

Decentralization As A Strategy for Improving Education System Performance in Rural Afghanistan: Promise and Prospects

by

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Overview

Strengthening Afghanistan's educational system is a critical element in the country's viability as a nation-state—both in the symbolic realm of sociopolitical dynamics and in practical terms of building institutions for sustainable human capital development. The success of Afghanistan's economic development strategy, its establishment of a stable civil society, and its' ability to maintain accountable government institutions rests on success in educating a new generation of children and youth, yet progress is, at best, faltering (Suhrke 2007; The Atlantic Council of the United States 2008; Center for the Study of the Presidency 2008; The United States Institute for Peace 2009),

Within Afghanistan, there is widespread concern about the pace of education system rebuilding as well as popular interest in the benefits of schooling and desire for quality education, .² However, this concern has not been translated into engagement but has rather eroded public support for the education system. Enrollment data suggest that Afghan parents have been “voting with their feet” enrolling less students each year in 1st grade since at least 2003.

As a result of inadequate procedures for assessing student learning it is uncertain what primary and secondary schooling in Afghanistan actually yields by way of student learning outcomes—but the evidence from university entrance examination results is that there are serious problems in providing students solid educational foundations for subsequent technical or professional training. However the current status quo might best be characterized, it will be crucial to establish a self-sustaining locally-observable dynamic of continuing improvement in instructional quality and student outcomes if there is to be any hope of either short-term or long-term success in the broad mission of enhancing learning opportunities for Afghan students.

School functioning is not immune from overall society and local community life. While general information on local level of armed conflict provides only a moderately reliable indicator of school functioning, the overall decay in security conditions in provinces such as Farah, Ghazni, Herat, Kunduz, Laghman, Loghar, and Kapisa as well as the ten or so southern and eastern provinces immersed in full-fledged conflict is sure to be having a negative impact on education system functioning.³

What is different now from the initial years of education system reconstruction in 2002-2005 is that strategic planning must consider not only proactive strategies for moving forward to improve the efficiency of the education system and quality of student learning but, it must also consider issues of “defensive” strategy, i.e. how to best sustain the educational enterprise in scenarios in which central government authority and functioning decay still further or evaporate entirely.

The central thesis of this presentation is that a strategy oriented toward decentralization of the national education system of Afghanistan – shifting significant portions of the education system's decision-making and funding from the heavily-centralized Ministry of Education in Kabul to the local school level – is a necessary and feasible strategic direction. Such a strategy has promise in addressing the quality of schooling received by Afghan students by improving school operational functioning, accountability, cost-effectiveness (by eliminating spending on layers of bureaucracy which add little value to service quality), as well as improving the likelihood of sustainability.

A proactive intentional devolution of authority to the local school and community level has the promise of jump-starting the crucial task of engaging Afghan society in discussing what “quality” in education means rather than imposing foreign, often antiquated, and often dysfunctional processes of “modernization”. It is important to note that decentralization is, in fact, already part of the Ministry of Education’s policy framework (MoE Strategic Plan 2009) although processes for doing so and concrete operational details have not yet been articulated.

My assessment of the prospects for decentralization here is based on what our project team learned of the micro-level realities of local education during nine months of field research in four districts of Sari Pul and Jawzjan provinces in 2006-2007.⁴ Our “baseline” research on local schools in Sari Pul and Jawzjan provided us an excellent opportunity to learn about school and educator resiliency-building on earlier ethnographic research in 2004-2005 in villages of Dai Kundi and Sari Pul where there had not always been a formal school presence.⁵ We also draw on our analyses of quantitative survey data generated by the Ministry of Education’s Planning Department;⁶ and our field research in evaluating a community-based school initiative serving 170,000 students in 17 provinces of Afghanistan during the period from 2003-2006.

I argue that the time to move forward with decentralization is now. Delays will only exacerbate a deteriorating situation. Such an approach is feasible, and that it can yield rapid and tangible benefits.

Feasibility of Decentralization and Prospects

The feasibility of decentralization as an education strategy must be assessed taking into account sociopolitical and cultural context in which the school system currently functions. Paradoxically, the extreme “command and control” organizational culture of the Ministry of Education fails to assure that values, policies, or initiatives from “the center” really ripple out to the periphery—because the “commands” are seen as so irrelevant to day-to-day local problems and the political space is filled more with efforts to maneuver for personal advantage than with efforts to actually improve education system performance.

The challenge then is not to better “control” the efforts of teachers, school principals, local community leaders, and ordinary citizens who believe in education but, rather, how to help them in doing the work they have already taken on.

In a recent analysis of decentralization as a systemic strategy for education quality improvement, Winkler and Yeo (2007) usefully identify three distinct forms of decentralization: deconcentration (reallocation of decision-making within an education ministry), devolution (transfer of decision-making to provinces, municipalities, or districts), and school autonomy (transfer of management responsibilities to elected or appointed local school governing bodies).⁷ I suggest that decentralization oriented toward the objective of school autonomy has the most promise although a limited practical role might be played by provincial and district-level administration.

Experience to date in Afghanistan in programs sponsored by international NGO’s (such as Save The Children USA, CARE, and Catholic Relief Services, as well as the USAID-sponsored Afghanistan Primary Education Program’s consortium (which delivered accelerated learning to 170,000 students in 2003-2006) yield results as good or better than the formal school system (Kissam and Intili 2006).⁸ The APEP experience also shows that it is possible over a period of only a few months to

gain local buy-in for community-based education and put in place rudimentary but reasonable provisions for local school governance (Kissam and Williams 2005). This evidence—stemming primarily from evaluation research in the non-formal school service delivery system—suggests that it is possible to jump start a “virtuous cycle” design to bring about concrete and positive changes for students’ learning, growing support for education in local communities which are indecisive about the benefits of the current education system, and strengthened resolve among currently demoralized school principals and teachers.

A Grounded Vision of What Decentralization Might Entail

In Afghanistan, a serious barrier to forward progress has been an inability to visualize concretely how standards for instructional quality might actually be implemented and how decentralization might tangibly contribute to quality. **Figure 1** below provides an example of the considerations which must be taken into account in devising a practical capacity-building strategy for instructional quality—one, but not the only, component of overall education system reform:⁹

**Figure 1: Pros and Cons of Decentralization
for Capacity-Building Oriented Toward Improving Instructional Quality**

<i>Decentralized Strategy for Enhancing Quality of Education—In-Service Teacher Training</i>	
<i>Pros:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher training can be tailored to actual needs of local schools and individual teachers and make use of available local resources, i.e. the best teachers at each school. • Local training with attention to “learning to learn” skills and fostering mechanisms of peer professional support may lead directly to sustainability • Costs for tailoring training to local circumstances can be offset by sound needs assessment by developing five to ten variants of training materials to respond to diverse teachers’ needs. • Transition from an initial cycle of in-service teacher training to sustainable peer networks to support skills development is easier.
<i>Cons:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying local qualified trainers, as well as screening, orienting, and training them, is difficult • Quality assurance problems may emerge unless the training strategy includes a norm-referenced framework and easily implementable M&E procedures for assessing quality of training delivered, teacher satisfaction, and learning outcomes. • More effort is required to generate the information to assess and report national progress.
<i>Decentralized Strategy for Enhancing Quality of Education—School Management Training</i>	
<i>Pros:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisors’ training can be designed to incorporate individual needs assessment procedures and approaches for developing individual development plans for teachers • Observation and feedback can be on a continuous basis and draw on local school resources effectively • Local community involvement in teacher oversight will build greater appreciation of process of education, greater confidence in quality of schooling, and leverage significant contributions to education system
<i>Cons:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local process of supervision and teacher evaluation might have less integrity • Local resources for peer support may not be readily available and/or there may be uneven quality

Although Figure 1 focuses (as does Afghanistan) on building education system local school personnel's ability to deliver quality instruction, a crucial additional requirement is development of a sound curriculum designed to provide Afghan students the foundation skills they need for entering the labor market, to ready them for lifelong learning, and to serve as a reference framework articulating the standards against which schools' performance should be assessed.

Attention must be given to the competencies Afghanistan's labor force will need to make the country competitive in a global economy (e.g. as visualized by the 21st Century Job Skills Partnership). However, just as importantly, the system needs to provide a curriculum that is based on the needs of Afghan society, making students literate/competent in all facets of functioning in their own local communities rather than providing them with a knowledge base and skills set anchored in European-influenced concepts of a "modern" curriculum as imagined circa 1955 by U.S., European, and Soviet educators.

A curriculum framework developed on the basis of a functional analysis of society's needs is necessary but funding for local schools to take the lead in development of instructional materials should be encouraged. Adoption of this sort of "responsive" over-arching curriculum framework, coupled with encouragement to teachers to flesh out subject matter content and link students' learning to everyday life, directly addresses the smoldering tensions between European-influenced secular education and demand in Afghanistan for an Islamic educational system. Such a mixed approach would allow local communities and their teachers to address the issue of schools' role in addressing character development and ethical principles—which would, in Afghanistan, be firmly rooted in Islamic principles. It is important to understand that encouraging incorporation of attention to character, ethics, values into an educational framework which concurrently catalyzes analytic thinking, discussion, and self-expression is an important step toward bridging the broadening gap between conservatives and progressives.

Why A Centralized Education System Approach Has Not Worked in Afghanistan

Key areas of central education system failures include: inattention to geographical variations in performance as a tool for quality assurance. disregard of system efficiency indicators (most critically, student dropout rate and inadequacy of student assessment procedures for determining student repetition or advancement), and focus on organizational processes, not on outcomes.

Inattention to Local Variations in Access to Schooling, Resources, and School Performance

Top-down initiatives are easiest to implement in the context of homogeneity—when a single intervention can be relevant to the situations of all schools and students. Unfortunately, in a country as diverse and as fragmented as Afghanistan, national-level analyses can say little about the actual educational experience of most students—due to the extent of variation from one area to another. Enrollment patterns, teacher qualifications, and school characteristics vary tremendously from province to province and among the more than 400 districts.

For example, a standardized model of school administration is limited in practical operational usefulness. For example, in Dai Kundi Province, the average teacher has 8.1 years of schooling while in Herat the average teacher has 10.8 years of schooling. Similar diversity can be observed from district to district even within a single province. For example, in one district of Wardak Province (Chak) 84% of the teachers are permanent teachers while in another (Markazi Bishsud)

only 15% are—implying substantial disparities in teacher educational attainment (since the permanent teachers are usually those with 12 years of schooling while contract teachers are those who fail to have these educational credentials).

Disregard of System Outputs and Basic Indicators of System Efficiency—School Dropout

The school dropout rate in Afghanistan—as indicated by reported numbers of students who miss or are not admitted to the final examination for a grade due to excessive absences—is extremely high—but this source of system inefficiency has never been addressed by the Ministry of Education’s centralized bureaucracy.¹⁰ Improvements in the 2007 National School Survey methodology now make it possible to distinguish students who are generally present in class, students who were absent during the period of the school survey, and students permanently absent, i.e. dropouts. In the 2007 National School Survey tabulation, 15% of the total national student enrollment are listed as being “permanently absent” while another 10% were not present during the survey period—suggesting that the commonly cited official national enrollment of almost 5.7 million students is actually closer to 4.3 million.¹¹

Going Beyond “Smoke and Mirrors”: The Promise of Decentralization

Decentralization is inevitably frightening to nation-states in organizational terms—because it represents loss of control and, just as importantly, loss of ability to “spin” representations of reality to ward off the difficult concrete glimpses of “what’s happening” with press releases, conferences, and similar high-level centralized events. Nonetheless, central system administrators in Afghanistan do not actually have the option of retaining control of a system as fragile as the current education system is—since their control was always tenuous (arguably even in the “golden era” of Zaher Shah a half century ago as Louis Dupree’s analysis makes clear). A deliberate decision to initiate a process of decentralization is their best hope for improving the education system’s capacity to deliver services; the alternative of continued efforts toward top-down management (without the intellectual or financial resources to positively contribute to local school functioning) can only exacerbate the current predicament.

In the following section we discuss a crucial first step in decentralization—how to engage school principals and other local school leadership (i.e. “school management teams”) in creating a school climate to support sustainable teacher skills improvement.

Tailoring School Management and Teacher Training to Diverse School Needs

An important consideration in rejecting a “one size fits all” approach to teacher training and school-level instructional leadership is to incorporate into education reform strategy a recognition of the diversity in size and function of different schools in the country.

A single template for school leadership does not work because there is no such thing as a “typical” Afghan school. For instance, school size and grades taught vary widely among Afghanistan’s “regular” (public, non-madrassa) schools, as shown in **Table 1** on the next page. The observed patterns with respect to school size and mission as part of the education system (along with patterns of teacher preparation in rural vs. more urban areas, language mix, ethnicity) provides an objective matrix for assessing the extent to which a one-size-fits-all system is inappropriate for Afghanistan.

Table 1: School Size for Different Types of Schools in Afghanistan

School Enrollment	School Type			
	Teach Primary Grades Only (1-6)	Teach Primary & Middle Grades Only (1-9)	Teach Middle & High Grades (7-12)	Instruction for All Grade Levels (1-12)
# of Schools and % of School Type in Size Range				
Very Small: 100 or less	551 (10.1%)	3 (0.2%)	8 (42.1%)	---
Small: 101-300	2,906 (53.0%)	167 (11.6%)	8 (42.1%)	16 (17.4%)
Medium: 301-500	1,203 (21.9%)	336 (23.3%)	2 (10.5%)	53 (5.8%)
Large: 501-1000	700 (12.8%)	582 (40.3%)	1 (5.3%)	252 (27.4%)
Very Large: 1,001 or more	122 (2.2%)	355 (24.6%)	---	600 (65.1%)
National	5,482 (70%)	1,443 (18%)	19 (<1%)	921 (12%)

Source: Shannon Williams et al, “Education Service Delivery System and Facilities” December, 2006 (based on 2005 National School Survey data from the Planning Department, Ministry of Education).

The vast majority (87%) of total country-wide enrollment consists of primary-level students. However, the capacity-building tasks which need to be undertaken in order to better respond to the instructional needs of these students and improve local school performance varies tremendously based on a number of factors. For instance, 10% of schools that teach only primary grades are very small schools, serving 100 or fewer students, while 12% are large schools serving between 500 and 1,000 students. Obviously, the administrative, supply, and infrastructure needs of local schools differ dramatically from community to community.

Small schools commonly have fewer than 15 staff—an ideal size for locally-initiated, peer-based teacher skills development and team-based school management.

Large and very large schools, on the other hand, tend to offer learning venues with a broader span of instruction and, thus, greater demands on teachers vis-à-vis subject matter mastery. With a staffing level of 100 or more teachers, there is also a deeper pool of peer expertise in these schools, with teachers of higher educational attainment able to provide peer support and coaching to less-educated or experienced teachers. While less evident in the currently available analyses of school size and instructional labor pool and requirements, the reality is that remote schools have more constrained availability of teachers and school principals, making this another dimension of diversity.¹²

In even our small sample of 12 schools of varying sizes in Jawzjan and Sari Pul provinces which we studied intensively we saw a range of very reasonable adaptations which relied on peer training as a strategy to enhance instructional quality assurance. These observations lead us to believe that the best strategy will be to focus on enhancing local efforts to provide peer-based in-service training, not on replacing it with external centrally-designed and delivered training.

Building on Existing Foundations for Autonomous School Management

One of the primary inputs to instructional quality is the selection of instructors, and many of these decisions are, in fact, already made outside of the central government. While the central administration of the Ministry of Education views its role as the source of all decision-making related to systemic change, the most crucial decisions—namely those relating to recruiting, hiring, supervising, and firing teachers – are often made at the local level. Almost one-third (31%) of the Afghanistan’s teachers are *agir* (non-permanent) teachers, many of whom teach in more remote locations, and hiring decisions for these teachers are left in the hands of officials at the local and district level.¹³

Day-to-day supervision of teachers is, of course, highly decentralized, taking place at the local school level.¹⁴ An issue which has been ignored in centralized planning discussions is that the assignment of teachers to specific subjects at specific grade levels is made at the local school (sometimes with informal consultation with the District Education Director and local community leaders). We saw these decisions being made thoughtfully while national-level centralized planning didn’t even recognize how teacher assignments might affect training needs.

In Sari Pul and Jawzjan, as in earlier applied research in Dai Kundi province, we discovered that the formal requirements for teaching (educational attainment) are only one consideration in the hiring process: in addition, extensive consultation and social networking within communities is a vital part of the personnel recruitment and selection process. In particular, the current official conceptualization of teacher’s jobs (and staffing requirements) is flawed in that “modernization” has entailed abandonment of traditional, but more finely-textured conceptualizations of teachers’ roles.¹⁵

While the purportedly “modern” version of education personnel management might suggest the need to replace a semi-formal system with a more formal one, the reality is that the current process takes into account a number of informal but relevant indicators of teacher competency currently ignored by official standards. In reality, the “imperfect” process of teacher hiring, by relying on local community members’ knowledge of local individuals rather than on formal assessment procedures, can provide more informed decisions regarding the qualifications of teachers and, at the same time, contribute to local buy-in to supporting education and problem-solving when teacher performance problems are encountered. Additionally, in a country where diplomas cannot be verified for validity (and do not necessarily represent any acknowledged level of competency), such informal assessments may currently provide a far more accurate assessment of candidates’ merit than official standards.

Cost Savings from Downsizing Provincial and District-Level Education System Staff

Teachers’ and principals’ accounts of visits from DED, PED, and very occasionally Kabul-based officials, made it clear that most review of teaching and school performance was hurried and perfunctory, consisting primarily of examination of records and documentation of site visits. Time constraints on provincially-based or district-based “system” review by PED or DED staff of local school performance are real and, thus, it is likely that the less-accessible schools are very seldom visited, assessed, or provided assistance. Even when assistance is actually provided, time available for “working with” local school personnel is short. While the “flow-down” process of technical assistance from centralized administration to local schools (using a theoretically reasonable but

inappropriate model) is costly and minimally effective, decentralization could serve as the basis to developing ambitious but workable approaches to engaging school managers, teachers, and community stakeholders (including parents, local professionals, business people, and community leaders) in school governance.

National School Survey data on actual levels of staffing are not entirely reliable, but I estimate provincial office staffing level to be on the average of 20 full-time employees and district office staffing to consist of about 5 full-time employees. This represents a total of approximately 2,500-3,000 positions (about 700 in PED's and perhaps 2,000 in DEDs).¹⁶ The core administrative functions of disbursement of salaries, facilitating the downward flow of regulatory memos and the upward flow of school-level reports could be accomplished even after downsizing provincial and district staff nationwide by about 2,000 positions and using cost savings to: a) strengthen local school management and governance and b) implement a "train the trainer" to prepare local school management teams (i.e. principals, deputy principals, and head teachers) to take primary responsibility for monitoring/evaluation of instruction and training/technical assistance to teachers.

Feasibility--Can Local Schools Be the Fulcrum for Leveraging Instructional Quality?

Interviews with school principals and head teachers at several schools in Kabul, as well as field research in 12 schools in Jawzjan and Sari Pul provinces, indicate that local schools can indeed serve as a solid fulcrum for leveraging instructional quality—in part because to some extent they already are.

Whatever their own formal qualifications were (and many were qualified more on the basis of their leadership and management skills than their formal training in education), the school principals we interviewed considered an important element of their roles to be coaching teachers, or (in the case where principals had little teaching experience themselves, arranging for more qualified teachers to help others). Our field research suggests moreover that even less educated school principals can and do contribute to quality of instruction—but that this is not an official role or one that is even sanctioned (since their leadership might conflict with central government regulations or guidance). The lack of local school budgets, self-confidence, and even basic models for structured programs of teacher training constrain their efforts to contribute to quality student learning.

One example of how instructional quality can be leveraged at the local, school level is Baharak School, a medium-sized school perhaps 45 minutes bicycle ride from the District Center of Sangcharak. It is quite typical in that virtually no one in the local area has the educational qualifications teachers are expected to have. At Baharak School, the principal supports peer-to-peer collaboration and already contributes to sustained efforts to improve teachers' pedagogical skills.

The case of Baharak School includes an interesting "best practice" which we observed in other rural schools as well—namely the practice of recruiting outstanding local students to become elementary-level teachers while they are still attending secondary school. It deserves note that this "best practice" is a traditional practice in rural Afghan villages.¹⁷ It should serve to explore ways in which to make use of traditional methods for contemporary needs—keeping in mind the often forgotten reality that "national" teacher supply is irrelevant to rural societies with tightly-knit social networks in small villages since "outsiders" would be very reluctant to move to such a community and would not be welcomed if they did.

Taking the First Steps Toward Decentralization and towards local school autonomy-- A School Management Team (SMT) Training Initiative

Generic discussion of strategies of decentralization have little utility unless they are linked to visualization as to how a new system configuration will actually serve to change the day to day interactions of instructional leaders (school principals and head teachers), teachers and learners and, hopefully, bring them together as a “community of learners”.

Some practical skills-development objectives for an initial investment to jump-start the process of building local school management teams (SMT’s) to become more effective instructional leaders and to leverage community support, collaboration, and resources are the following:

- ***Official guidance regarding School Principals’ roles needs to link more directly and flexibly to local context ,resources, and problems encountered in carrying out the schools’ central mission of fostering student learning than to regulatory compliance.*** The Ministry of Education must commit itself to develop training packages which are designed to encourage appropriate local adaptations in visualizing and carrying out school management tasks—e.g. for small rural elementary schools vs. for larger, primary/secondary “consolidated” urban schools
- ***School management teams’ skills in community mobilization and promotion of education as a collective priority need to be strengthened.*** Resources that could benefit schools do exist in the communities. SMTs should be trained in community needs assessment and community mobilization. This should not only include efforts to secure in-kind and financial donations, but human resources as well. For example, well-diggers might be able to give examples of real world use of mathematics, local pharmacists provide sound, basic health instruction going well beyond the minimal content in the official textbooks. Local teenagers who had traveled to urban areas could familiarize students with the Internet, returning refugees from Pakistan, provide instruction in English.¹⁸
- ***Help school management teams visualize what education is “good for”.*** Even where there is rhetorical support in a community for the general idea of education, there is only the sketchiest idea as to how education can contribute to a community’s well-being. SMT’s need additional training to effectively explain how schools can help respond to community needs and to make them relevant as actual centers for community learning. This could, for example, include running adult literacy classes, providing vocational training in addition to basic education, or identifying areas of study in which community members are interested and providing instruction in those.¹⁹
- ***School management teams need to be prepared to involve their students’ families as part of the school community and as valuable collaborators in their children’s learning.*** A few, but only a minority of school managers understand the extent to which schools can enhance student learning by fostering exploratory learning activities which go beyond the classroom walls (e.g. academic decathlons in which school students compete against students from other schools). SMT’s will need to be provided ways to positively engage even those parents with little education themselves.

- *SMT's need access to modest amounts of funding for implementing local school improvement projects.* Currently, all textbooks and instructional aids cascade down to local schools from Kabul. Local management capacity-building is infeasible without local authority for spending.

Conclusions

Decentralization to the local school level provides a means for Afghanistan to augment the scarce economic resources available for improving student learning. The promise of decentralization stems primarily from the possibility of mobilizing social capital as a resource for enhancing human capital in a service delivery system which is likely to remain under-funded for decades to come.

Engaging local social networks in the education enterprise is also crucial to sustainability of education in general and, quite specifically, to assure an ongoing process of quality improvement. In a fragile and volatile sociopolitical environment, school system decentralization holds out not only promise for more enthusiastic rapid improvements in school functioning but, also, holds out hope of sustaining community commitment to education even in unfavorable political contexts.

How can social capital generate human capital? Our research suggests that, as in many other systems, teaching ability is unevenly distributed and that systemic efficacy can be improved if organizational mechanisms can be devised to better distribute teachers' knowledge, skills, and practical expertise (as evidenced by actual teaching behavior). Social capital can generate human capital because, by drawing on resources of social capital to drive a system of peer-based teacher skills development, quality improvement can become affordable and even sustainable. To be sure, some "external" concepts and techniques should and could be introduced—but, in many cases, these relate not to cognitive knowledge but to the feasibility and desirability of flexibility, problem-solving, collaboration (as opposed to following the rules of a hierarchical management system which was deemed "modern" two or more decades ago).

Our research suggests that traditional practices of mutualism, working through informal or semi-formal systems of reciprocity, play an important role in assuring the viability of local schools even under current system functioning—especially since central system support is sometimes intermittent and the value added by bureaucratic processes of "quality assurance" (i.e. the efforts of district and provincial "inspectors") are questionable. Greater reliance on semi-formal and informal systems of social relations has great promise.

The seductively attractive schematic diagram with a "cascade model" with magical flowcharts of top-down education reform is unlikely to be implemented effectively in Afghanistan. Top-down processes of accountability are vulnerable in a political, social, and physical context with long "supply lines", where two-way communication is extremely difficult and where even top-down communication does not always result in reliable message transmission. Chains of accountability can be subverted by individual officials, by organized informal networks, or by the almost impossible logistic demands of 2-way information flow between a single information source (Kabul) through 35 provincial nodes, to 400 district nodes, to about 9,000 local schools.

Mathematic modeling of small-world theory suggests that structured distributed networks not only have the advantage of being efficient. More importantly, they are more resilient (Buchanan 2002).

Both “strong” links (bonding social capital) and “weak” links (bridging social capital) are required in an optimal system for mobilizing resources and effectively disseminating expertise and skills. The most robust social systems are structured to foster the development of small-scale social networks (the basic insight underlying “cluster school” strategies of capacity-building) and rely on the relationships of mutual reciprocity inherent in social networks to mobilize resources useful for achieving desired social objectives. The abstract flow-chart visualizations of “strategies” currently used—usually top-down ones, with inscrutable black boxes and flow-lines imagined in a vacuum—are a dangerous contemporary planning tool because the actual social universe of all societies is more complex.

Donor and Ministry of Education emphasis on clear delineation of objectives and inventories of activities in a “project” or “initiative”, while understandable and moderately useful, is not an adequate basis for actual systemic change—because the arbitrarily-developed logic models that populate donor and their counterparts’ files are just that, abstract representations of linkages between activities, results, and outcomes with no provisions for empirical testing and almost complete indifference to the complex processes of social network functioning—at the family level, the community level, within schools, and in interactions between schools and the communities which it is hoped will support them.

The nature of Afghanistan’s society makes it essential to give careful attention as to how outside resources and efforts to re-shape education to improve quality will play out at the micro-level of local communities and to recognize that, especially for a country with as few financial resources as Afghanistan, the responsible strategy cannot rely only on capital investments but must also give careful attention to the calculus of social capital, and civic capital and how they contribute to actual educational success as well as to political support for the abstract vision of education.

In assessing the risks of continued investment in “capacity-building” for a centralized bureaucracy in Afghanistan versus re-balancing that investment to shift resources toward a decentralization strategy, we need to close by emphasizing the risks of maintaining the status quo. Each year of delay in the shadow-world of centralized bureaucratic processes results in another year’s cohort of Afghan students attending schools where teachers and school principals feel ignored and demoralized by the insular processes of the centralized Kabul bureaucracy. Each year of delay also risks further decay in public confidence regarding the genuineness of the global community’s commitment to fulfill promises of equitable access to quality education or its ability to fulfill its commitments.

Decentralization of education system management will strengthen, not weaken, the legitimacy of the besieged Islamic Government of Afghanistan which is now suffering as much from its own inaction, inefficiency, lack of transparency, and corruption as from attacks by fundamentalist opponents of “modernism”.

The promise of externally-driven technical expertise and state institutions, including those charged with processes of democratic governance, is understandably questioned when so little has been done to improve the actual quality of public services and peoples’ lives. Decentralization holds out the promise of providing real-world grounding to grand abstract schemes of systemic education reform, assuring a focus on day to day functioning of schools as communities of learning, on teachers’ successfully carrying out the role they have in moving society forward, and on the day-to-day learning experiences of students.

ENDNOTES

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² During the summer of 2006, in a well-designed survey, 44% of respondents, ordinary people interviewed throughout Afghanistan, identified "social services and infrastructure" improvements as their top priority. This thorough review, assessing multiple dimensions of progress was conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project. See Seema Patel and Steven Ross, "Breaking Point: Measuring Progress in Afghanistan", CSIS, February 23, 2007. The 2003 National Rural Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) also identified a number of public concerns related to quality of schools and instruction (Naumann, Kissam, and Kirby 2005).

³ In the spring of 2006, my colleague Craig Naumann, prepared a detailed analysis, using MoE reporting data of the impact of conflict on school attendance in four conflicted southern provinces: Kandahar, Hilmand, Zabul, and Uruzgan. When Kissam was last involved in fieldwork in Afghanistan during the summer of 2008, his discussions with interviewers in the field and local survey personnel revealed very significant constraints on the functioning of central government institutions even in villages, provinces, and districts nominally under solid central government control and free of violence—for example, in various districts of Badghis, Nimroz, and areas of Laghman.

⁴ The field research was designed by Edward Kissam and Jo Ann Intili, led by Bianca Murray and included as key research field staff Mohammad Javad Ahmadi and Mohammad Massoud Saqib. Omar Qargha participated in observations and interviewing early in 2006 and Ed Kissam participated in field research in late 2006. Roya conducted numerous observations and interviews. Detailed findings based on observations and discussions with teachers and administrators in the four study districts were reported in Ed Kissam, Bianca Murray, and Sheila Husting, "Baseline Report: Demonstration Cluster Schools", November, 2007.

⁵ The ethnographic research in Dai Kundi and Sari Pul provinces was focused on implementation of accelerated learning classes in the APEP project but, at the same time, provided valuable insights about the sociopolitical dynamics of schooling in small rural villages. The research was conducted by field researchers living in the villages studied over a period of six months in 2005. One of the studies, conducted by Abdul Hussain in the village of Waras (Hussain, Wafa, and Kissam 2006) is available in final form.

⁶ The Ministry of Education designed and implemented the 2005 National School Survey. It includes separate modules on student enrollment, school staffing, and facilities. Our colleagues, Craig Naumann and Shannon Williams, worked extensively with the Ministry's Planning Department during 2006 to clean the dataset, review data collection and management procedures and recommend improvements to improve data quality. This survey is the basis for several published reports on the current status of education in Afghanistan but we believe the cleaned dataset we produced for MoE is the most reliable one (see Shannon Williams et al, "Technical Memo #6 Preparation and Analysis Summary of the 2005 School Survey Data: Recommendations for future MoE School Surveys and Data Collection", December 31, 2006, for documentation of data-cleaning and analysis procedures and discussion of technical limitations of the dataset.

⁷ "EQUIP 2 Working Paper: Identifying the Impact of Education Decentralization on the Quality of Education", Academy for Educational Development, 2007.

⁸ Very preliminary results from a New York University team's rigorous evaluation of Catholic Relief Services' implementation of a community-based schooling in Ghor Province (as part of the PACE-A consortium) are promising vis-à-vis quality of student learning also (personal communication, Dana Burde, March, 2008).

⁹ Other aspects of education service delivery system functioning are important inputs to education quality. These include quality and availability of instructional resources (textbooks, teaching aids, library materials), facilities (classrooms, laboratories, heating for winter instruction), supplementary programs to enhance student well-being and ability to learn (feeding programs, de-worming campaign)

¹⁰ The Ministry of Education's 2005 National School Survey and the overall school reporting system have design features which compromised definitive analysis of school dropout data. See Amir Mansoor, "Drop Out Study in Basic Education Level of Schools in Afghanistan", Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, May, 2007. Mansoor provides an excellent discussion of provisions for retaining students on school rolls who are actually *mahrooms* (students denied admission to the final examination for a grade due to excessive absences) and, thus, presumptive dropouts. This group is referred to "MNAFE" (Missed or Not Admitted to the Final Examination) by Naumann and Kissam-- "Analysis of 2005 School Survey Data on Student Enrollment in 1383 and 1384: Strategic Planning, Methodological, and Policy Implications", Technical Memo 1, Provided to Planning Department, Ministry of Education, April, 2006.

¹¹ This disparity is large enough to call into question the actual trend line for growth in student enrollment from 2002-2007 since at least 840,000 students counted as part of enrollment growth in 2007 are not in school and as many as 1.4 million may not actually be.

¹² Geocoding of school travel time from the district center (an enhancement recommended to the MoE's Planning Department) would permit improved analysis of this important aspect of education system functioning.

¹³ Shannon Williams, Edward Kissam, Craig Naumann, Sabir Hazratzai, "Profile of Teachers: Ministry of Education Regular Schools in 1384 (2005)", Technical Memo # 8, Aguirre Division, JBS International, February 7, 2006. This report tabulated 37,696 *agir* teachers. Subsequently, the 2007 national school survey has reported only 19,663 *agir* employees (some of whom may not be teachers" in General Education, i.e. Regular Schools. We believe this new, lower figure is likely to be incorrect, given the levels of educational attainment reported in the same survey (since nominally a teacher is expected to have at least 12 years of schooling to be hired as a permanent teacher).

¹⁴ Basic regulations/guidelines for supervision of teachers exist but they are skeletal and formal. They enter into school principals' practice but do not in any sense provide an operational model as to what "good teacher supervision" might consist of.

¹⁵ For further discussion see Omar Qargha and Sheila Husting 2007.

¹⁶ Published tabulations of 2007 National School Survey report 6,620 General Education administrative staff but current tabulations do not break out non-teaching staff for the different levels: Central, Provincial, and District administration. Thus, this is a rough estimate.

¹⁷ A study, our team conducted in the Waras area of Dai Kundi province (Abdul Hussain, "Waras Community Case Study of APEP Implementation", JBS International, 2005), for example, traced the career of a local teacher in the village who had been recruited when she was identified at the age 10 years old as the brightest 4th grader and agreed-upon choice to become the village teacher (although this was during the Taliban regime the central government did not control this remote area of Hazarajat). At age 25, after 15 years of teaching experience, she was a self-confident, flexible teacher, also using "modern" instructional techniques although she had never studied beyond 4th grade.

¹⁸ These are concrete examples drawn from the resources available in a relatively small rural district center, i.e. Toqsar.

¹⁹ The programmatic analogue of administrative bureaucracy in Afghanistan appears to be the idea that every specialized educational program requires analogous corresponding institution or organizational locus. In practice, this makes it difficult to undertake new initiatives because it is believed to be outside the purview of non-specialists. The costs of rigidly-defined institutional functions and the resulting turf war are not only economic. They are also psychological since it is believed that without "experts" (which are unavailable) and creation of a new organization (often implying construction of a new facility—the visible image demarcating bureaucratic turf) forward progress is impossible.