

The Performance Review of the Community Development Councils from Prospective of Local Governance in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The Community Development Council (CDC) is the new paradigm of socio-economic development of the government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan that establishes and finances by National Solidarity Program (NSP) of The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) to improve the life and livelihood of rural dwellers through strengthening the good local governance. More than 75 % of Afghan populations are living in rural areas of the country. But in recent years, the rural residing people moving to big cities increased for the reasons of poverty, drought, insecurity, and lack of access to public service (UNDP, 2015);(Rahimi, 2011). Therefore, NSP was designed to support the rural communities through authorizing them by law to participatory identify, plan, implement and monitor the small and medium scale development projects in their villages (MRRD, website). The NSP is playing the managerial role to finance the CDCs designed projects and provide technical assistance whereas required.

Since the start of NSP program in mid-2003, until end of 2015 total 46,647 CDC were democratically established in rural areas of the entire country, which have formal administrative structure. This study reviews the structure, role-playing of CDCs as local governance, and advantages of converting the CDCs to Villages Councils (VCs) that defined as part of sub-national governance in the constitution.

The context of this paper is based on policy review, NSP periodic reports and field observations to reflect the findings and opinions of community members toward the impact of the community driven development program in Afghanistan.

Key words: Community Development Council (CDC), Village Councils (VCs) Socio-Economic Development, and Local Governance.

Introduction

Community driven development found its role in mass grass-root economic development in rural areas of Afghanistan. After fall of the Taliban regime, the newly established government created the National Solidarity Program (NSP) within the structure of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) to develop a new paradigm of socio- economic development program through establishing and authorizing Community Development Councils (CDCs) in rural areas of the entire country. The structures of CDCs are designed to encompass at least 25 families and most 300 families. And if, the villages, having less than 25 residing families, they encourages to join the nearby other community; but on contrary, if the number of living families in one village is more than 300, the village does not split into two communities, and all the inhabitants count as member of one community and receive the block grant amounts counts for maximum members (300 families) community. After the enumeration of families in the village, all

of the villagers democratically elects four office bearers/ executive positions, including the Chairperson, Voice Chairperson, Secretary, and Cashier for its CDC through the secret ballot to lead and represent the community decisions as well as keep relation with regulatory agencies.

NSP opened office in all province of the country which called the Provincial Management Unit (PMU) to provide the technical assistance to communities for proper projects documentation process, giving legislative consultants, monitoring their physical projects work progress for recommending the NSP headquarter office for releasing the block grant installments to community's bank accounts, and collaborating with CDCs and NSP main office.

As of the beginning of 2004 to end of 2015, total 46,647 CDCs established all over the country and these communities independently could complete 75,271 projects at their villages to have the direct effect on sustainable economic development and improving the lives and livelihoods of rural dwellers in Afghanistan.

Most of the financial resources for CDCs establishment and its project funding contributes to multilateral Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), which administrates by World Bank, and the rest of amount directly contributes by many other countries, including, France, Denmark, Italy, Czech Republic, Netherlands, and New Zealand. The most part of NSP funds (72 %) allocated as block grants to finance the small-scale community development projects. Of the remaining 28 %, about 19 % has gone to pay to facilitate partners (FP) to oversee the election and training of community development council (CDC) members, and about 9 % has covered administrative costs (SIGAR, 2011).

In Afghanistan, communities are not officially recognized as the sub-national unit of governance and they are established as formal structure and representative of villages resident to run the government-funded projects. But gradually, the new idea emerged that role of these communities, as an official structure of governance in villages could be more efficient for economic activities and expanding of the local governance.

Methodology

The main objective of this study is to review the efficiency of socio-economic development as a new model of bottom-up development and strengthening of local governance in rural areas Afghanistan. For the said purpose, initially, this study reviews the legal statuses of local governance in constitution and other policy papers of the country, and then detail study the achievements of CDCs as paradigm of participatory social economic development in rural area of the country. Furthermore, this study reviews the possibility of legalizing the CDCs for strengthening the village level governance in Afghanistan.

The quantitative method used for collecting data from various sources. For having the opinion of CDC members regarding the affects of community leading development projects on life and livelihood rural dweller, the researcher distributed the questioners to CDC members and also open-ended interviewed with chair persons of 35 CDCs in two provinces (Ghghato district of Ghazni province and Ple-alam Distric of Logar province) of Afghanistan on September, 2016. Moreover, the primary data also collected from Management Information System (MIS) and Finance Departments of NSP. For further studying, many published academic papers and official reports were reviewed to purposely answer the question of “ How the new established CDCs in rural areas of Afghanistan contributes to social and economic development through good local governance?”

Findings and Discussion

Afghanistan is unitary centralized government; the authority delegates through line ministries and provincial governors to provinces and districts administrations. Beside of the government administrative structure, the new enforced constitution in 2004 delineated the elective provincial councils (PCs), district councils (DCs) and village councils (VCs) to attain active participation of people to the local administration. But since the ratification of the Constitution, the regulatory units did not develop the policy and detail official guidelines for the establishment of DCs and VCs as the local institutions to operationalize the bottom-up governance in rural areas where are living the vast majority of people.

According to Population Projection Report of the Central Statistic Organization of Afghanistan (CSO), (2015-16) indicated, around 75.1% of the population, which estimated 20.8 millions of people are living in rural areas of the country. Additionally, this report indicates the lower rate of literacy, more poverty, and less public awareness related to governance in the countryside rather the big cities. Considering the social, economic, and governance challenges in remote areas of the country, in 2003, the central government established the NSP to develop an effective mechanism for improving the life and sustainable livelihood of rural people through strengthening the good local governance (NSP, website). According to By-Law, CDC objectives were to work within communities to improve and strengthen local governance, promote community welfare, and strengthen a sense of solidarity (SIGAR, 2011, P.18).

In Afghanistan, the Community Driven Development (CDD) was designed to mobilize rural society in each village level separately and form an official structure that encompassing all residents of the villages, which called the CDC. And then, all villagers as the members of CDCs, without gender prejudice democratically elect the CDC's executive positions. These executive positions that also called the CDCs office bearer positions are the Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, Secretary, and Cashier to manage the community projects activities, leading the CDCs decisions making, and retain contacts with Facilitating Partner (FP) and PMU. Nomination for any of four CDC seats is the volunteer and the winner must receive over 50% of casted ballot. For assuring the equal gender participation in community affairs, two out four positions must fill by female members (NSP Operation Manual VI, 2012, P.15).

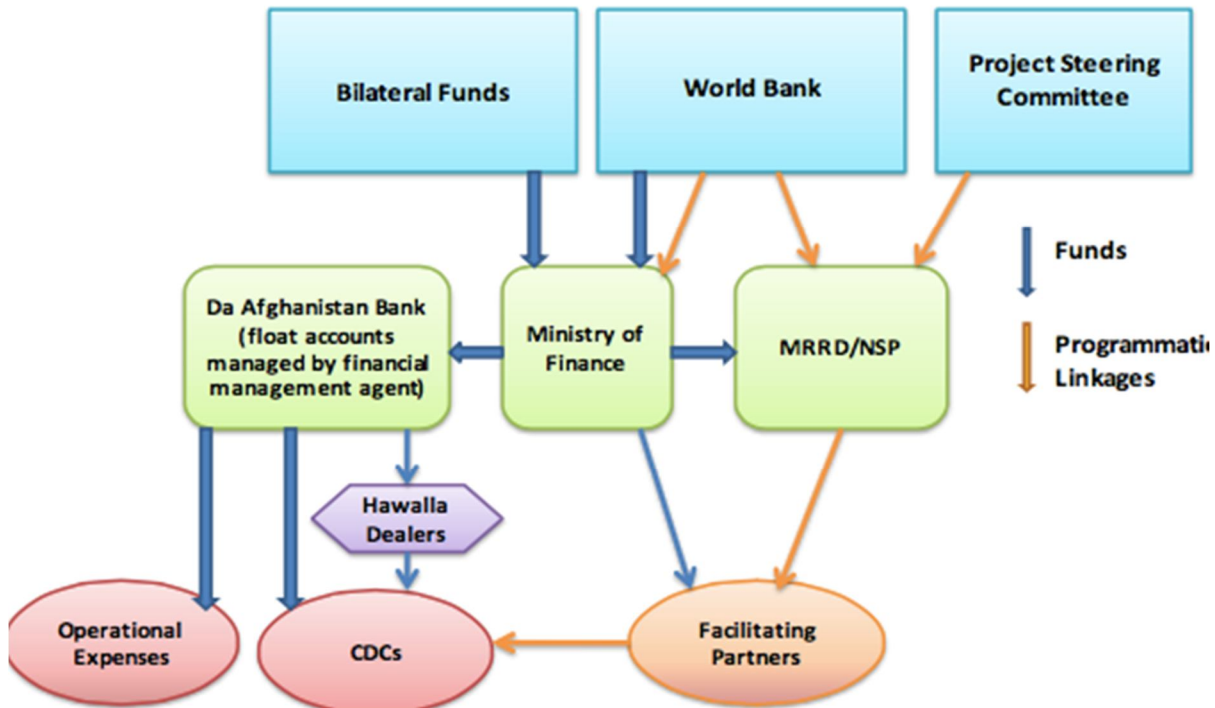
The FP or/and PMU, manage and supervise the election process of CDCs and help anywhere they need technical assistance throughout formulation of CDs and their project implementation process.

Once the community established, NSP disburses entitled block grant amount (allocated budget for community projects) to CDCs created bank accounts. The Block grant amounts, limited to US\$60,000 per community, are determined by the number of families in a given community (up to 300 families, multiplied by US\$200 per family. (NSP Operation Manual VI, 2012, P.5), and (SIGAR, 2011, P.6) In addition to NSP block grant, CDCs also contribute 10% of the budget to share in financing and owning of the projects. The project proposals prepare at the limit of ceiling amount of CDC's budget. CDCs can allocate its block grant for one project or many sub-projects.

The NSP program entirely relies on external financing; since the beginning of this program in mid2003 till the end of NSP Phase III in 2015, the total budget of NSP is an estimated of US\$ 2.7 billion (Finance Dep. NSP, 2015); all this amount are granted by international financial institutions and donor countries. Among other donors, the World Bank contribute the highest proportion of fundraising through Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) in which many donor countries including: (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, EC/EU, Finland, Germany, Norway, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States of America), and Japan Social Development Fund (JSDF) provides their grant to NSP for establishment of CDCs and implementing community leading role project. In addition to World Bank financing, many other

countries directly finance the NSP, which are Denmark, France, Italy, Netherlands, Czech Republic and New Zealand. The government of Afghanistan developed especial unique fund flow mechanism for donating the NSP, and block grant financing of CDCS that depicted in figure 1:

Figure 1: NSP Funding Flows and Programmatic Linkages

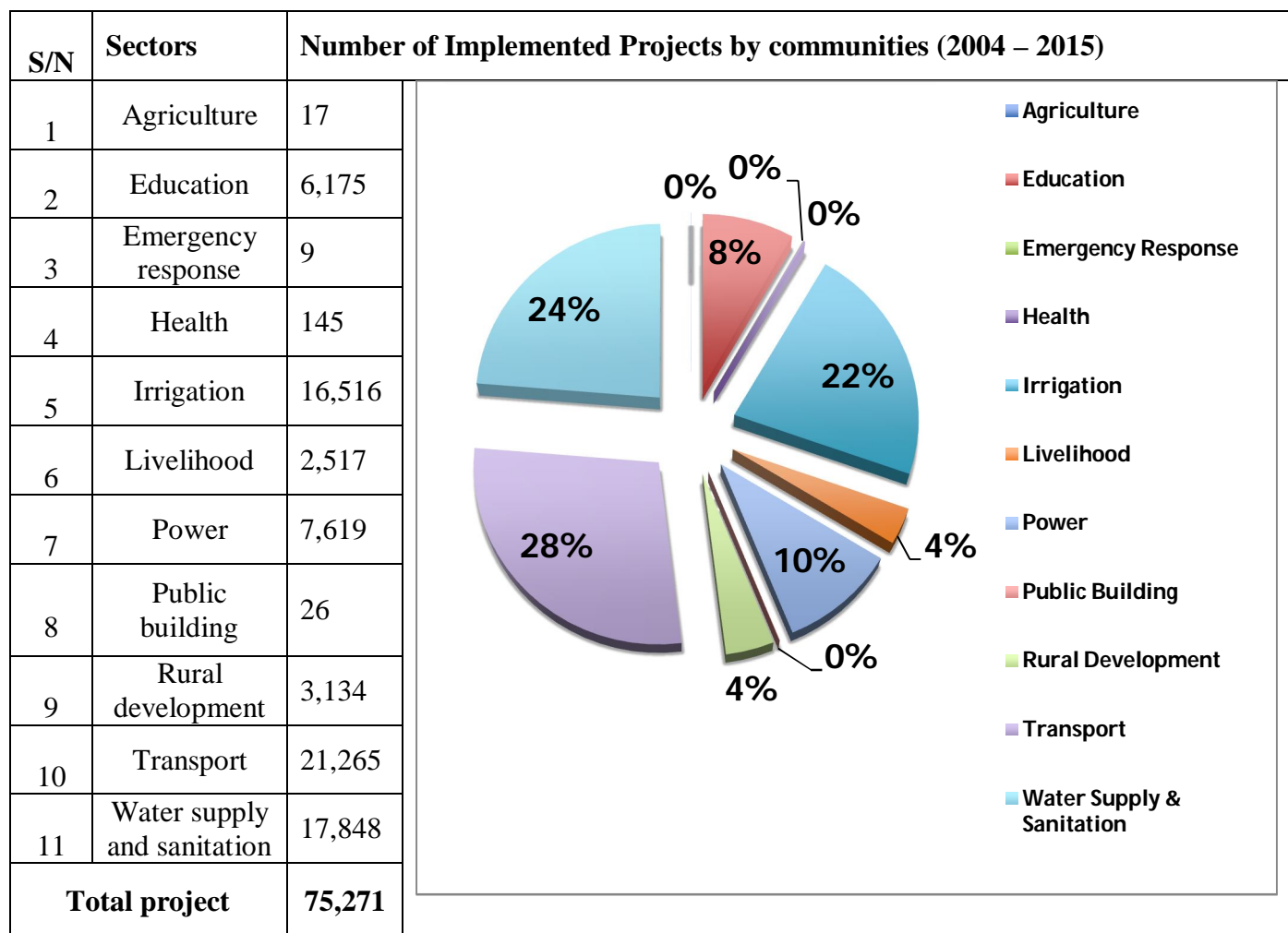


Source: SIGAR (2011)

From 2004 to end of 2015, total 46,647 CDCs established as effectively reliable institutions ensuring local governance at the community level (NSP Activity Report, 2015). The established CDCs successfully completed 75271 projects in rural development sectors, mainly, transportation, water and sanitation, hydropower, irrigation, agriculture, and education, which unprecedented in the history of Afghanistan from viewpoint of volume of project implementation and role-played by rural society for economic development. Community approach development created an opportunity for rural society in Afghanistan to use their capacity through constructive sharing of opinions related to their community affairs and joint effort to get access to public development infrastructures.

Figure 2; show the sector wise implemented projects by CDCs in the overall country from 2004 until 2015.

Figure 2: Sector Wise Implemented Projects by CDCs in Rural Areas of Afghanistan.

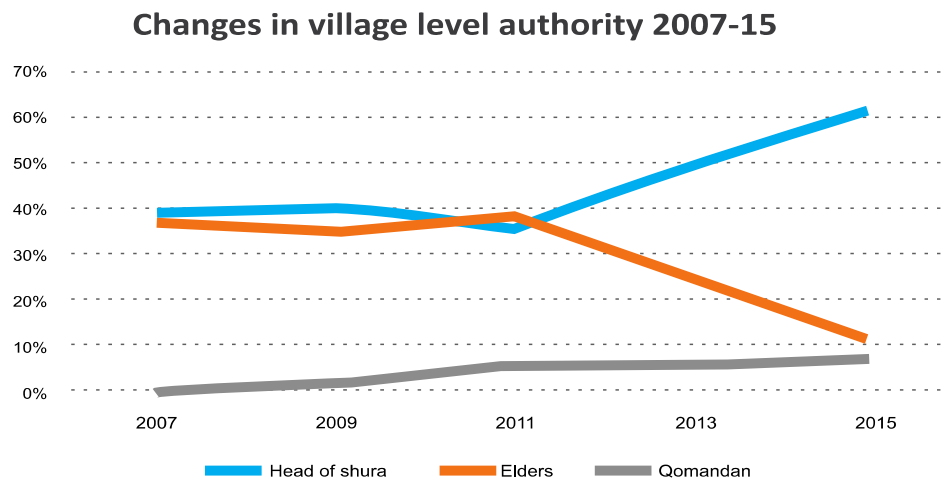


Source: Author (Data collected from MIS Dep. of NSP)

As the figure 2, depicted that CDCs invested major of its block grants in essential rural development sectors such as education, irrigation, and water supply and sanitation sectors to keep sustainable development in their communities. Since the beginning of NSP program, almost all CDCs implemented three phases of NSP funded projects in their community and this participatory project planning and implementation improved the capacity of CDCs to attract the attention of other government and Non-government organizations to give their humanitarian funded projects for implementation to CDCs. In fact, now, the CDCs not bounds only to NSP projects, but also, some communities used more their capacity for sprawling further development activities in their residential areas. According to World Bank report (2015) show, 35,000 communities that were established by NSP implemented 80,000 projects from other organizations in their communities. Besides of economic benefits of CDCs in rural areas of Afghanistan, it extensively uplifted the social mobility and merit-based representative selection opportunity for villagers. As part of the social benefits, the evidence shows that trends for selecting of literate CDC's executive positions gradually rose since the beginning of the program that considers essential for grassroots local governance and, institutional capacity development. According to UN-HABITAT research survey, the percentage of literate CDCs executive positions (Chair, Vice-chair, Secretary, and Treasure) has

increased from 19.9% during NSP cycle one to 35.8% in NSP cycle three (Affolter, Sawayz, Noori, & Shrestha, 2006, P.83); this changes toward bringing educated people who are predominantly among the young generation for managerial positions of councils gives sign for better institutional changes and wise social and political decisions in sub-national governance level. Traditionally in Afghanistan, elders and guerrilla commanders were the more powerful person in villages; they were able to decide on behalf of villagers. But the CDC mechanism partially changed the traditional rural decision maker's bodies. Also, this is significant institutional and cultural change in society where the authority and competence associated with power and age rather than education and skills. According to Affolter et al. (2006) "In NSP Phase II, almost 66% of the male members elected for CDC heads were below the age of 50 while 78% of the female was less than 50 years old" (P.84). Since CDC's key positions were democratically being elected by all village residents and, the CDCs representatives have the financial and institutional support of government and voting support of community members, they became more powerful people for social affairs in village levels. The result of Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) survey concluded that the authorities of CDCs head (Head of Shura) are gradually being increased for the period from 2007 to 2015. But on contrary, the power of village elder (traditional authorized person in villages of Afghanistan) declined (Nijat, 2015). (See figure 3).

Figure 3:



Source: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

Empowering the community head represents rising of local formal institutions that will gradually play the significant role in social-economic development. The slightly increasing authority of local commanders (Qomandan) is directly related to insecurity and political instability; strengthening the sub-national governance and peace building process will diminish the illegal power of local commanders, because they are also members of community and will realize better future life and sustainable livelihood for themselves and community members through empowerment of local legal institutions.

Taking an example of India, where also like Afghanistan, the major of its population are settled in rural parts of the country, the central government developed the village-governance to accelerate the economic growth and development, as well as self-governance "Panchayat". After the independence of India in 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India said, "India is poor because the villages of India are poor. India will be rich if the villages of India are rich."

“Panchayats” should be given greater power; for we want the villagers to have a greater measure of real swaraj [self-government] in their own villages”; around 70% of Indian people are living in rural areas of the country (Kumar et al., 2013). Then, it is difficult for central government to lead the economic development through good governance in remote areas of the country. Therefore, the self-governance is more effective way to improve the governance all over the country. In addition to that, in 1947 Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of Indian revolution said that ‘independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or Panchayat having full powers (Kumar et al., 2013). He was fully aware that centralized administration becomes the breeding ground of exploitation and corruption. Besides it also kills the basic spirit of democracy. (Pradhan, & Joseph, 2013).

Based on (Sub-national Governance Policy of Afghanistan, 2010) the Village Councils are involved in both the development activities; and also, help to support the rule of law, human right, and good governance because the elected members have reputation and influence in rural society. But, since the shaping of Constitution in early 2004, in which the local governance described, the government was unable/ not willing to set up these local institutions. Relating to village governance, many organizations and studies suggest the conversion of CDCs to VCs, which have already established by NSP in all 38,000 villages of the country. This conversion will upgrade the legal position of CDCs and also prevent the huge financial expenditure of government that will be spent on new VCs. More importantly, if in one village, two or more legal institutions represent the same members, it will create conflicts within councils. Many institutions including the World Bank suggest the, institutionalization of the CDCs into VCs to acts both as governance and development functions, and also the impact evaluation of World Bank support the ideas that legitimacy of governance is based on active development functions. Therefor, separation of development and governance functions jeopardizes the role of VCs in local-governance (World Bank. 2012). On other hand, the MRRD, MoF, and International donors support the conversion of CDC to VCs, the legal government bodies described in the Afghan Constitution (SIGAR, 2011);(Laster, 2007). The CDCs are the closest established councils overall villages of country, and these institutions relatively proved maintaining positive connection between people and government. So, strengthening of them, as called VCs in constitution are easier than trying to invent yet another councils (Shurkin, 2011).

More importantly, in end of 2016, the NSP changed to Citizen Charter as a National Priority Program (NPP) that several ministries collaborate on the single program to Ensuring Citizens’ Development Rights; Building Better Governance; Reforming Development Planning & Management and Developing Partnerships. The Citizens’ Charter will go one step further than NSP and bring the CDCs to the forefront of program delivery and all development activities thereafter. The CDCs will be linked to the sub-national government to improve communication and coordination from the community to the district, provincial and national levels, which will increase Government visibility and accountability (“Citizens Charters,” n.d, Para. 2).

Decentralized Development and Accountability

Afghanistan has unity-centralized governance where all decisions take in capital “Kabul”. Relating to local governance, the article 140 of the constitution of Afghanistan mandates the elective DCs and VCs for each three years, but still the government reluctant to held election for democratically electing the local governance councils representing the rural living people in sub-national governance. The established CDCs by NSP in rural areas of the country do not officially accept by the government as part of local governance. But, it is considered as village level

communities for using their allocated block grant in community prioritized development projects in their villages.

In this research survey, it was found that 82% of interviewed people were strongly satisfied from implementing the development program by communities and reasoning that community-driven development is based on prior needs of villagers and also creates job opportunities for local people. On many occasions, like CDC conferences, and public meetings the CDCs member requests from government to recognize them as VCs to have stronger legal support and long vision for development of their community. Meanwhile, community-driven development reduces the cost of projects. Members of communities believe that they give authority to decision-making bodies of communities through democratic secret ballot election. Due to the familiarity of villagers from each other, usually, the trustworthy people elect to represent the CDCs. Therefore; the key members of the community feel more responsibility toward its community in thoughtful project implementation and financial accountability. Theoretically, local CDCs make the better decision in project selection and implementation, because they have a better understanding of their at most local needs than externally appointed representatives. Now considering the success of community approach development in rural areas of Afghanistan and high satisfaction of stockholders from social economy development mechanism and also at most utilizing of communities form project, potentially encourages the government for pursuing socio-economic development model for the rural area of Afghanistan.

Other big challenges for the government of Afghanistan are the insecurity. Especially, in South, Southeast, and some other parts of the country, where the government opposition armed groups have the strong presence. Usually, they destruct the government and international organization`s project. But referring to CDC`s projects, since the communities are the owner of the NSP funded projects and directly share 10% of the total budget, the insurgent groups do not abandon these projects. According to FP, CDCs convince the government opposition groups to not stop their projects (SIGAR, 2011). Off course, as the insurgent groups are also the member of communities and benefit from projects implementation in their villages, on another hand, the CDC`s Heads negotiate with them about the advantage of projects for community members.

Corruption and cumbersome bureaucracy is the other constraint for appropriate implementation of development projects by the government. Corruption has widespread social and economic consequences from the reduction of public revenues and shrinking the quality of public service, and the result adversely affects GDP growth and capital accumulation at the national level (Sundgren, 2009). Taking into account corruption in Afghanistan, the rate of corruption has reached the looting level in the last one and half decades. After insecurity, corruption is the second biggest challenge for Afghanistan (UNODC, 2013). A survey by the Asian Foundation (2016) showed that almost all survived people responded that corruption is a big challenge in their daily life. Considering the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (2016) Afghanistan ranked 169th out of 176 countries in the world, which made it the 7th most corrupted country in the world. The socio-economic development reduces the time consuming and increase the transparency in the financial expenditure of the projects, because the designed structure for CDCs in Afghanistan involves participatory planning, implementing and monitoring. For increasing the layer of financial and cash management, at least three out of four office bearer/ executive members of CDCs must authorize the cash withdrawal from CDC`s bank account and payment vouchers.

The unprecedented in the type of CDD in Afghanistan greatly uplifted the local governance and gives an opportunity to rural people to take part in social and economic activities. The central government of Afghanistan is structurally weak and also highly corrupted to deliver service and implement highly effective and efficient project in remote areas of the country. Therefore,

strengthening of the local governance and involving the rural communities is the suitable way for spreading the governance and performing the development activities. According to Barfield, J (2009) “Afghanistan’s unitary system is weakest at the local level, where laws are not implemented and many regions are insecure. Ministries demand that critical paperwork, planning, and decision-making be done in Kabul, forcing provincial Afghans to travel there—at great expense—for even trivial matters.”

Conclusion

The CDCs played the significant role through participatory project planning, implementation, and monitoring in the rural area of Afghanistan. Furthermore, gradually, the CDCs found the role of effective institutions of sub-national governance and socio-economic development. Looking to the beginning of CDC’s establishment, this program commenced before ratification of the Constitution of Afghanistan and creation of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) as social institutions for development activities to serve for their own prior sustainable needs with the financial backing of the government. But since the constitution defined the VCs as an official institution for village governance; then, it will be more significant to convert the CDCs to VCs to improve the legislative framework of CDCs and also stand as the single village level institution as part of sub-national governance to act as bottom of pyramid in governance and social-economic development.

Localization of economic development, peace building process, and enhancing the role of law will greatly help the provision of good governance in Afghanistan; because, the central government faces to widespread corruption, cumbersome bureaucracy, and inability to bring peace and political stability. Taking the example of NSP as the model of socio-economic development in Afghanistan, where the government having the financing and regulatory responsibility, the CDCs could better manage and implement the medium and small-scale development project also collaborate in conflict resolution at the community level. Furthermore, since CDCs are the participatory program, it provided more transparency and accountability in resource management of economic and social projects.

Based on the latest demographic report, around 75.1% of Afghan populations are living in rural areas of the country. Then, establishing of the DCs and VCs that defined, as local governments in the constitution is important to be established. Therefore, the conversion of CDC to VCs is one of the appropriate ways of strengthening of the local governance in Afghanistan.

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Web resources:

MRRD <http://www.mrrd.gov.af>

NSP www.nspafghanistan.org

Citizens-charters <http://mrrd.gov.af/en/page/69/citizens-charter>