as the "most effective" elements of capacity building.[722] Another list of the programme's capacity building accomplishments reads as an almost farcical catalogue of Western constructs: "District Social Workers (DSW) Program; SIKA local program oversight meetings; Advocacy and lobby[ing]; SIKA board member training."[723]

[720] See also Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization," 77.

[721] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 25.

[722] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 25.

[723] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Information on USAID's Stability in Key Areas Program- Southern Region, Afghanistan," 14.

Finally, SIKA did provide some capacity building efforts centred on vocational training. These rested on slightly sounder assumptions, since they aimed to impart skills that could bring locals some economic benefit, and decrease the appeal of the insurgency. (These assumptions were only *slightly* sounder, as evidence from Afghanistan and elsewhere has largely rejected the assumption underpinning this type of project, that employed men are less likely to engage in political violence.[724]) However, in practice, these initiatives often spurred unintended consequences. As one Afghan described the problems with this assumption, citing a SIKA-managed project in a rural Kandahar district to train youth in motorcycle repair:

> There were 200 participants in this training. But 200 people is much more than the number of motorcycles [needed to be repaired at any one time]. In every house, there will be one motorcycle mechanic. How will they find jobs? Their expectations are raised. Then everyone will compete. So why do they go? Because they all get a kit at the end, and they will sell it.[725]

Embroidery training was another effort criticised by locals: "Where is the market? Who will buy these? Often USAID pushes us to do things."[726] In addition, the embroidery training targeted women for its pupils, while men were the ones perpetuating the insurgency.

2.5 Evaluating Durability

SIKA's designers intended for the programme to be durable: the original contract called for "Afghanization" which it defined as "developing sustainable systems and institutionalizing

[724] E. Berman et al., "Do Working Men Rebel? Insurgency and Unemployment in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Philippines," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 4 (2011): 496–528.

[725] Interview with Afghan-national researcher 1, Kabul, March 15, 2014

[726] Ibid.

processes within the GIRoA [Afghan government] to allow them to continue program activities after the close of the contract."[727] Despite these ambitions, SIKA achieved **low durability** in its effects. The subnational institutions and processes it tried to institute produced almost no institutional residue that continued on past the lifetime of the programme.

During the lifetime of the programme, the most prominent structures and processes SIKA promoted were setting up Stability Working Groups to employ its Stability Assessment Methodology to identify and address sources of instability. Throughout the programme, US officials insisted that this methodology was useful and relevant to Afghan counterparts: as one contended in early 2014, "The biggest success of SIKA has been its facilitating engagements between the Afghan government and communities. Identifying sources of instability was valuable, and SAM will be handed off [at the end of the programme]. The ministries want it."[728] After the programme concluded, however, the near-universal verdict was that the methodology had gained little local traction. A senior USAID official conceded that the programme had accomplished "Not much from a systemic point of view. Did the Afghans take on anything from SIKA? No."[729]

More broadly, the programme's attempts to ensure durability through handover largely comprised a collection of Western-facing "products" that had limited resonance in the Afghan context. Echoing a theme that runs throughout the SIKA programme, they reflected a sense that

[727] US Agency for International Development, "Stability in Key Areas- South (SIKA-South Program) Contract Document," 19.

[728] Interview with USAID governance official 1, Kabul, March 2014.

[729] Interview with USAID governance official 4, Washington, November 2015..

capacity was a set of deliverables to be transferred. A programme document notes that as part of their "sustainability plan," the programme managers left, "Products such as service provider catalogues…. communications and outreach plans…. project photos, catalogues, and posters, curriculums used for taught capacity building modules, and gender mainstreaming guides and plans."[730] The SIKA implementers seemed optimistic about the future relevance of such training materials. One report provides a catalogue of training documents that were handed over at the end of the programme, including "gender and female-specific trainings, communications trainings that included advocacy, fundraising, lobbying, negotiation strategy, unity building, and district communications trainings, district government capacity building development trainings, grant writing and management, conflict management trainings, and water management trainings." The report continued: "Most of these will benefit the … local government offices which can recycle training modules for new staff or conduct refresher courses themselves."[731] Yet the documents do not grapple with the question of who, at the district level, would conceivably impart these trainings in the future.

Other donor assessments conceded that the physical handover of written products was unlikely to ensure that SIKA's impacts would be durable.[732] USAID evaluations noted that the programme leadership had "requested letters of commitment from the MRRD and had a series of

[730] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 39.

[731] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 39.

[732] As one noted, "While the handover of products, training documents, and reports was important, the government required additional resources in order to make SIKA successes sustainable. [Stability Working Groups'] continued operation is dependent on the will of the participants and the likelihood of future funding from the MRRD or district governments. Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 39.

closeout meetings where the sustainability of these community [SWG] meetings was discussed."[733] However, the same report acknowledged USAID's limited ability to convince the Afghans to carry the programme onward, and that the ministry prioritised ensuring the durability of its DDAs rather than SIKA's SWGs.[734] Ultimately, Afghan preferences shaped outcomes, and NABDP and its DDAs were the Afghan priority.

Interviews on SIKA afterwards confirmed that in the medium term, the programme failed to make any durable systemic reform of Afghan governance. It had not devolved capacity or resources to the lower tiers of government; instead, district-level actors and international officials were still waiting for another wave of financial largess to again arrive in the district. Multiple international officials admitted in interviews that their plans for post-SIKA district governance solely comprised a vague list of hopes: "Hope for NSP [to come to the village level again], plus better market linkages through some program," "hope for better line ministry reps", and a hope that specific local officials would successfully lobby Kabul for more patronage.[735] Ultimately, as one document acknowledged, "The overall sustainability of [SIKA] programs and grants is questionable. [It] may end quickly once participants realize they will not receive funding."[736]

[733] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 39.

[734] "It is still unclear what MRRD's plan is, especially considering that funding for district entities has been reduced and the ministry is more focused on its own development bodies represented by the DDAs and not on the bodies the SIKAs organized." Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 39.

[735] Interview with USAID Governance Official 5, Kabul, March 2014.

[736] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 39.

Donors were left looking back at the Afghan government with "hope", and SIKA had achieved no durable effects. As one US official admitted, reflecting upon district-level governance in the wake of the enormous resources of SIKA, "We are back to where we were four years ago. The Kabul-local connection is not happening."[737]

3.1 Explaining Why, Part One: Weak Host Government Partnership

SIKA achieved a low degree of effectiveness, and no durability, in improving decentralised subnational governance. The remainder of this chapter now turns to unpacking why, with its sky-high resources and ambition, the programme's results fell well short of success.

I have argued that the first independent variable explaining stabilisation programme outcomes is the quality of the *host government partnership*. At first blush, SIKA's partnership with the MRRD seemed auspicious. USAID specifically chose to collaborate with the MRRD because the ministry was viewed as a strong ministry, based upon its success with NABDP and other programmes. However, as I trace in this section, although it partnered with a strong host ministry, the USAID-MRRD *partnership* was a weak one. The ways in which US government officials interfaced with the ministry ultimately undermined the collaboration. Ironically, the way that the American programme managers did not fully consult with MRRD provoked resentment within the ministry, which was accustomed to being respected for its expertise.

[737] Interview with USAID Governance Official 6, Kabul, March 2014.

3.2 MRRD: Selected for its Strength

By the time of SIKA's design in 2010 and 2011, MRRD was widely acknowledged by Afghans and donors alike as an effective, well-run ministry capable of projecting its programmes to the district level and below. In the previous chapter's case study of the National Area-Based Development Programme, we traced multiple reasons why the ministry was viewed as a "success story."[738] The ministry enjoyed capable top-level leadership from its launch under Hanif Atmar onwards, with one exception. By the time SIKA was being planned, the highly capable Deputy Minister Mirwais Barmak was at the helm for relevant purposes, and in 2012 he took over as minster.[739] The ministry benefitted from having no institutional or personnel-related legacy from Soviet times, allowing it to attract top-notch talent; its Afghan leadership pursued an intentional institutional development strategy rather than allowing the organisation to be overly shaped by donor preferences. The organisation built significant vertical linkages into the provincial, district, and village level that enabled it to project its "infrastructural power" well beyond the capital.[740] Well before the time period of SIKA's design, MRRD had expanded its work to greatly exceed the initial mandate of "rural rehabilitation and development;" it was *de facto* the most significant

[738] Frauke de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," in *Snapshots of an Intervention:The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance*, 2012, Chapter 20.

[739] As described in Chapter 5, there was one exception to this rule; Jarullah Mansuri was widely seen as a weak minister. However, his weakness seemed mitigated by the strong deputy structure in place by his time; further, he was departed from his role by the time SIKA got underway. See also Orzala Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015), 80–81.

[740] See Chapter 5 for further detailed discussion. See also de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story."

player in the local governance arena, despite its rival IDLG's ostensible mandate to oversee subnational governance issues.

None of this was lost on US government officials. As USAID began its preparations to design the stabilisation programme to end all stabilisation programmes, the programme that would become SIKA, it eyed MRRD as its ministerial partner in order to leverage these strengths. As one US government official recalled, as he surveyed the range of programmes and structures operating at the district level, "MRRD was more legitimate from a stabilization perspective."[741] As the official SIKA contract captured it, SIKA was to exemplify "Afghan ownership", which meant that the programme "must be seen as an extension of the GIRoA [the Afghan government], not as increased foreign presence and must work within Afghan structures."[742] USAID management reached out to MRRD leadership , at this point Deputy Minister Mirwais Barmak, to propose "co-design" and collaboration on the new stabilisation programme.

At the point of initial outreach, the partnership also seemed to be an appealing one from the MRRD perspective. As one senior MRRD staffer recalled about USAID's initial proposal of SIKA, "At first, they came in and gave us this Power Point; it sounded excellent. They offered us

[741] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

[742] US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization in Key Areas- South (SIKA-South Program) Contract Document," 20.

$300 million for community priorities."[743] However, both sides agree that the relationship quickly deteriorated.

3.3 Quick Souring of the MRRD-USAID Partnership

Upon commencement of more detailed talks on the programme, MRRD personnel were frustrated to learn that, despite the promise of both sides "co-designing" together, the Americans had already largely developed the programme. As one advisor to Barmak recalled,

> The director of USAID stabilisation programs came to MRRD to present the plan to present to Barmak. I was in this meeting. The deputy minister asked me to review the document. The Americans said, "We want to have MRRD to be part of it", but it was horrendous. [The programme] was already in the [contractor] bidding process. I said this to the Deputy Minister: 'I don't see the link between MRRD and SIKA!'[744]

When the American representatives returned a few days later to ask for Barmak's signoff, this advisor recounted: "The deputy minister was very mad. He said, 'You call this co-design?' Barmak was a well-polished guy, but he really lost his temper."[745]

Another perspective from the Afghan side emphasises the lack of communication from the Americans: "USAID did not explain its vision to Afghan entities."[746] Compounding the problem, the MRRD leadership saw the lack of consultation as a matter of respect. One MRRD advisor recalled Barmak saying, "You can't just make me sign on this. This is humiliating

[743] Interview with Former MRRD Official 6, Kabul, January 2016.

[744] Interview with former MRRD Staffer 2, Kabul, January 2016.

[745] Ibid.

[746] Interview with former Afghan Member of Parliament 2, Kabul, March 2014.

me."[747] Even after Barmak's refusal to approve the programme forced USAID to rewrite the programme documents to some degree, according to that staffer, "We were not influencing the nitty gritty."[748]

Unsurprisingly, American interviewees describe the abortive effort at SIKA "co-design" in a very different light, and underscore their obligation to provide accountable oversight of US tax dollars. As one senior USAID official described the problem, "MRRD didn't like the contractor of SIKA. They wanted to be able to tell SIKA what to do."[749] The MRRD side argued that the programme should be part of the ministry's "on-budget" portfolio, aligned with the Afghan government's stated intention at that time to bring together the many various strands of programmes into a more coherent whole. But U.S. officials, fully cognizant of increased scrutiny on stabilisation budgets and programmes, feared this was too risky even under the leadership of a relatively non-corrupt ministry.[750] The reports of NABDP as a "slush fund" for Parliament may have already reached some US officials. Finally, there were also non-negotiable limits to how much flexibility USAID regulations could allow for any contract.

It is impossible to fully weigh the merits of each side's views. But most importantly for this thesis, the Afghans and the Americans agree on one key point: the initial conflict between USAID and MRRD stalled the actual necessary paperwork needed to launch the programme for

[747] Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 21, 2016.

[748] Ibid.

[749] Interview with USAID governance official 4, Washington, November 2015.

[750] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 7.

over a year, causing a delayed start for SIKA's full implementation. Even more crucially, this laid the seeds of ongoing mutual distrust once the programme got underway.[751]

3.4 Intensifying MRRD-USAID Tensions

Once SIKA was launched, the partnership between the MRRD and USAID became marked by still more wariness and poor communication. From the Afghan perspective, SIKA benefitted from MRRD's good name and reputation, but rarely bothered to consult MRRD expertise on rural stabilisation, governance and development in the actual operations of its programme. In retrospect, even US government accounts acknowledge that this occurred, at least to some degree. As one analytical report notes: "Ironically, the SIKAs, programs that were designed to foster stronger governance, sometimes minimized the role of their government partners in project design, implementation, and monitoring. Program managers sometimes strong-armed the government into signing documents as quickly as possible or simply went around them when they disagreed with programming approaches...Unsurprisingly, when SIKA implementing partners marginalized their government counterparts, it caused tension with them."[752]

From the Afghan perspective, the US engagement with MRRD counterparts was perfunctory. One MRRD staffer recalled: "I was the national coordinator for SIKA. Everything for SIKA came through me; I was the Afghan government coordinator. And yet, I never knew

[751] "While USAID issued the SIKA contracts in late 2011 to early 2012, the Afghan Government did not sign the implementation letter until September 2013." Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 7.

[752] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization," 75.

how much we were spending [on SIKA]. The Ministry of Finance also asked and also didn't find out. The Minister of MRRD said he wanted to know, and he never did."[753] The official USAID account echoes this trend of minimal engagement, noting that of the four regional branches of SIKA, only one of them met with MRRD counterparts weekly.[754] Another Afghan staffer, who had worked on SIKA, admitted that, when it came to project-level design, "No one from MRRD was involved."[755]

This lack of collaboration often led to Afghans' sense that their time was being wasted to support the pretence of "MRRD co-leadership." As one staffer recalled, early on in the SIKA programme, he was still hopeful a genuine partnership could be forged. "I provided them with a list of priority projects in the districts; they negotiated for six months, all these people from the General Counsel and other offices came to us in turn, and eventually they said they couldn't do it."[756] At the local level, one evaluation cited several instances in which "SIKA managers even threatened to cancel projects if the government did not comply with their demands to sign off on documentation before the officials had time to perform adequate due diligence."[757]

The U.S.'s lack of engagement with Afghan government counterparts went beyond the MRRD. It also included omitting engagement with presidentially-designated senior officials, such as Ashraf Ghani, the head of "Inteqal", the Afghan government's transition initiative (who

[753] Interview with MRRD Official 6, Kabul, January 2016

[754] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 19.

[755] Interview with former Afghan Member of Parliament 2, Kabul, March 2014.

[756] Interview with MRRD Official 6, Kabul, January 2016.

[757] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization," 76.

would soon be elected president).[758] One MRRD staffer told a story of a meeting between Ghani and the director of USAID/Kabul, Ken Yamashita, along with Minister Barmak. According to his recounting, "Ghani says: "Mr Yamashita, USAID is a mess. We don't know what is going on with this SIKA project."[759] Unsurprisingly, as Afghan officials had little involvement with the programme, they lacked incentive or ability to ensure its durability and integration into Afghan government structures.

4.0 Explaining Why, Part Two: Lack of Local Embeddedness

The second factor explaining SIKA's lack of durability and effectiveness is that the programme lacked local embeddedness in broader contemporary Afghan social and political order. As detailed in Chapter 2, in conceptualising "local embeddedness", I build upon scholarship underscoring the importance of "working with the grain" in governance reform, as well as the importance of underlying political settlements. The SIKA programme failed to identify "feasible entry points" for advancing effective subnational governance and instead ushered in high, technocratic expectations almost, in Brian Levy's words, "conjured out of thin air."[760]

I identify several ways in which SIKA lacked local embeddedness. Its managers insisted upon complicated, technical analytic processes to address problems that were fundamentally political, and the programme generated projects that weren't the highest priority of communities.

[758] Interview with former SIKA implementer 1, Washington, June 2019.

[759] Interview with MRRD Official 6, Kabul, January 2016

[760] Levy, *Working with the Grain*.

Finally, and similar to the ASOP programme discussed in Chapter 4, SIKA was first buoyed, but ultimately undermined, by its association with the short-term US military counterinsurgency campaign.

4.1 Stability Analysis Methodology: Technical Attempt to Address Political Problems

First, SIKA's primary analytic processes and tools went totally against the grain of local Afghan political and social order. SIKA hinged upon the "common goal of creating inclusive, Afghan-led project identification and prioritization processes."[761] To do so, as noted above, the programme introduced two primary processes and institutions: Stability Working Groups (SWGs) and the Stability Analysis Methodology (SAM). SIKA implementers convened SWGs to walk them through the SAM, a series of analytic exercises to identify local "sources of instability. After this point, these local communities and SIKA implementers would undertake a "project feasibility matrix" to identify a project that SIKA could undertake to mitigate this local source of instability: in an idealised illustration, if local water shortages were causing conflict, then SIKA could dig a well and resolve the source of conflict.[762]

The SAM failed to work "with the grain" of local Afghan political order in multiple ways. First, the processes were simply too complicated and acronym-laden to gain local traction. The District Stability Framework, the precursor to the SAM, had required international officials to take a multiple-day course in order to utilise it. SIKA's contract called for the District Stability

[761] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization," 70–71.

[762] Interview with Afghan-national researcher 1, Kabul, March 2015.

Framework to be simplified, leading to the SAM. But even this "simplified" tool still required multiple onerous steps of work sheets and flip charts to undertake. As one US government report acknowledged, "Afghan elders and district officials were often overwhelmed by the terminology, concepts, and processes."[763] (Indeed, even the highly sophisticated readers of this Oxford DPhil thesis may find themselves overwhelmed by the terminology.) Another US government evaluation noted that SAM was "Too complicated for uneducated participants (the majority)."[764] Even in the heyday of SIKA, when optimism was high, one longtime US government official based in Kandahar acknowledged, "I seriously, seriously doubt that any Afghans will use SAM" after there were no longer SIKA staff looking over their shoulders.[765]

SIKA's poor fit with local political order went well beyond the complexity of its worksheets. It was premised on the idea that local "sources of instability" were discrete technical problems- and thus responsive to stabilisation programming's limited toolbox – rather than deep systemic and political challenges. As noted above, multiple interviewees reported that in practice, communities often reverse-engineered the SAM to identify "sources of instability" [SOIs] that would correspond to an infrastructure or refurbishment project that they already had on their wish list.[766] From cash-strapped locals' perspective, there was often utility in the outcome, as any infrastructure project was welcome; but the exercise did nothing to affect the overall "sources of instability", which were widely acknowledged to be predatory governance

[763] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization," 159.

[764] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 2.

[765] Interview with USAID stabilisation official 9, Kandahar, March 2014

[766] See also Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization," 77.

and corruption. One Kandahar-based Afghan implementer recalled that the vast majority of the projects communities identified as addressing SOIs were simple infrastructure such as irrigation walls, culverts, and school refurbishments; if the actual problem driving local instability was government predation or graft, then no one listed it as an "SOI."[767]

From the vantage point of Kabul, an Afghan staffer in MRRD echoed this: "The way of identifying SOIs was another problem. [Local communities] would go and sit in the district governor's office and talk about SOIs. So what if the bad governor is actually the SOI? Where can you take those findings? We didn't have a mechanism to say, you have a problem with your Chief of Police."[768] By framing the fraught issue of local power relations in terms of simple infrastructure, SIKA's tools were strikingly disembodied from local political and social order.

As a consequence, SIKA tended to execute projects that weren't the highest priority of communities. Despite the programme's towering ambition, in actuality, its implementers had a relatively limited menu of projects they could undertake: small infrastructure, refurbishment of old buildings (but not construction of new ones), community meetings, and training sessions. As one Afghan staffer recalled, *"*USAID had all these rules and regulations. So SIKA was supposed to address people's priorities, but instead they ended up with a menu that did not meet their needs. A lot of trainings."[769] An Afghan who had not worked on the programme provided an illustration: "How come when I go to a community, they tell me their priority is [building] a

[767] Interview with Afghan-national researcher 1, Kabul, March 2014.

[768] Interview with Former MRRD Official 6, Kabul, January 2016.

[769] Ibid.

school, but when SIKA goes to community, they say their priority is a community gathering with lunch or a DG [district governor] office "refurbishment"?[770] Other interviewees noted that although SIKA's trainings were useless from their standpoint, communities were willing to ask for them, because trainings came with free lunch. Further, running throughout the SIKA programme was the near-certainty that the windfall of stabilisation programmes would soon be ending as the U.S. prepared for "transition." As one Afghan interviewee noted, "People think that USAID is here, we need to get rich. They know that there is a decrease in aid budget."[771]

The SIKA experience contrasts heavily with NABDP, in which project selection overwhelmingly reflected key Afghan stakeholders' preferences—local elites, the constituent community-level bodies that made up DDAs, or relevant Afghan Parliamentarians. As discussed in Chapter 5, this feature raised serious normative questions of elite capture, but it did have the undeniable benefit of cultivating a broad constituency who was interested NABDP's success, ultimately enabling the programme's durability and effectiveness. By contrast, SIKA didn't seem to be offering many projects that communities wanted: As one after-programme analysis noted, "An analysis of the SIKA program's district project portfolios and executed grants shows a disparity between community-prioritized activities and the ones funded by the projects."[772]

[770] Ibid.

[771] Interview with Afghan-national researcher 1, Kabul, March 2015.

[772] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 5.

4.2 Conceptual Mismatch: Modesty and Predictability, versus Episodic Maximalism

SIKA lacked local embeddedness in a related, yet distinct, way. The programme's approach emphasised delivering often high-dollar, maximalist projects in a short-term and episodic fashion. Yet local Afghan priorities were actually much more modest: citizens preferred predictable, minimalist forms of service delivery over intermittent, maximalist ones.

Like many stabilisation efforts of the era, SIKA rested on the logic that service delivery would lead to popular support for the Afghan government; by extension, more service delivery (and more money) would lead to better results. This theory underpins many donor efforts to build government legitimacy in fragile states, though recent scholarship has called this emphasis into question.[773] Yet in embracing this approach, SIKA's designers missed that most rural Afghans had a distinctly different opinion of what services were needed. Afghans reliably cite security and justice to combat corruption as the "services" they most want.[774] SIKA and other stabilisation programmes did not endeavour to directly affect these.

Other than justice and security, most rural Afghans prioritised services that were more quotidian, and at the same time more reliable, than SIKA's projects. As one interviewee explained, critiquing SIKA's episodic offerings of training sessions and tractor distribution:

[773] For critique of this dominant donor approach, see Hamish Nixon and Richard Mallett, "Service Delivery, Public Perceptions and State Legitimacy: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium" (London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, June 2017).

[774] Though gathering data and characterizing the sentiment on the Afghan population as a whole is fraught with challenges, The Asia Foundation's annual poll of the Afghan population's perceptions is the most robust effort. In 2014, consistent with other years, respondents cited "insecurity" as Afghanistan's biggest problem, and corruption as its second-biggest problem. See The Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2014: A Survey of the Afghan People" (Kabul, November 18, 2014).

> It is not this kind of service that people want. They just want a functioning clinic that exists, and when people want to go to the clinic, they want someone to be there. In agriculture, people don't want free services. That has never existed in this country. When we go to agriculture department in our district, we don't expect fertilizer for free. We expect that the guy will be knowledgeable, and that it will be quality. People don't want free biscuits.[775]

Echoing this, another Afghan former SIKA staffer based in Kandahar explained: "Here's what people actually want: *tazkiras* [identification cards], university entrance documents, land titles, tribal conflict resolution, coordination of security."[776] The findings mirror critiques of ASOP in the previous chapter: particularly in times of war, Afghan citizens desired predictability and reliability, not the episodic, feast-or-famine delivery of stabilisation projects. With the benefit of hindsight, a US government evaluation of the programme echoed the problems with the overemphasis on service delivery. "Service delivery isn't a stabilization panacea… The program design stipulated that improved service delivery would improve local governance. However, it is clear from [this] impact evaluation that this was not always true."[777]

The SAM methodology exacerbated this problem, because it hinged on the assumption that trust in government could be meaningfully bolstered by episodic, one-off projects, rather than demanding continuous interaction. By the time the ponderous SAM methodology was utilised to identify a "source of instability", and the "stability working group" agreed upon a (putatively) appropriate project to address this source of instability, actually bringing in an implementer to undertake the project would entail months and months of effort or waiting. Yet

[775] Interview with former Afghan Member of Parliament 2, Kabul, March 2014.

[776] Interview with Afghan-national researcher 1, Kabul, March 2015.

[777] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 5.

this single project was expected to somehow bolster the community's overall sense of government legitimacy and rectify instability.

Even a brief thought-experiment can explain why this logic is faulty. A Western reader could imagine a situation where his local city administration never picked up trash, fixed roads or provided administrative documents. Yet once a year, that city council undertook one extensive consultative process to identify one big-ticket project that might or might not be the reader's own personal priority, that then required another several months to implement. Obviously, this single process would not meaningfully increase the individual's trust in his government; only repeated iteration, or services that were limited yet reliable from the start, might do so, over the course of years.

Ultimately, U.S. government evaluations of SIKA echoed this insight: "The vast majority of communities received a one-off intervention such as a small gravel road, a culvert, or a school protection wall. However, *it is evidently clear that SOIs cannot be addressed through one intervention only.* Multiple activities (hard and soft) should be implemented in the same area over time because doing so increases the magnitude of project impacts and improves prospects for sustaining gains in stability and consolidating support for the government."[778] At the same time, notably, the Taliban itself was successfully rolling out a more coherent and predictable, albeit draconian, justice and service delivery system—a point to which we will return in subsequent chapters.[779]

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[778] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 3. Emphasis added.

[779] See Ashley Jackson, "Life under the Taliban Shadow Government" (London: Overseas Development Institute, June 2018).

SIKA further exacerbated this mismatch with local expectations through its emphasis on "cash-for-work" activities: projects that employed local Afghan men for small infrastructure and maintenance tasks, with the logic that paying them and keeping them occupied would decrease their likelihood of joining the insurgency. On a broader level, quantitative research has cast doubt on the validity of this assumption.[780] More specifically to SIKA, cash-for-work projects often upset the local social and economic equilibria. These initiatives often overlapped with tasks that Afghan communities had been organizing among themselves for centuries, such as water management or canal cleaning. Further, these activities often had unintended consequences. As one Afghan observer recalled: "I had to stop projects when the culverts were being constructed in the personal land of the farmers."[781]

SIKA's myriad offerings of various forms of training further heightened this tension. These were based on similar economic assumptions as the cash-for-work: that unemployed youth would turn to the insurgency, so providing them with skills would increase their job prospects and thus advance the counterinsurgency effort. Yet rather than SIKA contributing meaningfully toward stabilisation, SIKA's trainings were most valued as subsidies for the participants. As one Afghan observer noted, "people are interested in the materials—you must give them per diem, and materials."[782] Though this was certainly a distinct attraction for participants, it amounted to a

[780] For example, Berman et al emphatically reject it, based upon research in Afghanistan among other places. See E. Berman et al., "Do Working Men Rebel? Insurgency and Unemployment in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Philippines," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 4 (2011): 496–528.

[781] Interview with Afghan-national researcher 1, Kabul, March 2015.

[782] Ibid.

one-time resource transfer to SIKA's participants, and did little to develop a long-term constituency for SIKA and thus increase its durability after the programme ended.

SIKA also lacked local embeddedness in that it often focused on the district governor as the local representative for project delivery. District governors were key personnel on Stability Working Groups, and served as vital representatives to host SIKA events or meetings.[783] From the US government perspective, officials' participation in such ceremonies "showed communities that the government was aware of and responsive to their needs."[784] But SIKA injected previously-alien financial incentives into the governor's performance of his role: as one Afghan complained, "All these projects paying for lunch at the governor's—historically, people come to see the governor, he receives them, he serves them lunch."[785]

Further, associating the governor with this activist conception of service delivery contrasted starkly with the traditional role of an Afghan district governor, seen primarily as a mediator of conflicts and a "gatekeeper" to further relationships. [786] Line ministries historically provide (very modest) services in the Afghan system. Yet SIKA insisted that the district governor be a primary "Afghan face" of project delivery,[787] and thus boosted his service delivery function to a much greater level than the job traditionally entail. Though this bolstered the

[783] AECOM International Development, "Stability in Key Areas (SIKA)- East in Inteqal: Support to Good Governance"; Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Information on USAID's Stability in Key Areas Program- Southern Region, Afghanistan."

[784] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 15.

[785] Interview with MRRD Official 6, Kabul, January 2016

[786] Hamish Nixon, *Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008).

[787] Several other stabilisation programmes also demonstrated this over-emphasis on the district governor.

district governor's profile in the immediate term, in the medium run, it did nothing to change his capacity or incentives to deliver services for his constituents.[788] District Governors would remain appointed by Kabul rather than downwardly-accountable, without direct ability to oversee service delivery by ministries. Thus the SIKA preoccupation on project delivery through district governors inflated their role in the short term, but had limited traction in the long term.[789]

4.3 Association with Short-term Agendas: Military Counterinsurgency Campaign

Similar to the ASOP programme discussed in Chapter 4, SIKA was first buoyed, but ultimately undermined, by its affiliation with the US military counterinsurgency campaign. The programme began on the heels of the 2009-2011 American "surge" that aimed to augment the ISAF coalition in its struggle against the Taliban. As the counterinsurgency effort reached unprecedented resource and manpower levels, military representatives repeatedly pointed out that the civilian component required commensurate strength. SIKA, with its towering ambition and budget to match, was meant to help address this need. However, in ways similar to ASOP, the association with the military campaign ended up undercutting the programme's durability and effectiveness.

From the start, the military designation of "key terrain districts" – "insecure and unstable areas identified by U.S. military commanders to be the most critical to the success of the U.S.

[788] I introduce this point in Frances Z. Brown, "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing, Again," *The American Interest*, November 2012.

[789] Brown, "Bureaucracy Does its Thing, Again."

counterinsurgency mission"-- determined where in Afghanistan SIKA would operate.[790] The alignment of SIKA to Key Terrain Districts, a requirement written into SIKA's initial contract,[791] served to further alienate the leadership of MRRD, who complained widely that their own prioritization on district selection was completely ignored.[792] As profiled in Chapter 5 on NABDP, many MRRD staff were also opposed to collaboration with foreign military actors, and felt their own MRRD brand was jeopardized by any such affiliation.[793]

This disconnect from MRRD prioritization did considerable damage to SIKA on a practical level, because it meant that the ministry had limited interest in ensuring the programme's effectiveness or longevity. Against this backdrop, the US government hand-wringing on whether MRRD would or would not support the continuation of the programme, examined above under "Durability", was already a lost cause.

More broadly, the military prioritization of SIKA districts also served to undermine effectiveness of the programme. Comparative research into community-level governance and development programmes in Afghanistan demonstrated these programmes were, unsurprisingly, less effective in more volatile areas.[794] The US government's own reports conceded that SIKA

[790] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Information on USAID's Stability in Key Areas Program- Southern Region, Afghanistan," 5.

[791] US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization in Key Areas- South (SIKA-South Program) Contract Document," 7.

[792] See quote from senior MRRD leadership in Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization," 73.

[793] See NABDP Case Study, Chapter 5, Section 3.2.3: Not tied to short-term agendas (military).

[794] Andrew Beath, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov, "Randomized Impact Evaluation of Afghanistan's National Solidarity Programme" (The World Bank, July 1, 2013); Fotini Christia, Andrew Beath, and Ruben Enikolopov, "Do Elected Councils

plunged considerable resources into "low levels of district governance and activity", thus rewarding insecure districts and making limited impact.[795] Notably, not all volatile districts were inauspicious for programming; the NABDP programme operated in several that were as violent as those hosting SIKA. But NABDP's sponsors were able to select among insecure districts based upon other criteria, for example a strong district governor who would make the programme more viable, in contrast to SIKA, which could only operate in military-designated areas.

Another challenge stemming from the military selection of SIKA's districts of operation was that the military often shifted its areas of priority. This frequent change of geographic focus was reasonable for a security force campaign, focused on "clearing" areas of "bad guys" But it was inappropriate to SIKA's goal of cultivating local governance processes and confidence in local government representatives, endeavours which are inevitably years in the making. As the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction elaborated:

> The constantly shifting designation of priority districts undermined the effectiveness of stabilization programming. Districts were deemed critical and then deprioritized and military forces withdrawn in periods as short as six months, raising expectations and then undermining the confidence of local populations. This problem only worsened as the military drew down. Because the military clearing effort was often incomplete and local forces were incapable of sustaining any security gains, those gains were often reversed after coalition forces pulled out. Often stabilization programs that were being implemented in areas dictated by military priorities were left to complete implementation amid rapidly deteriorating security, and lost access to target communities as a result. The SIKAs sometimes found themselves working in districts where not only was there no

Improve Governance? Experimental Evidence on Local Institutions in Afghanistan," *The World Bank Policy Research Working Paper*, n.d., June 2013.

[795] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 3.

> district government to work with, but as the military surge ended, the area returned to total insurgent control.[796]

Taken together, the cumulative effect for SIKA was that its success was totally interlinked with, and dependent upon, foreign military presence. Similar to ASOP, SIKA gained some traction when the military was assisting its access and operations. But it forged institutional linkages with ISAF at the expense of its alignment with local political and social order, and in the end, this undermined its durability and effectiveness.

5.0 Conclusion

This chapter offers a further elaboration of the analysis that I have developed of bottom-up stabilisation in Afghanistan. SIKA did not improve decentralised local governance, and none of its processes or structures were durable beyond the lifetime of the programme, despite USAID's ambitious claims. The SIKA case further demonstrates that a strong host government *partner* is not the same as a strong host government *partnership*. USAID explicitly chose to collaborate with the formidable MRRD for SIKA, because of the ministry's successful performance in programmes such as NABDP. But the resultant partnership itself was self-defeating: USAID interaction with MRRD served to undermine MRRD's strengths, alienate MRRD leadership, and thus ultimately did not translate into a programme that was durable or effective. Further, SIKA lacked local embeddedness. Its promotion of a technocratic rather than political vision of stabilisation, its episodic rather than predictable form of service delivery, and

[796] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization," 75.

its close association with the military counterinsurgency effort all undermined its effectiveness and durability.

Here, I offer several brief further reflections on the implications of the SIKA case for my broader inquiry into bottom-up statebuilding. First, the story of SIKA again compels us to rethink the focus on capacity building in statebuilding endeavours. Like many foreign interventions, the SIKA programme framed capacity building as a primary, technical means of "fixing" the deficiencies in Afghan governance. In specific, SIKA programme managers focused on building Afghans' capacity to *communicate* with each other. They sought to help establish communication and "linkages" between Kabul-based officials one on hand, and local government representatives on the other; they also laboured to teach locally-based Afghan to "improve their ability to communicate" with their own citizens. [797]

But there are notable weaknesses in the assumption that Afghans simply needed to be "taught" how to communicate with one another and that governance will improve.[798] After all, Afghanistan's "government of relationships" has, for centuries, hinged upon Afghans' ability to find the right person to petition.[799] As we saw with NABDP, both citizens and government officials proved extremely resourceful at finding one another and communicating, when the

[797] US Agency for International Development, "USAID Afghanistan Stabilization Fact Sheet."

[798] This point is introduced in Frances Z. Brown, "Rethinking Afghan Local Governance Aid After Transition," United States Institute of Peace Special Report, August 2014.

[799] See Nixon, *Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan*.

patronage flows incentivized them to do so.[800] In short, the programme framed communication challenges as reflecting technical shortcomings of Afghan capacity and knowledge, whereas the deeper challenges to communication were political and human.

In other capacity-building efforts, the SIKA programme also aimed to build capacity for Afghan government representatives to understand and ameliorate "sources of instability" at the local level.[801] Here too, the logic of capacity building was that if only Afghan officials could *understand* the factors driving local conflict—by way of the immensely complex "Stability Assessment Matrix"-- they would set about fixing them, and, as programme documents claimed, the programme would help "build confidence" of the citizens in their state.[802] Yet this logic also missed the highly political, rather than technical, nature of instability; oftentimes, it was the government who was causing instability. Other SIKA capacity-building initiatives centred upon teaching Afghans skills to be good donor aid recipients, rather than necessarily imparting skills more germane to Afghan life; still other activities viewed "capacity building" as transferring documents and power point modules. There is much to critique about all these variants of capacity building; in comparison with the other cases, we will return to this theme in Chapter 7.

Second, this case again underscores the importance of Afghan national and local elites' agency in shaping outcomes. After USAID programme design alienated MRRD leadership, the

[800] As one longtime international analyst noted, "Afghans are good at talking about things that matter to them." Interview with former World Bank Official, May 2014.

[801] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas," 8–9.

[802] US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization in Key Areas- South (SIKA-South Program) Contract Document," 7.

ministry leadership effectively blocked the programme from gaining traction, and chose not to lobby for SIKA's structures to be sustained, instead favouring the DDAs of NABDP. Separately SIKA's few instances of "wins" occurred when the programme happened to align with other indigenous interests. As an official US government assessment notes, "There was one SIKA-East project that program staff were particularly proud of because it was done in such a dangerous location, but we found out accidentally that it was only implemented there because the Taliban shadow governor wanted it there."[803]

Third, the SIKA case provides a rich example of what could be called *performative statebuilding*: Afghan stakeholders acting out the ceremonial aspects of a "responsive, accountable" local government in order to placate their foreign benefactors. SIKA is not the first manifestation of this: Barnett and Zurcher similarly describe "symbolic" peacebuilding in interventions, in which "the symbols of reform have been transferred and thus there is the surface appearance that there has been a transformation of the kind of state," even though "the existing power relations have largely remained unscathed."[804] SIKA's particular brand of performative statebuilding hinged on the SAM: rural communities and local government officials laboured through the theatrics of the onerous Stability Assessment Methodology process to identify "sources of instability," ostensibly to determine which development projects should be undertaken to mitigate these problems. Yet all the while, these Afghan actors had already

[803] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, "Stabilization."

[804] Barnett and Zurcher accordingly term a very similar phenomenon "ceremonial or symbolic peacebuilding." Michael Barnett and Christoph Zurcher, "The Peacebuilder's Contract: How External Statebuilding Reinforces Weak Statehood," in *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 35.

developed their wish list of projects that they knew were within the foreign contractor's pre-ordained menu of options: a multi-player performance in which the donor also played its role.

Finally, the SIKA case adds to our understanding about the conceptualisation and implementation of service delivery as a key tenet of statebuilding interventions. Counterinsurgency and stabilisation doctrine hinged on the logic that if foreigners helped the Afghan government deliver services, the Afghan government would win over popular support. Yet the actual services delivered in the SIKA were often a poor fit for local expectations. SIKA promoted a notion of "service delivery" that was deeply linked with the imperative of extending the writ of the state, but civilians in many of the most volatile areas targeted by SIKA rejected this agenda.[805] Second, there were problems with SIKA's episodic project delivery rather than recurrent service availability, and often dispensed maximalist rather than modest offerings. As described above, Afghan interviewees argued that many projects trotted out under the "stabilization" banner were "not the kind of service that people want." Instead, they had more quotidian priorities: a clinic that would actually be open, issuing the national identification card, proctoring the university entrance exam, and resolving land issues—all again underscoring the theme of predictability. We will return to this finding again in the next chapter.

[805] See Frances Z. Brown, "The U.S. Surge and Afghan Local Governance" (U.S. Institute of Peace, September 2012).

Chapter Seven: Implications and Contributions

1.0 Overview

We return now to the initial observation that motivated this thesis. A growing policy consensus, as well as an incipient body of academic literature, contends that "bottom-up statebuilding" offers a viable or preferable alternative to the international community's traditional liberal statebuilding approaches, marked by top-down models and national-level institutions. Accordingly, this thesis sought to begin to answer a broad question: does the bottom-up model truly represent a more promising paradigm from top-down statebuilding interventions? And if so, under what conditions?

The case studies generated a theory explaining why some bottom-up statebuilding programmes promote effective, durable subnational governance in the wartime Afghanistan context, while others do not. This chapter reflects upon these factors. It also synthesises other insights from the empirical chapters to examine their broader implications for literature on international statebuilding interventions in conflict.

2.0 Is Bottom-Up Statebuilding a Better Approach?

In their 2009 volume, Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk argued that discussions of statebuilding interventions "still tend to be superficial, relying more on catch phrases than substance. Meanwhile, the underlying sources of statebuilding's problems are rarely explored—

or even directly acknowledged."[806] Paris and Sisk's book was seminal in expanding our understanding of these tensions (largely) from the perspective of the national capital.[807] Just as they argued ten years ago that those contradictions must urgently be examined, this thesis contends that today, much more must be understood about the dilemmas inherent in localised efforts. If the top-down paradigm of statebuilding is laden with tensions, this thesis demonstrates vividly that the bottom-up model is equally so.

One primary implication is that despite foreigners' idealisation of local governance as more "organic" than other levels of government,[808] building states from the bottom up is not simple or straightforward. In fact, many of the same challenges scholars have chronicled in national-level interventions were replicated in bottom-up approaches. Bottom-up statebuilding is equally likely to be beset by the "coordination problem", dependency dilemmas, and clashes between short-term and long-term structures and imperatives.[809] Local-level programmes face trade-offs between capacity and legitimacy in design of national state institutions, and tensions

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[806] Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations* (Taylor & Francis, 2008), 3.

[807] There were a few exceptions to the volume's predominant focus on national-level institutions. For example, see Michael Barnett and Christoph Zurcher, "The Peacebuilder's Contract: How External Statebuilding Reinforces Weak Statehood", and David Roberts, "The Superficiality of Statebuilding in Cambodia: Patronage and Clientelism as Enduring Forms of Politics," both in *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

[808] Schetter convincingly criticises this assumption with regard to Afghanistan. See Conrad Schetter, ed., *Local Politics in Afghanistan: A Century of Intervention in the Social Order* (S.l.: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[809] Astri Suhrke, *When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Miles Kahler, "State-Building After Afghanistan and Iraq," and Roland Paris, "Understanding the "coordination problem" in postwar statebuilding," both in *The Dilemmas of State-Building: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations*, ed. Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk (London: Routledge, 2009); Sarah Cliffe and Nick Manning, "Practical Approaches to Building State Institutions," in Call and Wyeth, ed, *Building States to Build Peace*.

between transitional delivery structures and support for more permanent institutions—just as top-down interventions do.[810] Like national-level interventions, bottom-up interventions were also marked by a "sheer level of ambition" and "*transformative* commitment" on part of external actors that, in retrospect, were wholly unrealistic for the short time frame.[811] In bottom-up statebuilding, just as its top-down variant, foreign interveners should put local politics at the heart of their approach—and in both cases, they rarely do so effectively. Specific to Afghanistan, the empirical cases resoundingly affirm Jonathan Goodhand and Mark Sedra's criticisms of the international project there: "Local forms of authority are not necessarily more legitimate or embedded, and decentralization may be a recipe for a return to warlord rule. Furthermore, international actors were ill equipped to play the game of local politics, having only a very limited understanding of the Afghan political economy."[812] We will examine all these observations further below.

My findings on problematic aspects of bottom-up statebuilding share important similarities with recent critiques of the related "local turn" in peacebuilding.[813] From a practical perspective, the assumption that accountable, effective governance will "trickle up" is as shaky as the assumption embedded in the top-down approach that accountable, effective governance

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[810] Sarah Cliffe and Nick Manning, "Practical Approaches to Building State Institutions," in Call and Wyeth, ed, *Building States to Build Peace;* Charles T. Call, "Conclusion," in Call and Wyeth, *Building States to Build Peace*.

[811] Quotes are from Mats Berdal's critique of the ambitious peacebuilding project, in Mats Berdal, *Building Peace After War*, 1 edition (Abingdon England ; New York : London: Routledge, 2009), 13.

[812] Jonathan Goodhand and Mark Sedra, "Rethinking Liberal Peacebuilding, Statebuilding and Transition in Afghanistan: An Introduction," *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 3 (2013): 239–54.

[813] See Chapter 1 for an overview of the "local turn" in peacebuilding and this thesis's conceptualisation of its relationship to bottom-up statebuilding.

will "trickle down."[814] From a normative standpoint, there is a likelihood of the "co-optation of the local turn agenda not by the international community, but by the national government and political elite."[815] In some peacebuilding contexts, scholars have argued that the local turn's emphasis on providing aid to grassroots communities "has freed both national and international actors from the imperative of addressing politically charged national level issues."[816] This thesis shows that this critique also applies to the Afghan bottom-up statebuilding project: by dispensing maximal resources to community-level efforts in the hopes of fostering more inclusive governance, the donor class and the Karzai administration alike evaded grappling with the fact that the Karzai administration ultimately didn't *want* to devolve power to the periphery.

The thesis represents a refinement and corrective to earlier peacebuilding literature that advocates for a bottom-up approach. For example, in her seminal work on the Congo, Séverine Autesserre describes a "workable bottom-up strategy" that she argues foreign peacebuilders should have operationalised between 2003 and 2006, and outlines a suite of initiatives that strongly resembles the programmes examined in this thesis.[817] The programmes studied in this

[814] Anita Ernstorfer, Diana Chigas, and Hannah Vaughan-Lee, "From Little to Large: When Does Peacebuilding Add Up?," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 10, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 72–77; Ernstorfer, Chigas, and Vaughan-Lee.

[815] Giulia Piccolino, "Local Peacebuilding in a Victor's Peace. Why Local Peace Fails Without National Reconciliation," *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 3 (March 1, 2019): 1–26.

[816] Piccolino makes this argument in the context of Cote D'Ivoire, where the sensitive national-level issues being evaded were transitional justice and democratization. Giulia Piccolino, "Local Peacebuilding in a Victor's Peace. Why Local Peace Fails Without National Reconciliation," 15.

[817] Autesserre provides "the outlines of a workable bottom-up solution" that that would have included more resources, local conflict resolution projects around land disputes, "organizing meetings" and supporting "traditional councils" to help "communities manage future antagonisms", and engaging small, mobile special operations forces from the UN peacekeeping force in conjunction with these projects—a suite of initiatives that greatly resembles the stabilisation programmes featured here. Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 184–86.

thesis occurred years later, demonstrating a shift in donor strategy (arguably in part because of the awareness raised by Autesserre's and others' important critiques).[818] Although this thesis examines a very different context in Afghanistan, it helps us better understand the actual outcomes when foreign interveners respond to advocates for a "bottom-up" approach.

Finally, the thesis shows that donor "bottom-up" statebuilding approaches pursued an objective of decentralisation that was at odds with the Kabul-based government's agenda, which hinged on the maintenance of heavily centralised executive. Facing Karzai's opposition to meaningfully devolving power, stabilisation programmes were often a palliative but rarely a cure.

2.1 Under What Conditions Does It "Work"?

Yet despite this sobering assessment, some bottom-up statebuilding programmes *can* advance foreign interveners' objectives of improving durable, effective local governance in support of the overall statebuilding process. The thesis contributes an important counterpoint to scholars who reject the entire exogenous statebuilding premise; under some conditions, international support *can* augment local political will to achieve positive effects.

This thesis identifies two primary conditions for this to occur, at least in Afghanistan. Programmes were more likely to contribute to durable, effective subnational governance when, first, the programme enjoyed a strong partnership with a host government counterpart at the capital level, and second, when the programme demonstrated "local embeddedness" within

[818] On Autesserre's book being "widely read and discussed" within the practitioner community, see Giulia Piccolino, "Local Peacebuilding in a Victor's Peace. Why Local Peace Fails Without National Reconciliation," 1–26.

Afghan vertical and local political economy. The thesis's one modest success case, the NABDP programme, leveraged a strong partnership with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. In addition, the programme both bolstered, and benefitted from, local political economy and patronage networks. In particular, it (inadvertently) proved a useful rent-distribution mechanism for Afghan Parliamentarians and district-level elites. This incentivised both local and national stakeholders to support the programme's achievement of its objectives, and gave these actors a stake in the programme's durability.

By contrast, the ASOP programme partnered with a weak host government counterpart, the Independent Directorate for Local Governance. The programme also worked against the grain of local political economy: it created no rents for any constituents beyond its actual ASOP *shura* members, so other elites had limited interest in its durability. It was also closely tied to two ephemeral agendas: the foreign military surge, and the re-election campaign of Hamid Karzai. While these two imperatives enjoyed momentum and resourcing, the programme expanded its writ. But when they waned, ASOP's traction suffered as a result.

The third case study, the Stability in Key Areas programme, demonstrated that a strong host government *partner* is not the same as a strong host government *partnership*. Indeed, SIKA's USAID sponsors explicitly chose to partner with the formidable MRRD, because of the Ministry's successful performance in programmes such as NABDP. However, in this case, the ways in which donor interacted with the MRRD backfired. Rather than harnessing MRRD's strength and advocacy on behalf of the programme, MRRD leadership soured on the programme because they perceived that USAID was not consulting with the Ministry in its development. MRRD managers consequently resisted integrating the programme into the long-term Afghan

government structures and processes. SIKA also lacked local embeddedness: like ASOP, it became closely associated in the eyes of the population with the externally-backed counterinsurgency military campaign. It also promoted a complex "Stability Assessment Methodology" that was wholly unsuited to local Afghan political order.

2.2 Theoretical Implications

Scholarship and practice on stabilisation and statebuilding have advanced considerably in the five to ten years since the case studies featured in this thesis. The empirical findings here align with and expand several key scholarly insights of recent (and less recent) years.

First, the thesis's sole success case of NABDP, however modest, has important implications. Given the famously bleak track record of external statebuilding interventions, uncovering factors that may influence (more) successful outcomes is a worthwhile endeavour.[819] The NABDP case generated insights into what conditions may foster durable, effective bottom-up statebuilding: when a programme enjoys a strong partnership with a host-government ministry, and when it aligns with and bolsters local political-economic interests. This second factor builds upon the "limited access orders" concept developed by Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, Steven B. Webb, and Barry R. Weingast, in which "the political system manipulates the economy to create rents as a means of solving the problem of violence."[820] North et al argue that in limited access orders, "rent-creation provides the glue that holds the coalition

[819] For example, from the related peacekeeping field, see Virginia Page Fortna and Lise Morje Howard, "Pitfalls and Prospects in the Peacekeeping Literature" 11, no. 1 (2008): 283–301.

[820] Douglass C North et al., "Limited Access Orders In The Developing World :A New Approach To The Problems Of Development," *Policy Research Working Papers*, 3, accessed May 30, 2019.

together, enabling elite groups to make credible commitments to one another to support the regime and to perform their functions."[821]

NABDP appears to have provided just such a "glue" to ensure that Afghan parliamentarians, local elites, and even international statebuilders had an interest in ensuring the programme gained acceptance and achieved durability. Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand, and Patrick Meehan anticipate a similar type of elite bargain in their own recent work on stabilisation initiatives to dampen violence: "Providing elites with preferential access to political privileges and economic opportunities ('rents') can provide the 'glue' to hold together fragile coalitions between elites. These rent-sharing arrangements can stabilise violent conflict by providing a mechanism through which powerful challengers to state authority are co-opted into stable coalitions." [822] In contrast, the only constituency for the ASOP programme seemed to be the members of the ASOP councils themselves, thus decreasing the programme's durability.

The NABDP case yields deep normative tension: the programme that drew upon, and perpetuated, Afghan neopatrimonial systems is the programme that is best-suited to (eventually) advance a durable statebuilding result. In other words, an initiative which advanced personalistic rule and illiberal means is hoped, with time, to promote a liberal institutional outcome. Cheng, Goodhand and Meehan predict these contradictions, noting that political stability based upon the rent-sharing arrangements they describe "may create baleful legacies" in the effort to advance

[821] North et al., 8.

[822] Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand, and Patrick Meehan, "Synthesis Paper: Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains That Reduce Violent Conflict," Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project (London: U.K. Stabilisation Unit, April 2018), 2.

"good governance."[823] Sam Hickey similarly documented this contradiction in development interventions: "Some informal and clientelistic modes of politics, which are generally castigated within the good governance agenda, can in some cases play a positive role regarding the instigation, implementation and sustainability" of interventions."[824] The NABDP case also echoes the conclusions of Dipali Mukhopadhyay's study of Afghan statebuilding. In her investigation of Afghan warlords who transformed themselves into provincial governors who bolstered the state, Mukhopadhyay came to conclude that

> the inextricability of the personal and the political, the informal and the formal, was at the very heart of the logic driving modern state construction in Afghanistan. That logic, although a far cry from the Weberian ideal, has the potential to generate productive outcomes just the same. In Afghanistan and elsewhere, there were moments when greed and nepotism actually advanced the construction of political authority, even governing capacity.[825]

Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates (once again) that the "implementation and sustainability" of international stabilisation programmes rarely comes close to donors' ambitions for the programmes. Against a backdrop of myriad ephemeral donor projects, identifying a programme that did manage to achieve effectiveness and durability is significant, despite the

[823] Ibid.

[824] Sam Hickey, "Turning Governance Thinking Upside-down? Insights from 'the Politics of What Works,'" *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 7 (August 1, 2012): 1233.

[825] Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 361.

undesirable "greed and nepotism" involved.[826] The findings also support Timor Sharan and John Heathershaw, who argue that in Afghanistan, "rather than formal institutions providing incentives and shaping preferences of factions, the reverse has occurred: the dynamics of factionalism have shaped the process of formal institution-building."[827] More broadly, the thesis provides further evidence in support of the view that deeper consideration and understanding of local politics should underpin foreign interventions. Though donor discourse on "thinking and working politically" has advanced considerably since the period studied in this thesis, in practice, interventions still fall short.[828]

What are foreign interveners to make of all this? Goodhand concludes that in cases such as Afghanistan, "the implication of this analysis for peacebuilders is the need to think carefully about the creation and distribution of rents in order to secure elite loyalty to the system."[829] Notably, in our study, NABDP achieved success not because foreign interveners "thought carefully" about how to distribute and create loyalty. Instead, foreigners stumbled upon this arrangement almost by chance, conforming to Booth's argument for "operationalising with the grain": "Institutions which overcome the key bottlenecks in public goods provision will be ones

[826] Afghan analyst Haseeb Humayoon comes to a similar ambivalent conclusion: "In the long term, these dynamics are highly undesirable for accountable and responsive governance, but the liquidity of these patronage networks at least insure that interests get negotiated and clashes get averted." Haseeb Humayoon, "Afghanistan's Gray Future," *Foreign Policy*, October 18, 2012.

[827] Timor Sharan and John Heathershaw, "Identity Politics and Statebuilding in Post-Bonn Afghanistan: The 2009 Presidential Election," *Ethnopolitics* 10, no. 3–4 (2011): 297.

[828] Carothers and De Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution*.

[829] Goodhand, Jonathan, "Getting the Politics Right: Beyond 'Good Governance' in Afghanistan," in *Afghanistan- Challenges and Prospects* (Routledge, n.d.), 96.

that *by accident or* design address the relevant collective action problems."[830] The ultimate result in the NABDP case resembles Barnett and Zurcher's notion of a "compromised peace": Afghan preferences heavily reoriented the programme, but international actors were able foster some governance institutions, via conditionality, in the process. Barnett and Zurcher argue that given the context, this outcome "might not be such a terrible result."[831] We will return to this theme below.

3.0 Broader Implications

Beyond theory generation, a cross-case comparison of the three programmes also offers several other insights about the conceptualisation and implementation of bottom-up statebuilding programmes. Below, I reflect upon what these cases reveal about the promise and pathologies of exogenous statebuilding efforts, and how this thesis contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on foreign interventions in civil war.

3.1 Primacy of Afghan Agency

International relations literature has often (over)emphasized the strategies and role of foreign actors in "fixing failed states;" [832] in contrast, all three cases of bottom-up statebuilding underscore the centrality of *Afghan* stakeholders in influencing outcomes.

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[830] Booth David, "Introduction: Working with the Grain? The Africa Power and Politics Programme," *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (March 4, 2011): 1–10.

[831] Barnett and Zurcher, "The Peacebuilder's Contract: How External Statebuilding Reinforces Weak Statehood," 48.

[832] For example, the current Afghan President's work argues along this vein, as well as others. See Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*, 1 edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford

The newly-elected Parliament stands out as a consequential player in this story. Members of Parliament were keen to deliver projects for their constituents and assert their relevance vis-à-vis the powerful Afghan presidency—and also to capture their own resource streams. Parliamentarians resourcefully utilised their positions as relationship-brokers between centre and periphery to influence stabilisation programmes, and ultimately to shape political-economic affairs in their home provinces. In the ASOP case study, lawmakers were key actors in impeding the new IDLG and its pet project ASOP from gaining traction; conversely, many legislators became key advocates for (and beneficiaries from) the NABDP programme. Though some scholars have rightly documented Parliament's crucial role in Kabul-periphery patronage networks,[833] most investigations of the Afghan statebuilding project have tended to treat the legislature as a discrete, and often less consequential, issue than executive branch machinations. This thesis suggests we should reconsider this framing and fully contemplate how dynamics *between* the two branches influence state consolidation.

Key Afghan ministers also had determinative impact on outcomes. Jelani Popal of the IDLG made several far-reaching decisions: to exclude Parliament from initial decisions formulating IDLG, to develop IDLG as an overtly political exponent of Hamid Karzai's election machinery, and then later to lead the ministry into collaboration with foreign military forces. His successor as permanent director, Abdul Khaliq Farahi, proved consequential in his own way.

University Press, 2009); Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Cornell University Press, 2014).

[833] For example, political anthropologist Noah Coburn, whose fieldwork has documented how Parliamentarians are "important members of local patronage networks who provide some of the few real opportunities for communities to connect with the funding opportunities available in Kabul," Noah Coburn, "Connecting with Kabul: The Importance of the Wolesi Jirga Election and Local Political Networks in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, May 2010).

Farahi proved a much less assertive champion for the directorate's interests within the competitive Kabuli inter-ministerial scrimmage; at the key moment when ASOP could have been institutionalised, he did not advocate effectively on its behalf.

In contrast, the NABDP programme greatly benefitted from the leadership of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. The initial post-Bonn minister, Hanif Atmar, parlayed his facility with foreign donors and personal links to Karzai into a building a formidable ministry. His strategic vision and management prowess enabled MRRD programmes such as NABDP to project their reach into the periphery. His successors, Ehsan Zia and Mirwais Barmak, built on this progress and made two consequential decisions: to assertively shield NABDP from collaboration with foreign military forces, and to champion NABDP's District Development Assemblies (DDAs) in cabinet-level negotiations. Barmak leveraged his own personal advocacy to push NABDP forward and to ensure that NABDP DDAs, rather than the ASOP *shuras*, came out ahead in the policy debates on district-level councils.

These same dynamic Afghan ministers could also act as spoilers, as the SIKA case study illustrates. Ironically, USAID sponsors selected MRRD for the SIKA partner ministry because of MRRD's organisational strength. But when ministry leadership felt excluded from meaningful planning decisions, antibodies were ignited within the ministry. Ultimately, because USAID officials alienated Barmak, the SIKA programme had no high-level Afghan advocate to ensure the continuation of the programme's structures and processes as it neared its endpoint. In contrast to Barmak's championing of the DDAs, the ministry seemed pleased to oversee SIKA's termination.

These are but a few examples of Afghan agency. More broadly, the entirety of the thesis resides in the long shadow of President Karzai, who largely successfully resisted the decentralisation agenda that the stabilisation programmes aimed to advance. And as traced throughout the empirical chapters, local-level stakeholders made crucial rent-distribution choices that impacted the outcomes of all three programmes. As Goodhand notes, foreigners in Afghanistan were often "sucked into games they scarcely understood, with external aid being converted into the political currency of patronage."[834]

Taken together, the cases provide a counterpoint to many accounts of Afghan statebuilding that focus overly on the role and choices of external interveners. To be sure, foreigners funded the programmes and installed their staff and systems. And as Afghan scholar Orzala Nemat convincingly shows, donor interventions did affect Afghan power dynamics, often in unanticipated ways, by allowing new actors to emerge.[835] But in this thesis, what separated the success case from the failures was shaped almost entirely by Afghan elites, determined to leverage each programme to meet their own agendas. The story resonates with what Joel Migdal has memorably called the "*real* politics of third-world societies", which he describes as "struggles over the state's desire for predominance, the accommodations between states and others, and the manoeuvres to gain the best deal possible"-- politics that "have often taken place far from the capital city."[836] In her own study of Afghan statebuilding, Jennifer Murtazashvili

[834] Goodhand, Jonathan, "Getting the Politics Right: Beyond 'Good Governance' in Afghanistan," 102.

[835] Orzala Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015).

[836] Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 32.

argues that the International Relations field's focus on exogenous interveners is understandable, given the logistical challenges of researching local actors, but as a result, the discipline tends to exaggerate the roles of foreigners in the state building enterprise.[837] The findings also echo Charles Call's argument that "national actors' calculations hold a privileged and underemphasized role in existing accounts" of the success or failure of postwar peacebuilding,[838] and underscore Oisín Tansey's reflections on the often-modest role of foreigners in state consolidation.[839] In the story of Afghan bottom-up statebuilding programmes, foreign donors played Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the central drama: Kabul's inter-ministerial competition and complex centre-periphery patronage politics.

3.2 Performative Statebuilding: Artifice, or Gateway to Progress?

The cases provide myriad examples of how Afghan stakeholders acted out the ceremonial aspects of a "responsive, accountable" local government in order to placate their foreign benefactors—what I would term performative statebuilding. This is not a new scenario: indeed, Barnett and Zurcher argue that in many peacebuilding interventions, "the symbols of reform have been transferred and thus there is the surface appearance that there has been a transformation of the kind of state," even though oftentimes, "the existing power relations have

[837] Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 6–7.

[838] Charles T. Call, *Why Peace Fails: The Causes and Prevention of Civil War Recurrence* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 6.

[839] "The final mode of transition… is determined by the interaction between international administrators on one hand, and the nature of the domestic elite balance of power on the other…. it is domestic actors that determine final outcomes Oisín Tansey, *Regime-Building [Electronic Resource]: Democratization and International Administration*, Oxford Scholarship Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

largely remained unscathed."[840] Dipali Mukhopadhyay extends Migdal's idea of "real politics" to examine the complex realities of Afghan centre-periphery relations, rather than the "theatrics of statebuilding."[841] Séverine Autesserre has explained in fine-grained detail just how foreign interveners' quotidian habits facilitate these dynamics.[842]

In this study, Afghan officials' performative statebuilding was especially evident at the Independent Directorate for Local Governance, an institution that was neither truly *independent*, nor particularly interested in *directing* effective *local governance*. Instead, the organisation was instrumentalised by both the Karzai re-election campaign and the foreign military forces to act out the drama of increasing local government accountability to the population. One Afghan official at the IDLG memorably described how the "real politics" of local order were largely unchanged by the IDLG's episodic donor-driven forays into district government such as the ASOP programme: "The [village] dynamic pauses when foreigners come in. They are waiting for you to leave so life can begin again as normal."[843] Three other former IDLG staffers similarly chronicle a process of "policy pantomime" within the directorate with regard to governance reform initiatives.[844]

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[840] Barnett and Zurcher accordingly term a very similar phenomenon "ceremonial or symbolic peacebuilding." Barnett and Zurcher, "The Peacebuilder's Contract: How External Statebuilding Reinforces Weak Statehood," 35.

[841] Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*, 22.

[842] See Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[843] Interview with IDLG Official 6, Kabul, January 2016.

[844] Peter Blunt, Farid Mamundzay, and Muqtader Nasary, "The Long and the Short of Policy Pantomime in Afghanistan," *Progress in Development Studies* 17, no. 1 (2017): 67–88.

The SIKA programme generated its own brand of performative statebuilding. Rural communities and local government officials laboured through the theatrics of the onerous Stability Assessment Matrix process, ostensibly to identify "sources of instability," which in turn would determine which development projects should be undertaken to mitigate these problems. Yet all the while, these Afghan actors had already developed their wish-list of projects that they knew were within the foreign contractor's pre-ordained menu of options: a multi-player performance in which the donor's agent also played its role.[845] Meanwhile, in the ASOP programme, ASOP *shura* members gamely performed the routine of learning how to use complicated "assessment indicators" to evaluate government services in their district. Yet these skills were irrelevant to affecting the "real politics" of how ministries interfaced with rural areas in practice.[846] Indeed, the entire stabilisation project in Afghanistan—based upon a "theory of change" that the Kabul-based government simply needed to learn how to respond to its rural communities, and the rural communities merely needed to learn to voice their own priorities—hinged on a profound sort of theatre. In reality, the barriers to decentralisation of authority were political, not technical.[847]

[845] See Chapter 6.

[846] See Chapter 4.

[847] "The lesson of the surge is that there is no exogenous, localized technical solution to a centralized political will problem—and more broadly, that a state-building project in which the interests of the international community do not align with the Afghan government will fall short." Frances Z. Brown, "The U.S. Surge and Afghan Local Governance" (U.S. Institute of Peace, September 2012), 2.

Yet as Barnett and Zurcher remind us, symbols and performance *can* matter to the statebuilding endeavour.[848] The bargains struck between elites and external interveners can "leave open some possibility for reform" over time; statebuilders can foster visible new governance arrangements that "can encourage existing actors to reprioritize their interests and develop new networks of associations that can, over time, build support for liberalisation."[849]

The NABDP case study provides a modest window into how such an evolution from *performative* to *actual* statebuilding might occur in the Afghan context, given time. Prior to the NABDP programme, Afghan districts had never before been represented by a consultative body, and the primary district-level official had been the upwardly accountable district governor. The programme provided a visible new forum for deal-making between the newly empowered Parliamentarians eager to deliver projects for their districts, and local DDA representatives keen to advocate for their community's priorities. The NABDP DDAs became the recognisable face of district-level governance in many areas and the focal point for popular advocacy. Recall the observer who noted in Chapter 5, "What DDAs did is …create that habitual pattern [of feedback] and a real sense of accountability—not just sending your emissary to the provincial level. [It created] the aura of government and the *inevitability of governance*, rather than the ad hoc."[850] In short, the initially ceremonial institution of DDAs reified into a significant political force, promoted new associations, and over time, built (some) space for liberal statebuilding outcomes.

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[848] Barnett and Zurcher, "The Peacebuilder's Contract: How External Statebuilding Reinforces Weak Statehood," 35.

[849] Ibid.

[850] Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015.

A question for future scholarship is how to build upon performative statebuilding toward actual reform.

3.3 Legibility and Predictability: Essential to Outcomes

The three case studies also invite us to consider the significance of *legibility and predictability* in the design of exogenous statebuilding interventions.

From DDAs to DCCs to CDCs, from SAM to SWGs, donor local governance initiatives in Afghanistan accumulated into a sloppy alphabet soup over the years. Although this thesis has laboured to clearly delineate the many acronyms that constituted donor subnational governance projects, even the most diligent reader can be forgiven for still being confused. By comparison, the diligent reader can imagine the bewilderment experienced by many Afghan villagers, who did not enjoy the dubious benefit of referencing this tome. But flippancy aside, the implications of the inscrutability of donor projects for the bottom-up statebuilding endeavour are significant for several reasons.

First, the complexity of institutions undermined the expansion of accountability that is meant to be at the heart of the liberal statebuilding endeavour. NABDP's DDAs and ASOP's *shuras* became rival district-level councils, and a textbook case of "institutional multiplicity" in statebuilding contexts examined by other scholars.[851] The international project in Afghanistan aimed to build accountability, but instead, the "fragmented, inconsistent and donor-driven"

[851] Institutional multiplicity can be understood as "the multiple 'rule systems' that confront economic and political actors providing distinct and different normative frameworks and incentive structures in which they act." See Gabi Hesselbein, Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, and James Putzel, "Economic and Political Foundations of State-Making in Africa: Understanding State Reconstruction," Crisis States Working Papers Series (London: Crisis States Research Centre, 2006).

approach to district governance confounded feedback mechanisms.[852] One Afghan interviewee noted that on the ground, the proliferation of donor-funded councils simply meant that there were more bodies from whom the population were forced to tolerate graft.[853] The parent ministries, IDLG and MRRD, saw maintenance of their councils as a means to create and protect rents rather than deepen accountability.[854]

Second, predictability and legibility of each programme ended up having great implications for its effectiveness and durability. As recounted, the SIKA programme featured a needlessly complex Stability Assessment Matrix process through which communities were meant to prioritise stability-enhancing local projects. Similarly, the ASOP programme attempted to inject inscrutable new rules of the game into local politics on everything from council composition to "monitoring results" to "communications products." Recall the district official who told Nemat, "ASOP was a failed experiment….No one knew what their role was and what they should do… I think finally this confusion resulted in their full closure of the programme."[855] The population—already worn out by decades of war—were left largely perplexed. As both ASOP and SIKA tried to overlay alien new rules onto pre-existing community political life,

[852] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 7.

[853] Interview with Afghan-national researcher 2, Kabul, February 2012.

[854] As a World Bank assessment noted, "It should be noted that government agencies [MRRD and IDLG] seem happy to allow the existing situation to continue, preferring to operate and even grow their large portfolios of programmes despite fragmentation, overlap and aid effectiveness issues." World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011, 5.

[855] Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism," 153.

Afghan citizens saw these literally foreign practices as unreliable and untrustworthy. Consequently, these processes and structures had limited durability after the programmes ended.

In contrast, NABDP demonstrates the potency of legibility from the perspective of the population. Recall the international development practitioner who remarked, "If you went into a village, if you talked about DDA, *they knew what it meant. They talked about the DDA*."[856] This seemingly basic level of recognizance proved to be crucial: "knowing what it meant" was a bar rarely met within the jungle of donor-sponsored acronyms. As chronicled in Chapter 5, the DDAs' prominence allowed them to expand their writ beyond their initial development-oversight mandate, into the realms of resource coordination, planning, conflict resolution, oversight of non-NABDP projects, and other functions—in short, the everyday stuff of governance. At some points, DDA members took it upon themselves to add to their proclaimed authorities; at others, the councils received credit for achievements that were not actually theirs. In the highly ambiguous subnational governance context, both were effective means of increasing the programme's impact.[857]

Taken as a whole, the empirical findings underscore the central role that predictability, in the eyes of the population, plays in contested contexts.[858] ASOP and SIKA introduced

[856] Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

[857] As one locally based World Bank advisor recalled, "It was a complete mess [in local governance]. There was confusion. Things might have been the doing of ASOP shuras", but the population assumed it was the DDAs. Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015.

[858] David Kilcullen notes that in wartime, people seek "survival through certainty" and defer to actors who can enforce a consistent system of rules and sanctions." David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 67.

unwelcome ambiguity into local politics: neither provided what David Kilcullen describes as "the order and predictability [the population] craves in the deeply threatening, uncertain environment of insurgency."[859] Afghan citizens chose to respond to the programmes by hedging. NABDP seemed to establish and reinforce a legible political system that communities and elites could leverage, and this had staying power.

3.4 Further Problematising the "Local Turn"

Although donors' complex web of local governance initiatives was ill-suited to the context, Afghan subnational politics themselves are far from simple. On the contrary, the thesis demonstrates the many ways in which the networked, hybrid nature of Afghan local order was, in fact, much more sophisticated than foreigners' conceptualisation of "the local" presumed. This disparity between the complexity of local politics on one hand, and international actors' simplistic rendering and discourse on the other, represents another tension embedded into the bottom-up statebuilding model.

In his seminal work *Seeing Like a State,* James C. Scott contrasts central planners' historic intentions for "radically simplified designs for social organization" with the concept of *metis,* local practical knowledge based upon informal processes and the improvisation that lies at the heart of a "complex, functioning order."[860] Scott studied how this "high modernist ideology" has been deployed by *authoritarian* states—not the case in our examination of Afghanistan. Yet

[859] Kilcullen, 67–68.

[860] James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale Agrarian Studies (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 1998), 7.

his analysis of *metis* still has much to teach us about the "hubris" of foreign, centralised programme planners in the Afghan context. To take but one example, SIKA's Stability Assessment Matrix reflected donors' "self-confidence about scientific and technical progress": that foreigners could somehow provide the natives with the technical tools to surgically remove local "sources of instability." The assumptions underlying these tools were also almost quaintly simplistic: for example, that SIKA's construction of one boundary wall would foster popular trust in the government after decades of predation.

In addition, the case studies show that the assumptions embedded in this "local turn" – that district politics were simple, inclusive, and easy to reform—was rarely borne out by the evidence.[861] Aziz A. Hakimi shows that the foreigners' embrace of the "local" was often "based upon an idealised and reified vision of the past,"[862] while Goodhand adds: "Calls for bottom-up state building and local governance based on pre-war traditions fail to appreciate how society has moved on."[863] The ASOP programme was a particularly stark example: the programme aimed to select *shuras* of elders on a "traditional, consensus basis."[864] Yet this framing of "traditional elders" failed to take into account the more hybridised form of local power in contemporary Afghanistan, which was increasingly interconnected by technology and business to the capital

[861] Schetter warns that, "when the local level is discovered as the key to understand Afghan society, it fails to take the plurality of local politics into consideration." Conrad Schetter, "Introduction," in *Local Politics in Afghanistan: A Century of Intervention in the Social Order*, 2013, 3.

[862] Aziz A. Hakimi, "Getting Savages to Fight Barbarians: Counterinsurgency and the Remaking of Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 2013, 1–18.

[863] Goodhand, Jonathan, "Getting the Politics Right: Beyond 'Good Governance' in Afghanistan," 99.

[864] Robert Hellyer, "Addressing Concerns about Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP) Councils and District Development Assemblies (DDA)" (Embassy of the United States of America, Kabul, Afghanistan, February 21, 2011), 1.

and beyond. Further, as all three cases demonstrate, local politics were not automatically more inclusive in the way that foreigners romanticised them.[865] Elite capture occurred on the local level, and indeed was a factor that allowed some programmes to gain traction—it was just less often acknowledged by Kabul-bound international actors.[866]

The cases also show how the foreign counterinsurgency campaign's emphasis on the "local and tribal" [867] was often, in practice, inappropriate to both Afghan "real politics" and donor objectives. The ASOP collaboration with the U.S. military Afghan Local Police (ALP) initiative was a case in point. Although the U.S. general overseeing the programme touted its model "to use the tribes and other ethnic groups" to unleash "the power of this culture in protecting itself at the local level," [868] the results of the ASOP-ALP collaboration for current-day Afghan governance objectives were underwhelming. Further, the effectiveness and durability of both ASOP and SIKA suffered because the programmes were required to operate in military "key terrain districts", rather than selecting their areas of operation based upon how they might fit into a broader multi-level governance strategy. The programmes also became logistically dependent upon the U.S. military's operations around its "tribal engagement strategy"—a

[865] Scott himself underscores that his emphasis on *metis* does not mean that he is "uncritically admiring of the local, the traditional, and the customary", which are often associated with "domination, monopoly, and exclusion." Scott, *Seeing like a State*, 7.

[866] This finding echoes Mansuri and Rao's study of nearly 500 community-driven-development programmes globally. Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?*, 1 edition (Washington, D.C: World Bank Publications, 2012).

[867] For example, see Seth G. Jones, "It Takes the Villages," May 2010.

[868] Quoted in Thom Shanker, "Applying Early Lessons to Build Afghan Security," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2013, sec. Asia Pacific.

strategy itself that was developed, as Hakimi writes, based upon "notions of the tribal traditions of local governance and self-defence" that were developed "by selectively piggybacking on nineteenth-century colonial ethnography."[869]

Finally, the findings also problematise the discourse of "Afghan-led", "Afghan first", and "Afghan face" that predominated during much of the heyday of the surge, paralleling other U.S. counterinsurgency campaigns. The cases deepen our appreciation for the contradictions embedded in the conceptualisation of "local ownership" in peacebuilding and statebuilding interventions.[870] SIKA demonstrates how the US government's superficial efforts at the "Afghan owned" programme backfired when the actual Afghans involved, the MRRD leadership, felt underappreciated.[871]

3.5 Newly Hybridised Forms of Afghan Power and Identity

The thesis also contributes to our growing understanding of the increasingly hybridised forms of power and identity in the Afghan statebuilding context. The case studies point toward two distinct ways in which donors' conceptualisations of Afghan political life failed to incorporate this increasingly blurred reality.

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[869] Hakimi, "Getting Savages to Fight Barbarians."

[870] For an examination of these complexities in the context of U.N Peacekeeping operations, see Sarah B. K. von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace?: Local Ownership and United Nations Peacekeeping*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[871] Already there is growing increasing recognition in the development circles that local ownership agenda is more complicated than previous framings, and must entail "a complex array of systems and networks, not an exclusive group of individuals or institutions." See Alex Thier, "Transforming Fragile States: Forging a New Consensus" (London: Overseas Development Institute, June 2019), 6.

First, as Mukhopadhyay argued above, power in post-Bonn Afghanistan does not wholly comport to the simple breakdown of "formal power" versus "informal power."[872] Nor does it reflect the clean delineation between "traditional leaders" versus "young people" that donors clung to in framing the case-study programmes: DDA members as "younger, more modern and better educated" in contrast to the "older, traditional" authorities of ASOP.[873] The foreigners' conceptualisation missed the rapid evolution of Afghan socio-political order and Afghan centre-periphery networks, what one interviewee described as "an increasingly sophisticated hybrid system."[874] Donors (ironically) underestimated the degree to which cosmopolitanism, facility in hobnobbing with Westerners, and business orientation all fuelled political-economic power in the new Afghanistan. One longtime analyst captured this misunderstanding:

> There is a generation of Afghans in their 20s and 30s, and the assumption is because they are young and savvy, they will be politically unconnected and not into the old way. That assumption is totally false. Economics is an increasingly important part of the equation. Even old commanders have their own foundations and businesses.[875]

Indeed, NABDP and its DDA members proved able to leverage the new, hybrid nature of Afghan socio-political networks.[876] They built upon how Afghans already knew how to

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[872] "The inextricability of the personal and the political, the informal and the formal, was at the very heart of the logic driving modern state construction in Afghanistan." Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*, 361.

[873] World Bank, "District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs- Policy Issues and Challenges," March 29, 2011.

[874] Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 3, Kabul, February 2012.

[875] Ibid.

[876] Nemat captures a related, but somewhat distinct, form of hybridity in the new Afghanistan: the line between "foreigners" and "Afghans" is increasingly blurred, as some major actors in this space, such as current President Ashraf Ghani, have traversed between the two. See Orzala Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan", 207.

operate—distributing patronage, petitioning, consulting among themselves—the "cultural repertoire" Booth describes. There was a silver lining to this: as Afghan analyst Humayoon notes, Afghan strongmen now "have a multitude of reasons to invest in the constitutional order: from access to power and prestige, to immunity and business."[877] However, as one international interviewee argued, "There is still abuse of power, but it is getting more sophisticated. In the war years, the abuse of power was crude violence. Now, it's being connected to business interests, starting an NGO, getting contracts, keeping tabs on parliament."[878]

In addition, the foreigners missed another form of hybridity in the new Afghan context: the blurred line between local *politics* and local *development projects*. As detailed throughout the thesis, donors formally demarcated two redundant types of *shura* at the district level by saying that the ASOP councils would be "focused on governance" while DDAs would "oversee development." U.S. government official documentation insisted these councils were "created for explicit and district purposes."[879] It further noted that the entirety of the U.S. civil-military counterinsurgency workforce agreed this distinction was crystal clear.[880]

But in actuality, this delineation didn't resonate with the lived experience of rural Afghans, for whom matters of sectoral services, development resources, politics, and justice

[877] Humayoon, "Afghanistan's Gray Future."

[878] Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 3, Kabul, February 2012.

[879] Hellyer, "Addressing Concerns about Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP) Councils and District Development Assemblies (DDA)," 3.

[880] "At a recent event held in RC-South [Regional Command-South], attended by more than fifty civilian and military persons stations in the region, this issue was widely discussed and it became clear to those present that the roles of these two distinct entities are different, and should not interfere with one another, so long as their roles are clearly communicated by IDLG and MRRD to communities." Hellyer, 4.

overlap almost completely.[881] The resultant "institutional multiplicity" of competing local councils ended up undermining, rather than promoting, the goal of improving government accountability that lay at the heart of the international statebuilding project in Afghanistan. As one longtime observer noted earlier in this thesis, the putative distinction between governance and development issues

> ….just didn't make sense. You cannot separate all the politics that goes into understanding needs and grievances and systems, if you're not looking at both combined. Separating those two bodies… it sets it up for potential spoilers. You're using these development-focused individuals against the governance-focused individuals. One is being resourced and one is being given "decision-making power."[882]

In the broader Afghan political economy, donor resources were *the* major source of finance (along with the illegal opium trade), so capturing development resources constituted a major source of political power. In the same vein, the case studies demonstrate how leadership of MRRD, charged with the seemingly technocratic domain of managing rural development projects, ended up wielding more political power than IDLG leaders, former diplomats who putatively oversaw "local governance." MRRD leadership had resource streams to barter with Parliamentarians and local elites. IDLG supposedly had political appointments of provincial and district governors, but in practice, these were largely captured by the Presidential Palace.[883]

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[881] This point is introduced in Frances Z. Brown, "Rethinking Afghan Local Governance Aid After Transition," August 2014. "Sharp distinctions between health services, education services, agricultural aid, democracy and governance sector programs, and justice sector programs mirror the foreign aid bureaucratic apparatus and the Kabul-level ministry structure. Among the subnational population, however, these divisions are not particularly meaningful."

[882] Interview with former US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 2017.

[883] See Martine van Bijlert, "Between Discipline and Discretion: Policies Surrounding Senior Subnational Appointments" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, May 2009).

This insight about the blurred line between "development" and governance" may hold implications for interventions beyond Afghanistan. There is a narrative within Western bureaucracies that the polished diplomats within the Embassy negotiate the big political matters, while their scruffier compatriots in development agencies just oversee the technical and "softer" matters of development. Even the advent of "whole of government" approaches to stabilisation and fragile states over the past fifteen years have placed diplomatic actors in the prime position of driving strategy.[884] Yet the lesson of the ASOP and NABDP programmes is that without control over programmatic resources, this putative oversight of "strategy" doesn't mean much.

3.6 Capacity Building: For Whom and For What?

This thesis has further challenged an early, yet still persistent, orthodoxy in exogenous statebuilding literature: a focus on building state capacity as a primary, technical means of "fixing" the deficiencies in failed states.[885]

Both the SIKA and ASOP programmes heavily emphasised building Afghan capacity, with programme managers particularly emphasizing two inter-related objectives. First, they aimed to build communication and "linkages" between *Kabul-based officials* one on hand, and local government representatives on the other.[886] This goal reflected the overarching

[884] For example, from the U.S. side, the Stabilization Assistance Review places the State Department as the lead on stabilisation strategy, and USAID as the implementer of the strategy, all supported by the military. U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of State, and US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas" (Washington, 2018).

[885] For example, Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart have focused their work on describing "how the international community can help a government acquire the capacity to serve its citizens," while Francis Fukuyama Ghani and Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States*, 5.

[886] U.S. Agency for International Development, "USAID Afghanistan Stabilization Fact Sheet," June 2011.

counterinsurgency framing, in which "extend[ing] the reach of government to unstable areas" was a seen as a necessary step for better service delivery and, ultimately, state consolidation. In practice, "fostering linkages and communication" between Kabul and the periphery often entailed carting Kabul-based IDLG officials into outlying districts by U.S. military transport, or giving Afghans each other's phone number.

As a second objective, ASOP and SIKA programmes aimed to teach *Afghan authorities based at the local level* to "improve their ability to communicate" with their own citizens. As one US government official mused regarding SIKA, "What does success look like? When people are approaching district representatives" to ask for projects.[887] Donors also launched "service provider fairs", in which local officials were volunteered to explain government offerings to their constituency. Local government officials were further prodded to participate in the opening and closing ceremonies for donor-funded projects to "show their engagement."[888]

In short, these programmes framed communication challenges as reflecting technical shortcomings of Afghan capacity and knowledge, rather than inherently political obstacles. But the evidence in this study and elsewhere calls into question this logic.[889] Multiple interviewees disputed the assumption that Afghan citizens simply needed to be "taught" how to communicate

[887] Interview with USAID stabilisation official 10, be phone, March 2014.

[888] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas: Final Performance Evaluation" (Prepared for U.S. Agency for International Development, September 2015), 19.

[889] See Ashley Jackson and Orzala Nemat, "Politics over Evidence: Questioning the Link between Service Delivery and State Legitimacy in Afghanistan" (London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, August 28, 2018).

with one another.[890] In truth, both citizens and government officials proved extremely resourceful at finding one another and communicating, when the stakes warranted them doing so.[891] Indeed, the entire system of patronage, petitioning, and "government of relationships" had for decades hinged on Afghans' ability to locate and talk to one other.[892] As one US government official long based in rural Kandahar mused, the programmes were based on the idea that Afghan government officials needed to be introduced to one another, but "It's always amazing to me how many district governors already had a line directly to Karzai."[893] Any faulty centre-periphery connection was not due to lack of earnest foreigners "facilitating communication", but a deeper political calculus: often, rural officials didn't *want* to be connected to the capital, or Karzai didn't want to respond. This critique extended to other aspects of the programmes' capacity building as well: foreigners laboured to teach various *shuras* how to negotiate with one another about common problems, but Afghans had been exercising these skills forever.[894]

[890] This point is introduced in Frances Z. Brown, "Rethinking Afghan Local Governance Aid After Transition," August 2014.

[891] Recall the long-time international analyst who noted, "Afghans are good at talking about things that matter to them." Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 5.

[892] On the "government of relationships" see Hamish Nixon, *Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008).

[893] Interview with USAID stabilisation official 9, by phone, March 2014.

[894] As Nemat illustrates, the injection of foreign funding into the equation had other perverse effects. She quotes a citizen of Nangarhar, saying that before foreign democracy-promotion intervention, "It was not difficult for us to gather a group of people in one house and discuss our problems and issues, but now if you aim to do so, everyone expects you to pay something. We were regularly meeting with no expectation for return, but that culture no longer exists... now every time you speak of *shura*, elections, or gathering people, they think they must be paid." Orzala Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan."

On a related note, the SIKA programme also aimed to teach Afghan government representatives to understand and ameliorate "sources of instability" at the local level.[895] Here again, the logic of capacity building was that if only Afghan officials could understand the factors driving local conflict—by way of the immensely complex Stability Assessment Matrix--they would set about fixing them, and, as programme documents claimed, the programme would help "build confidence" of the citizens in their state.[896] For many Afghan interviewees, this logic was risible: the real problem was government corruption.

As a final type of capacity building, various SIKA and ASOP initiatives seemed principally to focus on making Afghans ideal recipients of donor aid, rather than imparting skills relevant to local Afghan political life. As one emblematic example from SIKA's final report of accomplishments, local government officials "learned how to file, keep records, keep time, and manage meetings during their daily office operations."[897] For all of donors' putative focus on "building capacity", in reality, their projects seemed to be compounding and perpetuating dependency. This tension echoed what Astri Suhrke described years earlier—the "contradictory project" of building an Afghan-owned state via intrusive, maximalist external aid[898]—yet in the design of programmes such as SIKA, this dilemma was rarely acknowledged.

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[895] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas: Final Performance Evaluation," 8–9.

[896] US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization in Key Areas- South (SIKA-South Program) Contract Document," March 4, 2013, 7.

[897] Management Systems International, "Stability in Key Areas: Final Performance Evaluation," 25.

[898] Suhrke, *When More Is Less*, 15.

Notably, practitioners on the ground recognized the problems with governance capacity building exercises that lacked any reference to Afghan officials' real-life authorities and incentives. Recall the frustrated international governance expert who noted, "Practices get built up by doing, but also by doing things that *actually matter*" rather than the skills being practiced in donor projects[899]—an assessment echoing scholars such as Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock.[900] SIKA and ASOP largely thrust Afghans through exercises that *didn't* actually matter—their councils had no standing budget, offered no pathway to permanent structures, and required communities to undertake charades such as the Stability Assessment Matrix that would have no future relevance. Another civilian put it bluntly: "These Afghan guys get things done, when they want to. [If not], it's because they probably don't really care about a project."[901] By contrast, the NABDP programme came with a standing budget, creating a meaningful forum for negotiation, and consequently seemed to have incentivised Afghans to understand and navigate its systems. As another observer recalled, "DDA was for something real, and the other [*shuras*] were for something else."[902]

In summary, this thesis adds to the body of scholarship that has, in recent years, identified important challenges and nuance in statebuilding practice that tends to conceive of capacity

[899] Nixon, *Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan*.

[900] Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock, *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); Lant Pritchett, Matt Andrews, and Michael Woolcock, "Escaping Capability Traps through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) - Working Paper 299," accessed October 27, 2014.

[901] Interview with USAID stabilisation official 10, by phone, March 2014.

[902] Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015.

building as primarily a technical exercise to fix weaknesses.[903] It further relates to work of scholars such as Call who examine the peacebuilding field, and argue that international interveners should reorient towards a focus on state legitimation rather than state capacity.[904] The cases should fully put to rest the recurrent (and colonialist) assumption in statebuilding programme design that the Afghan natives simply needed to be "taught" how to connect with each other. The thesis also supports Volker Boege, M. Anne Brown, and Kevin Clements's reflections on the concept of "hybrid orders" versus "fragile states", in which they argue for "focusing on the strength and resilience of socio-political formations that are present on the ground, that work, and that provide public goods for people and communities."[905] The NABDP case demonstrates that, contrary to what Cliffe and Manning call the "fallacy of *terra nullis,*" Afghan officials and citizens all proved tremendously innovative in leveraging a programme for their purposes.[906] In many cases, there was available capacity among "these Afghan guys" to "get things done"—and provide "public goods for people and communities" as a result.

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[903] For example, see Lisa Denney, Richard Mallett, and Matthew Sterling Benson, "Service Delivery and State Capacity: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium." (London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, June 2017); Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock, *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); Lant Pritchett, Matt Andrews, and Michael Woolcock, "Escaping Capability Traps through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) - Working Paper 299," accessed October 27, 2014; Volker Boege et al., "States Emerging from Hybrid Political Orders: Pacific Experiences The Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies Occasional Papers Series.," *Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies. The Occasional Papers* x, no. 11 (September 1, 2008): 1–41; Stephen D. Krasner and Thomas Risse, "External Actors, State-Building, and Service Provision in Areas of Limited Statehood: Introduction," *Governance* 27, no. 4 (2014): 545–567; Shahar Hameiri, "Failed States or a Failed Paradigm? State Capacity and the Limits of Institutionalism," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 10, no. 2 (2007): 122–49.

[904] Call, *Why Peace Fails*.

[905] Volker Boege, M. Anne Brown, and Kevin P. Clements, "Hybrid Political Orders, Not Fragile States," *Peace Review* 21, no. 1 (February 27, 2009): 13–21.

[906] Cliffe and Manning, "Practical Approaches to Building State Institutions," in Call and Wyeth, *Building States to Build Peace*.

3.7 Problematising the emphasis on service delivery

Related to capacity building, this thesis also contributes to our understanding of the role of service delivery in statebuilding interventions. Supporting service delivery has long been a key tenet of international statebuilders' paradigm, mirroring a formal Weberian logic of rational legitimacy. Scholars have argued that interveners should assist fragile states in their ability to fulfil key functions, thus rectifying the "sovereignty gap" and thereby, it is hoped, leading to greater state legitimacy, or at least "performance legitimacy."[907] Counterinsurgency and stabilisation doctrine evinced a similar logic: if foreigners helped the Afghan government deliver services, the Afghan government would earn popular support. In recent years, assumptions of the linkage between service delivery and state legitimacy has been challenged on multiple fronts.[908] So too has the relationship between project delivery and popular support, and the relationship between "winning hearts and minds" and successfully countering an insurgency.[909] The empirical cases presented here add to this conversation. The programmes profiled demonstrate several particular flaws in both donors' conceptualisation and implementation of service delivery as a means of supporting statebuilding.

[907] Ghani and Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States*; Fukuyama, *State-Building*.

[908] Denney, Mallett, and Benson, "Service Delivery and State Capacity: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium."; Hamish Nixon and Richard Mallett, "Service Delivery, Public Perceptions and State Legitimacy: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium" (London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, June 2017); Jackson and Nemat, "Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium | Politics over Evidence."

[909] For example, see Jacqueline Hazelton, "The 'Hearts and Minds' Fallacy: Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare," *International Security* 42, no. 1 (2017): 80–113, Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder, "Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan," *Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA*, 2012.

First, the actual services delivered in the SIKA and ASOP programmes were often a poor fit for local expectations. The programmes hinged on episodic project delivery rather than recurrent service availability, and often dispensed maximalist rather than modest offerings. Recall the Afghan interviewee who noted that the various projects trotted out under the "stabilisation" banner were "not the kind of service that people want." He continued: "They want a functioning clinic that exists. People want to go to the clinic and know someone is there. People don't want free services. That has never existed in this country. When we go to agriculture department in our district, we don't expect fertilizer for free. We expect that the guy will be knowledgeable."[910] Another Afghan interviewee noted described his more quotidian yet important priorities for what services the government should provide: issuing the national identification card, proctoring the university entrance exam, and resolving land issues. Taking the long view of Afghan history, Thomas Barfield and Neamatullah Nojumi remind us: "It was no accident that the "do-little" Musahiban dynasty… deliberately chose minimalism as its guiding policy. Despite its many weaknesses, this dynasty gave Afghanistan a half-century of peace — the longest in the country's history — and maintained a functioning state structure throughout its existence."[911]

Second, the stabilisation programmes promoted a notion of "service delivery" that was deeply linked with the imperative of extending the writ of the state. Yet civilians in many of the most volatile areas targeted by SIKA and ASOP disliked this agenda. Instead, the local

[910] Interview with former Afghan member of Parliament 2, Kabul, March 2014.

[911] Thomas Barfield and Neamatollah Nojumi, "Bringing More Effective Governance to Afghanistan: 10 Pathways to Stability," *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 4 (December 1, 2010): 40–52.

insurgency largely stemmed not from *lack* of government services, but what citizens viewed as the incursion of the predatory Kabul-based government, aided by foreign military forces. No amount of stabilisation projects could atone for the fact that these communities primarily wanted to be left alone.[912]

As an international analyst reflected in an interview, "the priority of the people is to have a government that doesn't interfere in their lives. We have assumed, incorrectly, that the first step is to make a government that *looks* like a functioning government. But there's an important middle step, before that or service delivery matters—that is having a government that's not predatory."[913]

4.0 Conclusion

It is by now abundantly clear that bottom-up statebuilding interventions—like their top-down variants – are rife with tensions and unintended consequences. A more flippant observer might note that the more fervently a scholar or policymaker believes that "grassroots" approaches are a panacea, the farther from the grassroots level that individual must reside.

Yet bottom-up approaches do offer promise: under some conditions, stabilisation programmes have promoted effective, durable subnational governance in the wartime Afghanistan context. Further, as this chapter has traced, there are specific ways in which bottom-

[912] On the effectiveness of local customary self-governance in Afghanistan, see Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan*; I introduce related arguments about the problems with the "expanding the writ of the state" agenda in the Afghan counterinsurgency context in Frances Z. Brown, "The U.S. Surge and Afghan Local Governance" (U.S. Institute of Peace, September 2012).

[913] Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 3, Kabul, February 2012.

up programmes can open the door to further reforms: by leveraging the primacy of national-level actors in shaping outcomes, by converting "performative statebuilding" into actual inclusive statebuilding, by utilising the power of legibility and predictability to establish accountable governance forums, and by drawing upon the actual capacity existent on the ground in Afghanistan and presumably many other fragile states. The picture is neither fully bleak, nor fully utopian. Admittedly, such a qualified assessment does not lend itself to a pithy recommendation of "what works" in statebuilding interventions. But this thesis has aimed to depict this thorny area of international relations as it is, and not as we wish it might be.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

This final chapter briefly recaps the ground covered in the thesis; reflects upon the limitations and generalisability of the findings beyond Afghanistan; considers policy implications; and indicates areas for further research.

After an introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provided a justification of the primary cases, and explained the research design. The evaluative framework was developed to assess each programme with respect to whether it improved *capacity, accountability, authority and autonomy* at subnational levels of government, and whether these effects endured beyond the lifetime of the programme.

Chapter 3 situated the subsequent empirical chapters within the context of the international intervention in Afghanistan. It summarized Western donors' statebuilding efforts from the fall of the Taliban in 2001 until the end of the thesis timeframe in 2014, with a particular focus on initiatives aiming to reform local governance.

Chapters 4 through 6 contained a structured, focused comparison of the three primary case studies, the National Area-Based Development Programme (NABDP), the Stability in Key Areas (SIKA) programme, and the Afghan Social Outreach Programme (ASOP). For reasons of comparability and maturity, all were based in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2014, and each explicitly aimed to improve local government effectiveness. This theory-generating portion of the thesis aimed to identify which factors are most important in explaining the divergent outcomes of these bottom-up stabilisation initiatives. It found that programmes were more likely to contribute to durable, effective decentralised subnational governance when, first, the

programme enjoyed a *strong partnership with a host government counterpart* at the capital level, and second, when the *programme demonstrated "local embeddedness"* within Afghan vertical and local political economy. The thesis's one modest success case, the NABDP, leveraged a strong partnership with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, and aligned with local political economy and patronage networks.

Chapter 7 examined the theoretical implications of the empirical chapters. The case studies demonstrated that despite the bleak record of two of these programmes, one bottom-up statebuilding programme did advance foreign interveners' objectives of improving durable, effective local governance in Afghanistan, in support of the overall statebuilding process. In so doing, it contributed an important, albeit modest, counterpoint to scholars who reject the entire exogenous statebuilding premise.[914]

The chapter also explored the empirical chapters' broader implications for literature on internationally-backed statebuilding interventions in conflict. It reflected upon the primacy of national actors' agency in affecting outcomes, and the flaws of service delivery and capacity building as two twin orthodoxies of the donor-backed statebuilding interventions. It also examined the promise and perils of "performative statebuilding", the importance of legibility and predictability in the design of exogenous statebuilding interventions, and the shortcomings of the "local turn" in peacebuilding models.

[914] For example, see David Chandler, *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-Building* (Pluto, 2006).

1.0 Limitations and Generalisability

This study has clear temporal limits. The empirical chapters evaluated whether programmes achieved effectiveness and durability until the end of the Karzai administration in 2014. The one success case, NABDP, established structures that endured until this juncture, and that were positioned to become the *de facto* district-level councils in the years to come. However, when the successor administration of Ashraf Ghani was inaugurated, that government was less supportive of NABDP's councils, because it claimed it would be holding elections for official district councils soon. (At time of writing over five years later, these elections still had not been held.)

Though this change complicates the assessment of durability, it should not be viewed as a total refutation. Put in perspective, in any democracy, a change in leadership often results in consequential shifts in agenda. In the much more institutionalised context of the United States or the United Kingdom, upon taking office, every new administration oversees termination or rebranding of significant numbers of its predecessors' signature policies. In Afghanistan, it is predictable that the new "National Unity Government" wanted to launch or rebrand its own efforts; as one longtime international governance advisor explained, "NUG would like to claim its own new initiatives."[915] Furthermore, even without high-level backing, as recently as 2019, DDAs continue to persist in Afghan public discourse, continue to meet in some areas, and are

[915] Interview with MRRD official 7, Kabul, January 25, 2016.

cited as a functional model of governance that could be rejuvenated to support the current policy priority: a peace settlement with the Taliban.[916]

The study was also inevitably limited by access and security in measuring each programme's success in improving local governance. Afghanistan has 400 districts, and the local-level effects of each programme inevitably varied; at the same time, from a scholarly standpoint, I sought parsimony in identifying patterns of explanations. I aimed to capture these various effects as rigorously as possible, through triangulating a wide range of primary sources and interviewees and leveraging extant large-scale surveys where possible, and conducting fieldwork in Kandahar and Nangarhar provinces. Still, my efforts to identify parsimonious patterns in the data inevitably simplified and generalised. This challenge is familiar to many political science accounts that attempt to qualitatively capture a wide range of communities' or stakeholders' perspectives.[917]

As another limitation, this study was set in the somewhat *sui generis* context of Afghanistan during the surge. All three cases occurred during the height of military and civilian assistance, between 2009 and 2014. This decision taken in order to ensure comparability between cases; in addition, the international stabilisation effort in Afghanistan can be viewed as a "critical

[916] In 2019, subsequent to the time period in this thesis and after several years of dormancy, MRRD re-launched another version of NABDP, likely reflecting the continued "brand recognition" of DDAs.

[917] As Autesserre describes the tension between capturing accurate factual minutiae and illuminating generalisations in the peacebuilding world, paraphrasing Peter Uvin: "It is likely that for any statement I make, there have been people who acted or thought differently. Any claim about the "diplomatic community" or "The UN" is bound to do injustice to some people or organizations. The same holds true, for that matter, for statements about "Congolese politicians" or "traditional leaders" or "rural inhabitants of the eastern Congo." I sought to respect the variation that exists in each group, but... my analysis.. is bound to generalize and simplify." Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 35.

case." Yet further research would be needed to determine whether findings are generalisable across other contexts, particularly those with fewer donor financial or military resources.

At first blush, the variable of *host government partnership* appears to be salient in other stabilisation contexts. Two illustrative cases provide a brief example. In Syria, the international community spent over a billion dollars on local governance and stabilisation efforts in opposition-held areas.[918] The overarching paradigm of these stabilisation programmes was opposite of the model for stabilisation programmes in Afghanistan—donors aimed to bolster the rebel governance structures *opposing* President Bashar al-Assad, rather than bolster the central government as was the case in Afghanistan. Yet at the programmatic level, the logic was remarkably similar—stabilisation projects supported local councils in hopes they would become more capable, responsive, and accountable to their constituents, and ultimately, solidify into a formidable, accountable government that could withstand pressure from competitors.

These Syria stabilisation programmes relied heavily upon their partnership with their host government counterpart, in this case, the Syrian Interim Government's Assistance Coordination Unit. This entity was intended to be the institution that ensured foreign-backed initiatives would be integrated into the authentic structure of the Syrian (rebel) government. Yet unfortunately, the ACU proved to be fractious and ineffective, riven by multiple donor sponsors' agendas.[919] The

[918] This figured compiled from public US, UK, and EU documents. For full accounting, see Endnote 1 of Frances Z. Brown, "Dilemmas of Stabilization Assistance: The Case of Syria" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 26, 2018).

[919] ICAM, "ICAM Community Profiles: Key Takeaways," May 26, 2016; Brown, "Dilemmas of Stabilization Assistance," 9-12.

local stabilisation programmes were still able to operate with some success on a local level, but their broader traction was hampered by the ACU's limitations.

In Somalia, international stabilisation programmes have attempted bottom-up statebuilding in partnership with the Ministry of Interior, Federal Affairs and Reconciliation (MOIFAR). Yet the woefully limited capacity of the Ministry, according to some practitioners, impeded these programmes' impact.[920] As of this writing, both the UN and USAID are aiming to augment the MOIFAR's capacity, but concrete improvements are yet to be seen.

Future research into these cases could more systematically examine this preliminary assessment of host government partnership. It could also investigate the salience of the thesis's other main variable, *local embeddedness*, which is nearly impossible to assess without in-depth fieldwork. Further research could broaden the study to the several places in which the U.S. or other donors have sponsored stabilisation programmes--Nigeria, Libya, Iraq, Mali, northwest Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere—to probe whether the theory extends to these cases.

2.0 Policy Implications

The first major policy implication of this thesis is that an externally backed reform agenda that clashes with the interests of the host nation government will fail. Stabilisation programmes aimed to devolve power away from the capital; unsurprisingly, the capital resisted this agenda. Hamid Karzai was happy to invoke "local governance" when it equated to capturing donor resource streams, but he never shared donors' overriding objectives of building local

[920] "Correspondence with Somalia Stabilisation Practitioner," November 26, 2019.

empowerment. Central government resistance or co-option was paramount in explaining the failure cases, while the success case largely succeeded by keeping distance from Karzai.

At the time of writing, this lesson has now become so widely accepted in policy circles that noting it almost seems redundant. Post-mortems of the Afghan counterinsurgency effort inevitably point to the fact that the U.S. "didn't have a partner" in the Karzai government. Reflecting this truism, the U.S. government in 2018 promulgated policy guidance which acknowledged that subnational-level stabilisation "is more effective when it is informed by national-level policy reforms."[921] Yet although this policy lesson is obvious, it still bears repeating. Recent accounts of the Afghan war, such as the *Washington Post's* newly-released "Afghanistan Papers," chronicle that senior U.S. policymakers were aware all along of the gap between their aspirations for Afghanistan, and those of the Karzai government.[922] They carried on regardless.

The second policy implication of this thesis is that policymakers should reconsider their idealisation of the "local" and the "bottom-up." Despite the appealing idea of grassroots programmes, bottom-up statebuilding is no panacea. Local structures are just as prone to predatory governance and exclusion as national ones. The mantra of "bringing the government closer to the people" does not hold up if "the people" mostly want to be left alone.[923] The

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[921] U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Defense, and US Agency for International Development, "Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas" (Washington, D.C, 2018), 8.

[922] Craig Whitlock, "Confidential Documents Reveal U.S. Officials Failed to Tell the Truth about the War in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.

[923] Frances Z. Brown, "The U.S. Surge and Afghan Local Governance" (U.S. Institute of Peace, September 2012).

bottom-up approach also needs top-down reinforcement to succeed.[924] Furthermore, "going local" is labour-intensive, and raises real practical challenges in effecting progress at scale—in the Afghan case, there are some 35,000 local communities.

Although the international community has disavowed another large-scale counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, there is still considerable fascination with "the local" and "the community" in policy discourse and programmatic recommendations for the country. Today, some Western policymakers express hope that the Afghan peace process can be supported by "bottom-up" initiatives.[925] Afghan policymakers are susceptible to this as well. The current Afghan president has launched an ambitious Citizens' Charter programme focusing on village-level Afghanistan, and has stated that the peace process will come "village by village."[926] Starting in 2018, the Afghan government and U.S. military have promoted a new "Afghan Territorial Army" initiative, with many of the same features as those programmes profiled in this thesis: "community buy-in" and *shura* meetings—all in collaboration with the Independent Directorate for Local Governance.[927] Initial reports suggest that this programme suffers from familiar challenges of scale, command and control, and relationship to the overarching government structure.[928]

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[924] Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?*, 1 edition (Washington, D.C: World Bank Publications, 2012).

[925] Correspondence with International Afghanistan Governance Expert 6, November 6, 2019.

[926] Ibid.

[927] Kate Clark, "The Afghan Territorial Force: Learning from the Lessons of the Past?," *Afghanistan Analysts Network* (blog), January 15, 2019.

[928] Clark.

Beyond Afghanistan, policymakers continue to flock to bottom-up solutions. The U.S. government is undertaking similar stabilisation programmes in areas including Syria, Somalia, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere. Their underlying assumptions are remarkably similar to those profiled, and criticised, in this thesis. In the years since the time period studied, other key donors' stabilisation policy guidance has made progress. The UK, through its new stabilisation doctrine and underpinning Elite Bargains and Political Deals project, emphasised that "political processes should be locally-led and reflect the reality of local arrangements of power and the elite bargains which underpinned them."[929] It also focuses on the centrality of political processes, and noted the "limitations of large-scale international stabilisation interventions, especially those which were military-led and took an externally-driven statebuilding approach."[930] The key challenge now for UK Stabilisation Unit practitioners is integrating this updated guidance into field-based operations.[931]

As a final policy implication, there exist practical ways in which the bottom-up approach could be improved. First, it should be informed by sober arithmetic about the number of governance units that need to be reached. When designing stabilisation programmes, U.S. policymakers never seemed to seriously grapple with the fact that there were roughly 400 districts in Afghanistan, and over 35,000 communities, or that reaching just a subset of these could be tokenistic and perhaps even exacerbate conflict. Second, and related, focusing first on

[929] UK Stabilisation Unit, "The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners," March 2019, 9.

[930] Ibid.

[931] Interview with UK Stabilisation Unit official, London, July 2019.

the middle tiers of governance is often a more promising approach. Afghanistan's provincial-level councils still did not have clearly defined authorities or responsibilities at the time of the surge; unsurprisingly, trying to roll out district-level councils beneath them caused still more confusion and still less accountability. Third, tying bottom-up approaches to actual budgetary incentives and authorities is essential. Bottom-up approaches tried to tutor local councils on how to prioritise and spend money. But most of these councils (beyond NABDP, which had a standing budget) never had a hope of exerting these authorities in the long term, making these exercises irrelevant at best, and dangerously expectation-raising at worst. Fourth, as Goodhand notes, policymakers should think more clearly about patronage flows and rents when designing programmes.[932] Finally, as participatory-development specialists have counselled for decades, repeated iteration, rather than one-off engagement, is necessary to change local governance practices and norms.[933]

3.0 Future Research

This thesis aimed to contribute meaningfully to our understanding of the conceptualisation and empirical record of externally backed statebuilding efforts; however, several important areas of research lay beyond the scope of this project. The research pointed to several related strands of inquiry that would be worthwhile for future scholarship, particularly for projects that widen the study of bottom-up statebuilding beyond a single country.

[932] Goodhand, Jonathan, "Getting the Politics Right: Beyond 'Good Governance' in Afghanistan," in *Afghanistan- Challenges and Prospects* (Routledge, 2019), 96.

[933] Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*.

Identifying pathways from performative statebuilding to inclusive governance. The NABDP achieved (qualified) success largely by happenstance, because it aligned with local incentives and a strong partner ministry. Other scholars have anticipated this type of serendipity in leading to positive governance outcomes.[934] Though the reasons for NABDP's viability were largely unanticipated by foreign interveners, as discussed in Chapter 7, the programme opened up important pathways to reform. It created space to convert "performative statebuilding" into actual inclusive statebuilding, by establishing accountable, recognizable governance structures on the ground that provided forums for citizens to engage with their government. It also drew upon the actual capacity present on the ground in Afghanistan (and presumably many other "fragile states") to deliver services for the population[935]—even though those services also happened to be in the interest of Parliamentarians who co-opted the programme. Barnett and Zurcher similarly argued that symbols and performance *can* help advance statebuilding reform: interveners can foster visible new governance associations that can, over time, forge pathways toward liberalization.[936] In short, the initially ceremonial institution of DDAs reified into a

[934] For example, Booth predicts that successful institutions in public goods provision "will be the ones that by accident or design address the relevant collective action problems." David Booth, "Introduction: Working with the Grain? The Africa Power and Politics Programme," *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (March 1, 2011): 1–10.

[935] See Volker Boege, M. Anne Brown, and Kevin P. Clements, "Hybrid Political Orders, Not Fragile States," *Peace Review* 21, no. 1 (February 27, 2009): 13–21.

[936] Michael Barnett and Christoph Zurcher, "The Peacebuilder's Contract: How External Statebuilding Reinforces Weak Statehood," in *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 35.

significant political force, promoted new associations, and over time, built (some) space for liberal statebuilding outcomes.

Going forward, a key research frontier is how interveners may better identify these potential pathways for reform *before* an intervention, rather than sometimes stumbling onto it by chance. A closer look at the mechanisms at play in NABDP would be warranted, but this research agenda would also widen the scope of inquiry to other contexts and countries, to identify common patterns among successful "accidental" pathways to reform. This research would connect with the already-vibrant scholarship and growing consensus on the imperative of "thinking and working politically" and the need for political strategies to underpin peacebuilding initiatives.[937] Humility is in order: as Mansuri and Rao reminded us in their comprehensive study of participatory development interventions, building small infrastructure is a "much more predictable activity than changing social and political systems… addressing political failures requires a shift in the social equilibrium that derives from a change in the nature of social interactions and from modifying norms and local cultures."[938] Considerable further research is needed to match this emergent consensus for politically-informed work with an evidence base for how it has actually blazed trails to reform in practice.

[937] For example, see Ed Laws and Heather Marquette, "Thinking and Working Politically: Reviewing the Evidence on the Integration of Politics into Development Practice over the Past Decade" (Overseas Development Institute, March 2018; see also the affirmation that "political strategies must drive peace operations" in the Independent High-level Panel on Peace Operations, "Report of the Independent High-Level Panel on Peace Operations" (United Nations, June 17, 2015).

[938] Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*, 291.

Shifting from competitive statebuilding models to accommodation paradigms. Second, future research should focus less on a counterinsurgency and statebuilding model that is predicated on *competition* between the host government and insurgents, and one that is focused more on *accommodation and bargaining* between the two parties. The Afghan stabilisation model hinged on the idea of a "contest for governance": if the Afghan government could be supported to build up a formidable, legitimate and effective state, it would win over popular support from the Taliban, and ultimately achieve victory.[939]

But this theory did not hold up in practice. First, the Taliban itself has over the years proven a formidable statebuilding enterprise, building up its own service provision and bureaucracy.[940] The programmes studied in this thesis were not painting on an empty canvas, and were just one small piece of the overall context; widening the aperture, much of Afghanistan was subject to the Taliban's own robust version of "bottom-up statebuilding." And second, in recent years, Western policymakers have gradually moved away from the hope that the Afghan war will end in a "victory" for the Afghan government, and have galvanised movement toward peace talks with the Taliban that will, at best, lead to a negotiated political settlement.

These realities point to the need for research on a post-war statebuilding paradigm that is premised on compromise and negotiation, rather than decisive victory. Often, as with the

[939] U. S. Army, Lt General David Petraeus, and Lt General James F. Amos, *Counterinsurgency: FM 3-24* (Boulder, Colo.; Newbury: Paladin Press, 2007); Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, "Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy" (U.S. Department of State, February 2010).

[940] Ashley Jackson and Rahmatullah Amiri, "Insurgent Bureaucracy: How the Taliban Makes Policy," United States Institute of Peace, accessed December 7, 2019, Ashley Jackson, "Life under the Taliban Shadow Government" (London: Overseas Development Institute, June 2018).

Taliban, this would involve compromise with actors viewed, from a Western liberal lens, as unsavoury. The objective here would be to identify statebuilding outcomes that, if not perfect, would be more inclusive or legitimate than the alternatives. Beyond Afghanistan, some policy discourse policy in other counterinsurgency contexts such as Somalia have begun to reflect this reality of the need to end civil wars without a clear-cut victory.[941] Broader research into "elite bargains" in stabilisation contexts has also begun to reflect this.[942] Still, much more scholarship is needed into accommodation paradigms in statebuilding, in Afghanistan and beyond.

Identifying Pathways from Bottom-up Approaches to National-level Reform. Underlying the bottom-up programmes profiled in this thesis is the same assumption underlying other stabilisation programmes globally: that local-level success will somehow expand to governance improvement on a broader scale. In the Afghan case, U.S. officials often spoke of an "ink blot" spreading outwards: that districts that showed progress in interlinked security, governance and development goals would be viewed by neighbouring areas as desirable, and would somehow be emulated by those districts. Simultaneously, policymakers expressed hope that these bottom-up efforts would somehow connect to Kabul-led governance initiatives—despite the reality that there were few concrete efforts to actually link these local-level and top-down reform efforts, and despite the fact that Kabul's political class had limited interest in bolstering local-level accountability and good governance. This assumption goes well beyond the Afghan case: from

[941] For example, see Jason Hartwig, "How to End the Civil War in Somalia: Negotiate with al-Shabaab," *War on the Rocks*, May 13, 2019.

[942] Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand, and Patrick Meehan, "Synthesis Paper: Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains That Reduce Violent Conflict," Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project (London: U.K. Stabilisation Unit, April 2018).

Colombia to Syria to Somalia, internationally-assisted peacebuilding efforts that achieve attractive traction on a community level often struggle to show how their programmes transform governance dynamics on a broader scale. A hugely important future research agenda could unpack the assumptions underlying these programmes and identify any viable pathways by which community-level progress does indeed lead to reforms on a broader level.

Understanding the Ideational Persistence of the Bottom-up Approach. Finally, more research is needed into a puzzle that emerges from this thesis and other scholarship: given bottom-up statebuilding initiatives' lackluster record in achieving their stated objectives, why do these approaches persist in discourse and policy? This query is prompted by the notable regeneration of local or community-based stabilisation programmes in donor approaches to Syria, Somalia, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere, even as internationals have sworn off large-scale "nation-building" as was attempted in Afghanistan and Iraq. This question is also spurred by recent developments within the U.S. military. The Special Forces community has already embraced a shift toward orienting toward more localised partnership approaches that encompass civilian governance-oriented tasks, as well as security ones.[943]

This research agenda would likely encompass a variety of strands, including organisational behaviour, bureaucratic theory, cognitive bias, and a historic examination of

[943] These approaches often encompass tasks traditionally known as civilian ones. "Special operations forces forge relationships that can last for decades with a diverse collection of groups: training, advising, and operating alongside other countries' militaries, police forces, tribes, militias, or other informal groups. They also conduct civil-affairs operations that provide medical, veterinary, or agricultural assistance to civilians, improving the standing of local governments and gaining access to and a greater understanding of local conditions and populations." Linda Robinson, "The Future of Special Operations," *Foreign Affairs*, December 2012; Linda Robinson, *One Hundred Victories: Special Ops and the Future of American Warfare*, First Edition edition (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013).

institutional learning within the U.S. foreign policy apparatus. It would also add to a growing body of knowledge on the recurrence of ineffective policies and practices in the international intervention and peacekeeping field.[944]

Preliminarily, one tentative explanation for why bottom-up approaches continue to garner support include pathologies of the U.S. policymaking apparatus, in which familiar policy and programmatic tropes are often offered up as options, and in which dependable metrics for measuring governance-related "success" in complex foreign interventions are hard to ascertain.[945] Another potential explanation relates to the predominance of military voices in policy decision-making, which crowds out understanding of the nuanced challenges of governance reforms, and the outsize influence of particular "warrior-intellectuals" such as General David Petraeus in shaping public and policymakers' views in foreign policy.[946] There are also likely organizational factors at play, such as international community turnover in key areas, which renders sober assessment and feedback loops difficult to obtain. Other analytic pathologies also likely explain this phenomenon, including confusion of discrete patches of progress with replicable models; data paucity and the triumph of anecdotal "evidence"; cultural romanticism and Orientalist notions of "the tribes"; misleading use of analogies across countries

[944] For example, see Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[945] On the challenges of measuring success, see Craig Whitlock, "Confidential Documents Reveal U.S. Officials Failed to Tell the Truth about the War in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.

[946] See David Miller and Tom Mills, "Counterinsurgency and Terror Expertise: The Integration of Social Scientists into the War Effort," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2010): 203–221.

and sectors,[947] international community turnover, and Western policymakers' confusion of "local" with simple.[948] There are also specific explanations that may be related to Afghanistan in particular; some interviewees noted the prevalence of analogies to Iraq in the formulation of the Afghanistan bottom-up strategy, with insufficient acknowledgement of how Iraq was a relatively more capable central state.[949]

This undertaking would build upon several related strands within international relations scholarship. Scholars such as Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore have provided a constructivist argument tracing the pathologies of international organisations' behaviour, tracing how international organizations' behaviour "often produce undesirable and even self-defeating outcomes repeatedly", without incurring negative consequence.[950] Extending Weber, they point to the fact that in some bureaucracies, certain familiar procedures become so embedded within bureaucracies, that the desire to revert to these playbooks subverts an analysis of the overarching goals of an intervention. They point to the international community's emphasis on (often premature) elections in post-conflict contexts as an example.[951] More broadly, this scholarship could also build upon the robust debate on to what degree ideas and ideology shape foreign

[947] The ways in which the Iraq model of stabilisation may have influenced planning for an Afghan approaches provides an useful example of the phenomenon of analogy in foreign policy decisionmaking.

[948] I introduce some of these ideas in Frances Z. Brown, "Afghanistan's Need for Reform: We Have Seen the Enemy, and It Is Our Anecdotes," *Foreign Policy*, October 30, 2012; Brown, "The U.S. Surge and Afghan Local Governance," 13.

[949] Interview with US stabilisation official, Washington, October 2017.

[950] Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations," *International Organization* 53, no. 4 (1999): 701.

[951] Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations," 720; in making the argument about post-conflict elections, they draw upon Roland Paris, "Peacebuilding and the Limits of Liberal Internationalism," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (1997): 54–89.

policy.[952] International relations scholarship more broadly has long grappled with how principal-agent problems can undermine bureaucratic agencies' performance, a relevant consideration here, as well. Specific to bottom-up approaches, Manrusi and Rao have already documented the longstanding recurrence of community-driven development projects, from their initial use in the 1950s and 1960s, to policymakers' dismissal of them in the subsequent decades, to their renovation starting in the 1990s. Observing this cycle, they argue that the embrace of these community-driven initiatives is "still driven more by ideology and optimism than by systematic analysis, either theoretical or empirical."[953] The same may be true of stabilisation initiatives.

As a very final word, despite policymakers' regular disavowal of foreign "nation-building" adventures, the international community will likely continue to be compelled to intervene in civil wars overseas. And despite all the evident challenges, I still join the side of scholars who believe that international actors should continue to engage in statebuilding endeavours. In these ambitious efforts, localised initiatives will likely continue to offer intrinsic attraction. Yet as I have aimed to demonstrate throughout this thesis, bottom-up approaches have achieved murky results, at least as previously conceived. Understanding the persistence of the idealisation of bottom-up approaches, despite the international community's undistinguished record in implementing them, thus has urgent policy and scholarly implications. So, too, does

[952] For example, see Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*, Cornell Studies in Political Economy (Ithaca, New York ; London: Cornell University Press, 1993); Neta Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization, and Humanitarian Intervention [Electronic Resource]*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 81 (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[953] Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development*, 3.

understanding how future bottom-up efforts can be conceptualised and implemented to be a bit more effective. Conflict-affected populations will continue to desperately need the capable, legitimate governance that international statebuilders aspire to support.

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

(Names supplied separately at viva)

1. Interview with former ASOP staffer 1, Kabul, January 27, 2016.

2. Interview with former SIKA implementer 1, Washington, June 2019.

3. Correspondence with former SIKA implementer 1, July 2019.

4. Interview with Afghan Ministry of Finance staffer 1, Kabul, January 22, 2016.

5. Interview with US government stabilisation official 1, Kandahar, February 2012.

6. Interview with former SIKA implementer 2, March 15, 2018.

7. Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 1, Boston, October 10, 2014.

8. Interview with US State Department official 1, by phone, June 4, 2012.

9. Interview with stabilisation implementer 1, Kabul, March 2014.

10. Interview with former MRRD staffer 1, London, October 2018.

11. Correspondence with international expert on Afghan governance 2, August 2018.

12. Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 3, Kabul, February 28, 2012.

13. Interview with USAID governance official 1, Kabul, March 16, 2014.

14. Interview with international advisor to IDLG 1, by phone, October 13, 2015.

15. Interview with international advisor to the IDLG 1, Kabul, January 21, 2016.

16. Interview with Ministry of Finance staffer 2, Washington, June 8, 2018.

17. Interview with USAID governance official 2, Kabul, March 16, 2014.

18. Interview with international decentralization expert, Washington, October 13, 2015.

19. Interview with USAID governance official 3, Kabul, February 29, 2012.

20. Interview with former US government official and international expert on Afghan governance 4, Washington, November 1, 2017.

21. Interview with USAID development official 1, by phone, May 25, 2012.

22. Interview with international advisor to IDLG 2, Kabul, March 18, 2014.

23. Interview with USAID stabilisation official 1, by phone, May 14, 2012.

24. Interview with international advisor to IDLG 3, by Phone, October 19, 2015.

25. Interview with international stabilisation advisor to US Special Forces, Kabul, February 28, 2014.

26. Interview with US State Department official 2, Kandahar, February 2012.

27. Interview with USAID stabilisation official 2, Kandahar, February 2012.

28. Interview with Ministry of Finance staffer 3, Kabul, February 2012.

29. Interview with UK Stabilisation Unit official, London, July 28, 2019.

30. Interview with USAID governance official 4, Washington, November 30, 2015.

31. Interview with Afghan-national researcher 1, Kabul, March 15, 2014.

32. Interview with USAID stabilisation official 3, Kabul, February 26, 2012.

33. Interview with Afghan-national researcher 2, by phone, January 2018.

34. Interview with Afghan-national researcher 2, Kabul, February 22, 2012.

35. Interview with Afghan-national researcher 2,Washington, June 2019.

36. Correspondence with Afghan-national researcher 2, December 2019.

37. Interview with former MRRD staffer 2, Kabul, January 21, 2016.

38. Correspondence with former MRRD staffer 2, January 2016.

39. Interview with USAID stabilisation official 4, Washington, November 2012.

40. Interview with USAID stabilisation official 4, Kabul, March 16, 2014.

41. Interview with USAID stabilisation official 5, by phone, February 4, 2014.

42. Interview with USAID Governance Official 5, Kabul, March 2014.

43. Interview with USAID stabilisation implementer 2, Kabul, March 2014.

44. Interview with Former Member of Afghan Parliament 1, Kabul, January 20, 2016.

45. Interview with MRRD official 3, Kabul, January 28, 2016.

46. Interview with Senior IDLG Official 1, Kabul, January 23, 2016.

47. Interview with Senior IDLG Official 2, Kabul, March 2014.

48. Interview with Former Senior IDLG Official 2, Washington, December 4, 2015.

49. Interview with USAID stabilisation implementer 3, Kabul, March 2014.

50. Email Correspondence with International Advisor to IDLG 4, August 11, 2014.

51. Interview with former International Advisor to IDLG 4, Oxford, July 11, 2015.

52. Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 4, London, October 2017.

53. Interview with Senior IDLG Official 3, Kabul, May 2015.

54. Interview with USAID Governance Official 6, Kabul, March 2014.

55. Interview with US government stabilisation official 6, Washington, October 27, 2017.

56. Interview with MRRD official 4, London, October 6, 2017.

57. Interview with Former Cabinet-level Afghan Government Official 1, Jalalabad, January 25, 2016.

58. Interview with MRRD official 5, Kabul, January 24, 2016.

59. Interview with former Afghan Member of Parliament 2, Kabul, March 2014.

60. Interview with Ministry of Finance staffer 5, Washington June 8, 2018.

61. Interview with senior IDLG official 4, Kabul, March 19, 2014.

62. Interview with Afghan-national researcher 3, Washington, September 25, 2017.

63. Interview with IDLG Official 5, Kabul, January 24, 2016.

64. Interview with former SIKA programme staffer 3, by phone, July 24, 2017.

65. Correspondence with former SIKA programme staffer 3, July 2018.

66. Interview with IDLG Official 6, Kabul, January 28, 2016.

67. Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 5, Oxford, May 14, 2014.

68. Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 5, by phone, August 10, 2015.

69. Interview with State Department official 3, Kandahar, March 2012.

70. Interview with State Department Official 4, Kabul, February 2012.

71. Correspondence with State Department Official 4, July 2015.

72. Interview with MRRD Official 6, Kabul, January 27, 2016.

73. Interview with USAID stabilisation official 7, by phone, February 2012.

74. Interview with USAID Governance official 7, Kabul, March 2014.

75. Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 6, Kabul, March 13, 2014.

76. Interview with former senior ASOP staffer 2, Kabul, January 27, 2016.

77. Interview with Afghan-national researcher 4, Kabul, January 20, 2016.

78. Interview with Department of State official 5, Kandahar, March 2012.

79. Interview with USAID stabilisation official 8, Kabul, March 16, 2014.

80. Interview with international expert on Afghan governance 7, New York, April 2018.

81. Correspondence with international expert on Afghan governance X, April 17-19, 2018.

82. Interview with USAID governance official 8, Kabul, February 2012.

83. Interview with USAID governance official 9, Kandahar, February 2012.

84. Interview with MRRD official 7, Kabul, January 25, 2016.

85. Interview with USAID stabilisation official 9, Kandahar, March 11, 2014.

86. Correspondence with Somalia Stabilisation Practitioner, November 26, 2019.

87. Correspondence with international stabilisation implementer 4, November 2016.

88. Interview with Former Kabul-based NGO executive, Washington, October 31, 2017.

89. Interview with USAID governance official 10, Washington, February 2014.

90. Interview with USAID USAID governance official 10, Washington, May 2012.

91. Interview with international Afghan expert on Afghan governance 8, Washington, January 2017.

92. Interview with International Advisor to IDLG 5, Kabul, March 19, 2014.

93. Interview with International Advisor to IDLG 5, by phone, August 15, 2015.

94. Correspondence with International Advisor to IDLG 5, September 2015.

95. Interview with United Nations Development Programme official, Kabul, March 18, 2014.

96. Interview with international expert on Afghanistan governance 9, September 2012.

97. Correspondence with International Afghanistan governance expert 9, November 6, 2019.

98. Interview with former international advisor to IDLG 6, Washington, July 2015.

99. Correspondence with former international advisor to IDLG 6, August 27-29, 2015.

100. Interview with USAID stabilisation official 10, by phone, March 18, 2014.

101. Interview with MRRD Official 8, Kabul, February 2012.

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