MO-09 Community-driven development: the randomised evidence on village self-government

The Induced Participation Paradigm and Civil Society Failure

Over the past three decades, international development agencies, multilateral lenders, and national governments have channeled more than $85 billion into Community-Driven Development (CDD) and Community-Driven Reconstruction (CDR) programs[1]. The core operating premise of this paradigm is that entrenched local poverty, administrative sclerosis, and state predation can be circumvented by transferring fiscal resources and executive decision-making directly to local village assemblies[1]. By mandating inclusive institutional procedures—universal adult franchise, direct democratic deliberation, public financial auditing, and demographic quotas for historically marginalized cohorts (particularly women and lower-status lineages)—CDD theorists postulated that donor capital could simultaneously construct cost-effective physical infrastructure and transform patriarchal, exclusionary social orders into transparent self-governing polities[1].

The theoretical lineage of CDD draws from disparate traditions: Albert Hirschman's micro-level development economics, Robert Chambers's participatory rural appraisal, and Elinor Ostrom's institutional principles for governing common-pool resources[1]. However, the institutionalization of these principles within large donor bureaucracies, most notably the World Bank, converted an organic, prolonged, and historically conflictive political process into a standardized, programmatic product[1]. In their global synthesis, *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?*, Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao (2013) establish a conceptual distinction between *organic participation*—which originates endogenously through long-term communal mobilization, structural resistance, or shared geographic hazard—and *induced participation*, which is engineered exogenously through project manuals, conditional block grants, and outside facilitators[1].

Mansuri and Rao demonstrate that induced participation operates under a foundational flaw: the presumption that rural villages are coherent, egalitarian, and cooperative units waiting to be liberated by external grants[1]. The reality across rural societies is characterized by *civil society failure*, where traditional communities are fractured along lines of caste, kin, clan, and economic status[1]. In such environments, the injection of unmonitored communal capital does not liberate marginalized citizens; instead, it provides a new locus of rent extraction for established elites[1].

To counter this vulnerability, Mansuri and Rao formulate the "sandwich" thesis: localized collective action succeeds only when local participatory structures are supported by a responsive, accountable central state possessing the coercive and legal capacity to discipline

local power-brokers[1]. When the state lacks administrative reach, or in post-collapse scenarios where the state's reach has evaporated entirely, induced community governance faces severe structural strains[1]. Over the past two decades, development economists have turned to large-scale randomized controlled trials (RCTs) across diverse cultural contexts to assess whether village self-governance can be artificially induced.

Empirical Ledger: Randomized Controlled Trials of Village Self-Governance

The randomized controlled trial revolution in development economics has evaluated CDD and CDR programs across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Utilizing randomized block designs, pre-analysis plans, and behavioral measurement techniques, these studies isolate the direct physical output of localized public goods from changes in political behavior, gender norms, and collective action capacity[5].

Afghanistan: The National Solidarity Programme

The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) was launched in 2003 by the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, financed by the World Bank and international donors, representing one of the largest post-conflict stabilization programs in modern history[14]. Across the country, the program mobilized over 30,000 villages[14]. To evaluate the causal impact of the intervention, Andrew Beath, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov (2013, 2016, 2017) conducted a large-scale randomized field experiment covering 500 villages situated across 10 rural districts in Balkh, Bamyan, Badakhshan, Baghlan, Ghor, Herat, Nangarhar, and Parwan provinces, tracking approximately 13,000 households over four years[14].

Villages assigned to the treatment arm established a gender-balanced Community Development Council (CDC) through secret-ballot elections, produced a comprehensive village development plan, and received an infrastructure block grant averaging $33,000 (allocated at roughly $200 per family, capped at $60,000 per village)[14]. In a nested sub-experiment, Beath, Christia, Egorov, and Enikolopov (2016) experimentally varied the electoral institutions utilized to select CDC leaders: traditional open consultation versus secret-ballot elections, and within elections, at-large single-district systems versus proportional representation across multi-member sub-village clusters[17].

The physical and service-delivery impacts of the NSP were clear and statistically significant[14]. Access to clean drinking water increased by 15 percentage points ($p <$), average household time spent fetching water fell by 5 percent, and domestic electricity availability rose by 26 percentage points ($p <$)[14]. Secondary public goods also expanded: primary school enrollment for girls rose, child medical consultations and prenatal clinic visits increased, and subjective female and male economic welfare measures improved[14]. Villagers exhibited substantial increases in positive attitudes toward the central government and external donors, reflecting an appreciation for the material resources provided[14].

However, the program failed to achieve its core political and institutional objectives[14]. While female participation within project-mandated CDC meetings was maintained during the

lifecycle of the grant, Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov (2013, 2017) observed zero institutional spillover into traditional, non-project governance domains[17]. Customary village governance—specifically dispute arbitration, land allocation, and general political negotiation—remained within the domain of the traditional, exclusively male *jirgas* and *shuras*[14]. Once block grant funds were fully expended and external NGO facilitators withdrew, the induced CDCs atrophied[14]. Traditional headmen (*maliks* and *arbabs*) and tribal elders resumed authority over community life, demonstrating that formal project committees served as temporary mechanisms to capture external funding rather than vehicles of permanent democratic transformation[14].

Indonesia: The Kecamatan Development Program

Indonesia's Kecamatan Development Program (KDP, later institutionalized nationwide as PNPM Rural) was initiated following the 1998 Asian financial crisis and the collapse of the Suharto regime[22]. The program decentralized infrastructure procurement to tens of thousands of rural communities[23]. Two field experiments designed and evaluated by Benjamin Olken provide key empirical data on anti-corruption monitoring and democratic decision-making structures.

In his evaluation of corruption mechanics across 608 Indonesian villages in East and Central Java building rural roads, Olken (2007) tested the relative efficacy of top-down auditing against bottom-up community oversight[24]. The study measured physical diversion through direct engineering analysis: a team of independent civil engineers excavated core samples from newly constructed roads to calculate material density, measured road dimensions, surveyed local market prices for materials and labor, and compared estimated physical construction costs against the financial outlays submitted by the village project management committees[24].

Across the entire sample, baseline leakage was substantial: missing expenditures averaged 24 percent, largely driven by phantom purchases and unverified deliveries of crushed rock, sand, and gravel[24]. The experimental interventions yielded a marked divergence in outcomes[24]:

- **Top-Down Audits**: Increasing the probability of an external, top-down state audit from a baseline of 4 percent to 100 percent reduced missing expenditures by 8 percentage points—a 30 percent reduction in diverted capital ($p <$)[24]. The financial savings generated by the prevented theft exceeded the total administrative cost of fielding the professional audit teams[24].
- **Grassroots Community Monitoring**: Distributing hundreds of personal invitations to village accountability meetings and distributing anonymous citizen comment forms increased meeting attendance from an average of 40 to 60 villagers, but had zero statistically significant impact on missing materials (0.0 percentage point reduction)[3]. The community monitoring intervention generated minor reductions in unaccounted-for labor expenditures, but only in villages with lower social inequality and less concentrated elite power[24].

Where powerful village elites were entrenched, ordinary villagers faced substantial risks of social retaliation, rendering bottom-up oversight largely ineffective[24].

In a complementary study across 49 villages in East Java, North Sumatra, and Southeast Sulawesi, Olken (2010) evaluated the procedural mechanics of direct democracy versus

representative democracy[22]. Communities were randomly assigned to choose infrastructure projects either through representative village meetings (attended primarily by hamlet chiefs and formal village elites) or via direct universal adult plebiscites using secret ballots[22].
Voter turnout in plebiscite villages averaged 807 citizens per community—a 79 percent participation rate among eligible adults, balanced evenly between men and women—representing twenty times the attendance of representative meetings[22]. Despite this surge in participation, the plebiscites had negligible effects on actual project choices[22]. The project types (roads, bridges, water supply networks) and their geographic placement within the village were statistically indistinguishable between the two treatments[22].
Elites retained control over the initial agenda-setting phase: ordinary villagers were restricted to choosing between proposals pre-selected by elite committees[22]. However, the plebiscites generated large increases in citizen satisfaction, perceived legitimacy, and project ownership, even among voters whose preferred options were defeated[22]. Direct democracy functioned as a powerful instrument for generating subjective legitimacy while leaving elite-engineered project distributions intact[22].

Sierra Leone: The GoBifo Initiative

The GoBifo ("Move Forward" in Krio) pilot project was implemented in post-civil war Sierra Leone between 2005 and 2009 to test decentralized community planning[5]. Katherine Casey, Rachel Glennerster, and Edward Miguel (2012) conducted a four-year randomized evaluation of GoBifo across 236 villages (118 treatment, 118 control) and 2,832 households across Bombali and Bonthe districts[5]. The evaluation is a milestone in empirical economics for establishing the use of comprehensive, pre-registered pre-analysis plans (PAPs) to eliminate selective reporting and publication bias[5].
Treatment communities received approximately $5,000 in direct block grants (roughly $100 per household, or $4.50 per capita annually) accompanied by sustained institutional facilitation over four years[5]. Communities established village development committees with mandated gender parity and designated youth representatives, participating in guided collective deliberation to select and execute local public works[5].
The empirical findings revealed a sharp contrast between physical output and institutional change[5]:

- **Public Goods and Economic Welfare (Hardware)**: GoBifo generated large, unambiguous physical gains[5]. Treatment villages demonstrated a 0.20 to 0.30 standard deviation (SD) improvement on composite indices of local public goods, community asset stocks, and physical infrastructure (including community centers, latrines, and grain-drying floors) ($p <$)[5].
- **Democratic Practices and Collective Capacity (Software)**: Across a pre-registered index of 63 institutional outcomes—measuring local collective action capacity, civic group dynamism, inclusivity of village decision-making, empowerment of women and youth, and trust in political institutions—the estimated treatment effect was $+0.00$ to

$+0.05\ SD$, statistically indistinguishable from zero[5].

- **Behavioral Structured Choice Tests**: To assess whether democratic habits transferred to real-world choices outside the project framework, researchers presented communities with concrete opportunities: choosing between alternative configurations of building supplies, allocating a cash gift, and managing a subsequent matching grant[5]. In both treatment and control villages, customary authorities—paramount chiefs, section chiefs, and village headmen (*Taa Gbakoi*)—directed project selections and controlled the funds without measurable shifts in broad consultation or female voice[5].

Revisiting these 236 communities eleven years after project launch, Casey, Glennerster, Miguel, and Voors (2021) confirmed the persistence of this divide: while physical infrastructure maintained a modest positive differential (+0.20 SD, roughly two-thirds of its short-run magnitude), the institutional governance effect remained negligible (+0.059 SD, $p <$, substantively close to zero)[30]. The customary chieftaincy system absorbed the donor funds without yielding political authority[31].

Liberia: Community-Driven Reconstruction

In post-conflict Liberia, James Fearon, Macartan Humphreys, and Jeremy Weinstein (2009, 2015) evaluated a community-driven reconstruction program implemented by the International Rescue Committee across 83 to 170 rural communities in the country's northern and western districts[35]. The program provided communities with $17,000 in infrastructure block grants paired with democratic council elections and civic leadership training[36].

To evaluate collective action capacity while avoiding self-reporting bias, Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein deployed a behavioral Public Goods Game (PGG) with real financial stakes[36]. Community residents were given cash sums and allowed to contribute anonymously to a communal pool, which was multiplied by an experimentally varied payout factor and allocated back to the village for public development[36].

Villages exposed to CDR exhibited higher contributions to the public good under specific interest-rate conditions, demonstrating an improved ability to coordinate and mobilize financial capital for communal projects[36]. However, subsequent ethnographic investigations revealed that this experimental cooperation did not translate into an erosion of customary authority[36]. Customary town chiefs, council elders, and the secret *Poro* societies retained control over judicial disputes, land use, and customary labor obligations[36]. The induced committees dissolved once donor funds were depleted[36].

Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: The Tuungane Program

The Tuungane ("Let's Join Together" in Swahili) program was a large-scale CDR initiative executed by the International Rescue Committee and CARE International across 1,250 conflict-affected villages in South Kivu, Maniema, and Katanga provinces[12]. Macartan Humphreys, Raul Sanchez de la Sierra, and Peter van der Windt (2012, 2014, 2019) conducted a randomized evaluation utilizing pre-registered analytical protocols and an unannounced behavioral audit named the RAPID test[12].

Treatment communities received democratic training, elected project management

committees under a strict 50 percent female quota, and administered infrastructure block grants totaling over $3.7 million[12]. To measure real institutional change, the researchers introduced the RAPID test: an unannounced $1,000 unconditional cash grant offered to both treatment and control villages for rapid project execution, conditional on inclusive community decision-making[12].

Across hundreds of outcome variables, Tuungane produced null results regarding institutional reform, democratic practices, social cohesion, and female empowerment[12]. Treatment communities exhibited identical rates of elite capture, fund diversion, and female exclusion during the RAPID test as control communities[12]. Traditional village chiefs (*Mwami*) and local armed factions accommodated project requirements during the funded phase to secure capital, then resumed traditional extraction once programmatic oversight ended[12].

Uganda and the Philippines: Social Accountability and Collective Action Crowding Out

In Uganda, Martina Björkman and Jakob Svensson (2009) evaluated a community monitoring program across 50 rural primary health dispensaries[44]. Unlike broad CDD initiatives, this program focused on localized social accountability: facilitators convened community meetings where standardized report cards on health clinic performance (waiting times, staff absenteeism, infant immunization rates) were shared with citizens, who then drafted joint action plans with health providers[44].

Initial endline findings were notable: child mortality under age five fell by 33 percent, dispensary utilization surged, and health worker absenteeism declined sharply[44]. However, Björkman Nyqvist, de Walque, and Svensson (2017) and subsequent multi-site replications found that these impacts attenuated over time, were difficult to scale without intensive donor oversight, and struggled to overcome systemic health supply constraints[46].

In the Philippines, the KALAHI-CIDSS program was evaluated across 198 matched municipalities by Innovations for Poverty Action[48]. While the program successfully delivered transport and water projects—reducing farm-to-market shipping costs by 17 percent ($p <$) and water collection times by 15 percent—it generated null impacts on political participation and citizen self-efficacy outside the project structure[48].

The evaluation identified a negative effect on informal social capital: participation in traditional voluntary communal labor (*bayanihan*) and independent village mutual-aid groups declined in treatment communities[49]. The formal, compensated, and rules-heavy donor procedures displaced organic, uncompensated community solidarity systems[49].

Comparative Evidence Matrix

The empirical evidence demonstrates that while CDD serves as an effective mechanism for constructing low-complexity physical public goods, it does not reliably reform village political institutions, empower marginalized groups, or build permanent collective action capacity[4].

Study & Setting	Sample Size & Scale	Duration	Institutional Design	Physical / Public Goods Impact	Political & Institutional Governance Impact	Replication & Long-Run Persistence
Beath, Christia, & Enikolopov (2013, 2016, 2017) Afghanistan (NSP)	500 villages, 10 districts, ~13,000 households[14]	2007–2011 (4 years)[14]	Elected village councils (CDCs); secret ballots; gender quotas; ~$33,000 grants[14]	Water access +15 pp ($p <$); electricity +26 pp ($p <$); girl schooling +5 pp[14]	Female voice confined strictly to CDCs; zero spillover to traditional *jirgas*; traditional heads retain authority[14]	Consistent across 10 districts; induced councils atrophied after funding ended[14]
Olken (2007) Indonesia (KDP)	608 villages, East and Central Java[24]	2003–2004 (18 months)[24]	Road infrastructure block grants; top-down audits (4% to 100%) vs. grassroots monitoring[24]	Road construction completed; verified via engineering core samples[24]	Top-down audits reduced missing expenditures by 8 pp ($p <$); community monitoring had 0 pp impact on stolen materials[2]	High internal validity; replicated across public procurement literature[24]

					[4]	
Olken (2010) Indonesia (KDP)	49 villages, 3 provinces (Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi)[22]	2004–2005 (1 year)[22]	Representative hamlet meetings vs. direct universal adult plebiscites (79% turnout)[22]	Block grant infrastructure allocation to roads, bridges, and water systems[22]	Plebiscites raised citizen satisfaction and perceived legitimacy; zero impact on project types or locations[22]	Replicated in Afghanistan NSP; procedural legitimacy decoupled from agenda control[22]
Casey, Glennerster, & Miguel (2012, 2021) Sierra Leone (GoBifo)	236 villages, 2,832 households, 2 districts[5]	2005–2009 (Round 1); resurveyed in 2016 (11 years)[5]	Direct village block grants (~$5,000); village development committees; gender quotas[5]	Public goods index: +0.20 to +0.30 SD ($p <$); maintained at +0.20 SD at 11 years[5]	63-outcome institutional governance index: $+0.00$ to $+0.05$ SD (null); traditional chiefs retain control[5]	Methodological benchmark; null institutional results replicated across Sub-Saharan Africa[11]
Fearon, Humphreys, & Weinstein (2009, 2015)	83 to 170 communities, northern/western districts[35]	2006–2008 (2 years)[36]	~$17,000 block grants; community-wide committees;	Local basic infrastructure built (bridges, drying floors,	Statistically significant increases in lab Public	PGG behavioral results sensitive to experimental

Liberia (CDR)			behavioral Public Goods Games[36]	schools)[36]	Goods Game contributions; zero change in chiefdom authority[36]	framing; institutional structures persisted unchanged[36]
Humphreys, Sanchez de la Sierra, & van der Windt (2012, 2019) DR Congo (Tuungane)	1,250 villages, 3 provinces (South Kivu, Maniema, Katanga)[12]	2007–2011 (4 years)[12]	~$3.7M funding; elected village committees; gender quotas; unannounced RAPID audit[12]	Modest infrastructure delivery; primary health and schooling structures built[12]	Null effects across all institutional, governance, trust, and female voice metrics in real behavioral audits[12]	Largest randomized CDR evaluation; confirmed institutional limits of induced participation[12]
Beatty et al. (2018) Philippines (KALAHI-CIDSS)	198 municipalities, multi-province[50]	2011–2015 (4 years)[50]	Multi-year block grant cycles; facilitated open *barangay* planning assemblies[48]	Farm-to-market transport costs fell 17% ($p <$); water collection times fell 15%[48]	Zero increase in political agency beyond project; measurable crowding out of traditional *bayanihan* labor[48]	Replicates evidence that formal aid structures displace organic informal cooperation[49]

Microeconomic Mechanisms of Elite Capture and

Dark-Triad Predation

In political economy and institutional economics, elite capture is defined as the process by which socio-economically or politically dominant individuals or factions misappropriate public decision-making processes or financial resources for private benefit[1]. Within small communities, individuals with dark-triad traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—exploit structural gaps in participatory procedures to advance their interests[34]. Jean-Philippe Platteau and Frederic Gaspart (2003, 2004, 2005) modeled the microeconomics of elite capture in community-based initiatives[9]. Platteau demonstrates that local elites function as *development brokers*[54]. Because outside agencies, donors, and facilitators cannot observe local cost structures, social networks, or true household preferences, they rely on literate, articulate, or traditional leaders to mediate the project interface[54]. This creates an information asymmetry[55].

The broker calculates the rent extraction rate that balances private returns against the risk of triggering donor flight or community unrest[54]. The broker provides ordinary community members with just enough material benefit to satisfy project requirements, while capturing discretionary funding, procurement margins, and patronage opportunities for their personal network[54].

In environments lacking external legal institutions, individuals displaying dark-triad personalities exploit standard participatory governance structures through distinct behavioral vectors:

- **Narcissism (Performative Deliberation and Moral Capture)**: Narcissistic actors utilize open assemblies as platforms for public positioning[1]. Because village meetings often conflate verbal eloquence with administrative integrity, narcissistic individuals dominate public discussion[6]. They readily adopt the vocabulary of community empowerment, equality, and public interest, presenting themselves as defenders of the poor[7]. In the absence of audited, written ledgers, communities mistake performance for accountability, granting these actors managerial discretion over shared assets[6].
- **Machiavellianism (Agenda Control and Factional Splitting)**: Machiavellian actors focus on what Olken (2010) identified as the primary vulnerability of direct democracy: *agenda-setting*[22]. The Machiavellian actor allows the community to vote freely, but ensures that all options on the ballot disproportionately benefit their faction or land parcels[22]. By securing agreements with key lineage heads and exploiting inter-group tensions, the Machiavellian prevents the formation of a unified reform coalition[1]. They also take control of administrative tasks, managing project files, recording minutes, and exploiting literacy gaps to manipulate operational accounts[24].
- **Psychopathy (Coercive Deterrence and Social Retaliation)**: The findings of Olken (2007) regarding why grassroots monitoring failed to halt corruption reflect the impact of coercive deterrence[24]. The diversion of physical materials—diverting cement bags, substituting cheaper gravel, shortchanging labor rolls—is carried out by individuals willing to use intimidation[24]. In a village of 300 people, an ordinary resident who challenges a dominant leader faces immediate retaliation[24]. Psychopathic actors exploit the absence

of formal police protection by imposing high social costs on challengers: threatening their access to grazing lands, excluding them from mutual-aid networks, or using physical intimidation[24]. Rational villagers balance the small individual benefit of recovering stolen community goods against the severe private cost of retribution, choosing silence and allowing elite capture to persist[8].

Mansuri and Rao (2013), drawing on Rao and Ibañez (2005), distinguish between *benevolent capture* and *malevolent capture*[1]. In rural environments, traditional leaders frequently possess higher literacy, broader trade connections, and lower coordination costs[10].

Under benevolent capture, an elite actor monopolizes decision-making and bypasses participatory consultation, yet manages public goods capably and provides functional infrastructure for the community[1]. In contrast, under malevolent capture, predatory elites extract funds, produce substandard or unfinished assets, and maintain control through coercion[10].

The Scale Ledger: Human Aggregation and Governance Breakdown

Governance arrangements do not scale linearly[1]. Institutional mechanics that operate efficiently at the scale of 30 individuals can fail when extended to 300, 3,000, or 30,000 people due to information costs, free-rider dynamics, cognitive constraints, and growing agency gaps[1].

The Scale Ledger: Performance by Demographic Tier

Scale Rung	Population Range	Operational Status & Historical Viability	Dominant Failure Mode	Information & Coordination Costs
Household	4 to 10	Universal, highly viable across all cultures; basic economic production unit.	Intra-household patriarchal domination; domestic violence; unequal nutrition/labor allocation.	Near zero information costs; continuous face-to-face monitoring.
Hamlet / Band	30 to 50	Historically robust; foraging bands and kinship clusters; high	Factional split along lineage lines; vulnerable to single	Low; everyone observes everyone; gossip and social

		normative cohesion.	aggressive sociopath if unpunished.	sanctions enforce public norms effectively.
Village	150 to 500	Viable for basic physical tasks; the core locus of CDD; fragile institutional permanence.	**Elite Capture & Agenda Control**: Illiteracy leaves books opaque; high cost of whistleblowing .	Moderate; coordination requires formal meetings; free-riding begins; agenda-setting dominates.
Parish / District	1,500 to 5,000	Fails under pure direct democracy; requires representative federation; historically common.	**Cartelization of Delegates**: Village elites collude at district council; complete exclusion of marginalized.	High; face-to-face trust breaks; administrative and logistics overhead requires full-time staff.
Town / Watershed	15,000 to 50,000	Never works via pure CDD; requires formal municipal apparatus, courts, and coercive police.	**Bureaucratic Extraction & Warlordism**: Armed capture; systemic fiscal corruption.	Severe; information asymmetry necessitates formal professional audits; informal monitoring collapses.
Region / Bioregion	500,000 to 5,000,000	CDD utterly unviable; requires institutional state apparatus, tax base, and written legal	**Oligarchic Capture & Civil War**: Resource predation by militarized political elites.	Massive; extreme distance between citizen and decision-make r; requires complex state

		code.		bureaucracies.
Nation / Continent	50,000,000 to 500,000,000	Beyond any participatory framework; operates via constitutional federation or empire.	**Totalitarianism / Systemic Collapse**: Systemic bureaucratic failure, state capture by kleptocrats.	Systemic; requires national statistical systems, mass media, and formal institutions.
Planet	8,000,000,000	CDD unviable; anarchic state system with weak multilateral coordination.	**Global Tragedy of the Commons**: Total defection on global public goods (climate, conflict).	Near insurmountable; no central sovereign enforcement mechanism exists.

At the hamlet level (30 to 50 people), collective action operates through regular face-to-face contact[1]. The free-rider problem is mitigated because individual labor contributions and consumption are visible to the entire group[24]. Normative sanctions—including gossip, social exclusion, and withdrawal of mutual labor—are sufficient to maintain baseline cooperation without formal institutions[24]. Standardized voting procedures are often unnecessary at this scale, as decisions emerge through continuous kinship negotiation[1].

At the village level (150 to 500 people), direct mutual observation begins to decline[24]. This scale crosses the cognitive threshold where individuals can remain fully informed about every member's economic and contractual activities[24]. As a result, informational specialization occurs: a literate, commercially connected minority takes on administrative roles[34].

This dynamic explains the pattern observed across the RCT literature: villages successfully coordinate direct physical labor—such as clearing drainage ditches or digging wells—because output is visible[5]. However, financial accounting, procurement negotiations, and agenda drafting are easily captured by small leadership cliques[22].

At the district level (1,500 to 5,000 people), direct democracy becomes physically unworkable due to meeting logistics and transaction costs[5]. Governance must shift to representative delegate systems[22].

This transition introduces an agency gap: village delegates sent to district councils often form

cartels with peers from neighboring villages[1]. The empirical evidence from Indonesia's KDP subdistrict forums shows that village delegates frequently engage in logrolling, securing projects for their own coalitions while presenting outcomes to their home communities as administrative mandates[1].

The Capture Test: Vulnerability Vectors and Institutional Countermeasures

The Capture Test evaluates how governance structures hold up against calculated takeover in the absence of higher-level legal systems[8]. Without external law enforcement, predatory actors use specific vectors to capture local institutions:



Predatory factions begin by exploiting the *time tax* of participatory democracy[4]. Subsistence farmers and manual laborers cannot afford to attend multiple meetings each week[4]. A faction

exploits this dynamic by intentionally extending procedural debates and scheduling assemblies during peak agricultural hours[4]. Working villagers drop out of the process, leaving assemblies dominated by the capturing faction and its dependents[1].

Next, the faction secures positions on the administrative committees that draft voting menus and manage accounts[22]. As Olken (2010) demonstrated, once a group controls the proposal menu, the general vote is compromised: every option on the ballot advances the faction's interests[22].

In communities with low literacy, these actors centralize accounting records, inflate costs under difficult-to-verify categories (such as transport charges or aggregate fill), and disguise graft as waste or inflation[24]. If an ordinary villager challenges the accounts, the faction isolates the individual through family pressure or threats to their access to communal resources[24]. Because the community lacks an independent judiciary, the personal cost of whistleblowing far outweighs the individual share of recovered funds, leaving corruption unaddressed[8].

The experimental literature identifies three structural mechanisms that effectively resist this capture sequence:

- **Universal Secret-Ballot Elections (Olken 2010; Beath et al. 2016)**: While secret plebiscites failed to change the project menu, they effectively dismantled the ability of elites to handpick council members[19]. Open show-of-hands votes reinforce elite control by allowing powerful families to monitor and intimidate dissenters[19]. In contrast, secret ballots enable communities to remove abusive leaders in favor of younger, technically capable alternatives[19].
- **Independent Physical Audits with Unannounced Inspections (Olken 2007)**: Physical audits proved to be the most effective anti-corruption instrument in the field[24]. Extracting physical core samples from finished infrastructure to measure material density and dimensions prevents elites from disguising diverted resources with manipulated paper receipts[24]. Accountability requires verifiable physical metrics rather than open-ended discussion[24].
- **Ex-Ante Public Budget Signboards**: Interventions requiring total revenues, line-item budgets, and supplier unit prices to be painted onto permanent signboards or walls in central village plazas reduced diversion compared to paper records kept in private homes[54]. Broad public visibility reduces information costs for all residents, turning community spaces into open ledgers[3].

The Epistemological Separation Matrix

A rigorous institutional evaluation requires separating three distinct narratives: the claims made by project participants and promoters, the patterns documented in operational project records, and the causal mechanisms identified by modern microeconomic scholarship.

Systematic Epistemological Disaggregation

Governance	What the	What the	What Modern

Dimension	Arrangement's Promoters & Actors Said It Did	Administrative & Operational Record Shows It Did	Microeconomic Scholarship Infers
Democratic Deliberation	Created egalitarian village assemblies where all voices—including women, the poor, and low castes—determined community destiny[1].	Meetings were heavily managed by external project facilitators; attendance dropped steadily once initial grants were allocated[1].	**Performative Compliance**: Deliberation functioned as an exogenous conditionality required to unlock external block grants[5]. Customary patriarchal hierarchies allowed the performance while maintaining control over fundamental village resources[5].
Resource Allocation & Targeting	Targeted the poorest households and marginalized factions, delivering critical infrastructure that reflected community priorities[1].	Infrastructure built was heavily biased toward road works, community halls, and projects pre-selected by literate village heads[5].	**Agenda-Setting Monopolization**: Elites ceded control over the nominal voting mechanism while maintaining absolute control over the choice menu[22]. The poorest lacked the social capital and leisure time to contest the agenda[1].
Corruption & Accountability	"Grassroots community monitoring" and social	Significant discrepancies between billed costs and physical	**Asymmetric Social Cost of Whistleblowing**: Grassroots

	accountability committees eliminated theft and empowered citizens against graft[24].	outputs persisted; 20% to 24% of funds regularly went missing in un-audited projects[24].	monitoring fails on its own due to acute free-rider dynamics and fear of elite retaliation[24]. Only formal, top-down, physically verifiable audits successfully curtail theft[24].
Social Cohesion & Conflict Resolution	Rebuilt social capital, healed post-war divisions, built civic trust, and established durable habits of collective action[1].	Project-specific committees dissolved rapidly once funding ended; traditional councils (*shuras*, *jirgas*, chiefdoms) handled all real disputes[5].	**Software Inelasticity**: Social norms, customary law, and informal authority structures are deeply entrenched equilibria that resist marginal changes from short-term financial infusions[5]. CDD delivers physical goods, not political modernization[4].

Critiques, Pathologies, and the Romance of the Primitive

The randomized evidence validates long-standing critiques from political sociologists, institutional anthropologists, and heterodox economists who cautioned against the assumptions of the participatory development movement.

In *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (2001) argued that participatory development often functions as an apparatus of control presented under the guise of empowerment[6]. Cooke, Kothari, and their co-authors (such as David Mosse and Frances Cleaver) identified several structural contradictions within the participatory method[6]:

- *The Tyranny of Decision-Making*: Participatory procedures bypass formal representative systems and obscure structural inequalities, steering marginalized individuals into legitimizing outcomes already chosen by entrenched elites[6].
- *The Tyranny of the Group*: Group dynamics in open village assemblies enforce a false consensus, framing dissenting voices as uncooperative and undermining the informal

strategies poor people traditionally use to negotiate with local elites[6].

- *The Tyranny of Method*: Standardized participatory toolkits treat heterogeneous, conflict-ridden communities as cohesive groups, ignoring internal divisions of caste, lineage, and gender[1].

Katherine Casey (2018) highlighted the overlooked economic cost of participation: the *time tax*[4]. Participation requires scarce labor time[4]. Expecting impoverished individuals to spend hours in planning meetings, monitoring sessions, and uncompensated construction committees imposes an extractive burden on the poor[4].

When a municipal government constructs infrastructure, citizens continue their productive work; when CDD constructs it, the operational burden is shifted onto local residents[4]. If the resulting infrastructure suffers from substandard engineering or is diverted by local leaders, the poor end up worse off, having surrendered valuable labor time for cosmetic democratic engagement[4].

These dynamics connect to the broader critique developed by James Ferguson (1990) in *The Anti-Politics Machine* and Tania Murray Li (2007) in *The Will to Improve*. Development programs routinely transform structural political conflicts—such as land rights, unfair tax systems, and elite extraction—into technical community-level coordination tasks.

CDD internalizes this approach by framing poverty as a localized coordination failure, suggesting that if villagers would deliberate cooperatively and manage their own works, poverty would recede[1]. In doing so, it isolates the village from broader political struggles, pushing communities to compete against neighboring hamlets for small donor grants rather than organizing to challenge regional inequalities[1].

Finally, the CDD literature exposes the naturalistic fallacy—the assumption that historical or small-scale human societies were egalitarian and harmonious[1]. Historical and ethnographic research reveals that traditional agrarian villages were frequently governed by entrenched patriarchies, debt bondage, caste segregation, and hereditary land monopolies[1].

Small size does not eliminate tyranny; it personalizes it[10]. An authoritarian state is often distant and bureaucratic, while an agrarian village despot lives in close proximity, controls the water source, and monitors the community directly[24]. Autonomy at the village scale without institutional checks frequently leads to personal despotism rather than egalitarian self-rule[8].

Summary of Robust Findings

1. External block grants combined with local committee structures successfully deliver functional, low-cost physical infrastructure in rural villages[5].
2. Induced participatory procedures produce virtually zero durable change in local political institutions, social capital, or customary power dynamics[5].
3. Mandated female inclusion increases women's participation during subsidized meetings, but fails to alter non-project political authority or traditional dispute resolution[14].
4. Direct universal adult plebiscites dramatically enhance citizen satisfaction and perceived legitimacy, but do not alter the types or locations of public projects chosen[22].
5. Local elites dominate project selection through agenda-setting, pre-selecting project

options before any popular vote occurs[22].

6. Grassroots community monitoring fails to curtail infrastructure corruption due to free-rider dilemmas and the high social cost of confronting neighbors[24].
7. Independent, top-down physical audits backed by enforceable sanctions reduce material theft and financial corruption significantly and cost-effectively[24].
8. Introducing formal, procedural aid programs can erode organic mutual aid and displace customary voluntary collective labor (*bayanihan*)[49].
9. Elite control of community projects is often benevolent regarding administrative efficiency, but malevolent and extractive when social inequality is extreme[1].
10. Localized self-governance cannot maintain equity or resist dark-triad capture without a supportive, responsive external framework providing monitoring and enforcement[1].

Contested and Open Questions

The experimental literature leaves several critical theoretical and empirical questions unresolved:

- **The Comparative Delivery Counterfactual**: Does physical infrastructure built via CDD exhibit greater structural longevity and return on capital than infrastructure built by formal local government line ministries or commercial contractors in weakly governed environments? Direct head-to-head randomized trials comparing community execution to professional municipal execution remain scarce[2].
- **The Problem of Time horizons**: Does the failure of CDD to reshape political institutions reflect an inherent inability of external programs to change culture, or is it an artifact of standard donor timelines (three to five years) that are too brief to influence historical patterns of authority[8]?
- **The Catalysts of Organic Collective Action**: Given that external interventions fail to induce lasting collective capacity, what environmental or social pressures cause inclusive self-governance institutions to emerge organically without external patronage[1]?
- **The Net Welfare Burden of the Participation Tax**: What is the definitive economic accounting of the labor time surrendered by subsistence households attending deliberative assemblies compared to the lifetime value of the assets built[4]?
- **Decentralized Auditing Mechanisms**: In the absence of an external sovereign state, can inter-village peer audits recreate the disciplinary power of top-down auditing, or will neighboring elites inevitably collude into regional cartels[1]?

Foundational Literature for Deep Study

- Mansuri, Ghazala, and Vijayendra Rao (2013). *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?* World Bank Policy Research Report. Washington, DC: World Bank[8].
  A meta-synthesis of almost 500 studies that articulates the mechanics of civil society failure, establishes the difference between organic and induced participation, and outlines the necessity of the state-society "sandwich" for sustainable accountability[1].
- Casey, Katherine, Rachel Glennerster, and Edward Miguel (2012). "Reshaping Institutions: Evidence on Aid Impacts Using a Preanalysis Plan." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*,

127(4): 1755–1812[5].
A field experiment across 236 villages in Sierra Leone that pioneered comprehensive pre-analysis plans, documenting substantial gains in physical public goods alongside null effects on 63 measures of institutional change and collective capacity[5].

- Olken, Benjamin A. (2007). "Monitoring Corruption: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Indonesia." *Journal of Political Economy*, 115(2): 200–249[24].
  A study across 608 road-building villages demonstrating that top-down audits cut missing expenditures from 24 percent to 16 percent, whereas grassroots monitoring had zero impact on stolen materials due to elite intimidation and free-rider disincentives[24].
- Olken, Benjamin A. (2010). "Direct Democracy and Local Public Goods: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Indonesia." *American Political Science Review*, 104(2): 243–267[22].
  An evaluation comparing representative meetings to direct plebiscites across 49 villages, demonstrating that while universal voting sharply increased project satisfaction and perceived legitimacy, project outcomes remained unchanged due to elite control over the initial agenda[22].
- Beath, Andrew, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov (2013). "Empowering Women through Development Aid: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Afghanistan." *American Political Science Review*, 107(3): 540–557[17].
  An evaluation across 500 villages demonstrating that mandatory female inclusion created temporary, project-specific female participation, but had zero spillover impact on traditional dispute arbitration or customary patriarchal *jirgas*[14].
- Humphreys, Macartan, Raul Sanchez de la Sierra, and Peter van der Windt (2019). "Exporting Democratic Practices: Evidence from a Village Governance Intervention in Eastern Congo." *Journal of Development Economics*, 140: 279–301[12].
  A study of the Tuungane project across 1,250 villages using the unannounced behavioral RAPID test, showing that extensive democratic facilitation produced no measurable change in collective governance, elite predation, or social trust[12].
- Cooke, Bill, and Uma Kothari, eds. (2001). *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books[6].
  A theoretical critique detailing how participatory development techniques often function as instruments of co-optation, legitimizing local elite power and depoliticizing structural economic conflicts[6].
- Platteau, Jean-Philippe, and Frederic Gaspart (2003). "Disciplining Local Leaders in Community-Based Development." *Centre for Research on the Economics of Development (CRED)*, Working Paper[54].
  A formal microeconomic model demonstrating how local development brokers exploit information asymmetries to capture project rents, calibrating extraction to stay below the threshold that would prompt outside intervention or village revolt[54].
- Casey, Katherine (2018). "Radical Decentralization: Does Community-Driven Development Work?" *Annual Review of Economics*, 10: 139–163[2].
  An analytical review assessing global evidence on radical fiscal decentralization,

contrasting the successful delivery of basic infrastructure against persistent institutional nulls, and examining the labor opportunity costs imposed on participants[4].

Implementability after the Fall

When industrial supply chains break down and the central state collapses, communities are thrown into localized survival. In this environment, the empirical lessons of the CDD literature become essential design criteria. If a surviving settlement designs its governance around naive assumptions of natural village harmony and unmonitored discussion, it risks rapid decline into elite capture or local despotism[1].

Minimum Viable Governance Across Scales

1. The Household (4 to 10 People)

At the household level, governance operates through direct kin relationships, pooled labor, and shared food consumption. The decision-making rule rests on head-of-household direction balanced by informal consultation. Accountability is enforced through continuous, face-to-face observation; slacking or defection directly threatens collective survival. The primary internal vulnerability is domestic despotism, where dominant figures monopolize caloric, tool, and medical reserves.

2. The Village (300 People / ~50 Households)

At the 300-person village scale, governance requires a dual-structure model that separates proposal formulation, executive management, and physical auditing:

- **The Village Assembly (Direct Secret Plebiscite)**: All adult members convene quarterly. To prevent deliberative capture, the assembly does not draft policy proposals; it votes by secret ballot (such as dropping colored markers into sealed urns inside an enclosed stall) to approve or reject plans presented by work committees[19].
- **The Executive Works Council (3 to 5 People)**: Selected through sortition (lottery among literate, farming households) for non-renewable one-year terms. The council oversees daily communal labor, path maintenance, irrigation schedules, and defensive perimeters[32].
- **The Physical Inspection Watch (3 People)**: An independent group holding no administrative authority. Their sole role is physical verification: measuring timber volumes, pacing canal depths, counting grain bags, and confirming that resource allocations match reported outlays[24].
- **Decision-Making Rule**: Strategic communal actions—such as clearing new land, modifying water rights, or imposing labor obligations—require a 60 percent supermajority via secret ballot[19].
- **Accountability Tool**: The Public Plaza Blackboard or Carved Stone Slab. Total community inventories, labor contributions, and resource disbursements must be inscribed in open view[54].

3. The District (3,000 People / ~10 Villages within a 15-Kilometer Radius)

At the district scale, direct assembly governance is unworkable; the system must transition to a delegate federation governed by strict mandates:

- **The Confederate Council**: Each village sends two delegates (one woman, one man)

selected by secret plebiscite[12]. Delegates carry imperative mandates: they are bound to vote according to written instructions from their village assembly and are subject to immediate recall if they deviate[23].

- **The Inter-Village Cross-Audit Corps**: To replace state audits, villages conduct mutual peer inspections[24]. An audit team from Village A physically examines the stores and works of Village B, while Village B inspects Village C[24]. Because adjacent villages compete for resources, their incentive to identify and report discrepancies is far higher than that of co-villagers who face intimidation from local leaders[24].
- **Decision-Making Rule**: Unanimous consent among member villages for mutual defense agreements and watershed management; two-thirds majority for regional trade corridors.
- **Accountability Tool**: Rotating council meetings across member villages to prevent any single settlement from monopolizing administrative control.

Foundational Prerequisites to Launch

To function in a stateless environment, a community requires four foundational mechanisms:

- **Functional Literacy and Basic Numeracy**: A minimum threshold of 5 to 10 percent of the adult population must be able to read, write, and balance dual-entry ledgers[34]. Without written records, informational gatekeeping by self-selected elites will quickly undermine communal governance[54].
- **Physical, Unalterable Records**: A hard-copy "Book of the Commons." Ledgers must be maintained in duplicate—one held by the Executive Works Council and one by the Physical Inspection Watch. Every transaction, tool loan, and grain withdrawal must be recorded and initialed in public view[24].
- **A Shared, Fixed Calendar**: A physical sundial, marked calendar post, or common bell establishing a fixed meeting rhythm. Assemblies must occur at predetermined intervals on non-work days[60]. This prevents leaders from calling unannounced meetings when working villagers are away in the fields[4].
- **An Enclosed Physical Voting Stall**: A secure, private space (such as a curtained partition in a communal storehouse) that guarantees total ballot secrecy[19]. Open voting in small communities exposes voters to coercion and reinforces elite dominance[19].

The First Failure to Expect

The primary breakdown in post-collapse self-governance will be the monopolization of agenda-setting by articulate or traditionally dominant actors, followed by the disengagement of ordinary working residents from village assemblies[4].

Within three to six months, the initial sense of shared crisis will give way to the exhausting demands of daily survival labor[4]. Working members will begin skipping long deliberative meetings[4]. Self-interested and charismatic figures will step into the administrative vacuum, framing their involvement as selfless service[6]. They will secure control of the records, negotiate private agreements with external factions, and reduce the village assembly to a rubber stamp[54]. If the settlement lacks secret-ballot recall procedures and independent physical audits, it will

rapidly shift from an open self-governing community into an informal local despotism[8].

Principles

- Direct universal participation in village assemblies increases citizen satisfaction and procedural legitimacy, but fails to alter the distribution of public goods without structural control over agenda-setting[22].
- Exogenous infusions of resources and training delivered through short-term project cycles cannot permanently reorganize customary informal authority or social hierarchy[5].
- Bottom-up community monitoring is structurally incapable of preventing elite resource theft unless backed by the credible threat of external, objective physical audits and enforceable sanctions[8].
- Mandatory demographic representation quotas alter the composition of project-specific administrative bodies, but do not organically transfer political power to marginalized groups in traditional governance domains[14].
- Direct, secret-ballot elections select significantly younger, more technically skilled, and less traditional leaders than consensus-based communal consultations[19].
- The transaction costs of participatory collective action impose a regressive labor-time tax on subsistence households that frequently exceeds the marginal value of the public goods produced[4].
- Standardized formalization of communal governance can displace and erode pre-existing organic mutual-aid traditions and informal collective action norms[49].
- In the absence of a sovereign external rule-of-law apparatus, community-driven decision structures are systematically captured by dark-triad individuals who weaponize information opacity, procedural exhaustion, and the threat of unpunished social retaliation[8].

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