

Human Security in Afghanistan: Where do we go from here?

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After three decades of war, Afghans are undergoing a transition in government and the withdrawal of international security forces - a transition of challenges and opportunities. Among these challenges, Afghanistan's economic growth is expected to shrink considerably due to the withdrawal of ISAF and decreases in foreign assistance. Even in this period of uncertainty, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in humanitarian and development endeavors remain committed to working in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is one of poorest and least developed countries in the world, ranking 175th out of 187 countries on the UN Human Development Index. More than a third of Afghans live below the poverty line. Nine million people are in need of aid. The country faces rising unemployment, especially among youth. More than two million Afghans are still refugees in Pakistan and Iran; 650,000 Afghans are internally displaced. While over 5.7 million Afghan refugees have returned since 2001, many still face significant challenges to reintegration. They lack access to land, shelter, clean water and other basic services.

Despite these challenges, much progress has been made and there are significant gains on which to build. School enrollment in Afghanistan has jumped from one to eight million between 2002 and 2013, with the benefit of international assistance. The average life expectancy increased from 42 to 49 years. Maternal mortality dropped from 1,600 deaths per 100,000 births in 2001 to 327 deaths in 2010, a decrease of 79%. Most of these successful development outcomes have been achieved through community-based programming developed and implemented in partnership with Afghan communities themselves.

As donors seek to normalize development and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, we offer the following recommendations:

- 1. Make a long term, meaningful commitment to the people of Afghanistan to reach their development goals.** This commitment should be obvious to Afghans, particularly the poorest living under the poverty line, through the real improvements in their daily lives. It should be based on need rather than purely military or diplomatic objectives with the overall aim of demonstrating to Afghans that a viable state with an accountable electorate is a very real possibility after decades of conflict. Recent gains must be built upon, ideally with the support of local and provincial governments working with Afghan civil society, and with private sector and work force development that creates the basis for a sustainable economy. Donors should commit to remaining engaged in the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States process in Afghanistan, which has peacebuilding and statebuilding goals as its foundation.

- 2. Align humanitarian and development assistance.** The lack of development in Afghanistan makes its people extremely vulnerable to economic and natural disasters and impedes the country's ability to prepare for, and overcome these shocks. Much of the country suffers from a lack of basic services and many areas of the country are chronically food insecure. An emphasis on long-term development, aligned with adequate humanitarian assistance, disaster risk reduction and resilience approaches, can help minimize the effects of natural and man-made disasters. Long-term funding is critical and should be invested strategically through extensive community consultation. Commitments of multi-year assistance will further the goal of transitioning from humanitarian to development assistance, improve disaster risk reduction and lay the foundation for Afghanistan to become more self-sufficient.
- 3. Expand effective community-based development programs.** There have been many successful partnerships between various Government of Afghanistan ministries and NGOs. Normalization of aid should build and expand on these programs. Donors should consider direct bilateral and multilateral funding of civil society agencies that have an established track record and long-term commitment to Afghanistan. By working closely with poor communities, and supporting them in their efforts to identify their needs and shape development programming, civil society can ensure program sustainability and effectiveness. In community based programming, beneficiaries hold implementers accountable. NGOs with community-based acceptance models of security have long-standing relationships with communities, which allow them to operate in some of the most insecure areas of the country.
- 4. Seek new and additional methods of accountability.** The US Government and other donors must find additional methods of oversight and accountability. Mobile technology and enhanced program monitoring protocols can together provide strong and reliable project monitoring information. In recent years, mobile data collection has become a cost-effective method that allows for speedier data collection in low literacy environments. Other advantages include: real-time monitoring of data collection, elimination of error caused by manual data entry, and ability to add-on interactive mapping or other data visualizations. Mobile data collection has been tested and proven to work as a powerful monitoring and collection tool and has demonstrated its ability to operate in culturally sensitive and fragile environments. While it is not possible to use these proposed new methods in every community, they can be valuable resources that allow NGOs to gain a better understanding of impact alongside other approaches that bring in Afghan participation.
- 5. Find durable solutions for refugees, internally displaced persons, and refugee returnees.** We must work to ensure sufficient reintegration programs for the millions of Afghans seeking to rebuild lives in their home country. The National Priority Programs (NPPs) such as the National Solidarity Program (NSP) have significant potential to reach returnee communities across Afghanistan and contribute to sustainable return. Priority should be given to resilience programming in areas of high return. For those refugees who cannot safely return home, countries must be identified that can offer refuge and asylum, and support must be provided in the areas where the vast majority of Afghan refugees reside through the Regional Solutions Strategy. Implementation of Afghanistan's National Internally Displaced Persons Policy should take into consideration not only urgent needs, but reforming and building up basic services like housing, health, and education, that will stop the cycle of displacement and provide a foundation upon which the displaced can rebuild their lives.