



How to cite this article:

Nikoui, K., Tohidfam, M., & Soltani, A. (2027). Development Policymaking for Justice and Social Equality in Afghanistan (2004–2021). *Journal of Historical Research, Law and Policy*, 5(3), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jhrp.372>



Article history:
Original Research

Dates:

Submission Date: 11 March 2026

Revision Date: 23 June 2026

Acceptance Date: 30 June 2026

First Publication Date: 13 July 2026

Final Publication Date: 01 May 2027

Development Policymaking for Justice and Social Equality in Afghanistan (2004–2021)

1. Kambakhsh. Nikoui ¹ : Ph.D. student, Department of Political Science, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
2. Mohammad. Tohidfam ^{2*}: Department of Political Science, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
3. Alireza. Soltani ³: Department of Political Science, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

*corresponding author's email: tohidfam@iau.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the policies, programs, and strategies of the Afghan government in the field of developing justice and social equality from 2004 to 2021. The main research question is the extent to which the policies of this period, within the framework of institutionalism and the theories of justice proposed by John Rawls and Nancy Fraser, contributed to the realization of social justice. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the integration of historical institutionalism, Rawls's theory of justice as fairness, and Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional model of justice. This research was conducted using a qualitative approach through content analysis of Afghanistan's development documents and semi-structured interviews with university professors, government employees, and civil society activists. The data were examined using MAXQDA software and thematic analysis. The findings indicate that although policies in the areas of redistributing educational, health, and infrastructural services led to a relative improvement in access, institutional weakness, corruption, insecurity, and dependence on foreign aid prevented the sustainable realization of social justice, while the dimensions of recognition and participation received less effective attention.

Keywords: *social justice; public policymaking; historical institutionalism; Rawls's theory of justice; Nancy Fraser's justice; Afghanistan.*

Introduction

After 2004 and the establishment of the republican system in Afghanistan, social justice and equality were introduced as key objectives of state-building and central axes of public policymaking. With the support of the international community, the government attempted to reconstruct administrative structures, enhance institutional capacity, and expand public services at the national and local levels. The formulation of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, administrative reform programs, and sector-based policies indicated that social justice was regarded not merely as a political ideal, but as part of the official state agenda after 2004 (1, 2). Despite these efforts, evidence obtained from the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews shows that these policies were shaped from the outset within fragile, centralized institutional structures influenced by political and external interventions (AC01; GD01; CS01). This situation caused extensive structural, institutional, and security-related



challenges to obstruct the practical realization of justice-oriented objectives and highlighted the need to rethink the policies and their consequences.

Accordingly, in such a context, the main question of this study emerges from the gap between “what was designed” and “what was realized.” Although official government documents presented a comprehensive set of justice-oriented programs in the fields of education, health, infrastructure, social welfare, and civic participation, the findings derived from MAXQDA analysis indicate that these policies were largely formulated and implemented in a linear, top-down manner, with limited participation by real stakeholders (AC02; GD02; CS03). Structural inequalities, weak administrative capacity, systemic corruption, insecurity, and heavy dependence on foreign aid prevented a significant portion of these policies from being transformed into sustainable outcomes. This situation constitutes the central problem of the study: how social justice policies in Afghanistan were designed, under what influences they were shaped, and why some of them failed at the implementation stage.

Therefore, to analyze this issue scientifically, the theoretical framework of the study is based on three complementary approaches. First, historical institutionalism makes it possible to examine social justice policymaking within the context of historical trajectories, power structures, institutional lock-in, and administrative constraints; these concepts were repeatedly emphasized in the narratives of university professors and government employees as major obstacles to effective policymaking (AC01; AC03; GD03). Second, John Rawls’s theory of justice as fairness provides criteria for evaluating redistributive policies and equality of opportunity (3). The qualitative findings show that social justice policies during this period mainly focused on the minimal expansion of access to services and were less able to produce equality of opportunities and outcomes (GD01; AC02). Third, Nancy Fraser’s three-dimensional model of justice, comprising redistribution, recognition, and participation, extends the analysis of justice beyond the economic level to the domains of identity and participation (4). Analysis of interviews with civil society activists shows that the two dimensions of recognition and participation, especially for women, minorities, and marginalized groups, remained symbolic and non-institutionalized in the policymaking of this period (CS01; CS02; CS03).

On this basis, the main research question is formulated as follows: How were the social justice policies of the Afghan government during the period from 2004 to 2021 designed and implemented, and to what extent were they able, within the framework of historical institutionalism and the theories of justice proposed by Rawls and Fraser, to lead to the realization of justice and social equality? This question is based on hypotheses rooted in historical evidence and empirical findings. First, the social justice policies of this period were mainly focused on the redistribution of services, while the two dimensions of recognition and equal civic participation received less effective attention (AC01; CS02). The second hypothesis is that weak institutional capacity, systemic corruption, administrative incoherence, insecurity, and dependence on foreign aid were the main obstacles to the realization of social justice; even when policies were designed comprehensively, these conditions did not allow their full implementation (GD02; GD03; AC03). It is also assumed that, due to a long history of fragility and historical lock-in, institutional structures were unable to transform justice-oriented policies into sustainable outcomes; this issue was emphasized as a shared factor by all three groups of interviewees.

In this regard, the significance of this study lies in the fact that social justice has been one of the most fundamental needs and demands of Afghan society over the past two decades, and the failure of related policies has had direct effects on stability, welfare, and state legitimacy. The findings of MAXQDA analysis indicate that the failure of these policies was not merely caused by a shortage of resources, but was the product of a complex interaction among

institutional weakness, politicization, external dependence, and the exclusion of citizens' genuine participation (AC02; CS03; GD01). A systematic analysis of these policies within a precise theoretical framework can contribute both to understanding the causes of past failures and to designing future policies. Moreover, the absence of in-depth theoretical-empirical studies in this field further reinforces the necessity of this research. Thus, examining the process of social justice policymaking in Afghanistan from 2004 to 2021 shows that, despite the extensive design of justice-oriented programs and the considerable increase in international financial resources, structural and institutional limitations prevented these programs from being transformed into sustainable achievements. By relying on a multidimensional theoretical framework and empirical findings derived from qualitative analysis, this study seeks to provide a scientific and precise account of the reasons for these failures and to show that the future path of social justice in Afghanistan requires a fundamental rethinking of public policymaking and institutional capacities.

Research Background and Literature Review

The existing literature on social justice in Afghanistan from 2004 to 2021 shows that studies have mostly focused on institutional, developmental, and governance-related dimensions, while few have offered a systematic analysis based on the theories of justice developed by John Rawls and Nancy Fraser and the approach of historical institutionalism. A critical review of this literature shows that although concepts such as state-building, administrative reform, development, and political participation have been widely discussed, social justice has mostly been examined implicitly rather than as an independent analytical framework. The findings derived from the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews also confirm this gap; all three groups of interviewees identified the absence of a coherent theoretical framework in social justice policymaking as one of the main causes of the failure of these policies (AC01; CS02; GD01). Therefore, in general, the research background can be categorized into four main areas.

Institutional Studies, Governance, and State Capacity in Afghanistan

A significant portion of the existing literature focuses on state fragility, weak administrative capacity, systemic corruption, and the role of informal power networks in Afghanistan. In this regard, the works of Afghan and non-Afghan authors have made important contributions to explaining the institutional context of policymaking. Mujib al-Rahman Rahimi, through a critical examination of Afghanistan's political structure and order after 2001, considers the absence of an effective governance mechanism and the establishment of a form of authority-centered centralization as the main causes of the continuation of conflict and the failure of social justice (5). Similarly, Abdul Ali Mohammadi, in *Afghanistan and the Modern State*, examines the process of state-building and legal mechanisms and shows that public policies after 2001 were mostly designed on the basis of ethnic and network-based mechanisms, which prevented the institutionalization of social justice and equality (6).

In addition, Kai Eide, in his analysis of the experience of the United Nations mission in Afghanistan, refers to intra-elite conflicts, the role of external actors, and their impact on the policymaking process (7). Timor Sharan, in *The Network State: Power and Wealth Relations in Afghanistan after 2001*, shows that ethnic-jihadi networks and political oligarchies played a decisive role in weakening justice-oriented policies and gender equality (8). Related analyses focusing on the crisis of political-economic policies and the role of international institutions have also attributed the failure of public policies to the weakness of state structures and external dependence (9).

Accordingly, the findings of the semi-structured interviews in this study, particularly the views of university professors and government employees, are consistent with this literature and show that although institutional structures after 2004 were formally reconstructed, due to historical lock-in, centralization, and politicization, they lacked the capacity to transform justice-oriented policies into sustainable outcomes (AC03; GD03). However, most of these studies have examined social justice not as an independent analytical category, but on the margins of discussions of state-building and governance.

Studies on the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and Government Development Documents

Studies related to the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and other government development documents have mainly focused on macroeconomic dimensions, infrastructure development, governance reform, security, and poverty reduction. These studies show that the National Development Strategy, as a comprehensive document, had defined broad objectives for the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan, but its implementation faced serious institutional, security, and managerial challenges. However, the analysis of these documents from the perspective of social justice, especially based on the theories of justice developed by Rawls and Fraser, has been very limited and constitutes an important gap in the research literature.

In this regard, studies on the pathology of Afghanistan's developmental policymaking from 2004 to 2021 have criticized development policies and shown that these policies focused more on achieving quantitative and project-based objectives than on structural justice (10). The findings of MAXQDA analysis also reinforce this conclusion; government employees and civil society activists stated that development policies were mainly designed according to the logic of service redistribution rather than legal recognition or genuine citizen participation (GD02; CS01).

Theoretical Literature on Social Justice: Rawls, Fraser, and Historical Institutionalism

Studies that directly address theories of social justice are mainly located within the fields of political philosophy and public policymaking, and they have rarely been applied to the analysis of Afghanistan's experience. John Rawls defines justice as fairness and emphasizes the fair distribution of basic liberties and opportunities, especially in favor of disadvantaged groups (3, 11). Nancy Fraser, by presenting a three-dimensional model of justice, extends the analysis of justice to the domains of economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and political participation (4, 12). Alongside these two approaches, historical institutionalism, with its focus on historical trajectories, institutional lock-in, and the role of formal and informal institutions, provides a suitable framework for analyzing the sustainability or failure of justice-oriented policies (13, 14). Despite the theoretical richness of these approaches, their application to the analysis of social justice in Afghanistan has been limited and has often remained abstract. The findings of the semi-structured interviews show that social justice policymaking in Afghanistan was practically devoid of a conscious connection with these theoretical frameworks, and this led to a focus on the redistributive dimension and neglect of the dimensions of recognition and participation (AC01; CS03).

Studies on Civil Society, Civic Participation, and Human Rights in Afghanistan

Studies in this field focus on the growth of civil society, women's participation, human rights, the media, and the role of local institutions over the past two decades. This literature shows that despite the relative development of civil society, effective citizen participation in public policymaking remained limited and largely symbolic. However, most of these studies have not analyzed the relationship between political participation and social justice within the

theoretical framework of Rawls and Fraser. The findings derived from MAXQDA analysis, especially from the perspective of civil society activists, show that the exclusion or marginalization of vulnerable groups from the decision-making process was one of the key factors in the failure of social justice policies (CS02; CS03). These findings further highlight the existing gap in the research literature. Overall, although numerous studies have addressed state-building, development, governance, and civil society in Afghanistan, the analysis of social justice policies based on a combined theoretical framework comprising historical institutionalism, Rawlsian justice, and Fraser's three-dimensional model of justice has remained neglected. This study seeks to fill this gap by relying on policy documents, institutional analysis, and qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews, and to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the experience of social justice in Afghanistan from 2004 to 2021.

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

The theoretical framework of this study is based on three complementary approaches, each of which contributes to explaining social justice and the policymaking process in Afghanistan from a different angle. The selection of these approaches is based not only on the theoretical literature, but also on the recurring patterns extracted from the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews using MAXQDA software; the empirical data show that the analysis of social justice in Afghanistan would be incomplete without simultaneous attention to institutional structures, normative criteria of justice, and participatory and identity-based dimensions (AC01; GD01; CS02).

Historical Institutionalism

Historical institutionalism emphasizes the role of institutions, path dependency, institutional lock-in, and gradual change in the formation of public policies (13). This approach makes it possible to analyze Afghanistan's social justice policies within the context of structural transformations after 2004, state reconstruction, international interventions, and limitations in administrative capacity. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, policies are not merely the product of momentary rational decisions, but the result of the interaction of power, formal structures, informal networks, and the legacy of past governance.

In line with this view, the study by Tohidfame and Tousarkani on the media policymaking model shows that public policymaking in transitional contexts is strongly affected by "established institutional rules, informal mechanisms, and dependence on previous trajectories," such that even when official objectives and discourses change, patterns of decision-making and implementation persist (14). This finding is consistent with the concept of "institutional lock-in" in historical institutionalism and shows that policy reforms, without changes in the institutional context, often lead to the reproduction of past patterns. In the same vein, the authors emphasize that public policymaking, including social justice policymaking, is not a linear and purely state-centered process, but is shaped within a network of formal and informal actors, power relations, and institutional norms—an issue that becomes more intense and complex in fragile and post-conflict countries. This is particularly important in Afghanistan, where the state after 2004 faced institutional weakness and the influence of informal structures.

The findings of MAXQDA analysis reinforce this theoretical interpretation; all three groups of interviewees referred to the persistence of centralized patterns, weak institutional coordination, and the reproduction of informal mechanisms of power. University professors and government employees emphasized that even justice-oriented policies designed after 2004 could not produce sustainable outcomes because of institutional lock-in, state fragility, and the politicization of institutions (AC03; GD03). This situation is consistent with Tohidfame's analysis, which

shows that in the absence of deep institutional reforms, policies in the stages of implementation and evaluation are diverted from their initial objectives under the influence of informal networks and established power structures (14).

Therefore, the integration of historical institutionalism with the findings of contemporary institution-centered studies shows that the failure of social justice policies in Afghanistan should not be sought merely in weak policy design, but in the “continuity of institutional trajectories, the lock-in of power structures, and the inability to transform the formal and informal rules governing the policymaking process.” Thus, historical institutionalism provides an appropriate analytical framework for understanding the persistence of inequalities and the failure of justice-oriented reforms in Afghanistan.

John Rawls's Theory of Justice

Justice is a multidimensional concept that refers to the fair distribution of social benefits and burdens, the guarantee of equal access to rights and opportunities, and respect for human dignity (15). In political science, social justice is regarded as a fundamental normative criterion for evaluating policies and the performance of public institutions and therefore occupies a central position in public policy debates. In political philosophy, theories of justice have presented diverse approaches to the nature and realization of justice. Some of these approaches emphasize “equality of outcomes” and define justice in terms of equal or fair outputs, whereas others focus on “equality of opportunity” and argue that justice is realized when all individuals have an equal chance to access resources, positions, and social offices, even if final outcomes differ. In this context, John Rawls, by presenting the theory of “justice as fairness,” sought to provide a normative framework for designing social institutions and evaluating public policies. Rawls explains justice within the framework of a hypothetical social contract and from the standpoint of the “original position” and the “veil of ignorance,” and proposes two fundamental principles of justice: first, the principle of “equal basic liberties,” which guarantees the equal enjoyment of fundamental political and civil liberties by all citizens; and second, the “difference principle,” according to which social and economic inequalities are legitimate only if they bring the greatest benefit to the least advantaged groups in society (11). These principles provide a normative and institutional basis for evaluating policies and governance structures.

From this perspective, social justice in Rawls's theory is not limited merely to the distribution of economic resources, but encompasses broader domains of social life. Therefore, the analysis of justice in public policymaking requires simultaneous attention to “distributive indicators” regarding the allocation of resources, “participatory indicators” regarding the level and quality of participation by social groups in decision-making, and “normative and ethical indicators” regarding fairness and respect for human dignity (16).

For this reason, in complementing this framework, Nancy Fraser conceptualizes social justice in three dimensions: “redistribution, recognition, and representation or political participation.” In her view, just policymaking is realized only when, in addition to the fair distribution of resources, identities and social differences are recognized and all groups have the possibility of effective presence and representation in the political arena (4). Moreover, Amartya Sen, through the “capability approach,” emphasizes that justice is not limited merely to access to resources, but must also consider individuals' real capacity to use these resources and transform them into genuine life opportunities (17).

On this basis, social justice in public policymaking is not merely an ethical principle or an abstract ideal, but an analytical and practical framework for guiding the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies. Neglecting justice can lead to a crisis of political legitimacy, the intensification of inequalities, and the weakening of social

cohesion; ultimately, through growing public dissatisfaction and the exclusion of citizens from the political order, this situation endangers the stability and survival of the ruling order. Within this framework, Rawls's theory of justice, by emphasizing the two fundamental principles of the fair distribution of basic liberties and opportunities and the regulation of inequalities in favor of the least advantaged, offers clear normative criteria for evaluating public policies (18).

Accordingly, this understanding is also consistent with institution-centered analyses in the field of governance; Tohidfame, by emphasizing the link between good governance and social policies, shows that social justice becomes realizable when states move beyond the distribution of services and pay attention to reforming institutional rules, guaranteeing equality of opportunity, and enhancing accountability and citizen participation (1). From this perspective, social justice is part of the basic structure of society and is directly linked to political legitimacy and social cohesion.

The analysis of the qualitative data in this study shows that social justice policies from 2004 to 2021 were mainly designed on the basis of a minimal interpretation of Rawlsian justice. Interviewees, especially government employees, interpreted social justice more as the expansion of access to basic services than as the realization of genuine equality of opportunity or the reform of institutional and structural inequalities (GD01; GD02). This pattern of policymaking is consistent with Tohidfame's findings, which show that in many developing countries, social policies are limited to the distribution of short-term benefits and, due to weak governance, fail to intervene in the structures that generate inequality (1).

From a Rawlsian perspective, such a focus on service distribution, without intervention in unequal structures of power and opportunity, cannot lead to the realization of "justice as fairness." Tohidfame also emphasizes that social security and welfare policies acquire a justice-oriented character only when, within the framework of good governance, they lead to the fair redistribution of opportunities, the reduction of institutional inequalities, and the strengthening of social participation; otherwise, these policies will perform merely a palliative and temporary role (1).

On this basis, John Rawls's theory of justice, in combination with the good governance approach, provides a critical framework for assessing the gap between the declared objectives of policies and their actual outcomes in the Afghan context; this framework shows that social justice is realized not through the minimal expansion of services, but through the reform of institutional structures, the guarantee of equal opportunities, and the institutionalization of accountability and citizen participation.

Nancy Fraser's Theory of Justice

Nancy Fraser considers justice to be a three-dimensional phenomenon comprising redistribution, or the fair distribution of economic resources and opportunities; recognition, or the elimination of discrimination and the recognition of cultural, gender, and social differences; and participation, or equal access by different groups to political decision-making and public policymaking processes (12).

This approach is particularly important for the study of social justice in Afghanistan because economic inequalities, ethnic and gender cleavages, and limitations on political participation have simultaneously affected public policymaking. The findings of MAXQDA analysis show that Afghanistan's social justice policies were mainly focused on the redistributive dimension, while the two dimensions of recognition and participation, especially in

relation to women, minorities, and marginalized groups, remained symbolic and non-institutionalized (CS01; CS02; CS03).

In this regard, civil society activists emphasized in the interviews that the exclusion or merely formal participation of citizens in the decision-making process was one of the main causes of the failure of social justice policies. These findings show that Fraser's three-dimensional model provides an appropriate framework for analyzing social justice in Afghanistan not only theoretically, but also empirically.

Therefore, combining historical institutionalism, Rawls's theory of justice, and Fraser's three-dimensional model of justice makes it possible to provide a multidimensional analysis of social justice policies; such an analysis attends both to the institutional and historical structures of policymaking and to the normative and participatory criteria of justice. The findings derived from the analysis of semi-structured interviews show that the selection of this theoretical framework is not merely an abstract choice, but a methodical response to the real patterns observed in the experience of social justice policymaking in Afghanistan. This theoretical framework provides an analytical foundation for examining the design, implementation, and consequences of social justice policies from 2004 to 2021.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach based on descriptive-analytical documentary analysis and the analysis of semi-structured interviews. The objective is to understand and explain how policies of justice and social equality were formed and implemented in Afghanistan from 2004 to 2021 and to evaluate them within the theoretical framework of historical institutionalism and the theories of justice developed by Rawls and Fraser. The combination of documentary and qualitative data makes it possible to analyze more precisely the gap between official policies and the practical experiences of policy and social actors.

Accordingly, the research data were collected from five categories of sources: policy documents of the Afghan government, including the National Development Strategy, national and sectoral development programs, and governance reform documents; reports of international institutions, such as the World Bank and UNDP; academic studies and research related to social justice and public policymaking; secondary analysis of governance, human development, and inequality indicators; and finally, semi-structured interviews with three groups: university professors, government employees, and civil society and human rights activists. The interviews were conducted in accordance with research ethics principles, and to preserve confidentiality, the names of interviewees were removed and a specific code was assigned to each interview.

Therefore, the qualitative data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software. In this process, the interviews were first transcribed and then analyzed through the stages of initial and axial coding. The extracted concepts were matched with the theoretical categories of historical institutionalism, Rawlsian justice, and Fraser's three-dimensional model of justice in order to identify dominant patterns, points of conflict, and gaps between policy design and practical implementation. As a complement to documentary analysis, the qualitative data made it possible to systematically incorporate the perceptions and evaluations of different actors involved in the process of social justice policymaking into the final analysis.

Accordingly, the analysis process was conducted at three complementary levels: first, describing justice-oriented objectives and mechanisms in key development documents; second, conducting an institutional-structural analysis of capacities, power relations, and path dependencies that affected policymaking; and third, conducting a normative

analysis based on the theories of Rawls and Fraser to assess the degree of policy alignment with the principles of fairness, redistribution, recognition, and participation. This integrated approach enables the study, beyond merely describing policies, to provide a critical and multidimensional analysis of the experience of social justice in Afghanistan.

Macro-Level Social Justice Policies in Afghanistan (2004–2021)

The findings derived from the analysis of semi-structured interviews, which were coded and analyzed using MAXQDA software, show that macro-level social justice policies in Afghanistan after 2004 were mainly grounded in the framework of the “Afghanistan National Development Strategy” and were based on three axes: security, governance, and socioeconomic development. Interviewees evaluated these policies as an effort toward “redistributing resources, expanding public services, and strengthening formal institutions,” while at the same time emphasizing the significant gap between their declared objectives and practical outcomes (AC01; GD01; CS02).

The analysis of national policy documents also confirms these findings. Afghanistan’s “National Social Policy,” as the first formal framework of the government for realizing social justice, defined poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon and emphasized support for vulnerable groups, social protection, and equal access to basic services (1). However, rather than focusing on structural empowerment and sustainable economic reforms, this document adopted a supportive and state-centered approach; according to many interviewees, this contributed to the continuation of social dependence and limited the sustainable effects of social justice (CS03; GD02). In the same vein, the “Afghanistan Education Sector Strategy” introduced education as a key instrument for realizing social justice and human development and emphasized equal access, the reduction of gender and regional gaps, and the improvement of educational quality (10). This document regards education as the foundation of social mobility and inequality reduction; however, the field findings show that weak institutional capacity, inequality in the distribution of educational resources, and insecurity prevented the practical realization of educational justice and, in some cases, contributed to the reproduction of social inequalities (AC02; CS01).

On the other hand, the “Afghanistan National Sustainable Development Goals” document, as a macro-level and overarching framework, formulated social justice in relation to goals such as poverty reduction, inequality reduction, quality education, and accountable institutions (9). This document sought to align Afghanistan’s social policies with the global sustainable development agenda; however, the analysis of interviews and documents shows that the objectives of this document largely remained at the level of normative commitments and, due to weak institutional coordination and the absence of binding implementation mechanisms, did not lead to tangible outcomes in the field of social justice (GD03; AC04).

On this basis, the analysis of policy documents and the qualitative findings of the study show that although social justice policies in Afghanistan from 2004 to 2021 emphasized equality and social justice at the discursive and documentary levels, in practice they faced a serious gap between “policymaking and implementation” under the influence of structural challenges such as weak governance, dependence on foreign aid, insecurity, and limited institutional capacity.

Institutionalism and Justice: The Role of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy

Based on MAXQDA analysis, the “Afghanistan National Development Strategy” was one of the most frequently repeated concepts in the interviews. University professors regarded this document as the first coherent attempt to

move policymaking from a personalized and informal condition toward an institutional and program-oriented framework. From the perspective of government employees, this strategy, by emphasizing poverty reduction, service development, and institutional strengthening, was consistent with Rawlsian principles of justice, especially equality of opportunity and support for disadvantaged groups. The qualitative analysis shows that although the National Development Strategy theoretically encompassed all three dimensions of justice in Fraser's model, in practice its institutional and executive dimensions faced serious limitations because of weak state capacity and institutional lock-in (AC03; GD01).

Therefore, in complementing these findings, an examination of related policy documents shows that Afghanistan's "National Social Policy" was practically defined in continuation of the National Development Strategy and sought to institutionalize social justice through the redistribution of resources, the establishment of social protection, and support for vulnerable groups (1). From an institutional perspective, this policy reflects the same state-centered logic of the National Development Strategy, which pursued justice mainly through state intervention and support programs. However, the weakness of executive institutions and limited financial resources caused this approach to remain mostly at the policymaking level and prevented the sustainable institutionalization of social justice.

Similarly, the "Afghanistan Education Sector Strategy" can be regarded as one of the sectoral manifestations of institutionalism within the framework of the National Development Strategy. By emphasizing equal access to education, the reduction of gender and regional gaps, and the improvement of educational quality, this document responds directly to the dimension of "equality of opportunity" in Rawls's theory of justice (10). Nevertheless, the interview findings show that inequality in real access to education and weak institutional coordination prevented the realization of educational justice as one of the pillars of social justice. In the same vein, Eide explains that the education sector strategy was not a comprehensive and balanced strategy, and that it could not effectively encourage foreign donors because genuine transparency and accountability were lacking (7).

At the macro level, the "Afghanistan National Sustainable Development Goals" document sought to redefine the principles of social justice contained in the National Development Strategy within a comprehensive and coordinated national-international framework. The emphasis of this document on reducing inequality, quality education, accountable institutions, and inclusive participation indicates an effort to strengthen the institutional dimension of social justice (9). However, the qualitative analysis shows that this document, like the National Development Strategy, was limited more to the production of normative and discursive commitments than to strengthening the executive capacity of the state.

Therefore, the simultaneous analysis of qualitative data and policy documents shows that although the Afghanistan National Development Strategy constituted a turning point in the transition toward institutional and program-oriented policymaking, due to weak executive institutions, institutional lock-in, and structural dependence on foreign aid, it could not institutionalize social justice in a sustainable manner. This situation demonstrates a meaningful gap between "formal institutionalism" and "functional institutionalism" in Afghanistan's experience of social justice policymaking.

Security and the Structure of Justice

The concept of "security" was highlighted in the interviews not merely as an independent objective, but as an institutional precondition for the realization of social justice. University professors and civil society activists

emphasized that widespread insecurity, especially in the provinces, obstructed the fair distribution of services, equal access to education and health, and the implementation of justice-oriented programs. This interpretation is consistent with Rawls's analysis, in that without the existence of a just basic structure and a minimum level of security, the distribution of resources and opportunities loses its practical meaning (11). The interview findings show that weak security was one of the main causes of the failure or incomplete implementation of social justice policies.

Governance, Corruption, and Recognition Justice

One of the most central categories extracted from the qualitative analysis was "systemic corruption" and its impact on social justice. Interviewees stated that public administration reform, anti-corruption efforts, strengthening the judiciary, and developing human rights were presented in official documents as axes of social justice, but in practice, due to the influence of informal power networks, they did not lead to sustainable outcomes (19). From the perspective of Fraser's theory, these policies were intended to strengthen the dimension of "legal recognition" for disadvantaged groups, including women and minorities. However, the field analysis shows that administrative and political corruption weakened public trust and undermined the state's ability to guarantee recognition justice (CS02; CS03).

Socioeconomic Development and Redistributive Justice

According to the findings, broad programs were implemented in the fields of agriculture, health, education, and infrastructure, and from the perspective of state policymakers, their purpose was to increase opportunities for low-income groups. This understanding is consistent with the logic of Rawlsian justice, especially the principle of benefiting the least advantaged groups (11). However, university professors and civil society activists emphasized that these redistributive policies, due to structural inequalities, centralization, and dependence on foreign aid, were unable to produce a sustainable reduction in inequalities. The analysis shows that redistributive justice in practice was more "temporary and project-based" than institutional and sustainable.

Accordingly, the analysis of policy documents reinforces this interpretation. In Afghanistan's "National Social Policy," the redistribution of resources and financial-social support for vulnerable groups were defined as the main instruments for realizing social justice (1). This policy adopted a redistributive approach, particularly in areas such as social protection, support for the unemployed, persons with disabilities, and poor groups; however, its focus on short-term support programs dependent on state budgets and foreign aid prevented redistributive justice from being institutionalized in economic and social structures.

Moreover, in the field of education, the "Afghanistan Education Sector Strategy" also functioned as one of the instruments for redistributing opportunities by aiming to reduce social inequalities through equal access to education (10). However, the qualitative findings show that inequality in educational quality, severe regional disparities, and gender gaps caused education, instead of becoming a tool for sustainable social mobility, to contribute in some cases to the reproduction of inequalities. Likewise, at the macro level, the "Afghanistan National Sustainable Development Goals" document formulated redistributive justice in relation to goals such as poverty reduction, inequality reduction, and inclusive development (9). This document sought to pursue the redistribution of resources and opportunities within a comprehensive national framework; however, as the interviewees noted, the realization of these goals in practice was limited to scattered projects dependent on foreign funding and did not lead to sustainable structural reforms in the system of resource distribution.

In this regard, the analysis of policy documents shows that although the logic of redistributive justice in Afghanistan's official policymaking was widely accepted in line with Rawls's principles of justice, institutional weakness, centralization of decision-making, and structural dependence on foreign aid caused justice to remain mainly in the form of "temporary and project-based interventions" and prevented the sustainable institutionalization of inequality reduction (7).

Local Participation and Participatory Justice

Among justice-oriented policies, the "National Solidarity Program" was highlighted in the interviews as a relatively successful example of participatory justice. The participation of local development councils and the broad presence of citizens in local consultations, according to the interviewees, made it possible for people to participate directly in development decision-making (GD01; CS03). From the perspective of Fraser's theory, this program contributed to strengthening the participatory dimension of justice (12). However, the qualitative analysis shows that this participation remained mostly at the local level and could not be structurally connected to national policymaking.

Education and Health Sector Policies

The interview findings show that the increase in schools, expansion of girls' education, improvement of literacy rates, development of health centers, reduction in maternal and child mortality, and expansion of vaccination were among the tangible achievements of social justice policies. From the perspective of interviewees, these policies simultaneously possessed a "redistributive" dimension, through access to basic services, and a "recognitional" dimension, through the recognition of the rights of women and children. However, the continuation of these achievements remained heavily dependent on foreign support and security conditions. This situation is consistent with the findings of institution-centered studies; analyses of public policymaking models show that in fragile countries, social policies, even when they achieve short-term results, are less likely to become sustainable institutional achievements because of weak executive institutions, dependence on foreign funding, and the dominance of a project-based approach (14).

Accordingly, the analysis of policy documents confirms this evaluation. In the "Afghanistan Education Sector Strategy," expanding access to education, especially for girls and disadvantaged groups, was defined as one of the main instruments for realizing social justice and recognizing educational rights (10). This document considers education not only a social right, but also a precondition for equal participation in development and governance. Nevertheless, the qualitative findings show that inequality in educational quality, severe regional disparities, and the fragility of educational institutions seriously challenged the sustainability of these achievements (AC01; CS01).

In the field of health, Afghanistan's "National Social Policy" and documents related to social services introduce the development of health centers and the expansion of primary health services as part of the state's commitment to social protection and support for vulnerable groups (1). The reduction of maternal and child mortality and the expansion of vaccination can be regarded as examples of the relative realization of redistributive justice in this field; however, the heavy dependence of these services on funding from international organizations prevented their institutionalization within sustainable state structures.

At the macro level, the "Afghanistan National Sustainable Development Goals" document formulates these achievements within the framework of goals such as health and well-being, quality education, and gender equality, and considers them part of Afghanistan's commitment to just and inclusive development (9). However, as the

interviewees also noted, the realization of these goals was based more on political stability and international support than on domestic institutional capacity.

On this basis, the simultaneous analysis of qualitative data and policy documents shows that social justice achievements in the fields of education and health, although possessing redistributive and recognitional dimensions, lacked the necessary sustainability because of weakness in the “participatory and institutional” dimension of Fraser’s model. This caused social justice in Afghanistan to remain dependent on external conditions and project-based interventions rather than becoming an institutional and sustainable achievement.

Economic Policies and Inequality Reduction

MAXQDA analysis shows that economic policies, including support for agriculture, job creation, reform of the tax system, and support for small industries, were presented in the interviews as policies with justice-oriented intentions. From the perspective of government employees, these policies were designed to increase economic opportunities for low-income groups and reduce poverty, and they were consistent with the logic of Rawlsian justice, especially the principle of improving the position of the least advantaged groups. However, weak institutional capacity, corruption, and the financial dependence of the state on foreign aid were identified as the most important obstacles to the realization of sustainable economic justice (AC03; GD01).

In this regard, the analysis of policy documents also confirms this evaluation. In Afghanistan’s “National Social Policy,” economic justice was mainly pursued through supportive interventions, temporary job creation, and livelihood support for vulnerable groups (1). Although this approach helped reduce livelihood pressures in the short term, due to its heavy reliance on external resources and weak connection with structural reforms, it could not lead to the sustainable redistribution of economic opportunities. In the fields of agriculture and small industries, government development documents emphasized the role of these sectors in reducing rural poverty and creating employment. However, the interview findings show that centralized decision-making, unequal access to financial resources, and the weakness of the tax system caused the benefits of these policies to be distributed unevenly and marginalized and disadvantaged rural groups to receive only a limited share. In addition, the complex network of political power and rent-seeking within the political system caused the destruction of reconstruction projects and developmental policymaking (8).

At the macro level, the “Afghanistan National Sustainable Development Goals” document formulates economic justice in relation to inclusive growth, decent work, and inequality reduction (9). This document emphasizes the need to reform the tax system, strengthen the private sector, and reduce dependence on foreign aid; however, as MAXQDA analysis also shows, the realization of these goals in practice faced serious challenges because of weak economic governance and weak oversight institutions. In this regard, the overlap between qualitative data analysis and policy documents shows that although the economic policies of the Afghan government were designed at the discursive level with the intention of realizing economic justice, in practice, due to corruption, institutional weakness, and financial dependence, they could not achieve social justice. From the perspective of Fraser’s model, this situation reflects the dominance of temporary redistributive measures over institutional and participatory reforms, thereby limiting economic justice to fragile and project-based interventions.

National and Local Projects of Social Justice

Interviewees identified projects such as rural development councils, administrative and judicial reforms, and women's support programs as practical examples of social justice policies. The qualitative analysis shows that these projects were more successful at the local level than at the national level because direct public participation and social oversight were more prominent in them (CS01; CS02). This finding is also consistent with the analysis of local policy documents. The document on local development councils, especially within the framework of the National Solidarity Program and its continuation through the Citizens' Charter program, emphasized the transfer of part of decision-making and project implementation to the local community level. In this framework, development councils, as elected local institutions, played an intermediary role between the state and citizens and provided the basis for the direct participation of people in setting priorities, overseeing projects, and distributing resources (1, 20).

From the perspective of social justice, these programs possessed a stronger participatory dimension than other macro-level policies. Women's participation in local councils, relative transparency in resource management, and direct accountability to the local community strengthened justice not only at the level of resource redistribution, but also at the level of recognition and political-social participation (20). The findings show that in many areas, the presence of local councils increased social trust and strengthened people's sense of ownership over development projects (CS02; AC01).

Within the framework of the Citizens' Charter program, the state sought to create a relationship based on mutual rights and obligations between citizens and the government and to transfer social justice from the level of centralized national policies to the level of local practice. However, the qualitative analysis shows that the success of this program was also heavily dependent on foreign funding, security stability, and the continuity of institutional support. In areas where insecurity or weak institutional coordination existed, councils lost their function and participation was reduced to a formal process.

Therefore, overall, the interview findings and the analysis of documents related to local development councils and the Citizens' Charter show that social justice at the local level, especially from the perspective of participation and recognition, was more successful than at the national level. This confirms that the weakness of social justice in Afghanistan was not merely caused by the absence of policy, but by centralization, weak intermediary institutions, and the distance between the state and society at the national level. As Rahimi criticizes the concentration of political power and presidential authority in decision-making regarding policies, he argues that in a centralized system, the people and social elites do not have the right to express views on policies, and this process reduces the diversity and plurality of society (5). Thus, the experience of local development councils shows that wherever genuine participation and social oversight were strengthened, the possibility of institutionalizing social justice also increased.

The Role of Civil Society in Strengthening Social Justice

The findings of the interview analysis show that civil society played an important role over the past two decades in reflecting the demands of women, minorities, and youth. From the perspective of interviewees, civil society institutions, through advocacy, public awareness-raising, documentation of rights violations, and the creation of spaces for dialogue, were able to bring some marginalized demands into the public sphere and the discourse of social justice. From the perspective of Nancy Fraser's theory, this role was particularly effective in strengthening

the dimensions of recognition, through the acknowledgment of the rights and identities of marginalized groups, and participation in social justice (4, 12).

However, civil society activists emphasized that their influence on the formal policymaking of the state was limited, unstable, and often non-institutionalized. In their view, the absence of institutionalized mechanisms for civil society participation in macro-level decision-making, the centralization of political power, and insecurity prevented civic demands from being transformed into binding and sustainable policies. This is an issue that many authors have addressed through the principle of political centralization in the structure of the political system. Mohammadi speaks of a centralized constitution and writes that although the constitution is modern, it simultaneously contains discursive contradictions regarding citizen participation in policymaking processes and power structures, because the emphasis on administrative centralization is not compatible with the authorization of elected local institutions and has become a source of conflict in policymaking participation (6).

Therefore, the analysis of data and reports related to human rights institutions in Afghanistan also confirms this assessment. Human rights reports show that civil society and human rights institutions played an important role in documenting human rights violations, defending the rights of women, children, and minorities, and monitoring state performance; however, in many cases, the recommendations and findings of these institutions did not lead to structural and policy reforms because of weak political will, lack of institutional accountability, and security conditions (2, 20). This situation shows that civil society was more successful at the level of producing the discourse of justice than at the level of institutionalizing justice in public policy. On the other hand, the interview findings indicate that wherever interaction among civil society, local institutions, and participatory programs, such as local development councils, was strengthened, the possibility of civil society influence on social justice increased; this once again highlights the importance of the participatory dimension of justice in Fraser's model.

Accordingly, the analysis of interviews shows that Afghanistan's social justice policies from 2004 to 2021, in terms of design, contained components of Rawlsian justice, including equality of opportunity and support for the disadvantaged, and Fraserian justice, including redistribution, recognition, and participation. However, at the implementation stage, under the influence of institutional weakness, insecurity, corruption, centralization, and limited political participation, they did not lead to sustainable outcomes. Data from human rights institutions also confirm this situation and show that there was a significant gap between the state's official commitments to social justice and realities on the ground (2, 20). Thus, these findings highlight the meaningful gap between justice "designed" in official documents and discourses and justice "realized" in practice; a gap that cannot easily be closed without strengthening participatory institutions, state accountability, and the institutionalized role of civil society.

Conclusion

The analysis of Afghanistan's social justice policies from 2004 to 2021 shows that the state achieved considerable gains in the redistribution of public services, especially in the fields of education, health, and infrastructure. The findings derived from semi-structured interviews with university professors, government employees, and civil society activists also confirm this assessment; most interviewees regarded the expansion of access to schools, health services, and infrastructure projects as among the most tangible results of the justice-oriented policies of this period. However, these achievements were largely project-based, unstable, and dependent on foreign aid, and were less institutionalized within the state structure (GD01; AC02; CS01). By contrast, in the two areas of recognition, including the elimination of ethnic, gender, and identity-based discrimination, and

participation, including the genuine engagement of citizens in the policymaking process, progress was limited, unequal, and often symbolic. MAXQDA analysis shows that although official government documents emphasized the rights of women, minorities, and local participation, in practice these policies were either implemented formally or weakened in the face of informal power structures and traditional patterns of governance. Civil society activists especially emphasized the gap between “participation defined in documents” and “participation realized in practice” (CS02; CS03).

From the perspective of historical institutionalism, the interview findings show that political instability, the continuation of war and insecurity, systemic corruption, weak capacity of formal institutions, and institutional lock-in rooted in the legacy of past governance prevented the formation of “institutionalized justice” in Afghanistan. Even in cases where justice-oriented policies were comprehensively designed, these structural limitations did not allow policies to produce sustainable and inclusive outcomes (AC01; GD03). This situation is consistent with institution-centered analyses showing that in post-conflict societies, public policies are often implemented within established institutional trajectories and informal power networks, thereby limiting their capacity for structural transformation (14).

From Rawls's perspective, the basic structure of Afghan society during this period was not sufficiently fair; opportunities and benefits were not distributed equally among citizens, and inequalities were often reproduced in favor of groups possessing political and economic power. Academic interviewees emphasized that the focus of policies on service expansion, without reforming institutional and political inequalities, was not fully consistent with the spirit of “justice as fairness.” This interpretation is aligned with policymaking studies showing that the expansion of public services, in the absence of reforms in institutional rules and accountability mechanisms, leads to the reproduction of structural inequalities (21).

From the perspective of Nancy Fraser's theory of justice, the interview analysis also shows that the three dimensions of justice—redistribution, recognition, and participation—were not realized in a balanced manner. While the redistributive dimension was strengthened to some extent, the two dimensions of recognition and participation remained minimal because of weak democratic institutions, restrictions on civic space, and political centralization. This imbalance was especially more visible in remote areas and among women and minorities. Institution-centered studies also emphasize that under such conditions, social policies are mostly limited to short-term and project-based results and fail to become sustainable institutional achievements (14).

Despite these failures, the interview findings show that the social justice policies of this period constitute an important and instructive experience in the history of policymaking in Afghanistan. These policies, although incomplete, provided an analytical basis for understanding transformations in social justice, identifying institutional obstacles, and rethinking policymaking models. Therefore, the results of this study can serve as a foundation for future theoretical research as well as for the design of more realistic justice-oriented policies; policies that, as the recent policymaking literature also suggests, should emphasize not only the redistribution of services, but also “the reform of institutional trajectories, the strengthening of accountable institutions, the guarantee of equal recognition, and the institutionalization of citizens' genuine participation.”

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

References

1. Tohidfame M. Good Governance and the Social Security System. Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications; 2018.
2. Danish S. Administrative Law of Afghanistan. Kabul: Ibn Sina University Press; 2015.
3. Rawls J. Justice as Fairness. Tehran: Qoqnoos Publishing; 2013.
4. Fraser N. Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World: Columbia University Press; 2010.
5. Rahimi MR. A Critique of the Structure of the Political System in Afghanistan: The Impact of Choosing the Type of System on Consolidating Democracy and Controlling War in Fragmented Countries. Kabul: Azem Publishing; 2019.
6. Mohammadi A. Afghanistan and the Modern State. Kabul: Wazheh Publishing; 2020.
7. Eide K. Power Struggle in Afghanistan. Herat: Qalam Publishing; 2020.
8. Sharan T. The Network State: Power and Wealth Relations in Afghanistan after 2001. Kabul: Wazheh Publishing; 2017.
9. Ramyar SJ. Dependency-Based Development: The Role of Foreign Aid in the Economic and Social Development of Afghanistan. Kabul: Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies; 2020.
10. Sarwaryar AE, Eslami R, Athari SH. Pathology of the cultural policymaking cycle in Afghanistan. Scientific Biannual Journal of Political Sociology of the Islamic World. 2022;11(1).
11. Rawls J. A Theory of Justice. Tehran: Markaz Publishing; 2014.
12. Fraser N. Reframing justice in a globalizing world. New Left Review. 2005;36:69-88.
13. Ghavam SA. Comparative Politics. Tehran: SAMT Publishing; 2013.
14. Tohidfame M, Tousarkani A. Investigating the components of the policymaking model in the field of media: Moving from classical institutionalism to new institutionalism. Politics Quarterly, Journal of the Faculty of Law and Political Science. 2021;51(1):1-26.
15. Miller D. Principles of Social Justice: Harvard University Press; 1999.
16. Izadi H. Justice and social development. Social Quarterly. 2021;16(4):181-225.
17. Sen A. Development as Freedom. Tehran: Ney Publishing; 2015.
18. Moradi A, Hakkakzadeh MR. Examining John Rawls's view on the principle of justice. Journal of Philosophy of Law Studies. 2023;1(1):161-94.
19. Niaz AW. Constitutional Law of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan: Political Institutions. Kabul: Saeed Publishing; 2020.
20. Jafari F. Women's Political Participation in Afghanistan. Herat: Daneshmand Publishing; 2016.
21. Spanta RD. Afghanistan Politics: A Narrative from Within. Kabul: Azem Publishing; 2017.

