



After the Collapse: The Linkage Between Corruption and Aid - what it means for a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

For Rahela Trust by Wahidullah Azizi

Abstract

For almost two decades since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the international community, including the U.K., has provided millions in aid to Afghanistan. The aid provided has contributed to the overall betterment of public services, including healthcare, education, governance, and infrastructure. Also, relying on foreign aid helped Afghanistan create a sustainable economy for almost two decades. In the absence of proper oversight, however, external aid also fostered widespread corruption that has hindered national development. Mismanagement and lack of coordination between the former Afghan government and the donor community had exacerbated the problem. Nonetheless, a constant flow of foreign aid ensured that the former Afghan government could spend money on essential services and carry out development plans. With the violent takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 by the Taliban, the flow of aid has drastically diminished, which resulted in a humanitarian crisis unmatched in the recent history of the aid-relying country. Some donors have committed limited funds, mainly for humanitarian purposes. The funds are crucially needed to avert urgent issues such as food insecurity and acute malnutrition. Nonetheless, effective transparency measures are needed to ensure that aid is not wasted. This research draws on the lessons learned during the past two decades to help the country and donors with the current situation. It further evaluates the current humanitarian efforts in the light of political uncertainty, limitations on human rights, and restrictions on women and girls' education.

Keywords: Afghanistan, humanitarian aid, Taliban, corruption, ODA

Introduction

The longest war for the US and its allies might have come to a close, but the real battle for Afghanistan only begins. Years of aid from the international community did not reduce the suffering of the Afghan people. Years of widespread corruption and mismanagement on the

part of the Afghan government and the donor community lessened the effect of aid-funded projects. This paper first analyzes Afghanistan's aid system during the last twenty years. Then, it probes the linkage between corruption, mismanagement, and aid – mostly development projects but also humanitarian assistance. The Afghan government and the international community failed to develop an effective working accountability mechanism that could ensure transparency and avoid aid leakage. Despite a vast portion of development aid turning to dust and being lost to corruption, embezzlement, and political considerations, Afghanistan has come a long way since 2001. The development aid enabled the Afghan government to improve services, increase girls' enrollment in schools, raise life expectancy from 44 to 69 years, and reduce maternal mortality by more than three quarters (Dixon, 2017).

Nonetheless, the withdrawal of international forces and the political blitz that saw a Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021 prompted the donor community to stop many of its programmes. As a result, a humanitarian crisis of "unparalleled" proportions is unfolding that affects much of society. The international community has since stepped up and committed to providing humanitarian aid to avoid a total collapse. UN conference in March 2022 managed to raise \$2.4 billion that will be channeled through its many agencies working on the ground in Afghanistan. At this crucial moment, this assistance must be provided to the people of Afghanistan. On the same note, ensuring the aid is not wasted and used effectively is even more important. In the last section of this paper, aid arrangement under the Taliban is explored. Many of the donor countries do not recognize the regime in Kabul.

Background

With the Taliban back in power, the flow of development aid to Afghanistan has largely stopped, plunging the country into an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Since 2002 Afghanistan received more than \$146 billion in development aid from the United States alone; in addition, billions more [were] flowed in [by] from allies, including the U.K., E.U., and international organisations (Mohammad, 2021). Using development aid, Afghanistan funded the delivery of public services, such as the provision of healthcare and large-scale infrastructure projects. Part of the funds was also used to support legal framework such as, strengthening anti-corruption agencies (ACAs), drafting strong access to information law, and creating a vibrant space for media and civil society. On the other hand, the recent restrictions on girls' education put in force by the Taliban put aside much of the progress achieved over the last two decades during which time the education sector has witnessed commendable improvement [during the last two decades]. For instance, in 2020, there were 10 million children enrolled in schools, 40 percent of whom were girls (Wang, 2021). This is a big achievement compared to a few thousand female students in 2001.

However, throwing money at the problem can go only so far. No amount of aid can substitute for a self-reliant long-term solution. Almost all experts agree that aid can help boost the economy, attract investment and create jobs, but a lack of proper monitoring produces the opposite results. One study (Qadamshah, n.d.) finds that in the case of

Afghanistan, it was not the aid that was a problem but the mismanagement and waste. Another study published in 2012 questions the impact of aid in Afghanistan and concludes that the "perceptions of aid are overwhelmingly negative" (RAF, 2012).

Since the fall of the Republic in August 2021, there has been a lot of speculation and soul-searching as to what went wrong. Few have discussed the relationship between endemic corruption and mismanagement of aid. A US government watchdog report, "What We Need to Learn," published in August 2021, summarizing the country's engagement in Afghanistan, indicates that the United States, as the largest donor, has downplayed the early signs of corruption risks - a challenge that undermined the entire state-building efforts in Afghanistan (SIGAR, 2021). Ryan Crocker, who served as the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan twice, confirms this assessment by stating, "The ultimate point of failure for our efforts, you know, wasn't an insurgency, it was corruption" (Shapiro & Emamdjomeh, 2019). He further adds, "you just cannot put those amounts of money into a very fragile state and society, and not have it fuel corruption. You just can't."

Similarly, other countries, including the U.K., overlooked the dangers of increasing corruption. Asking *if* development aid in Afghanistan fueled corruption, R.A Connor, cited above, agrees that a lack of sufficient oversight mechanism and a rush to spend too much money in little time has fostered corruption. According to his assessment, for the U.K. to achieve its stated goal of stabilization using development aid as a tool, the former Afghan government and the international community failed to have in place comprehensive anti-corruption measures (RAF, 2012b). The E.U. has reached a similar conclusion after years of engagement in Afghanistan. It has cut short the development assistance to Afghanistan, citing "endemic corruption" shortly after the Taliban takeover of power in Kabul. The E.U. has provided more than €4 billion in development aid to Afghanistan since 2012 (Euronews, 2021). This amount is in addition to the € 1.4 billion the political union provided in humanitarian assistance since 1994.

Corruption and development aid

There is [a] general agreement among observers that post-2001 development aid blew a fresh breath into the shattered Afghan economy by creating investment opportunities, employment, and a whole new class of Afghan elites known as the "9/11 millionaires" (Wilkie, 2021). Most millionaires in this class started as interpreters to foreign troops before making their fortunes as government contractors. Several of these millionaires occupied important government positions, and some became successful entrepreneurs. While there is no single number on the amount of direct spending by the U.S. and its allies, it is generally understood that the U.S. spent more than \$2 trillion dollar during the course of two decades in Afghanistan (Neta C. Crawford, 2021). This amount contains mostly military spending but also development aid provided by the U.S. and its allies, mainly the OECD donors, including the UK, Germany, Nordic countries, Canada, and Switzerland (Bak & Kukutschka, 2019). For instance, Japan provided some \$6.9 billion to support the stabilization and reconstruction

efforts (Nippon, 2021). Regional countries have also played a role. India provided more than \$3 billion.

However, despite the huge amount of development aid coming into Afghanistan, the country remains one of the poorest in the world. According to the Asian Development Bank, almost half the population (49.4 percent) live below the national poverty line and more than a third (35.4 percent) of those employed. Where did all the aid go to? Experts point out to aid ineffectiveness of development attempts in Afghanistan during the past twenty years. Lack of a coherent nation-building plan on the part of the U.S. which defined the overall approach of donor community including EU and the UK, has been singled out as an important policy decision. One day after the Taliban takeover on August 15, President Biden stated that his country's mission in Afghanistan was "never supposed to have been nation-building" (The Whitehouse, 2021). "It was never supposed to be creating a unified, centralized democracy." Two days later, in an interview, he confessed that nation-building in Afghanistan never made sense to him (Kessler, 2021). Successive American Presidents since George Bush alluded to the same thing that the U.S. was not in Afghanistan for nation-building and hence not stuck with the burden thereof. Nonetheless, the U.S. was all into nation-building. Some, including Keith Richburg, believes at least it was something between– "a half-in, half-out approach." He concludes that "America tried nation-building in Afghanistan – but never committed to it" (Richburg, 2021). Other countries, including the U.K., mostly followed the U.S.

Regardless of the debate over the early intentions, Afghanistan was soon flooded with huge sums of money in very little time that the Afghan economy could not easily (?) absorb. The aid was mostly tied [tight] to the broader political stabilization and military objectives. For instance, the aid provided by the U.K. before the fall of Kabul was conditioned to progress in line with peace talks with the Taliban and the promotion of democratic values, including human rights and granting women theirs (Loft & Mills, 2021). Through a series of conferences on Afghanistan, donor countries pledged development aid in supporting the Afghan government. At the Brussels Conference in 2016, donors committed to \$3.8 billion annually in aid to the country. Two years later, at the Geneva conference, the amount was increased to \$15 billion between 2018 and 2020 ("Doing Business 2019," 2019). Even a few months before the collapse, donor countries renewed their pledges at the "2020 Afghanistan Conference" to a tune of \$3.3 billion annually (2020 Afghanistan Conference, 2020 n.d.). Some \$150 billion the Washington spent on reconstruction, aid programmes, and security forces in Afghanistan is more than in any country – surpassing the total expenditure of the U.S. under Marshal Plan for the recovery of Western Europe after World War II (Withlock, 2019). Even so, observers agree that massive influxes of money tied to international efforts led to corruption (Murtazashvili, 2015). With the international community turning a blind eye to the abuse and waste of aid money in favor of broader political objectives and stabilization, corruption undermined the reconstruction efforts. But as Conner explains, the paradox with development aid in Afghanistan was that it was there to support the government in improving governance, the rule of law and fund infrastructure programmes, its very presence, he claims, fueled corruption which, in turn, undermined the stated recovery goals (RAF, 2012b).

In addition to a relentless insurgency in the past two decades, endemic corruption in Afghanistan was considered a bane undermining the reconstruction efforts. For most of the time, Afghanistan remained at the bottom of Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) as one of the top most corrupt countries in the world. In 2005 when for the first time Afghanistan was included in the index, the country ranked 117 out of 158 countries and territories. Ironically, the country took a dive from 2008 onwards, at the time when more troops and thus development aid committed to Afghanistan. Except in the 2015, 2016 and 2020 ranking that just managed to stay below 170 ranking, for the rest of the years it remained in the top most corrupt category ([Transparency International, 2022](#)). Another survey in 2016 finds that citizens paid up to \$3 billion in bribe to access basic public services such as healthcare, justice and education at the time when the country's entire security budget worked out a little more than \$5 billion (IWA, 2018). In addition to petty corruption, embezzlement and nepotism, Transparency International observed grand and political corruption was a much serious problem. This type of corruption mostly involved warlords that were bankrolled by NATO as an anti-Taliban counter force to keep the group in check. This investment did not return any profits as many of the warlords were among the first group of people to exit the country. They received special privileges in the Afghan government (Bak, 2019b). Corruption has played a part in the house-of-card-style collapse of the Afghan government. As I discussed elsewhere explaining, "How Corruption Played a Role in the Demise of Afghan Government", the growing distance between public and government due of the widespread corruption undermined government legitimacy that the Taliban capitalized in the latter days of the republic ([Azizi, 2021](#)). Not surprisingly, in June 2020, John Sopko head of Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) who is looking into complaints of fraud and misuse of U.S. spending in Afghanistan warned that corruption was "the most insidious threat" facing the Afghan government (Sopko, 2020).

Aid and the alarming humanitarian situation

The hurried U.S. decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan coupled with the even hastier collapse of the Afghan government on August 15 2021, resulted in a sharp economic decline. A recent U.N. report about Afghanistan indicates that the August 2021 economic shock lost the country \$5 billion in illicit economy which had taken almost a decade to add ("One Year in Review: Afghanistan Since August 2021: A Socio-Economic Snapshot," 2022). The majority of donor programmes stopped shortly afterwards which meant no more salaries for teachers and other public sector employees that were funded by donor programmes such as one under the management of The World Bank – The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). In addition, Afghanistan is under sanctions from the U.S. and international community, preventing the central bank to access its reserves held in the U.S. and other countries amounting to some \$10 billions. In February 2022, President Biden ordered the splitting of the \$7 billion currently held by the Federal Reserves of New York, between the families of 9/11 victims and the other half for what the order intended to "*provide a path for the funds to reach the people of Afghanistan*" under humanitarian action ([Aljazeera, 2022](#)).

In September, the administration moved to create a trust for the \$3.5 billion from the reserve money based out of Switzerland ([Savage, 2022](#)).

Afghanistan's economic meltdown explains a lot about the status of the economy during the past two decades – an aid-dependent economy. Most of the Afghan government's budget came from donor fundings, including development and operational spending. Some 75 percent of government income depended on the flow of foreign aid which accounted for some 40 percent of the GDP ([Cordesman, 2022](#)). In addition, many donor-funded programmes were operating independent of the national budget that has remained a point of policy disagreement between the Afghan government and its international donors until the end. Since August 2021, most developed countries have frozen their direct assistance to a Taliban control Afghanistan. Many who benefited from the donor funded projects are left on their own. Even before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan suffered from the adverse impact of covid-19 and severe drought, which compelled the Afghan government in mid-2021 to announce an emergency to address the problem ([OCHA, 2022](#)). More than a year after the collapse, Afghanistan is plunged into a humanitarian crisis that the International Rescue Committee has warned will kill more people than in the past 20 years of war (IRC, 2022). In September 2021, UNICEF chief had warned that as many [much] as 1 million children in Afghanistan could suffer from acute malnutrition this year, leading to a death in 'most perilous hour' (Santora et al., 2021). On top of the man-made disasters, Afghanistan was not even spared by nature. In 2020, a devastating earthquake killed more than 1000 people and injuring 3000 leaving thousands of houses destroyed ([Menon, 2022](#)). The latest political change in Afghanistan has exposed the failure of developing a political system in an aid-dependent environment. It raises more questions than answers. On its own foreign aid could help achieve development goals, however, experts criticize its lax oversight or lack of it which they believe resulted in widespread corruption. Nonetheless, the extent of current humanitarian crisis is multi-dimensional. On top of an endemic corruption problem, covid-19 and the four decades of instability have multiplied the problem by many folds.

To avert a total collapse, the international community stepped up to provide direct aid to the people of Afghanistan. On top of sanctions placed on the Taliban leaders, there are huge political gaps between the group and international community. The latter responded with drastically reducing aid and limiting it to only the humanitarian kind which is administered through aid agencies - bypassing the de facto regime in Kabul. Most of the donor countries conditioned any further engagement with the regime on respect to human rights, freedom of women and creating a media friendly environment. The European Union based any future engagement with the group on five pillars, of which one specifically requires the Taliban to commit to provide free access to humanitarian aid and extend support in delivery and distribution ([Szucs, 2021](#)). Since August last year, the U.S. has provided more than 1 billion in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. According to the USAID, with an additional \$327 million, the US remains the largest donor. In its September 2022 press release the agency urged other donors to keep its pledges (USAID, 2022). The top U.S. aid agency was pointing out to the March 2022, donor pledge conference on Afghanistan that was led by the U.N. and co-hosted by the governments of the UK, Germany and Qatar ([UN-OCHA, 2022](#)). The high-level pledging event was first of its kind after the collapse of the former republic. More

than forty countries and institutions pledged \$2.4 billion in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, with the U.K. pledging \$375 million – second biggest donor after the U.S. Nonetheless the total pledged amount falls short of its intended goal of \$4.4 billion that the U.N. hoped to raise. Other sources of aid come from individual initiatives by state and institutions. For instant, Germany has announced provision of €600 million for humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan inside and in the neighboring countries (FFO, 2021). In October 2021, the E.U. also announced a support package for the Afghan people worth €1 billion (European Commission, 2021). Overall, the amount of assistance has drastically reduced comparing with the pre-2021 when it was not restricted to only humanitarian aid.

The future of aid in Afghanistan

Development experts battle the question of foreign aid effectiveness in economic growth. The proponents of foreign aid based their position on the findings of Craig Burnside and David Dollar (Dollar & Burnside, 2000). As William Easterly (2003) demonstrates, Burnside and Dollar argue that foreign is effective and contributes to growth when fiscal policies are good (Easterly, 2003). Easterly summarized their findings about foreign aid and economic growth in the following words: "We find that aid has a positive impact on growth in developing countries with good fiscal, monetary, and trade policies but has little effect in the presence of poor policies." Their finding, based on data about the developing economies collected by the World Bank, has been cited among academic circles and influenced policy decisions on foreign aid. On the other hand, critics take a more precocious stand and consider developing countries' history, culture, and various institutions. Instead, scholars on this camp advise more accountability and effectiveness on the part of aid agencies (Easterly, 2003: p-40). In Afghanistan, there has been little emphasis on the effectiveness and accountability of aid agencies.

With the current arrangements of humanitarian aid being channeled through UN aid agencies, it is essential to ensure transparency. Afghanistan is prone to corruption risk in the aid sector. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Afghan government and the international donor community developed an effective system for "controlling the flow of aid money, countering waste and corruption, and reporting on the overall effectiveness of aid" (Cordesman, 2022b). Similarly, an assessment by Transparency International of corruption risk in the humanitarian sector concluded that corruption risk is hampering humanitarian aid from getting where it needs to go (Transparency International, 2017). It called on the Afghan government and the international community to strengthen transparency and accountability in humanitarian aid to ensure a fair, rapid, and corruption-free sector. However, little to no evidence suggests that this recommendation was considered.

Furthermore, it is unclear how the Taliban will attempt to divert humanitarian assistance away from those who need it most. Mark Bowden, who was humanitarian aid coordinator for Afghanistan (2012-2017), and Florian Weigand, a research associate at LSE, add that foreign humanitarian aid can become a subject of Taliban's internal "politics and power dynamics,

including rent-seeking," (Bowden, Weigand, 2021). According to reports by a local newspaper, the Taliban clashes with locals over the distribution of aid, leaving four people injured ("Four Injured Over Distribution of Humanitarian Aid," 2022). A month before the event, locals reported the Taliban allocating humanitarian aid to their [food] soldiers and supporters in the underdeveloped Ghor province (Etilatroz, 2022). This indicates the vulnerability of aid to intervention from the Taliban group, which the aid agencies want to see the last thing dealing with. On the other hand, it is an indication of aid mismanagement and corruption. In the past, the Afghan government frequently benefited from corruption.

Summary

During the last two decades, Afghanistan has largely depended on aid to fund its development program and pay the salaries of doctors, nurses, and teachers, ensuring public service provision. The country has improved on certain indicators, including healthcare, education, and an increase in life expectancy. However, the vast sums of aid that flooded the country did not result in a sustainable economy that will gradually help reduce poverty. On the other hand, due to a lack of proper oversight mechanisms, widespread corruption took hold of the country, with [money] funding siphoned from public projects. Corruption also widened the gap between the public and the government, making the Taliban's violent government takeover easier. The donor community's sudden cutting of funds has plunged the country into a humanitarian crisis. [Even though] Some aid is restricted to only [for] humanitarian purposes [is coming through]. Since August 2021, the UN and other aid agencies have been processing most of the funds and assisting the people on the ground. There is a need for increased transparency and accountability regarding aid distribution. The last two decades of aid delivery in Afghanistan demands more accountability and transparency.

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