

Taking village context into account in Afghanistan

Key messages

- Villages must not be treated as if they are all the same in the design, implementation and evaluation of interventions that seek to bring changes in the ways they organise their affairs; this study proposes a method for clustering villages with similar characteristics.
- Greater attention needs to be given to the processes by which newly introduced organisational structures are incorporated into older customary arrangements.
- There are 'good' and 'bad' elites in the villages – those who are inclined to work for the common good and those who are not – and they need to be worked with in different ways.

Since 2001 there has been a major effort by development actors – governments, donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – to bring Afghan villages into developmental and political processes. These efforts tend to assume either that villages lack institutional structures and accountable governance systems or that, if they exist, they have been captured by politically powerful elites to serve their own ends. Thus programmes such as the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) and the Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Programme (AREDP) have sought to introduce new democratic structures and organisations for collective action into villages.

It is common for NGO field workers, both in the NSP and other activities, to contrast villages that have been easy to work with or are otherwise receptive with those that are more difficult to work with and where powerful people are more concerned with their own interests than those of the rest of the village. Accordingly it is possible to talk of village elites behaving in different ways: those with more of a developmental perspective and desire to build public good provision ('good' elites) versus those where the elites act to limit access to such public goods and capture them for themselves ('bad' elites).

Significant differences between villages lie in the role, nature and relative number of their elites. Where land inequalities are low, the elite is likely to be both relatively economically insecure and more numerous. The village elite is therefore likely to have a shared interest in promoting and supporting social solidarity and ensuring the provision of public goods. However, where the elite is relatively small and where it is

Briefing paper 17
September 2015



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A Saripul village: Given the limited penetration of the outside world into Afghan village life, collective action at the village level continues to play an important part in ensuring the provision of basic services for all

economically secure, often as a result of large landholdings, the incentives to promote social solidarity and widen access to public good provision are likely to be more limited. Here the elite is prone to act more in its own interests than in the interests of the village population at large.

This study has investigated how different village contexts might influence the delivery of public goods and the impact of external interventions. It has formed part of AREU's contribution to the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC), an eight-country, six-year research programme investigating how people in places affected by conflict make a living and access basic services such as education, health, water, social protection; and livelihood services.

Accordingly, the study has sought to develop methods that can be used to identify the key village variables that might help account for differences in village behaviour and explain how these link to potential or actual public good delivery outcomes. This approach would allow villages to be characterised before programmatic interventions are made and may also allow a clustering of villages that are similar with respect to their potential for generating public goods. Such differences in village behaviour and outcomes need to be systematically addressed both in programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Two questions informed this study:

- Is there systematic variation in the ways in which existing customary structures in village government influence the ways in which public goods are accessed and delivered?
- Can this variation be characterised and used to inform programme design and implementation so that it takes better account of variation in village preconditions, discriminates between village types and designs, and manages programme interventions and assesses their effects according to village context?

Methods

A data collection instrument was designed to explore the relationships between variables (such as ethnic composition, distribution in land holdings, etc.) that might explain village behaviour and outcomes as reflected in the level and scale of village public goods provided. It was divided into five sections:

- An assessment of the position of the village in relation to the outer world: this included foundational or given characteristics of the village taking into account historical events and external connections and information on the perceived effects of the NSP.
- Information on the village economy, its resources and land distribution to develop a description of its resource wealth and to assess the degree of land inequality.
- Information on customary village institutions and their performance, including the identification of the influential people in the village based on gender. This included information on how the introduction of the NSP was seen to have affected these structures, including any changes in women's representation in them.
- Information on organisations introduced to the village by external actors since 2001.
- Evidence on public good provision and the degree to which it has been driven by customary organisations and externally influenced actions; the primary data collected focused on the dates of starting of primary and secondary education for boys and girls and the percentage of boys and girls attending school.

The study was done in two contrasting provinces, Badakhshan and Nangarhar, both of which have villages in mountains and in valleys or plains. Five districts in each province were selected. Within each district, villages that were located in contrasting altitudinal and geographic positions (plain, valley side,

mountain, etc.), with different ratios of irrigated and rainfed land, were purposively sampled. Data from male and female key informants was collected from 43 villages in Badakhshan and 49 in Nangarhar by trained field teams who were debriefed about their observations on village differences.

The data was analysed in two steps. First, a narrative analysis was undertaken of the evidence on village variability in terms of physical and social dimensions, the role and significance of customary institutions, and the interplay between these and new organisational arrangements instituted through the NSP. The second step drew on statistical methods (factor analysis and clustering techniques) to consider the extent to which and on what basis, drawing from the sample, villages could be clustered based on shared behaviour (foundational or causal factors) and outcomes of that behaviour as reflected in the level and scale of village public goods provided.

Key findings

1. First, **villages cannot be treated as if they are all the same in the design, implementation and evaluation of interventions** to bring about change in the ways in which they are governed or collective action is organised. There are some systematic differences. Some villages are governed better than others and there are reasons why this is so. This will have an influence on efforts to bring change to villages. Evaluation of intervention impacts which do not take account of what was already there and underlying patterns of difference (as shown by the cluster analysis) may have missed some important lessons.

2. Second, **there is a need to have a much more nuanced view of working with village elites**. Elites fulfill important functions in village-level governance with respect to the broader institutional landscape of risk and uncertainty in which villages are located and in many cases they clearly have considerable legitimacy. But a distinction can be made, in simple terms, between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ elites – between those who are inclined to work for the common good and those who are self-interested. What the empirical evidence indicates is the very variable nature of elite behaviour in villages and of the factors that confer elite status. Land ownership may be part of what confers elite status but it may not necessarily be the only, or even the most important, factor. Inequality is a fact of village life but it is the form and shape of that inequality and what it generates that is the critical issue.

The village, despite its shifting boundaries, remains for most of its inhabitants the most significant institution in their lives. Given the limited penetration of the external world into village life (although this is slowly changing), collective action at the village level will continue to have a primary role in ensuring public good provision. Working with ‘good elites’, who may not derive their status from land or inheritance but rather from performance and reputation, will remain a fact of life for external interventions. As the NSP found (Beath et al., 2013: 67) external interventions do not necessarily make things better.

From this follows the question of how to work with the ‘bad’ elite. A first step is to specifically identify where village conditions are such that the elite is self-interested and likely to attempt to capture external resources for its own benefit. This may be where

ownership of irrigated land is heavily concentrated in the hands of a few landowners. Does this mean that such villages should simply be avoided? Or does it suggest an entirely different way of working with such villages? Empirical evidence has repeatedly shown that the elite cannot be ignored and will be difficult to coerce or displace. This argues for a much more graduated approach of both supporting the non-elite in specific ways and at the same time working with the elite to bring them to a view that it might be in their interests to broaden access to public good provision in the village. It is a question of incentives related to pressures and rewards and building step-by-step processes of change building on good-enough-governance approaches. How in practice this can be done requires further research.

3. Third, external interventions have effects, and in the case of the NSP in Badakhshan this seems to have been the greater accountability of customary leaders. But **rather than seeing new organisational structures such as the Community Development Council (CDC) running in parallel to existing customary structures, greater attention needs to be paid to the process of institutional ‘bricolage’ whereby the old (customary structures) and new (the CDCs) borrow from and mutually reshape each other’s practices and ways of thinking**. Thus customary structures may become more ‘democratic’ in content as CDCs may depart from design and become more informal. Change comes slowly, but fundamental to understanding change is knowing what is there in the first place. Assumptions that the ‘democratisation’ of village-level government and a focus on individual rights will displace existing collective action and means of accountability have been unrealistic. Comparative evidence (Tsai, 2007) also indicates that there can be important synergies between village-level collective capacities to generate public goods and external interventions to supplement these.

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Conclusions and recommendations

Understanding the ways in which different villages work and why is not easy: there is no simple recipe or formula which can generate that knowledge. But an appreciation of how villages work is needed to justify the sorts of change processes that might be brought about by external interventions and how these might be made. The method and approach used in this research does provide some guidelines about how implementing agencies in Afghanistan – whether NGOs or national programmes – might understand the village context more analytically and systematically, and use such understanding in the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes.

We do not yet know whether the basis of the village typology constructed here will be appropriate or sufficient for other parts of Afghanistan. This will need investigation. But any approach will require attention to what have been called ‘foundational’ features and using these key factors to characterise villages.

The key factors that need to be taken account of in grouping villages that are similar or dissimilar include:

- Higher or lower altitudes – for example, at higher altitudes fertile land may be more scarce
- Land ownership distribution patterns and the degree of concentration of irrigated land ownership
- The identity of customary authority in the village and how this is linked to landownership
- Village ethnic identities in relation to surrounding villages
- The history of public good provision in the village and its effects

The core lesson for those working in programme design is that village context has to be systematically taken account of in the design, implementation and evaluation of interventions.

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This briefing paper is based on the following SLRC working paper: Mapping village variability in Afghanistan: The use of cluster analysis to construct village typologies (http://securelivelihoods.org/publications_details.aspx?resourceid=356&search=1&Themes=&Country=1&Organisation=&Author=&PublicationType=3&Keyword=&DateFrom=&DateTo=)

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