

EVALUATION DEPARTMENT

REPORT 7/2016 COUNTRY EVALUATION BRIEF



Afghanistan



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The purpose of this **Country Evaluation Brief** is to present relevant knowledge about donors' development efforts in Afghanistan. The brief systematises relevant findings from existing evaluations of development interventions in the country. The idea is to present the findings to the reader in a succinct and easily accessible format.

Readers who want to explore key issues in depth can access the underlying reports through the reference list. At our website, you can also find a set of short "Evaluation Portraits" summarising the key contents of those documents.

The Country Evaluation Brief was researched and produced by the Chr. Michelsen Institute.

Oslo, November 2016
Per Øyvind Bastøe, Evaluation Director

PHOTO: TORBJØRN KJOSVOLD/FORSVARETS MEDIESENTER

Main findings

The constraints on effective provision and implementation of assistance in Afghanistan since 2001 are distinct:

WESTERN POLITICAL AND MILITARY interests largely defined the nature and magnitude of aid flows. Conventional criteria for development assistance (notably absorptive capacity and credible conditionality) were, as a consequence, ignored or overruled. In some areas, military strategy or tactical concerns dictated aid allocations.

ENORMOUS RELIEF and development needs reinforced the rationale for large assistance programmes despite limited absorptive capacity.

A MAJOR CONCERN is the lack of documented effects on poverty reduction, gender equality and the sustainability of interventions.

SOME PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORMS notwithstanding, the Afghan government was by the end of the period unable to generate sufficient revenues to substantially lessen its dependence on foreign funding. Escalating armed conflict underscored the weakness of the state and cast serious doubt on the sustainability of foreign assisted projects and programmes.

DESPITE INSECURITY AND A WEAK STATE, there were opportunities for rendering effective assistance through a programme strategy that joined foreign funding with NGOs and a line ministry. The extremely low baseline of development in 2002 made it possible to show early rapid growth in select service sectors in a few years. The greater challenge is to sustain these trends.

A HEALTH SECTOR REFORM recorded an impressive immediate output (a fourfold increase in health facilities in the 2002–2011 period) as well as similar results in improved health (under-five mortality was almost halved).

THE PROGRAMME for community-based rural development (the National Solidarity Programme) showed that bottom-up development on a local and small scale was possible. While vulnerable to local elite capture, a positive effect is a more positive attitude towards women's roles and position in society.

IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR, impressive results were recorded in terms of immediate output (schools built and pupils enrolled). The outcome in terms of quality and attendance was more uncertain, and at any rate more difficult to assess.

INTERNATIONAL NGOS with a long track record in the country and a long-term horizon for programmes succeeded in building local civil society capacity through partnering arrangements.

USE OF MULTI-DONOR TRUST FUNDS when well managed had distinct advantages and should be considered in similar situations.



AFGHANISTAN

Estimated population

31.3 mill. (UNDP, 2015)

Population age structure

64% under 25 years (CIA, 2015)

Urban population/urbanization

26.7% of population, 3.96% annual change (CIA, 2015)

Refugees returned since 2001

5.7 mill. (UNHCR)

Internally Displaced Persons

0.95 mill. (IDMC, 2015)

Human Development Index ranking

171 (of 188 countries)

Gender Inequality index ranking

152 (of 188 countries)

National Poverty Rate

35.8% (UNDP, 2015)

Mean years of schooling

3.2 years (UNDP, 2015, data from 2013)

Adult literacy rate

31.7% (UNDP, 2015)

Life expectancy at birth

60.4 years (UNDP, 2015)

Child Mortality Rate

70.2 per 1000 live births (UNDP 2015)

Aid as proportion of state budget

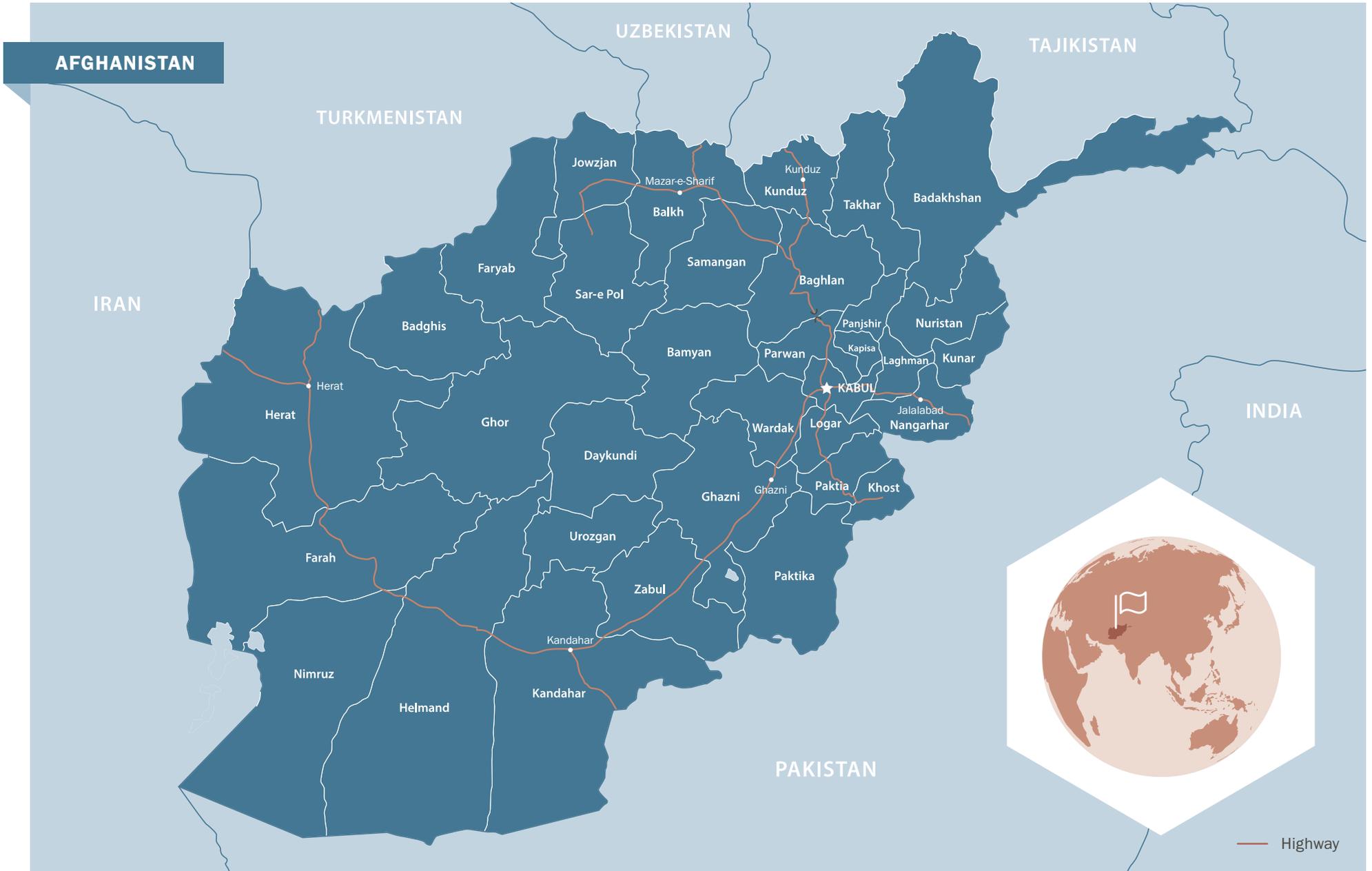
90% (Afghan MOF, 2015)

Corruption Perception Index

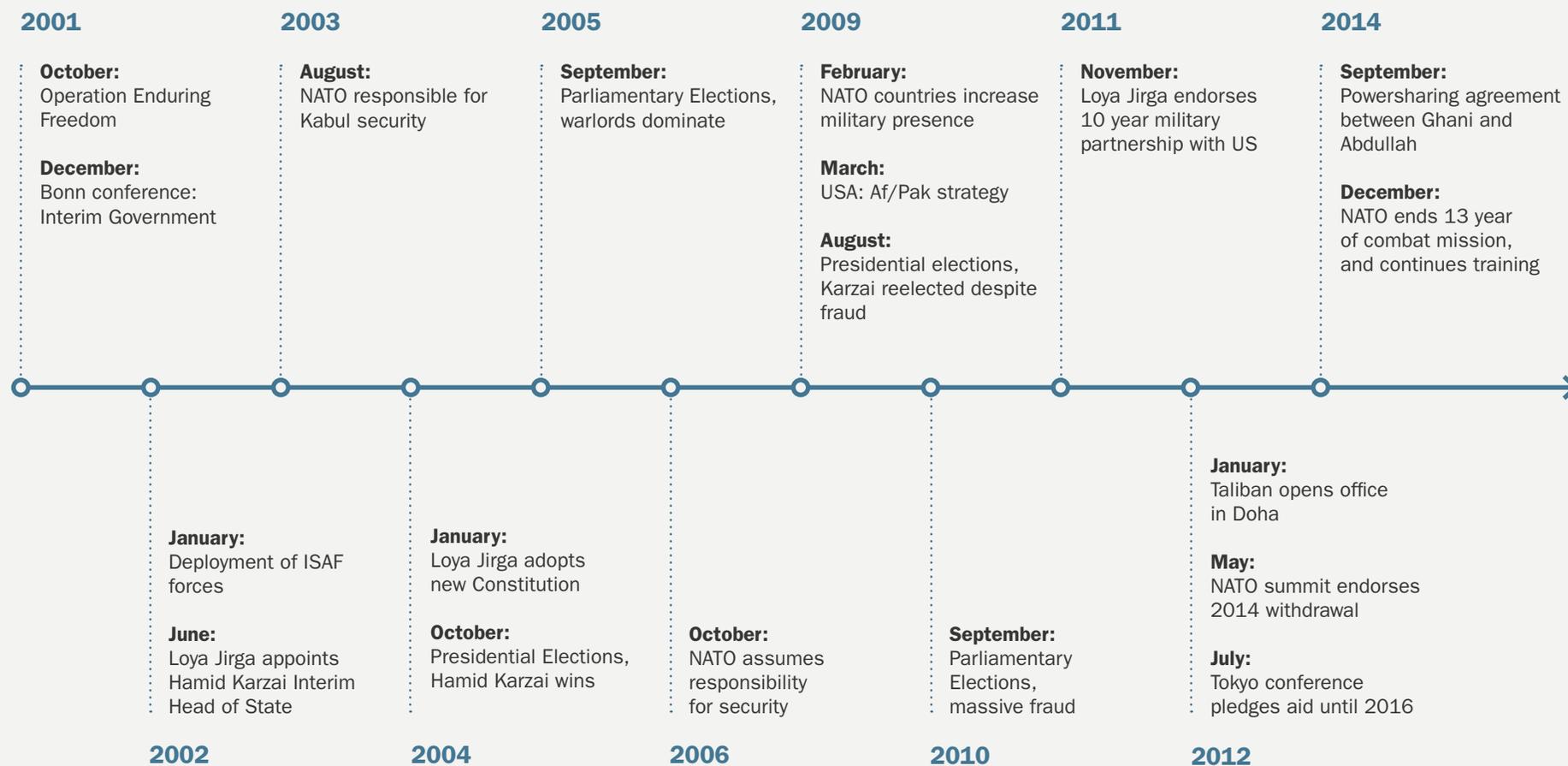
166 (of 167) (TI, 2015)



PHOTO: TORBJØRN KJOSVOLD/FORSVARETS MEDIESENTER



KEY EVENTS 2001 – 2015



1. Introduction

Afghanistan has since 2001 received over USD 57 billion in official development assistance (NOU 2016, p. 40). An analysis of its impact must start with a recognition of the special context in which this massive amount of aid was injected.



PHOTO: SANDRA CALLIGARO/TAIMANI FILMS/WORLD BANK

USD 57 billion official development assistance to Afghanistan since 2001.

Afghanistan was not simply a country in a fragile and conflict-affected situation. Given the high-profile nature and military costs of the Afghan conflict, the principal donors were in a hurry to demonstrate results. This encouraged direct donor execution of projects through the creation of parallel structures and extensive use of technical assistance to bolster the state administration; these in turn undermined the statebuilding project (Suhrke 2011). The weak Afghan state – a result of historical conditions including over two decades of violent conflict prior to 2001 – made it difficult in the short run to observe the 2011 New Deal principle that aid in fragile states should be more country-led than traditional approaches to development. During the past decade, the escalating war, in which the principal Western aid donors were direct parties, compounded the problems of providing effective assistance.

This brief first provides some context to donor engagement in Afghanistan. The next sections draw out main findings from prominent evaluations of funding mechanisms and development interventions to support state building,

governance, social services provision, community development and cross-cutting issues. The concluding section articulates lessons learnt and future challenges.

We have reviewed 50 published evaluations and several unpublished NGO evaluations. 29 evaluations were selected for a closer review, based on the following criteria: (a) areas prioritised by the donors: governance, social services (education and health), community development and support to civil society; (b) areas and channels of particular relevance in Afghanistan (and other fragile states): multisector programming, humanitarian assistance, multi-donor trust funds and support to/through non-governmental organisations; and (c) cross-cutting issues: gender, environment and anti-corruption.

Evaluations examined were affected by the difficult context. Insecurity limited access to project sites (SIGAR and USIP 2014) and introduced systemic bias in data collection by disproportionately permitting collection in the more secure areas (Mansfield 2015). Limited

field work lent more weight to self-evaluations despite their inherent limitations. Limited baseline data made it difficult to assess results.

Numerous evaluations have been produced, but most have a limited focus. Some assess mainly perceptions, not external realities (e.g. Böhnke et al. 2015). Others assess only process (e.g. in establishing partnership) and not organisational output (e.g. Lundberg et al. 2014, Sterland et. al.2014). Evaluations that assess results mostly do so in relation to stated project or programme objectives. Only a few large donors, notably the World Bank (2012 a) and UNDP (2014), assess the effects of aid interventions on a sector as a whole (e.g. education), or poverty reduction. Agency sponsored evaluations rarely assess the broader consequences for the local political economy and, to our knowledge, have not done so in the case of Afghanistan.

We further consulted academic literature, including policy studies and various types of assessment.

2. Country context

Afghanistan has had continuous armed conflict since the late 1970s. Deep internal divisions along ethnic, tribal and religious lines, and long-standing vulnerability to interference by neighbouring countries, have further increased state fragility. The weight of tradition, religious conservatism and nationalism contrasted with the transformative social agenda that international donors and a small group of Afghan reformers launched after 2001.



PHOTO: KEN OPPRANN

Afghanistan's position in 2001 at the bottom of the Human Development Index underscored the formidable reconstruction and development tasks. In place of a functioning state and governance structures, most assistance apart from the educational sector was provided through a government-NGO partnership. NGOs were responsible for implementation and the government for planning, monitoring and evaluation and reporting to the various trust funds.

Optimism and some progress in the first years after 2001 were subsequently undercut by the escalating conflict. The deteriorating security situation created pressures to direct assistance to insecure areas based on short-term military priorities, which meant sustainable results were difficult to achieve. Increasing military operations also led to greater need for humanitarian assistance and consequent shifts in aid. In some areas, international military forces delivered humanitarian and development assistance. Monitoring and evaluation of all types of assistance became more difficult, particularly by independent actors.

From around 2005 and onwards, the Taliban grew in strength and expanded throughout most of the country. Setbacks soon appeared in the civilian sector as well. It became increasingly evident that the Afghan government was totally dependent on international assistance and had been complicit in or permitted massive misuse of funding. A system based on nepotism and patronage had developed, and with it widespread corruption that proved difficult to curb (Strand 2014a).

Partly for these reasons, several donors channelled much of their funding through trust funds, notably the World Bank-managed Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) and the UNDP-managed Law and Order Trust Fund (LOTFA). Trust funds also promised benefits in terms of coordination, strengthening the Afghan state and the effective exercise of fiduciary responsibility. When donors looking towards 2014 started to scale down embassy staff, trust funds became even more attractive.

After the drawdown of international forces in 2014, insecurity increased further, as did



PHOTO: LARS MAGNE HOVTUN

civilian casualties. The economy plummeted, resulting in high unemployment, especially amongst youth, and outmigration increased. A contested election in 2014 led to the US-brokered “National Unity Government” that took a long time to find a functioning form and by mid-2016 remained fragile.

The situational context had three principal negative consequences for development assistance.

First, military priorities distorted the direction of assistance by giving priority to fragile and conflict prone areas, and created demands for

quick results. This had negative effects on the quality of implementation, quality assurance, corruption control and sustainability (Thomson et al. 2012). A report by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction and the US Institute of Peace (SIGAR and USIP 2014) found that too much money, spent too quickly, and often with insufficient consultation with Afghans, had been the largest obstacle to effective delivery of external assistance.

Security concerns also affected aid projects more directly. Almost all evaluations identify security risks as the main challenge to project implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Growing Taliban influence as well as other sources of increased violence made it difficult to access projects to document outcomes and measure impact.

Limited state capacity had a negative multiplier effect, making it difficult to turn a vicious circle into a virtuous one as parallel structures were established and maintained. The Danida evaluation (Thomson 2012) emphasises the



Road construction training. PHOTO: UN PHOTO/FARZANA WAHIDI

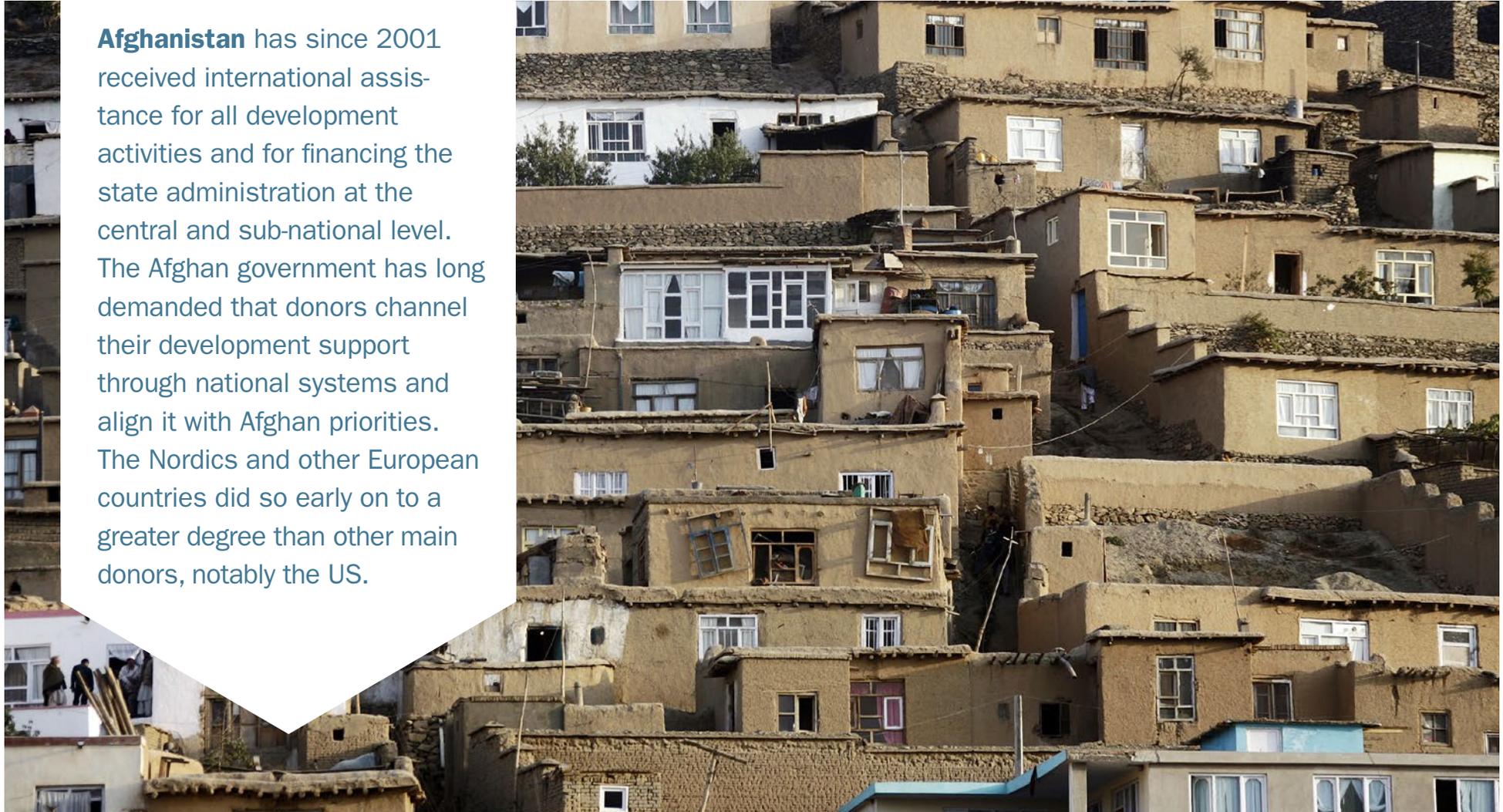
shortage of management and implementation capacity within the Afghan government, particularly at the provincial level. Not fully trusting the government to manage donor funds, the donors could not fully adhere to the “New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States” on a strategic and policy level. The related shift towards use of trust funds led the Danida evaluation to raise another concern, asking to what extent the national budget in effect was determined by donors.

Military priorities distorted the direction of assistance by giving priority to fragile and conflict prone areas, and created demands for quick results.



3. Donor engagement in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has since 2001 received international assistance for all development activities and for financing the state administration at the central and sub-national level. The Afghan government has long demanded that donors channel their development support through national systems and align it with Afghan priorities. The Nordics and other European countries did so early on to a greater degree than other main donors, notably the US.

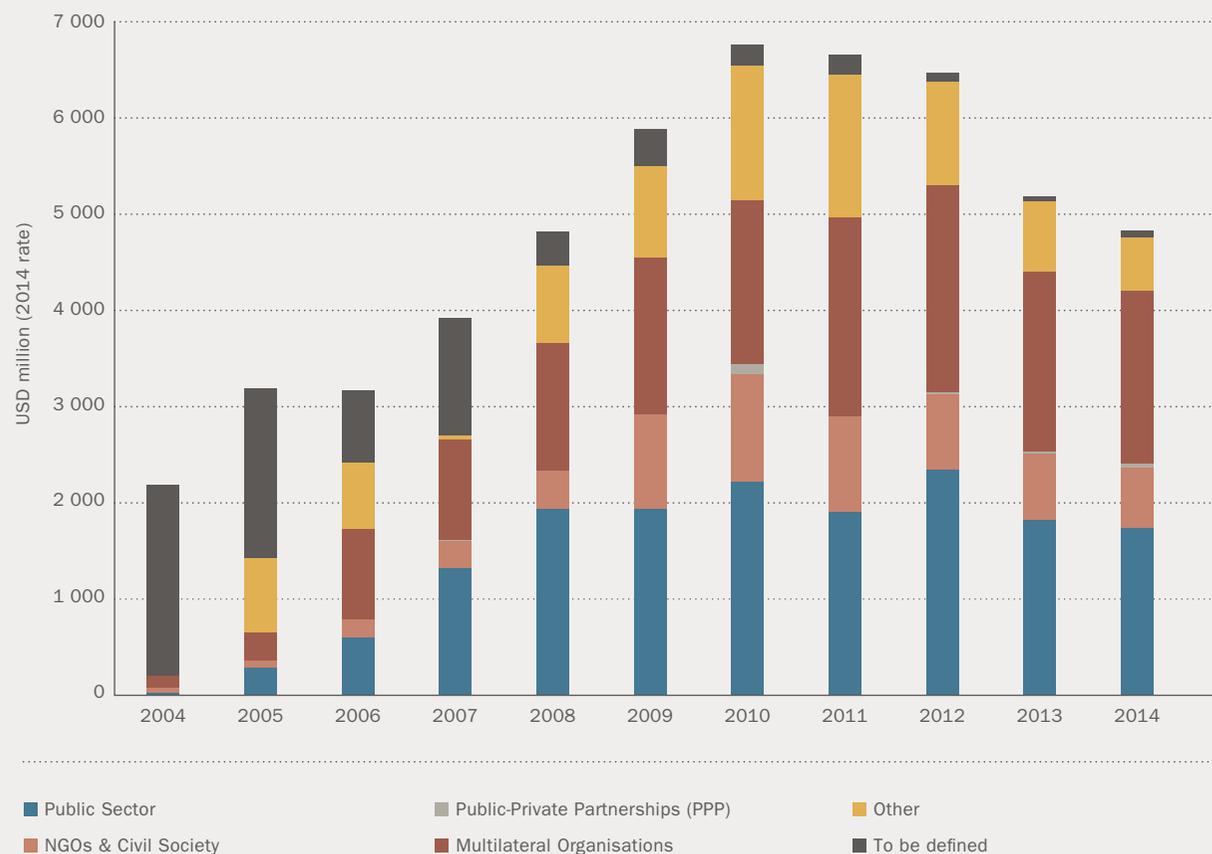


Kabul. PHOTO: TORBJØRN KJOSVOLD/FORSVARETS MEDIESENTER

Over time, Afghan demands became more widely accepted. In 2012, the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework established that donors should route at least 50 percent of their development funding through the national budget, and align 80 percent of the aid with the National Priority Programmes.

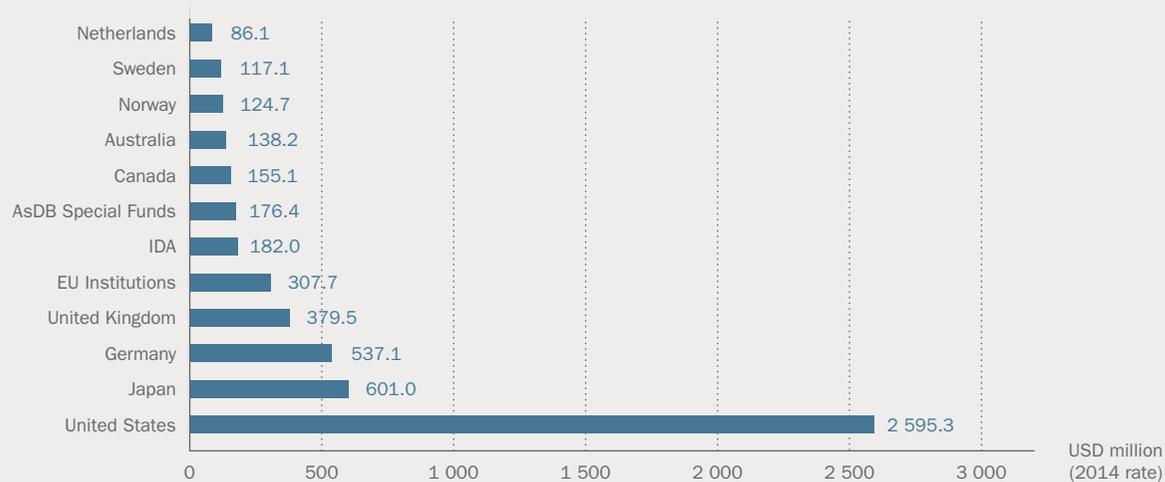
Government reports covering the period 2012–14 had a bleak outlook. Afghanistan continued to be highly dependent on development aid, which averaged over USD 4 billion annually and accounted for 90 percent of total financial inflows in the period (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2015). Yet aid was gradually decreasing (see figure 1), and goals for economic growth were unlikely to be met. The illicit economy, primarily from drug production, was in 2011 estimated at the equivalent of one-sixth of the country’s gross domestic product. The drug economy has proved highly resistant to donor efforts to curb it (Byrd and Mansfield 2012).

FIGURE 1 // TOTAL ODA TO AFGHANISTAN BY CHANNEL AND YEAR (2004-2014)



As figure 2 shows, the United States has throughout been by far the largest development donor. The US is also the largest donor to the security sector.

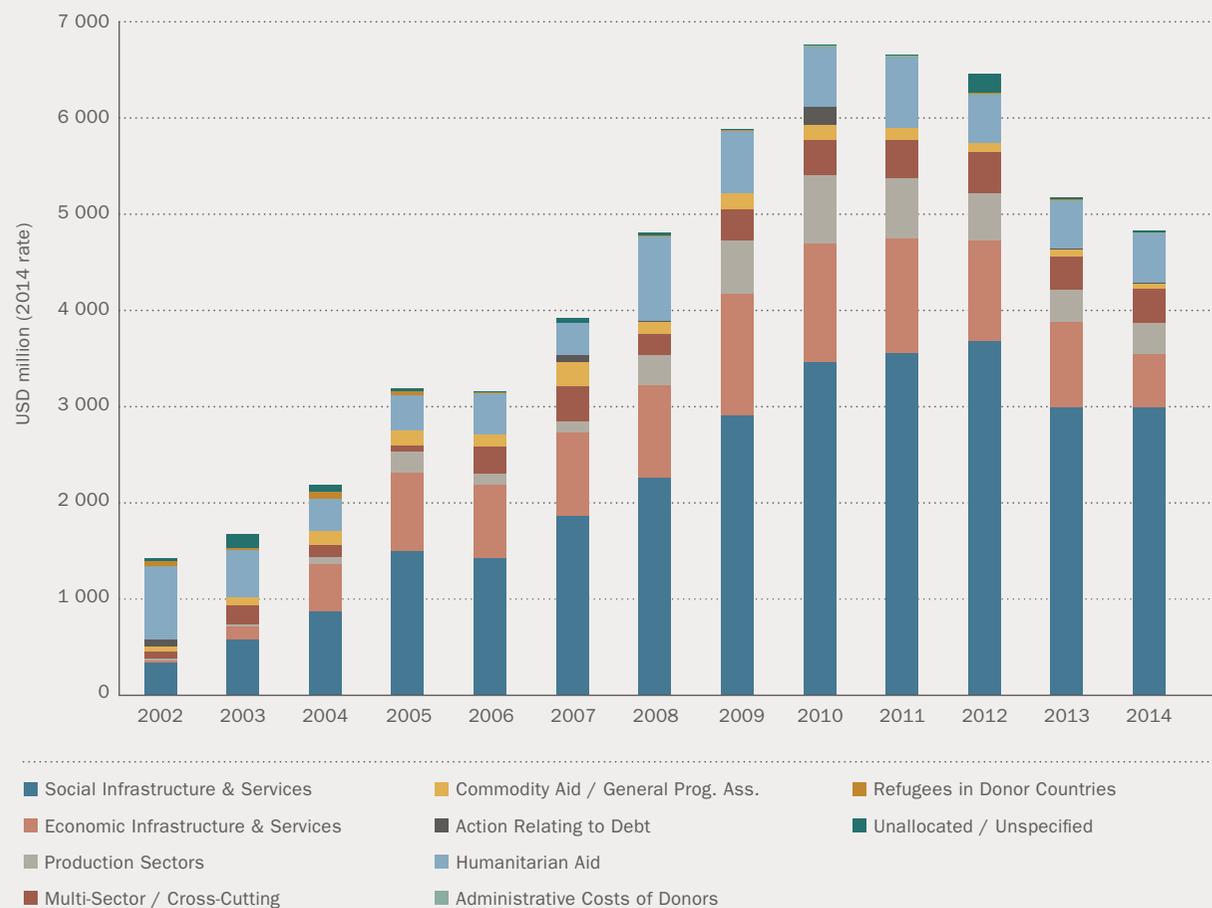
FIGURE 2 // TOP 12 DONORS OF GROSS ODA TO AFGHANISTAN (2010-2014)



For the period 2012–2014, three sectors – (a) security, (b) infrastructure, and (c) agriculture and rural development – account for 49 percent of all ODA disbursed (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2015, p. 15). In the infrastructure sector, transport and energy received the bulk of funding. In the third category, agriculture received most, followed by rural development (primarily for the National Solidarity Programme). Approximately 12 percent of ODA provided to Afghanistan was spent on humanitarian assistance (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2015).

70 percent of on-budget ODA was provided through four multi-donor trust funds; the remaining 30 percent was provided to the budget direct, mainly in the form of project support.

FIGURE 3 // TOTAL ODA TO AFGHANISTAN BY SECTOR (2002-2014)



4. Evaluations of aid

As a rule, the evaluations reviewed have limited analysis of the impact of aid beyond immediate output or outcome for the target group. The same applies to sustainability considerations. Several evaluations note this. Recent evaluations of Nordic assistance found the development support was relevant and mostly led to positive outputs and outcomes, but programmes generally lacked conflict analysis, impact measurement and assessment of sustainability.



Containers of military supply. PHOTO: TORBJØRN KJOSVOLD/FORSVARETS MEDIESENTER

Limited baseline data account in part for the paucity of impact analysis (Norad 2012). Yet improved baseline data since 2010 has not produced significantly more such studies. Moreover, as noted above, security conditions might have produced systemic biases in assessments (Mansfield 2015).

While many studies recognise the difficulties of measuring sustainability, they agree that the government's heavy financial dependence on donors makes most development activities unsustainable in the absence of donor funding. This problem appears not to have been properly addressed at the planning stage in some programmes. In other programmes (e.g. UNDP's LOTFA, which pays salaries for the police) discontinuing funding is seen to pose an unacceptably high security and/or political risk (Strand and Taxell 2016). No country other than the US seemed to have data or evaluations of aid delivered through the military, or have made them public, despite the large amounts spent.

It appears total assistance has had very limited effect on poverty reduction. According to UNDP (2014, p.xii) poverty rates had actually increased from 33 percent in 2005 to 35.8 percent in 2015.

MULTISECTOR PROGRAMMING

Many donors pursued a strategy of a “comprehensive”, “integrated” or “whole-of-government” support, where development assistance (including aid channelled through the military) and diplomatic engagements were designed to complement and support each other. The related use of trust funds and development of “compacts” and “mutual accountability frameworks” created a regulated space for co-ordination and negotiations with the Afghan government.

Several evaluations reflect this integration by covering all or several of the areas of assistance identified. A review of multisector evaluations will therefore precede an assessment of other types of assistance.

The World Bank-administered Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) covers

The government's heavy financial dependence on donors makes most development activities unsustainable in the absence of donor funding. 

governance, social services and community development. It has been the largest single source of on-budget aid, funding the government's recurring costs and 21 national programmes, including education, agriculture, rural development, health, social development, infrastructure and governance. A 2012 review concluded that the fund was the donors' preferred mechanism for on-budget funding, citing “low overhead/transaction costs, excellent transparency and high accountability, and [being] a well-functioning arena for policy debate and consensus creation” (Scanteam 2012, p. 23). The review nevertheless found shortcomings in the reporting of results and

called for better monitoring and evaluation. Later reports indicate continued donor satisfaction with the ARTF, though some concern over location of international staff in Dubai for security reasons.

The UNDP administered Law and Order Trust Fund (LOTFA) was established in 2002 as a channel for donor support to develop and maintain the national police. It remains the main source of salary payments for around 150 000 police and prison staff.

Despite donor concerns over possible mismanagement of funds in LOTFA, regular evaluations of the programme undertaken for each phase by the same consulting firm, the latest in 2012, had not uncovered any problems (Atos Consulting 2012). A subsequent report by Afghanistan's Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee documented substantial mismanagement, however, including salaries paid for "ghost police". While the reforms undertaken following the review focused primarily on UNDP procedures, rather than on procedures and funds handled within the



An Afghan woman prays in a doorway of the courtyard of the Hazrat-e-Ali shrine, or Blue Mosque, in Mazar-i-Sharif PHOTO: FARSHAD USYAN/AFP/NTB SCANPIX

Ministry of Interior, donors were sufficiently satisfied with the new safeguards to continue their support.

While the Bank is praised for its management of the ARTF and UNDP is criticised for its handling of LOTFA, the activities of either fund are not expected to be sustainable in the absence of current level of external funding. Evaluations further question if the relevant Afghan ministries have sufficient management, implementation and monitoring and evaluation capacity to handle the programmes on their own.



Afghan police in front of Kart-e-Sakhi shrine after a militant attack at a Shiite shrine in Kabul, Oct. 12, 2016 PHOTO: RAHMAT GUL/AP PHOTO/NTB SCANPIX

The World Bank and UNDP also have their own programmes for capacity building and improving governance of Afghan institutions, support for social services, and community and private development. We find equally large variations in results here as for the trust funds, pointing to structural weaknesses of UNDP.

In 2014, the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office Assessment of Development Results analysed UNDPs direct and indirect contributions to Afghanistan's development from 2009 to 2013 (UNDP 2014). Projects assessed included LOTFA, disarmament and demobilisation,

institutional development and capacity building, and poverty reduction and provision of basic social services. The report is critical, citing lapses in oversight, a lack of thorough capacity assessments and management issues, leading to weak management, reduced efficiency and a lack of synergies between parallel programmes. These organisational weaknesses contributed to limited results in UNDP's programmes for poverty reduction and income generation. One of the report's few positive assessments was that UNDP's relationship with the government had followed the principles of the New Deal.

The World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group (World Bank 2012 b) assessed the relevance and effectiveness of the Bank's support to Afghanistan for the 2002–11 period, addressing key risks to sustainability. The Bank's strategy was organised around three pillars: 1) building the capacity of the state and accountability to its citizens, 2) promoting growth of the rural economy and improving rural livelihoods, and 3) supporting growth of the formal private sector, including through infrastructure development. In contrast

to the UNDP evaluation, this assessment was positive on relevance and responsiveness, citing acceptable progress towards most major programme objectives. The challenging country context was cited as responsible for failure to fully achieve the objectives under the three pillars.

The formal, overarching programme goal of the United States, the largest and most influential donor, is a stable and effective Afghan-led development. The agricultural sector has the highest financial priority. The limited number of publicly available evaluations makes it difficult to assess results and sustainability of US aid programmes. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction identifies security conditions as a primary concern and hindrance to programme implementation (SIGAR and USIP 2014). Some programmes are assessed positively on results, notably the agriculture and livelihood programmes.

Norway, Denmark and Sweden are among the 12 largest donors to Afghanistan and represent a substantial financial and diplomatic contribution.

The three countries use similar funding channels (including trust funds where they actively seek to influence policy) and types of implementing partners where national NGOs figure prominently. The results emerge as quite equal, with some variety in priority and specialisation between implementing NGOs. Their methods are similar, except that Denmark had more integration between its military and civilian components. Sweden had its own staff to undertake field monitoring. Norway and Denmark did not, despite assessing security challenges similarly. Sweden and Denmark have undertaken comprehensive evaluations of their development assistance and engagement, while one Norad report (2012) covers the Norwegian support from 2001 to 2012. The recent report from a government appointed commission to examine Norway's engagement in Afghanistan assesses aid in a broader political context (NOU 2016).

Interventions with an instrumental focus (i.e. directly influencing change) tend to be more effective in achieving results than those trying to create understanding and reframe debates or build capacities and change behavior. This is the main finding of a synthesis of Sida evaluations (Pain et al. 2015, p. 5). While interventions have improved access to public goods, such as education and health, there have been few food security and income effects, and the overall impact on poverty reduction has been limited. Although girls' access to school has improved, there have been few knock-on effects in terms of gender equality. All projects in these evaluations used some measures of participatory processes, but strong evidence on inclusive processes is missing, suggesting limited ownership.

The UK adopted a “whole-of-government” approach, especially in Helmand province where it had a military presence. The objectives for the livelihood programmes were: 1) to maximise opportunities for rural Afghans to make a legal living, and 2) through the stability that derives from increased income and employment, to increase confidence in the state. The findings of its last comprehensive country programme evaluation in 2009 were discouraging. Except for funding through the ARTF, almost half of ongoing projects (48 percent) were unlikely to achieve their targets. Smaller projects performed better than larger and more complex ones, and counter-narcotics efforts had “little success” despite efforts to create alternative income opportunities (Bennett et al. 2009).

The only systematic impact assessment of a multiple-aim donor programme was commissioned by Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and covers assistance delivered in North East Afghanistan from 2007 to 2013. Data were collected in four main thematic areas:



Students' coats hanging on the wall, Kabul 2006. PHOTO: UN PHOTO/ESKINDER DEBEBE

1) security, 2) development aid and basic services, 3) perception of international actors, and 4) perception on sub-national governance. The study tested the assumption that the international military presence and development assistance would improve security, increase development and thereby create more positive attitudes towards international actors and the Afghan government at the sub-national level (Böhnke et al. 2015).

The majority of the respondents in 2013 (71 percent) rated the overall security situation in Afghanistan negatively. Criminals were seen

Norway is the 10th largest donor to Afghanistan.

as the largest security threat, followed by the Taliban and “foreign forces”. Almost all households (91 percent) and communities said they had benefitted directly from development aid, and thought that development actors and the government had contributed to better services such as jobs, income opportunity, quality of roads and electricity. Improved basic services did not create positive perceptions of international actors or sub-national governance, however. Almost three-quarters of the respondents perceived foreign development aid as a threat to local ways of life and Islamic values, even if it brought material benefits. Slightly over half said that the district and province administration never looked after local needs (Böhnke et al. 2015).



PHOTO: TORBJØRN KJOSVOLD/FORSVARETS MEDIESENTER



PHOTO: UNDP UAMA/FARADIN WAEZA

GOVERNANCE

Donors committed in the 2001 Bonn conference to support a five year war-to-peace transition period based on development of liberal democratic institutions and an effective and professional state administration, including the police and the judiciary. As several evaluations found, however, many of these programmes and projects did not deliver to expectations. The reasons were many and complex.

One set of reasons lay in the Afghan political landscape. The victors after 2001 had distributed positions and ministries along political and ethnic lines to preserve a fragile and constantly

re-negotiated coalition. With political patronage permeating state administration at the national and subnational level, implementing merit-based civil service reform was difficult. After many years of support, USAID found that only five out of nineteen government agencies functioned reasonably well without extensive international technical assistance (Office of Inspector General, USAID 2011). Corruption, which fed on a system of patronage and the massive influx of foreign funds, made public financial management a major objective, but difficult to achieve. Periodic elections were marked by increasingly large-scale fraud due to technical shortcomings (e.g. no recent census), weak

institutions (e.g. for public accountability), deep political divisions, and a mounting insurgency that effectively disenfranchised voters in parts of the country.

Governance support was from the beginning a donor priority, with responsibility divided among designated “lead nations”. Not fully recognising the problems of state-building and democratisation in a conflict situation, donors long entertained vastly overambitious expectations.

One of the World Bank’s three pillars for Afghanistan relating to governance was to build the capacity of the state and accountability to its citizens. A major World Bank evaluation covering the period 2002–11 (World Bank 2012 b) found acceptable progress towards most of the major objectives. While support for public administration had led to important reforms, public administration remained vulnerable. There was little evidence of improved civil service performance and the government’s ability to control corruption and enforce anti-corruption measures remained weak. That same critique is made of UNDP’s

efforts to develop anti-corruption capacity (Riksrevisjonen 2015), while a Sida evaluation (Bryld et al. 2014) of the UNDP-administered Afghan Sub-National Governance Programme is highly critical with regard to effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability, despite delivering numerous activities and outputs. The evaluation found that the effectiveness was limited due to poor political commitment to devolution and collaboration and communication between the Afghan institutions involved, and poor leadership.

The problems of governance more broadly reflected a tendency by donors to give priority to building technical capacity over strengthening political legitimacy. A comprehensive UK country programme evaluation in 2009 pointed to the extensive use of technical assistance as a matter of concern. Technical assistance did not automatically equate to capacity development, nor did it increase the government’s legitimacy and ability to deliver, particularly outside Kabul (Bennett et al. 2009).



Network rehabilitation and expansion of electricity supply to Kabul, 2012.
PHOTO: GRAHAM CROUCH/WORLD BANK

Donors tended to give priority to building technical capacity over strengthening political legitimacy

SOCIAL SERVICES

National and international actors agreed to prioritise provision of social services. Education and health had long been neglected and women and girls had been particularly disadvantaged under the Taliban. The new Afghan government wished to maintain operative control in the education sector (except for building of schools and teacher training), but in the health sector opted for partnership with NGOs to implement a basic package of health services.

The World Bank, through the ARTF and other programmes, supported various social services, mostly to education (the EQUIP programme), but also to health. Evaluating the entire period 2002–11, the World Bank (2012 b) found that health services improved significantly in the number of facilities and quality of services, as evidenced particularly by reduced child and maternal mortality rates. In the education sector, access improved greatly at the primary level, but less so in higher education. An evaluation of the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee's project for Hospital Midwifery Education is very positive

Funding for health and education was either channeled direct to the relevant ministries, or, in the education sector, mostly via the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund donors (with the notable exceptions of the US, Denmark and Turkey). Evaluations in both sectors document impressive results that reflect consistent commitment from donors and the government, appropriate management strategies, a low baseline that gave high returns on investment in basic services, and strong popular demand for these services. Importantly, the Afghan ministries most directly concerned had relatively effective and professional leadership. Nevertheless, the evaluations demonstrate increasing concerns over accuracy of reporting, corruption and quality in the education sector. As elsewhere, sustainability is an issue.

(Munk Petersen and Hamed 2014) as are other evaluations of NGO educational social service projects reviewed.

Yet questions have been raised about the results in the education sector, and there are fewer evaluations to draw on. The Ministry of Education admits that their data on school enrolments and teachers are not independently verified (Strand 2015) and might be less than the numbers announced by the Ministry and donors. The quality of education is low compared to other countries in the region, and there is a significantly low uptake and high

drop-out rate for girls in some parts of the country (World Bank 2012 b). Denmark was one of few countries to provide direct budget support to the ministry until 2014, and a comprehensive evaluation (Taylor et al. 2012) is critical of the results. The report notes a lack of capacity and oversight in the ministry and strong reliance on external technical assistance. The World Bank evaluation (2012 b) likewise acknowledges that inadequate supervision affects the quality of education.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Community development was another high-priority area. The government in cooperation with the World Bank launched the National Solidarity Programme, which became the main vehicle for donor support through the Bank's multi-donor trust fund (ARTF). Based on experiences from Indonesia, NGO partners assisted local communities to elect village councils (with female representation) and to select and implement small village-based development projects.

The National Solidarity Programme was a ministry/NGO partnership which now reportedly covers an estimated three-quarters of the country's villages. Several evaluations have found impressive results in terms of concrete project outputs in the villages, and some impact on political participation and community social structure through a somewhat greater role for women (Beath et al. 2015). The Afghan government presents the Programme as its biggest development achievement, including the opportunities provided for social empowerment of rural women. Key factors making this possible have been the role of a government

ministry with Afghan technocrats in leadership positions who enjoyed strong donor trust, alongside financial support and technical assistance from the World Bank and the underlying soundness of the concept itself (Scanteam 2012). The World Bank evaluation (2012 b) is positive, but identified modest growth in the rural economy and modest results relating to improved rural livelihoods.

Donors have supported Afghan civil society organisations to promote their role as a democratic force, support a rights-based approach to development, and reduce dependence on international NGOs for service provision. Afghan civil society is diverse and fragmented, but has been important as social service providers, voices for human and democratic rights and a pool of talents for government service. Individual projects supporting community and civil society organisations have received mixed reviews, but the larger Nordic ones (with a long track record in Afghanistan) are positively assessed for their management, programmes and projects (Lundberg et al. 2014).



Jirga, community meeting. PHOTO: KEN OPPRANN

A donor effort to pool funding to support smaller projects implemented by civil society organisations was less successful. The Tawanmandi trust fund was designed to improve governance by increasing the accountability and responsiveness of the Afghan government to its citizens. An evaluation rated project implementation and capacity building positively, but found it too early to determine if awareness raising had led to systematic community behaviour change (Amin Consulting 2014). Donors nevertheless decided in 2015 to terminate the fund, citing weak fund management by the British Council, which apparently lacked the structure and

experience to handle such a fund (Strand and Taxell 2016).

Norwegian Church Aid aims to build capacity and channel funding through Afghan NGOs with different profiles and projects in many parts of the country. An evaluation found that the organisation's partnership approach – partnership as a network allowing for joint participatory planning, coordination of projects and monitoring and evaluation – had considerable added value compared with other donors and funding partners. Nevertheless, the evaluation noted weaknesses regarding sustainability, and recommended more resource-sharing at province and district levels and a less diffuse project portfolio (Sterland et.al. 2014).

Afghan civil society 
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and democratic rights.

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Afghanistan's exposure to natural disasters (earthquakes, landslides and droughts) and man-made conflicts have produced a massive need for humanitarian assistance, including for the internally displaced and the over 5 million refugees who have returned during the past 15 years. Continued violence since the drawdown of international forces from 2012 has increased the need for assistance while limiting access to many areas and endangering aid delivery.

The World Food Programme (WFP) is the largest agency in terms of volume of provision of humanitarian assistance. Their Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation in Afghanistan was in 2012 their second largest in the world, representing 9 percent of WFP's total global budget. The aim was to enhance food security and improve the human and productive capital of 7.6 million food-insecure Afghans through relief, recovery and capacity development projects. The humanitarian assistance is delivered by international and Afghan NGOs; some are specialised in this field (as the Norwegian Refugee Council), others provide

humanitarian assistance in addition to their regular community development or service provision.

The WFP is distributing vital resources on a massive scale, but its performance in planning, management and monitoring has received mixed reviews. An evaluation of the WFP operation in Afghanistan over a recent two-year period (2010–2012) found insufficiently robust and systematic approaches to monitoring, data paucity, and intermittent access and partner capacity constraints. This made it difficult to assess results, although mother-and child health and nutrition projects clearly demonstrated encouraging results. Lack of conflict analysis in the programme design made it difficult for the organisation to respond to changes on the ground (Bennett et al. 2012).

Choice and performance of implementing partners is another difficult area. Some WFP-implementing NGO projects have failed, partly due to increased insecurity. Worsened security has also limited opportunities for monitoring and evaluation, although some innovation has

taken place (Strand 2014b). Some NGOs have limited collaboration with government agencies and have not attempted to build government capacity. At times, the legitimacy of a local government partner may be questioned and generate conflict around a project (Bennett et al. 2012).

Some projects providing specialised assistance have fared better. The Norwegian Refugee Council is a specialised humanitarian agency that mostly relies on international staff in executive positions. The evaluation of its Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance Programme finds that it has made a real and tangible difference in the lives of many returnees and internally displaced. While noting the problems and complexities of programming in Afghanistan, the report overall finds that the programme has been successful (Notio Partners 2014). A client survey showed high satisfaction rates with the process to resolve cases, the outcome of cases and the quality of the Programme's assistance. Equally important, 88 percent of counselling cases and 71 percent of legal assistance cases

The spread of violence has increased the need for humanitarian assistance.

had led to a durable solution. Sustainability is of concern and recently led the organisation to reduce its dependence on international staff and increase collaboration with relevant ministries (Strand and Taxell 2016).

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) undertakes most of the assisted return and reintegration from Europe and neighbouring countries, as well as assisting IDPs. While IOM's logistics operation is highly rated, advisory and reintegration assistance to returnees – and hence the sustainability of the return – is much more problematic. Two recent evaluations strongly criticise the quality of IOM's performance in this regard (Samuel Hall Consulting 2014; Strand et al. 2016).

CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES: GENDER, ENVIRONMENT AND CORRUPTION

The 2014 Human Development Report ranks Afghanistan 152 out of 188 on the Gender Inequality Index. Women's rights have long been a high-priority and high-visibility issue for many donors, reinforced by UN Resolution 1325 and an Afghan national action plan. Most donors have gender equality as a cross-cutting programme dimension as well as targeted projects, although priorities and approaches vary considerably. The results are mixed. Environmental issues have not been prioritised while there has been a failure to address problems of corruption.

Gender

To improve women's rights, some organisations emphasise measures to strengthen institutions of justice and women's access to justice; others work more indirectly to empower women through socio-economic development and access to the political arena.

The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), established as part of

the 2001 Bonn process, plays a central role in the human rights field, including women's access to justice. The Commission generally has done exemplary work under difficult conditions, as testified in a report by the International Human Rights Network (2011). The report finds that AIHRC has had an impact on human rights beyond its core activities. The Commission's activities in advocacy, monitoring, capacity building and awareness – raising are cited, as are its wider contributions to human rights progress in Afghanistan. A Danish evaluation (Thomson et al. 2012) confirms these conclusions. The Commission's achievements are noteworthy given the widespread notion among many Afghans that the human rights agenda is internationally imposed and contrary to their culture, religion and traditions.

A European Commission evaluation (Bennett and Nemat 2015) finds that strengthening the judiciary and women's access to justice is important, and so is a more indirect approach that offers women opportunities to influence policies, strategies and practises. Evaluations

in this area treat access to education and health services (see 4.3 above) as a means towards long-term empowerment. A 2012 assessment of Norwegian-funded projects (Lexow et al. 2011) finds that NGOs have helped empower women and enabled women and girls to take advantage of a wide range of opportunities. Important reasons for success were the inclusion of men and elders in the process and a gradual approach. By contrast, an evaluation of Norwegian NGOs working with gender in rural Afghanistan (Wimpelmann and Strand 2014) found that “gender projects” frequently appear as “tick the women box”

AIHRC has had a 
positive impact on
human rights beyond
its core activities.

projects, with limited planning and ambitions for results.

Environmental concerns

Environmental issues have not been prioritised in Afghanistan, either by the government or the donors, and have therefore hardly been evaluated. This is a problem given that prolonged conflict typically has adverse effects on the environment. Afghanistan is in addition extremely vulnerable to natural disasters (earthquakes, droughts and flooding). Safe drinking water is scarce and air pollution in the larger cities high. Some NGO projects have

attempted to mitigate the negative environmental effects of development and response to natural disasters, but only on a small scale. UN agencies have joined in a project with the government called “Integration of Sustainable Environmental Management in Afghanistan”. This is the only project found to have been evaluated after a multi-donor study in 2005 reviewed government and donor support in this area (Saba 2005).

The evaluation report finds project activities relevant, although limited in scope and duration. Projects reviewed suffered from poor design and a weak implementation set-up. This led to mixed results in capacity building and, in the end, few sustainable livelihood opportunities. Some capacity development had taken place, but the value of the programme overall was more in preparing the ground for continued support. Visible improvements in livelihoods seem more “incidental” (Ahmed 2013).

Corruption

Corruption forms a complex feature of the Afghan context. Consistently high levels of

corruption pose a significant challenge to stability and sustainable development (World Bank 2012 b, UNDP 2014). The international community has itself played multiple roles, seeking to curtail at the same time as fueling corruption. With an initial focus on peace and security, corruption was seen as unavoidable as it helped hold together a diverse coalition of national actors, bringing spoilers into the fold. It was not until 2006, and the development of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, that corruption was placed firmly on the policy agenda. In numerous subsequent high-level conferences, the government and the international community jointly agreed that the fight against corruption should be a priority. Despite this, little concrete action was taken, and Afghanistan remains one of the most corrupt countries in the world. As a result, donors are struggling to maintain a “zero tolerance vision” while having to engage with ministries and programmes with high levels of corruption. As noted in an evaluation of Canadian support to Afghanistan, “[w]idespread corruption is another unintended impact of the large flows of donor money into the country” (DFATD

2015). High levels of aid, together with limited absorptive capacity and a poorly functioning public administration, meant that the international presence in Afghanistan itself became a driver of corruption. Donors appear to have paid more attention to managing and mitigating fiduciary risks with projects than addressing corruption more broadly (Pain et al. 2015). Concerns about corruption also led donors to increasingly ring-fence their funding, e.g. through increasingly requesting preferencing their funding to the ARTF (World Bank 2012 b). Where donors did seek to address corruption in a more programmatic sense, projects and programmes are often described as either too ambitious or too narrow in scope (Pain et al. 2015, UNDP 2014), and as having little or no effect on levels of corruption. Where some success was noted, e.g. ARTF’s support to public administration reform and strengthening of the Ministry of Finance, the scope of the problem meant that the evaluators still found overall impact to be limited (Scanteam 2012).

In sum, the vast majority of evaluations examined recognise corruption as a major

obstacle to development in Afghanistan. The international community is seen as having been too preoccupied with safeguarding its own funds. The failure to address the problem of corruption within the government is typically attributed to a lack of institutional capacity and political will for the necessary reforms. Broader studies note the lack of political will also among donors who fear that reducing funding will lead to more instability (NOU 2016). Conditionality thus loses its credibility.



Tax-exempt military fuel imported into Afghanistan is being sold on the open market causing the government huge revenue losses, 2016.

PHOTO: WAKIL KOHSAR/AFP/NTB SCANPIX

Widespread corruption
is another unintended
impact of the large
flows of donor money
into the country.



5. Lessons learnt



A major concern that emerges from this review of more than a decade of development assistance is the lack of documented impact on poverty reduction, gender equality and the sustainability of the interventions. This contrasts with the large investments made and the documentation of outputs and outcomes from several individual projects and programmes.

Class in physics and chemistry being conducted at the Female Experimental High School in Herat, 2012. PHOTO: GRAHAM CROUCH/WORLD BANK

A lack of evaluations of assistance delivered by or through the military, which has a primary security objective, makes it difficult to differentiate between the outcomes of these as compared with projects that have a clear development objective. Nevertheless, a general observation seems plausible. Given that part of the assistance has been highly politicised and/or had a security objective, it led to a higher threshold for addressing programme/project mismanagement (e.g. the LOTFA case). This in turn led to increased corruption with negative effects on outcomes.

The experience with the National Solidarity Programme suggests that community participation in planning and implementation, combined with more extensive oversight mechanisms, helps to curb mismanagement. This requires, however, that the government entity concerned has political backing, a system in place and is willing to address the problems.

Unintended but positive effects are more difficult to identify, but the National Solidarity Programme's apparent influence on attitudes



Afghan women in Herat collect saffron flowers, an alternative to poppy cultivation. PHOTO: JALIL REZAYEE/EPA/NTB SCANPIX

towards women's roles and position in society is noteworthy. The support for smaller and professional Afghan NGOs addressing rights and corruption issues has helped build an Afghan capacity that has proved effective in their respective fields.

The evaluations reviewed here mostly deal with immediate output (e.g. health clinics), sometimes with outcomes (e.g. improved health), but rarely with broader social impact (e.g. on gender equality). None address the effects on the structure of political power and related conflicts, although some recognise the importance of doing



Grape harvesting in Kunduz, PHOTO: XINHUA/SIPALSA/NTB SCANPIX

so. Many reports recognise the limited results of assistance to governance and democracy development, election support and capacity building, but there is a gap in evaluations of such programmes and limited analysis of what caused failure. Another gap is the limited attention paid to the agricultural sector despite its importance for food security and job creation, and of failed efforts to curb drug production. Several lessons regarding aid interventions in conflict-affected environments with a weak state can nevertheless be drawn from this material.

LOOKING AHEAD

The Afghan case has above all demonstrated the need for realistic ambitions. Overreach in relation to absorptive capacity as broadly defined has enormous potential for producing unintended and negative effects (corruption, dependence, parallel structures). Once established, such unintended consequences are extremely hard to reverse, as the Afghan case also demonstrates.

On a project level, the corollary is that interventions with an instrumental focus (i.e., directly influencing change) tend to be more effective in achieving results – and hence more realistic in the short run – than efforts to create understanding, reframe debates or build capacities and change behaviour. Producing outcomes with respect to public goods and participatory processes requires at a minimum a long-term commitment that is carefully calibrated to the local context.

Aid interventions operate in a complicated political marketplace and substantial aid necessarily affects the local political economy.

As the general literature shows, this is particularly clear in so-called post-conflict environments (Berdal and Zaaf 2013), and by extension even more so in highly fluid and conflictual political situations. One implication for project and programme design is that serious conflict analysis must be included, and frequently updated.

The Afghan case further shows that undertaking development policies in a context where donors engage in large part for security reasons adds a layer of complexity and often distorts aid interventions. In the field, the logic of development and the logic of security did not always harmonise, but appeared as constellations of opposite interests and actors. Projects and even overall aid policies were at times driven by military strategic or tactical interests, leading to unsustainable projects that at times were misguided and dysfunctional when assessed from a development perspective.

Use of multi-donor trust funds when well managed had distinct advantages in the Afghan case and should be considered in similar

situations. Such funds can be an important instrument of statebuilding, although national ownership is more easily developed if the recipient government is already firmly established (Barakat et.al. 2012). For donors, pooled funding reduces risk, facilitates coordination, and lessens the burden on individual donors to allocate and train staff to navigate in a difficult aid landscape.

A general implication of these findings is that the much-reduced international military presence in Afghanistan, and the country's reduced visibility compared to other centers of conflict, are in some respects a blessing in disguise. Obvious distortions to sensible aid policies have been reduced, permitting the aid community to work more in line with principles that are particularly important in conflict environments. That includes above all having a long-time perspective, observing the limits of local absorptive capacity, negotiating with local power holders to secure ownership and protect projects, and having realistic ambitions.

A set of “good practices” can further be distilled from evaluations of this case:

- › Demand conflict sensitivity studies and ability to adapt, encourage and support innovative methodologies for monitoring and evaluation and baseline studies to allow for impact measurement.
- › Prioritise smaller and community-rooted projects in collaboration between government, donors and NGO/businesses to ensure ownership and control, rather than larger “exhibition” projects.
- › Prioritise and maintain funding for interventions that improve access to and quality of public goods such as education and health (including safe drinking water).
- › Increase attention to the agricultural sector given the potential for increased job opportunities and food security.
- › Encourage synergies between programme and project (and donors), and require sustainability assessments as part of the initial project proposal.
- › Combine innovation with caution when in programmes to strengthen gender equality, and allow time for change.
- › When making a serious aid commitment for the long term, ensure sufficient and skilled staffing at embassies to maintain their “development diplomacy”, including a capacity to coordinate development efforts and to monitor and evaluate programmes and partners in complex aid environments.



PHOTO: UN PHOTO / HELENA MULKERNIS

Use of multi-donor 
trust funds when well
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Abbreviations

AIHRC	Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission	NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ANDS	Afghan National Development Strategy	NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
ARTF	Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund	NPP	National Priority Programme
ASGP	Afghanistan Sub National Governance Programme	NSP	National Solidarity Programme
CDC	Community Development Council	PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
ELECT	Enhancing Legal and Electoral Capacity for Tomorrow	SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
EQUIP	Education Quality Improvement Programme	UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
GoA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
IDLG	Independent Directorate of Local Governance	WB	World Bank
IDP	Internally Displaced Person	WFP	World Food Programme
LOTFA	Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan		
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation		
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs		
MoE	Ministry of Education		
MoF	Ministry of Finance		
MRRD	Ministry for Rural Rehabilitation and Development		
NABDP	National Area Based Development Programme		

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Photo: UN Photo/Eric Kanalstein (cover)
Farmer collecting wheat.

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