

The (re-)construction of Afghanistan – Suggestions for a conditionality policy

With the implementation of the Petersberg agreement having started (transfer of power to the interim authority on 22 December 2001), the focus of the international community is now shifting to the provision of assistance for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The present situation constitutes a unique window of opportunity to turn – with international assistance – this "failed state" into a viable one based on the rule of law, fundamental human rights and a process of sustainable human development.

For the first time in many years,

- a central authority is in power in Kabul which is backed by the international community and which constitutes an acceptable counterpart for development cooperation
- the international community has expressed its commitment to deliver not only humanitarian and emergency aid but also financial and technical assistance for the reconstruction (or perhaps rather construction) of Afghanistan. Assistance institutions seem to recognise the scope of assistance required.

While international forces are to ensure the security in Kabul, at local levels development assistance should be of particular importance for ensuring security, development opportunities and confidence in the political process. External assistance could play a key role not only for the development of the country but also for the creation of allegiances towards state institutions and the public administration.

The challenge, however, is huge:

- Large amounts of money and other resources will need to be managed. Not only monitoring, accounting and auditing mechanisms will need to be established but also participatory approaches facilitating control by beneficiaries to avoid mismanagement and corruption.
- Many development and aid organisations – non-governmental and official, local, bilateral and international, financial and technical, humanitarian and development – will be involved. Few of them have experience in working in Afghanistan. All of them will agree to the need for coordination but none will want to be coordinated by others. A clear cut and straight forward strategy should therefore be adopted as a framework within which all development organisations should operate.
- The political, military and development agenda of the international community will need to be linked up to reinforce – rather than (as happened in the past) counteract – each other.
- People in Afghanistan have been alienated from state institutions and public administration. It is not sufficient to establish a central government in Kabul, but at the same time, the state and its administration need to be constructed bottom up. It may be advisable to base the (re-)construction effort at the level of districts (there are some 320 of them). While in the context of Afghan social organisation it is difficult to speak of specific village communities, and while provinces are somewhat abstract and heterogenous structures, the "district" appears to be a recognised concept. Moreover, from a development assistance perspective, districts are manageable units.
- The main risk, however, not only to the (re-)construction of the country but also to the military and political process, is that of renewed infighting between leaders and their factions, and the return of the warlord culture of the early 1990s. Agreements have been broken before in Afghanistan. Several personalities who have ruined the country and taken the people of Afghanistan hostage previously are still very influential or are back in power. For them international assistance will be regarded as an opportunity to strengthen their power base.

Historically, central governments in Kabul have hardly seen their role as one of distributing resources to develop the regions within Afghanistan, but to ensure their own survival against the regions and factions. It has been stated that the principle of governance in Afghanistan since its creation has been that rulers in Kabul use external resources to secure allegiances at local levels and to manipulate social segmentation.

In the present context, the international community providing external resources could make use of this principle in a positive way, that is, to "manipulate" the development and (re-)construction process by linking assistance to specific conditions. In other words: In order to counter the above risks and make use of the present opportunities, the international community should agree upon and adhere to a clear-cut conditionality policy when providing development assistance to Afghanistan.

Such a conditionality policy could contain the following elements:

- International development organisations – in cooperation with the interim authority – should elaborate and agree upon conditions (including verifiable criteria) which need to be met before development assistance is provided to a specific area. These conditions should relate, for example, to gender, human rights, drug control, transparency and accountability, and compliance with the political and military process. They should reflect the most essential priorities and be clear and transparent to all stakeholders. Too many conditions and criteria would not be manageable.
- Development assistance should only be provided to provinces if there is an explicit commitment by the provincial leadership towards these conditions.
- Within these provinces, development assistance should only be provided to districts if the conditions are actually met. This focus would strengthen the district as the administrative entity and framework of reference (as opposed to specific leaders or factions or "tribe"). A differentiation of beneficiaries within districts would not be workable as this would be impossible to monitor.
- A priori, no development assistance may be provided to districts which do not comply with the agreed upon conditions.
- However, in cases where obstacles to development assistance cannot be overcome without assistance, targeted help to address these specific issues could be made available on the condition that there is an expressed commitment by the administrative or political leadership of the district.
- Compliance should be monitored by an assistance coordinating mechanism under the leadership of an organisation which has experience and a presence in Afghanistan, which can ensure interaction with the political and military process and which has experience with aid coordination. The United Nations Development Programme may be the most appropriate organisation for this purpose.
- A distinction needs to be made between humanitarian aid aimed at meeting emergency needs on the one hand, and financial and technical development assistance aimed at the (re-)construction of Afghanistan. The conditionality policy should only apply to the latter.

There is some experience in Afghanistan with conditionality, namely with regard to drug control following the publication of the first UNDCP survey in 1994. The survey showed not only for the first time the scope of narcotics production in Afghanistan but it also became obvious that some of the regions which benefitted most from international aid and some of the local leaders who served as the United Nations as key interlocutors in the political process were at the same time major beneficiaries of the drug business. Not poverty but the attitude of the local leadership was the main factor favouring opium poppy cultivation. In August 1994, UN agencies working in Afghanistan therefore agreed on a conditionality policy which resulted in the withdrawal of assistance from provinces such as Helmand and certain districts in Nangarhar. In Nangarhar, the local authorities subsequently destroyed some of the poppy fields to demonstrate their commitment. Given the circumstances in Afghanistan at that time and the following take-over of the main poppy growing provinces by the Taliban this policy was never applied on a wider scale. The situation has changed and a new window of opportunity is now open.

One could argue that it is difficult to establish a common framework for development assistance on the basis of a "negative" conditionality policy which may appear to punish people for the failures of the leadership of their district or province. However, all the development assistance which is presently being committed will not be sufficient to meet the needs of the 320 or so districts in Afghanistan. Priorities will need to be set when allocating assistance. Why not focus support on those areas and interlocutors meeting basic conditions and thus offering the best prospects for sustainable human development? Positive conditionality.

Alexander Seger

Bonn, 8 January 2002