

RETHINKING LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Susanne Schmeidl, Katja Mielke,
Conrad Schetter

As the Taliban reshape Afghanistan's local governance around religious authority and centralised control, development actors face a fundamental dilemma: Community structures once used to work around the regime now fall under its increasing oversight. This policy brief examines what remains of local agency, and how to navigate the dilemmas and trade-offs that follow.

bicc policy brief

KEY MESSAGES

1 AID PROGRAMMES NEED TO ARTICULATE THEIR PRINCIPLES CLEARLY

Conflict sensitivity, do-no-harm, impartiality and inclusion should guide all programming and be reflected in internal guidance and partner agreements. If aid programmes cannot avoid engaging with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) or associated actors, they should base their decisions on the concrete effects on communities and document their rationale to maintain accountability and protect staff.

2 TREAT CONTEXT ANALYSIS AS A CONTINUOUS, OPERATIONAL PROCESS, NOT AS A ONE-OFF EXERCISE

Move beyond one-off assessments and integrate regular, light-touch (context) updates into monitoring, evaluation and learning processes and systems. Track shifts in local power dynamics, IEA oversight and restrictions on women and girls. Use findings to trigger concrete programme adaptations to targets, safeguards and activities.

3 ADOPT A FUNCTION-BASED APPROACH TO SELECTING LOCAL ACTORS

Identify required roles first (e.g., beneficiary selection, dispute resolution, grievance handling), then assess who performs these roles locally. Distinguishing formal roles from actual influence and avoiding overreliance on single actors is key. Work with communities to identify appropriate actors, and cross-check selections through multiple sources—community feedback, comparison with other actors and simple peer or social audit mechanisms—to ensure legitimacy and avoid capture.

4 CLARIFY THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN POLITICAL POSITIONING AND OPERATIONAL DECISION-MAKING

Maintain a clear distinction between high-level political positions and the operational choices required for implementation. At the same time, recognise that such decisions carry political and legitimacy implications. Establish internal review mechanisms (e.g., senior-level sign-off) for high-risk engagements to ensure consistency with agreed principles.

5 STRENGTHEN TRANSPARENCY AND ADAPTIVE MONITORING SYSTEMS

Design monitoring frameworks that go beyond outputs to track participation, inclusion/exclusion, local decision-making and safe access to feedback and complaint mechanisms, especially for women and marginalised groups. Regular reflection points should assess dilemmas and trade-offs, identify who bears the risks and inform necessary course corrections.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE SINCE 2021

PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COUNCILS (CDCS) AS HYBRID GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES PRE-2021

Before 2021, local governance in Afghanistan was characterised by overlapping and plural structures of authority and representation—village councils, elders, religious authorities and customary brokers—whose roles varied by region, ethnicity and socio-political context. Community Development Councils (CDCs), introduced through the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) in 2003 and continued under the Citizens' Charter Afghanistan Programme, did not replace these actors. Rather, they operated alongside and were often co-opted by existing customary and religious authorities, on whom they depended for legitimacy. CDCs thus constituted a state- and donor-initiated institutional layer embedded within a broader landscape of community representation shaped by longstanding bottom-up governance practices.

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The NSP positioned CDCs as the primary interface between communities, the state and donors, with elected councils preparing village development plans and managing block grants. Official figures report that more than 35,000 councils were established across all provinces, with nearly US \$2 billion in grants disbursed over two decades, though their actual functionality often diverged from project reporting. Women's participation was highly uneven—frequently symbolic or mediated through customary structures. CDCs partly filled a structural gap in subnational governance, functioning as *de facto* interlocutors in the absence of elected district and municipal councils,

yet their legal status remained ambiguous, and they lacked fiscal authority. Many became project committees active mainly when new funding was available, doing little to build enduring state capacity.

POST-2021 TRANSFORMATION: ULEMA SHURAS AND RECENTRALISATION

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 fundamentally altered sub-national governance by changing who holds power and on what basis. Provincial and district administrative structures largely persisted, but authority was recalibrated through new appointments and explicit emphasis on ideological alignment with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's (IEA) religious and political vision. Newly institutionalised provincial religious *shuras* (*ulema* councils) mark a clear shift away from donor-supported participatory development models such as CDCs towards governance grounded in religious authority, doctrinal enforcement and direct accountability to the IEA's supreme leader Amir Hibatullah Akhundzada. Members are selected through a centrally controlled, non-elective process overseen by the Office of Leadership in Kandahar. Beyond religious guidance, the *ulema* councils receive complaints, mediate disputes and monitor civilian and security officials, feeding assessments to the Amir's office and exercising significant informal influence over provincial governance.

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Ulema councils are composed almost exclusively of Sunni clerics hand-picked by the Amir, with limited ethnic and sectarian diversity, particularly in Hazara-majority areas where Shia scholars have been systematically excluded. At the local level, many CDCs initially persisted in a nominal capacity—liaising with new officials or assisting with humanitarian distributions—but their legal status and authority were never formalised. Over time, the IEA recentred local authority around *ulema* and Taliban-aligned elders, with CDCs increasingly sidelined, stripped of official responsibilities or reconstituted with regime-loyal members. Ultimately, the May 2024 decree dissolving CDCs and transferring their remaining functions to *ulema* councils formalised this shift, reflecting both the rejection of externally sponsored governance models and the sharp post-2021 decline in foreign aid that had sustained them.

The Taliban are systematically replacing state-recognised intermediaries with loyalists, embedding political control and using these appointments as patronage.

In practice, however, dismantling CDCs appears less about institutional replacement than about reconfiguring, weakening

or removing intermediary governance structures associated with the previous order. Yet this has not produced a governance vacuum. Traditional actors—elders, *maliks*, *wakil-e guzars*, mullah imams—continue to mediate community concerns and coordinate aid delivery, while the Taliban are systematically replacing state-recognised intermediaries with loyalists, embedding political control and using these appointments as patronage. The IEA's National Development Strategy reflects this shift by locating *ulema* councils within a security-focused pillar and framing community participation primarily around maintaining order rather than development planning. In provinces more distant from Kandahar or characterised by greater social and political diversity, more locally adaptive arrangements persist, and customary actors continue to negotiate authority with IEA officials—underscoring the resilience of customary governance even as centralisation progresses.

LOOKING AT THE INITIAL EXPERIENCE WITH PROJECT-LEVEL SUBSTITUTES FOR CDCS

Since the dissolution of CDCs, UNOPS and its partners have started to introduce community representative groups (CRGs) under the Afghanistan Community Resilience and Livelihoods Project (CRLP), funded by the World Bank and the International Development Association. CRGs are non-governmental project bodies with separate male and female wings and subcommittees for grievance redress, operations and maintenance, disaster risk management and beneficiary selection. The World Bank presents CRGs as efficient mechanisms that assume many of the coordination and accountability functions previously carried out by CDCs, thereby sustaining community-level engagement and oversight under current constraints.

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However, given the systematic reshaping of subnational governance and community representation, this claim requires qualification. CRGs may replicate certain project-level functions, but they should not be conflated with broader governance or representative structures. They operate within a political context that tightly circumscribes civic participation and limits accountability, particularly for women, and their influence is largely bound by project parameters rather than embedded in local governance systems. Given the enduring fluidity of customary governance, CRGs are likely to bring together a mix of traditional actors and newly empowered, IEA-aligned intermediaries who already act as liaisons between communities and authorities.

The formal emphasis on inclusion, including mandated female representation, risks masking substantive constraints that go beyond the criticisms levelled at CDCs. Under tightening

restrictions on women's mobility, employment and public engagement, high female quotas may remain largely nominal. This gap between design and practice highlights a key vulnerability in the CRG model: While it may preserve operational delivery and donor accountability, it offers only limited safeguards against the broader contraction of civic space and recentralisation of authority and is unlikely to prevent Taliban influence over local governance and community-level decision-making.

IMPLICATIONS: WHAT HAS CHANGED AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN...

... FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION ACTORS

The implications for development cooperation actors depend on how well current strategies account for three factors: the enduring strength of customary authority, selective openings created by new IEA structures and shrinking but still functional spaces for community agency. Local governance arrangements continue to adapt; in some contexts, former CDCs are reportedly tolerated and contribute to community-based monitoring in sectors such as health and education. While based on anecdotal evidence, this suggests that space for local implementation persists under certain conditions, theoretically enabling incremental improvements in service delivery and oversight.

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... FOR LOCALISATION STRATEGIES

The shift from elected CDCs to IEA-appointed or controlled structures complicates localisation models that rely on independent and representative community bodies. Three dynamics are particularly important:

- **Customary structures remain the most stable entry point.** *Jirgas*, *shuras*, community leaders (*maliks*, *spin geris*/ *rish-safeds*/ *muysafeds*, *arbabs*, *wakil-e guzars*) and issue-specific committees continue to function, remain socially embedded and, in some areas, have become more visible while the IEA consolidates its own structures. These bodies are routinely used by development actors and IEA authorities alike for dispute resolution, beneficiary identification, resource allocation and managing returns, albeit under increasing IEA oversight.
- **Taliban-appointed intermediaries complicate community engagement.** The formalisation of *ulema shuras* into official *ulema* councils and the reconfiguration of district and provincial governance through appointments of IEA-aligned individuals have created stacked layers of authority structures that prioritise Sharia-based decision-making and often function as gatekeepers between communities and external actors.

- **Community agency is uneven but not extinguished.** Women, youth and minorities retain limited but real influence in sectors where the IEA is more permissive, such as health, livelihoods, climate adaptation and natural resource management.

Localisation strategies should therefore move away from structure-based approaches toward function-based participation—engaging local actors based on the roles they actually perform (mediating, mobilising, overseeing, resolving disputes, facilitating access) rather than their formal titles. This builds on long-standing NGO practice in Afghanistan, where engagement has historically relied on locally legitimate intermediaries and ad hoc community structures across different political regimes.

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... FOR POLITICAL STRATEGIES TO ‘WORK AROUND’ THE TALIBAN

The boundary between state and community has become increasingly blurred: IEA-appointed or approved community representatives and *ulema* now occupy positions previously treated as “community” rather than “authority”. Approaches relying on community-based engagement can therefore no longer be assumed to bypass IEA interaction, since they may involve IEA-aligned actors even in the absence of formal government roles.

Recreating CDC-type arrangements risks rebuilding a parallel, donor-dependent governance architecture.

Technical engagement with IEA-approved structures already occurs to enable project implementation and does not in itself contradict political processes that address the IEA’s responsibilities. The key question is not whether to engage but how to identify, assess and mitigate risks—engaging on clearly defined functions (needs assessment, social audits, grievance handling) while systematically assessing who performs these roles, which interests they represent and what risks of exclusion, coercion or elite capture arise. Avoiding IEA-linked structures without a clear strategy risks empowering unaccountable intermediaries or bypassing the very communities localisation aims to support; recreating CDC-type arrangements risks rebuilding a parallel, donor-dependent governance architecture.

OPERATIONAL DILEMMAS

Based on the above analysis, donors and implementing organisations face three core operational dilemmas that can be mitigated but not eliminated.

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Engagement versus legitimacy risk: Engagement with local intermediaries, sectoral systems and infrastructure is often unavoidable but may unintentionally legitimise or reinforce regime authority. The critical boundary lies where functional coordination crosses into IEA-system strengthening. Mitigation requires: Clear differentiation between compliance-level interaction, functional coordination and institutional strengthening; explicit red lines and risk thresholds; and context-specific, case-by-case judgement by sector, region and activity.

Service delivery versus regime stabilisation: Maintaining essential services is necessary but may contribute to perceptions of IEA effectiveness, while withdrawal may directly harm vulnerable community members. Legitimation effects cannot be fully avoided and must instead be managed. Mitigation includes prioritising low-visibility, community-facing delivery modalities where feasible and taking activity-level decisions based on visibility, attribution and systematic impact rather than portfolio-wide rules alone.

Local actors remain essential for access and accountability but increasingly operate within Taliban-controlled or influenced systems

Localisation versus control, risk and inclusion: Local actors remain essential for access and accountability but increasingly operate within Taliban-controlled or influenced systems, heightening risks of elite capture, exclusion (especially of women and minorities) and reduced oversight. Mitigation involves risk-aware complementarity—working through local actors where necessary while reinforcing inclusion, safeguards and accountability externally—alongside structured decision-making matrices frameworks across sectors, regions and activity types.

CROSS-CUTTING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NAVIGATING OPERATIONAL DILEMMAS

The Taliban’s return to power in August 2021 has been accompanied by an active effort to reshape both national and sub-national governance, reordering authority around religious leadership and centralised control. At the same time, local governance institutions in Afghanistan remain plural and hybrid: Customary structures continue to operate but are increasingly reshaped, co-opted or penetrated by actors aligned with the IEA.

In this context, new project-driven bodies such as CRGs may replicate certain project-level functions associated with CDCs, but they do not constitute independent governance institutions.

They operate constrained by the IEA's control over civic space, particularly regarding meaningful participation and protection of women and marginalised groups. For development actors, 'working around' the IEA through community-based structures is therefore no longer a clean or impartial option: Community intermediaries are increasingly embedded within or influenced by the IEA's governance system creating what can be understood as so-called wicked dilemmas: Situations in which trade-offs between access, inclusion and legitimacy cannot be fully resolved but must be continuously managed.

Future engagement by development agencies therefore requires politically informed, function-based localisation and conflict-sensitive programming.

Future engagement by development agencies therefore requires politically informed, function-based localisation and conflict-sensitive programming, grounded in clearly articulated principles. Such an approach acknowledges the dilemmas while managing trade-offs transparently, rather than relying on binary distinctions between state and community or attempting to recreate parallel, donor-dependent governance structures. It requires continuous (and not one-off) context-specific analysis, critical reflection and adaptive decision-making to minimise harm while preserving space for meaningful community engagement.

In addition, aid agencies should maintain a clear separation between high-level political positions (non-recognition, sanctions, diplomatic red lines) and the operational decisions required to maintain essential service-delivery and protection. Internal processes should define approval thresholds, ensure joint political-operational review of sensitive cases and prevent operational decisions and risk management from quietly undermining agreed political commitments. Regular reflection is needed on which trade-offs have been made, who bears the costs and whether engagement approaches require recalibration.

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CONTACT

Elvan Isikozlu
Head of Advice & Scientific Transfer
elvan.isikozlu@bicc.de
+49 (0)228 911 96-54

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