

ENHANCING SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN RURAL COMMUNITIES: ANALYZING INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

Social participation is a cornerstone of sustainable rural development, particularly in fragile states like Afghanistan. This study investigates the challenges and opportunities of fostering social participation in rural Afghan communities by analyzing successful international models and proposing practical strategies tailored to the local context. Drawing from global experiences in countries such as India, Bangladesh, and South Korea, the research highlights key factors such as policy frameworks, decentralized governance, inclusion of marginalized groups, and capacity building. The study employs a qualitative methodology, integrating secondary data analysis and expert consultations to identify actionable recommendations. Findings reveal that while Afghanistan's traditional governance structures, like shuras and jirgas, provide a foundation for participation, significant barriers such as gender inequality, limited decentralization, and inadequate resources persist. The proposed strategies emphasize integrating traditional and modern participatory approaches, leveraging digital tools, and enhancing collaboration between government institutions and NGOs. This research contributes to the broader discourse on participatory rural development, offering insights into building resilient, inclusive communities in fragile contexts.

Keywords: Social participation, rural development, Afghanistan, participatory governance, international models, capacity building, policy frameworks

Introduction:

Social participation—the active engagement of individuals and groups in collective actions to improve their community—plays a pivotal role in fostering sustainable development, particularly in rural areas (Slanzi et al., 2024). Rural communities, which often face limited access to education, healthcare, infrastructure, and economic opportunities, stand to benefit significantly from enhanced social participation. This concept emphasizes community-driven solutions, promoting equity, cohesion, and resilience in addressing development challenges (Leath et al., 2018).

Globally, numerous countries have implemented policies and programs to enhance social participation in rural areas, with varying degrees of success. These initiatives have been critical in mobilizing local resources, building community trust, and achieving developmental goals (Fisberg et al., 2021). Afghanistan, with its predominantly rural population and persistent socio-economic challenges, presents a compelling case for examining how social participation can contribute to sustainable rural development. Despite the critical need, social participation in Afghanistan remains constrained by factors such as political instability, cultural norms, inadequate institutional frameworks, and low levels of education and awareness (Hernandez et al., 2022; Yar, 2024). While

the importance of social participation in rural development is widely recognized, Afghanistan struggles to integrate this concept into its development agenda effectively. International experiences offer valuable lessons, yet their applicability to Afghanistan's unique socio-cultural and political landscape remains under-explored. A lack of contextualized strategies has contributed to fragmented and often unsustainable development efforts in rural areas. Without robust mechanisms to foster and institutionalize social participation, achieving inclusive development in Afghanistan's rural communities remains elusive (Ndinda et al., 2017). Existing literature provides valuable insights into social participation frameworks and success stories from countries worldwide, such as India's community-driven rural development programs and Latin America's participatory budgeting models. However, there is a noticeable gap in analyzing these experiences from an Afghan perspective. Limited research has focused on adapting global best practices to Afghanistan's context, addressing its unique challenges and opportunities. Moreover, few studies provide actionable strategies for rationalizing social participation in Afghanistan's rural development policies.

This study seeks to fill the identified gap by analyzing international experiences in enhancing social participation in rural development and contextualizing these lessons for Afghanistan. It aims to contribute to academic discourse by offering a nuanced understanding of how Afghanistan can leverage social participation to address pressing developmental challenges in rural areas. Additionally, the study provides policymakers and practitioners with evidence-based strategies to design and implement effective social participation programs. By doing so, it aspires to empower rural communities, reduce poverty, and foster sustainable development in Afghanistan.

The primary objectives of this research are:

- 1) To analyze international experiences and best practices in enhancing social participation in rural development.
- 2) To assess the current state of social participation in Afghanistan's rural communities.
- 3) To develop practical, context-specific strategies to promote social participation in Afghanistan.

Research Methods

The research focuses on enhancing social participation in rural communities, particularly in Afghanistan, by analyzing successful international models and proposing tailored strategies. The methodology employed in this study is qualitative, which allows for a comprehensive understanding of the complex social dynamics at play.

Methodology Overview: The research utilizes a combination of secondary data analysis and expert consultations to gather insights into social participation frameworks. Secondary data was collected from existing literature, including case studies from countries such as India, Bangladesh, and South Korea, which have successfully implemented participatory governance models. This data helped identify key factors that contribute to effective social participation, such as decentralized governance structures and the inclusion of marginalized groups.

Additionally, the researchers conducted interviews with experts in the field of rural development and social participation. These consultations provided practical perspectives on the barriers faced by Afghan communities and the potential for integrating traditional governance structures with modern participatory approaches. The findings highlight significant challenges in Afghanistan, including gender inequality, limited decentralization, and inadequate resources.

The study culminates in actionable recommendations aimed at enhancing social participation in Afghanistan's rural areas. By leveraging both traditional community structures and contemporary digital tools, the research proposes strategies that foster collaboration between government institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This methodological approach not only contributes to the academic discourse on participatory rural development but also offers practical insights for policymakers and practitioners working within fragile contexts like Afghanistan.

Results and Discussion

Current State of Social Participation in Afghanistan

Challenges and Opportunities: Afghanistan's rural communities face significant challenges in fostering meaningful social participation, yet there are also notable opportunities for growth.

Challenges

1. **Cultural and Social Norms:** Afghanistan's deeply entrenched patriarchal and tribal structures often limit inclusive participation, particularly for women and marginalized groups. Social hierarchies and traditional decision-making processes frequently exclude these groups from community dialogues and initiatives (UN Women, 2021).

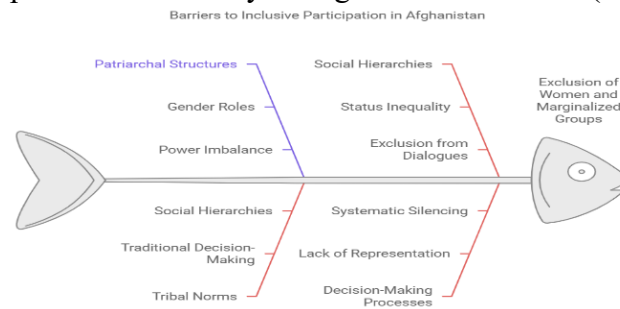


Figure 1. Challenges

2. **Political Instability and Conflict:** Decades of conflict and political instability have severely eroded trust in institutions, creating a fragmented social fabric. Local communities often perceive external development interventions as politically motivated, further complicating efforts to mobilize collective action (World Bank, 2022).

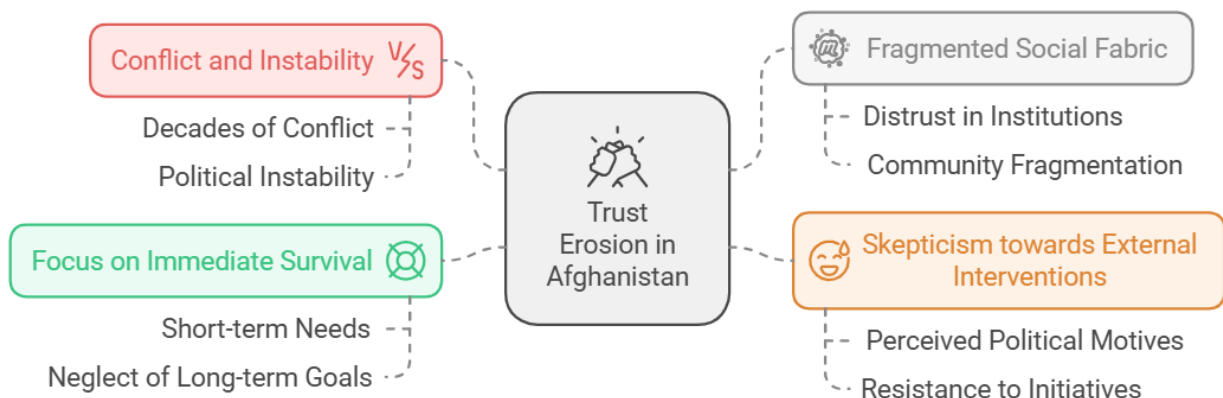


Figure 2. Political Instability and Conflict

3. **Weak Institutional Frameworks:** Afghanistan lacks robust institutional mechanisms to support social participation. Limited decentralization, insufficient local governance structures, and the absence of clear legal frameworks undermine the effectiveness of community-driven development (CDDRC, 2020).

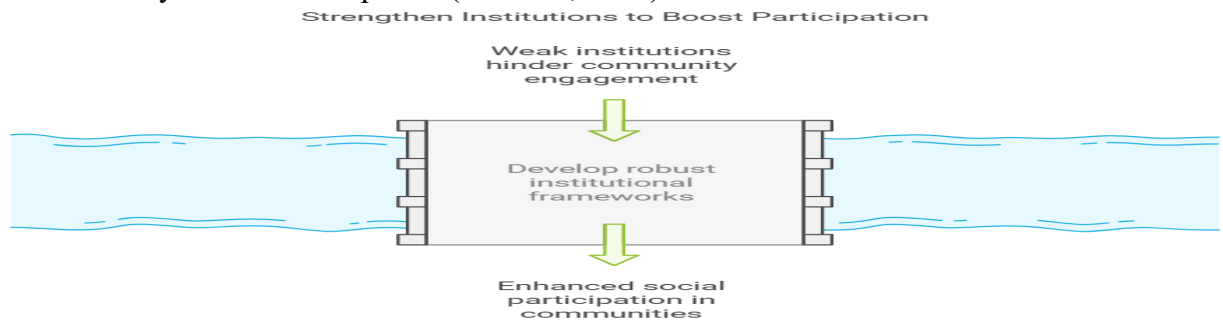


Figure 3. Weak Institutional Frameworks

4. **Economic Constraints:** High levels of poverty and unemployment in rural areas reduce the capacity for voluntary participation, as individuals prioritize immediate livelihood needs over long-term communal goals (UNDP, 2022).

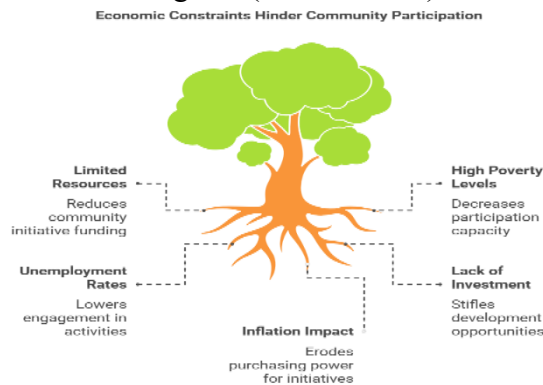


Figure 4. Economic Constraints

5. **Education and Awareness:** Low literacy rates, particularly among women, hinder the ability of rural populations to engage in informed decision-making and advocacy for their rights (Afghanistan Ministry of Education, 2021).

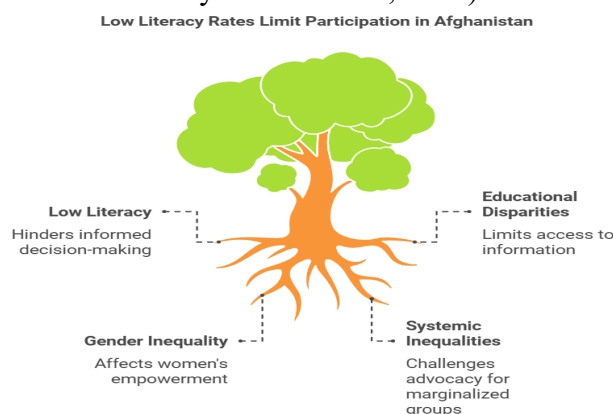


Figure 5. Education and Awareness

Opportunities

1. **Community Resilience:** Despite challenges, Afghan communities have shown resilience through informal networks and traditional systems like shuras (local councils) and jirgas (tribal assemblies). These structures can serve as platforms for enhancing social participation if adequately supported and modernized (Smith, 2019).



Figure 6. Community Resilience

2. **Global Development Assistance:** Continued international support for community-based programs, such as those led by the World Bank and UNDP, provides opportunities to institutionalize participatory approaches in rural development (World Bank, 2022).

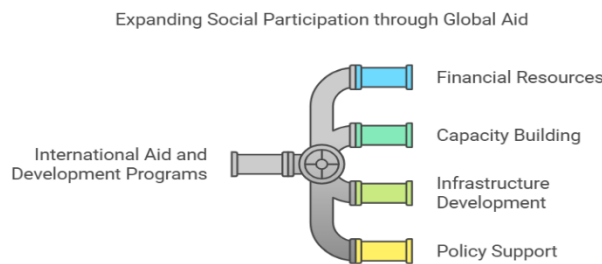


Figure 7. Global Development Assistance

3. **Youth Engagement:** Afghanistan’s youthful population presents a significant demographic advantage. Programs aimed at engaging young people in community initiatives can drive innovation and sustainability in participatory efforts (UNICEF, 2021).



Figure 8. Youth Engagement

4. Digital Connectivity: Increasing access to mobile technology and the internet offers potential for digital participation, allowing rural communities to engage in broader networks and gain access to vital information (GSMA, 2022).

Empowering Afghan Communities through Digital Connectivity

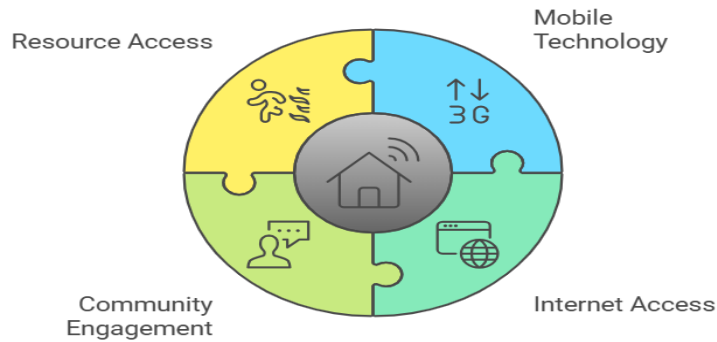


Figure 9. Digital Connectivity

Analysis of the Current Situation: Contemporary Examples

Several recent initiatives illustrate the status of social participation in Afghanistan:

1. National Solidarity Programmed (NSP): Launched in 2003, the NSP was a flagship community-driven development program that empowered rural communities to identify, plan, and implement their development projects. By establishing Community Development Councils (CDCs), the program created a platform for participatory decision-making. Despite its successes, challenges such as elite capture and uneven implementation highlighted the need for improved monitoring and local capacity-building (Beath et al., 2015).

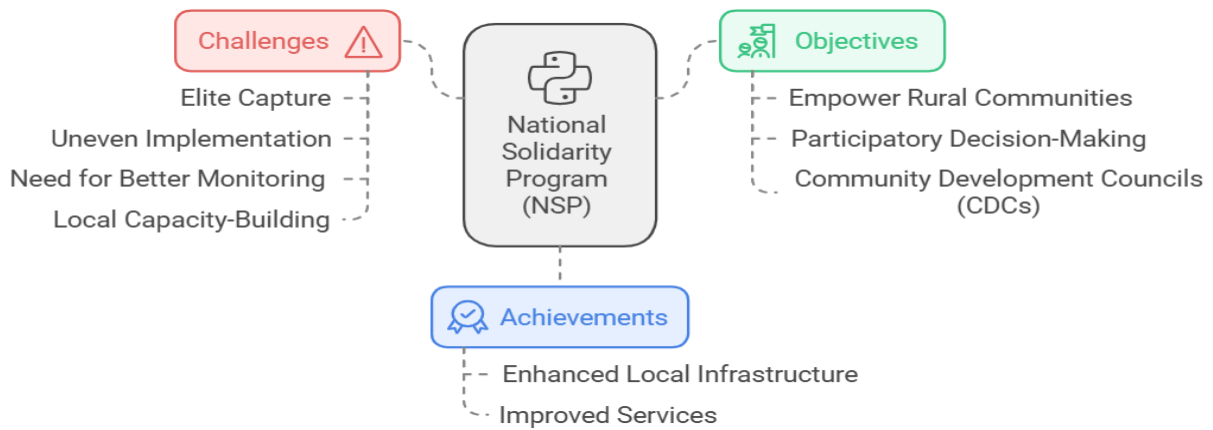


Figure 10. National Solidarity Programmed

2. Women’s Empowerment Programs: Projects like the Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Program (AREDP) have sought to enhance women's participation in economic and social activities. While these initiatives have made progress in empowering women, cultural resistance and security challenges often limit their scalability (World Bank, 2020).

Enhancing Social Participation in Rural Communities: Analyzing International Experiences and Practical Strategies for Afghanistan



Figure 11. Women's Empowerment Programs

3. Local Peacebuilding Efforts: Informal peacebuilding initiatives led by local leaders and civil society organizations demonstrate the potential for grassroots participation in conflict resolution. These efforts leverage traditional structures like jirgas while incorporating modern conflict management techniques (Smith, 2019).



Figure 12. Local Peacebuilding Efforts

Lessons from Past Experiences: Successes and Failures

Successes

1. Community-Led Development Projects: Programs like the NSP demonstrated that when given ownership and resources, Afghan communities are capable of implementing development projects effectively. Success was often linked to the alignment of initiatives with local priorities and the inclusion of traditional leadership structures (Beath et al., 2015).
2. Women's Literacy and Training Programs: Initiatives focused on literacy and vocational training for women, such as those run by BRAC Afghanistan, have shown success in enhancing female participation in both household decision-making and community development activities (BRAC, 2020).

Failures

1. Top-Down Approaches: Development programs that imposed external solutions without local consultation often failed to gain community buy-in, leading to poor sustainability and resistance. For example, certain post-2001 infrastructure projects were abandoned due to a lack of community involvement during the planning phases (Barfield, 2010).
2. Ineffective Monitoring and Corruption: Issues like corruption and weak oversight have undermined several participatory projects. Elite capture—where influential individuals dominate decision-making—has often excluded marginalized groups and diluted the intended benefits of participatory initiatives (CDDRC, 2020).



Figure 13. Failures

The current state of social participation in Afghanistan is characterized by both significant challenges and promising opportunities. Lessons from past experiences underscore the importance of aligning development initiatives with local needs, strengthening institutional frameworks, and addressing socio-cultural barriers. This analysis highlights the critical need for innovative and context-specific strategies to enhance social participation as a cornerstone of rural development in Afghanistan.

International Approaches and Models of Social Participation

Social participation models have been implemented worldwide to address developmental challenges, particularly in rural areas. These models emphasize the active involvement of communities in decision-making, resource mobilization, and the execution of initiatives. This section critically analyzes successful international experiences, focusing on the key components and elements of success in social participation models.

Analysis of Successful Experiences

India: Panchayati Raj System: The Panchayati Raj system in India is one of the most comprehensive decentralized governance models globally. Introduced through constitutional amendments in the 1990s, the system established local governance institutions at the village, block, and district levels. Key features of the model include:

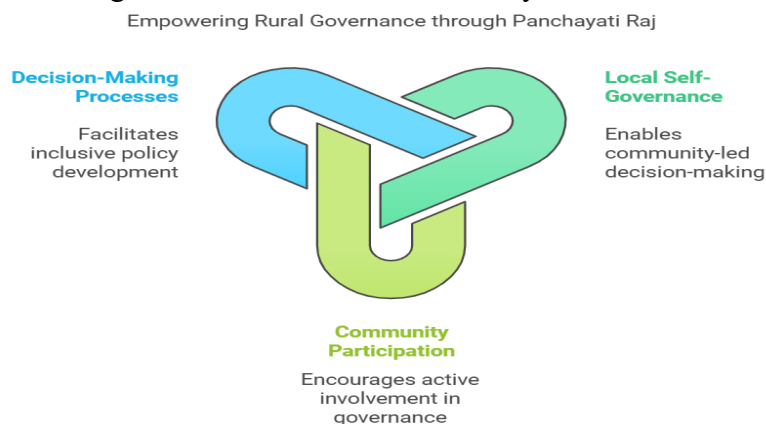


Figure 14. Analysis of Successful Experiences

1. Legal and Financial Empowerment: Village councils (Gram Panchayats) have authority over local development plans and budgets, ensuring that decisions reflect community priorities (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).
2. Inclusion of Marginalized Groups: Reserved seats for women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs) have enhanced equity in decision-making processes (Rai, 2017).
3. Capacity Building: Extensive training programs for elected representatives and community members ensure informed participation.

The Panchayati Raj system has significantly improved rural infrastructure, education, and healthcare, although challenges like corruption and elite capture persist (World Bank, 2020).

Bangladesh: BRAC's Community-Driven Development Model

BRAC (formerly Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) employs a participatory approach to rural development. Its model integrates health, education, and economic empowerment programs, focusing on:



Figure 15. Community-Driven Development Model

1. Grassroots Mobilization: BRAC organizes village committees to identify and prioritize local needs.
2. Women's Empowerment: Women's participation is central to BRAC's initiatives, particularly in microfinance, education, and health programs (Hulme & Moore, 2007).
3. Sustainability: By encouraging local ownership and capacity building, BRAC ensures the long-term viability of its programs.

BRAC's approach has been instrumental in reducing poverty and improving social indicators in Bangladesh, with its microfinance model replicated globally (Ahmed et al., 2021).

Brazil: Participatory Budgeting (PB)

Participatory budgeting in cities like Porto Alegre has revolutionized resource allocation by engaging citizens directly in budget decisions. Key aspects of the model include:

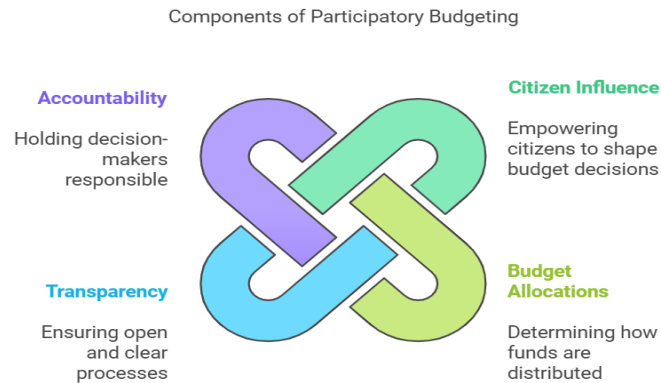


Figure 16. Participatory Budgeting

1. **Transparency and Accountability:** Community members are involved in deciding how public funds are allocated, reducing corruption and mismanagement (Avritzer, 2002).
2. **Empowered Local Councils:** Local councils represent diverse community interests and ensure broad participation.
3. **Annual Iterative Process:** The budgeting process occurs annually, allowing continuous refinement based on community feedback.

The model has improved infrastructure, healthcare, and education in participating regions and is widely regarded as a best practice in democratic governance (World Bank, 2020).

South Korea: Saemaul Undong (New Village Movement)

South Korea’s Saemaul Undong is a government-led initiative launched in the 1970s to modernize rural areas. Its success is attributed to:

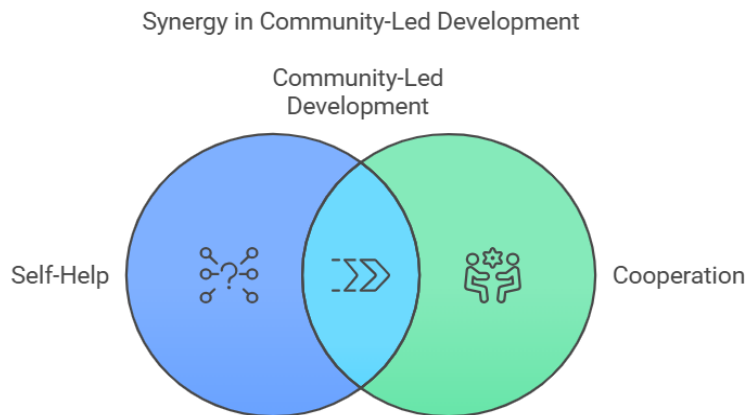


Figure 17. New Village Movement

1. **Integrated Government Support:** The government provided financial and technical assistance while emphasizing self-reliance among communities (Kim, 2011).
2. **Leadership and Motivation:** Community leaders were trained to inspire collective action and ownership.
3. **Incremental Development:** The initiative started with small, achievable projects, building momentum for larger-scale development.

This model transformed South Korea’s rural economy and infrastructure, providing lessons on combining top-down support with bottom-up participation (Smith, 2019).

Kenya: Harambee Movement

Kenya's Harambee movement focuses on community-driven resource mobilization for local projects, such as schools and clinics. Core elements include:

Harambee Movement Hierarchy



Figure 18. Harambee Movement

1. Community-Led Initiatives: Projects are initiated and funded by community members, fostering a sense of ownership.
2. Government and Private Sector Partnerships: Additional funding and support are often secured from external sources.
3. Focus on Education and Healthcare: Many Harambee projects address immediate needs in education and health, which are critical for long-term development.

Despite some criticisms regarding sustainability, Harambee remains a powerful example of leveraging community solidarity for development (Mutiso, 2020).

Components and Elements of Success

From these international experiences, several common components and elements of successful social participation models emerge:

1. Inclusivity: Ensuring participation from all segments of society, particularly marginalized groups, enhances equity and collective ownership (Cornwall, 2008).
2. Capacity Building: Training and educating community members strengthen their ability to participate meaningfully and make informed decisions (Narayan, 2002).
3. Transparency and Accountability: Clear mechanisms for monitoring and feedback reduce corruption and increase trust in the process (Avritzer, 2002).
4. Local Empowerment: Decentralization and legal frameworks that empower local governance ensure decisions align with community priorities (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).
5. Sustainability: Projects that emphasize local ownership and build long-term capacity are more likely to endure beyond external funding periods (Ahmed et al., 2021).
6. Integration with National Policies: Successful models align community initiatives with broader development goals, creating synergy between local and national efforts (Smith, 2019).

International models of social participation provide valuable lessons for fostering sustainable development in rural areas. From India's Panchayati Raj system to South Korea's Saemaul Undong, these experiences demonstrate the importance of inclusivity, transparency, and local empowerment. Adapting these lessons to Afghanistan's unique context presents an opportunity to enhance social participation and address pressing development challenges.

Practical Strategies for Enhancing Social Participation in Afghanistan

To foster sustainable social participation in Afghanistan, it is crucial to design and implement strategies tailored to the country's unique cultural, social, and political context. This section outlines actionable recommendations under three key areas: developing supportive policies, leveraging community capacities, and clarifying the roles of the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

1. **Developing Policies to Support Social Participation:** Effective policy frameworks are fundamental to institutionalizing social participation in Afghanistan. Key recommendations include:

Establishing a Legal Framework for Participation

- a. Develop and enforce laws that mandate community involvement in local governance and development planning, modeled on successful initiatives like India's Panchayati Raj system (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).
- b. Codify women's and marginalized groups' rights to participate in decision-making processes, addressing historical exclusions (UN Women, 2021).

Promoting Decentralization

- a. Strengthen sub-national governance by empowering provincial and district councils with decision-making authority and budgets for community-driven projects (World Bank, 2022).
- b. Ensure that decentralization efforts are accompanied by capacity-building programs for local officials to implement participatory approaches effectively.

Integrating Social Participation into National Development Plans

- a. Embed participatory principles into Afghanistan's development strategies, ensuring alignment with global best practices and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- b. Create monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the effectiveness of participatory initiatives and adjust policies as needed (UNDP, 2022).

Local Processes and Utilizing Community Capacities

Afghanistan's communities possess rich cultural and traditional resources that can be mobilized to enhance participation.

Building on Traditional Structures

- a. Leverage traditional assemblies like shuras and jirgas to promote inclusive decision-making while modernizing them to ensure broader representation (Smith, 2019).
- b. Train community leaders to facilitate participatory processes that prioritize transparency and accountability.

Fostering Grassroots Organizations

- a. Support the formation of Community Development Councils (CDCs) and other grassroots groups, modeled on the successes of the National Solidarity Programmed (Beath et al., 2015).
- b. Facilitate the establishment of women's and youth groups to enhance their voices in local governance and development.

Using Digital Tools for Participation

- a. Expand access to mobile technology and the internet to facilitate digital participation, such as virtual town halls and surveys (GSMA, 2022).
- b. Develop platforms that allow communities to submit feedback on government services and development projects.

Capacity Building and Education

Enhancing Social Participation in Rural Communities: Analyzing International Experiences and Practical Strategies for Afghanistan

- a. Invest in training programs for community members to understand governance processes, project planning, and advocacy.
- b. Incorporate civic education into school curriculums to instill participatory values from an early age (Afghanistan Ministry of Education, 2021).

The Role of Government and NGOs: Collaboration between government institutions and NGOs is vital to ensuring the success of participatory initiatives.

Role of the Government

- a. **Facilitator Role:** The government should act as an enabler, providing resources, legal support, and institutional backing for participatory initiatives.
- b. **Transparency and Accountability:** Establish anti-corruption mechanisms to ensure the fair allocation of resources and prevent elite capture of community projects (World Bank, 2022).
- c. **Incentivizing Participation:** Introduce incentive programs for communities that demonstrate active participation in local governance and development.

Role of NGOs

- a. **Capacity Building:** NGOs should focus on empowering communities by providing training and resources for effective participation (BRAC, 2020).
- b. **Advocacy and Awareness:** Promote awareness campaigns that highlight the benefits of social participation, particularly for women and marginalized groups.
- c. **Mediating Role:** Act as neutral facilitators in areas where trust in government institutions is low, ensuring that community voices are heard.

Public-Private Partnerships

- a. Foster partnerships between the government, NGOs, and private sector to pool resources and expertise for participatory initiatives.
- b. Encourage corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs to support community-driven development projects.

Strengthening social participation in Afghanistan requires a multi-faceted approach that includes supportive policies, the mobilization of community capacities, and active collaboration between the government and NGOs. By institutionalizing participatory practices, leveraging traditional structures, and embracing modern tools like digital platforms, Afghanistan can foster a more inclusive and empowered rural population. Implementing these strategies will not only address pressing developmental challenges but also contribute to the long-term stability and resilience of Afghan communities.

Discussion

The research aimed to explore strategies for enhancing social participation in rural Afghanistan by analyzing international experiences and their applicability to the Afghan context. Key findings include:

- 1) **Policy Frameworks and Decentralization:** The absence of a comprehensive legal framework and limited decentralization hinder effective participation in Afghanistan. Aligning with the findings of Mansuri and Rao (2013), the study underscores the importance of empowering local governance institutions to facilitate community-driven initiatives.
- 2) **Role of Traditional Structures:** Afghanistan's traditional decision-making bodies, such as shuras and jirgas, were found to have potential as platforms for participatory governance. This supports Smith's (2019) assertion that leveraging cultural practices can enhance local ownership of development projects.

- 3) Inclusion of Marginalized Groups: Women and marginalized communities remain underrepresented in participatory processes. The study reinforces the arguments of Cornwall (2008) that inclusivity is a critical determinant of successful social participation.
- 4) Community Capacity Building: Capacity-building initiatives were identified as vital for enabling informed participation. Similar to findings from BRAC's model in Bangladesh (Hulme & Moore, 2007), the study highlights the role of education and training in sustaining participation.

Comparison with Existing Literature: The findings resonate with international experiences while highlighting Afghanistan's unique challenges:

- 1) Policy and Institutional Challenges: Unlike India's Panchayati Raj system, where decentralization is legally mandated, Afghanistan lacks a robust legal framework to institutionalize participation. This gap aligns with the broader literature on governance in fragile states (World Bank, 2022).
- 2) Gender Disparities: The underrepresentation of women in Afghanistan parallels challenges in other conservative societies but is more pronounced due to entrenched cultural norms. This is consistent with the observations of UN Women (2021), emphasizing the need for targeted interventions.
- 3) Community-Driven Development: Success stories like South Korea's Saemaul Undoing and BRAC's initiatives in Bangladesh demonstrate the potential of grassroots mobilization, which Afghanistan can adapt. However, the lack of resources and security concerns differentiate Afghanistan's context.

Conclusion

This study examined strategies for enhancing social participation in rural Afghanistan by analyzing international experiences and proposing context-specific recommendations. The findings underscore the critical role of legal frameworks, decentralized governance, and capacity-building initiatives in fostering community-driven development. Leveraging traditional structures like shuras and jirgas while ensuring inclusivity—particularly for women and marginalized groups—emerged as vital for sustainable participation.

The research highlights the significance of adopting a participatory approach to address Afghanistan's developmental challenges, emphasizing its potential to build social cohesion, empower communities, and enhance resilience in fragile contexts. By aligning lessons from successful international models with Afghanistan's unique socio-political realities, this study contributes to bridging the gap between theory and practice in rural development. Ultimately, the study underscores that social participation is not merely a tool for development but a pathway toward equity, empowerment, and lasting peace. Its insights provide a foundation for future research and practical interventions, paving the way for transformative change in Afghanistan's rural communities.

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