

An Analytic Review of Brick's "Political Economy of Customary Organizations in Rural Afghanistan"

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Abstract

This paper discusses *The Political Economy of Customary Organizations in Rural Afghanistan* by Jennifer Brick (2008) (hereafter, "the work"), which tries to ascertain whether public goods can be provided in a failed state and proposes a mechanism that provides social order as a public good. Brick achieves this by studying customary and non-customary organisations in rural Afghanistan and develops a theory to explain when a rural local authority might fulfil the purpose of public provision and governance. This paper demonstrates and analyses Brick's findings, and proposes one main criticism to Brick's quantitative research method.

Keywords: regional politics, political economy, Afghanistan, rural area, J Brick

1. Introduction

This paper discusses *The Political Economy of Customary Organizations in Rural Afghanistan* by Jennifer Brick (2008) (hereafter, "the work"), which tries to ascertain whether public goods can be provided in a failed state and proposes a mechanism that provides social order as a public good. Brick achieves this by studying customary and non-customary organisations in rural Afghanistan and develops a theory to explain when a rural local authority might fulfil the purpose of public provision and governance. This paper demonstrates and analyses Brick's findings, and proposes one main criticism to Brick's quantitative research method.

2. Powers in Rural Afghanistan

Brick primarily focuses on powers in rural Afghanistan in the context of customary organisations and CDCs. While there are other organisations, such as warlords, provincial governments, and NGOs, she regards the first two as the most relevant to public good provision and social order in rural Afghanistan.

2.1 Customary Organisations

As outlined in the work, customary organisations in Afghanistan vary drastically across regions. Most customary organisations in villages can be divided into *shuras*, *maliks* and *mullahs*. A *shura* is the village council that functions as a parliament and is usually headed by village elders. They gather to discuss and address problems within and outside the village. *Mullahs* are religious leaders and lawgivers in the village. They settle disputes within and outside of the village, collect funds to help the less fortunate, and maintain mosques. Sometimes, they also act as teachers. The *malik* is the village's executive, whose primary responsibility is to represent the village to government institutions, acting as a link between the people and the formal government (Brick, 2008). Their responsibility requires an understanding of the governmental system, which suggests that they are usually from the more educated families in the village. The *malik* is selected in *shuras* or elected; they interact with district governors in their day-to-day work and are compensated by villagers in the form of money or over in-kind payment, for example, crops or labour.

2.2 Non-customary Organisations: Community Development Councils (CDCs)

CDCs are the most significant and common non-customary organisations in Afghanistan. Launched by the government in 2001, the CDC programme is primarily funded by the UN and other NGOs. A CDC acts as a channel for external funding and deliberates on the developments that this funding can generate. It was proposed, by the Afghanistan government and many NGOs, as a replacement for customary organisations in Afghanistan, as many officials and academics usually see them as archaic and symbolic to a feudalistic society.

3. A Theory of Local Self-governance

Brick advances four conditions under which a local customary organisation can provide public goods and offers four predicted implications that follow when these conditions are met.

3.1 Four Conditions

3.1.1 Condition 1: Separation of Power

To Brick, separation of power is essential to providing public goods without the over-extraction of public wealth. *Shuras*, *maliks* and *mullahs* (“branches”) all exercise their powers within a particular, non-overlapping domain of public governance. This separation arises from the difference in the sources of each branch’s authority and legitimacy. Rulers’ constrained power predicts better private property rights and the provision of public goods (North and Weingast, 1989). Conversely, unconstrained village leaders are inclined to over-extract public wealth for self-interest.

3.1.2 Condition 2: Existence of Checks and Balances

Checks and balances between different leaders prevent the abuse of power at the village level. As each branch derives legitimacy from different sources, they can constrain each other. Checks and balances also prevent competition between the branches, which could diminish the benefits of public provision.

3.1.3 Condition 3: A Large Number of Veto Players

A veto player is an individual or entity whose agreement is necessary to implement change (Tsebelis 2002). Brick identifies landowners as being veto players because rural communities in Afghanistan primarily depend on agricultural production. When there is more equality in the distribution of land ownership, the number of landowners increases and each exerts similar levels of influence, therefore increasing the number of veto players. This, in turn, means that villagers can impose more constraints on leaders and align their incentives to make decisions in the public interest.

3.1.4 Condition 4: Extractive Ability

To govern and provide public goods, village leaders require funding. Revenues of customary organisations can take the form of cash or in-kind contributions (such as crops or labour). Contributions from villagers also compensate leaders for their work. In addition, leaders might also have the power to redistribute wealth. This is a typical feature of an authority that exercises independent governance as they can sustain themselves independently using their extractive capacity and accountability to their people, as opposed to an external entity like a CDC, which cannot sustain itself, nor be accountable to its people (Sangiovanno, 2007).

3.2 Implications

Brick suggested four implications that will emerge if the previous four conditions are realised:

Implication 1: Public goods will be provided when customary organisations are characterised by accountability through informal separation of powers, increased distribution of economic power, and sources of revenue.

Implication 2: Individuals who are members or leaders of customary organisations will not have better access to public goods than non-members.

Implication 3: The presence of non-accountable organisations (such as warlords or CDCs) will fail to improve access to public goods and services.

Implication 4: Individuals who are members of non-customary social organisations will have greater access to public goods than other members of the community because these organisations are less accountable.

(Brick, 2008, 18)

3.3 Brick’s Hypothesis

To test her theory, Brick hypothesised that the provision of public goods in villages with a *shura* is better than in villages without a *shura* because it almost always implies the presence of a *mullah* and a *malik*. The *shura*, *mullah* and *malik* increase villagers’ access to public goods and complement the formal government or a warlord if the warlord functions as a formal state would. By contrast, she hypothesised that the existence of a CDC would either constrain or have no influence on the provision of public goods.

4. Quantitative and Qualitative Methods and Results

Brick conducted the 2005 National Rural Vulnerability Assessment (designed by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development with the support of the World Bank) and a public opinion survey (designed by

the Asia Foundation, funded by as US official agency and administrated by Afghanistan authority). These datasets form the basis of her quantitative analysis. She also offers three case studies from a set of interviews in 2008 (Brick, 2008).

4.1 Results From Quantitative Studies

Brick found that when people have access to informal leaders such as a *malik*, *mullah* or a *shura*, they perceive themselves as being in relatively less danger. At the same time, evidence also suggests that a CDC has no positive influence over the community's security.

Brick also finds no evidence that CDCs increase the rate of crime reporting to the government while *shuras* do, the results demonstrate that customary organisations can increase access to formal government. When people have faith in non-governmental forces, they are less likely to report a crime because they treat these forces as a substitute, albeit an imperfect one, for the formal government. However, *shuras* still increase the likelihood of reporting a crime, suggesting that they are complementary mechanisms to the formal government (Brick, 2008).

4.2 Results From Qualitative Studies

Specific case studies from Brick's study unanimously suggest that non-customary organisations (such as CDCs and warlords) may create disorder and disputes, supporting the quantitative results above.

The interviews shed light on how and why CDCs do not effectively promote regional stability and development. For example, although leaders in CDCs are elected, they are not accountable to the villagers or the governments they serve but instead to FPs. The power within the CDC is not separated and lack checks and balances, which may lead to regional instability. While external resources given to CDCs can promote development in the short term, no mechanism drives local accountability and long-term governance stability (Brick, 2008).

5. A Critique of Brick's Quantitative Method

Brick's observations, theory, and proofs appear valid. Nonetheless, some areas deserve further evaluation. A major concern is her quantitative methodology, specifically her comparison between the CDCs and customary organisations, where I find her choice of indicators problematic.

Brick chooses land dispute settlements, dispute resolutions, and local safety and security to measure CDCs and customary organisations' impacts on the provision of public goods. If these indicators improve when a customary organisation is present and not when a CDC is present, she concludes that the customary organisation benefits public goods provision and improves regional order, while a CDC does not.

Comparing both types of organisations on their effects on land disputes, dispute resolutions, and local safety is, however, biased because customary organisations and CDCs differ fundamentally in their history and characteristics. Customary organisations, for example, inherently originate from the village community and have historical experience in settling disputes with neighbouring villages. On the other hand, CDCs are more inclined to provide villages with external funding and help them develop public infrastructure. As such, no robust conclusion can be reached with this biased comparison.

One may think that Brick only chose these indicators for their relevance to measuring regional order, while most of the sectors in which CDCs operate are irrelevant to regional order. However, it must be noted that investments such as in agriculture, education, and health can positively impact regional order. For example, agricultural and educational projects can increase individuals' productivity and; thus, resources. As resources become less scarce and incomes increase, the number of vital disputes decreases and trivial disputes increase: disputes may not decrease in frequency but still fall in extent and severity. However, the latter is not easily quantifiable. Thus, Brick's measurement method is unsuitable and inconclusive.

Brick's choice of outcome variables and comparative methodology is well-intentioned and broadly reasonable. However, the biases discussed above means that the advantages of customary organisations are overemphasised, and the strengths of CDCs' public provision and its effects on improving regional order are overlooked. It is true that CDCs' efforts are more difficult to quantify, but their impacts should not be neglected. An investigation over time with a large sample may more precisely measure the impact of CDCs' public goods provision on regional order because this tracks projects over time and provides a time-varying effort measure.

Alternatively, rather than measuring the frequency and perception of local safety and security, one can measure the frequency of extreme disputes. Brick's assessments, surveys and interviews may be inconclusive because of her focus on disputes regardless of their severity. For example, low-intensity disputes, crimes or regional unrest may be frequent, and people's perceptions of their own safety are subjective. This provides a rationale to focus on extreme disputes only. If there are fewer cases of extreme disputes or unrest in an area, it suggests that

worst-case situations that result in social chaos are rarer and that disputes are generally manageable regardless of their frequency. To conduct this research, comparisons can be made between regions with only a CDC and regions with only customary organisations on the difference in the number of extreme disputes. One could identify these cases by looking into quantitative measures such as deaths, resources expended, or whether there was any physical conflict. The causes of these extreme events can further be investigated through official records or interviews.

6. Conclusion

The Political Economy of Customary Organizations in Rural Afghanistan explains the local political structure of a customary organisation and compares it with Community Development Councils. Brick introduced four for her self-governance theory and its four implications. She then used quantitative and qualitative methods to justify her theory.

A thorough review of her work raises a major concern about her quantitative methodology. Her choice of land dispute, dispute resolution, and local safety and security as indicators for measuring public good provision are positively biased towards customary organisations due to their historical characteristics. A time-varied or/and an extreme-case targeted research may be considered as complements or substitutes.

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