



Afghanistan: The Problems with Aid Dependency and the Need for a Plan B

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Setting the scene

Due to its strategic location, Afghanistan has been of interest to several great powers over the years, although many Afghans are proud to say that none of these powers have succeeded in conquering the country. Afghanistan has sometimes been called the graveyard of empires, arguing that withdrawal from Afghanistan marked the beginning of the decline of the British empire in 1919 and of the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1989.¹ It has already been argued that August 2021 could mark the beginning of the end of the “US empire” too.²

For better or worse, however, one dominant force still controls Afghanistan: Aid. In 2019, 75 per cent of state public expenditure was financed by international grants.³ In August 2021, as the Taliban entered Kabul, the carpet was rapidly pulled from under the Afghan state. Donors withdrew funding, and state institutions as well as the economy are now on the brink of collapse.⁴ Food prices are skyrocketing,⁵ 93 per cent of the population do not have enough food to eat,⁶ and doctors have to choose “who to save and who to let die”.⁷

¹ Barfield, Thomas, “Afghanistan, A Cultural and Political history”, 2010, Princeton University Press, p. 242 – 255.

² See for example <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/04/opinion/afghanistan-withdrawal-america.html> 2021-10-19, and <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/28/does-afghanistan-mark-the-end-of-american-empire> 2021-10-19.

³ The World Bank, “Afghanistan: Public Expenditure Update”, 2019, p. 6, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/696491564082281122/pdf/Afghanistan-Public-Expenditure-Update.pdf> 2021-09-20.

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58328246> 2021-09-20.

As the world has stood bewildered trying to understand what has unfolded since the Taliban seized power, several major donors have pledged to address the humanitarian crisis through the provision of increased disaster relief aid. A crisis that in fact was worsened by the currently unfolding state collapse, caused by the very same donors withdrawing funding to the state.⁸

This brief reviews the lessons learned from 20 years of providing aid to Afghanistan and explains how the withdrawal of aid to the state radically exacerbates the humanitarian crisis. Furthermore, it argues that donors must work harder to establish indigenous ownership and develop plans for when circumstances rapidly change, so that the situation of an escalating humanitarian crisis can be avoided in the future.

Dependency on aid

The Afghan state has been dependent on international support since at least the nineteenth century.⁹ However, the extent of aid dependency has declined gradually since 2001. For most of the 2000s, around

⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/business-health-afghanistan-coronavirus-pandemic-middle-east-2af7c7c8c2022c7a7cdf17b0697e5784> 2021-09-29.

⁶ World Food Programme, Afghanistan Food Security Update, 2021, <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000131668/download/> 2021-09-22.

⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1100652> 2021-09-29.

⁸ <https://apnews.com/article/europe-afghanistan-geneva-united-nations-taliban-e719ed118ceobdc4fe31aeb1bf3d8047> 2021-09-17.

⁹ Clark, Kate, “The Cost of Support to Afghanistan: Considering inequality, poverty and lack of democracy through the ‘rentier state’ lens”, 2020, Afghanistan Analysts Network, p. 7.



90 per cent of state expenditure was covered by aid.¹⁰ By 2019 this had come down to around 75 per cent. Nonetheless, these grants constituted 45 per cent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP), compared with other low-income countries where the average stands at around 10 per cent.¹¹

Afghanistan is what economists call a 'rentier state', which means that the state is dependent on unearned income. Rentier state theory is usually applied to states where oil is the major source of unearned income (the rent).¹² In Afghanistan, however, the rent has been made up of international aid, which the country has been deeply and structurally dependent on.

This dependency on rent has had fundamentally negative consequences for Afghanistan. It has, for instance, contributed to a lack of political accountability to its citizens, and hence undermined national ownership as donors have had vastly more influence over the state and its policies than the Afghan population has. Another serious consequence has been that the state has not required much tax revenue in order to sustain itself, leaving the government with little incentive to focus on tax policies or

strategies to develop domestic production that would increase state revenue.¹³

Furthermore, the combination of a high level of foreign aid, the lack of strict implementation of tax policies, and widespread poverty have stimulated the negotiation of loopholes to avoid taxes.¹⁴ The resulting corrupt practices have been a major challenge. Afghanistan scored 19/100 in Transparency International's 2020 rankings, making it one of the 15 most corrupt countries in the world.¹⁵ The sector most prone to corruption has been the judiciary, while the education, healthcare and security sectors are also badly affected.¹⁶

Three types of foreign assistance are provided to Afghanistan: humanitarian, development and military. Humanitarian assistance is immediate relief in crises, such as providing food and medical assistance. Development assistance aims at the longer-term promotion of democracy and poverty reduction.¹⁷ Military assistance is army-led reconstruction combined with military efforts, and has been used in Afghanistan to train military forces, pay the salaries of troops and engage in infrastructure projects, but also to buy loyalties in the form of grant assistance and weapon sales.

¹⁰ According to Sarajuddin Isar, the former chief of staff to Afghanistan's central Bank, as cited in Clark, 2020, p. 8-9.

¹¹ The World Bank, "Afghanistan: Public Expenditure Update", 2019, p. 6, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/696491564082281122/pdf/Afghanistan-Public-Expenditure-Update.pdf> 2021-09-20.

¹² Rentier state theory was established by Hossein Mahdavy in 1970, and then further developed by Giacomo Luciani and Kazem Bablawi in 1987, as explained by Clark, 2020, p. 4-6.

¹³ Clark, 2020, p. 14-15.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2020", <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/afg> 2021-10-08.

¹⁶ Bak, Mathias, "Corruption in Afghanistan and the role of development assistance", 2019, Transparency International.

¹⁷ <https://www.sida.se/sa-fungerar-bistandet/tva-sorters-bistand> 2021-09-28.



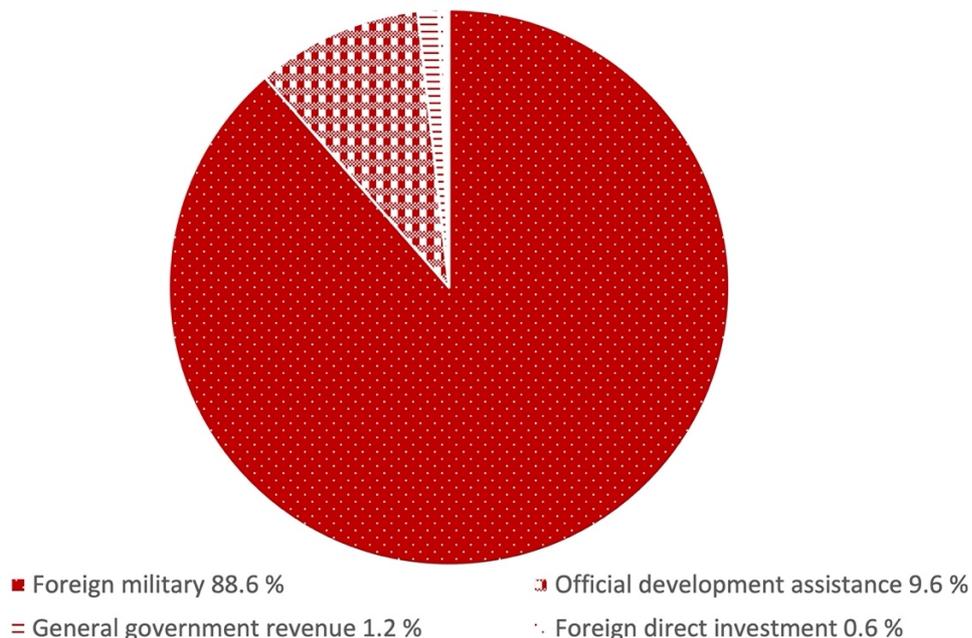
Military assistance has been criticised for not achieving sustainable results.¹⁸

It is impossible to map out the exact amount international aid expenditure in Afghanistan, as both senior analyst Kate Clark and researcher Adam Pain have noted. According to Pain, "The expenditure of military forces, the diverse range of donors, different types of aid both on and off budget has contributed to an 'overall lack of transparency ...in terms of what has been spent on what and where'".¹⁹ Nonetheless, it is clear that military spending has been substantially higher than spending on development and humanitarian aid. Between 2000 and 2009,

official development assistance (ODA) constituted just 9.6 per cent of the total \$274.7 billion in resource flows to Afghanistan, while 88.6 per cent was spent on the military and 5.6 on security-related aid that does not fall under the definition of ODA. In the same period, the Afghan government raised only 1.2 per cent of total resource flows through its own revenues.²⁰

Economic growth in the country has also been highly dependent on aid and varied with the level of external resource flows. The average annual rate of economic growth between 2003 and 2014 was around 9 per cent, but dropped significantly to under 3 per cent in the period 2015 to 2020²¹ as a consequence of the reduction in

Foreign and domestic resource flows to Afghanistan 2000-2009



Source: Poole (2011) through Pain (2012)

¹⁸ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/27/what-has-49-billion-in-foreign-military-aid-bought-us-not-much-pub-75657> 2021-09-29.

¹⁹ Pain, Adam, "Punching Above its Weight or Running with the Crowd? Lessons from Sweden's Development Cooperation in Afghanistan 2002-2020", 2021, Expertgruppen för Biståndsanalys, p. 18.

²⁰ Adam Pain, "Livelihoods, Basic Services and Social Protection in Afghanistan", 2012, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, p. 8-9, <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/7718.pdf> 2021-09-30.

²¹ Clark, 2020, p. 14-15.



international military spending that came with the withdrawal of ISAF forces in 2014.²²

Tax avoidance has been a constant struggle in Afghanistan, and was particularly prevalent during the term of President Hamid Karzai (2004–2014) due to weak tax policy implementation. When Ashraf Ghani entered office in 2014, however, several new taxation policies were introduced that increased revenue. The Business Tax Rate was doubled to 4 per cent, and a 10 per cent tax was imposed on mobile phone top-ups. Despite these efforts, however, resistance to paying taxes remained widespread around the country, which consolidated the idea of taxes as an unreliable source of income for the state.²³ According to the World Bank, however, Afghanistan has “seen remarkable growth in government revenues” through taxation, and income has grown from 3 per cent of GDP in 2002 to around 14 per cent of GDP in 2019, a figure that matched those of other low-income countries.²⁴

Total US spending on the war in Afghanistan in 2001–2022 has been estimated at a staggering \$2.3 trillion.²⁵ Nearly \$145 billion of that has been spent on relief and reconstruction, according to the Special Inspector General for

Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR),²⁶ mainly on training the Afghan National Security Forces, development assistance, good governance projects, and anti-narcotics and anti-corruption efforts.²⁷ During the 20-year intervention, nearly half the funds spent on relief and reconstruction (\$73 billion) were spent on military aid, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.²⁸

In its extensive evaluation of how US aid was invested in Afghanistan 2001–2021, SIGAR found that there had been little actual effect, given the amount of money spent. The failures are linked to not implementing a coherent strategy, not having realistic timeframes for long-term interventions, a lack of sustainability in projects, military and civilian works that have counteracted each other, a lack of cultural understanding and a failure to monitor and evaluate properly.²⁹

Sweden has played a relatively small part in the provision of aid to Afghanistan. Sweden’s contribution of \$1.55 billion donated between 2000 and 2020 represented just 1–2.6 per cent of total funding. A study by Adam Pain on the effectiveness of Swedish aid to Afghanistan, concludes that neither the United Kingdom nor Sweden made any particular unique

²² The International Security Assistance, known as ISAF, was an international military mission in Afghanistan 2001–2014 with the aim to combat terrorism with more than 130,000 troops from 51 countries, see https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm 2021-09-24.

²³ Sarajuddin Isar, “Taxation, the prerequisite of state-building, an overview of tax system in Afghanistan”, 2020, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, p. 3, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339662347_Taxation_the_prerequisite_of_state-building_an_overview_of_tax_system_in_Afghanistan_Contents 2021-09-30.

²⁴ World Bank Group, “Navigating a Sea of Uncertainty”, 2020, p. 21, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/32886>

[1579623579913/pdf/Afghanistan-Development-Update-Navigating-a-Sea-of-Uncertainty.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/publication/2021/09/afghanistan-development-update-navigating-a-sea-of-uncertainty.pdf).

²⁵ \$532 billion out of \$2.3 billion are estimated interests on war borrowing, in a calculation made August 2022 <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022> 2021-09-15.

²⁶ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), “What we need to learn: lessons from twenty years of war in Afghanistan”, 2021, p. 1.

²⁷ <https://www.sigar.mil/about/index.aspx?SSR=1> 2021-09-15.

²⁸ <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2021/20-years-us-military-aid-afghanistan> 2021-09-28.

²⁹ SIGAR, 2021, p. VIII-XI.



impact, but only followed the US lead on aid strategies.³⁰ Pain concludes that the reason for this might have been a “a sort of herd mentality, ‘we are all in this together’, and none has been willing in a sense to fail the narrative of Afghanistan, a lack of courage (...), people have invested too much in it”.³¹

Having described the main aspects of the challenges with aid dependency, however, it is important not to downplay the significant positive changes to which international aid has contributed in the past two decades. Tremendous progress can be seen in certain areas: the child mortality rate has been cut in half,³² the number of students in school has grown from 800,000 to more than 8 million, per capita incomes have more than doubled and 9 years has been added to life expectancy at birth since the early 2000s.³³

Afghan ownership and agency

Ownership and agency are central to discussions on aid. The notion of “country ownership” became prevalent in the discourse on development aid in the mid-1990s, in reaction to the term “conditionality” which was frequently emphasized in the 1980s by organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Local ownership was

to be created by making aid recipients the owners and main designers of the projects, instead of donors imposing projects from abroad. The term was not formally established, however, until the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness of 2005. It was then further elaborated in the Accra Agenda for Action of 2008.³⁴ However, the emphasis on “results and value for money” in those agendas were too “modest”, according to more than 40 countries and organisations, which led to the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States in 2011.³⁵

The New Deal, which was signed by the G7+ governments, as well as fragile and conflict-affected states, development partners and civil society, sought to create long-term commitments where the fragile state took charge of its own destiny and had ownership of the process of building up the new state. Some of the pledges that were made included promises by development organisations to support nationally owned and led development plans, and donor countries committed to inclusive planning processes.³⁶

The support provided to the Afghan state has sought to create development in Afghanistan that is Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.³⁷ This process has entailed the Afghan government compiling national

³⁰ Pain, 2021, p. 21-24.

³¹ Adam Pain in the seminar “Sveriges bistånd till Afghanistan – vilka är lärdomarna?” by Expertgruppen för biståndsanalys, 31 August 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gku3ciworVE&t=695> (32 min).

³² In the year of 2000 the average was that 129 out of 1000 children died under the age of five, in 2020 the average is 60 children out of 1000. https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/report/widget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=AFG 2021-09-21.

³³ UNDP, Economic Instability and Uncertainty in Afghanistan, 9 September 2021, p. 1, <https://www.undp.org/publications/economic-instability-and-uncertainty-afghanistan-after-august-15> 2021-09-29.

³⁴ Savedoff, William D., “What Is ‘Country Ownership?’ A Formal Explanation of the Aid Relationship”, 2019, Center for Global Development, p. 1-2.

<https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/what-country-ownership-formal-exploration-aid-relationship.pdf> 2021-10-11.

³⁵ https://www.pbsdialogue.org/media/filer_public/07/69/07692de0-3557-494e-918e-18dfoe9ef73/the_new_deal.pdf 2021-10-11.

³⁶ <https://www.pbsdialogue.org/en/new-deal/about-new-deal/> 2021-09-27.

³⁷ See for example European Parliament resolution of 10 June 2021 on the situation in Afghanistan (2021/2712(RSP)) https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0294_EN.html 2021-10-01.



development plans to be achieved over a period of time, one of the aims of which has been to move away from donor dependency.³⁸ In return for funding the plans, the international community has demanded progress on deliverables and reforms, among other things, on fighting corruption, and enhancing security and equality.³⁹ While these demands were met with vows and commitments from the Afghan government,⁴⁰ there was little substantial progress.

With the U.S. being in the lead of the international presence in Afghanistan, it is interesting to study the 2021 SIGAR evaluation, "What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction". It finds that US-supported interventions were not sustainable, since: "Afghans often lacked the capacity to take responsibility for projects".⁴¹ Furthermore, "even when programs were able to achieve short-term success, they often could not last because the Afghans who would eventually take responsibility for them were poorly equipped, trained or motivated to do so".⁴² Additionally, SIGAR lists "The US government also clumsily forced Western technocratic models onto Afghan economic institutions; trained security forces in advanced weapon systems they could not understand, much less maintain; imposed formal rule of law on a country that addressed 80 to 90 per cent of its disputes through informal means; and often struggled to understand or mitigate the cultural and social barriers to supporting women and girls".⁴³

Afghans were obviously expected to fit into a US model that had been imposed on them. What the US leaves behind today is a country in ruins because, in the eyes of SIGAR, Afghans "lacked the capacity" to take over what the US had provided. Hence, while the international community may have managed to stimulate a certain level of Afghan agency, it clearly failed in terms of promoting sustainable ownership. The reason, however, is not that Afghans failed to make the most out of the aid, but rather because aid was designed in such a way that it failed to create space for ownership to grow, and was impeded by the lack of sustainable domestic funding. Ostensible ownership turned out to be built on shifting sands.

The question is: by whom were the projects considered successful? Since the projects seem to have worked while driven by US assistance, it seems clear that the ownership was American rather than Afghan. For state-building projects to be considered successful by the Afghan population, they would have had to be geared to nurturing ownership by strengthening the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of its citizens.

Max Weber (1864–1920) argued that it is the monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a certain territory that defines the modern state. However, he also emphasised that the state must be built on legitimate grounds; that is, there must be others legitimising the state in order for it to

³⁸ The government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF) 2017-2021", p. 12, https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5b28f4294.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2ZTQYB018W12ebs-x_7Fh8CcQGx5yP3jRSzSSGoHNRgqeFse8Kkv-JxSg 2021-10-01.

³⁹ Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework (GMAF), Geneva Conference on Afghanistan November 27/28,

2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/gmaf_final_26_nov_2018.pdf 2021-10-04.

⁴⁰ The government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF) 2017-2021", p. 1.

⁴¹ SIGAR, 2021, p. IX.

⁴² Ibid, p. X.

⁴³ Ibid, p. XI.



be legitimate.⁴⁴ In Afghanistan, the primary focus of the US and its allies was the military, in order to create a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. However, whereas the state was primarily focused on its relationships with and accountabilities to foreign donors, or gaining legitimacy from outside, less attention was paid to building the social contract between the state and its citizens in order for the people to legitimise the state. While the outer world had legitimised the Afghan state, corruption, lack of responsiveness to the needs of its people and the use of violence by multiple armed opposition groups were indicators of a state that lacked domestic legitimacy.

The humanitarian crisis today

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan did not start with the Taliban offensive in the summer of 2021. Drought, COVID-19, a long-standing conflict and a malfunctioning state challenged by corruption and inefficiency were already plaguing the country. Nonetheless, donors' withdrawal of funding for the state caused the humanitarian crisis to escalate rapidly, shaking the country to the core.

Health facilities are denying patients care due to a lack of medicine and equipment. Of the 2309 health facilities in the country, only 393 were fully operational as of mid-October 2021.⁴⁵ Food prices have risen, as have levels of malnutrition. According to

the World Food Programme, at the beginning of September 2021, 93 per cent of the population had insufficient food to eat.⁴⁶

Immediately after the takeover, the US froze nearly \$9.5 billion in assets of the Afghan Central Bank, held in New York, as the Taliban is on the sanctions designation list of the US Treasury.⁴⁷ Funding by the World Bank, the European Union and the IMF was also suspended.⁴⁸

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has assessed the potential risks of the socio-economic crisis since the Taliban takeover. A worst-case scenario is that 97 per cent of the population could fall below the poverty line by the middle of 2022.⁴⁹ This is likely to happen, according to the UNDP, if the situation develops into a "high intensity crisis" involving a fragmented economy and interruption of trade with all partners, leading to a drop in GDP of 13.2 percentage points by the middle of next year.⁵⁰

As humanitarian needs grew rapidly, the UN pledged \$1.2 billion in humanitarian support in September 2021.⁵¹ International resistance to funding a Taliban regime, which might imply legitimising it, means that some aid has now been redirected to address the humanitarian crisis instead.

In her 2020 analysis of two decades of aid to Afghanistan, senior analyst Kate Clark

⁴⁴ Anter, Andreas, "The Modern State and Its Use of Violence", 2019, The Oxford Handbook of Max Weber.

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<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/9/28/medic-s-in-afghanistan-face-tough-choices-as-healthcare-crumbles> 2021-10-15.

⁴⁶ According to a survey made with phone calls from 19 July-15 August, and 20 August and 5 September 2021. <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000131668/download/> 2021-09-22.

⁴⁷ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-17/u-s-freezes-nearly-9-5-billion-afghanistan-central-bank-assets> 2021-09-22.

⁴⁸ <https://apnews.com/article/business-health-afghanistan-coronavirus-pandemic-middle-east-2af7c7c8c2022c7a7cdf17b0697e5784> 2021-09-22.

⁴⁹ That is an increase of 25 percentage point from 2020 when the poverty rate was 72 per cent of the population.

⁵⁰ UNDP, 2021, p. 4-5.

⁵¹ <https://apnews.com/article/europe-afghanistan-geneva-united-nations-taliban-e719ed118ce0bdc4fe31aeb1bf3d8047> 2021-09-17.



wrote that: “Until now, the resources coming into Afghanistan have proved reasonably stable”.⁵² Just over a year later, it can be concluded that the resources going into Afghanistan were indeed stable for 20 years, until they weren’t anymore.

After the Taliban regime was ousted in 2001, international donors created a state that was deeply dependent on international funding; 20 years later, as circumstances changed, donors withdrew and the humanitarian crisis worsened. Now international aid has shifted to humanitarian assistance to mitigate the effects of state collapse – a collapse escalated by the very withdrawal of aid. The difference is that long-term assistance to stabilise and develop a country has been replaced by short-term assistance to relieve a rapidly deteriorating crisis.

Conclusion: the need for a plan B

The large amounts of international aid that have been spent in Afghanistan over the past 20 years have led to major improvements in quality of life for millions of Afghans. However, they have also consolidated an untenable dependency on external aid. Despite the ambitions and goals of the New Deal, and 20 years of trying to establish a stable and sustainable state, the much encouraged agency of the Afghan state never really developed into ownership. The Ghani government fell like a house of cards as the Taliban entered city after city in the summer of 2021.

Instead of nurturing a self-reliant state, international aid in fact consolidated a weak and dependent Afghan state. This is an inherent catch-22 of foreign assistance to fragile states: large-scale aid is needed to support the creation and growth of a state but for that state to become sustainable, it

must increasingly generate its own revenue and build national ownership through mechanisms of accountability and legitimacy vis-à-vis its population. The aid dependency in itself, however, creates few incentives for the state to move in that direction. In fact, it seems to discourage it.

To find a way out of this dilemma, there must be a solid strategy from the outset for how the state will move towards sustainability, legitimacy and ownership. Such an approach must include clear donor demands on the implementation of government tax policies and the generation of revenue. It also requires donors to pay close attention to the risks of dependency undermining country ownership. Only when the state gains control of its finances, and the government is responsive and accountable to its citizens, can real ownership be achieved.

Having noted the above, it must of course be acknowledged that building sustainability and ownership takes time. In Afghanistan, state revenue did gradually increase, albeit far too slowly to result in any genuine sustainability even after two decades. The sudden withdrawal of aid revealed exactly how vulnerable the state-building project was, as we soon started to see institutions closing down.

One factor that has worsened the humanitarian crisis is that donor funding was obviously withdrawn without a sober assessment of the risks or any accompanying alternative plan. Given the well-known high levels of aid dependency, it should have come as no surprise to the donor community that instantly frozen aid would soon result in the collapse of public services and socio-economic meltdown. It might have been expected that risk assessments would have been initiated at least following the deal on troop withdrawal

⁵² Clark, 2020, p. 30.



between the Taliban and the US in February 2020, after which the Taliban began to gain substantial ground.

One key lesson learned from Afghanistan is therefore that there must be a plan B when engaging in providing support to conflict-ridden fragile states. If withdrawn aid is not to lead to an exacerbated humanitarian crisis, the donor community must be prepared with alternative mechanisms for the continued funding of public services and livelihoods support, in order to prevent a humanitarian crisis should the state be taken over by a warring party or install an illegitimate government. As donors obviously lacked such a plan B for Afghanistan, the only alternative option to aid withdrawal would have been to continue funding the new regime – a politically

inconceivable stance as it would have entailed legitimising the new powerholders.

Aid must be firmly anchored in an effective strategy for achieving sustainability and ownership, as the long-term goal must always be that aid will one day not be needed anymore. A lot of work remained to be done but Afghanistan was on a slow path to greater financial independence and agency, albeit only to a lesser degree to true ownership. Just as the British, the Soviet Union and the US left Afghanistan, the empire of Aid must also withdraw eventually – but not overnight. The future withdrawal of aid must be far more strategic and organised than the military withdrawal we have just witnessed.

Moving forward

- In Afghanistan, donors must urgently find politically acceptable mechanisms for continuing to fund essential public services, such as healthcare, education and livelihood support, to avoid allowing functioning systems to collapse and a further deterioration in the humanitarian and socio-economic crisis.
- In moving forward with support to fragile states, donors must revisit policies and plans on how best to promote, and create incentives for, the generation of state revenues and the strengthening of country ownership.
- When designing aid to fragile states, risk assessments need to be frank and accompanied by “Plan B thinking the unthinkable” that addresses uncomfortable questions such as: What happens to the population, and the institutions invested in, if aid to the state must suddenly be reduced or withdrawn? What would alternative ways for continuing support look like in such a situation? How can preparedness be ensured for these alternatives?



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