



Recalibrating relations with Afghanistan: collective action by international actors

Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative on adapting
and innovating aid delivery

**Alastair McKechnie, Kathryn Nwajiaku-Dahou, Mark Bowden, Marcus Manuel
and Ed Laws**

May 2022





United Kingdom
Humanitarian
Innovation Hub

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI or our partners.

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

How to cite: Bowden, M., Laws, E., Manuel, M., McKechnie, A. and Nwajiaku-Dahou, K. (2022) *Recalibrating relations with Afghanistan: Collective action by international actors*. ODI Report. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/collective-action-by-international-actors).

Photo: Jeff/flickr. Reproduced under a Creative Commons licence (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

Acknowledgements

This paper has benefited immensely from contributions to a series of workshops involving the Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative and its partners – the Center for Global Development (CGD), Chatham House, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), ODI and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC). In particular, the authors would like to thank Sarah Rose of CGD who provided constructive and helpful comments on an earlier draft. We are also grateful to Becky Owens for editorial support, Maegan Rodricks for coordinating production of the report and Anil Shamdasani for typesetting and design. Opinions and any errors or omissions are the authors' responsibility.

About this publication

This paper has been produced in partnership with the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub under the Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative.

About the authors

Alastair McKechnie

Alastair McKechnie is Senior Research Associate, Development and Public Finance, and Politics and Governance, ODI.

Kathryn Nwajiaku-Dahou

Kathryn Nwajiaku-Dahou is Director, Politics and Governance, ODI.

Mark Bowden

Mark Bowden is Senior Research Associate, Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI.

Marcus Manuel

Marcus Manuel is Senior Research Associate, Development and Public Finance, and Equity and Social Policy, ODI.

Ed Laws

Ed Laws is Research Fellow, Politics and Governance, ODI.

Contents

Acknowledgements / i

Acronyms/Glossary / iii

Executive summary / 1

1 Introduction / 3

Report outline / 3

2 Towards definitional clarity – What do we mean by international collective action? / 6

2.1 Principles of collective action / 6

2.2 Collective action in Afghanistan / 7

3 What can we learn from past international engagement with Afghanistan? / 9

4 Political obstacles to international collective action / 12

4.1 US policy towards Afghanistan – a key constraint / 12

4.2 Gender and human rights / 13

4.3 Collective action within Afghanistan / 14

5 Current considerations – Core areas that require and challenge international collective action / 15

5.1 Operational engagement with the Taliban, Afghan institutions and civil society / 15

5.2 Adapting aid delivery to Afghanistan's new situation / 18

5.3 Navigating the political economy of Western and other actors / 21

References / 24

Acronyms/Glossary

AFP	Agencies, Funds and Programmes
ARTF	Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund
CDC	Community Development Council
CGD	Center for Global Development
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
EU	European Union
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IFI	International financial institute
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
US	United States of America

Executive summary

This report sets out key lessons from past international involvement in Afghanistan, so that current and future engagement can avoid repeating mistakes that have reduced effectiveness in the past.

The report defines collective action when two or more international actors work together to achieve a common objective, which would be harder or impossible to deliver unilaterally. The conditions for collective action are fundamentally political. International actors engage in collective action not only because they are aware of advantages at technical level or in the abstract, but because they also believe it serves their specific interests.

The report sets out four conditions for structuring collective action around the constraints of partners' political economy:

1. Recognising that political opposition to engagement with the Taliban¹ has popular roots in partner countries and requires more effective communication to change the narrative about engagement. This should emphasise the self-interest of donor countries around migration and security, and moral imperatives for development as well as humanitarian action. The narrative should help partner countries understand the nature of Taliban governance, and the hard realities and difficult choices involving Afghanistan today. Communications should also involve making the Taliban aware of the implications of their actions on international support.
2. Any strategy for engagement or disengagement requires understanding the Taliban regime and the scope for constructive engagement that reinforces the positive instincts of Talibs while restraining more militant elements. It is difficult to see this happening without deeper discussions with the de facto government, which will in turn require international representation in Afghanistan.
3. There is a need for international consensus on development engagement that addresses the underlying drivers of humanitarian crises; reinforces stability, peace and inclusive development; and leads towards economic self-sufficiency. A humanitarian-only approach has serious limitations, not least because it accelerates the decay of Afghan institutions (that might need to be resuscitated), aid dependency and growing Afghan resentment at overbearing foreigners. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund have until recently taken the lead on development and economic analysis. Agreement is needed on how they should re-engage, including under the auspices of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). UNAMA itself needs its analytical capacity strengthened

¹ 'Taliban' is a loose term that describes the de facto coalition led by members of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. It includes members of the Haqqani network affiliated to, but not controlled by the Taliban, as well as appointments from other factions. The de facto government describes itself as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

to provide political, humanitarian, human rights, security and transnational crime analysis that is independent of the competing interests of United Nations agencies, funds and programmes.

4. Institutional arrangements for enabling collective action need to be put in place. These arrangements could grow from a blueprint for collective action, created by a group of eminent persons that encompasses the interests of Afghanistan's partners past and future. This blueprint could include: organisational arrangements for the multilateral system; coordination arrangements between bilateral partners and the government; arrangements for managing flows of humanitarian aid and development assistance; arrangements for including non-Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee partners, and the design of platforms that ensure policy coherence, coordination and accountability, including – most importantly – to the people of Afghanistan. The aid and security architecture for Afghanistan that existed prior to August 2021 was seriously broken and contributed to the Taliban victory. There is now an opportunity for a complete rethink.

1 Introduction

About the Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative

This report draws on a series of events under the Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative (ASLI). This initiative was convened with the support of the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub and the donor, the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, in partnership with the Center for Global Development (CGD), Chatham House, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), ODI and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC).

Between December 2021 and February 2022, ASLI convened four workshops led by each of the partner organisations in turn. The workshops brought together senior leaders, decision-makers, experts, researchers and practitioners to discuss what comes next for foreign aid in Afghanistan. The lead organisation for each workshop published an accompanying paper, of which this is one.

The **first workshop**, led by Chatham House on 17 December 2021, explored four potential scenarios for Afghanistan's political, economic, and security trajectory over the next 18–24 months. The **second workshop**, led by IDS on 28 January 2022, explored need and vulnerability, tying the drivers of these conditions to the scenarios outlined by Chatham House. The **third workshop**, led by CGD on 9 February, assessed options for future aid instruments and mechanisms to address the financial crisis. The **fourth workshop**, for which a background note was distributed to participants, was led by ODI on 28 February and focused on options for collective action.

Following the workshops and papers, ASLI published a **synthesis paper** that summarises options for effective international engagement with a changed Afghanistan.

ASLI seeks to leverage the collective knowledge and experience of leading global think tanks working on Afghanistan and aid issues. Our goal is to make a coherent and evidence-based contribution to emerging and ongoing work addressing development and vulnerability in Afghanistan.

Report outline

This report and the workshop that informed it are intended to build consensus on the question of 'collective action' – primarily among Western and other international partners – on how to engage with the reality of today's Afghanistan. We begin by establishing some

definitional clarity about what joined-up action for common purpose and aligning incentives to this end means. The collective action problem within international engagement in Afghanistan has traditionally focused on questions of 'effectiveness' (coherence and coordination) and 'local ownership' (alignment with the objectives and plans of the Afghan authorities). Yet the

‘authorising environment’ has now fundamentally changed. The question, then, becomes how to foster collective action for effectiveness in a context where the principle of local ownership is deeply contested.

As the earlier workshops in this series noted, it is no longer possible to return to the status quo prevailing in the two decades prior to August 2021. In view of the dramatically altered situation in Afghanistan, this report fully acknowledges the challenge presented by fundamentally altered international relations with the country.

There are three arenas in which it is possible to consider the question of collective action, each of which are interlinked:

- a. political dialogue
- b. monitoring mechanisms
- c. aid delivery.

The current authorising environment means that there may only be room to discuss collective action on monitoring and delivery. There is currently little room for discussing collective action on political dialogue in the absence of consensus or appetite. We note, however, interesting initiatives on political dialogue underway; for example the OECD Oslo dialogue, and initiatives by Qatar and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The problem is that there are many of them, they lack focus and run the risk of creating coordination problems between international actors.

Given that the arenas are interlinked, political obstacles – especially the absence of appetite for or consensus on political dialogue – will most likely impinge upon possibilities for collective action

on monitoring and delivery. The report will focus primarily and necessarily on these obstacles and consider how collective action might take place and be reinforced in key areas.

The aim is to detail and discuss what the obstacles are, how to tackle them and what it would take to generate the kind of collective action required to address the challenges Afghanistan faces. We acknowledge the scope and scale of these challenges, with deadlock in its international relations and international attention increasingly focused on the Russia-Ukraine war.

This report aims to encourage innovative, out-of-the-box thinking about what would be required to alter relations between Afghanistan and the international community – mainly, but not solely those countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee – in ways that strengthen collective action for effective delivery and monitoring of foreign assistance that benefits the Afghan people.

The report sets out:

- A definition of collective action.
- Lessons learned from previous engagement in Afghanistan.
- Key political obstacles to collective action.
- Challenges for collective action/engagement with respect to monitoring and delivery:
 - **Operational engagement with the Taliban,² Afghan institutions and civil society** when there is little or no formal recognition of the de facto government. Issues for discussion include who should facilitate engagement and how, to what end and on what basis; the role of conditionality (e.g. on gender),

2 See footnote 1.

sanctions regimes and compacts; and the role of the United Nations (UN) and international financial institutions (IFIs).

- **Adapting aid delivery to Afghanistan’s new situation**, taking into account the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) to engagement with IFIs and the changing humanitarian mandate, including a role for Afghan voices.
- **Navigating the political economy of Western and other actors**, which might include the OIC, Gulf countries such as Qatar, Russia, Turkey, China and Afghanistan’s other neighbours, and the UN. This would also consider recognition of the de facto government in Afghanistan and its implications for foreign assistance. This report sketches out key actors’ interests and incentives, laying the groundwork for discussion about how these can be aligned – and what it would take – to achieve collective action in ways that increase scope for addressing the challenges identified in the workshops.

2 Towards definitional clarity – What do we mean by international collective action?

2.1 Principles of collective action

For the purposes of this report, we use a simple and expansive definition: collective action occurs when two or more international actors work together to achieve a common objective that would be harder or impossible to deliver unilaterally.

This understanding of collective action can incorporate a wide range of practices: formal or informal networking; communication and information sharing; joint working; sharing of risks and responsibilities; deliberate cultivation of shared ground, etc.

We see the drivers of collective action as partly technical: international actors are typically motivated to engage in collective action when they have the capacity to do so and are informed about (or persuaded of) the likely positive consequences of doing so and the likely negative consequences of not doing so.

However, the conditions for collective action are also fundamentally political – international actors are typically motivated to engage in collective action not only because they are aware of the advantages at a technical level or in the abstract, but also because they believe it serves their specific interests.

The relative costs of taking part in collective action, and the kind of goods that can be achieved, are important for understanding the incentives

and disincentives of different international actors to contribute. Such incentives and disincentives exist at levels of governments, institutions and the staff within them. Incentives for collaboration ideally should be aligned, especially at the staff level where action occurs.

Collective action is easiest to achieve if there are mutual net gains for all participating actors. Conversely, actors tend not to contribute towards a collective effort if the benefits they stand to accrue are worth less than the cost of their contribution, or if they stand to gain at least some of the benefits of collective action regardless of whether, or how much, they contribute – the classic ‘free-rider’ problem in game theory. Free-riding is most likely to arise when the collective group in question is large and the potential benefits of collective action are widely shared or ‘non-excludable’. Solutions typically involve enforceable rules to restrict free-riding and motivate actors to behave in their collective interest. This is why at the institutional level it is important to have bureaucratic incentives for staff that reward rather than ignore the importance of collaboration.

Collective action can also be undermined by coordination challenges, which can arise because of geographical or social distance, lack of trust, or different ways of defining problem(s) among the collective. The solutions to these challenges typically involve convening actors, establishing a dialogue to reach a common agreement, then putting in place mechanisms to prevent

backsliding. However, different time perspectives among actors (e.g. military and development) or international partners can also undermine collective action, and advantage the first mover in defining a problem and set of solutions.

2.2 Collective action in Afghanistan

If we apply this definition in the case of Afghanistan, it is clear that commitment to international collective action, at least in principle, was observable at the International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn in 2001 and subsequent pledging conference in Tokyo in 2002, which were preceded by international meetings in Washington DC, Islamabad and Brussels. Agreements reached at these meetings sought to influence the political and economic development of Afghanistan, as well as to determine its governance structures and regional relations. A parallel set of meetings determined security arrangements, coalitions and structures for Afghanistan and its allies.

When referring to international collective action in this report, we primarily mean action among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member partners, but also extend the concept to embrace other international partners. It is also important to recognise that various frameworks for collective action have developed over the past two decades.

International collective action in Afghanistan until 2012 was dominated by a focus on security and counterterrorism through both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Counter-Terrorism Committee of the UN Security Council (UNSC). More recently, international collective action has focused on the security transition and movement towards a peace process; it has been dominated by the withdrawal agenda of the United States (US). However, there has also been broader

international engagement in these processes through a network of special representatives for Afghanistan and Pakistan from the major OECD donor countries, who still provide the main channel for international political and diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan. The UN through UNAMA provides a 'good offices function' as a channel for regular engagement with the Taliban.

Collective action on economic and development issues has primarily taken place through regular pledging conferences, and aid coordination structures established within Afghanistan under the UN mandate. Aid coordination has tended to be dominated by the interests of the five major donors – the US, the European Union, United Kingdom, Germany and Japan – while other important regional donors such as India, Turkey or other groupings, OIC and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) remained disengaged.

A number of regional groupings have developed concerned with regional political and trade issues that successive Afghanistan governments have used as a counterweight to the dominance of OECD donors. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is the most prominent, chaired by China and including Russia, India and Pakistan, as well as neighbouring Tajikistan. As a geographically landlocked country with a high dependence on imported energy and food, Afghanistan is also highly reliant on regional trade groupings such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program and, to some extent, the Economic Cooperation Organization.

Afghan politicians and past governments have proved adept at navigating their way through and around the various forums for collective action. Afghan leaders have been skilled at brinkmanship, acknowledging the preferences of their partners

and exploiting the differences between them. The Taliban is no exception. It has proved its expertise in ‘forum-hopping’ during the peace process and already demonstrated its intent to develop greater engagement with regional groupings.

3 What can we learn from past international engagement with Afghanistan?

It is worth considering some of the lessons of past international involvement in Afghanistan to avoid repeating mistakes.

- **Abrupt changes in foreign support can do enormous harm.** Rubin (2002) has argued that a sharp decline in both US and Soviet aid in the 1970s weakened the Afghan state and created conditions favourable to a communist takeover and four decades of civil war. Neglect of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet forces led to continued conflict among factions of mujahideen fighters and the first Taliban regime. While less likely now, sharp increases in financial aid beyond the capacity of the country to absorb it can generate waste, corruption and lack of public confidence in the government and its partners. Heightened perceptions of corruption in Afghanistan also undermined public support in the partner countries.
- Achieving coherence and coordination across the international effort proved difficult during the 2002–22 period, despite ostensibly good relations between the government of Afghanistan and its international partners. **Incoherent, inconsistent policies and poor coordination across different policy communities** were the rule rather than the exception for the humanitarian, development assistance, diplomatic and security sectors. Coordination and coherence at this level was especially difficult despite arrangements by the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board for civilian assistance, and the platforms provided by the ARTF, the Law and Order Trust Fund

for Afghanistan and the Afghan National Army Territorial Force. Security considerations drove partner engagement with Afghanistan, including the protection of military forces deployed to the country until they were gradually withdrawn following a ‘surge’ operation in 2011. The security sector was better funded, with more analytical and operational outreach than civilian agencies. It dominated policymaking, but policies were incoherent (e.g. buying off powerholders with cash while simultaneously seeking to improve governance).

- **Coordination was structured around meetings.** These had little influence on partners’ decisions and failed to recognise or address problems as they arose. Partners sought Afghan government endorsement of their agendas. The Afghan governments saw most agreements coming out of these meetings as vague and that non-compliance would be unlikely to be held to account. International meetings, especially pledging conferences, also distracted government attention and oriented governments towards funding partners rather than the Afghan people. Such coordination was centred on the priorities of international partners rather than those of Afghans.
- **Key players were prone to unilateralism.** They were reluctant to share information and coordinate with the government and other like-minded partners. Coordination was centred on OECD members and there was limited engagement with regional partners. Countries such as China, GCC and OIC member states, Russia and Turkey were not an active part of

the civilian coordination structure. Even among the OECD country partners, there was intense diplomatic rivalry – a case of the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’, whereby several partners pursued their own advantage and followed domestic policy interests to the detriment of a common position.

- **Compacts have had limited success** due to difficulty in agreeing priorities among partners and with Afghanistan, and lack of partner accountability for commitments and incentives among the parties to demonstrate successful implementation to their constituencies or to renege. ODI’s Lessons for Peace (L4P)³ project has shown that previous compacts had little depth of Afghan ownership as approval was often rushed through cabinet at the last minute before funding conferences, without seeking broader support among the government, parliamentarians or civil society (McKechnie and Bowden, 2020).
- **The role of the UN in engaging with the de facto Taliban authorities was critical.** UN engagement with Afghanistan during the previous Taliban government was essential in allowing humanitarian support to reach the Afghan people at a time of economic collapse, and severe drought and vulnerability. This parallel system of service delivery, coupled with remittances from the Afghan diaspora, prevented an even deeper crisis. The UN’s role and inconsistency with deep local traditions of sovereign independence led to growing Afghan resentment, including from the new

government established in late 2001. As former Afghan government officials have stated, UN operations were considered expensive and led by foreigners, and largely did not have a transformational impact on civilian lives.

- **After 2001, parallel delivery structures continued to ignore Afghan sovereignty, authority and capacity.** There was a reluctance to seek and nurture the capacity that had survived the previous Taliban regime, which Afghans considered legitimate and which, with agreed support, could have soon been made to function. The creation of parallel delivery structures undermined state capacity, neglected Afghan priorities, and was inefficient and financially unsustainable, which created aid dependency and bred resentment among Afghans.
- **A functioning central bank and finance ministry were critical for effective engagement.** Early attention by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank to revitalise these institutions and provide support for public financial management created confidence that enabled the ARTF to access public development finance, and established Afghan budget process to set priorities and allocate funds the government raised or received from partners. IMF-supported currency reform and a central bank payments system smoothed the way for bilateral and humanitarian support.
- **There was a failure to understand Afghanistan and the Taliban.** Despite stated commitments to ‘coherence and coordination’, nominally grounded in the principle of ‘local

³ ODI’s Lessons for Peace: Afghanistan project is a large-scale research and convening initiative, funded by the Australian government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Initiated in May 2019, the project has provided evidence-based analysis, convening and research for international bilateral and multilateral donors supporting Afghanistan. For more information and to access the project’s full library of resources, see <https://l4p.odi.org/>

ownership', re-engagement of international partners with Afghanistan after 2001 came with preconceived ideas about sources of legitimacy (e.g. through the modern service delivery state), the nature of governance and public authority, and ignored patterns of authority grounded in historic, cultural, social, ethnic, regional, kinship and religious structures. The central roles of Islam and resistance to foreign occupation, and the culturally and linguistically diverse nature of Afghan society, are intrinsic to Afghan identity and identities.⁴ Taliban religious leaders capitalised on this, mobilising Islamic concepts of unity and authority to overcome and/or leverage cultural divisions and historical legacies of war to establish forms of order in the areas they controlled. After the 9/11 attacks, the Coalition conflated Taliban, Al Qaeda and terrorism, and generally overlooked evidence of differences both within the Taliban and between parts of the Taliban over accommodating Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups. The Taliban was excluded from the Bonn talks that created the post-2001 order, and peace overtures from Talibs over several years were apparently rejected (Malkasian, 2021).

- **Historic, cultural and social structures underpin Afghan governance.** Foreign invasions of Afghanistan date back to much earlier periods. Arguably, the current situation has parallels with the Arab Muslim invasion of Persia in the 7th century C.E., where absorption of Persian models of governance influenced Arab modes of governing for more than a 1,000 years (Axworthy, 2008). Afghanistan has a

legacy of centuries of forms of Turko-Persian statecraft. The Taliban will have to reckon with such traditions and the changes brought by two decades of international engagement, especially as it seeks to govern urban areas.

- **Afghan governments have also faced problems of collective action**, including finding internal coherence on agreed priorities, development plans and actions the international community could support. While governments were able to pass budgets and approve national programmes in some areas, these processes could not cope with programming large amounts of foreign assistance outside government budget systems that were loosely coordinated by central and local government officials.
- **International engagement was often short-term and reactive rather than strategic.** Without shared measurable goals and plans for how to achieve them, the international community focused on immediate problems that ignored long-term objectives to secure a stable political settlement, peace and increased prosperity. Engagement with military, diplomatic and development partners could be characterised as tactics without strategy.⁵

The international community and its Afghan allies sought to transplant a Western liberal state without sufficient regard for how political orders grow out of a country's long-established principles and historic practices and traditions that are in some ways unique to the country (including differing constitutional arrangements among Western countries themselves).

4 For a detailed account of the Afghan sociopolitical system and how political legitimacy has been determined see Barfield (2010).

5 The point about tactics without strategy was made by several people interviewed by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, published in the Washington Post (Whitlock, 2019) and summarised in Whitlock (2021).

4 Political obstacles to international collective action

Members of the international coalition are coming to terms with the reality of defeat. Afghanistan has historically been an easy country to invade; but it has been difficult for foreigners to shape governance there – and to find an exit. Once again, Afghans have defeated the largest and most modern armed forces in the world. Expenditure amounting to trillions of dollars, overwhelmingly on security and counterterrorism, has not succeeded in creating peace within a liberal state. Accepting defeat is understandably difficult for OECD members of the coalition, whose policymakers and officials may be experiencing inertia stemming from denial and anger linked to grief at loss, and who have yet to accept the new reality and explore what opportunities can be found in the current situation. This suggests the need to seriously consider lessons from the past and options for the future that it might be possible to rally around.

4.1 US policy towards Afghanistan – a key constraint

Policy inertia on the question of engaging with Afghanistan under the Taliban regime is most acute in the US, which has been the leading international actor, where the traumas of 9/11 and the 2003–11 Iraq war still linger. The US has seen Afghanistan through a lens of domestic security and counterterrorism, but there is also bipartisan sympathy for the Afghan people and the humanitarian crisis they face. Indeed, since

August 2021 the internal debate on Afghanistan in the US has evolved, with some gradual thawing of the authorising environment.

US sanctions, which have influence far beyond North America due to the US dollar-based global financial system, are a major factor governing most financial transactions, which has a great impact on economic activity throughout Afghanistan and therefore important social and political consequences. As participants at the Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative (ASLI) workshop mentioned, the complexity, compliance costs and perpetual risks of accidental non-compliance with US (and other) sanctions have made financial institutions reluctant to participate in any transactions involving Afghanistan, often referred to as bank de-risking.

The US Treasury has issued ‘general licences’, which clarify or grant exceptions to the sanctions regime, for humanitarian action, service delivery that meets basic human needs, governance and environmental management. The most recent one permits many transactions involving the de facto government in Afghanistan and its agencies.⁶

Policy innovation in the US, however, continues on the whole still to be stymied by political polarisation and deadlock. This situation could be exacerbated by congressional elections in November 2022 and if the 2024 presidential election produces a disputed result. It is politically

6 US Treasury General License No. 20 *Authorizing Transactions Involving Afghanistan or Governing Institutions in Afghanistan* 25 February 2022 (<https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20220225>).

difficult for the US to accept the de facto Taliban government and the loss of face this would entail, which could be complicated further by US military veterans and their families wondering whether their sacrifice was in vain.

While the US is far from having completely withdrawn funding and engagement with Afghanistan – the US was the single largest contributor to the UN humanitarian appeal in January – the risk is that the US will increasingly begin to treat Afghanistan like Cuba, Iran and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, maintaining hostility and sanctions for decades, and perhaps supporting anti-Taliban armed groups should they emerge. However, substantial US contributions to humanitarian aid to Afghanistan suggest some willingness to remain engaged.

Relations between the Taliban and US could further sour over sanctions and the executive decision to seize Afghanistan’s dollar foreign exchange reserves. The intention was to allocate them to humanitarian support and to meet claims awarded by US courts to people affected by the 9/11 events, as well as any future attacks on terrorists inside Afghanistan that kill civilians.

In addition to posing a threat to collective action on Afghanistan more broadly, US policy is a serious challenge to the continued engagement of the IMF and World Bank in Afghanistan. The US is the largest shareholder in both institutions, and access to the US dollar financial system is needed for the operations of IFIs and others engaged in international financial transactions. The inability or unwillingness of IFIs to engage in Afghanistan constrains their potential to act as intermediaries in managing their members’ pooled resources to provide platforms for coordinating financial assistance and ensuring policy coherence.

4.2 Gender and human rights

In addition to the challenges the US policy environment poses, there is clearly a fault line between Western liberal, jihadist and conservative Islamist world views over gender and other human rights issues. These constitute another important political obstacle to engagement with the de facto Taliban government and future assistance. Revulsion over the gender and human rights policies of the previous Taliban regime is widespread in OECD member countries, in particular, and cannot be ignored. The European Union (EU), US and others tend to draw red lines that are difficult for the Taliban not to cross for nationalist, Islamism and traditionalist reasons, particularly as the Talibs see themselves as victors and guardians of Afghanistan’s sovereignty and independence.

The Taliban may even be sincere in believing that its interpretation of shariah (Islamic law) protects the rights of women in a patriarchal society. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, which have nurtured radical Islamist movements worldwide, have successfully projected soft Islamist power for several decades, possibly below the radar of Western diplomats. The Taliban might find support backed by trade and investment elsewhere if conforms to religious, political or security objectives outside Afghanistan’s borders.

Strong domestic lobbies and a publicly principled stance on justice and inclusiveness constrain the approach of Western partners to Afghanistan. The UNSC in its 17 September 2021 resolution emphasised ‘the importance of the establishment of an inclusive and representative government, further emphasizing the importance of the full, equal and meaningful participation of women, and upholding human rights, including for women,

children and minorities⁷. The international community and the de facto Taliban government need to find a more creative approach to addressing these issues that facilitates real action to advance and uphold women's rights, rather than leading to posturing, Taliban reaction and inaction.

There are many tensions among the five permanent members of the UNSC – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the US – aggravated by the Russia-Ukraine war and an emerging and contested multipolar international order. This makes agreement on Afghanistan at the UN difficult and constrains the possibilities for UN engagement in the country. However, during the UNSC meeting in September 2021, which renewed UNAMA's mandate for six months, China, Russia, the UK and US agreed that Afghanistan should not become a base for terrorist groups. UN recognition of the new government of Afghanistan, which would be an enabler of humanitarian and development assistance, is likely to be fraught at the next UN General Assembly (UNGA) and could result in a prolonged stand-off.

4.3 Collective action within Afghanistan

Finally, we should recognise that problems of international collective action could affect the scope for collective action in Afghanistan. ODI research has shown that governance and inclusive development itself is essentially a problem of collective action (coordination, coherence, compliance) at domestic level (see Booth, 2012). The last Afghan government struggled to overcome factionalism and venality among national and local elites that ultimately contributed to its undoing. Attempts to create a

liberal state coexisted with what De Waal (2015) called a 'market for loyalty' that permitted local powerholders to extract economic rents in return for loyalty. International support can reinforce such tendencies if it is incoherent, uncoordinated and pursues short-term donor priorities. Conversely, international partners, if coordinated (at the very least), could reduce factionalism and incentivise Afghan commitment to poverty reduction, but only if they first address the wicked problem of with whom to engage if not with the regime in place.

The Taliban, too, faces the challenge of both responding to donor red lines, and coordinating and unifying members within its alliance – where conservative views on girls' education and gender more generally are widely held, notably by many of the foot soldiers who brought the Taliban to power. This is illustrated by the confusion over the policy reversals on girls' education at the beginning of the 2022 school year.

Even when collective action is feasible at international level, there is a gulf between agreements made in foreign capitals and translating them into action on the ground in Afghanistan.

In addition, the de facto government will also face the challenge of breaking with practices of rent-seeking embedded within Afghan institutions, that could both deprive it of potential revenues and sorely test levels of tolerance among the Afghan population with respect to corruption and abuse of power. Recognising, and adapting and responding to the challenge of collective action within Afghanistan itself, should be a key part of developing mutually productive international engagement.

7 [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2596\(2021\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2596(2021)).

5 Current considerations – Core areas that require and challenge international collective action

5.1 Operational engagement with the Taliban, Afghan institutions and civil society

Some international engagement with the Taliban is actually taking place in the guise of ‘humanitarian crisis response’ and shared security concerns. Such engagement is taking place in the context of a short-term, roughly one-year scenario – defined by Chatham House as ‘Stuttering’ when there has been little or no recognition of the current government and engagement in Afghanistan has been framed not as engagement with the de facto Taliban government but as a humanitarian response based on human rights goals.

The main interlocutors with the de facto government include the UN, Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries, Norway, Qatar and regional organisations such as the OIC. Some relaxation of sanctions to permit humanitarian payments has taken place and for transactions involving the de facto government and its agencies, but financial institutions remain unwilling to make transactions without additional insurance.

A humanitarian exchange fund that would convert foreign currency to afghanis, and would intermediate sanctions compliance risk has been under discussion by the UN and World Bank but has not yet reached fruition. Tensions have already arisen between humanitarian actors and the Taliban, which has sought to jointly manage the distribution of aid from the UN appeal. The Taliban

may seek to participate in funding decisions, including in the regional distribution of funds, as the areas it controlled had limited access to aid.

Several key events taking place that could influence collective action include:

- IMF/World Bank Spring Meetings (22–24 April 2022), where financing arrangements and the role of these organisations will likely be agreed on.
- UNGA (October 2022) where the issue of Afghanistan’s international recognition will arise.
- IMF/World Bank annual meetings (October 2022), which will possibly consider Afghanistan’s economic situation, financial flows and their modalities, and if there is consensus to adjust the roles of these organisations in Afghanistan.
- The UNSC on 17 March extended UNAMA’s mandate for 12 months after intense discussions. The mandate could be adjusted by further extensions before it is set to expire in March 2023.

Several countries have initiated bilateral or collective discussions with the Taliban, notably Norway, and through the EU office in Kabul. ASLI workshops highlighted how discussions between the Taliban and the UN, humanitarian organisations and some countries are taking place on the delivery of humanitarian aid, in particular. But multiple approaches by bilateral and multilateral partners to serve their own interests could lead to confusion.

Taliban delegations from the de facto government have met in Oslo and in Geneva to discuss humanitarian and human rights issues. These talks were seen by the Taliban as progress towards recognition, though this was not the intention of the meetings. Discussions led by the UN and humanitarian organisations on the delivery of humanitarian aid continue but are becoming more diffuse, conducted as they are now through the structure of ministries. There is a risk of repeating earlier failures of collective action that resulted in competing agendas among uncoordinated partners; and short-termism, which created problems for the future. Building consensus among partners, while necessary, is not sufficient without dialogue with the de facto authorities in Afghanistan.

The issue for like-minded partners is therefore *not whether to talk with the Taliban*, but the *nature and extent of this engagement*, who should orchestrate it and how the current political boundaries can be extended sufficiently to resolve operational and strategic issues. UNAMA has a coordination mandate and can serve as an interlocutor, but some workshop participants questioned its capacity to do this.

Processes initiated by the OIC, Pakistan, Qatar and Norway suggest how neutral countries or organisations might act as bridges between the Taliban, Afghan society more broadly and the international community, especially those members that are politically constrained from talking to the Taliban. Clarity is lacking over the role of these forums and their relations with the UN and UNAMA mandate.

Workshop participants stressed the need for dialogue with the de facto government to build trust and to better understand Taliban viewpoints and priorities that are constantly changing. Such dialogue is needed at local level as there are policy differences between district councils and the central government in Kabul, that can create opportunities; for example, for girls' education that has broad local support. Furthermore, it is sometimes difficult for the Taliban to resolve policy differences at national level, as was demonstrated by the unintended local-level consequences of policy reversals on girls' education.⁸

Understanding the Taliban requires greater international presence, both in Kabul and the regions. Shared local-level political economy analysis based on where donors are present could help. Effective humanitarian engagement requires dialogue with the de facto government, which cannot avoid issues of policy. Participants mentioned the impossibility of decoupling aid delivery from politics.

The lack of political recognition of the de facto government is reflected in the multiple sanctions on individuals associated with it, and the Taliban as an organisation – all of which make access to the finance that is vital for stability in Afghanistan challenging and collective action to address hurdles difficult.

5.1.1 The United States of America

US sanctions, which are applied to the Taliban as an organisation, as well as other organisations and individuals, lie at the core of the financial problems. The impact of the sanctions on the

8 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/the-ban-on-older-girls-education-taliban-conservatives-ascendant-and-a-leadership-in-disarray/>.

international banking system have had significant consequences for humanitarian organisations, as have the high costs of compliance and risk of sanctions-related penalties being imposed on organisations long after an alleged offence has occurred. Despite efforts by US authorities to adjust sanctions through the general licence procedures, concerns about both short- and long-term consequences of non-intentional breaches constrain transactions for humanitarian and other organisations such as banks. According to a report published by US law and policy institute the Brennan Center, ‘Even when one can potentially operate within the letter of the law, the sanctions regime is of such complexity, and the potential consequences of running afoul of U.S. law so dire, that there is a chilling effect on many businesses.’ The same report proposes reforms that would hold humanitarian actors to ‘a reasonable good-faith belief that the entity was facilitating the provision of humanitarian goods in accordance with the law should constitute an affirmative defence against any criminal or civil enforcement action’ (Boyle, 2021).

5.1.2 UN

The UN (and the EU and others) have also imposed sanctions, though humanitarian exceptions have been granted. While there are no overall trading sanctions, the UN sanctions place restrictions on the movement of individuals and affect the nature of organisations’ engagement with listed individuals, prohibiting them from providing any form of material support.

Most sanctions have been justified by allegations that individuals or organisations have engaged in terrorism. There seems little clarity about the path for further adjustments if those sanctioned, who are now in government, are no longer involved in or were to renounce terrorist activities. There are many examples of former terrorists forming or joining internationally recognised governments.⁹ Furthermore, the conditions for delisting sanctioned organisations and individuals appear to be shifting towards issues of human rights, gender and social inclusion – desirable objectives, but without transparent discussion among partners about how sanctions might fit into the set of instruments selected to achieve these goals, an issue arises for collective action.

US sanctions are the most difficult to address because, unlike others, the Taliban is sanctioned as an organisation. UN sanctions specifically target named individuals and are easier to adjust. The US sanctions also have a greater impact on both the international banking system and humanitarian organisations as the US Supreme Court has taken action on organisations retrospectively.

5.1.3 UN humanitarian appeal

The UN humanitarian appeal requested around US\$4.4 billion of which US\$0.6 billion has been pledged¹⁰. There are doubts about whether pledges will be honoured, given that the situation in Afghanistan is likely to be overshadowed by the war in Ukraine. That said, managing funding of this magnitude will challenge the UN system in Afghanistan. Workshop participants mentioned unhealthy competition for this funding among

9 Examples include the Mau Mau (Kenya), Viet Cong (Vietnam), Maoists (Nepal), Sandinistas (Nicaragua) and Palestine Liberation Organization (Palestinian Territories).

10 Financial Tracking Service – Afghanistan 2022; <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/1/summary/2022> (accessed 20 March 2022).

UN agencies, funds and programmes (AFPs) and non-governmental organisations. This is neither new nor surprising considering their incentives to capture these funds and secure the overheads on which their financing model depends. Participants called for strong UN leadership that reinforces the need for coordination and cooperation. Others warned of the dangers of channelling aid through a single entry point such as the UN.

Participants suggested that some waste and leakage of humanitarian funds was inevitable and that it was impossible to prevent some aid reaching the Taliban; the alternative was children starving and widespread deprivation. The multilateral system has experience of managing fiduciary risks in Afghanistan, especially through the special monitoring arrangements of trust funds such as the ARTF. Risk management and transparency of financial transactions are other reasons to ensure that the IMF and World Bank re-engage in Afghanistan.

5.1.4 Financing and the IMF/World Bank

The IMF and World Bank cannot engage fully with governments that do not have international recognition. Both institutions are needed in Afghanistan, even if only for their technical expertise and country knowledge, and have critical roles to play. Both are ‘specialised agencies’ of the UN. At their forthcoming meetings or as part of forthcoming discussions on revising the UNAMA mandate, there could be scope for exploring the possibility of ‘workarounds’, their roles in intermediating donor grants through trust funds, as specialised agencies, even if the authorisation of financing is currently unlikely.

5.2 Adapting aid delivery to Afghanistan’s new situation

Consensus on issues such as those described above (operational engagement with the Taliban in context of sanctions regimes; and the role of financing through multilateral banks and institutions as UN specialised agencies) would lay the basis for engagement from the onset of the 2022/23 winter and beyond. The minimum starting point is to ensure that arrangements should ‘do no harm’. So, a critical question is what actions by the international community could nudge a transition from the Chatham House ‘Stuttering’ scenario to ‘Progressing’, while avoiding the ‘Imploding’ and ‘Exploding’ scenarios.

While the current humanitarian crisis is acute and partly due to drought, workshop participants stressed that the situation is also dependent on interrelated economic and political crises Afghanistan faces. For example, civil servants not being paid makes the humanitarian crisis worse; the World Bank (2022) reports how deteriorating labour earnings have led to a decline in the quantity and quality of food consumed by households. Economic stability is also consistent with prevention of terrorism. Whether or not the de facto government receives international recognition, it will become increasingly difficult to separate political issues from technical aspects of aid delivery that have to cope with the authority that exists in Afghanistan. A ‘politically smart’ approach to aid delivery is needed that builds a workable consensus among partners, service providers and Afghan authorities.

Could international actors reach a consensus on collective action on operational engagement that selectively targeted the de facto government? This would imply nuanced approaches (based on local-level political economy analysis)

that distinguish between the Taliban political authorities, the institutions of the Afghanistan state, and the Afghan people and the organisations that articulate their voice. Such engagement is likely to be more effective when there is analysis, coherence and coordination achieved through collective action among partners. There may be options for international partners to engage at the technical level with state organisations staffed by professionals working under political oversight. Adjustments to the US sanctions regime on 25 February appear to support this. Options might also be sought that distinguish between those aspects of the Taliban that are an armed religious and political organisation and those responsible for civilian aspects of government, especially if they wish to implement policies and reforms that benefit the Afghan people.

There will also be a need to open channels with civil society to engage with minorities and others the political system might not fully represent. In exploring these options there may be benefits in building on and learning from previous global agreements and approaches to engagement in situations of fragility and conflict, such as the humanitarian Grand Bargain of 2016 and the principles of the New Deal active in International Engagement in Fragile States of 2011. Approaches that build on solving problems identified by the de facto government, where international support might be useful, would also be worth exploring (for more on this approach, see: Andrews, et. al, 2017; and Williamson, 2015). The above initiatives have tended to be most successful where the authorising environment has been conducive and where there has been political consensus.

Over the past two decades, there has been significant investment in public service delivery, public administration and other institutions to give Afghanistan capability greater than might be expected for a country at its income level. Such investment is beginning to decay as staff no longer get paid and as a result of brain drain, though some competent staff from the former regime are still in place." There have been proposals to pay salaries of Afghan public sector workers in critical areas such as health and education from the ARTF through UN agencies, but this is insufficient to prevent the decline of other public services on which even humanitarian assistance depends (e.g. aviation safety, electricity).

Decisions on how the international community should engage with the Afghan state and its institutions are fundamentally political questions. In a 'normal' situation – where the authorising environment is conducive – IFIs and the UN would provide analysis of options for engagement; but the IFIs are currently absent and UNAMA does not have the resources. Collective action among partners and alignment with shared Afghan objectives will become even more difficult if Afghan institutional capacity deteriorates further.

There was clear consensus at the ODI led workshop that a new compact was undesirable (unfeasible) and that the policy leverage of aid was at best uncertain. Previous compacts between Afghan governments and partners agreed on conditions for aid flows and modalities that were ratified at large aid pledging conferences. The Taliban might even prefer regional trade and

11 *The Washington Post* (18 January 2022) describes how the former deputy finance minister remained in place working as a bridge between the new government and international community; www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/18/afghanistan-aid-finance/ (accessed 20 March 2022).

partnerships to conditional Western aid, though development assistance could enable trade as a pathway to greater economic self-sufficiency.

Calls for principled aid, conditions and incentives are frequent in many donor countries and among Afghan civil society organisations, particularly on the question of education and the rights of women and girls. Yet in most countries, even if donors were to prioritise conditions, the track record on conditionality – and sanctions for that matter – is at best uneven in leveraging change that lacks broad local support. The prospects for conditionality imposed on the Taliban, which believes it has won a war to recover Afghan sovereignty, are unpromising. Furthermore, humanitarian assistance by its nature and principles is unconditional. Donor leverage is further limited due to the relatively small size of development aid compared to other resources potentially available to the Taliban (Mansfield and Smith, 2021), and competition from Afghanistan's emerging Asian and Middle Eastern partners.

It is crucial that donors make decisions on foreign assistance based on an accurate understanding of the country's political economy and appropriately informed estimates of the actual revenues available to the Taliban. Shortly before the events of last summer, consultants for ODI's L4P project studied the main sources of funds for different conflict actors in Nimroz province in southwest Afghanistan. The resulting report (Mansfield and Smith, 2021) helped explain how the group was able to mobilise support from erstwhile opponents through sophisticated pacts and agreements. It provided an indication of the likely role of these bargains, and the economic rents which underpin them, in keeping local powerholders included in the emerging settlement. In addition, the research underscored how misunderstanding Taliban revenues and the

role of the narcotics trade in recent decades (e.g. underreporting high volumes of 'unofficial taxes' secured from cross-border trade) has distorted donor policies and assumptions, a long-standing theme of the work of the study's lead co-authors.

At the national level, multi-partner trust funds such as the ARTF can serve as a platform for agreement on priorities, coordination and the pooling of funds and risks (see McKechnie and Bowden, 2020). Such funds can be aligned with government and budgets as they are developed, even though actual disbursement of funds does not go through Afghan treasury systems. There is a spectrum of how such alignment might take place depending on how relations develop between the de facto government and the international community (Coppin et al., 2011). Using trust funds as a vehicle for collective action requires IFIs and the UN to be present and engaged, for which there is no current consensus between Washington, New York and Brussels (including among UN and EU member states).

All this suggested to workshop participants that a different approach to engaging with the new Afghanistan is needed that builds on lessons from the past. This would acknowledge the differences in perspectives that exist within the Taliban and would start with a dialogue that is both explicit about them but seeks to deepen understanding of the Taliban authorities and the problems that they are concerned with. Rather than seeking compacts or conditionality, dialogue with the de facto government would seek understanding on key issues that could form the basis for deeper engagement in a development discussion when the situation is conducive.

Confusion around the Taliban's March 2022 announcement banning older girls' education illustrates the challenges that will be involved

in any future dialogue and the limited range of options available to partners. The decision arose out of differences between regressive and less conservative leaders in the Taliban movement and ‘failure to cultivate consensus on key issues hints at a deeper failure to communicate a clear vision and strategy to the wider Taliban movement and to the Afghan public. In other words, this is a crisis of leadership, the growing dominance of retrogressive clerics and a movement in disarray. International partners will find it difficult to show restraint, yet Afghan citizens will suffer more through the isolation of Afghanistan than will the government’ (Jackson, 2022).

At the same time, workshop participants cautioned against jettisoning principles (on gender rights) to engage the de facto Taliban government. There was broad agreement that international assistance had to be accountable to the Afghan people (e.g. through the existing network of community councils) to avoid mistakes of the past. This could involve deliberately not engaging in social sector spending (e.g. in the education sector) in ways that would let the de facto Taliban administration ‘off the hook’. Education has been an arena in which the de facto Taliban government in the past has invested. Donor engagement in the education sector could undermine scope for building relations of accountability with citizens. This suggests not using support to education – even of girls – as a ‘bargaining chip’ but sticking strictly to coordination and collective action around humanitarian aid and unfreezing access to Afghanistan’s own money.

Civil society is now weaker than it was and is being challenged on two levels: at the national level by the imposition of new regulations and at the local level by attacks on civil society organisations and locally imposed restrictions on their activities. Regional UNAMA representation

and action to represent citizens’ perspectives would enable local communities to feed back on their aspirations and needs into collective action processes and also into the planning and design of interventions and programmes. Community development councils (CDCs) created under the Citizens’ Charter and National Solidarity Program could enable assistance that is sensitive to local needs and accountable. Such modalities were suggested in the ASLI workshops. However, the Taliban authorities would need to be convinced that such shuras (consultations) were legitimate and relevant, rather than simply a creation of the former government. Such a case would be better made by CDCs themselves, possibly at the local level, rather than by foreign donors.

5.3 Navigating the political economy of Western and other actors

Collective action by Western donors in Afghanistan depends on manoeuvring around the constraints determined by the politics of key players such as the US, countries that supported the former government, and those that involve other parties, which might include the OIC, the UN, Gulf countries such as Qatar, India, Russia, Turkey and Afghanistan’s neighbours, including China. The political economy within countries and their alliances affects immediate issues such as sanctions, financial flows, aid modalities and recognition of the de facto government in Afghanistan, as well as how foreign assistance might transition to development support in the medium to longer term.

This paper has been written at a time when the war in Ukraine is unresolved and the impact of this on the post-Cold War international system is unclear. The Ukraine conflict is likely to affect Afghanistan not only through its immediate effects on food and energy prices and aid flows,

but also in terms of relations between and among Afghanistan and its old and new partners in the region and beyond. Already there are signs that the UN humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan might be seriously underfunded. Afghanistan could become a forgotten backwater of poverty and periodic crises; or it might return to a situation similar to the Cold War period, when it was a cockpit for geopolitical and regional rivalries, which it sometimes could exploit.

The Ukraine conflict has reinvigorated the NATO alliance, and strengthened cohesion and willingness among allies to cooperate, which might be expected to make collective action in Afghanistan easier. However, as in the International Security Assistance Force coalition, heightened national security and alliance considerations among partners might make them reluctant to challenge dominant members' policies in areas such as sanctions, the disposition of Afghanistan's financial reserves, financial flows, the role of multilateral institutions and relations with the de facto government.

In addition to strengthened partner relations arising from the Ukraine conflict, consensus has been reached on humanitarian action, preventing terrorism and forced migration, which could serve as the foundation for collective action. Already, the global consensus to support the Afghan people to cope with the humanitarian crisis they are facing has led to some flexibility on sanctions and engagement with the Taliban authorities, which could serve as a basis for dialogue. There seems to be widespread agreement on the need to prevent Afghanistan becoming a base for transnational terrorists. The Taliban itself has tolerated rather than fully supported international terrorism and seems committed to suppressing Islamic State-

Khorasan Province. However, preventing terrorism in Afghanistan has been treated as a security rather than a whole-of-society problem that requires collective action across a policy spectrum and the cooperation of the Afghan state and religious authorities.

So how might collective action be structured around the constraints of partners' political economy?

Firstly, by recognising that much of the political opposition in partner countries to engagement with the Taliban goes beyond just governments and is driven by deep-seated criticism of the Taliban's behaviour in power in the 1990s, compounded by more recent reporting of the Taliban's behaviour while in government today. Several workshop participants stressed the need for more effective communications and to change the narrative on engagement, to focus on donors' self-interest, emphasising concerns related to migration and security. However, tapping into partners' self-interest to draw attention to development and humanitarian imperatives is a double-edged sword, with the potential to skew responses in ways that make them less effective.

Secondly, any strategy for engagement or disengagement requires understanding the Taliban regime and the appetite for constructive engagement. There are indications of long-standing differences among members of the Taliban about engaging with the international community, including over policies related to gender and transnational terrorism (ODI, 2021).¹² How could a strategy be developed to reinforce those parts of the regime that see potential in positive engagement with the international community, while restraining more militant

12 <https://odi.org/en/publications/taliban-narratives-on-al-qaeda-in-afghanistan/>

elements? It is difficult to see this happening without discussions with the de facto government, which will in turn require international representation in Afghanistan.

Thirdly, there is a need for international consensus on development engagement that addresses the underlying drivers of the humanitarian crisis, which is largely developmental and at heart political. A humanitarian-only approach has serious limitations, not least because it accelerates the decay of Afghan institutions that one day might need to be resuscitated, creating aid dependency and fuelling further Afghan resentment towards overbearing foreigners (prevalent in the humanitarian sector) who appear to have more means at their disposal than the Taliban authorities. But how to implement a development-centred approach needs working out.

Learning lessons from the past, about what 20 years of international engagement – which embedded corrupt practitioners within state institutions – did for state-society relations in Afghanistan, will be critical. A return to unwieldy, process-heavy aid coordination mechanisms is both unlikely and undesirable. The ARTF has functioned as a platform for collective action on policies, shared financing and risk pooling. It continues to exist and could be resuscitated. But only with significant changes to its governance arrangements that take account of changed relations with the de facto government and the role the World Bank's board – a platform for collective action itself – permits it to play.

The quality of decisions will depend on timely analysis of the changing situation and on whether a strategic multi-year approach to goal-setting is taken that prioritises feasibility, and specifies how they might be achieved and evaluated. The

World Bank and IMF have until recently taken the lead on development and economic analysis, but given that both institutions can only work with internationally recognised governments, agreement is needed and policy waivers on how they should re-engage in Afghanistan, including under UNAMA auspices. The executive directors of the World Bank board could play a role in setting the parameters for collective action decision-making on these questions. UNAMA itself needs its analytical capacity strengthened to provide political, humanitarian, human rights, security and transnational crime analysis that is independent of the competing interests of UN AFPs.

Fourthly, institutional arrangements for enabling collective action need to be put in place. There was support at the ODI-led workshop to establish a group of eminent persons to create a blueprint for collective action. Ideally, such a group should encompass the interests of Afghanistan's partners past and future. This blueprint could include: organisational arrangements for the multilateral system; coordination arrangements between bilateral partners and the de facto government; arrangements for managing flows of humanitarian aid and development assistance; arrangements for including non-OECD partners; and the design of platforms that ensure policy coherence, coordination and accountability, including most importantly to the people of Afghanistan. The aid and security architecture for Afghanistan that existed prior to August 2021 was seriously broken and contributed to the Taliban victory. There is now an opportunity for a complete rethink.

References

- Andrews, M., Pritchett, L and Woolcock, M.** (2017), *Building state capability: evidence, analysis action*. Oxford University Press
- Axworthy, M.** (2008), *A history of Iran: empire of the mind*. New York: Basic Books
- Barfield, T.** (2010), *Afghanistan: a cultural and political history*. Princeton University Press
- Booth, D.** (2012), *Development as a collective action problem*. London: ODI
- Boyle, A.** (2021), *Checking the president's sanction powers: a proposal to reform the International Emergency Economic Powers Act*. New York: Brennan Center for Justice
- Coppin, E., Manuel M. and McKechnie, A.** (2011), *Fragile states: measuring what makes a good pooled fund*. Policy Briefing No. 58. London: ODI
- De Waal, A.** (2015), *The real politics of the Horn of Africa: money, war and the business of power*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Jackson, A.** (2022), 'The Ban on older girls' Education: Taleban conservatives ascendant and a leadership in disarray'. The Afghanistan Analysts, 29 March (The Ban on Older Girls' Education: Taleban conservatives ascendant and a leadership in disarray - Afghanistan Analysts Network - English (afghanistan-analysts.org))
- Malkasian, C.** (2021), *The American war in Afghanistan: a history*. Oxford University Press
- Mansfield, D. and Smith, G.** (2021), *War gains: how the economic benefits of the conflict are distributed in Afghanistan and the implications for peace. A case study on Nimroz province*. London: L4P/ODI (<https://l4p.odi.org/resources/war-gains-in-afghanistan-and-the-implications-for-peace>)
- McKechnie, A. and Bowden, M.** (2020), *Afghanistan Partnership Framework conditionality without ownership; tactics without strategy?* London: L4P/ODI (<https://l4p.odi.org/resources/afghanistan-partnership-framework>)
- Rubin, B.** (2002), *The fragmentation of Afghanistan: state formation and collapse in the international system*, 2nd ed., Yale University Press
- Williamson, T.** (2015), *Change in challenging contexts. How does it happen?* London: ODI (Change in challenging contexts - how does it happen? | ODI: Think change)
- World Bank** (2022), *Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey. Round 1 March 2022*. Washington DC: World Bank