

Annex 2: Formation of Public Opinion Through Interpersonal Communication in southern Afghanistan

Christian Marie, International Consultant
and Masood Karokhail
(contributions to background profile)

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Tribal Liaison Office - Kabul
House # 83, Street 1
Qala-e-Fatullah
Kabul, Afghanistan
Tel + 93 (0)799 83 71 83
ehsan.zahine@tlo-afghanistan.org



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1 Introduction

This study was commissioned and financed by Media Support Solutions (MSS) as part of a greater study on strategic communication issues in southern Afghanistan linked to a DfID initiative aiming at developing a strategic communications initiative in the South of Afghanistan to help contain insurgency through a shifting in public opinion and promoting dialogue.

The basic research questions focused on the formation of public opinion through interpersonal (non-media) communication and the influence of traditional leaders. This includes identification what sources of information people have access to, where they access those sources, and the level of trust/credibility they attach to those sources.

1.1 Methodology and Limitations

The report is on an exploratory study tapping into the existing knowledge of the Tribal Liaison Office and its staff, as well as original focus group discussions (FGD) and semi-structured interviews (SSI) with participants from the rural areas of the southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan and Zabul.

- Helmand focuses on the valleys running from Garmseer in the south through to Lashkargar, Grishk, Sangin, Musa Qala, Bagram to the side valley up to Kajaki, and Nawzad off to the West.
- Kandahar focuses on the area around the road out east to Spin Boldak, Arghandab, and Panjwei.
- The areas for Zabul and Uruzgan (Tirin Kot) were less defined but focused on the main rural settlement areas.

Standard qualitative methodology was used, including SSI, FGD, personal observations, informal interviews and a review of the existing TLO reports. For each province, 5-6 SSI and 3 FGD were conducted, with an average of 6-7 participants. Due to security reasons, most SSI and FGD were organized in Kabul during March 2008, except for Zabul province where the SSI and FGD were conducted in Kandahar, again for security reasons; yet two mullahs and two elders came to Kabul for the SSIs. The tables below provides an overview of the number of FGD and SSI interviews per province, as well as background of those interviewed.

**Table for FGD participants:
For each province 3 FGDs were held including 6-7 participants**

FGD Participants	Zabul	Kandahar	Uruzgan	Helmand
Shopkeeper	4	5	4	6
Business men	3	2	0	0
Farmers	7	4	3	3
Mullahs	1	1	2	0
Elders	3	3	5	3
Jobless	2	4	2	3
TLO field officers	0	1	0	0
Ex- Jihadi	0	0	4	0

FGD Participants	Zabul	Kandahar	Uruzgan	Helmand
commanders				
Teachers	0	1	0	2
NGO worker	0	0	0	1
Tailor	0	0	0	1
Total	20	20	20	19

Table for SSI interviewees:

For each province 5-6 SSI were conducted with some interviewees who were not in the FGD. In particular those participants were interviewed individually who didn't want to share their ideas in FGDs.

SSI interviewees	Zabul	Kandahar	Uruzgan	Helmand
Shopkeeper	1	1	0	1
Business men	0	0	0	0
Farmers	1	1	0	0
Mullahs	1	1	1	1
Elders	1	1	2	1
Jobless	1	0	0	0
TLO field officers	0	1	1	2
Ex- Jihadi commanders	0	0	1	0
Teachers	0	0	0	0
Total	5	5	5	6

The research also drew from the personal experience of the authors and TLO staff. The exploratory nature of the research, lacking rigorous field research and representative survey methods, introduces the following limitations and potential bias into the findings:

- Clear representation of the reality on the ground as well as the diverse population groups can not be guaranteed and findings will be biased towards the opinions of those individuals who participated in this study (mainly this excludes women, and youth)
- Difference among the knowledge of the various provinces covered within TLO and its staff, may lead to some imbalance in the report

The report is structured in the following sub-sections:

I. Profile of influential individuals at the community level

- Non-governmental actors
- Governmental actors
- Insurgency
- International actors

II. Findings

- Opinion-makers vs. Sources of Information
- Loss of influence of traditional elders
- The power of knowledge
- The power of fear/coercion
- The influence of mullahs as main trusted information
- The power of leadership
- Trust in government depends on entity and information needed
- Places of communication
- Radio as most powerful media
- The fear of "international"/foreign or non-Afghan propaganda
- The role of Mobile Phone/Literacy
- The power of music
- The Age difference/Clash of generations

III. Conclusion

IV. Recommendations

2 Profile of Influential Individuals at the Community Level

2.1 Non-governmental Actors

Elders

Prior to the war against the Soviet-backed government, power was primarily vested in the traditional landed tribal elite whose families played an important role locally and served as the traditional intermediaries between the government and communities. This allowed the elite families to leverage government patronage and resources to consolidate their leadership locally.

When the communists came to power in Afghanistan, notables of the local tribal elders (e.g. khans and maliks) and religious leaders (e.g., mullahs) initiated the jihad. At this time notables of the local tribal elders and religious leaders essentially had two choices, either join the mujahideen ranks or flee into exile.

As the war went on, factional affiliation soon began to complement tribal affiliations and hereditary status (especially of the powerful landed elite) began to give way to an achieved status of power, mainly linked to the ability of commandeering mujahideen fighters to design military strategies and win battles against the Soviet/Afghan army. The traditional tribal landed elites (khans) were either marginalized or had to join forces with the mujahideen parties in order to maintain (sometimes even extending) their power base.

In light of the above, an increasing number of traditional tribal elite families began to assume the position of commanders, either high or mid-level depending on their status within their community. The fame of commanders (respect based on military gains) soon began to replace the fame of more

peaceful oriented traditional tribal leadership (respect based on an ability to peacefully mediate conflict), undermining the traditional tribal system. In other words, only tribal elders who also became influential commanders were able to increase their power and influence.

One could argue that the main thing that changed during the long years of war was how an individual could rise to power. In the past, one had to come from influential landed elite families to gain power. During the war, even ordinary men could gain leadership status if they proved themselves as astute military strategists and showed bravery.

However and despite the influence of war and displacement on the integrity of tribal system, the tribe remains the main solidarity group for individuals in the district, and tribal affiliations continue to play a significant role in shaping political and social loyalties. As explained above, even commanders still affiliate strongly with their tribe and need their tribe/community to support them in order to have military strength as recruitment into militias is largely based along tribal lines.

In fact, **the role of tribal affiliations has increased since the fall of the Taleban regime**, as communities revert back to this known coping mechanism and familiar framework for informal governance in an attempt to fill a vacuum to the poorly functioning provincial and district level government.

Especially in the areas outside government control (mainly the rural areas) where the insurgency is also active, the role of tribal mechanisms and structures is an important survival tool for communities as they are more or less forced to resolve their internal disputes through traditional mechanisms bodies (e.g., jirga and Sharia) due to the lack of more formal governance mechanisms and adequate rule of law.

Furthermore, a TLO study has shown that even where state governance mechanisms do exist, communities' sometimes decide not to use the government court of legal system as they consider it highly corrupt, which usually consumes time and money for both parties. Usually settlements of dispute are in favor of those spending more money.

These obstacles keep the option of out-of-court mediation through a traditional jirga/Sharia very much a reality for rural communities. In sum, the weaker the local government, and the less the local governance structures are in touch with the central state apparatus that can control corruption, and the stronger the insurgency, the more likely will tribes cling to their own ruling mechanisms for social cohesion and survival or the justice system that is provided by Taleban in areas they control mainly around Sharia..

Last but not least, it needs to be mentioned that the three decades of war did impact on overall tribal integrity as well. Thus, **communities function best on a village level**, which tends to be the unit for conflict mediation. Thus, heads of family, village elders, mullahs, or syeds may manage local disputes among conflicting parties at the village and possibly somewhat larger community level, rather than calling on the larger conflict resolution mechanism of a jirga which necessitates the collaboration of various elders (possibly even various tribes).

Mullah and religious authorities

While mullahs are respected in traditional Pashtun society, they are considered to come from a different social group. Usually mullahs do not come from the landed elites (khan) families but more ordinary grass-roots level families. This is different from spiritual figures (such as Sayeds), which indeed often come from a long traditional of elite families and inherit their status just as elders do.

Traditionally, the village mosque is the place where the largest part of community interactions occurs. This makes mosques an ideal social and religious discussion forum. The community usually finances the village mullah. Mostly children and teenagers receive religious education from village mullahs in small groups. Even today when the insurgency control large parts of the district territory, the situation remains unchanged.

In addition to ordinary mullahs, there are special spiritual leaders that function as a social group, such as the Syyeds (or Quereish, who both claim to be direct descendants of the prophet). These individuals and groups are highly respected, and hold a very high social status (higher than ordinary mullahs), almost constituting “religious clans” that supply many of the religious scholars. Many spiritual figures who have emerged from these groups are held in high respect and prominence among their spiritual followers, which goes beyond the respect a traditional mullah is able to obtain.

Nevertheless, an ordinary mullah, through his knowledge, teachings, advice and conflict resolution skills can also rise in the ranks of respect, very similar to Sayeds. These prominent mullahs are also highly respected and consulted for conflict mediation, advice, religious learning and spiritual guidance. Especially as mullahs have entered mainstream tribal groups, spiritual followers also now come from other groups than just the Sayeds.

In addition to Sayeds, however, there are also religious or spiritual figures (Sufi/Pir networks) that usually come from prominent religious families. However a person can achieve a high religious position through religious education and the recruitment of followers. Usually the influence of such a spiritual network can cross district and provincial and regional boundaries depending on the charisma and number of follower of such Pirs.

All this makes **the religious landscape in communities' very complex, and outsiders need to be aware whom they are interacting with.** As traditional/ordinary mullahs are the most common to be found, they are further profiled below.

Traditional Mullah

The term of traditional mullah is usually referred to mullahs or religious figures who mostly run village mosques or larger community mosques. Such mullahs, as in-charge of mosques, tend to have religious students. The density of the population in a given village usually impacts on the number of students of such traditional mullahs.

The power of such mullahs is mainly at the grass-roots level and rarely extends outside the villages they work in. Traditionalist religious networks in the area studied are generally organized around deobandi Ulema and madrassas (religious schools), themselves linked with similar networks south of the border in Pakistan.

The social changes that occurred during the jihad and Taleban years have impacted on the mullah community drastically. Today, the Ullema community (mullahs and mawlawis) also come from mainstream tribal groups (rather than specialized religious ones) and has begun to influence politics directly. Traditional mullahs have also entered the ranks of commanders, thus communities usually distinguish between a fighting (Jangi mullah) and non-fighting mullah. It is important to remark that in the war-affected areas, a clear differentiation has to be made between the mullah-e-jangi (or fighting mullah) and the community mullah, the first one inspiring fear while the other inspire mostly respect.

The traditional mullahs can play an important role in legitimizing the rulers and creating community consensus. As many rural areas are under Taleban control, many of the local village mullahs also rally their support behind them in order to survive. Currently it appears that in the southern provinces, a significant number of local village mullahs can be considered pro-Taleban, as no religious leader is strong enough to speak up against the Taleban. Those who did and do are considered pro-government mullahs, many of which have been harassed or even assassinated over the past years.

Considering that strong religious support for the Karzai government would undermine the Taleban's legitimacy and weaken the foundations of their entire propaganda, the insurgency started to systematically target important pro-government religious figures in the South mainly since 2005. Thus, the Ulema community find themselves in a particularly delicate situation. For example, religious figures that are not with the Taleban are seen with suspicion and may be considered pro-government. Similarly, mullahs who are not openly pro-government may be considered as supporters of the insurgency.

As the Taleban appear very strong in some districts, Ulema or other religious personalities (pirs, sayeds etc.) cannot be relied upon to provide overt support to the government in the short term, particularly as many mullahs/pirs are vulnerable due to their lack of an armed support network. With a strong Taleban insurgency in some districts at present, traditional mullahs have once again risen to a status of high influence as the Taleban have appointed traditional pro-Taleban mullahs to handle conflict mediation on their behalf and function as an intermediate between the insurgency and the local population. The difference to the past Taleban regime is that the appointed mullahs are currently not active as commanders but rather as mediators in charge of resolving local conflicts using sharia law. In a sense the appointed mullahs are enforcing the Taleban backed Sharia law, and thus almost serve in an executive function or **parallel justice system**. This backing of local mullah by the insurgency has further undermined the role of tribal elders within their community as mullahs perform a more prominent role in conflict mediation at the village level.

2.2 Governmental Actors

The Karzai government enjoyed significant backing in the southern provinces that was expressed during the presidential elections of 2004. Tired of wars and restrictive regimes, local communities showed enthusiasm toward the new political process that was supposed to bring peace and stability. Especially the Emergency Loya Jirga (ELJ), the Constitutional Loya Jirga (CLJ) and the presidential elections, where people still felt that they could actually provide input and participate, were highly regarded.

The security situation began to deteriorate markedly from the end of 2004 onwards. Due to the inability of the government to bring stability, fight off the insurgency, and corrupt local government officials, the population was left to fend on their own. Given that the insurgency tends to fight anything that is even considered marginally supportive of the government, the local population fears being associated too closely with governmental actors or its supporters (e.g., NATO/ISAF forces). **As a result, the gap between the state and local communities is now wider than ever.**

This, combined with the deteriorating security situation and overall government weakness and inefficiency, led to a gradual shift in the balance of power within local communities in favor of the Taleban in the last years and, more generally, to a deep polarization of the society along tribal lines. Moreover, it appears that the government is not only inefficient and unable to provide basic services to the population, but is also perceived as corrupt and only partial or completely unrepresentative

servicing the clients of whoever happens to hold a local government post. As a result, local government and police have exacerbated tribal tensions, created private fiefdoms, abused the population thereby losing the trust of the majority of the population.

The lack of development, education and remoteness of many of the southern provinces has limited the qualified human resources that the government has been able to attract, especially as compared to some better-educated part of the country. The lack of a large educated class is one limiting factor in this respect. Growing insurgency activities and insecurities have also led to the state government favoring former jihadi commanders in government positions, assuming that they would be able to handle the situation better than better trained civilian bureaucrats. In addition, the rise of the insurgency has ensured that fewer and fewer individuals are willing to openly join the government, thereby further limiting the pool of available human resources that it can rely on.

It is equally important to remark that a significant number of government officials used to be also part of the mujahideen or communist era administration in the past - thus for the local population they did not reflect a new era (that was initially anticipated), but more of a repeat of problems from pre-Taliban times.

Even if the Taliban as such are not really liked, they are able to provide one single important service to the local community they so very much desire: **justice and security. Until the government can offer the same, it is unlikely to receive popular local support.**

Helping Afghans support political dialogue, as an alternative to violence will prove useless if the authorities cannot demonstrate the achievements of the current government. **We therefore conclude that people need to see (or believe) concrete evidence that the current government is based on political dialogue, representative of the people and can bring them a better life and better future than one based on violence and corruption.**

One of the main criticisms voiced by those interviewed was the perceived Government's incapacity to address people's problems and truly change their lives, despite the enormous amount of aid donated to the country.

Indeed, considering the multiplicity of multi-million dollars projects funded and publicized almost every day on radio and TV in comparison to the local realities in the southern provinces, one must admit that people in the southern rural areas especially with rise of insecurity have seen little change happening on the ground.

In many districts of southern Afghanistan, basic services such as justice, health or education are either not delivered to the populations or only inadequately so, fuelling the people's perception that the government is highly corrupt, spending the money on luxurious villas and cars for government officials and lacing their bank accounts.

Furthermore, inherited from the communist times and to a lesser extent from Daoud Khan's regime, Afghan elders have been raised with a certain ideal of welfare state and have been used to rely on public services; disappointed at a lack of delivery during the present regime.

If "corruption" and "incompetence" are the most often quoted reasons to explain such a disastrous image, these officials are moreover perceived as inaccessible, living in palaces, far away from the people's problems and concerns, with absolutely no sense of reality.

It is interesting to note that the interviews showed that people very clearly trust their Woluswal (district governor) more than their Provincial Governor; even more than a state minister. This is best explained by the fact that the Woluswal (or district Governor) seems to represent for the people “the Voice of the Government” at the local level and as such is believed to relay accurate and trustful information regarding government policies, decisions and decrees.

Even if many interviewees question his effective power and certainly do not really trust his capacity to convey their message at a higher level, **people see him as a reliable source of information, more reliable than higher government figures.**

The Security Forces

Communities again see government forces unorganized and poorly supplied to defend districts under government control. Nevertheless, a big difference of perception exists between the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). If many people praise the ANA for its discipline and professionalism, all people perceive the Afghan National Police (ANP) as corrupted and incapable of fighting the insurgency, emphasizing an obvious and general drug addiction problem in Helmand, Uruzgan, Zabul and Kandahar provinces. This is due to the fact that the ANA is often more diverse and comes from outside the area it serves, while the police is often linked to local strongmen and their clientele.

Even though the ANA was often seen as “just passing through,” when asked if they would comply with a government injunction if the ANA came to their village and forced them, an overwhelming 92% of the people answered yes. This might be because the ANA does constitute an organized government body with ability to coerce through force.

2.3 The Insurgency

It appears that an important feature of the strength of the insurgency is that it is able to engage the various tribes. Thus, while the mujahideen commanders (which often doubled as government actors) fragmented the tribal landscape due to personalized power-struggles, the Taleban is currently able to recruit support from marginalized elements within all tribes. As such, they are a uniting factor among the underdogs in the tribal areas, benefiting from the poor behavior of strong jihadi commanders. However, one should not exaggerate tribal allegiances here, given that no entire tribes stand behind the Taleban, but often only those individuals who felt they were marginalized and lost out.

Furthermore, other factors (e.g., religious indoctrination for example) also play a role. Thus only very general observations can tentatively be made about the level of tribal support towards the insurgency. Still it seems the Neo-Taleban is now managing to draw support from a larger group of tribes than during their first emergence.

The insurgency has in fact shown an ability to capitalize on the mistakes of the government in the past five years, including their ability to exploit the main tribal and factional conflicts and fault lines existing in the districts to their advantage. As such, while we often use the term Taleban and ‘insurgency’ as almost synonymous, it is important to note that the word insurgency would fit better to describe the diversity behind the current anti-government movement, as it is comprised of elements with strong ideologies (Taleban) as well as opportunistic individuals and those with grievances. It is crucial to understand that they are not uniform and differ from district to district in their appearance and ability to draw on tribal support.

High levels of frustration among the local communities with the current instability in the district surveyed could be observed; among the most frustrated, of course, are those individuals who have been intimidated by pro-government forces and overall have felt marginalized by the post-Taleban government. Nevertheless, the majority of the people currently endorse an end to fighting in the districts.

The insurgency is using a combination of religious and historical messages (mainly pointing to the historical context of Afghan resistance against foreign invaders) to increase their support among the local communities. The process of recruitment is ample in the local villages where young men have not much to do outside of farming chores. The Taleban currently are encouraging young men to join them, they are especially good in attracting frustrated and disillusioned young men who are looking for a different future.

The insurgents have been careful enough to embed and camouflage themselves inside the local villages. This means, small mobile groups of 15 to 25 men, move into local villages and keep a low profile. The local vegetation and terrain provides a good cover for the movement of men and supplies.

Parallel Structures (Shadow Government) of Insurgency

The appointment of a council or group of pro-Taleban mullahs to resolve local conflicts can be considered the Taleban's version of a justice/court system, with the appointed mullahs functioning as the judges whose decision and verdicts are backed by Taleban commanders. For example, the Taleban have not only appointed individuals as District Governor and District Police Chief, but also mullahs are appointed to resolve local issues and any administrative issues relating to Taleban.

Those interviewed confirmed that in the war-torn districts of southern Afghanistan, **the insurgents have managed to set up a parallel and functioning administration system, capitalizing on the desertion of most governmental services.** Woluswal (governors) and judges have been appointed by the insurgency in some districts, traveling around the area and delivering some services such as justice and conflict resolution. This has influenced the **perception that the insurgency somehow takes better care of people's daily problems and concerns than the government.**

"We are having two Woluswals in our district; one sent by the government who is staying in the district, the other one is assigned by the Taleban who is stationed in a shrine of the area" noted a farmer in Garamsir district of Helmand.

In Kajaki district of Helmand province, for example, the insurgents have imposed to every household a monthly tax of 600 Afghani (or 12 USD) for electricity. *"And you can trust me that everyone pays, contrary to Kabul..."* added, a teacher from Kajaki district.

The strict enforcement of Sharia, which was not happening before when the Taleban was still trying to "win the hearts and minds" of the people, is gaining momentum, such as prohibition of music, haircut, and the banning of television. In addition communities are forced to follow prayer times where the Taleban are able to enforce it.

Even though the local population is not particular in favor of Taleban governance based on strict Sharia law, they do appreciate that the Taleban tend to manage to bring an extreme level of security and stability. The areas currently under Taleban control tend to be stable. The roads within the district remain open and the movement of local, banditry, illegal checkpoints or criminal activities have been

greatly reduced and in many cases stopped. In “winning the battle of hearts and minds”, it is interesting to remark that one of the insurgents' main achievements is to have convinced people about their omnipotence; even in the areas under governmental control. **People strongly believe that the insurgents hear and see everything and that everything comes under their scrutiny.**

People's perception on the strength of the Taleban

It appears that more and more people are now considering plausible **a Taleban victory** over the governmental and foreign forces. This change of perception on the issue of the conflict obviously affects the tribal policy at a local level, **most of the tribes deciding collectively to bet on both sides of the conflict.**

“As a tribe, we can not afford to be seen as favoring one side rather than the other. Of course, we have Popalzai within the Taleban ranks, as much as we have many of our tribesmen working for the Government; no one knows what will happen in the future...” explained an influent Popalzai leader in Tirin Kot district of Uruzgan.

Such attitude of the tribe was confirmed by a respected Nurzai elder in Gereshk (Helmand) who argued that if his tribe *“decided as a whole to support one of the parties, this could benefit to other rival tribes, if this party was to lose the war”*.

The following may explain this perception: By opposition to foreign troops or ANA who are often seen as “just passing through”, the insurgents are part of the villagers' day-to-day life, hiding during the day but occupying the ground during the night, eating and sleeping in people's homes (people not having any other choice than to “offer them hospitality”).

2.4 International Actors

The ability to distinguish between various nations within NATO engaged in the south (simply through uniforms and flag) seems to be difficult for the local rural population at large. This is mostly true of ISAF convoys on patrols or in combat/mission, at the same time there seems to be a broader understanding in relation to various nations present within their respective provinces. Such as clearly distinguishing British presence in Helmand similarly Canadians in Kandahar that have managed to establish their distinguished identity. However at the same time ‘Americans’ tends to be an overarching term used for all foreign troops in the rural south.

We have to note that interviews showed the people believe they can make such a distinction, but some other statements may indicate that this is not universally true. Thus sometimes different troops still get confused which makes it **important for outsiders to know that boundaries are often blurred.**

“Goodies or badies”? Local perception of international forces

When asked if they would, for example, believe that British soldiers - in order to force the people out of an area and conduct their operations without collateral damages - could have knowingly injected the deadly “bird flu” virus into their chicken and birds, 50% of the participants in the Uruzgan FGDs answered positively while only 20% of the Kandahar interviewees believed that foreign troops could do such things.

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However, in Helmand Province where British troops are heavily engaged in fighting the insurgency, 100% of the participants answered positively to the credibility of such allegation, compared to 0% who believes American troops could do such things.

A shopkeeper from Musa Qala in Helmand asserted: *“I will accept this information about the British troops because they are our enemies since the times of our grand fathers”.*

A farmer in Nowzad district of Helmand confirmed very easily: *“I will believe such information because they have already completely destroyed our villages and continue to air bombard us even though they are in strong contact with Taleban. They can also do such petty things to us”.*

In Zabul Province, the same incredible figures (100% of the participants) could be observed.

Basically a common perception (not only in Helmand but also in Uruzgan, Zabul and Kandahar) is that the British have come back to take revenge from their previous unsuccessful Afghan campaigns and are ready for everything to avoid yet another defeat. At the same time, there is also a strong rumor that seems universally believed by those interviewed: **Almost everyone is convinced that the foreign forces are supporting the insurgents**, quoting countless stories of villagers witnessing air dropping by choppers to the insurgents. *“In our area, most people believe that British troops are having some kind of deal with Taleban. They believe that the British troops are providing food and other supplies to Taleban”* says a teacher in Kajaki district of Helmand Province.

It could appear that such allegations might be the result of military (NATO/CF) special operations that are within insurgency controlled territory. As such operations and recon missions involve small numbers and apply a very stealth approach in largely remote areas, the local people could mistakenly take them for insurgents.

There is also a high level of uncertainty among the local communities regarding the position of international forces in the war against the Taleban.

Despite the NATO superiority and resources, communities feel that the re-emergence of the Taleban has not been dealt with effectively. Communities again see government forces unorganized and poorly supplied to defend districts under government control. In addition they feel there is inadequate backing from NATO. The poor coordination between Afghan and international forces is very visible for the local communities.

Last but not least, it is interesting to highlight the words of a Kandahar resident in the western profiling of the insurgency: *“Stop calling them Taleban for a start. Taleban are Islamic students, people who study God. Of course, if you ask me to squeal on a Taleban, no one will accept to see him handed over to the foreign forces. **Call them bandits or insurgents and nobody will give a damn”.***

3 Findings

3.1 Loss of Influence of Traditional Elders

At the tribal level, it appears that a clear leadership and authority problem exists as it is absolutely impossible - in the four different provinces surveyed - to identify an undisputable and undisputed leader for all the tribe's representatives interviewed. For example, even at the very local level, interviewees from the same district could not agree on the same name to refer to as the most influential person within the community.

Interviews seem to indicate that the tribal leadership and influence in the southern provinces of Afghanistan does not seem to go beyond the geographical scope of the community's territory (village).

For example, if some Popalzai elders from Kandahar Province acknowledge the leadership of Ahmad Wali Karzai (President Karzai's brother) on their tribe, the Popalzai elders from Uruzgan certainly do not recognize it, claiming that a statement from this tribal leader would certainly never engage them. In terms of communication, the tribal leaders having obviously lost their power of influence, it appears that people will seek different views from several influential people at the community level before making a decision; therefore, news or information is considered reliable when it has been acknowledged by at least three different sources, among them the mullah playing an important role for social issues as much as the Woluswal who can be seen as the best relay of information at a community level for all questions related to national politics or local policies.

3.2 Opinion-makers vs. Sources of Information

In the war-torn districts where the tribal system and frame have been shaken by years of conflict, it came out in the interviews that elders perceive that the young generations have slipped through the influence of these community/village elders. For example, when asked about opium or heroin consumption within the community in face-to-face meetings, **all the elders in Helmand province and the face** to a lesser extent in Kandahar expressed their distress in of such situation and their total incapacity - at the tribal level - to influence such antisocial behavior.

Even though community leaders / tribal elders can very much be seen as influential at the community level, we need to differentiate between them being opinion makers vs. simply sources of information or authorities on certain topics. **Most of the participants in our study demonstrate an impressive independence of mind and free will, demanding and crosschecking several different sources of information before making up any decision.**

What one can assert is that if these leaders/ elders are often consulted and their advice requested, this does certainly not mean that all people will follow their decisions or recommendations. Results for media as a source of information, but not as an opinion maker were similar. People consider news accurate and reliable after being announced on one of the international radio stations (BBC, VOA, and RFE) and to a lesser extent on the National Radio or Television (RTA). However, all FGD participants asserted that they would certainly crosscheck the information through different media and discuss the matter with other villagers before making up their mind.

3.3 The Power of Knowledge

The perception of the community leaders (such as tribal elders or mullahs) as important sources and influence very much depends on their recognized level of knowledge or their political or social network beyond the borders of their village or district; a tribal leader for example might be very much perceived as a much more reliable source of information than the mullah or the Woluswal (district governor), if he is believed to have direct access to the provincial or even national authorities (which most of them do not have).

On specific and technical topics such as Reconstruction or Health for example, it appears very clearly that people value first and foremost knowledge or technical expertise, seeking information from technicians (doctors, teachers, engineers) rather than community leaders (elders, mullahs or Woluswal) before making up their choice.

For example, 96% of the interviewees asserted that on a health issue, they would first seek the advice of a doctor before anyone else; the mullah and the elder are being consulted to simply crosscheck the information.

In case of conflicting information between the doctor, the elder, the mullah and the Woluswal, the doctor would be for sure the most reliable source of information for an overwhelming majority of the people (92%), the mullah coming second and the elder third only.

However, in case of conflicting information regarding a governmental order or decree, when asked to rank in order the most trustable sources of information at a local level, 77% of the people answered the Woluswal, the local mullah coming second and the elder third.

3.4 The Influence of Mullahs

It is important to reiterate that in the war-affected areas, a clear differentiation has to be made between **the mullah-e-jangi (or fighting mullah) and the community mullah, the first one inspiring fear while the other inspired mostly respect.**

Community mullahs are consulted on any issue linked to religion and to a greater extent on most of social issues, as Sharia governs almost everyone's daily life and is constantly referred to when a decision has to be taken at the community level through jirgas or shuras (councils). In the southern provinces, due to the decline of the influence of elders, Sharia seems more powerful than the traditional community social code known as Pashtunwali.

In the villages, mullahs remain influential characters, even if they do not voice all opinions openly. Many, for example privately consider defiantly their opinion on many issues, such as politics or governmental related information.

Mullahs can be genuinely considered as a fairly good relay of information at the community level and are often consulted before taking a decision. Moreover it seems that in the rural areas and beyond the borders of the community, spiritual leaders such as "Pirs" and "Sayed" (descendants of the Prophet PBUH) retain very strong influential powers on the people who seek their opinion or interpretation of things.

Interviews showed that the villagers perceive an **announcement made by the mullah at the mosque during the Friday prayer as almost official.** The following example illustrates this.

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- When asked about a health issue, what would make him believe that an information is true, a farmer from Garmsir District of Helmand: *“An announcement from the mullah during the Friday prayer as well as the announcement of a doctor from the Ministry of Public health can surely make me believe that an information is true”*.
- When asked in case of conflicting information between the mullah and a village elder - regarding a government decree or order affecting their lives at the local level - who would they believe most, 59% of the interviewees answered that they would rather trust the mullah.
- When asked who they would refer to before deciding to comply with a governmental order or decree affecting their lives, a significant number of interviewees responded that they would first refer to the mullah rather than to the Woluswal.

The interviews also show that people value proximity over more distant religious higher authorities. For example, at a local level, the provincial Councils of Ulemas appear to be more influential than the National Council of Ulemas. When asked if they would comply with a governmental order relayed on radio/TV by the National Ulema Council, only 17% of Zabul interviewees answered positively compared to 34% if the Provincial Council of Ulemas relayed this order.

This might be best explained by the fact that people can indeed personally identify them and perceive them at some extent as part of the community, valuing their knowledge of the local environment over their religious knowledge.

Mullahs as communicators of information

When trying to assess the level of cooperation that one could expect from the mullahs in terms of relaying information, interviews revealed a surprising good will to collaborate with the authorities regarding general public information affecting positively the community (publicizing health or reconstruction issues for example).

Beside the Provincial Council of Ulemas (who had absolutely no echo in the insurgency influenced areas), mullahs did not acknowledge any formal network on which to inform people at a local level, but all of them asserted having links to the clerics in their neighborhood and asserting that they would be ready to mobilize them if the issue could not be related (or perceived as such) to the Government or the Foreign Forces.

However, when asked if they would accept to undertake training to act as social workers or mobilizers and convey accurate information to their people, **all of them refused, arguing that it would put themselves in great danger** as the insurgents would unquestionably learn about it. Receiving a salary or an incentive for such action would certainly not encourage them to do so, the fear being far more important than the possible gain.

Indeed, we witnessed a very palpable fear during face-to-face interviews with mullahs (from all four provinces of southern Afghanistan) who seemed under extreme pressure, **believing that the insurgents were constantly spying on them.**

It appears that several mullahs in Uruzgan and Kandahar provinces who had been previously on the payroll of the Ministry of Religious Affairs had to refuse their “salary” after receiving direct and serious threats from the insurgents (a message pinned on their door during the night).

In order to participate in the FGD, a mullah from an insurgents' controlled district in Uruzgan Province had to take his mother with him (officially to bring her to hospital) in order to justify his absence and his travel outside the district.

In the same province, another mullah participating in the FGD reflected that before receiving a donation of pens and notebooks for his madrassa, he received a letter pinned up on his door warning him that he would face serious reprisals if he would accept the donation from kafers (non-believers). He refused the donation.

3.5 (Lack of) Trust in Government

Overall, one can say that **the Government suffers from a extremely bad image in the provinces** included in this study. People perceived its representatives as corrupt and inefficient and consequently not trusting their words. For example, people recurrently complain about the very poor delivery of the local and private contractors hired to implement reconstruction projects in the provinces (something which they wanted the government to monitor better).

During face-to-face interviews, for example, those interviewed said that especially if a government order was to affect their lives seriously (such as poppy eradication for example), **almost nobody would today comply with such an order relayed by media.**

If "corruption" and "incompetence" are the most often quoted reasons to explain such a disastrous image, these officials are moreover perceived as inaccessible, living in palaces, far away from the people's problems and concerns, with absolutely no sense of reality.

The interviews show that - as far as authorities / officials are concerned - people value proximity or identifiable individuals at the community level (Woluswal and to a much lesser extend Governor) rather than high ranking personalities (Ministers) based in Kabul, perceived as far from the ground realities and people's concerns. Thus, **people trust more their District Woluswal than their Governor and even more than a state minister.**

In our research a paradox emerged: it appears that this distrust materializes through its representatives (Woluswal, Police officers, Governors and Ministers) but did not seem to affect the President (see later discussion on perception of Karzai). For example, when asked if they would comply with a governmental decree announced through radio or TV by a minister, only 28% of the interviewees answered positively, compared to 76% for a decree announced by the president. A further paradox emerged about trusting government sources in general, vs. those considered as knowledgeable (see earlier discussion on power of knowledge), Indeed, when asked about whom would they consider a trustable source of information regarding a health or a reconstruction issue affecting their specific area, most of the people answered a doctor from the Ministry of Public Health or an engineer from the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Rural Development, compared to much fewer people who would rather trust a doctor or an engineer from a NGO or a private company.

Woluswal-District Governor

The Woluswal (or district Governor) is the closest Government representative that villagers can access and is therefore perceived at some point as “part” of the community, or at least aware of the community's reality.

He represents for the people the voice of the Government at the local level and as such is believed to relay accurate and reliable information regarding Government policies, decisions and decrees. Even if many interviewees question his effective power and certainly do not really trust his capacity to convey their message at a higher level, people do see him as the most reliable source of information at the local level, for all governmental-related information.

In case of conflicting information regarding a governmental order or decree, when asked to rank in order the most trustable sources of information at a local level, 77% of the interviewees answered the Woluswal.

As expressed by an ex-jihadi commander in Uruzgan Province: *“The Woluswal can be trusted because he will not relay an information without verifying its source and its source is always the central Government”.*

Last but not least, it is important to mention here that if information at times can be conveyed from the top to the bottom of the society, the opposite transmission of information (from bottom to top) is perceived by the people almost impossible. There is a strong impression amongst those interviewed that the Government does not feel the pulse of the people nor listen to it.

3.6 Leadership vs. Government

Surprisingly enough possibly, for the Kabul political microcosm, President Karzai remains popular among the people of southern Afghanistan, retaining somehow the trust of the people. He is genuinely perceived as a “good person”, able to unite the Nation, but very much isolated, even within his own ranks and to some extent by his own family.

When asked if they would comply with a President's order announced through radio or TV, 76% of the interviewees asserted that they would obey President Karzai's order, compared to 38% who claim would comply with a relevant Minister's injunction.

Surveying reasons for this belief in leadership, even if there was a distrust in other government structures, two reasons were noticeable:

First, Daoud Khan (the “dictator” deposed by the communist coup) stood out as the only one that people would have obeyed after hearing his speech on radio; *“People respected his power because people knew he worked for them”* was heard many times.

In terms of image, it is interesting to note that many elders could recall stories of Daoud Khan's intransigence when it came to defending people's interest; throwing a Kandahari baker in his tandoor (oven) after traveling to Kandahar and verifying that the man was really cheating on the weight of the bread sold to the people or throwing the chief engineer into the water of the canal he had just built during the opening ceremony in Kunar, after assessing some technical problems. Second, regionalism plays a great role in the perception of President Karzai, many people calling him “our President” and emphasizing their pride to see a Pashtun from the South heading the State. The same phenomenon, however, could be observed regarding Mullah Omar, with people taking great pride of a “hewadwal” (compatriot in Pashto) standing up to the most powerful armed forces in the world.

3.7 The Power of Fear / Coercion

Fear seems to be one of the main factors behind the insurgents' influence in the districts, interviews indicating that intimidation (relayed by word of mouth) seems very efficient. The following statistics illustrate this: **99% of the interviewees asserted that they would strictly comply with an insurgent's order, only 24% of the interviewees believed they would follow their advice.**

For example, a mullah from Panjwae district of Kandahar Province who defiantly and vocally claimed that he would never follow a Taleban advice, admitted that he would of course strictly comply with an order, explaining: *"I think staying alive is the most important thing"*.

The power of coercion

It is somewhat amazing (if not frightening) to observe in the interviews and FGDs the apparent discrepancy between the communication efforts displayed by the Afghan Government and the International community vs. that of the insurgency.

While the international community and the Afghan Government spend millions of dollars on massive communication campaign combining audio, video and print media, a single and simple letter pinned up on someone's door by the Taleban during the night is often enough to convey efficiently a message.

In Kajaki district of Helmand province, for example, the insurgents have imposed to every household a monthly tax of 600 Afghanis (or 12 USD) for electricity. *"And you can trust me that everyone pays, contrary to Kabul..."* added a teacher from Kajaki district.

3.8 The Fear of International / Foreign or non-Afghan Propaganda

A striking lesson that emerged during interviews and FGDs was **an enormous fear among the people of the southern provinces of Afghanistan of being manipulated.** A vast majority of the interviewees believe that the state and its leadership being weak - responsible for the critical political situation - can be attributed to the foreigners and local strong men. *"manipulate the President and forbid him to act by himself"*.

"Propaganda" is a word that was frequently used and repeated during the interviews - an obvious and strong reminiscence from the Afghan communist regime era - and could be perceived as almost **paranoia** in the people's minds.

As a result, regarding information and media, all interviewees demonstrated a great maturity and a surprising responsible citizenship (considering a high illiteracy rate), expressing their need to crosscheck information from several and different sources before considering it as 100% accurate and trustful.

Using audiotapes and VCD to convey messages

Extensively used by the insurgents for their propaganda, audiotapes as much as VCD are seen very logically as propaganda instruments.

However, when asked if a free distribution of audiotapes could be used for public information campaigns and have a significant impact on people's minds, only 14% of the participants answered positively. As explained a resident of Lashkargah district in Helmand Province: *"People will start questioning these free distributions of audiotapes and will believe it is a propaganda tool in favor of the foreigners"*.

A farmer from Panjwae district in Kandahar province confirmed:

“Most of the people have access to radios. Instead of distributing the audiotapes, I think it will be more useful and practical to announce such messages through well known radios like our national radio and TV”.

Asked if a video CD distributed to him could make him believe an information is true, a shopkeeper from Musa Qala district in Helmand answered: *“A movie will certainly not make me believe that something is true. Making fake videos is easy and very possible”.*

3.9 Places of Communication

Very differently from Western individualist cultures, Afghans are very social and talk to each other everywhere, at any time, asking questions, exchanging news and sharing information very commonly. It is very usual and natural to engage conversation with other passengers while traveling on a bus or collective taxis as much as while sitting in a teahouse.

Even though no specific place can be formally identified as the best to exchange information, it came strongly out in interviews that mosques can definitely be seen as the most convenient place to pass on information, as all villagers attend prayers in their local mosque on daily basis.

Traditionally, the village mosque is the place where the largest part of the community interactions occurs (especially as there is generally an absence of similar public gathering places). This makes mosques an ideal social and religious discussion forum.

The village mosque is also to a large extent the communal guesthouse of the village community. Traditionally travelers will go the mosque for shelter and food and villagers will offer guest accommodation and food at the mosque. Sometimes such guest come in large numbers, as it was the case with mujahideen groups during the 1980s and early 1990s and is again the case nowadays with insurgency groups.

It is important to reiterate here that many villagers consider an announcement made during the Friday prayer as almost official.

The insurgency is currently noted to be using the fair (weekly markets) every week and other larger gatherings to denounce the government and those who spy for them using loudspeakers on four-wheel drive vehicles driving through the local markets.

3.10 The Role of Mobile Phones

Text messaging through mobile phones is not yet seen as a relevant way of accessing the people from the rural areas of southern Afghanistan.

More than 80% of the participants believed it could not be used to convey messages efficiently), four reasons can explain this:

- Mobile phones still remain a luxury item in the village,
- Most of the people do not know how it works beside calling and answering calls,
- The dramatic illiteracy rate among the rural population.
- The difficulty to identify the source

A mullah in Panjwae district of Kandahar confirmed: *“Most of the people in rural areas do not understand the different options offered by mobile phones; they just know how to call and how to receive a call”.*

Some people in the FGDs did recall receiving text messages in Pashto (mostly advertisement of the operator) but never from the insurgency.

3.11 Radio as most Powerful Media

Radio remains by far the most popular medium and also the most trusted source of information in the rural areas of southern Afghanistan. Those interviewed tend to listen to the radio on short waves, arguing that is made for a better reception than FM.

The interviews and FDGs shows that news is considered true and reliable if it is broadcast on one of the three main international radio stations (BBC, Voice of America - VOA, Radio Free Europe - RFE) with a very clear preference and trust for BBC.

Nevertheless, a vast majority of those interviewed claimed that if this news was somehow related to their community, they would rather believe a local official (Woluswal or Governor) and nevertheless crosscheck information before considering true and reliable. Thus again, the power of proximity in terms of trusting sources can be observed.

Even though BBC, VOA and RFE remain absolute references for the accuracy and the impartiality of the news (all interviewees declared listening regularly to at least one of these stations), all interviewees expressed their distrust of local radio stations, claiming that these stations were totally under foreign influence having to depend on their funding and relay their messages.

In Uruzgan province for example, an influential elder said: *“I do not believe 1% of what radio Nawa announces; all the programs are propaganda; nothing useful”.* The same kind of remarks could be heard from the people of Helmand where people expressed very little trust for the accuracy of the information broadcast on radio Sabawoon.

A farmer from Lashkargah was quoted saying: *“Last year in Helmand, radio Sabawoon announced that if the people did not support the Taleban, the Government would not eradicate their poppy fields; later on, it became clear that the advertisement was sponsored by the British troops and not by the Government of Afghanistan”.*

Outside local and international radio stations, the official government broadcasters, RTA, is by far the most trusted source of information and one of the most listened, especially regarding information concerning the government.

When asked which radio stations would they recommend (the list submitted to the FGD participants only included national or local radio stations, the others not broadcasting commercials) if the authorities had to broadcast any public service announcements (PSA or short messages) on radio to inform the people of their area, an overwhelming 71% of the interviewees answered RTA, the national and public broadcaster. A shopkeeper in Musa Qala underscores *“About RTA, let me tell you that 100% of our local people are listening to it, including me”.*

One of the reasons to explain this preference is that the state-owned radio is very much seen as “independent”, compared to private stations, which rely on private funding.

As a shopkeeper in Nowzad district of Helmand Province remarked during his face-to-face interview: *“Radio-e-Milli is not private; it is not taking any money from broadcast or advertisement and is surely more trustful when it comes to news”.*

An influential tribal leader from Uruzgan confirmed: *“Actually I do believe 100% on national radio broadcasting from Kabul because it cannot broadcast fake news and information”.*

Radio Programs and Formats

Among popular programs and beside news, many interviewees mentioned the obituary programs as important.

Regarding formats, those interviewed appreciated open discussions and forums around radio roundtables.

In terms of information dissemination, those interviewed **valued confrontational life discussions rather than recorded messages or pre-recorded informational** programs, where people can make their own appreciation of things through arguments and verbal rows. Those interviewed especially valued interactive radio and TV programs where the microphone is given to common people and where listeners or viewers can express their opinions and ideas.

A majority of those interviewed appreciated dramas for the information such format could convey, provided these dramas can prove entertaining.

When asked if they believed that dramas could convey accessible and efficient messages to the people, 83% of Uruzgan participants answered positively for example.

A mullah in Panjwae district of Kandahar Province confirms: *“Our society learnt a lot from the BBC drama, it is interesting as well as very informative. I think it will be useful for the people”.*

3.12 The Weak Influence of TV and Print Media

Television and video

Television remains a very rare luxury in the villages of southern Afghanistan, where only the satellite television channels can be received, provided electricity (generator) and equipment (dish and receiver).

In the areas under the insurgents influence, the privileged few who did possess such equipment had to remove the dish antennas from their roof, fearing some Taleban reaction (it appears that in most cases, this was at their own initiative rather than following a precise and direct threat).

Nevertheless, interviews did suggest clearly that people value the power of image as a proof to verify information.

When asked what would make them believe that news could be 100% true (among a list of different scenarios including all different media), a majority of those interviewed valued pictures, an overall 27% of the interviewees mentioning photos or videos.

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RTA, the national TV broadcaster was quoted numerous times as a popular channel with people retaining an amazing trust of its news. RTA television seems very much to be perceived as even more official than the RTA radio, being the media of reference for governmental communication.

In the urban centers, people who do own television expressed little confidence in private Afghan TV channels, perceiving Tolo TV and Ariana TV as very much Kabul-centered but moreover anti-Pashtun. Leemar (a Pashto TV channel) was apparently much more appreciated than the others, but to a much lesser extent than RTA.

Last but not least, when people do possess TV satellite equipment (in or in the vicinity of urban provincial centers), they also favor Indian or to a lesser extent Pakistani entertainment channels and programs, most of them quoting TV dramas or serials and Bollywood style movies.

Print media

Newspapers are not available in the rural areas of southern Afghanistan and their impact on the populations can therefore not be assessed.

When asked about the best way to make news trustworthy, those interviewed valued the impact of image. Thus one could conclude that posters or leaflets displaying photos and very little text (because of the illiteracy problem) could be used in the rural areas as they convey lasting information (as it was done during both elections). However one should remember while using these media that they could be very much perceived as “propaganda” tools.

Cartoons by comparison were perceived very much as inappropriate as source of information (or opinion former) in contrast to actually images such as photos.

3.13 The power of Music

Music remains extremely popular among people from the southern provinces of Afghanistan, as most of those interviewed claimed to only interrupt their musical program on radio to listen to the news, usually on international radio stations (BBC, VOA or RFE).

Those interviewed (a majority above 40 years old) expressed a clear preference for Afghan traditional musicians and local Pashto singers, such as Obeidullah Kandahari, Wali Mahammad Kandahari, Abdullah Muquri or Nagma (a woman Pashto singer).

Pashto Pakistani singers were less popular among the older people, especially in Kandahar and Helmand where elders praised the Kandahari poetry.

These traditional musical tastes are not shared by the younger generations, who rather listen to Indian music (Bollywood style music) or also Pakistani pop music.

A farmer from Garmser district in Helmand emphasized the importance of music: *“Even in Taleban controlled areas people listen to music and most of the people in our areas listen to Pashto songs”*. In Kandahar Province for example, if nobody quoted Radio Rana (broadcast by the Canadian Army) as a regular or reliable source of information, several interviewees - during the interviews and FGDs - praised their musical programs, where people can call and dedicate the song through a phone message.

4 Conclusions

- Influential individuals (tribal elders, community leaders) at the community level certainly have an important consultative role - especially among the older generations - but can certainly not be considered as opinion makers.
- In the insecure districts and to a larger extent in all the southern provinces of the country, it appears that the younger generation has almost completely slipped through the influence of these community/village elders.
- News or information is considered reliable when it has been acknowledged by at least three different sources, among them the mullah playing an important role for social issues as much as the Woluswal.
- The Woluswal can be seen as the best relay of information at a community level for all questions related to national politics or local policies.
- In terms of transmission of information, people value proximity, trusting local people, who are perceived as more capable of understanding and sharing their day-to-day life and reality. For example, people trust their Woluswal more than their Governor and even more than a state minister.

In that regard, it seems necessary to work on improving the image (and therefore the communication potential) of the Government representatives (Ministers and Governors) who suffer from a disastrous public image.

“Corruption” and “incompetence” are the most often quoted reasons to explain the distrust in government. Government officials are perceived as inaccessible, living in palaces, far away from the people's problems and concerns, with absolutely no sense of reality.

- In terms of presidential image, it is interesting to note that many elders praised Daoud Khan's presidency more than any other political leader.

Beside his Pashtun and southern affiliation, many elders remember him as a “strong leader and a great Statesman”, recalling stories of Daoud Khan's intransigence when it came to defending people's rights and interest; throwing for example a Kandahari baker in his tandoor (oven) after traveling to Kandahar and verifying that the man was really cheating on the weight of the bread sold to the people.

As pointed out mischievously by some influential tribal leader from Kandahar, “nobody in Kandahar has ever met this burnt Kandahari baker, but Daoud Khan could rely on very good secret police that surely invented the story and spread the rumor...”

- Our research indicated that possibly more than the social status of any influential individual (except for the President), the vehicle through which information or news is relayed, bestows a value to this information or news, radio or television making it official or trustable for an overwhelming majority of the people.
- The research indicated a general fear of manipulation; the word “propaganda” is commonly used to qualify communication developed by the Government and moreover by the international community (not to mention the foreign forces).

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Therefore, people are used to verify and crosscheck any news or information from different and various sources, including influential individuals but moreover through media.

- The BBC, VOA and RFE are largely and strongly perceived as very trustable source of information and one can almost say that news is considered “official” and true when broadcast through these networks.
- RTA, the public service radio (and TV) station enjoys a surprising popularity among the villagers of southern Afghanistan and should definitely be considered as a very interesting channel of communication to reach these populations, when considering media placement for public information campaigns.
- Our research shows very little confidence for the news and information broadcast through local FM radio stations, perceived as “propaganda instruments” established and funded by foreigners.
- Audiocassettes and video CD are not believed to convey true and reliable information, even though being used extensively by the insurgency. These “propaganda” tools are perceived as easy to communicate fake information.
- Even though radio remains by far the most popular medium and the most trusted source of information, it appears that people do value pictures to assess the truth and the reality of information. One could say that people need to see to believe, or at least assess facts authenticated by different credible sources rather than just words.
- Helping Afghans support political dialogue, as an alternative to violence will prove useless if the authorities cannot demonstrate very practically and visually the achievements of the current regime. Again, people need to see (or believe) concrete evidences that the regime based on political dialogue can bring them a better life and better future than the one based on violence.
- One of the main criticisms heard during interviews was the perceived Government's incapacity to address people's problems and truly change their lives, despite the enormous amount of aid donated to the country. People feel that little has changed for them, despite all the millions of dollars of international aid.

In many districts of southern Afghanistan (mostly due to insecurity), basic services such as justice, health or education are not delivered to the populations, influencing the people's perception that the Government is only spending the money on luxurious villas and cars, when not stealing it.

This incapacity to impose the law and provide good governance is surely one of the main reasons behind the perceived weakness of government.

- The insurgents' main achievement is to have precisely imposed their omnipotence on the people's minds; even in the areas under governmental control, people strongly believe that the insurgents hear and see everything and that everything comes under their scrutiny.

In contrast to foreign troops or ANA who are often seen as “just passing through”, the insurgents are part of the villagers' day-to-day life, hiding during the day but occupying the ground during the night, eating and sleeping in people's homes (people not having any other choice than to “offer them hospitality”).

In many insecure districts of southern Afghanistan, the insurgents have set up a parallel and functioning administration system, capitalizing on the desertion of most governmental services and fuelling the perception that the insurgency somehow takes better care of people's daily problems and concerns than the Government; Woluswal and judges have been appointed by the insurgency in some districts, traveling around the area and delivering some services such as Justice.

- There is a great necessity to disaggregate the Taleban. Nowadays every anti-government or even banditry crime is attributed to the insurgents, generically called "Taleban" without any distinction. Here it is important to note that Taleban referring to religion (and somehow sacred) in the Afghan collective unconscious, it could prove vital in the future to brand the insurgency differently (branding them for example "insurgents" or "criminals") or at least differentiate the elements of the insurgency.

"Stop calling them Taleban for a start. Taleban are Islamic students, people who study God. Of course, if you ask me to squeal on a Taleban, no one will accept to see him handed over to the foreign forces. Call them bandits or insurgents and nobody will give a damn" pointed out a Kandahar resident.

5 Recommendations

- Local shuras or jirgas hosting or convened by the Woluswal can be considered the most interesting places/moments to deliver messages to the people and answer questions on behalf of the official authorities/government, as they usually gather all the local community leaders (including the mullahs).

These events and their outcome should be publicized through the national and public broadcaster RTA through its regional station's network.

- BBC, VOA and RFE are the most trusted radio stations, but it might prove difficult to rely on their full cooperation to inform or influence people, as they are less likely to accept outside material.

Therefore, RTA could be considered as a credible alternative channel to support any large-scale communication campaign targeting the rural general populations.

- People genuinely appreciate open discussions and forums around roundtables (radio and television); gathering identified knowledgeable individuals such as scholars or scientists and where people believe they can make their own opinion. Among recognized technicians, civil servants seem to enjoy great trust compared for example to NGO workers.

When talking about the local implementation of a reconstruction project for example during a radio program, the message will prove much more trustworthy if it comes from the mouth of a local civil engineer rather than from the Minister himself.

- In order to change the Government's devastating image, it appears crucial to show Ministers and Governors at work, in the field, sharing people's daily concerns and suffering and answering people's questions.

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Reportages in the field, talk shows and open discussions forum where the accountability of these authorities is challenged should be produced and broadcast through appropriate media.

- It emerged that the people retain some confidence in the Presidency and that he should definitely be “used” more often to deliver messages to his people.
- One of the main objectives that communications will have to achieve is to show that where there is no violence, government authorities and the international community is able to provide support and services to the people. This means, the reality has to change and correspond more to messages produced. Otherwise messages are considered as propaganda and not trusted.
- Radio and TV crews need to get out of Kabul and go the field, focusing less on Minister's ribbon cutting when reporting about projects but more on local people interviews, asking and showing how projects have impacted on their lives and emphasizing the commitment and the work of national stakeholders (authorities and contractors).
- Following announcements of funding and project's signing (through radio or television), media should follow-up the story and cover the successful implementation of projects in peaceful areas of the country (or moreover in peaceful districts of their province).
- Taking into consideration the general fear of manipulation and despite the project's visibility usually imposed by the donors, international stakeholders need to understand that branding a communication / public information campaign will prove absolutely counter-productive.
- A communication campaign aimed at promoting peaceful conflict resolution and targeting the youth (the age-bracket for the insurgency recruitment) should be designed and tailored specifically.

It appears that this younger group have different media consumption habits from its elders, looking for entertainment (music broadcast on radio and serials or movies broadcast on TV) as a way to escape their idleness and boredom.

A very subliminal approach needs to be developed in order to reach this segment of the population, betting on a long-term approach.

In that regard, infotainment programs (combining information and entertainment) could appear to represent a solution; one can believe that TV and radio serials or soap operas containing messages could attract young audiences, as much as songs/music could also positively influence the younger generations.

- Finally, it could prove very interesting in the future to better understand the influential power of women within the family circle.

Indeed, despite the heavy “clichés” regarding the social role of women in Afghanistan, many indicators show that within the family inner circle, women retain a very strong influence on their children's perception of things, shaping their personalities and their understanding of the World.

Considering the young age of most of the insurgents, it could prove vital in the future to not neglect this specific segment of the population when promoting peace and political dialogue.