



# Participation in Practice in Community-Driven Development Projects in Afghanistan: A Case Study of Herat City

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## Abstract

Poverty, lack of volunteering culture, and low level of literacy are some of the problems that challenge the true engagement of local communities in decision-making processes in developing countries. For effective engagement of communities in local projects, the World Bank has initiated the community-driven development (CDD) approach in Afghanistan. One of the CDD's programs was the Citizens Charter National Priority Program (CNPP) that reached the end of its first phase in 2020. Throughout the program, the World Bank has provided the basic services to urban and rural communities across Afghanistan. This research tends to assess to what extent people participated in the community-driven development projects in Afghanistan with special focus on Herat city, a city located in western Afghanistan. Applying a qualitative research approach, we conducted 61 semi-structured in-depth interviews with community development experts, urban managers, and members of community development councils in Herat city. Although citizens have participated in some aspects of the program, e.g., elections, establishment of community development councils (CDCs), prioritization, and implementation of infrastructure projects, this research has questioned the sustainability of CNPP. Despite the effectiveness of the program—economically speaking—CNPP has failed to truly engage women and underserved communities in decision-making process. Added to this, the program has been considered unsuccessful in empowering local communities and in institutionalizing the concept of “citizen participation.” Moreover, it was also revealed that CNPP prioritizes service delivery over social issues (e.g., empowerment, active participation of the citizens, institutionalization of CDCs, sustainable and continuous performance of CDCs, and public awareness). For sustainable operation of CDCs, the Afghan government should recognize CDCs as integral parts of the Afghan political system.

**Keywords** Community-driven development · Women · Herat city · Empowerment · Local community

## Abbreviations

CDD	Community-driven development
NSP	National Solidarity Program
CCNPP	Citizens Charter National Priority Program
CDCs	Community development councils
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
FP	Facilitating partner
GA	Gozar assembly

PMU	Project management unit
CDP	Community development plan
CLD	Community-led development

## Introduction

The term “citizen participation” is often defined as a mechanism by which citizens can find themselves involved in decision-making processes (James, 1979). In recent years, participation in the public sphere has significantly been growing; and there is still the need for inclusive engagement of citizens in public management (Perez-delHoya et al., 2018). Citizen participation has been widely recognized as a significant mechanism for urban governance and decision-making process (Nguyen et al., 2015). Of course, citizen participation and engagement take various forms and structures in different countries. Developed countries have institutionalized citizen participation due to their social

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structures, but it has not been institutionalized properly in developing countries yet. To address this challenge, giant donors and funding bodies such as World Bank and USAID have sought to institutionalize community-driven development approaches in conflict-affected countries (Chowdhury & Aktaruzzaman, 2016; Denhardt et al., 2009).

To assist and empower the communities in developing countries, the World Bank has utilized the community-driven development (CDD) approach—an approach that empowers and enables local citizens to be part of the decision-making processes in implementing community-driven development projects (Barron, 2010; Hanif et al., 2022). By empowering communities in identifying their development priorities and motivating local communities to engage with local governments on the provision of public services (Bhatia et al., 2018), CDD is considered to be an effective community development model in fragile and conflict prone areas (Anderson, 2019).

One of the most popular CDD initiatives in the global south including Afghanistan is the National Solidarity Program (NSP) which was implemented in three phases from 2003 to 2015 in Afghanistan by the World Bank (Introduction to CCNPP, 2021; Beath et al., 2013c). The Citizens Charter National Priority Program (CCNPP) replaced NSP in Afghanistan following the end of the third phase of National Solidarity Program in Afghanistan in 2015. In fact, the first phase of CCNPP started in 2016 and ended in 2020 (Assess-Transform-Reach Consulting (hereby ATR), 2020). CCNPP was designed to engage community members in prioritization, planning, and implementation of decisions that shape or co-shape the future development of their communities (.). CCNPP strategic priority is to bump up the effective delivery of infrastructure and social services to communities through strengthened community development councils (CDCs). Most of these services were part of minimum service standard (MSS) list that the government is determined to deliver to the citizens of Afghanistan (ATR, 2020; ). Community development councils (CDCs) are the heart of the Citizens Charter National Priority Program. Through CCNPP, CDCs are democratically elected and trained to implement basic development projects. Grants for the implementation of projects are transferred from the Ministry of Finance to the local communities' bank accounts—each community is entitled to open a bank account for budget allocation and transfer—overseen jointly by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and Independent Directorate of Local Governments in rural and urban areas, respectively. Meanwhile, some NGOs—called facilitating partners (FP)—are working closely with the councils for the purpose of facilitating the process of grant transfer and grant allocation for the implementation of the projects. CDCs directly implement projects in their own areas (ATR, 2020; Introduction to

CCNPP, 2021). It is worth noting that an urban CDC covers between 200 and 250 households and each CDC receives grants roughly \$70,000.00 (4,700,000.00 Afs—exchange rate is valid for the month of September 2021) per community. CDCs can spend this amount of money to implement projects related to community development, such as street upgrading and drainage system, provision of clean drinking water, solid waste management, household numbering, and lighting/electricity (also see Hanif et al., 2022). In addition, a standard Gozar is formed from the integration of 4 to 5 CDCs or a population of roughly 800–1250 households. Each Gozar assembly (GA) roughly receives a grant of \$200,000 (13.4 million Afs—exchange rate is valid for the month of September 2021). Each GA should allocate this budget for the implementation of approved projects at the GA level. Some of GA-level projects are secondary road upgrading and readjustment, provision of potable water, park/recreation areas/playgrounds, solid waste management, lighting/electricity, and livelihood projects for women (CCNPP, 2017a, b; GoIRA, 2016b).

CCNPP seeks to mobilize and expand local knowledge through community engagement during community-driven development projects in Afghanistan. This participatory process is designed to ensure that all groups of a community including the under-valued and marginalized communities have a voice and contribute to the prioritization, planning, and implementation of projects (ATR, 2020). Despite the high importance of community-led development projects (see Schiavo et al., 2022), it is argued that, in practice, public involvement has been under-valued in global south (Chado et al., 2016) and the effectiveness of participation in practice needs to be further explored (Conrad, et al., 2011). While the primary focus of CCNPP is citizens' participation and empowerment, the presence of women and marginalized groups, poverty alleviation, and provisioning of basic services to the local community (GoIRA, 2016a), in practice, there is still a question about the role and participation of citizens. This research, thus, aims to address how citizen's participation is manifested at the community level with the case study of Herat city. This type of research is of importance as it signifies how local communities feel themselves part of the community-led development projects in developing countries. While funding agencies promote and support the engagement of local communities in community-driven development projects, in practice, minorities and underserved communities including women are excluded or feel excluded from decision-making processes in community-led development projects in developing countries (see Hanif et al., 2022). There are several factors that influence the exclusion of underserved communities from the decision-making process in such type of projects. These factors will be deeply investigated in this research.

## Theoretical Framework

Community development is a positive response for reshaping and challenging the historical process of authority, particularly the power or influence of the government on local communities. Community development projects help people represent their community's needs (Bhattacharyya, 2004). In fact, community development programs are essential for improving the livelihood of the local community. This is because economic growth is directly linked to the betterment and improvement of social and infrastructural services in local communities (Coffey & Polese, 1985; Montoya, 1998; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020). Additionally, community development itself is part of democracy as democracy is the core of solidarity and liberation from authoritarianism. The highest level of solidarity requires us to be emotionally concerned about all members of the nation and the world and share empathy with anyone, regardless of their gender, racial, facial, and religious identity. This demonstrates, in practice, the desire to work together to build and maintain a compassionate community for the interest of the public (Bhattacharyya, 2004). Community development experts describe it as a mechanism that enables people to create communities based on their own interests and needs. However, this mechanism needs consistent coordination, facilitation, and appropriate action. On the other hand, given the adverse effects of climate changes on resources, e.g., shortages of water for irrigation and food insecurity (Loodin, 2021; Loodin et al., 2023), community developers harness local economic, human, and physical resources to build resilience and respond to the changing needs (Matarrita-Cascante & Bernnan, 2012; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020).

Added to this, funding bodies such as World Bank, UN, and Asian Development Bank strongly focus on local community empowerment (Islam & Morgan, 2012; Platteau, 2004; Walters, 2018). These international organizations tend to focus on existing community structures which allow donors to communicate more effectively with residents. Community-based development was first formalized by UNDP in a "social capital" development model organized and implemented through participation (Midgley, 1986; Walters, 2018) and community empowerment approach (Laverack, 2001; Sen, 2001).

The core of community-based development program is the citizen participation, as citizens' engagement is the foundation of democracy (Quick et al., 2016). The goal of participatory projects is to influence citizens. In fact, theories of participatory democracy assume that citizen participation can have a positive societal impact in terms of inclusion, skills, civic virtues, and legitimacy (Michels & Graaf, 2010). One of the key factors in community-driven

development approach is the transition of power to the local communities. In fact, Mathie and Cunningham (2003) stress that the transition of power to local communities has been at the core of participatory development research and practice in the last few decades. Participation plays a key role in reflecting and reshaping citizenship's values; however, effective participation requires resources such as skills, time, and money to create numerous benefits (Quick et al., 2016; Feldman & Quick, 2009). Scholars such as Michels and Graaf (2010) believe that participation in democratic structures leads to educational functions, integrated performance, and even greater decision-making legitimacy. Following the theories of participatory democracy, consultative democracy, and social capital, participation can be defined in four different aspects. The first aspect of legitimacy is the extent to which participants and other key actors support the procedures and outcomes (Michels & Graaf, 2010). While legitimacy is one of the most motivating features and requirements of participation, its absence leads to the disruption of participatory processes (Ozawa, 2012; Quick et al., 2016). The second aspect entails diversity and inclusion, which refers to the representation of relevant groups or interests (Michels & Graaf, 2010). One of the key challenges in participation is to ensure that a diverse range of citizens are involved, including those who have been underserved or underprivileged (Schlozman & Brady, 2012). Often, participatory processes are not inclusive as it lacks the engagement of stakeholders in dialogues over a specific issue (Quick et al., 2016). The third aspect includes civic skills and virtues. This aspect requires the citizens to get involved in decision-making process related to the planning and implementation of a community-driven development project. However, in the third phase, local communities should become more competent, acquire civic skills, and feel responsible through engaging in public affairs. Finally, the last aspect is deliberation that considers citizen participation as a tool for more rational decision-making process based on public reasoning (Michels & Graaf, 2010).

Community-driven development (CDD) approach that enhances citizens' participation in community-led development projects is a model of development that devolves the decision and resources to local communities. In fact, this approach considers communities, especially the poorer ones, as an asset and indispensable part of the development process (Dongier et al., 2003). The CDD is supported by two theoretical logics (Bhatia et al., 2018). The first is "efficiency argument" that addresses the functionality of the CDD as a mechanism for improving local development outcomes (Wong, 2018). The second theoretical logic is the rationality that considers CDC as a state-building tool for radical changes (Hanif et al., 2022). Through the

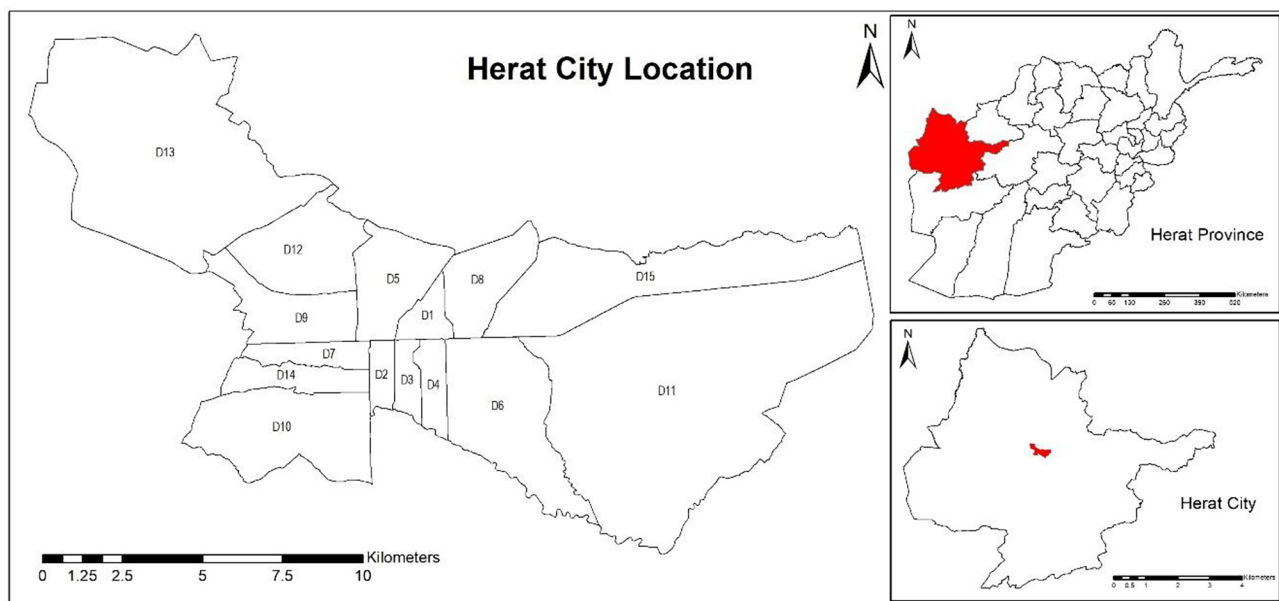
implementation of the first approach, communities are committed to corruption eradication (Wong, 2018; Bhatia et al., 2018). Proponents of the second CDD logic, however, argue that the CDD can strengthen the bonding effects (White et al., 2018) which normally points to greater trust and inclusiveness in local communities (Bhatia, et al., 2018; Ghani & Lockhart, 2009). It is also believed that CDD can bridge the gap between the central government and local councils. This is due to the fact that the primary responsibility of the councils is to strengthen the relationship between the government and the people through establishment of trust between the two parties (Bhatia, et al., 2018; Dixon et al., 2005). However, this approach has many opponents (Fritzen, 2007; Platteau, 2004). Park and Wang (2010) found that the largest CDD project in the world, China's poor-village investment program, suffered from elite capture. Elite capture means that the results of the aided projects are manipulated by the program leaders. Similarly, Mansuri and Rao (2004) argue that elite capture can be considered a structural constraint, but CDD projects can be used for serving the poorer and vulnerable communities. It is documented that CDD triggers not only economic gains (i.e., income) but also improves social outcomes especially in conflict-affected areas (King, 2013). That is why communities with high levels of social capital and greater trust are well represented and involved in community-driven development projects while the marginalized and poorer communities are excluded (Chase & Christensen, 2014; Khwaja, 2009).

Although CDD has become the World Bank's fastest growing strategy for providing services and development assistance for local and underserved communities (Dasgupta

& Beard, 2007), evidence suggests that it is time to reformulate or reframe the basic assumptions of CDD. The World Bank tends to scale up CDD approach from community level to national level. It will help local governments to contribute more resources to ensure the success of CDD and institutionalization of CDD. In fact, reframing CDD will help respond to disaster crises, improve the performance of other types of poverty-alleviation programs, enhance the use of social media to reduce CDD's management and transaction costs, and facilitate the dialogue between community members and policymakers (government authorities) (Wong, 2018). Added to this, in a recently published article, Loha (2023) claims that CDD—a project-based approach—will be replaced by CLD (community-led development)—a sustainably friendly approach designed to improve the system through capacity building—which will positively impact the performance of CDD in the future.

## Case Study

Herat province is located in western Afghanistan bordering with Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkmenistan. This province also shares border with Badghis, Ghor, and Farah provinces. Herat city—the capital of the province—is situated in the middle of Herat province and Enjil district covering around 184 square kilometers (Herat SMAP, 2018) (see Fig. 1). It is the third largest city and second most populated city in Afghanistan with an estimated population of 679,000 in 2017. The most populated districts of the city are the



**Fig. 1** Location of Herat city, western Afghanistan

second, fifth, and seventh districts (UN-Habitat, 2017) (also Fig. 1) Herat Strategic Development Framework (2020).

## Methodology

To further explore the concept of citizen participation in practice and to address the research questions, we utilized the qualitative approach. To uncover how people engage in CDD, we have employed semi-structured interviews with PMU/FP staff, social experts and practitioners, CDC members, and residents of communities. The reason behind relying on semi-structured interview is that this kind of data gathering approach is well suited for exploring the attitudes, values, beliefs, and motives of the local communities (Adams, 2015; Barriball & Alison, 1994; Richardson & Klein, 1975).

We also used the snowball method, as a sampling method for the selection of interviewees, because it helped us identify eligible interviewees (Goodman, 1961). Before starting the interview, 8 pilot interviews were conducted to arrange and finalize the research questions and the scope of the main interview. Then, 61 semi-structured interviews were conducted of which 36 interviewees were male and 25 were female. Of these 61 interviewees, 34 were members of CDCs, 18 were residents/beneficiaries, 4 were experts, and the remaining 5 were government authorities. All the interviews were conducted in June 2021. To follow good research ethic practice, we have used pseudonyms for all the interviewees (Loodin et al., forthcoming). We have used pseudonyms as most of the interviewees, especially women, did not feel secured if mentioned in research given the traditional, religious, and cultural taboos in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the key questions that were asked from the interviewees were as follows:

To what extent local communities are interested in engaging with CDD projects?

What stages of the project can people participate in?

During the data collection, we faced some challenges. One of the key challenges during the data collection was the closure of CDC offices in Herat city. With the completion of community-driven development projects, CDC offices are normally shut down. In such circumstances, it is quite challenging to coordinate and facilitate meetings with the members of CDC. The second key barrier was the unwillingness of female volunteers to be interviewed. Given the religious and cultural sensitivity in Afghanistan, women need their guardians (husband, father, or elder brother) permission for a face-to-face interview (Hyder et al., 2007), a decision which was difficult to be achieved in our case. Despite the challenges, we managed to interview some female interviewees through phone calls.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed for validation. We have also received the verbal approval and consent of all the interviewees for recording their interviews and their voices. Once the data was transcribed, we utilized the coding process during the data analysis stage (Flick et al., 2004; Moretti et al., 2011). Finally, the results of the coding process were analyzed and synthesized, which will be further discussed in the “Result and Discussion” section.

## Result and Discussion

In this section, we will investigate the participation in practice in CCNPP-related projects in urban areas of Herat city.

### Establishment of CDCs

One of the good things about this program was that all the people were eager to participate in the election, and the voting process was completely transparent. For each unit— a unit encompasses 25 households— a male and female representatives were elected. As per procedures, each council was established with the active engagement and cooperation of 20 males and females who were volunteers and trusted by the local community members. A CDC member in District 9, Herat city

The first phase of CCNPP in Herat province was implemented in 6 districts which included 200 CDCs. In total, 40 standard Gozars (assemblies) benefited directly from the services of this program. Based on the outcome of the interviews, the representatives were elected through transparent and anonymous vote. During the elections, a group of 20 men and women was chosen to establish the CDCs. After the establishment of each CDC, each elected member was able to autonomously vote for the head, deputy, treasurer, and secretary of the CDC. It is worth noting that CDC’s creation has also undergone the same procedure under the National Solidarity Program (Akbari & Rahmani, 2020; Beath et al., 2013c; Bhatia et al., 2018; IDLG, 2016).

Additionally, the interviewees of this research also confirmed that CDC’s election has occurred in their communities. Most of them were satisfied with the anonymous voting process; however, some respondents complained about the presence of customary elites in the CDCs. They argued that influential figures do control and influence the CDCs (see also Beath et al., 2013a & c). But, the results of this study show that elite did not have a broader control over the CCNPP process in Herat city.

This research also uncovered that the process of CCNPP was less dominated by the elders and other influential figures (elites) as the research was conducted in the urban area

of Herat city, Afghanistan. This is because FPs were primarily responsible to facilitate the election processes, and PMU oversaw the autonomous election process (Akbari & Rahmani, 2020).

It was documented that after the formation of CDCs, according to the operation manual of CCNPP (2017a, b), large public meetings were held, and the citizens' priorities were identified in a participatory way. In general, the CCNPP has initially been able to properly mobilize citizens and involve them in the establishment of CDCs by creating participatory opportunities. However, most of the public meetings for voting and sharing communities' concerns were held during the business hours (08:00–04:00 local time) leading to the deprivation of some of the community members from getting their voices heard. Despite the challenges, most of communities highly engaged in the meetings which we call it participatory process as most of the local communities were satisfied with the outcome of the meetings.

### Community Development Planning

... The process of prioritizing citizens' needs was very unrealistic and simplistic. From the five available options (Minimum service standard menu or MSS), people had to choose their priorities without actual assessment of the needs and their community development plans. ... Seyed Hamid Hamidi, an urban planning expert

The process of selecting priorities at the community level is based on the MSS list. In fact, people's priorities are selected based on a predetermined list. This process is done with the participation of the citizens in discussions and voting, if needed. In fact, citizens' needs and priorities are often shaped by the overall deliverability of the program (Mansuri & Rao, 2004). So, this process itself creates challenges. First, the priorities identified by the citizens are guided by the CCNPP MSS menu, through which the basic challenges of each community are not properly identified. Second, high-level plans (national, regional, provincial, or municipal levels) are not considered in the participatory planning stage, nor in the implementation stage. In fact, the prioritization process is not well coordinated with other development plans (see ATR, 2020). Third, CDP is not used to draw up large-scale urban development plans. Finally, due to the unplanned development across Afghanistan in the last two decades of US-led NATO forces presence in Afghanistan (GolRa, 2016b), the implementation of the CDP has not gone through the process of assessing the current situation, identifying resources, and presenting the plan based on a specific timeframe. Thus, the current practice does not incorporate CDP into the community-driven development projects in Afghanistan. In contrast, it is simply the selection

of MSS menu projects—starting with the first to fifth priorities. In fact, preparing a real CDP is a time-consuming process as it requires the high engagement and empowerment of the citizens or CDCs' members for the planning and implementation of CDP. Although Bhatia et al. (2018) believe that the model proposed by CDD is a bottom-up planning model through which local people have a better understanding of their environment and their needs than state planners, there is less evidence to highlight the use of local communities' knowledge in CDP programs. Therefore, it is recommended that for the next phase of the CCNPP, CDPs should consider the upper-level development plans—these plans use the potential capacity of the local community—that help reshape or reframe the overall development plans of Gozar or district.

### Service Delivery Projects

... People are completely satisfied with the CCNPP. Before the implementation of projects, our community was suffering from poor infrastructure, sanitation, and hygiene standards. But now our alleys/roads are paved, water supply networks are installed and connected, and roads are asphalted. So, we are very satisfied .... A citizen from district 14, Herat city

This quote illustrates the satisfaction of the citizens from well performance of CCNPP in delivering infrastructure projects at the community/Goza level. Prior to the implementation of CCNPP projects in districts 9–15, people lived in severely poor health conditions as the municipality was not able to meet the basic needs of the local communities, as claimed by the respondents. Now, the quality of their environment has changed, and people are very satisfied with the services delivered by CCNPP. Additionally, examining 25 CDD projects, White et al. (2017) documented the effective role of this approach in delivering basic services to communities. Similarly, Daniel (2014) in Nigeria and Sari (2018) in Indonesia found the success of CDD project in provisioning of micro-infrastructure projects. It is also noticed that CDD delivers infrastructure projects with even better quality and less corruption than the top-down government-affiliated programs (Bhatia et al., 2018; Mansuri & Rao, 2012).

Our results show that most communities selected their sub-projects given their high needs and priorities from the MSS list, but in some councils, project selection was influenced by FPs and PMU staff. Since local communities lack the required capacity in addressing accountability and reporting, they heavily relied on partners (e.g., FP and PMU). In consistency with the findings of Carrick-Hagenbarth (2021), we argued that PMU and FP's work is more result-oriented than being supportive, e.g., building the capacity of the CDC members.

Once projects are completed, local communities make sure to maintain these projects in good condition (White et al., 2018). While Wong (2012) asserts that CDD has positive impacts on the cost-effectiveness of the delivered services, White et al. (2018) believe that the idea that CDD programs are more cost-effective, in terms of service delivery, is not well documented in literature. We also support White et al.'s (2018) view as the CDD's administrative cost and the cost associated with PMU/FP is not included in the budget of community-led development projects in Afghanistan.

Also, some of the interviewees raised their concerns about citizen's financial contribution in planning and implementation of CDD projects in Afghanistan. Moreover, some members of CDCs, FP, and PMU employees are dissatisfied with 25% of the citizens' financial contribution to the projects. This is because it is quite challenging for the elected CDC members and PMU/FP employees to collect every individual's financial contribution in each Gozar. As most of Afghan communities come from financially poor background, local communities are rarely able to contribute to the projects financially. It was also unraveled that implementation of many projects has been delayed due to the collection of people's contributions, a time-consuming process. On the other hand, some CDCs' members think that despite the difficulties, they were able to collect people's contribution to development projects in a timely manner. As poverty plagued Afghanistan's economy, citizens are now less committed to the financial contribution to the development projects in their communities (ATR, 2020). It is predicted that citizens' cash contribution will be declined in the next phases of the CCNPP as citizens has already contributed 10% of the overall budget of NSP projects across Afghanistan (Bhatia et al., 2018).

Another pressing issue that was raised during the interviews is that the FPs are reluctant in sharing the project proposals—prior to the approval and implementation of the project—with the CDs and the local communities, especially the underserved communities who do not have a voice in the decision-making process (also see Loodin et al., 2021). We, however, believe that CDCs should be involved in all stages of project proposal and decision-making process as their involvement accelerates the process of proposal preparation.

## Women's Inclusion

Although CCNPP is designed to devolve 50% of the CDCs' key posts and membership to women, our findings show that, in practice, women do not represent 50% of the council membership. White et al. (2018) argue that even with half presence of women in most of CDD programs, in practice, their engagement in meetings is invisible. Of course, societal fabric has affected the level of women's participation, and participation level varies from CDC to CDC, but the

pressing issue is women's engagement in the decision-making process. In a male-dominated decision-making process, there is less room for women to shape the decision-making. It is asserted that the desire of men in monopolizing the power in decision-making process along with cultural and religious sensitivities, lack of proper education and women empower program at the community level, and low self-confidence are some of key factors that have reduced women's active participation in CDCs.

Men did not consider women at all; decisions were made by the chairman and male members of the council. Women only attended the early meetings of CDC but when they knew that their voices would not be heard, they became discouraged leading to their non-presence in the meetings.... Women are symbolically involved..." A woman CDC member in District 12, Herat city

Although there is not a lot of evidence to support the idea that CDD positively transforms and impacts women's livelihood (Casey, 2018; McCarthy et al., 2016; White et al., 2018), our analysis shows that people are more satisfied with the presence and participation of women than NSP projects. They are optimistic that the actions taken by CCNPP will open new horizons for women's active presence in urban communities. To address gender inequality in the CDC programs, NSP has introduced the large-scale gender inclusion and gender equality mandate at the CDC level in villages (Beath et al., 2013a, b, c). With the return of the Taliban to power, these gains are now at risk of being reversed (Yousaf, 2022). Evidence shows that women's engagement in community-led development projects has drastically declined, especially after the Taliban's taking over of the country. The recent Taliban's decree on banning women from working/education has limited women's role and participation in social democratic process including their engagement in community-driven development projects in Afghanistan (Roberts, 2023).

However, women exclusion from decision-making processes creates a big gap in the order and hierarchy of society (Dadras et al., 2022; Ghimire-Bastakoti & Bastakoti, 2006). Dadras et al. (2022) note that in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the cultural taboo and gender-based discrimination have placed women inferior to men leading to the weaker presence of women in decision-making process. In contrast, the gender bias has equipped men with more power and authority not only at the household level but also at the local and national level leading to the broader influence of men in decision-making process. In fact, the high influence of men—male dominance—has led to the marginalization of underserved communities (see Garner, 2022) including women. Added to this, D'costa (2016) has explored the detrimental effects of women exclusion from decision-making

process in Afghanistan and Pakistan. She noticed that gender-based discrimination in the above-mentioned two countries have increased women vulnerability and insecurity. Some of the detrimental effects of overlooking women's views on important decisions have forced some women to commit prostitution, human trafficking, and forced marriage. Also, Westendorf (2018) relates the failure of Sudan peace process to the exclusion of women from decision-making process.

Our evidence also shows that women's livelihood projects (women's trading centers) which were implemented at the Gozar level are often inactive. While some interviewees reason that the undeniable influence of men in decision-making process is the key to the closure of these commercial centers, others suggest that low-capacity building of women in a community and financial management capabilities are the reasons why women's trading centers are closed. Practically, lack of access to the market, lack of financial support to cover the costs of the center, and the inability of female-driven production centers to compete with the external markets are among the most important factors contributed to the failure of these projects in Afghanistan.

### Community Empowerment/Capacity Building

Evidence shows that empowerment and capacity building of CDC members as well as the residents, which has been one of the main goals of the program, has not been well structured. Local residents and CDCs complained about the lack/shortage of capacity building programs in their local communities.

A few empowerment and capacity building trainings have been conducted. The FPs were only concerned about preparing the report and taking photographs of the program. They did not care about capacity building of the residents in community-driven development projects... A female member of the CDC in District 13, Herat city

In fact, empowerment and knowledge sharing is a time-consuming process. That is why FP/PMU could not empower CDCs (see also, Mansuri & Rao, 2004; White et al., 2018). While some positive works have been done to uplift CDC expertise in procurement and project construction overseeing, these are not enough to institutionalize and empower the CDC.

The PMU office did not allow the CDCs to write the bank cheque. They declared that this should be written by one of our employees to prevent mistakes in bank cheques. Although they are right to some extent about the capacity of CDCs, the point is that they were dis-

interested in teaching the CDC members how to write a bank cheque... Head of a CDC in District 15

Furthermore, some CDC key members expressed their concerns that the FP and PMU directly controlled all their activities and limited CDCs' power and autonomy. Their concerns highlight that the PMU and FP were more interested in creating outputs, e.g., service delivery, rather than institutionalizing and empowering CDCs.

Wong (2012) argues that capacity building and empowerment should be included in the agenda of PMU and FPs because investing in capacity building is important for durability and sustainability of CDD programs.

The results of this study clearly indicate that CCNPP has failed to empower CDCs. Added to this, FPs/PMUs have largely focused on the results of micro-infrastructure projects. The CDD's hypothesis is that participation in sub-projects leads to capacity building of the community (Mansuri & Rao, 2012; Carrick-Hagenbarth, 2021). However, the CCNPP has failed to take the minimum required steps to enhance the capacity of the local community. In fact, empowerment requires longer and long-drawn-out development processes (McCarthy et al., 2016; Hickey & Mohan, 2005).

### Social Audit

Social auditing is an accountability mechanism through which citizens are mobilized to evaluate and audit government and CDC's performance to avoid corruption and political abuse during the community-driven development projects (DMM, 2017). Our evidence indicates that social auditing has not been adequately carried out during the implementation of the CDD projects as CDCs were less likely committed to the social auditing meetings. Unaccountability is one of the reasons why CDDs were reluctant to social auditing. Additionally, citizens also failed to make CDCs accountable. Perhaps, conducting capacity building training would increase the culture of social auditing as well as accountability among the members of a community.

### CDC Sustainability

The sustainability of the CDCs is of high importance to the local communities (Schiavo et al., 2022). It was argued that most CDC members are concerned about the sustainability of CDCs. They believe that if CDCs are not funded, then their role and influence will be harmed in society. In fact, for the sustainable operation of CDC, funding bodies such as World Bank should consistently fund community-driven development projects, unless they are recognized and legitimized by the local governments. Similar to our findings, Jakimow (2018) finds out that lack of funding has made the



work of community councils more challenging in Indonesia. In a similar case, Binswanger and Aiyer (2016) argue that CDCs can only maintain their political presence if they are provided with a secured flow of funds from the central and local governments.

According to the CCNPP operational manual (2017), the urban CDCs must be formalized and legally institutionalized by the local municipalities. Although the municipality has issued the official registration certificate for the CDCs, in practice, it does not recognize the CDC as an elective unit of urban institutions. That is why customary elites (Wakile-Gozar) are prioritized over the CDC's activities. In fact, CDCs' role and contribution in community development projects is undervalued by local governments and municipalities.

People think that the establishment of CDCs are just for the implementation of infrastructure projects; ... So far, CDCs at the community and Gozar level have not found their true place in a society and haven't been defined as units of local government yet. A CDC head, District 15, Herat city

In fact, the sustainability of the CDCs is questioned by a large number of scholars, e.g., Brick (2008), Beath et al. (2013c), and White et al. (2018). Added to this, to better institutionalize CDCs at local community level, the government should incorporate CDC into the local government framework, meaning that local municipalities should legitimize these institutions (White et al., 2018). On the other hand, Daniel (2014) argues that the existence of a bureaucratic system in a centralized context threatens the sustainability of local community-driven development programs. Therefore, for a sustainable CDC engagement in community-driven development projects, the Afghan government should legitimize CDCs at the community level.

Additionally, after the collapse of Ashraf Ghani's government in August 2021, all social structures including CDCs which were instrumentalized by CCNPP were suspended by the Taliban. One of the primary reasons why these programs were not sustainable was that these social structures have not been incorporated into the urban administrative management system of the Afghan government. In addition, lack of sustainable performance of CDCs, lack of legal mechanism for the broader presence of CDCs, and the reluctance of Taliban's government for maintaining these democratic structures are among other reasons that led to the suspension of these social structures in Afghanistan.

Finally, after the Taliban's taking over of Afghanistan, the World Bank has suspended all its development projects in the country. As a result of political turmoil in Afghanistan in August 2021 (Loodin & Warner, 2022), United Nations and some other NGOs, e.g., Norwegian Refugee Council and Danish Refugee Council, have changed their strategic mission in Afghanistan. Presently, the priority of these funding

agencies is the provision of emergency and humanitarian services for Afghan communities. In fact, the humanitarian services are provided to the needed communities through the facilitation of elders or representatives of communities—both rural and urban communities—as well as Imams (person who leads Muslim worshippers in the prayer) (Breslawski, 2022). The dominance and broader role of Imams and elders of communities over CDCs is due to the suspension of World Bank-funded projects in Afghanistan. Additionally, local development councils have entirely been unrecognized and overlooked right after the Taliban's taking over of Afghanistan. Thus, the suspension of World Bank-funded projects alongside the unrecognized of CDCs, especially after the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, has perpetuated the high influence of elders of communities and Imams in emergency and humanitarian assistance in the country.

## Conclusion and Implications

### Research Implications

Despite the high budget allocation for CCNPP, this program has failed to institutionalize citizen's participation in community-driven development projects in Afghanistan. The findings of this research uncover that CCNPP has prioritized the provision of basic infrastructure service delivery over social engagement and institutionalization of community-driven development approaches in Afghanistan. Disregarding social engagements and institutionalization of community-driven development approaches have largely contributed to the gender disparity in community-driven development projects under CCNPP across Afghanistan. Moreover, women's exclusion from decision-making process has been further augmented with the fall of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the regaining of power by the Taliban. Currently, women are banned from attending school and universities as well as working leading to the marginalization of half of the population of the country from socio-economic, cultural, and political affairs in Afghanistan (Essar et al., 2023), a trauma that has detrimental effects on a large part of the Afghan community.

For effective institutionalization of community engagement, especially the underserved communities and women in developing countries including Afghanistan, it is necessary to incorporate the local context (local knowledge, views, and perspectives) into the participatory approaches. In fact, the integration of local knowledge will lead to the robustness of the participatory approach, e.g., CCNPP, which eventually will help the members of communities to feel included—both men and women—in the decision-making process of community-driven development projects in developing countries including Afghanistan. Moreover, for the sustainability of CCPP, this research also suggests the creation or

establishment of public awareness and capacity building programs prior to the implementation of the CCNPP program in a community in Afghanistan. Such type of initiatives not only spread awareness but also increase local people's knowledge about the importance of decision-making process where everyone's voice—regardless of gender differences—is heard (Cornwall, 2003). Finally, for the effectiveness of policy implication, we also recommend the inclusion of governmental bodies in the decision-making process associated to the community-driven development projects. The reason why we stress government's inclusion in the decision-making process is that it will help and facilitate community development councils to be legally recognized and institutionalized as part of the Afghanistan's political structure in the future. For now, the Afghan government does not recognize these councils. Through broader engagement of both local communities and the government, local communities will sustainably operate as a chapter of Afghan government's hierarchical administrative system.

## Conclusion

Employing a semi-structured interview approach—a qualitative research method—this article has assessed the effective participation of local communities through CCNPP, a leading CDD project in Afghanistan. Specifically, this research aimed at assessing how CCNPP participatory approach has been managed in practice and to what extent citizens' active engagement in community-driven development projects have been portrayed. The evidence of the study suggests that citizens have actively participated in the election of CDC members, the establishment or the creation of the CDCs, and prioritization and implementation of the community-driven development projects. While the provision and implementation of infrastructure services to the local communities in urban areas is highly appreciated and valued by local communities, CCNPP has been unsuccessful in engaging women and underserved communities in decision-making process at the community level (urban environment). Added to this, CCNPP has failed to institutionalize and integrate community development councils (CDCs) into the government structures. In fact, CDCs have been unrecognized by the Afghan government, and their functionality and operation have come to a stop once community-driven development projects had completed in urban communities specially after the Taliban's taking over of Afghanistan. Finally, we argued that for an effective and meaningful engagement of Afghan communities, especially women and underprivileged communities, CCNPP should facilitate the process of legitimizing CDC by the Afghan government. In fact, this recognition and legitimacy will help better illustrate the inclusiveness of participation in community-driven development projects in Afghanistan.

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**Availability of Data and Material** The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

## Declarations

**Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate** All the data and the obtained information were coded to protect the respondents' names. This research did not disclose the names of the ones who were interviewed for this research.

**Consent for Publication** We, the authors, give our consent for the publication of this manuscript in the Global Social Welfare Journal-Springer.

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