

# UK aid to Afghanistan

Literature review

**November 2022**



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## Abbreviations

<b>AHF</b>	Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund
<b>ALP</b>	Afghan Local Police
<b>ANDSF</b>	Afghan National Defence and Security Forces
<b>ARTF</b>	Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund
<b>COIN</b>	Counterinsurgency (strategy)
<b>DAC</b>	Development Assistance Committee
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development
<b>FCAC</b>	Fragile and conflicted-affected country
<b>FCDO</b>	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
<b>GDP</b>	Gross domestic product
<b>ICAI</b>	Independent Commission for Aid Impact
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organisation
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>IOM</b>	International Organisation for Migration
<b>IPC</b>	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
<b>IRC</b>	International Rescue Committee
<b>ISAF</b>	International Security Assistance Force
<b>JCNSS</b>	Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>NPP</b>	National Priority Programme
<b>NSC</b>	National Security Council
<b>OCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>ODA</b>	Official development assistance
<b>ODI</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
<b>PRT</b>	Provincial Reconstruction Team
<b>RUSI</b>	Royal United Services Institute
<b>SCA</b>	Swedish Committee for Afghanistan
<b>SIGAR</b>	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNODC</b>	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>WASH</b>	Water, sanitation and hygiene
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organisation



# 1. Key findings

This literature review supports and informs the Afghanistan country portfolio review by the UK's Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), which examines the relevance, effectiveness and coherence of the UK's official development assistance (ODA) investment in Afghanistan since 2014. The literature review supports specific themes of inquiry for the main review. This includes summarising the evolution of UK and international schools of thought related to external intervention in conflict settings, including state-building and peacebuilding; the literature on the approach taken to state-building in Afghanistan by the UK and other donor countries; the literature on international efforts to empower Afghan women and girls; and the history of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan since 2014.

The review is divided into four themes, chosen to provide background and evidence to support the main ICAI review of the UK's country portfolio in Afghanistan:

1. The evolution of schools of thought on state-building and peacebuilding support by external actors.
2. The approach to state-building and peacebuilding taken by the UK and other external actors in Afghanistan.
3. Empowering women and girls.
4. The humanitarian situation and aid response in Afghanistan since 2014.

The literature review draws upon a wide array of sources, all publicly available. These include journal articles, academic studies, press articles, books, think tank reports, strategy documents, policies, and assessments by the World Bank, UN agencies including the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), as well as parliamentary testimony from the UK.

The literature review is not exhaustive. First, it is limited to English-language sources. Second, a selection had to be made due to the extensive nature of the literature focused on state-building and peacebuilding in general, and on the situation in Afghanistan specifically. The literature review focuses on sources of particular relevance to ICAI's Afghanistan country portfolio review. It does not look at project-level, intervention-specific documentation for individual projects and programmes implemented by the UK during its presence in Afghanistan. This is done in a separate strategic review and is not within the remit of this literature review. The ratio of academic to grey literature reviewed varies across the three themes, with the literature drawing more on academic literature for the section on state-building and peacebuilding approaches and more on grey literature for the sections focused on practical approaches and challenges to humanitarian assistance and to the empowerment of women and girls in Afghanistan.

## 1.1 Structure of the literature review

The literature review is divided into three main sections, each corresponding to a separate theme:

- **Section 2: State-building and peacebuilding in Afghanistan.** This section covers the thinking and theories of change which underpinned the international and the UK state-building approaches in Afghanistan. The review assesses the state-building and peacebuilding doctrine informing the post-invasion international efforts at state-building and peacebuilding, which has its roots in the early 1990s. It highlights the main schools of thought, the main differences between them, key assumptions, the way they evolved throughout the course of the external intervention, and proposed alternatives. The section therefore covers how the historical context contributed to shaping the international approach to strengthening the state and building peace in Afghanistan. The literature review pays particular attention to the priorities and areas of focus for the UK's engagement at political and operational levels.
- **Section 3: Priorities and disbursement modalities for humanitarian assistance.** This section covers the history of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan since 2014, providing a brief overview of the evolution of humanitarian needs since 2014, and describing the main donors and organisations, funding channels and

coordinating mechanisms involved in the disbursement of humanitarian aid. It also highlights what the literature considers to be the weaknesses of the international humanitarian response.

- **Section 4: International efforts to empower women and girls.** This section summarises the literature on international efforts to empower Afghan women and girls between 2001 and 2021, including how their status has changed, how programmatic interventions fell short, and what lessons were learned.

## 2. State-building and peacebuilding in Afghanistan

This section looks at the terminology and thinking underpinning the UK's approach to state-building and peacebuilding in Afghanistan. It focuses on schools of thought and approaches that are particularly relevant to the external support in Afghanistan. The section is divided into six parts:

- The terminology of stabilisation, state-building and peacebuilding, setting out common definitions and discussing how these terms have often been used interchangeably, with slightly different connotations.
- Schools of thought on peacebuilding and approaches used by external actors in Afghanistan.
- Strengths and weaknesses of the international approaches employed in Afghanistan.
- The context of Western military intervention, and its impact on state-building and peacebuilding in Afghanistan.
- The UK approach in Afghanistan and how this evolved over time.
- Potential alternative approaches to state-building and peacebuilding.

### 2.1 State-building and peacebuilding terminology

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) (2008) describes state-building as "an endogenous process to enhance capacity, institutions and legitimacy of the state driven by state-society relations. Positive state-building processes involve reciprocal relations between a state that delivers services for its people and social and political groups who constructively engage with their state."

The term peacebuilding can be defined as international initiatives aimed at establishing long-term peace processes in fragile and conflict-affected states with the purpose of ending violence and rebuilding states (Ljungkvist and Jarstad, 2021). Peacebuilding includes "a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict, to strengthen national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development" (UN, 2010a:5). In 1992, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali defined peacebuilding as "action to identify and support structures which will tend to consolidate peace and advance a sense of confidence and well-being among people" (Boutros-Ghali, 1992).

Haider (2014) explains the differences between state-building and peacebuilding with reference to their different aims. The objective of peacebuilding is to prevent a return to violence by creating conditions conducive to peace. State-building, on the other hand, focuses on the development of an effective and legitimate polity, or government, based on law. One important aspect that both processes have in common is the fact that they are externally assisted interventions.

Both state-building and peacebuilding are relatively recent topics of academic study. As Waldman and Barakat (2014) note, neither emerged as an area of policy focus until the 1990s. This has meant a new and limited empirical base or body of theory, with policymaking and on-the-ground practice being informed by data of recent origin undergoing less iteration.

In operative terms – by practitioners involved in planning and implementing externally supported state-building and peacebuilding operations – the two concepts of state-building and peacebuilding have tended to be inchoate, invariably meaning different things to different people (Waldman et al., 2014) and sometimes used interchangeably. This has been the case in Afghanistan.

Mukhopadhyay (2021) argues that state-building and peacebuilding are both tools of international conflict management to prevent state failure from spreading and violent extremists from finding safe havens. That is, the

motivation of external actors is less about the spread of democracy and stability and more about combating a presumed nexus between failed or failing statehood – understood as ‘ungoverned spaces’ – and the proliferation of violent extremism (Jabri, 2013).

Afghanistan is a good example not only of how narratives around international intervention have been changeable, but also of the elasticity of the concepts and their ability to accommodate changing foreign policy rationales. Felbab-Brown (2021) notes in a Brookings Institution blog piece that “different priorities means vastly different policies” and distinguished between (i) prioritising maximum insurance against counterterrorism, (ii) preserving gains in Afghanistan, such as democratisation and women’s rights, and (iii) prioritising geostrategic imperatives, which means viewing the effort in Afghanistan in light of broader geostrategic interests vis-à-vis China and Russia. Willasey-Wilsey (2021), in a Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) commentary, argues that the US-led intervention in Afghanistan was initially driven by the ‘minimalist’ objectives of the War on Terror, but came to espouse a ‘maximalist’ state-building agenda. This is a commonly articulated observation, noted by Jaffe (2021) and Stewart (2021) as well as earlier by Gregory (2012) and Goodhand and Sedra (2013). In 2012, Gregory argued that the expansionist impulse in the war was reversed as “interveners fell victim to their own hubris and to many of the familiar pathologies of colonialism, including dependency, domination, and defiance”, leading again to a more limited engagement.

Changing political and security preferences, and how they affected ongoing processes of state-building and peacebuilding, have led to disagreements among scholars and practitioners alike on the substance of the concepts and what politically motivates them.

## 2.2 Main schools of thought on state-building and peacebuilding

In this section, we look at two schools of thought on external support for peacebuilding: ‘liberal peacebuilding’ and ‘peacebuilding from below’ (or local ownership peacebuilding).

### Liberal peacebuilding

The ‘democratic peace thesis’ is the idea that democratic states never engage in war with other democratic states – that they do not enter into militarised disputes with one another, and have created a “separate peace” (Doyle, 1983). Gat (2005: 73) describes this as “the most robust, ‘lawlike’ finding generated by the discipline of international relations”. Levy (1988: 661) notes that “the absence of war between democracies comes as close as anything to an empirical law in international relations”. The liberal peacebuilding approach rests on the democratic peace thesis (Paris, 2004: 42). In 2000, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted that “[t]here are many good reasons for promoting democracy [...] not the least – in the eyes of the United Nations – is that, when sustained over time, it is a highly effective means of preventing conflict, both within and between states” (Annan, 2000).

While the democratic peace thesis was originally about democratic states not going to war against each other, it has been expanded to include internal relations within democratic states. For instance, Rummel (1997: 85) posits that democracies are less likely than non-democracies to experience “revolutions, bloody coups d’état, political assassinations, anti-government terrorist bombings, guerrilla warfare, insurgencies, civil wars, mutinies, and rebellions”. Rummel (1995: 4) focuses on the procedural routines of democracy: “competitive elections, cross-pressures resulting from the natural pluralism of democratic [...] societies, and the development of a democratic culture and norms that emphasise rational debate, toleration, negotiation of differences, conciliation, and conflict resolution”. Meanwhile, Oneal and Russett (1997) focus on the peace-enhancing impact of liberal economic policies. Riggs (1995: 397) argues that democracy encourages communities to seek justice and conflict resolution by way of nonviolence, while Zartman (1993: 327) notes that the presence of democracy shifts “conflict from the violent to the political arena”.

From such arguments of the peaceful nature of democracies flow the corollary argument that conflict-ridden countries can become peaceful if they become democratic: that the spread of democracy “can be the key to resolving bloody battles within them” (Muravchik, 1996: 576). This is seen to justify active ‘democracy promotion’ based on arguments such as democracies “do not ethnically ‘cleanse’ their own populations” and “are much less likely to face ethnic insurgency” (Diamond, 1995: 6-7). This view became widely held among Western policymakers after the end of the Cold War. US State Department official Morton Halperin, for instance, contended that “the United States should take the lead in promoting the trend toward democracy” because

democratic governments “are more peaceful and less given to provoking war or inciting violence” (Halperin, 1993: 105, in Paris, 2004: 43).

Liberal peacebuilding approaches tend to see peace resulting from a mix of institutional regulation and liberal freedoms (Newman, 2009). Liberal peacebuilding approaches also tend to be top-down, with external actors intervening to establish the institutions necessary for the permanent, liberal governance of society, economy and politics. Richmond (2008) suggests that liberal peace starts as “a victor’s peace”, followed by “an institutional peace to provide international governance, a constitutional peace to ensure democracy and free trade, and a civil peace to ensure freedom and rights within society”. A key driver of liberal peacebuilding was the interventionist view that the international community should leverage, through multilateral action, “superior knowledge, deeper involvement, more commitment and the use of force where necessary” to “undertake more comprehensive and extensive interventions to secure global peace” (Sabaratnam, 2011: 5). Liberal peacebuilding could be seen as an attempt to standardise failed or failing states, bringing them into conformity with the rules and standards that govern the international system.

According to the liberal vision of peacebuilding, global principles for good governance have proved themselves – through the well-functioning polities of the West – and are therefore worth emulating in post-conflict interventions in failed states. Or indeed, according to Newman, by emulating these, as per the idea of peace as governance, peace will be a necessary outcome (Newman, 2009).

### From top-down approaches to local ownership in peacebuilding

Critics like Romashov et al. (2019), Paris (2010: 380), Donais (2009: 7), and Hughes and Pupavac (2005: 877) argue that liberal peacebuilding approaches do not actually restore autonomy and independence to local societies. On the contrary: domestic political actors are expected to uncritically implement an external vision for post-conflict governance. Because of this, Donais (2009: 9) and Call and Cousens (2008: 13) argue that liberal peacebuilding is viewed as a domain best suited for Western experts who understand the “mechanics of liberal democratic institutions”, making the adoption of ‘cookie-cutter’ approaches more likely in post-war peacebuilding. More directly put, Krause and Jutersonke (2005: 459) argue that externally led peacebuilding interventions often “follow a donor-driven, bureaucratic-institutional logic that conjures into existence a social field on which policies can be imposed by experts defined not by their local knowledge but by their grasp of institutional imperatives and pseudo-scientific models of society and social change”. According to this perspective, local preferences and perspectives are often seen as obstacles to be overcome (Donais, 2009: 6).

This type of criticism was fuelled by the troubled experiences of state-building and peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan in the first decade after the 2001 invasion. By 2008, an excessively centralised and corrupt state was posited by some writers as a catalyst for the growing insurgency in Afghanistan (Barfield, 2012). The efforts to support democratic and liberal governance principles were not working, and instead a top-down, bureaucratic and corrupt rentier state was taking hold.

This prompted interest in local, bottom-up approaches to state-building and peacebuilding. A school of thought affiliated with practitioners such as John Paul Lederach became known as ‘peacebuilding from below’. It posits that the challenge of rebuilding war-torn societies comes down to fostering the political, economic and social space within which indigenous, local actors can build a peaceful, just and prosperous society.

Peacebuilding from below is communitarian in character. While proponents of the liberal peacebuilding approach claim that liberal practices and institutions in a Western mould are both appropriate and worth pursuing at all times and in all places, communitarian approaches stress the importance of tradition and social context in determining the legitimacy and appropriateness of particular visions of political order, justice or ethics (Donais, 2009).

Local peacebuilding approaches stress that any viable resolution to the problems of political and social orders must “derive from and resonate with the habits and traditions of actual people living in specific times and places” (Donais, 2009: 6). These approaches emphasise the right of societies to make their own choices, regardless of the degree to which such choices correspond with emerging international norms. Local ownership of peacebuilding processes means that local actors, and not external ones, design, manage and implement politics and interventions (Nathan, 2007: 4).

While local ownership presents an alternative to liberal peacebuilding, thus pushing back against its claims of universalism and broadening the scope of peace research, Hughes et al. (2015: 818) have argued that romanticising the indigenous, or the local, can downplay the dangers of ethnocentrism, exclusivity and



intolerance. In the words of Maley (2013: 256), “it does not follow that respect for the informal, the old, or the local is intrinsically desirable”.

## Hybrid peacebuilding approaches

Hybrid peacebuilding combines elements of external intervention and a focus on local ownership and participation. The term refers to a “composite of exogenous and indigenous forces” (Mac Ginty, 2014: 392) and “a condition that emerges from top-down and bottom-up interactions” (Mac Ginty and Sanghera, 2012: 4). Hybrid peacebuilding approaches have been posited as an alternative to both top-down and localised approaches, but have also been subject to criticism, as discussed below.

## Criticism of local and hybrid peacebuilding

In the case of Afghanistan, Hakimi (2013: 389) has argued that overtly positive takes on local ownership and hybrid approaches were naive or disingenuous and did not necessarily reflect Afghan popular expectations of the state. The experience of war has made many Afghans want more state, not less, based on expectations of the state’s role as a provider of public goods. For all its flaws, the republic did oversee public service delivery which could, for some, depending on their location, be seen as successful. Furthermore, local-level authority is not necessarily more legitimate or embedded; indeed, the mention of decentralisation makes many Afghans fearful that it would herald a return to the warlord rule of the 1990s (Hakimi, 2013: 399). Importantly, the revival of local traditions, which Hakimi (2013: 389) criticises as based on an “idealised and reified vision of the past”, would invariably see the role of women minimised as well.

In a study of the Afghan Local Police (ALP), a militia supported by the U.S. military in Wardak province, Hakimi (2013: 399) shows the ways in which local-level structures can fall short. According to Hakimi, the creation of the ALP had invoked language about ‘local solutions’, with General Donald Bolduc (one of the ALP programme’s founders) arguing that it was culturally appropriate, Afghan-led, less intrusive, and a more cost-effective response to the insurgency. Hakimi’s research findings from Wardak did not support this. Rather he argued that the “ALP and its predecessors were top-down processes, opposed to the wishes of the local people and contradicted claims of local ownership”. Based on Hakimi’s study, Goodhand and Sedra (2013: 243), have suggested that localised peacebuilding can be seen as a way for interveners to evade accountability by passing on responsibility to local actors for the sake of justifying withdrawal, or to pin failures on local actors. Hakimi’s study also pointed to the creation of the ALP as being a way to ‘outsource’ the fighting of international forces to local men in Wardak.

## 2.3 Strengths and weaknesses of the international approach to state-building in Afghanistan

The state-building and peacebuilding interventions in Afghanistan engendered major positive changes such as increased education, the growth of the middle class, and improvements in women’s access to rights. They are, however, overshadowed by the shortcomings, failures and costs of state-building in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. There is consensus in both academic and grey literature that several features of the intervention, including its theoretical and normative underpinnings, the large inflow of funds, and excessive centralisation, generated a number of effects that went contrary to the stated transformative goals of state-building.

### Aid promoting a rentier economy

The combination of multi-year large influxes of aid funds with military firepower produced several significant contradictions in Afghanistan (Clark, 2020; Suhrke, 2013). The flow of foreign money overwhelmed the state’s capacity to absorb and spend it in a transparent, legal and socially responsive manner. The magnitude of aid flows, and their unmonitored disbursement, saw rent (foreign aid) coming into the hands of various political actors around whom no institutions existed to provide oversight and ensure accountability. This promoted the creation of a dependent and endemically corrupt rentier state. Rentierism contravenes state-building in that rentier states rarely develop effective tax systems or capable administrative features, including autonomous bureaucracies. According to rentier state theory, the consequences of rent-based state revenue include low economic growth, inequality and worse development outcomes (Beblawi and Luciani, 1987). In Afghanistan, where foreign aid was the main source of state income, Suhrke (2013) argues that structures of accountability were geared towards donors rather than electorates, and this harmed democratic accountability and culture (Suhrke, 2013). Clark (2020: 3) points out that rent “worked against democracy, development and the establishment of rule of law”. She further argues that to *whom specifically* rent accrued from the beginning of the intervention in 2001 – “not [...] to

a single ruler or party but to multiple, mainly military, power holders in a fragmented political landscape” – had a lasting effect on the entire post-Bonn political order (Clark, 2002: 3). The concentration of wealth led to a culture of impunity as far as corruption goes, but also, as Clark points out, Beblawi’s idea of a “rentier mentality” of entitlement (Beblawi in Clark, 2020: 21).

On the harms of dependence on rent, Goodhand (2013: 247) points out that “too much aid spent too quickly with little oversight can be delegitimising and destabilising”. Large sums of readily available foreign funds discouraged the development of local capacity and a sustainable, Afghan-owned order, undermining the international community’s objective of fostering a democratic polity in Afghanistan. With foreign donors providing vital economic and military resources, Suhrke (2013: 271) speculates that successive governments of the Afghan republic had few incentives to develop long-term bargains with the Afghan people to predicate democratisation. The clear dependence of the government on the foreign Western presence furthermore weakened the legitimacy of the government, allowing the Taliban to appropriate sources of legitimacy like Islam, independence and nationalism.

### Lack of strategic coherence

The international strategy in Afghanistan went from a ‘light footprint’ approach to a much heavier footprint by the middle of the last decade in response to deteriorating security, and finally to a mixed or ‘hybrid footprint’. Suhrke (2013) argues that repeated shifts in intervention strategies indicated irresolvable internal contradictions. One example of a paradox, identified by Suhrke, was the employment of heavy-handed external assistance to build a self-sufficient, Afghan-owned, liberal political order. The failure to deliver this with the realisation of more security and development delegitimised the process itself (Suhrke, 2013: 272).

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) (2021) has similarly pointed to the lack of strategic coherence in the August 2021 publication *What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction*, specifically that the U.S. government struggled to develop a coherent strategy, in part due to a continuously poor division of responsibilities among key government agencies, namely the Departments of State and Defence. The components, competencies and resources were mismatched as no “single agency had the necessary mindset, expertise, and resources to develop and manage the strategy to rebuild Afghanistan” (SIGAR, 2021: vii).

The strategic incoherence of the intervention ties in with another issue. Goodhand and Sedra (2013: 246) note that although framed as a longer-term transformative process, exogenous state-building in Afghanistan has been implemented with a short-term outlook, focusing on the ‘short-termist’ military needs of interveners. Commenting on the failure of the U.S. and NATO to develop a coherent strategy for Afghanistan, Maley (2013: 265) similarly notes how “all too often, international actors have scrambled to produce short-term palliatives rather than address problems synoptically”. He considers that donors viewing the intervention in Afghanistan as a turning point in the country’s history rather than as another phase in a longer-term process of state formation was a result of the engagement in Afghanistan being driven by external, Western security concerns, and by the War on Terror as opposed to genuine peacebuilding.

### Invalidating liberal peacebuilding

Others have argued that the liberal character of the intervention was a ‘veneer’ that donors used to legitimise their use of illiberal means to achieve external strategic ends. According to Mukhopadhyay (2021), the U.S. and its allies involved themselves not out of altruistic concern about the spread of democracy, but rather due to concerns about the presumed nexus between weak statehood and globalised violent extremism. But as the engagement grew in length, even the pretence of liberalism was abandoned, Suhrke argues. During the latter half of the intervention the goalposts had to move so that the overall objective was recast as ‘good enough’ governance.

Dodge (2021) traces the high costs and failures of the intervention to an unwarranted faith in “the universal applicability of the liberal-peacebuilding model”, conceding that while this clearly identified the problems to be solved in a weak or non-existent state and specified the ways to solve them, the solutions were dependent on unsustainable external commitment to state-building. Reflecting on how costly the planned political transformation has been to the Afghan population – a transformation which arguably never manifested – Dodge argues that the liberal peacebuilding model that drove the intervention should be considered invalidated and “removed from the policymaker’s toolbox” (Dodge, 2021: 6). Between 66,000 and 69,000 army and police

personnel were killed between 2001 and 2021 and an estimated 47,245 Afghan civilians died as a direct result of the war (Watson Institute, 2021).

The conclusions drawn by scholars like Mukhopadhyay, Suhrke and Dodge suggest, to varying degrees, that exogenous-driven intervention itself should be viewed as problematic in that it seeks to implement an internationally derived elite consensus (Selby, 2013: 62).

According to Mac Ginty, the liberal peace model acts like a monopoly, squeezing out alternative options and sources of power (Mac Ginty, 2007). One of the ways it does this, Mac Ginty (2010: 401) notes, is that liberal peace, as a directive for policymakers, is *both* expansive *and* evasive enough to accommodate both ‘coercive-realist’ and ‘emancipatory’ elements. As stated by Goodhand and Sedra (2013: 241), it is therefore easy for policymakers to assume that peacebuilding that fails is simply “diverging from the liberal path by not being liberal enough or by deploying illiberal means to achieve ostensibly liberal ends”. And indeed, the military intervention in Afghanistan had varying elements of consent and coercion, oscillating between a transformational project of state-building on the one hand, and pragmatic, illiberal practices aimed at building a coercive apparatus of control on the other.

In order to “rectify deficiencies before the UK next intervenes overseas” (Willasey-Wilsey, 2021), a RUSI commentary suggests that the UK should at least explore conceiving the failure in Afghanistan as going beyond the shortcomings in the methods and means of liberal peacebuilding, the dominant paradigm since the 1990s, and look also, or instead, to its deeper logic and legitimacy (Selby, 2013).

## Over-centralisation

Although Afghans do not necessarily consider local forms of authority as more legitimate, and often feared that decentralisation could have meant a return of the feared warlord rule of the 1990s (Hakimi, 2013), over-centralisation of governance in Afghanistan has been a frequent point of criticism levelled at the international community (Ahmed, 2015). Maley (2013) notes that an excessive focus on strengthening formal central state institutions and agencies – levels of governance with which the majority of Afghans have no interaction – led to a number of adverse effects. It engendered a disparity between assistance provided to areas affected by the Taliban insurgency and to those that were not, with the former receiving the majority of funds. This created a perverse incentive for relatively stable areas to prove instability in order to receive more aid (Maley, 2013: 265). Over-centralisation also undermined the legitimacy of the state in rural areas, benefiting the Taliban, and worsened a long-standing urban-rural schism when rural communities did not benefit from the so-called ‘peace dividend’ in the way that urban centres did (Goodhand and Sedra, 2013: 250).

## Difficulties coordinating and implementing the whole-of-government approach

Another shortcoming that beset the international intervention was the difficulty in coordinating between Western actors. Steinsson (2015), Jakobsen (2014) and Harpviken (2011) detail the challenges of operationalising the integrated whole-of-government approach in line with the comprehensive approach pursued by NATO member states like the UK and Denmark. Because of the importance of the military effort, the whole-of-government approach meant that diplomatic and developmental efforts had to be incorporated under the aegis of security (Steinsson, 2015). As security deteriorated, military dominance in integration efforts increased, entailing “assertion of authority”, and was therefore “openly challenged by many actors and more quietly disregarded by others” (Harpviken, 2011: 4).

In the 2010 review by the UK government’s Stabilisation Unit of the comprehensive approach and the UK approach to stabilisation, practitioners with experience in Afghanistan pointed out that the close association of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) community to military actors clashed with the former’s commitment to humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence (Baumann, 2010). The proximity to intervening military forces created an ‘image problem’ by association, but also a risk. NGOs have to maintain a clear distinction from armed actors not only for their own sake, but also for the safety of aid recipients and local staff (Baumann, 2010: 9). Another challenge Harpviken (2011: 4) points to as standing in the way of tight coordination was the “anarchic features” of the aid sector, where “thousands of actors” are in competition with each other for contracts, making coordination with them at the operational level very challenging.

## 2.4 The impact of international military intervention on state-building and peacebuilding in Afghanistan

In addition to some of the challenges to international approaches to state-building and peacebuilding in Afghanistan, described above, a significant amount of literature focuses on the context in which state-building and peacebuilding evolved in the country, namely the backdrop of the War on Terror, and Western (NATO) military intervention. Opinions differ throughout the literature on the appropriateness of military contributions to state-building and peacebuilding efforts. Clearly, the international intervention had a significant effect on the evolution and character of state-building and peacebuilding between 2001 and 2021, with attempts at state-building or peacebuilding being affected by the presence of Western military intervention, which precluded the neutrality of donor countries involved in state-building and peacebuilding efforts.

### The War on Terror

The coordinated terrorist attack carried out by the Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda against targets in the U.S. on 11 September 2001 was the deadliest attack carried out on the U.S. mainland to date, causing the deaths of 2,974 civilians and 19 terrorists (Bergen, 2001). During the weeks following this event, NATO approved Article 5, invoking its collective defence commitment (Ruhle, 2011). On 20 September 2001, President Bush gave an address to a joint session of Congress in which he announced the beginning of a 'War on Terror' (Bush, 2001), and by early October 2001, a series of military strikes were carried out by the U.S. and allies on sites around Kabul and Kandahar (Franks, 2002). After just a month, the Taliban regime was overthrown, and it was in this context that the task of building a new state began.

As Karakoç-Dora observes (2021: 173), the pursuit of peace and stability by the West in Afghanistan was articulated through the lens of the objectives of the War on Terror. This led to an attempt to create a Western-style democracy, motivated by the overall aim of bringing greater security to the U.S. and its allies (Karakoç-Dora, 2021: 177). It has also been argued that the political reforms and nation-building efforts that followed better reflected this external goal of creating Afghanistan as a democratic space where terrorism could not thrive (Hook and Spanier, 2013: 298), rather than an endogenously led process formed by an understanding of the historical-traditional context of Afghanistan and the needs of its fragmented society (Suhrke, 2010). Ozdemir (2016) goes further, arguing that state-building in Afghanistan has itself been used as a tool for achieving strategic and military aims of Western intervention. Development efforts in Afghanistan were expected to support a wider stabilisation agenda, often working in close cooperation with defence ministries. This led to criticism that, in the context of the War on Terror, development assistance had become 'securitised' (Wild and Elhawary, 2012: 1).

For Karlsrud (2019: 4), the issue is that a lot of the activities falling under broad approaches to stabilisation and counterterrorism have run contrary to traditional peacebuilding paradigms, even though many of these practices have been increasingly and confusingly articulated under that label. Moe (2015) makes the observation that during the first decade of the new millennium, counterinsurgency was promoted as the framework through which military views of peace- and state-building could be formulated. Indeed, emphasising the civilian and the political aspects of counterinsurgency "provides a legitimating narrative, and articulates counterinsurgency as, essentially, a humanitarian endeavour" (Moe, 2015: 6).

The oppositional issue between the goals of the Western counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy, with state-building and peacebuilding objectives on one side and the War on Terror's counterterrorism approach on the other, has been contrasted by some authors with the apparently more politically consistent motivations of the insurgency (de Wijk, 2020: 112). Although the language surrounding the US's COIN strategy evolved from a War on Terror to a global Struggle Against Violent Extremism (SAVE), and 'winning hearts and minds' – an ideological battle (Schmitt and Shanker, 2005) – the practicalities of carrying out counterterrorism activities (search and arrest, or destroy tactics) ran somewhat counter to COIN's stated goal of gaining the support of the local population (de Wijk, 2020: 128).

### The allied intervention

At the same time that the U.S. was engaged in Afghanistan in response to the 11 September attacks, for its own strategic interests, the other major military actor operational in Afghanistan was NATO, and the coalition of allied forces supporting the U.S. efforts, one of which was the UK. While the U.S. and NATO doctrines on COIN during the period ran concurrently with one another, observers have noted some important differences in the NATO and U.S. approaches, which have narrowed over time. For instance, NATO members share a jointly published



*Allied joint doctrine for counterinsurgency* (NATO, 2011) which notably does not contain dedicated principles on counterterrorism, while the US's own doctrine (CJCS, 2018: VII-28) references COIN and counterterrorism together. NATO's emphasis on the political, economic and psychological nature of counterinsurgency has had the effect of nuancing the US's stated views, as described by de Wijk (2020). However, despite a deepening of understanding, the complexity of the insurgency led to an overall failure of COIN in Afghanistan (de Wijk, 2020).

The difficulties faced by allied forces in Afghanistan, driven by the tension of trying to engage with a local population using military forces, is reflected in the structures that the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) established as part of the military intervention to deliver state-building and peacebuilding operations. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) were originally developed to be small teams of combined civilian and military personnel assessing humanitarian needs, implementing small-scale reconstruction projects, liaising with NGOs and, importantly, facilitating and expanding local Afghan government authority (SHAPE, 2005: 3). For many, at least initially, the PRT concept was not only original, but one of the success stories of Afghanistan (Gass, 2012). Over time, however, even military personnel directly involved in the command of PRTs noted the existence of coordination issues, allocative failures, lack of local engagement and ownership, and the need for a re-evaluation of the model (Vasquez, 2010).

Problems that NATO faced were due to constraints from external factors, such as an unexpectedly coherent and well-organised insurgency (Rynning and Hilde, 2022), as well as internal ones, with PRTs often facing resourcing issues (Vasquez, 2010). Other problems, however, could be said to derive from the structure and logic of the intervention and the organisation of the PRT model itself. In cases where local authorities were corrupt, or local contractors were unskilled, interventions were necessarily unsuccessful, reflecting negatively on the allied civilian and military teams (Perito, 2007). More fundamentally, however, members of the NGO community in particular pointed to the danger of military involvement in development and humanitarian activities 'blurring the lines' between civilian and military personnel conducting similar activities but tied to different overall mission goals (Mitchell, 2015). In a briefing paper to NATO in 2009, 11 international NGOs stated that the PRT engagement in development activities in Afghanistan was neither effective nor sustainable (Waldman, 2009: 5), while other commentators noted relief agencies' concerns that the use of military personnel in development endangers the neutrality of humanitarian operations, which relief workers rely upon to carry out their operations (Perito, 2007).

## Principal dynamics of the international coalition behind the intervention

The UK's engagement with the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan has been criticised in the literature as one of acquiescence. This criticism also included the way in which the UK withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021. Lord Darroch, former national security adviser and British ambassador to the US, remarked just days after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban that the UK had "rather passively acquiesced in the foreign policy disaster" from which it will take "quite a long time" to recover (quoted in Neilan, 2021). A publication from the UK Parliament's Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS) also questions the extent to which the UK government, since 2001, "has articulated a meaningful strategy for Afghanistan, identifying the UK's unique interests and concerns within an international coalition", presenting it specifically as a concern regarding the functioning of the UK's National Security Council (Joint Committee, 2021). The then UK foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, was asked, when publicly questioned in September 2021, whether the UK had ever had clear military objectives in Afghanistan, the means to achieve them or a "clear and coherent exit strategy". The JCNSS publication further cites oral evidence given by UK academic Michael Clarke before the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee two weeks after the fall of Kabul. Clarke contends that UK leaders "pretended" to be enacting a strategy in Afghanistan, but in reality "were operating little more than the UK's tactics within a U.S. strategy over which they had next to no influence" (Clarke, 2021).

Theo Farrell, in his 2017 book, *Unwinnable*, on the UK's involvement in the Afghan war, acknowledges that there were constraints on UK policy and politicians regarding Afghanistan (Farrell, 2017: 304-305), noting that former prime minister Gordon Brown "came under intense political pressure to pour resources into a war that privately he did not believe in" (2017: 269). According to Farrell, senior UK government officials agreed that the war could not be won, but instead of acting on this, they followed the U.S. lead and doubled down on the military campaign (2017: 422). Diverting from the course set out by the U.S. "would have damaged the 'Special Relationship' with problematic consequences for the United Kingdom" (Dixon, 2021: 9). Historian Max Hastings argued in an opinion piece, "Under U.S. orders", in *The Guardian* in 2008, that Britain would have to stay the course in the war until the U.S. decided to withdraw or "pay the price of being seen by the American people, as well as by their government, to betray the Atlantic alliance", noting that "[o]nly if or when Obama decides that the game is not worth the

candle will the boys come home” (Hastings, 2008). That is not to say that UK counterinsurgency thinking did not influence practice on the ground in Afghanistan. As Dixon notes, the UK impact was evident in the establishment of provincial reconstruction teams, more restrained rules of engagement, the Comprehensive Approach, and efforts to harmonise political and military aspects of involvement (Dixon, 2021: 13).

Reflecting on the beginnings of the UK’s strategic subordination to the US, Clarke pinpoints, in an online commentary for RUSI, a formative moment for this tradition of acquiescence following the removal of the Taliban in 2001. “Professionals from the Foreign Office” had argued in favour of bringing the then splintered Taliban into a new government, Clarke writes, as “junior partners – to co-opt them when they were weak and to isolate the most militant Taliban leaders outside the Kabul government”, but the Bush administration refused (Clarke, 2021). Clarke concludes that, over the horizon of two decades, the UK’s overall strategy was to align with that of the U.S. – “good or bad, right or wrong, and through thick and thin”.

## 2.5 The UK government’s evolving approach to state-building and peacebuilding in Afghanistan

Afghanistan marks a reference point for changing narratives around international intervention, reflecting not just wider shifts in policies, but also its ability to accommodate changing foreign policy rationales. External support for peacebuilding, state-building and economic development continued for two decades alongside ongoing fighting against the Taliban, but the underlying approaches underwent changes throughout the period.

The UK’s state-building approach and priorities have been expressed in a number of policy papers, aid reviews and other government publications. In the period from 1997 to 2009, led by the then Department for International Development (DFID), the main values and developments in the UK government’s approach to state-building and peacebuilding were set out in the four DFID white papers of 1997, 2000, 2006 and 2009 (Green, 2019). Following 2009, key policy papers include the DFID practice papers *Building peaceful states and societies* in 2010, the *Building stability overseas strategy* in 2011, and the *Building stability framework* in 2016.

The DFID white paper from 1997 aligns with the doctrine laid out by Boutros-Ghali’s 1992 *An agenda for peace* (DFID, 1997). Subsequent white papers were also informed by developments in UN doctrine. In addition, a considerable body of research literature on state-building and peacebuilding has been commissioned, first by DFID and then by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), to inform UK policy. The uptake, absorption and assimilation of research outputs into the articulation of development policy has become a focus area of its own given its importance (Waldman et al., 2014).

A key government document in the period covered by ICAI’s review is the *National security strategy and strategic defence and security review* (HM government, 2015), set by the UK’s National Security Council. The strategy states that creating jobs and economic opportunity is one of the measures the UK will pursue to tackle conflict and instability around the world. For Afghanistan, the strategy notes:

*“Although the UK’s combat mission has ended, we continue to support the National Unity Government of Afghanistan as they seek to build a more peaceful, secure and prosperous future for the country. We have made long-term commitments to Afghanistan’s future, including through financial aid and political support, which helps Afghanistan to make continued progress on corruption, good governance and human rights. Our bilateral aid programme – £178 million this year – will help set the conditions for long-term stability”* (HM government, 2015: 58)

The 2015 *National security strategy* also confirms the UK’s commitment to including women in peacebuilding: “We will continue to promote the active participation of women in peace-building discussions, including through work with governments such as in Afghanistan and Iraq” (HM government, 2015: 63). The commitment to the inclusion of women was reconfirmed in the 2018 *UK national action plan on women, peace and security* (HM government, 2018). The *National security strategy* was replaced in 2021 with the *Integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy*, which committed the government to “continuing to support stability in Afghanistan, as part of a wider coalition” (HM government, 2021: 62).

Two key concerns that have had long processes of contested and difficult incorporation into UK state-building and peacebuilding practice are the integration of civil and military streams of effort on the one hand, and a greater interest in ‘locally owned’, ‘bottom-up’, endogenous state-building with strong elements of informality

on the other (Waldman et al., 2014). The articulation of both stems in large part from interest into understanding and explaining the failures of Western state-building in Afghanistan. Specifically, the failure of converging the liberal peace doctrine and its associated theories of change with on-the-ground reality and practice in Afghanistan.

The clearest way these failures made themselves known was in the continuation and ineradicable nature of political violence in the country. In the 1992 seminal report, Boutros-Ghali emphasised that it was central to post-conflict peacebuilding to “strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict” (1992: 823). But a lesson born out of the experience of intervening Western states in Afghanistan appears to have been that societies experiencing conflict often relapse (Barnett et al., 2021: 237), thus fundamentally challenging the sequential or relational distinction between conflict prevention, peacekeeping and (post-conflict) peacebuilding. The creation of the UN peacebuilding architecture in 2010 reflected this growing realisation of crucial links between peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, with their differing degrees of military and civilian effort streams, in conflict management (UN, 2010). The UN peacebuilding architecture sprang from the need for better strategic coherence, at the level of the UN system, in addressing the needs of conflict-affected countries, and to bridge the gaps between international political, security and development efforts (Hearn et al., 2013: 3). Among other functions, it was also mandated to facilitate peacebuilding and conduct advocacy for peacebuilding.

On the point of strong continuity and the continuation of the above line of reasoning on greater integration in UK thinking on state-building and peacebuilding: in 2009 a briefing paper from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) stated that “[d]onors need to understand the links between peacebuilding and state-building” (implying that it was poorly understood) (Menocal, 2009: 1). The UK-based Foreign Policy Centre’s 2021 article *A ‘force for peace’? UK peacebuilding and peacemaking and FCACs*, states that “peacebuilding and peacemaking should not be in competition with other UK policy priorities for fragile and conflict affected countries (FCACs), but at the heart of them: addressing violent conflict is a *precondition* for advancing sustainable stability, not an inevitable *product* of other policy interventions” (Ramsbotham and Dumasy, 2021). As shown here, the matter of sequential or relational clarity between state-building and peacebuilding, discussed in 2009, continued to be discussed in 2021.

The movement towards an espousal of a more comprehensive, or integrated, approach to peacebuilding has been clear from just a few years into the intervention in Afghanistan. The focus of the UK Stabilisation Unit, created in 2007, shifted over time from a focus in line with U.S. thinking on post-war reconstruction to an agenda of stabilisation as a “combination of integrated civilian and military actions to reduce violence, re-establish security and prepare for longer-term recovery”, clearly emphasising the need to integrate civilian and military intervention policies (Barakat, 2016). Along with the UK, Denmark played a critical role in the push for a comprehensive approach, understood as a framework for greater civil-military coordination, putting it formally on NATO’s agenda as early as 2004 (Fischer and Christensen, 2005).

After its combat mission in Afghanistan ended in 2014, the UK’s relationship with Afghanistan changed. It was no longer dominated by a military presence, but became a commitment focusing on trade, development, diplomacy and military training – that is, reconstruction and development support (UK government, 2014). The transition has been evident in the way Afghanistan featured in the official policy documents. In the 2016 *Building stability framework*, Afghanistan is mentioned once in the entire document – in a footnote. Despite this lack of references to Afghanistan in official documents, UK programmatic support to Afghanistan continued, but appeared to be segmented into a piecemeal, project approach. For example, the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund programme UK Support to the Afghanistan Peace Process, piloted in 2018-19 and implemented until 2020, supported peace initiatives under the Afghan High Peace Council through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and administered Support to Peace and Social Cohesion in Afghanistan (SPSCA) programme. UK support was made up of £11 million in ODA funding over the programme’s life, and its primary goal was to support peacebuilding in Afghanistan by “building the capacity of women, tribal elders, religious leaders and youth groups in 13 provinces. The goal is to create a diverse network of peacebuilders (and women in particular), linking them with counterparts from Sri Lanka to share expertise and experience” (DFID, 2019).

## 2.6 What alternative approaches have been suggested in the literature?

Among both practitioners and scholars of peacebuilding and stabilisation alike there has been a growing orientation towards bottom-up and context-specific governance, with terms like local ownership becoming central to the vocabulary of intervention. With their emphasis on informal local-level structures and indigeneity,

conceptualisations of hybrid state-building had none of the liberal peace underpinnings of exogenous state-building, and were envisioned, according to Wimpelmann (2013) of the Chr. Michelsen Institute, to “restore Afghanistan to its allegedly harmonious traditions of the past”. However, examples of hybrid state-building, such as the ALP and informal-justice structures, have been opposed by many Afghans at the local level (Hakimi, 2013). Notwithstanding donor exhortations about the importance of local and informal institution-building, scholars like Hakimi (2013) and Mac Ginty (2008) show that these efforts were often exclusionary in the Afghan context, effectively contradicting claims of local ownership. Donor preferences “regularly overrode Afghan institutions” and “local-level ownership was often sacrificed in advancing the broader objectives of the interveners” (Wimpelmann, 2013: 419). The assertion is corroborated by Maley (2013: 264), who states that local-level leaders ended up “disenfranchised” on many key issues.

Hybrid state-building strategies persisted until the end of the 2001-21 post-Bonn Afghan republic, featuring at times in the intra-Afghan peace process with the Taliban as well. Their use by Western donors has been regarded with scepticism by scholars of state-building in Afghanistan, with Wimpelmann writing as early as 2013 that the interest in local peacebuilding was driven by setbacks in the Western stabilisation efforts which had become increasingly clear at the end of the first decade of the intervention.

Attempts at hybrid peacebuilding in Afghanistan have therefore not been perceived to be as successful as the reconciliation committees in Rwanda and Timor-Leste. Mac Ginty (2008:156) gives the examples of the U.S. resuscitating the Loya Jirga [gathering of tribal leaders] practice after the ousting of the Taliban in 2001, and concessions made to warlords. Underlining this, Goodhand and Sedra (2013: 249) note that there was “a lack of nuance in the interveners’ understanding of the Afghan political milieu” and a “tendency of those same interveners to selectively instrumentalise aspects of Afghan history and culture to advance their strategic interests”, and that the reorientation of donors to local-level structures and bottom-up state-building was “no more attuned to local realities than the attempts to transplant a modern, centralised Weberian state”.

According to Maley (2013: 266), the Afghan experience has shown hybridity as deserving neither wholesale dismissal nor the unquestioned approval it received from scholars and practitioners disillusioned with the failures of exogenous liberal state-building. Maley reflects that its viability will ultimately depend on conditions present in each context. This point is echoed by Hughes et al. (2015: 818), who write that “the local turn represents an insistence that... international interventions cannot be justified a priori. In this regard its function is a reminder of the intrinsic limits of international peacebuilding as a normative project”, and Ghunta, who notes that “given the distinctiveness of international conflicts, the standardisation of hybrid approaches is practically impossible” (2018: 2).

A related point here is the variability in even exogenous or externally driven state-building. Different donors adopted different logics through which to interpret Afghanistan and understand their own programmatic interventions and objectives (Steinsson, 2015). For some, Afghanistan was conceptualised more as a blank slate, while others saw Afghanistan as a “pre-modern, tribal, and stateless society” (Goodhand and Sedra, 2013: 248). Different readings elicited different approaches to state-building and peacebuilding – all of them taking place simultaneously or in close proximity, or even overlapping.

### **3. Humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan since 2014**

#### **3.1 Overview of economic conditions and assistance in Afghanistan since 2001**

##### **Trends in aid to Afghanistan**

Afghanistan was highly aid-dependent throughout the years of the external intervention, with the significant slowdown in economic growth since 2014 leading to an increased risk of collapse (World Bank, 2018). Violent conflict and natural disasters like droughts, floods and earthquakes have been a recurring plight for Afghanistan. Internal conflicts were a leading cause for the displacement of over 335,000 people in 2015, which was 78% higher than the previous year (USAID, 2016). By 2020, the UN estimated that conflicts had displaced about 1.3 million people since 2017, while natural disasters, such as avalanches and floods, affected roughly 250,000 Afghans every year (pre-COVID) (USAID, 2020). Persistent natural disasters, like the droughts and floods experienced by Afghanistan over the past two decades, worsen food insecurity, health, nutrition, shelter, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) conditions (Mayar 2021; USAID, 2016a; USAID, 2017; USAID, 2019). As a result, the international community responded by allocating additional funds to meet rising humanitarian needs. Between 2014 and 2015, the UN’s Strategic Response Plan for Afghanistan allocated over \$405 million yearly to support the



humanitarian response (USAID, 2014; USAID, 2015), and in 2016, seven bilateral donors, including the UK, committed \$47.2 million to the Common Humanitarian Fund<sup>1</sup> for Afghanistan (USAID, 2016a).

In the trajectory of the past 20 years, 2014 was a key year for Afghanistan as the country experienced a transition in security, political and economic situations (Koser, 2014). NATO concluded its combat mission, which involved more than 130,000 troops at its height, in 2014 and handed over the responsibility to the then Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), transitioning to a smaller non-combat mission (Resolute Support) to train, advise and assist the ANDSF (NATO, 2021). It also worked closely with components of the Afghan army, police and air force (NATO, 2022). The Resolute Support Mission concluded in July 2021 when the U.S. decided to withdraw all of its forces from Afghanistan. One year before that, in 2020, Afghanistan had witnessed a political transition with the peaceful transfer of power to the National Unity Government through a chaotic electoral process with accusations of fraud (Byrd, 2015).

With the withdrawal of a large number of international troops, the level of aid given to Afghanistan by the international community began to decline (World Bank, 2022a). This development was in part attributable to donor fatigue as Afghanistan had become one of the longest wars for the U.S. and its allies. But it was also part of a longer trend going back more than a decade. Overall assistance, including non-ODA expenditure, began to decrease from constituting close to 100% of Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009 to 42.9% in 2020 (World Bank, 2021: 4). And it was a development that was slated to continue. At the Geneva conference in November 2020, when donors renewed their commitment to aid for the 2021-24 period, several key donors would commit only to single-year pledges, making further support conditional on the then government making progress in the peace process, anti-corruption efforts and poverty reduction goals. According to the Afghanistan Development Update for April 2021, aid was expected at the time to decline by around 20% further than the decline for the 2016-20 pledging period (World Bank, 2021: 6). Since August 2021, the UN has launched two main funding appeals to support the humanitarian response. In the first, the flash appeal launched on 13 September 2021, the UN sought \$606 million for multi-sectoral assistance to 11 million people for the remainder of 2021, including \$193 million for newly emerging needs (OCHA, 2021). By January 2022, the crisis had escalated dramatically, and the UN appealed for a further \$5 billion. This included \$4.4 billion for humanitarian operations inside Afghanistan (the largest ever single-country appeal) (OCHA, 2022; OCHA 2022b), and a further \$623 million to support refugees and host communities in five neighbouring countries (UNHCR, 2022).

## Economic conditions in Afghanistan

Before 2014, Afghanistan's GDP grew by almost double digits (World Bank, 2019). In 2002 the country's GDP was estimated to be around \$4 billion, while by 2020 it was more than \$20 billion, a more than fivefold increase (World Bank, 2022b). In those years – as now – the domestic backbone of Afghanistan's economy was agriculture. According to the World Bank, by 2018 the agriculture sector contributed 25% of Afghanistan's GDP, with 61% of the country's population depending on income from agriculture (World Bank, 2018: 27). The same report argued that the agriculture sector would be critical for poverty reduction and economic growth in Afghanistan, contrasting this with how aid-led non-agriculture employment has not reduced poverty despite temporary job creation in the services sector (World Bank, 2018: 7).

Besides agriculture, remittances have also played a key role in the Afghan economy. Remittances from Afghan communities and families abroad have served as a lifeline for many in Afghanistan, particularly during times of crisis (Dawi, 2022a; Ross and Barratt, 2022; IOM, 2021). Between 2014 and 2017, remittances into Afghanistan more than tripled (Ross and Barratt, 2022; IOM, 2021). By 2020, the total formal remittances into Afghanistan were around \$788 million, roughly 4% of the country's GDP (Hall, 2021: 2). In 2014, the U.S. State Department estimated that informal financial services like the *hawala*<sup>2</sup> mobile banking system dominated the financial sector in Afghanistan, accounting for about 90% of financial transactions (Ross and Barratt, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2014). Despite efforts to improve financial inclusion, bank account ownership in Afghanistan between 2014 and 2021 remained the lowest in the world (10-15%) with gender disparities (Demirguc-Kunt et al., 2022; Ross and Barratt, 2022). The *hawala* system was not entirely licit nor illicit but was a crucial stream for remittance and money transfers and served as a livelihood strategy for many Afghans.

Opiate trafficking was another source of income for Afghans. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that the overall (gross) income generated by domestic consumption, production and

<sup>1</sup> A pooled funding mechanism for humanitarian activities overseen by the UN (USAID, 2016:3).

<sup>2</sup> The hawala system is an informal method of transferring money, including across borders, through a network of money brokers referred to as *hawaladers* (Ross and Barratt, 2022).

exports of opiates in Afghanistan to be between \$1.8 billion and \$2.7 billion in 2021. When expressed as a share of the total economy, this amounted to about 9% to 14% of the country's GDP (UNODC, 2021: 35) and exceeded the value of its officially recorded licit exports of goods and services (estimated at 9% of GDP in 2020) (UNODC, 2021: 9). As an illicit activity opium trade has deprived authorities of revenue and has been a significant source of income for insurgents (UNODC, 2021: 40). Attempts at suppressing it have, however, generated political support for the Taliban (Brown, 2020: 4).

The country's growth rate fell to around 2% from 2014 onwards (World Bank, 2019). The economy was further impacted by the onset of COVID-19 in 2020. The World Bank's Afghanistan Development Update from 2018 found that 55% of the Afghan population were living under the poverty line (World Bank, 2019: 6), while in July 2020 the Afghan Ministry of Economy reported that 90% of the Afghan population lived below the poverty line (Omid, 2020). As the need for remittances increased, the frequency and amount of remittances dropped due to COVID-19. Samuel Hall's (2020) study on the impacts of COVID-19 found that three-quarters of the households surveyed that were receiving remittances had reported that this key livelihood income had dwindled as senders struggled themselves. At the time of writing, remittances would have also been conceivably higher due to the displacement following the Taliban takeover in 2021. Institutions like Western Union and MoneyGram also temporarily suspended transfers after the takeover, further exacerbating a dire livelihood situation (Thomas, 2021a:33).

## 3.2 ODA funding channels and mechanisms

### Mechanisms for providing humanitarian aid

In the last 20 years, the international community primarily used two major aid disbursement mechanisms: on-budget and off-budget (Haque and Roberts, 2020). The on-budget mechanism involved channelling aid to the Afghan government through its Ministry of Finance and national systems, and spending it in line with the government's public financial management and procurement regulations. Precise data on the extent of funds channelled through each of these mechanisms is not publicly available. In 2010, donors agreed to channel 50% of their aid through the on-budget mechanism, through the government budget or trust funds, although as Bizhan (2018: 1020) shows, not all donors complied and the target was not reached.

The off-budget mechanism involved donors providing funds to implementing partners (UN agencies, international and local NGOs and contractors) directly without any significant participation, input or oversight from the Afghan government. Donors used the off-budget option for aid disbursement due to concerns about state weakness and aid corruption, and because of the need to "deliver quick results post-2001" (Cooper, 2018). As Bizhan (2018) argues, it engendered a number of unintended consequences. Donors unintentionally undermined the development of state institutions and thereby state legitimacy by channelling funds through off-budget mechanisms, creating a parallel public sector which was fiscally larger than the permanent public sector (Bizhan, 2018a: 36).

Bizhan (2018: 1019), who served as head of the secretariat for the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board and as director general of budget at the Afghan Ministry of Finance, also gives the example of 35 autonomous project units which donors established across government ministries to deliver aid and implement projects. The activities implemented by these structures pursued development agendas independent of the Afghan government, thereby diverting political and financial resources from permanent state institutions (Bizhan, 2018: 1026).

### Donor coordination and strategic alignment

Coordination among international donors remained weak throughout the 20 years. Indeed, a 2018 joint report by Oxfam and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) contended that aid effectiveness in the country had been hampered by 'fragmentation'. The report states, "[t]here are over 30 different international donors disbursing aid in Afghanistan, each with their own agenda and aid agreement with the government, and effective donor coordination and harmonisation is not a practice adopted universally [...] Yet there are still major issues of fragmentation, with donors bypassing government systems in multiple areas of the development sector, and it is this fragmentation that leads to ineffective aid" (ATR Consulting, 2018: 8).

The Oxfam/SCA report further stated that each donor pursued its own agenda "based on separate aid agreements with the government" and was free to fund areas that specifically resonate with their home country constituents, competing among themselves for projects outlined in the former government's National Priority Programmes (NPPs) (ATR Consulting, 2018: 16). SIGAR pushed back against the report's findings, insisting that the

creation of the NPPs and mechanisms like the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) and the Afghan Infrastructure Trust Fund exemplified the alignment and coordination between the international donor community and the Afghan government (SIGAR, 2018). Despite these disagreements between SIGAR and Oxfam/SCA, both reports point to poor management, coordination and monitoring of aid. They both also argue that the lack of transparency had contributed to unaccountability surrounding funding (Ruttig and Bjelica, 2018).

### 3.3 Humanitarian aid to Afghanistan

#### Development and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan

Since 2001, the international community has provided around \$65 billion in aid to Afghanistan (OECD, 2022). The UK government has been a major provider of ODA to Afghanistan since the beginning of the international military intervention in 2001. ODA refers to aid intended to promote the economic development and the welfare of developing economies, excludes loans and credits for military purposes, and must be reported to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Loft and Mills, 2021). Afghanistan is one of the largest recipients of UK bilateral ODA, receiving the second-highest amount in Asia. In the period from 2009 to 2019, Afghanistan received 12.6% of UK bilateral ODA, above India (12.2%) and below Pakistan (15.5%).

Between 2002 and 2021, the UK provided £3.5 billion of development and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan (around 8% of the total), focusing on improving governance, including the functioning of the Afghan government, and providing humanitarian assistance (Loft and Mills, 2021: 8). In the period from 2001 to 2003, humanitarian assistance represented the largest share of bilateral aid spending by the UK government. Since 2004, aid to support governance, civil society and security has constituted the largest proportion of UK commitments (Joint Committee, 2021: 13). In 2019, after a decade of fluctuating aid to Afghanistan - the country was the third-largest recipient of UK foreign aid that year - of which 44% was for government and civil society programmes, and only 22% for humanitarian assistance (FCDO, 2020a: 23; Loft & Mills, 2021:13).

#### Evolution of humanitarian needs in Afghanistan

The contraction of the economy since 2014, combined with severe droughts, has led to a deterioration in the humanitarian and protection context (Mayar, 2021). In 2014, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) found that 7.4 million Afghans were in need of humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2014), a figure that increased to 24.4 million in January 2022 (OCHA, 2022a; 2022b). This marked a 33% increase from the 18.4 million people OCHA identified to be in need in 2021 (OCHA, 2022a: 7; OCHA, 2021b: 6; OCHA, 2021a: 4). Out of the 24.4 million, 9.3 million are in 'extreme need' and 15.1 million are in 'severe need' of humanitarian assistance. The collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 pushed into severe crisis a considerable segment of the Afghan population which was dependent on development assistance (OCHA, 2021b: 6). OCHA figures show that 24 million people are experiencing food insecurity, with 18.1 million in need of access to health services, 16.2 million in need of protection, 15 million in need of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), 10.9 million in need of emergency shelter, 7.9 million in need of education, and 7.8 million in need of nutrition security (OCHA, 2022a: 8).

The humanitarian needs in Afghanistan have been compounded by severe droughts, floods and earthquakes. Afghanistan's drought cycle used to last for three to five years every decade, but this frequency has doubled in the past two decades and the cycle now occurs twice a decade (Mayar, 2021). In the 2010s there were droughts in 2011-13 and 2016-18. In 2016 a 7.5 magnitude earthquake resulted in hundreds of casualties, displaced over 20,000 people and affected 143,000 people across the country (USAID, 2015a). According to World Food Programme (WFP) data, by late November 2021, 98% of the population had insufficient food consumption – up from 81% before the fall of Kabul – with food security deteriorating in all regions since 15 August 2021 (WFP, 2021). According to the latest (May 2022) Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) acute food insecurity situation report, 19.7 million Afghans – almost half of the country's population – were classified in 'crisis' or 'emergency' (IPC Phases 3 or 4) between March and May 2022, including nine million in a state of 'emergency' food insecurity. This represents the highest number of acutely food-insecure people ever recorded by the UN in Afghanistan in ten years of IPC analyses in the country, but also the highest number in the world. A 'catastrophe' (IPC Phase 5, the highest on the scale) pocket of some 20,000 people was also detected in the remote province of Ghor for the first time since the scale was introduced in Afghanistan in 2011 (IPC, 2021). According to the European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Emergency Response Mechanism, an estimated 10,000 households were displaced from Ghor and Badghis in 2018 due to severe droughts that devastated their agricultural livelihoods and basic access to water (Ryan, 2018). The international community responded to environmental emergency

disasters by allocating additional funds through country-based pooled funds like the Common Humanitarian Fund for Afghanistan (OCHA, 2016). In response to this increased vulnerability, the UK donated \$13.1 million to WFP to assist affected populations (Ryan, 2018). Irrespective of the drought season, relief actors estimated that about 667,000 people would need assistance to survive harsh winter conditions between 2019 and 2020 (USAID, 2020). The 2018-21 Humanitarian Response Plan estimated that a total of \$612 million in 2019 would be needed to meet Afghanistan's humanitarian needs; by December 2019, 72% of that amount had been disbursed by the international community.

Before the withdrawal of international troops and the Taliban's capture of power in Afghanistan in 2021, there was agreement in both academic and grey literature that the country was sensitive to changes in international aid and that declining aid levels would pose an existential threat to the Afghan state (Sinno, 2015; Bizhan, 2018; Rubin, 2018). By 2021, more than two-thirds of the government's civil budget was provided by the international community, much of which stopped after the Taliban takeover, adversely affecting access to basic services such as education and health (OCHA, 2022b: 18). Following the Taliban takeover, the U.S. froze nearly \$9.5 billion of the Afghan central bank's assets due to the Taliban being on the sanctions designation list of the U.S. Treasury (Mohsin, 2021). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated the Afghan central bank's international reserves at \$9.5 billion in 2021 (IMF, 2021), and most are held by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York: a total of \$7 billion assets are held by the U.S. Federal Reserve. A further \$1.3 billion are being held in international accounts (Strohecker, Lewis and Lawder, 2021; Greenfield and Landay, 2022). Funding by the World Bank, the EU and the IMF was also suspended (Thomas, 2021: 39; Thomas, 2021a: 37). Furthermore, the economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. on the Taliban's government created a liquidity crisis in the country, adversely impacting the economic and humanitarian situation.

The focus of international aid has now pivoted to humanitarian assistance to mitigate the effects of state collapse, resulting in large part from the retreat of the international community and, with it, its withdrawal of aid (Wernersson, 2021: 4). The pre-August 2021 long-term assistance which aimed at stabilisation and development has now been replaced by short-term assistance to relieve a humanitarian crisis that continues to worsen. Continuing development aid, for instance to build institutional or governmental capacity, could be seen as legitimising the Taliban government (Wernersson, 2021: 10). Instead, Western aid agencies work closely with the UN to get assistance to the Afghan people (Amaro, 2021). The UN either directly implements projects or does it through international and local NGOs.

## Humanitarian context since the Taliban takeover

In September 2021, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) assessed the potential risks of the socio-economic crisis since the Taliban takeover. Its worst-case scenario was that 97% of the population could fall below the poverty line by the middle of 2022. That is an increase of 25 percentage points from 2020, when the poverty rate was 72% of the population (UNDP, 2021). In the same report, UNDP stated that this was likely to happen if the situation developed 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 2022.

On 31 March 2022, the head of UNDP, Achim Steiner, said during a trip to Afghanistan, "[w]e reported late last year that an estimated 97% of Afghans could be living in poverty by mid-2022, and regrettably, that number is being reached faster than anticipated" (UN, 2022). At a high-level pledging event, also on 31 March 2022, co-hosted by the UK, a total of 41 announcements of aid were made. The U.S. committed about \$512 million for 2022, the UK pledged over \$374 million, Germany pledged \$220 million and Qatar pledged \$25 million (UN, 2022). As of August 2022, fundraising accounted for 41.8% of the requirements of the 2022 HRP (OCHA, 2022).

## Delivery mechanisms for humanitarian aid in Afghanistan

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## Combining humanitarian and development efforts

Throughout the international intervention between 2001 and 2021, the UK also sought, through its humanitarian work in Afghanistan, to address poverty and gender inequality. As of June 2021, the UK was working through the Girls’ Education Challenge Fund to improve participation and opportunities for nearly 80,000 girls across Afghanistan. Other focus areas for humanitarian work throughout the period included gender-based violence response services and programmes to reduce poppy cultivation through the introduction of alternative crops and income sources for farmers. Mine clearance work has also been funded through NGOs like the HALO Trust (Loft and Mills, 2021: 16).

Following the regime change of August 2021, the international community made non-humanitarian aid conditional on the Taliban respecting the rights of Afghans (James, 2021). Funds from the IMF, the World Bank and the U.S. for reconstruction were also suspended (BBC, 2021), while Afghan central bank funds held by American financial institutions were frozen by the U.S. (Al Jazeera, 2021). Several organisations continue to deliver and coordinate aid in Afghanistan, including the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Norwegian Refugee Council, Médecins Sans Frontières and UN agencies like UNICEF, the WFP and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (Loft and Mills, 2021: 20).

## Methods of distributing humanitarian aid

For the AHF and its NGO partners, cash-based distribution through the Cash Facility has been crucial for their ability to remain and operate effectively in the country despite the banking and liquidity crisis (OCHA, 2021b: 19). The IRC similarly relies on cash relief as one of the primary pillars of its emergency response work, which also includes essential health services and protection of women and girls (IRC, 2021). The WFP similarly uses cash-based transfers, explaining that it opts for cash distribution “in areas where there are functioning local markets” to “empower people with choice to address their essential needs, while also helping boost local businesses and economies” (WFP, 2022: 1).

Now, as over the past 20 years, humanitarian agencies use a hybrid approach comprising both cash assistance and in-kind assistance such as food, shelter and medicine (ODI, 2015). While both modalities have their advantages and drawbacks, cash assistance appears in some cases to be a preferred modality of assistance. A systematic review carried out in 2016 on cash-based approaches in humanitarian emergencies found that cash-based approaches were a common strategy for the provision of humanitarian assistance, and are sometimes a preferred substitute for in-kind assistance when conditions permit (Doocy and Tappis, 2016: 1). An ODI report from 2015 argues that humanitarian cash transfers can be provided to people safely, efficiently and accountably, and that “Both women and men often prefer cash, local markets have responded to cash injections without causing inflation and it has generated positive impacts on local economies”. The report further stresses that while a greater use of cash won’t solve the problem entirely, it provides “greater choice and dignity”, is “less costly to deliver”, and “create[s] more opportunities for transparency in targeting and monitoring” (ODI, 2015: 14).

Among the disadvantages cited in the literature are the fact that cash assistance is more likely to be controlled by men and therefore bypass women, and the fact that it is prone to diversion, including corruption, seizure by armed groups and elite capture (ODI, 2015: 18).

## 4. Changes in the status of Afghan women and girls

With the expansion of the military intervention to a state-building project, the enfranchisement of girls and women became one of the primary stated priorities of the international community in Afghanistan (SIGAR, 2021: ix). Underpinning all projects, programmes and initiatives on women’s empowerment was the understanding that increasing women’s access to education, economic opportunities and equal rights would help improve the overall well-being of families and the overall economy (SIGAR, 2021: 96).

Until August 2021, there was significant progress in women’s rights across economic, political, social, education, health and legal areas, in stark contrast to 2001 when Taliban were in power (UN Women, 2021). But despite the

progress from 2001, Afghanistan continued to score at the bottom of gender indexes at a global level (Albrecht et al., 2022). Since the Taliban regained power in 2021, they have dismantled political, legal and social rights and enfranchisement of girls and women.

One of the most crucial achievements between 2001 and 2021 was the increase in girls' access to education (Zirak, 2021; World Bank, 2017:7). According to the World Bank, in 2003, about 67% of Afghan girls were enrolled into primary school; a figure that had risen to 82% by 2017 (World Bank, 2022c). In 2017, 39% of all girls were enrolled into secondary schools, compared to just 6% in 2001 (World Bank, 2017: 12; World Bank, 2022d). After returning to power in 2021, the Taliban imposed a ban on girls' education beyond sixth grade. Reneging on the pledge they had made only days earlier that schools would reopen for girls above sixth grade, the Taliban upheld the ban on girls' secondary schools in March 2022. Girls who showed up at school on the morning of 23 March were either sent home or found the gates closed (Ahmadi and Ebadi, 2022). The Taliban's messaging on girls' education has been growing increasingly contradictory, indicating a lack of consensus on key policies and a schism within the Taliban leadership. This is taking place as prominent Islamic clerics continue to point out that Taliban policy is misaligned with Islamic principles (Ahmadi and Ebadi, 2022; Emon et al., 2020).

In terms of economic participation, Afghan women experienced some improvement in the past 20 years, although their participation in income-generating activities remained considerably lower than that of men. In 2001, about 15% of Afghan women were working; in 2019 this had risen to 22%, indicating a modest increase in economic participation. From 2019, however, the proportion of employed women plummeted back to 15% by 2021 (World Bank, 2022). In comparison, although men's labour force participation stood at 76% in 2001, a gradual decline began in 2013 reaching 72% in 2019 and dropping to 67% by 2021 (World Bank, 2022e). In addition, the ratio of female to male labour force participation rate was 22.32% in 2021 which was a marginal change from the 20% rate in 2001 (World Bank, 2022f). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated in January 2022 that women's participation had decreased by 16% in the third quarter of 2021 (ILO, 2022).

As of May 2022, the restrictions on women's employment were estimated to result in an economic loss of \$1 billion, equalling almost 5% of Afghanistan's GDP (UN Women, 2022). Shortly after the Taliban takeover, female government employees were told to stay at home (The Guardian, 2021), while women working in healthcare were urged to return to work (Mackenzie, 2021). As of mid-2022, Afghan women continued working as doctors and nurses (Glinski, 2022). Interpretation of Taliban rules on women working in healthcare may, however, vary by locale (Lee, 2022). As Heather Barr from Human Rights Watch points out, this, along with Taliban suggestions that women avoid leaving their homes, can result in uncertainty among hospital administrators. In addition, the *mahram* mandate makes it difficult, and often impossible, for women to travel to and from work (HRW, 2021). Journalism is a profession that has been hit considerably by the Taliban's restrictions. A September 2021 survey by Reporters Without Borders shows that just 100 out of 700 female journalists in Kabul remained working in the media (RSF, 2021). According to a survey by the Afghan National Journalists' Union in March 2022, 60% of the Afghan women journalists surveyed had lost their jobs since the Taliban takeover and 79% had experienced physical and verbal threats and abuse by Taliban officials (IFJ, 2022).

Between 2001 and 2021, a number of factors thwarted progress in the economic empowerment of Afghan women. Chief among these were prevalently conservative and deeply ingrained patriarchal socio-cultural norms where men, as heads of households, are expected to be the primary breadwinners. In conservative areas, including large swathes of the Pashtun-dominated south and east of the country, there is also the perception that visibility of women outside the home threatens family honour. As Dupree writes, "to Western eyes, such customs might seem like a form of house arrest. In traditional Pashtun society, they are 'indissolubly linked to rural notions of the virtue and the maintenance of an ethical order' – concepts which long predate the rise of Taliban oppression" (Dupree, 1984: 310). Lack of relevant skills, inadequate access to professional networks, and gender-based discrimination played key roles as well (Albrecht et al., 2022).

Women experienced greater political empowerment and participation between 2001 and 2021. Women served as governors, mayors and members of parliaments (Kimathi, 2021). Randomised evaluations in Afghan villages established that by women's participation in some community-driven development programmes being mandated, there was a shift in men's attitudes towards women's participation in politics and, in turn, an increase in women's participation (J-PAL et al., 2021). At the time of the collapse of the Afghan government, around 24% of all members of Parliament were women, which made Afghanistan 76th in the world in terms of female participation in Parliament (IPU, 2019). Following the Taliban takeover, most female parliamentarians have fled Afghanistan, with a few still remaining in hiding within the country (Donkin, 2021).

Women's access to health services also experienced important progress. Life expectancy rose, and maternal, newborn and child deaths declined dramatically compared with the situation before 2001 (Albrecht et al., 2022). Indicating the extent of progress, in 2000 only one in ten births were attended by skilled health personnel, improving to nearly six in ten in 2019 (World Bank, 2021). Despite these developments, crucial gaps still persisted in women's access to the Afghan health sector. According to a 2020 study, two-thirds of Afghan women were unable to visit a health facility without a male family member, a so-called *mahram* (Yihun, 2020). According to Mirzazada et al. (2020), cultural norms surrounding gender continued to play a role in women's access to healthcare.

A 2021 report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) further points out that "a precise measurement of the reduction remains elusive" because the methodologies used to record maternal mortality data have changed over time, with the reliability of some data being questioned (SIGAR, 2021: xi).

Following the Taliban's return, the country's health sector, funded predominantly by Western countries which have since withheld funds, is on the brink of collapse (WHO, 2022). An example is the Sehatmandi programme, the "backbone of Afghanistan's health system", which provided healthcare for millions of people through 2,331 health facilities. Major funding for the programme was withdrawn following the Taliban takeover in August 2021 (WHO, 2022). As of January 2022, Afghanistan had only received funding to cover immediate needs for the early part of the year. According to Dr Luo Dapeng, World Health Organisation (WHO) representative in Afghanistan, the pause in funding the Sehatmandi programme will force the majority of public health facilities to close. As a result, "more mothers, infants and children will die of reduced access to essential health care". Women and children are at heightened risk since primary care facilities at village level provide emergency obstetric care, including Caesarean section services. Without this, women would have to travel long distances, putting themselves and their babies at risk (WHO, 2022).

## Main strategies, interventions and lessons learned

The advancement of women's rights remained a high-priority area of investment for the donor community throughout the past two decades. According to SIGAR, from 2002 to 2020 the U.S. Department of State, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Department of Defence disbursed "at least \$787.4 million for programmes that specifically and primarily supported Afghan women and girls in the areas of health, education, political participation, access to justice, and economic participation" (SIGAR, 2021a: xi). As of 2020, 3.5 million girls, out of approximately nine million students, attended school, and literacy rates among girls increased from 20% in 2005 to 39% in 2017 (SIGAR, 2021a: xi). Roughly 70,000 women held jobs as teachers as of 2018, representing about one-third of the country's teachers, and community-based education efforts were underway to close the enrolment gap between girls and boys. Laws and regulations were being passed which, in principle, offered women many protections, including the Elimination of Violence against Women law promulgated by presidential decree in 2009 (Yari, 2018). The National Action Plan (2015) was designed to further the advancement of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 – Women, Peace and Security, and a frequently stated objective of donors was for government and non-government organisations to mainstream gender in their policies and interventions (Yari, 2018: 8).

Despite progress across a number of measures, several significant barriers remained. Maternal mortality rates were still high, gender-based violence was endemic, and access to education and healthcare was deemed to be lower in reality than research figures reflected (SIGAR, 2021a: xi). Yari concludes from her research on interventions focusing on women's empowerment in Afghanistan that formal gains tended to be frail or fraught with weaknesses. For instance, despite women serving in leadership positions "as ministers, deputy ministers, and ambassadors" and comprising "28% of employees in civil society organisations" (Yari, 2018: 8), they were often used in a tokenistic manner and assigned deputy positions with limited authority. Similarly, despite anti-harassment regulations, women often struggled in workplaces. Yari cites specifically the example of harassment facing female police officers (Yari, 2018).

Examining 24 U.S. gender-related programmes, SIGAR found in 2020 that some programmes were predicated on theories of change which sometimes clashed with the Afghan context and the challenges women and girls faced. A frequent criticism of programmes has been the failure to take local context, including cultural norms, into consideration. There was often resistance to donors' efforts to change gender norms. A review conducted by Christoph Zürcher revealed that donors knew the importance of localising programme interventions, but rarely "made strategic adaptations to their aid portfolios, to the way they delivered aid, or indeed to their expectations of what could reasonably be achieved" (Zürcher, 2020a: 23). Zürcher's interview with SIGAR also revealed that only

two impact evaluations had been conducted in the area of gender programming, and that methodological standards for evaluations of gender projects were “consistently lower than those for evaluations in other sectors” (SIGAR, 2022).

SIGAR speculates that the high-level U.S. political focus on gender issues in Afghanistan may also have led to less rigour in the design of some gender programming. Specifically, the excessive focus may have led to compromises on quality, disincentivising efforts to design responsive theories of change and programme activities since funding was “more likely when a project was for women” (SIGAR, 2021: 35-36).

SIGAR’s 2021 report on gender equality – published just six months before Afghanistan fell to the Taliban – highlights lessons from a review of two decades of gender programming in the country. Two lessons in particular are notable in light of post-August 2021 restrictions on women’s freedoms as decreed by the Taliban. The first is the recommendation to engage men and boys on gender equality and women’s rights issues. This message was pointed out as early as 2013 in a little-noted foreign policy piece (Tygesen, 2013). Specifically, SIGAR notes that engaging male stakeholders can help shift and transform social norms and behaviours which perpetuate discrimination and inequality. For example, it has been suggested that working with male religious leaders as advocates for women’s empowerment could mitigate the risk of women’s empowerment efforts being viewed with suspicion or as “imposed by the West” (SIGAR, 2021a: 160).

The second lesson highlights how weak programme design and performance metrics decreased the responsiveness and success of gender programming. Monitoring and evaluation systems were too focused on measuring quantitative outputs and not focused enough on assessing “actual outcomes over time for women and girls” (SIGAR, 2021a: 161). There was excessive focus on quantifiable indicators, for instance the number of training sessions provided, “the number of peace-focused engagements with girls and women, the number of civil society organisations receiving U.S. assistance and engaged in advocacy, and the number of students in schools receiving U.S. assistance”, instead of the impact of those training sessions in improving the knowledge and skills of beneficiaries in Afghanistan (SIGAR, 2021a). The resulting recommendation is for rigorous impact evaluations to be undertaken to inform programme design and implementation. These should take into account that programme activities may not have direct and observable causal effects, but rather effects that could manifest as “wider, intangible shifts in social and cultural norms over time – shifts that are essential to progress” (SIGAR, 2021a: 161).

These lessons and recommendations emphasise responsiveness and the need for interveners to develop a more nuanced understanding of gender in the Afghan cultural context. Notably, they are also a significant departure from the preference for quick observable wins, an often prevalent feature in the approach of the international community in Afghanistan (Bizhan, 2018: 1019).



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