

CHAPTER SIX

Democracy Promotion, Local Participation, and Transnational Governmentality in Afghanistan

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The Emergence of a Transnational Governmentality

Afghanistan—a country evoking images of poverty and mass migration, violence, and religious extremism to a Western audience—may seem a strange place to study the effects of democracy promotion. Yet Afghanistan is the destination of thousands of experts who conceive their endeavor within the framework of a struggle between the values of modernity (democracy, human rights, women's empowerment, secular education, accountability, to mention but a few), the archaisms of tradition, and the corruption of the state system. Such an international involvement may recall to mind the presence of the Soviets in the 1980s who, in addition to their harsh military occupation, also implemented a development policy consisting of female emancipation, literacy campaigns, and land reform. But, more generally, Afghan history has been shaped recurrently by external actors. Building on the polity that the Pashtun tribes had created during their military advances of the mid-eighteenth century, modern Afghanistan came into being in the second half of the nineteenth century through the action of colonial powers. It is only at that time that the very name of the country was established, when the Russians and the British fixed its frontiers, making it a buffer state between their respective possessions in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.¹

Keeping such an historical dimension in mind, the main objective of this chapter is to examine the emergence of new forms of sovereignty linked to the action of transnational institutional actors. An examination of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), a much-celebrated rural rehabilitation program funded primarily by the World Bank, will highlight how the political economy of conflicts and postconflicts is influenced by the circulation and the use of resources brought through transnational channels. It will show how political games at national and local levels are evolving in relation to the presence of UN agencies and NGOs that are implementing reconstruction projects.

In a frequently quoted, seminal essay that explores the contemporary politics of globalization, Ferguson and Gupta (2002) make two points. First, states are spatialized not only through metaphors and symbols, but also through mundane bureaucratic practices that are characterized by verticality (the state is above civil society and then local communities and families) and encompassment (an ever-widening series of circles from the family to the local community and then nation-states and the international community). In such a mainstream model, civil society is conceived as a zone of mediation between the upper level of the state and the ground level of local groups. Second, Ferguson and Gupta stress the rise of networks of international and nongovernmental organizations around which a loose world of activists gravitates. New forms of power emerge that rely not only on benevolence and welfare programs but also on coercion and repression. This vast bureaucratic transnational system includes UN agencies (the United Nations Development Program [UNDP], the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], the World Health Organization [WHO], the World Trade Organization [WTO]), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), party foundations (such as the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs or the International Republican Institute in the United States, or the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in Germany), charity foundations (e.g., the Open Society Institute of the speculator and philanthropist George Soros), think tanks (such as Brookings Institution and International Crisis Group), and other nonprofit institutions that promote democracy (like the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, which logistically helped to organize and monitor elections in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, or Ukraine). Environmentalist or religious transnational groups (Christian or Islamic) and so-called grassroots associations must also be included in the picture. All these structures constitute networks that span various countries. By their actions, they complement and sometimes challenge

more familiar forms of state spatialization and participate in a reconfiguration of governmentality between states and nonstate entities. They contribute to the transnationalization of state-like practices and then to the emergence of new relations between politics and territory. The current disdain for the state as an institution capable of managing social life and the celebration of the virtues of civil society may be understood in such a broad context.

Ferguson and Gupta's analysis (2002) is based on a comparison between India and Africa, where the respective weight of the state and NGOs is different. But the authors' main points are valid for many other places. In a country such as Afghanistan, organizations of civil society are not below the state, and they will not replace it; rather they will coexist with it. They are supported by a vast transnational apparatus of governmentality that blurs the distinction between the local and the global, the national and the international. Classic Weberian social sciences link the nation-state with the development of bureaucracy as more rational and efficient forms of organization. By contrast, contemporary scholarship increasingly acknowledges the existence of overlapping and often competing sovereignties within and across national borders (Hansen and Stepputat, 2006) that involve benevolence and welfare programs as much as coercion and repression. These layered and segmented sovereignties, partly linked to the action of the vast bureaucratic transnational system described earlier, are particularly visible in Afghanistan.

The chapter begins by exposing the ideals of participatory democracy at the community level that are promoted by the World Bank through the NSP. The NSP national conference held in Kabul in November 2007 serves as a connecting thread to successively bring out the larger narrative of progress and international solidarity, the acquisition of a new habitus through participation in discussion workshops, the reconfiguration of the social geography of the Afghan rural world, and the complexity of stakes in national politics. Finally, the discussion returns to issues of transnational governmentality and emerging forms of sovereignty, which are particularly visible in a country such as Afghanistan.

An Ideal of Community Building: The NSP

The NSP is the main project of rural reconstruction underway in Afghanistan.² Launched in 2003, it is funded primarily by the World

Bank through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) and administered by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). Field implementation is organized on a district basis by 29 facilitating partners (FPs) that comprise one UN agency, 21 international, and seven national NGOs.³ The program aims to bring reconstruction funds directly to rural people by establishing local community development councils (or CDCs)⁴ that are elected democratically by secret ballot, and whose function is to manage local development. According to the official rhetoric:

The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) was created by the Government of Afghanistan to develop the ability of Afghan communities to identify, plan, manage and monitor their own development project. NSP promotes a new development paradigm whereby communities are empowered to make decisions and manage resources during all stages of the project cycle. The program will lay the foundation for a sustainable form of inclusive local governance, rural reconstruction, and poverty alleviation. (National Solidarity Program, 2006: 1)

The program is presented as based on Afghan traditions, such as *hashar*⁵ and *jirga*,⁶ as well as on the Islamic values of unity, equity, and justice. A first phase covered the period from May 2003 to March 2007 and reached 17,300 communities.⁷ A second phase was underway from April 2007 to March 2010 and was meant to reach 4,300 additional communities, for a total of 21,600 communities, or 90 percent of the 24,000 villages or rural settlements⁸ and an overall budget of US \$929 million.⁹

The structure of the whole program is pyramidal, with each step of the implementation and each partner theoretically subjected to criss-crossed monitoring and evaluation. The NSP may be divided into several stages: community mobilization leading to the election of the CDCs; building the capacities of the CDCs' members and more generally of the local people; preparing the development plan and submitting various subprojects; and, finally, implementing the projects. Supported and guided by an FP, the CDC must prepare a community development plan, which identifies development priorities and proposes some concrete projects. The program brings together various institutional actors. Because the World Bank does not have a presence at the level of rural villages, it subcontracts to specific NGOs—officially selected

through a competitive process—thus, creating a structure of action at the national scale of patronage and power.

Two types of projects are eligible: public infrastructure (water supply and sanitation, irrigation, clinics, school building, environmental management) and human capital development. The NSP does not fund the construction or rehabilitation of government and religious buildings. The communities may receive AFS 10,000 (approximately US \$200.00) per family up to a maximum of AFS 3,000,000 (approximately US \$60,000). This means that there is an incentive for the local population to form communities made up of 300 families at the most. Afghans conceive of a domestic unit as one of people eating food cooked in the same pot; the unit often including more than two generations. However, with a curious lack of sensitivity to the Afghan cultural context, the concept of family is defined in official NSP documents as “a husband, a wife (or wives), and unmarried children; or a single head-of-household (male or female) and his/her unmarried children” (National Solidarity Program, 2006: 7).

A series of measures are planned to ensure the participation of women at each stage of the overall process (election, participation in the decision-making process, and implementation). A tripartite agreement must be signed between each CDC, the relevant FP, and the provincial office of the MRRD. Supported and guided by the FP, it is the main duty of the CDC to prepare the community development plan, conceive some concrete projects, and submit them to the MRRD, and eventually to implement them. An external consultant oversees the financial aspects of the project. Between 2003 and 2007, it was the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), the German group for technical cooperation, and, since 2007, Maxwell Stamp, a private economics consultancy based in London.

For many actors and observers, the NSP can produce positive changes. Among a vast corpus of reports that stresses the merits of the program, Nixon (2008) thinks it is necessary to overcome the distinction between governance and development. He considers that the CDCs have the potential to assume more responsibility, although several logistical issues should be addressed. In such a perspective, there is a need to formalize the role of the CDCs beyond the NSP mandate and allow them to become effective governance institutions at the local level. Others are more skeptical. In spite of having worked for the same research organization as Nixon (the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit¹⁰), Brick (2008) sees the mere election of CDCs as an

insufficient condition to create accountability. Although these councils are supposed to derive their legitimacy from the local population, their very existence depends on the influx of resources drained through the MRRD and the FPs. Brick demonstrates how the CDCs can compete with the existing functional mechanisms, such as elders' deliberative assemblies, which have proved to be relatively efficient in mediating disputes and providing public goods.

By identifying beneficiary communities, the NSP produces a new division of Afghan territory and thus alters the preexisting principles of social organization. The ideal of community building and participatory democracy carried on by the NSP is based on the supposed virtue of a civil society. As will be demonstrated, local groups in Afghanistan are in contrasting political arenas, characterized by competition for the rare resources, where different political entrepreneurs are struggling—often with violent means—for power.

A Narrative of Progress and International Solidarity

In the fall of 2007, I attended the NSP national conference in Kabul, in the very place where the June 2002 and December 2003–December 2004 *loya jirga* were held. This location symbolizes the practices of deliberation that accompany the (re)construction of the Afghan state taking place under the thrust of the international community. CDC delegates came from all of the country's provinces. Their presence and the diversity of their origins represented the national community to be built.

Tuesday, November 13 was a big day because President Karzai addressed the delegates. Security measures were exacting. One had to wait a long time in the early morning cold and submit to the guards' authoritarianism before being able to enter the compound where huge tents had been set up to hold the meetings. Toward 9 a.m., the noise of a helicopter was heard. A wave of excitement ran through the crowd, and several persons rushed to the front rows. But another 15 minutes passed before Karzai made his entrance—nearly surreptitiously—by way of a lateral access. He shook some hands while making his way to the stage, accompanied by Ehsan Zia, the minister of rural reconstruction. With intentional simplicity, he addressed the assembly: "*Salâm aleikom sâheb, khosh âmadi!*" (Good morning Gentlemen/Ladies. You are welcome!). He made a sign to the audience to take their seats before he sat down at the main desk. Two screens on either side of the big tent alternately showed images of the orators and the public.

Several people spoke. An MR RD representative first spoke in Pashto; then a young man wearing a cream-colored Western suit recited a *surat* from the Koran. Finally, there was a short welcome speech by a woman dressed in bright yellow, who then gave the floor to Minister Zia. The latter spoke in Persian. He began with the usual greeting to the members of government, the diplomatic body, and the representatives of the United Nations. He sang the NSP's merits, underlining that for the first time in its history, the Afghan people (*mardom*) were taking their destiny in hand. He insisted on the close collaboration between the government and the rural population in the 34 provinces of the country. Some of his sentences were punctuated by applause, but his voice was often drowned out by the humming of the helicopters overhead. Several CDC delegates then spoke in Pashto or in Persian, depending on their geographical origins.

Finally it was Karzai's turn. The public rose to its feet, but he immediately made a sign to the people to sit down, adding an ostentatious courtesy by saying "*merabâni!*" ("It is very kind of you!"). On several occasions during the speech, someone from the public stood up to manifest his support, sometimes by reading a small note, sometimes in verse. The president began speaking in Persian to greet the delegates and again welcomed them. He referred to a recent bomb attack in which several dozens of people (59 according to the estimates he had) had died, including an influential Shia member of parliament. "*Âmi kâr sâhi nist!*" ("Such an action is unjust"), he thundered, demanding the public's support. He mentioned the diverse geographical origins of the victims of the bomb attack as if to symbolize the country's unity when confronted with blind violence. He shared his grief, but continued with the hope of seeing the country develop: "38,000 villages are finally benefiting from reconstruction projects." Progress was visible, he noted with a small anecdote to illustrate the country's electrification: "I was returning to Kabul by plane at night and saw numerous small lights on the ground: 'Where are we?' I asked the pilot—'We are flying over Afghanistan!' he answered." This progress has been possible thanks to help from the international community (*jam'a-ye jehâni*) that is helping Afghans even if they have committed all kinds of atrocities, he commented.

In the middle of his speech, Karzai switched to Pashto. He mentioned international terrorism, Al Qaeda, the Taliban, the process initiated at the Bonn conference in late 2001, and the constitution. He rendered homage to the victims of *jihâd*, who have increased year after year and whose sacrifices made victory over the Soviets possible.

He also spoke of migration, of the Afghan diaspora in London, New York, Washington, Shahjah, Mashhad, or Islamabad, which deprived the country of its living strength. “This should not recur!” He stated that Afghanistan is henceforth “on the path of progress” (*dar rāh-e taraki*). The fact that it was now possible to produce sewing needles was sufficient proof. He took out a pen from the pocket of his waistcoat and showed it proudly to the crowd saying it was made in Afghanistan. A man in the middle of the hall got up to express his enthusiasm. After looking at him, Karzai greeted him in Uzbek. There was vigorous clapping in the audience. He kept going and showed a packet of electric switches produced in Herat and then a cable. The president ended his speech by proclaiming that buying products made in Afghanistan—and not only melons—was a patriotic act. Amid the crowd’s hurrahs, he came down from the stage, made his way toward the public, shook hands, and went toward the women’s corner to greet them, bowing slightly before leaving. It was 11.30 a.m.

The alternating use of Persian and Pashto symbolized the country’s unity and made clear that it was not composed only of Afghans—a term historically reserved for Pashtuns. It indicated the subtle hierarchy of languages on the national stage: Persian and Pashtu for the speeches, with a few sentences in other languages to give them a place, even if subordinate. The presidential speech displayed the delicate balance between an appeal to national pride—in his rather discreet reference to the victory over the Red Army—and the recognition of international aid. He illustrated the tension between the national and supranational levels. In November 2007, Karzai insisted more on the latter by giving greater weight to the support of the international community than to anti-Soviet resistance. But things changed with the presidential elections of August 2009. Accused of benefiting from massive frauds, Karzai fell back on national values and increasingly presented himself as someone who was struggling to safeguard the sovereignty of Afghanistan against Western interference. This evolution in his speech and political alliances can be detected in his attitude toward the NSP and local government.

The Workshop Culture: Acquiring a New Habitus

The NSP’s national conference was an opportunity for delegates representing CDCs to establish contacts, perfect their knowledge of procedures, and exchange thoughts or views on the strong points and weaknesses of the program. It may also be seen as the setting for

acquiring a habitus shared with people working in similar structures across the country and thus strengthening the sentiment of belonging to a particular group that distinguishes itself from the rest of the population by its commitment to development. The workshops (*grupkâri* or *kâr-e grupi*, literally “group work”) are places where subjectivities are constructed and negotiated in novel ways.

I attended one of these discussion workshops. Dressed as a Westerner, I sat down in a corner and did not intervene in the debates. My presence invited no particular curiosity or question; CDC members seemed accustomed to having experts of all kinds accompany them in their activities. Some men were wearing the turban, but those with bare heads were quite numerous. Several women were present, strictly veiled, but none wore the *burqa*, which envelops one from head to toe. When the women spoke, the men listened to them, nodding heads with ostentatious deference.

A delegate from the eastern part of the country, wearing a waistcoat, a *pakul*,¹¹ and sunglasses, opened the session with a long prayer in Arabic. He then spoke in Pashtu. Another delegate followed, also beginning with a prayer in Arabic (but a shorter one), then spoke in Persian: “*khwârhâ-ye aziz, berâdarân-e gerami*” (“Dear sisters, dear brothers”). He began his speech by extolling the victory of the Afghans over adversity and the defense of religion and continued with the merits of the NSP, which was bringing services directly to the population and thus sealing the link with the government. The discussion then dealt with the points for improvement in the future, particularly the articulation between CDCs and provincial authorities. Men and women representatives of CDCs and employees of the MRRD or FPs all boasted of the merits of the NSP when they spoke, declaring that the program had brought democracy to the level of villages. Expressions of “*wahdat-e mardom*” (unity of the people), “*taraki-ye mardom*” (progress of the people), “*bâzsâzi-ye watan*” (reconstruction of the homeland), were repeated like mantras by each speaker. The boundary between members of FPs and CDCs seemed fuzzy, and I understood, with some surprise, that some people were both at the same time. The discussion was organized around a flip chart on which staff from the ministry and NGOs noted the main points addressed, with the idea of carrying them forward to the managing bodies of the NSP. At the same time, small secondary groups formed fairly quickly. Some groups made an effort to highlight the positive points of the program, to limit the deviations, and strictly apply the rules of the participative procedure defined by the NSP. Others, after mouthing some sentences of praise borrowed from conventional rhetoric, stated their grievances. They complained about receiving insufficient amounts

to make real contributions to the development of their places of origin and underlined the necessity for more ambitious projects, thought out at a supravillage level (roads, district hospitals, and so on).

Beyond the content of the debates, technical questions and proposals for improvements, how these workshops were organized and conducted profoundly marked the minds and behaviors of the participants. The lack of gender segregation, in particular, was an oddity in the Afghan rural world. As if to make the situation acceptable and manage their discomfort, men and women were extraordinarily polite. The delegates seemed to negotiate multiple belongings through the body language and words they used. They were present as members of CDCs, a development structure that is directly dependent on international aid rather than any administrative entity. Their fealty certainly was to the MRRD and, therefore in theory, to the Afghan state but also to the World Bank, to the experts who had conceived the NSP, and to the international community that was financing it through the ARTF. This constellation provokes subtle changes in the modes of socialization—of *habitus* in Bourdieu's terminology—these systems of long-lasting arrangements, “structuring structure,” that organize social practices and the perception of these practices, but also “structured structure” that is influenced by the division of society into various categories.¹² Despite their differing points of view, all the participants in these workshops agreed on the importance of maintaining the “field” that gave them the possibility of gathering under the *loya jirga*'s tent in the Afghan capital, a place symbolically charged with power. Their link to the NSP brings them resources and status. Members of CDCs, the staff of the MRRD, and various partner NGOs are interdependent in a certain market. Integration into this market implies the acquisition of specific values or behaviors and how to implement them. Like any social field, the NSP changes practices and perceptions while producing new distinctions. This process takes place in a social space charged with relations of power in which adherence to the principles of NSP does not exclude insertion into the segmented structures of tribal solidarity or clientele networks set up by the parties and local strongmen.

Local Politics: The Overlapping Sources of Solidarity and Conflict

During the NSP national conference, I met the representative of the CDCs from the district of Jaghori where I had earlier conducted

fieldwork. He was a young man with a thin, carefully trimmed mustache. He was wearing dark-colored trousers, a jacket, and an impeccably white shirt and seemed to want to give himself a modern look. He had recently opened the first Internet café in one of the main bazaars of the district. He had spent some time in Iran and Pakistan and had encountered the Internet in Indonesia, where he had traveled, like many Afghans, with the hope of clandestinely entering Australia (Monsutti, 2009).

Socialized and educated abroad and literally connected with the global world by his professional activities, this CDC representative symbolized the emergence of a class of men and women whose social and political activities are linked to resources—both material and immaterial—made available by the presence of international and NGOs. At the same time he is a stakeholder in the complex power games of his native region through his link to a resistance commander who was recently expelled by the district chief appointed by the central government. But the NSP has a far deeper impact than giving visibility to people who are inevitably involved in factional struggles; it contributes to redefining the social and political geography of the Afghan rural world.

It is not rare to observe the administration of districts sheltered in modest premises, be it a simple shop in the bazaar or a compound going back to the precommunist period. Common sights include an official wearing a turban and sipping a cup of bitter tea, a Hermes typewriter, or perhaps an old Soviet jeep. What a contrast these are to NGO offices—particularly those benefiting from NSP manna—with their young employees, their generators, and their four-wheel drive vehicles made in Japan. Waving the flag of donor countries, the ostentatious presence of these organizations tends to wipe out the visibility of the Afghan state at the local level and confine it to the field of police control and its trail of abuses. Such a situation illustrates the range of multiple and segmented sovereignties that characterizes Afghanistan as well as many postcolonial states in Asia and Africa.

The district (*uluswāli*) of Jaghori,¹³ the origin of my interlocutor, lies in the east of Ghazni Province, on the southern fringes of Hazarajat.¹⁴ Despite the constant migratory flux, the demographic pressure remains intense. Farming is hard; every plot of ground that can be cultivated is used. Small terraces are arranged for irrigated agriculture, using underground canals, and some orchards cheer up the landscape. Wheat, beans, fruits (apples, apricots, mulberries), and nuts (almonds and walnuts) are the main products. More than agriculture, the economy is actually based essentially on the financial contribution of the men who

work in the coalmines around Quetta, Pakistan, or do manual labor in Iran (Monsutti, 2004, 2005).

The official limits of the district are not clearly defined. In local discourses and representations, but also by the social practices, Jaghori can be divided into a little more than 20 regions (*manteqa*), which have never, however, been officially acknowledged. Each *manteqa* consists of several hamlets (*qaria*) scattered near the irrigated plots. Many *qaria* are occupied by more than one descent group, but almost no descent group is grouped in only one location. In other words, kinship and residence are not congruent. The inhabitants of the region are related by many overlapping obligations. First, belonging to a patrilineal lineage imposes a number of duties: revenge, mutual financial aid (e.g., in case of marriage, to put together the bride price), and participation in common celebrations—in short, a diffuse solidarity and the feeling of sharing a common destiny. The other types of kinship relations (through the women, by the mother, sister, or wives) are often less compelling and allow more flexibility. Second, the inhabitants of the same hamlet often own in common one or two irrigation canals whose maintenance they ensure and whose water they share, following a predefined cycle. These rights are transmitted from one generation to the next with the land, and are successively divided among the heirs from the time the canal was built. If this tight cohabitation and interdependence can create conflicts, it also imposes concessions. Third, several hamlets may join efforts to maintain a place for reunions with a religious goal (e.g., the *member*) and to pay the services of a mullah who can ensure Koranic readings and basic teachings (Edwards, 1986; Bindemann, 1987: 43).

In addition to the many different kinds of solidarity ties, endemic insecurity characterizes social relations and everyday life in Jaghori. The region was comparatively untouched by fighting during the Soviet occupation. However, as in the rest of the Hazarajat, internal conflicts and sociopolitical upheavals have been profound, reaching a proportion unknown in the tribal war. Settling of feuds can be murderous, more so now that everyone owns heavy arms (automatic guns or even rocket launchers and flamethrowers). The beginning of the 1980s witnessed merciless conflicts between two emerging classes of leaders: the secular intellectuals, often from well-off families and affiliated to parties of Maoist inspiration, and the Khomeinist militants, returning from Iran and generally from a more modest sociological background. In the early 1980s, the latter group gained control over most of Hazarajat (Roy, 1985: 194–205; Harpviken, 1996). After defeating their opponents and in spite of their ideological proximity, two movements inspired

by Khomeini—the Sazman-e Nasr (“Victory Organization”) and the Sepa-ye Pasdaran (“Army of the Guardians”)—bitterly struggled for power (Ibrahimi, 2009).

In 1989, the Red Army retired from Afghanistan. Afraid of being excluded from peace talks, the Hazara leaders understood that unity was the way to salvation. Because of recent disruptions, this unity could only be built on a new ideological ground, that of Hazara identity. With the active support of Iran, the main Shiite factions strove to bury their past disagreements and agreed to form a vast unitary movement, the Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan (“Party of the Islamic Unity of Afghanistan”). The reins of power remained in the hands of the religious leaders, but the new party also incorporated many secular intellectuals (soldiers, engineers, doctors, and teachers). They tried to become indispensable and to again play a political role by creating NGOs that provided health care, education, or the construction of roads.

In contrast to such a recent history of conflict, the NSP looks for an ideal level of solidarity, where the interests of all converge. Assuming that the jihâdi commanders and, more generally, the stakeholders, are discredited among the population, this community-building approach aims to facilitate the emergence of a new class of notables sensitive to the values of the donors, with the ultimate goal of fostering social cohesion and horizontal ties of cooperation in the social fabric of rural Afghanistan. In such a tense and fragmented context, that an optimal subsidy of resources is paid by the NSP to communities of 400 households represents an incentive to division. In the district of Jaghori, as elsewhere in Afghanistan, the number of CDCs set up by the NSP largely exceeds the number of manteqa. In quite a few cases, political factions within each manteqa (often borne of older parties, particularly Nasr and Sepah) form distinct CDCs, with the aim of independently gaining access to the resources provided by the program. Local politics is structured around a subtle blurring of solidarities and rivalries where the strongest obligations entail major sources of tension. Unlike the well-known model developed by Sahlins (1965) to account for the social dimensions of exchange, the circle of general reciprocity in Afghanistan is one in which violence is not uncommon. The ideal of community building and harmony promoted by the NSP is in sharp opposition to the recent past when different local actors were struggling for power. Far from being a space of solidarity, local and territorial groups of rural Afghanistan—whether vaguely called “communities” or “villages”—must be conceived as political arenas where

people compete as much as they cooperate for the scarce resources, such as water, land, migration connections, aid money.

National Politics: The Stakes of Rural Rehabilitation

During the national conference of the CDCs, some representatives of the MRRD and of the Ministry of Agriculture quarreled. The former reproached the latter for being passive; the latter—backed by their colleagues in the Ministry of the Interior (MoI)—accused the former of becoming conceited about their privileged relations with donors of international funds, leading them to exceed their prerogatives. Indeed, the MRRD sought to transform CDCs into a tool of local governance,¹⁵ whereas the MoI believed that the CDCs had encroached on the prerogatives of the existing administrative structures.

The contrast is also embodied in the premises of the two ministries in Kabul as well as in the body language of its officials; it is moreover rich in lessons for understanding how social relations are critically influenced by access to the funds of the international community. The Ministry of Agriculture is in the war-torn neighborhood of Karte Sakhi, in an old building in which the marks of combat are still visible. Relatively light security measures express this institution's marginality. The civil servants present seem to rejoice at the arrival of a visitor who offers them the occasion to exchange some words over a cup of tea. On the other hand, the MRRD occupies a new complex to the south of the city of Kabul, not far from the old Darul Aman Palace, constructed in the 1920s by the reformer king Amanullah. Access is protected by security measures worthy of a Western airport. The atmosphere is quite different: various buildings in a well-maintained park, young technocrats with moustaches and well-cut jackets, seem to be constantly running between two appointments. These two places and the officials inhabiting them underline the heterogeneity of the Afghan state apparatus and illustrate the differentiated integration of various ministries into the networks of transnational governmentality. The MRRD attracts numerous funds through the NSP and other programs of reconstruction. It constitutes a site of power that is more important than the Ministry of Agriculture.

This contrast does not prevent the circulation of elites between diverse structures of the Afghan state: Mohammad Hanif Atmar, one of the promoters of the NSP and MRRD from 2002 to 2006, was successively Minister of Education from 2006 to 2008, before becoming

Minister of Interior; Mohammad Asif Rahimi, who was vice minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development in 2007 became Minister of Agriculture in 2008.¹⁶ Moreover, there are many Afghans as well as international experts who credit Hanif Atmar with future presidential ambitions. The MRRD will have served him—it is said—as a springboard to construct a political clientele across the national territory; his name will remain attached to a period of optimism and expansion of the NSP rather than to the end of the program.

The disagreement between the MRRD and the Ministry of Agriculture about the role of the CDCs was resolved with the establishment of the Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG) by a decree on August 30, 2007 by President Karzai. This move reflects a certain centralization of power. The responsibility of supervising provincial governors, district chiefs, and provincial and municipality councils was withdrawn from the MoI and entrusted to the new office, which had an explicit mission to connect people with the government and achieve significant improvements in service delivery at the subnational level. With the IDLG, Karzai also seems to have disavowed the MRRD's ambitions. Some leaders of the new entity, narrowly linked to Karzai, reproach the MRRD for going it alone and not coordinating with the rest of the government. They oppose the idea of CDCs transforming themselves into administrative structures of local governance and adhering to the text of the 2004 Constitution that foresees free, general, secret, and direct elections of village, district, and municipal councils for a period of three years (IDLG, 2007).¹⁷ In such a perspective, the CDCs are one institutional partner among others and cannot claim to be more than bodies emanating from civil society, responsible primarily for development projects.

Beyond the rhetoric of improving the coordination and promoting good governance, security, development, and economic growth, the creation of IDLG seems to reflect the president's will to work closely with traditional rural elites in the hope of stabilizing the country's rural regions rather than with men and women committed to the principles of democracy and human rights. This shift of attitude did not prevent the coexistence of different strategies. At the very moment when Hamid Karzai was praising the support of the international community during the national conference of CDCs in November 2007, he was maneuvering behind the scenes to form a big coalition with the future presidential elections in mind. This realignment of political alliances appeared clearly when Karzai succeeded in winning the support of several historic leaders of the war who had earlier been hostile to him,

such as Abdul Rashid Dostum and Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq. After the presidential elections of August 2009, marred by allegations of massive fraud, tensions heightened between Karzai and the foreign powers present in Afghanistan, mirroring the evolving relations between the Afghan government and its international protectors.

In such a quickly changing political atmosphere, the momentum of the NSP seems to have run its course. The program is still celebrated by the government and the donors as an example of success, but its political importance has fallen in the context of repositioning and redefining alliances. The case of NSP nevertheless shows that humanitarian assistance is now part of politics in Afghanistan. It is one of the resources that concerned parties are seeking to use in their struggles for power, even if the program could never really fulfill its initial ambitions of covering the entire national territory.

Reshaping Sovereignty: Transnationalization and Depoliticization of Power

The NSP is one of many “schemes to improve the human condition” studied by James Scott (1998); it is one more expression of this “will to improve” described by Tania Murray Li (2007). The rationale of such a development program is to convince rather than to coerce and gives its full significance to the concept of “governmentality,” coined by Foucault: the “government of mentality.” As illustrated by the NSP, the will to improve is translated into explicit programs in two steps corresponding to the main tasks of the CDCs: first, identifying the needs and the problems that have to be solved; second, translating these problems into technical terms. In so doing, the issues are simultaneously rendered nonpolitical. Indeed, building his analysis on an agricultural project in Lesotho, James Ferguson (1994) has shown how the development apparatus is an “anti-politics machine” that fails to address political-economic questions related to the control of the means of production and the structure of inequalities.

In their planning and action, humanitarian and development experts tend to overlook the political relations that produce and reproduce inequalities of status, wealth, and power. “They focus more on the capacities of the poor than on the practices through which one social group impoverishes another” (Li, 2007: 7). Poverty is considered an unfortunate condition rather than the result of asymmetrical relations.

Identifying and supporting vulnerable people is then sufficient to empower them. Educating and training people becomes more crucial than changing social structures. Development programs are thus not abortive schemes; they are fragments of reality and induce specific effects on the social life of millions of people around the world. For its planners, the primary goal of the NSP was to enhance the capacity for action of local communities—to give them the ability to define their own development priorities. The real impact of the various projects that have been implemented on everyday life may be debated beyond the apologetic tone that characterizes the official discourses of the different institutional partners. There is no doubt that bridges have been built and wells dug with the resources channeled by the NSP. But did the program create better living conditions for the rural people? Did it bring more social justice, more economic and political equality? Did it enhance transparency and popular participation?

Yet, the significance of a project such as the NSP is far from being limited to its explicit intentions. It must be considered beyond its success or failure in terms of postconflict reconstruction and development. It contributed to the expansion in the rural regions of a pyramidal bureaucracy with national and international elements intermingling.¹⁸ At the time of the presidential election of 2004, the NSP was much celebrated by Hamid Karzai. Its importance seems to have become more modest with the realignments of alliances preceding the successive election of 2009. In spite of its lost momentum, the NSP has served as a point of entry for the central government to become more visible at the local level. As an Afghan interlocutor once told me with a disenchanted detachment, “It was a subsidy given by the international community to Karzai’s first presidential campaign.” Burdened by its dependence on the foreign presence and the progress of the insurgency, state power remains weak in Afghanistan. But the NSP is an element of the vast humanitarian and development apparatus that reconfigures the subjectivity of people, transforms social relations and personal aspirations, and teaches new terminologies and body gestures. The workshops organized at different levels by the NSP seek to target a group of entrepreneurial people who are expected to become factors of social change in passing on the message at a lower level. Besides the technical dimension of the training, these workshops also convey values, such as participatory democracy, aversion to corruption, and absence of gender segregation.

If we follow Ferguson and Gupta (2002) on transnational governmentality, the idea that there is a vertical relation between the state,

civil society, local communities, and families is misleading. The grass-roots dimension of many associations of the so-called civil society is tenuous compared to their level of dependence on their international donors. Organized in apparently horizontal networks spanning national borders, these associations and their animators adopt a discourse of human rights, democracy, and legibility. The subtle—and often not so subtle—problem of their popular representation and legitimacy remains unnoticed. Although the programs they implement are very alien to the centralized planning described by Scott (1998), it appears that the high modernist project of rationalizing human life does not belong exclusively to states anymore, but is increasingly taken over by overlapping transnational networks that carry out state-like practices across various polities.

These transnational networks, as we have seen, channel resources that may be used in social and political struggles. The presence of alternative and sometimes competing resources contributes to a vast range of multiple and segmented *de facto* sovereignties¹⁹ in places like Afghanistan and many other postcolonial states in Asia and Africa. Transnational institutions implement state-like programs, thus contributing to the emergence of “multiple and layered forms” (Hansen and Stepputat, 2006: 309) of sovereignties.²⁰

A state such as Afghanistan has an old history of external influences (it was already a historic pattern with British subsidies during the nineteenth century) that may limit state sovereignty but also enhance it. Without its own revenue, the government in Afghanistan—with a high level of internecine competition between various ministries and offices—may build some legitimacy by being associated with the distribution of international aid. The state is spatialized in a very concrete way into distinct territories. Civil servants are indispensable intermediaries for crossing different spatial and administrative barriers, as much for transnational institutions as for the national population. There is a coexistence between a layered and divided state apparatus, with multiple and segmented *de facto* sovereignties on the one hand, and the pervasiveness of the nation-state as the unique organizational entity of today’s international politics (with a homogenization of the world political geography since the end of the colonial empires) with the emergence of new forms of transnational governmentality on the other. In our specific case, one may wonder if Afghanistan will be like Rimbaud’s drunken boat: seduced at first by the waves of the global sea, but switching from exaltation to debasement, brought finally to its own deliquescence.

Notes

* This chapter is based on a field research funded by the Agence nationale de la recherche, France. I am grateful to the Program in Agrarian Studies, at Yale University, where I had the opportunity to develop and present my work during the academic year 2008–2009. I am in debt to the people who have provided intellectual support and insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper (in strict alphabetical order): Susanna Fioratta, Yan Greub, Shah M. Hanifi, Karen Hébert, Kay Mansfield, Keely Maxwell, Boris-Mathieu Petric, Laura Sayre, James Scott, K. Sivaramakrishnan, Nandini Sundar, Arundhati Virmani. An expanded version of this text has been first published in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54(3), July 2012.

1. See Schetter, 2005; and Hanifi, 2008.
2. See the sites: www.mrrd.gov.af/; and www.nspafghanistan.org/.
3. See <http://www.nspafghanistan.org/default.aspx?Sel=17> (accessed in February 2012).
4. In Persian, *shurā-ye enkeshtëfi*. “Community Development Council (CDC): A group of community members elected by the community to serve as its decision-making body. The CDC is the social and development foundation at the community level, responsible for implementation and supervision of development projects and liaison between the communities and government and nongovernment organizations. The CDC can be formed in a village where a minimum of 25 families are settled, and communities with less than 25 families are encouraged to join with others to establish the CDC” (National Solidarity Program, 2006: vi).
5. A kind of collective voluntary work meant to assist a neighbor or to improve community infrastructure.
6. “*Jirga/Shura*: traditional Afghan village councils comprised of elders. Under NSP, communities are free to elect community members of their choosing to their Community Development Council, which may or may not include members of existing *jirgas* or *shuras*” (National Solidarity Program, 2006: vii).
7. “Community: A community must have at least 25 families to be eligible for a block grant. Small villages frequently join together to meet this requirement. For this reason, the total number of ‘communities’ targeted by NSP will always be less than the 38,000 ‘villages’ estimated to exist in Afghanistan” (National Solidarity Program, 2006: vi).
8. The notion of village is not clear when applied to the Afghan context. “Village: As of 2007, it is estimated that 42,000 villages, also referred to as ‘rural settlements’, exist in Afghanistan. Previous estimates were as low as 20,000. No accurate census data is available and it is unclear if consensus has been reached on a working definition of ‘village.’ Ground evidence shows that several of these ‘villages’ comprise less than 25 families. Going by the NSP requirement that a ‘community’ must comprise a minimum of 25 families, and experience during NSP Phase I, it is estimated that the villages would translate to around 28,500 NSP communities, thus creating the average of 1 NSP community = 1.474 rural settlements. However the current average used is 1 NSP community = 1.583 rural settlements” (<http://www.nspafghanistan.org/default.aspx?Sel=15>; accessed on March 19, 2009).
9. As a term of comparison, the annual budget of the Afghan state is US \$960 million, accounting for 93 percent from international assistance.
10. www.areu.org.af/.
11. The hat made famous by Ahmad Shah Massud.
12. See for instance Bourdieu (1979: 191).
13. The district covers 1,855 sq. km and has a population of more than 150,000 with an average of 6.7 persons per household (Johnson, 2000: 46). Given the region’s climate, the high altitude, and rare precipitation (less than 300 mm every year, Geokart, 1984), the

- population density (about 80 inhabitants per sq km) is very high. When recalculated on the basis of people per square kilometer of cultivable land, the population density of the Behsud region (Wardak Province, with somehow comparable ecological conditions to Jaghori) for instance, is greater than that of Bangladesh (Johnson, 2000: 46).
14. The central part of Afghanistan, inhabited mostly by Persian-speaking Shiites.
 15. See: "Community Development Council: [...] Its initial mandate is to oversee implementation of the NSP activities within the community. However, it is envisioned as a permanent local governance body that will take on additional responsibilities beyond NSP as it matures" (National Solidarity Programme, 2006: vi).
 16. A similar circulation is found among the district chiefs and provincial governors. It permits Karzai to redistribute positions, and consequently, resources to his allies and clients while preventing them from forming stable political strongholds.
 17. See more specifically Art. 137–141 of the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Office of the President: http://president.gov.af/sroot_eng.aspx?id=68, accessed in February 2012).
 18. Similarly, the project in Lesotho described by Ferguson has been a development failure, but it allowed the government to gain control over the opposition strongholds in the mountains: "It did not bring about 'decentralization' or 'popular participation,' but it was instrumental in establishing a new district administration and giving the Government of Lesotho a much stronger presence in the area than it had ever had before" (1994: 252).
 19. Classically understood here as the "ability to kill, punish, and discipline with impunity wherever it is found and practiced" (Hansen and Stepputat, 2006: 296), but also the capacity to protect through benevolence and welfare programs.
 20. Postcolonial states are characterized by what Hansen and Stepputat call "outsourced sovereignty" (2006: 307).

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