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Down at the District

A Look at the District Delivery Program

by MAJ Gail Fisher

In foothills of eastern Afghanistan on a brilliant spring day, district elders from Sayyidibad crowd into a cold, sunlit room in the cinderblock district center. They listen to speeches from men smartly dressed in western style just arrived from Kabul.

An enormous wooden table sits squarely in the middle of the room. The district center was built only three years ago, but a florescent light already dangles precariously from the ceiling, one end free of its anchor. Burnt-orange curtains, stained and torn, hang on the windows. Brightly colored plastic-wrapped snacks are brought in with tea, and the Provincial Governor gives his speech over the rattle of opening snacks and sipping of tea.

The Provincial Governor speaks of endless disappointments, the Afghan central government's broken promises, and proposes a way forward in the district. Promise and caution comingle in the morning's remarks.

The insurgency: lack of government, corruption and of security

The conflict in Afghanistan is a political and economic struggle fueled by poor leadership and long-standing local grievances. Legitimate governance in the more insecure districts and provinces is largely absent, or nascent, at best. When present, government officials are too often corrupt, and disenfranchise and antagonize local communities, expanding opportunities for insurgents and criminals.

The International Security Assistance Force Joint Command (IJC) Counterinsurgency Strategy is a three-tiered approach that supports the Afghan government's efforts to deliver good governance, responsive development, and expand security to district, provincial, and national levels. The strategy aims to help the Government of



Tea server in Sayyidibad, Afghanistan
Photo by Gail Fisher



the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) protect the people by extending its reach, and support social and economic development.

The GIROA strategy for improving governance involves an overhaul of subnational governance and district-level service delivery. President Karzai appointed the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), headed by Director Jelani Popal, as the responsible agency for subnational governance. The IDLG describes two significant challenges in the *IDLG Annual Report 2009*: “Firstly, at the subnational level, the IDLG structures (the Provincial and District Governor’s Offices) have insufficient and inadequate human resources. Secondly, the subnational structures are missing many key systems and structures needed to play their expected role.”

Indeed, finding qualified Afghans who will work in unsecure or at-risk districts and provinces is difficult. After 30 years of warfare and neglect, many civil servants lack of skills in financial management, computer operation, and management, aggravating conditions already ripe for corruption. When district and provincial government facilities are available, they often lack electricity, plumbing, heating, and basic office supplies. At the provincial level, inadequate budgets compound the challenges, and municipalities have difficulty collecting revenues and managing finances. For these reasons, and others, the local government has difficulty delivering the most basic and essential services.

Another significant hurdle is the unitary structure of the centralized government in Kabul. President Karzai appoints provincial governors and their deputies. Ministries in Kabul control many key hiring decisions within provincial and district administrations. Money flows from Kabul ministries down to the provincial level in a fairly arbitrary manner that might very well be unrelated to the size of the population or a district or province’s specific development needs. District officials themselves do not have budgets. District Development Councils and Provincial Development Councils are focused on development issues and have limited ability to hold accountable the governors and ministry representatives.

This centralized administrative structure could work, and did in Afghanistan’s past. However, without physical security and functional, formal justice, good, responsive governance cannot take root. As security elements become more capable in Afghanistan, they become harder for insurgents and criminal to threaten with physical violence. The lone civil servant or contracted worker is a far more inviting target. The already limited road structure in Afghanistan is targeted by insurgents, restricting the freedom of movement for legitimate business and administration. While many government employees are willing to take the risks of being associated with the government, absenteeism and regular access to the population remains a challenge in many areas of Afghanistan, notably key population centers in Kandahar, central Helmand, Ghanzi, and Nangahar.

The Afghan government is well aware of these problems and the IDLG is taking steps with its international supporters to address security, capacity, and capability challenges.

The Independent Directorate for Local Governance

Tucked into a leafy corner of Kabul’s “green zone,” the Independent Directorate for Local Governance’s (IDLG) building stands as a testament to the Soviet and then Taliban occupation. Rumors of previous torture sessions juxtapose with the building’s current orderly rows of pink roses and the calming fountain playing in the front lawn. Once a week, most

weeks, the main conference room table fills with smart men and women from GIROA ministries and international embassies and a modern public address system crackles to life. Gathered together to discuss service delivery at the district level, the weekly group reviews programmatic issues and seeks solutions district by district. One recent morning, the representative from the Ministry of Education delivers a particularly impassioned monologue about the need for developing an accurate assessment process to determine what schools exist, as well as a warning about promising too much. The group around the table agrees, and plans are made to sharpen a district assessment process that is taking shape.

The IDLG is a key actor in addressing Afghanistan's administrative problems. The director, Mr. Jelani Popal, has President Karzai's support in spearheading a new sub-national governance policy that attends to the many structural reforms necessary and which ultimately will lend legitimacy to the central government.



The IDLG spearheaded a significant policy reform document, the Sub National Government Policy, which addressed many of the structural problems associated with the unitary government structure. The sub national governance policy improves provincial planning and budgeting processes by establishing that 25 percent of the development budget for the provinces will be decided by the provincial council, the provincial development committee and the governor. This arrangement represents a significant shift from the central government to the provinces in terms of development responsibility. The new sub national governance policy is being followed by the requisite implementing laws and rules, drafted by the IDLG.

The IDLG also has instituted programs which assist with governance and service delivery at the district level. The first is the Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP), which creates representative district shuras in districts where there is weak or no current representation. The IDLG has started these ASOP shuras in Helmand, Ghazni, Logar and Kapisa provinces and will expand to approximately 100 districts around Afghanistan. The second program is the performance-based governor fund which will provide provincial governors with funding across six functional areas. This will build provincial capacity to budget, prioritize, plan and execute projects for their constituents. Third, IDLG has established a municipal support program to assist the 153 municipalities across Afghanistan develop the ability to manage the complex administrative tangle of large and ever growing municipalities. And finally, IDLG has established the District Delivery Program, or DDP. In concert with the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Public Health, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission, the Supreme Court and the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock and others, IDLG has conceived of a program that builds governance down to the district level while also seeking to deliver services that the people want. The IDLG goal is to implement the DDP program across 49 focus districts in 2010 representing the districts with the majority of the population as well as high density of commerce and trade routes.

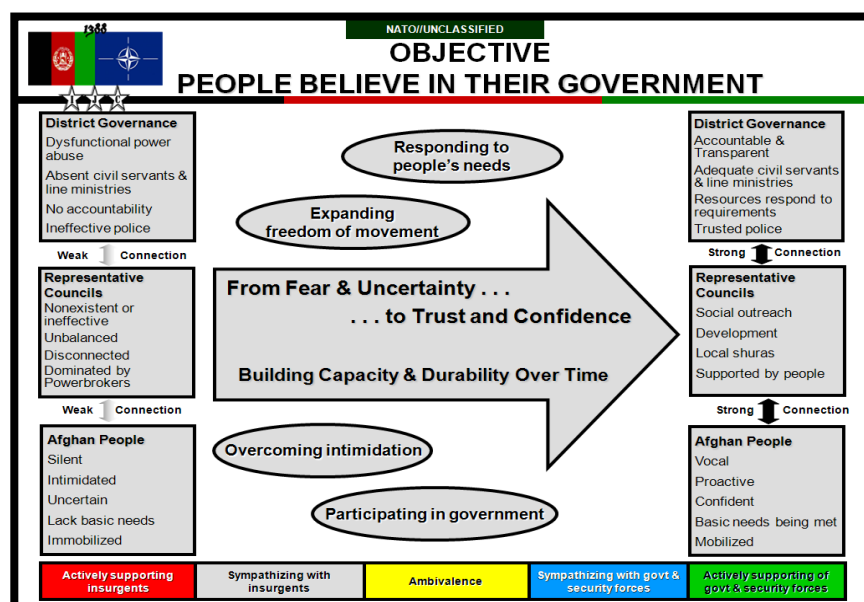
Although the IDLG has a primary coordinating role across the various ministries in implementing DDP, other ministries such as the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) have strong histories of supporting programs. For example, the MRRD has two programs in its portfolio that supports the creation and development of District Development Assemblies (DDAs) and Community Development Councils (CDCs). These assemblies also act as representative shuras in the communities, much the same as the shuras of the IDLG program, aiming to mobilize communities to help themselves through representative bodies. These are strong and long-standing programs that serve to augment DDP.

The District Delivery Program: Building legitimacy and sub national governance

The District Delivery Program (DDP) builds governance district by district by focusing on hiring and training officials, mentoring them and building representative shuras. It also ties the government to the shuras by asking for citizen participation in prioritizing service delivery, and then with backing from the international community, assists local officials with delivering those services.

The program is unique among other governance programs and previous efforts in a several ways. First, it provides a structure for synchronizing governance, development and security and uses service delivery as an appropriate vehicle to build legitimacy. Providing health services to their district, for example, officials demonstrate to the local population that the government is functioning and can provide benefits to those who support it – benefits the insurgents have never provided, and simply *cannot* provide. Next, the DDP program is unique in that it aligns security with DDP hiring, training, and placement of officials and the delivery of important services via coordination of the Afghan National Security Force efforts and the International Security Assistance Force coalition efforts.

The District Delivery Program first of all, focuses on placing trained officials in the district and provincial government positions. The Afghan Civil Service Institute trains individuals in a five day course that teaches basic skills. Subsequent mentoring for up to nine months after the five day course helps institutionalize these skills. The IDLG and Civil Service Institute face hurdles in hiring, however: finding or training civil servants to achieve the



qualifications needed to serve in the local government – in many cases the expectation has been that a civil servant will hold a bachelor's degree. Additionally, the associated danger of getting to and from work and the relatively low pay offered civil servants makes hiring difficult. The central Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is helping, as well, waiving some more unrealistic qualifications for hiring and adding a standard hazardous duty type pay to

basic salaries for jobs in more dangerous areas. So, thanks to a concerted and coordinated effort, civil service at the district level is incrementally becoming more and more attractive.

Through implementation in Central Helmand, IDLG learned the necessity of having a representative council participate in DDP. Rather than establishing a nation-wide structure to apply to all districts – in a nation where each village, valley, and district has its own unique requirements – the IDLG is ready to work through whatever form of district development council is already in place or that the people will find best meets their needs and cultural requirements.

Two important engagements represent the formal steps of the District Delivery Program process. Organized and led by the IDLG staff, representatives from the Afghan social development national ministries – for instance, the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock; the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development; the Ministry of Public Health – first engage the provincial governor and, then, the district governor and representative council to discuss the way ahead for their district. Discussions address the development needs of the community and what the DDP program can provide.

A second engagement includes a workshop that brings together the ministries, the representative council and the provincial and district government officials. Together, they review a DDP draft plan that the IDLG produced in response to requirements identified in the first engagement. One of the primary functions of the workshop is to ensure that the DDP plan is harmonious with existing district and provincial development plans. More importantly, perhaps, the second engagement helps ensure that the representative council has a voice in the development priorities of the district – giving voice and a sense of ownership to the people.

The final DDP plan goes before the provincial governor for approval to ensure his or her ownership and support at that level. Once approved by the governor, the plan then moves to the IDLG in Kabul, and after final approval by a council composed of ministries called together by IDLG, a commitment of resources, support, and service delivery begins. Periodic engagements between the IDLG and the district and provincial governors' offices all help hold each other accountable to the agreements.

Afghan and coalition also have a role, of course. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) working with coalition forces focus on creating an environment that will enable government workers to perform their functions without fear of retribution or violence. In the long run it will be the responsibility of the ANSF to secure its own country and the functioning government, and the DDP process focuses on that obligation. Each element of the DDP process – engagements, approvals, and service delivery – all work to connect governance from Kabul to the provinces, down to the districts, and to the people who will ultimately choose the Taliban or GIRoA as their representative government. In fact the bottom-up process from the District up to Kabul is the true strength of the District Delivery Program.

Support for the program

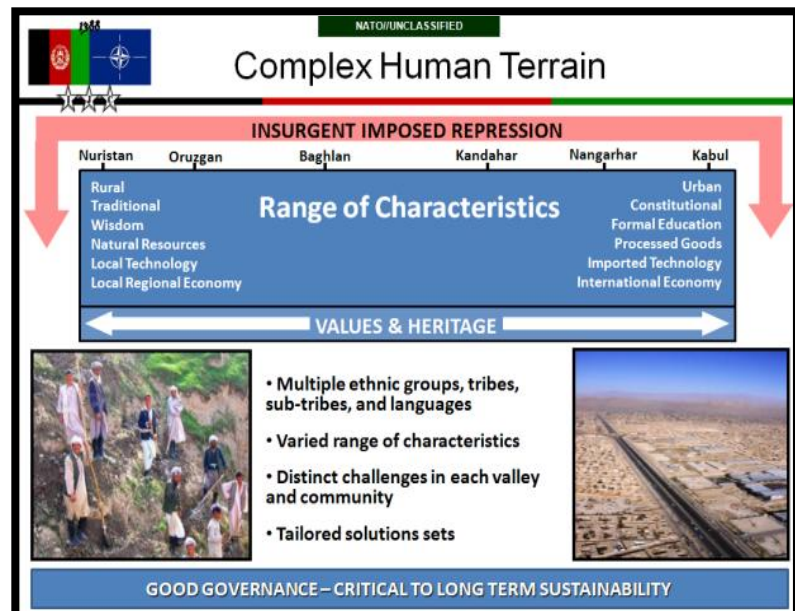
The international community has a limited role in the actual DDP process, but plays a supporting role in delivery. Three primary funding streams use donor commitments. The first and preferred funding comes from the Afghan government's budget process. Donor monies for operational costs are provided to the Ministry of Finance and flow to the province where the district governors and provincial line ministers can access the funds.

Developmental costs associated with specific projects are provided through already established international community programs, such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID) or the Department for International Development (DFID). USAID has established a menu of programs currently in place in Afghanistan which are being redirected to focus districts established as DDP candidates. Another accessible funding stream is the U.S. military Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP), available for short-term, small projects as well as for construction or rehabilitation of structures.

The international community strives to work together across the districts to ensure that security actions are not in conflict with development and governance programs. While difficult, this coordination is extremely important to the ultimate success of not just DDP, but to the overall success of developing government in Afghanistan.

An encouraging beginning

Decisions about district requirements simply cannot be made in Kabul. The mosaic of Afghanistan's districts and provinces defeats any single cookie cutter approach, and a danger is imagining the DDP provides a single solution across the country. Indeed, the vastly complex human terrain, defined by multiple ethnic groups, tribes, sub-tribes, languages represents a broadly varied range of characteristics that require a tailored solution from district to district. However, properly applied, the District Delivery Program will recognize those unique requirements and respond to them. It is a top-down guidance bottom-up refinement sort of program. The great potential strength of the DDP is its tailorable characteristics.



The first DDP district was Nad Ali in the Helmand Province in the south, as part of the Central Helmand River Valley Operation Moshtarak initiated in early February 2010. Afghan National Security and Coalition Forces cleared insurgent activity and, once relatively clear, security forces held the territory to deny insurgents the ability to disrupt placement of the legitimate government. Even as the forces were clearing Nad Ali, civil servants were being hired and trained, and the DDP plan was drafted.

Assessments and workshops have occurred in approximately half dozen districts to date. Hiring takes longer than originally anticipated, and bringing service delivery to the districts is slow. Lessons from the Helmand Province show that local shuras need to be inclusive, and that the Provincial Governor's office is central to the entire effort. Funding mechanisms are awkward, and could use refinement.

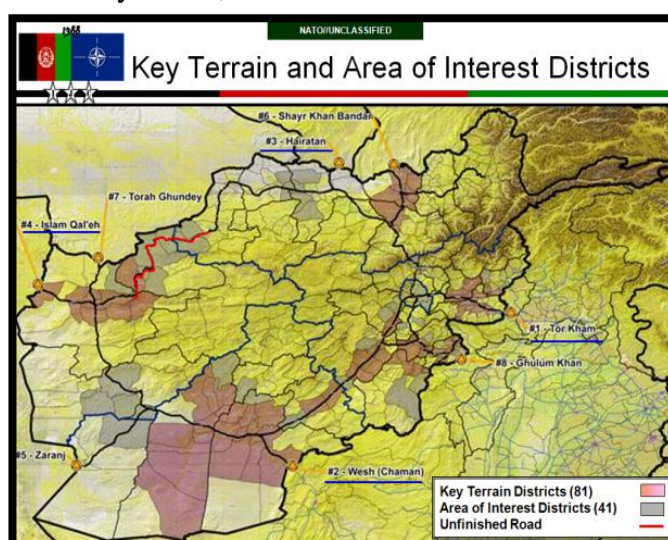
Other issues involve the tentativeness of the donor community. The disparate viewpoints of the various donor agencies causes considerable tension in the stakeholder group. Concerns

about GIRoA's capacity, both within IDLG and across the ministries, to implement DDP abound. Yet to date, the IDLG has hired a full time staff consisting of two specialized teams that conduct the assessments and workshops, and outreach to the central ministries has begun. Also, the IDLG has managed to maintain a fairly regular schedule of assessments and workshops, and in some instances has outpaced the ability of the international community to support. Ministries are sending representatives to planner meetings, and to the executive-level decision making meetings signaling their support.

International focus on Kandahar and whether the stabilization efforts of the coalition forces, the embassies and donor community will work creates a smaller margin for error which is not necessarily bad. Measuring success will be difficult, and the ultimate litmus test will be the public opinion across the 49 districts this year. As in war, the art of building government is messy and fraught, but in the end perhaps one of the most rewarding endeavors.

Conclusion

The District Development Program is not a panacea for all that ails Afghanistan. It is a process, not a product. There are other programs across Afghanistan that build grass roots government participation, or that seek to build security forces, but none which combine governance with development and with security, building Afghan capacity at each level of government. It is important to understand that not all districts in Afghanistan will have DDP implementation, and that GIRoA and the international community have agreed to focus on the key terrain districts as a start. Important, too, is the commitment of the Afghan government—especially the Independent Directorate of Local Governance now working hard to execute the plan and coordinate the ministerial resources essential to governance and development – to this program.



For the international community, then, GIRoA has created the opportunity to help build Afghan governance district by district by investing across governance, development and security sectors simultaneously, rather than in a piecemeal fashion. The synchronization, while hard work, is necessary because the methods of the previous several years have not always helped.

As the international community monitors progress of the campaign in Afghanistan, one small district in the eastern foothills gains a tentative beginning. The elders in Sayyidibad reconvened after lunch that spring day, seated now around pieces of paper on the floor. Fluid script penned from right to left outlined sub district development needs. Discussions and arguments erupted over the district needs. Ministry representatives moved from circle to circle to listen and discuss, and in this way representative government started to take hold. Promise and caution comingled again, but at the end of the day, the district elders with their long beards met with the men from Kabul and discussed district requirements. The first step was taken.

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