



Afghan voices on aid and conditionality

Discussion note
October 2021

Tonje M. Viken (Conow) and Ian Kaplan (NAC)

With contributions from Mustafa Himmati, Nargis Mohammadi, Qudratullah Rajavi, and Hashim Rawab



Content

1. Methodology	4
2. What does conditionality mean for Afghanistan?	5
3. The Afghan Partnership Framework Agreement (APF)	7
4. Developments within the Taliban	7
5. Negotiating with the Taliban	9
6. Some international perspectives on conditionality	10
7. Some Afghan perspectives on conditionality	12
8. Conclusion	18
<i>References</i>	21

The Afghanistan committee has been working for a peaceful Afghanistan through 40 years. Through our projects, we support the Afghan people in the development of a democratic and equal society without poverty.

CONOW is a centre for international relations. We assist our clients with knowledge and advice on country situations, government relations, social responsibility, corporate communications, security and emergency preparedness.

Acknowledgements

This report was commissioned by the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC). It does not represent the views of the NAC, and any omissions or errors are the authors' own.

Invaluable guidance and input was provided by Gry Synnevåg and Terje Watterdal, Chair of the Board and Country Director respectively.

Published by: The Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC)

Address: Kolstadgata 1, 0652 Oslo

Phone: (+47) 22 98 93 15

Email: info@afghanistan.no

Read more at: www.afghanistan.no

Photos: All photos are taken by NAC employees, members, and partners

Copyright © Norwegian Afghanistan Committee



Foreword

This report was commissioned of Conow by the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee in the spring of 2021 with the purpose of harvesting Afghan perspectives on a range of issues in order to revisit the foundation for NAC policy and advocacy. At the time, large swaths of the country were under Taliban control, and the future seemed uncertain.

On 12 August 2021, Taliban took Kabul, leading to a dramatic evacuation of internationals from Afghanistan. This creates enormous challenges for Afghans and international aid actors in the country. There is an on-going debate on how to deal with the Taliban and what conditions should be imposed on the regime. This is our contribution to bringing Afghan perspectives into the current debate.

While the political leadership in Afghanistan has changed, the needs and challenges that the Afghan people grapple with every day remain very much the same. The Sustainable Development Goals and Leave No-One Behind Agenda commits the international community to a sustained effort to ensure that the right to health, education and stable institutions are met.

We are immensely grateful to NAC's staff, who have committed themselves to all stages of this project from planning, developing interview guides and conducting interviews on the ground. We would also like to thank the Afghan citizens and international experts who have taken the time to be interviewed or participated in workshops for the purpose of this study.

Liv Kjølseth
Secretary General, Norwegian Afghanistan Committee

Afghan voices on aid and conditionality

On 12 August 2021, the Taliban retook Kabul city and with that toppled the Ghani government. These events call into question the notion of partnership with the Afghan state and the nature of aid in the coming months and years. International donors will have to decide how and to what extent they will engage in dialogue with – let alone recognize – the new Taliban-led government. Questions include who will represent Afghanistan in the UN, how to channel aid, and on what conditions? Similarly, international NGOs working in the country will have to make difficult choices regarding program design and red lines for working in the context of a Taliban-led government in order to stand by their beneficiaries.

In its most basic sense, the concept of conditionality refers to the conditions for beneficiaries that are placed by donors, multilateral organizations such as the UN and World Bank, and NGOs on humanitarian aid and development support. Conditionality can be attached to a number of issues ranging from corruption, human rights, anti-terror measures, holding of elections, inclusive government, etc.

The main goal of this report has been to draw on learning from NAC programming and local connections to make informed policy and advocacy messages targeting Norwegian policy makers and the wider public. Organizations such as the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC), with a long-standing presence in the country, still believe it likely they will be able to negotiate their continued operations with the Taliban. However, recent events highlight how difficult an endeavour this may be. It is vital to hold the Taliban accountable to their word and ensure the safety of national NGO staff as well as that of NGO beneficiaries and vulnerable groups in the population at large. That being said, there are organizations such as NAC, which have proven their capacity to operate in extremely difficult circumstances, regardless of which group is in power in Afghanistan. NAC, for example, has been able to deliver meaningful assistance to its beneficiaries under various regimes, including the Taliban, since 1980, conducting both humanitarian aid and longer-term development work. Until otherwise proven, NAC's point of departure is that the organization will be able to continue its work with and for Afghans in order to alleviate poverty. While it may be necessary to increase the humanitarian aspect of NAC's work, the organization strongly believes that pivoting entirely into humanitarian assistance is not a sustainable approach in the long run.

Subject to local variation, there seem to be some gaps between the public statements made by the Taliban, and what is being done on the ground. While there has been a continuous dialogue with the Taliban for years, we note that there has been little in the way of frank discussion among various aid actors and with donor governments on the challenges and dilemmas that this entails. This debate is no longer possible to avoid, and politicians and NGOs are now discussing possible red lines for both donor states and organizations that operate in the country. This discussion note is intended to feed into that debate.

1. Methodology

The report is result of a collaborative project with shared responsibility between an Afghan project manager and an external consultant. This collaboration has been fruitful, and discussions with NAC staff proved valuable in triangulating the analysis in the early stages of the project. With the Taliban takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021, the project had to be redefined both in terms of outputs and selection and analysis of material. In addition, the ability of NAC staff to take on their intended roles in the project was severely restricted. However, the voices raised in this discussion note represent the view of key stakeholders.

The following is based on semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and findings from interviews with NAC women's Self-Help Groups. In addition, seven semi-structured interviews have been conducted with a selection of international actors with unique knowledge of the country. It should be noted that the interviews who informed this discussion note on conditionalities were made long before the impact of the World Bank halting all financial support for key education and

health programmes, and the blockade of access for the Afghan National Bank to its assets abroad. The Afghan interviewees were already living under varying degrees of Taliban control, and some of the interviews take into account the possibility of a Taliban takeover. Some of the answers have been provided to questions that are no longer pertinent. It is also likely that answers would have been different if one had foreseen a full Taliban takeover. Nevertheless, there is learning to be had in the material.

A few recent background reports and related literature are drawn upon in order to deepen and triangulate the analysis and understanding of the collected material.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH AFGHAN NATIONALS

23 semi-structured interviews were conducted by NAC staff in July and August 2021. The purpose of the interviews has been to collect a range of views of a cross section of Afghans in positions of formal and informal power at national, provincial and district levels. Care has been taken to ensure representation of women and minorities. The selected sources are actors who are relevant in an Afghan context but are not from amongst the actors that are closely linked to the international community. Interview guides were developed by NAC staff in close collaboration with an external consultant in June 2021. Extensive interview notes were provided to the external consultant in English and analysed with Dedoose. The external consultant has drafted this discussion note in close collaboration with her Afghan counterparts.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

Seven semi-structured interviews have been conducted with relevant actors. They have been selected by NAC on the basis of the nature and extent of their experience from working in Afghanistan. The latter have been conducted under Chatham rules, and the interviewees will be lumped together in the category of “experts”. Semi-structured interviews were made based on tailored interview guides developed by the consultant. Interviews were conducted in the period between June-August 2021.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND WOMEN'S SELF-HELP GROUPS

Three focus group discussions were held in Badakhshan, and Ghazni provinces in July 2021 with a maximum of 15 participants in each. The selected participants were community leaders, Community Development Council Cluster Heads, Community Development Council heads/members, community elders and influential people at provincial level in Afghanistan. Focus group discussions were conducted using Community-Based Systems Dynamics (CBSD).

This discussion note also draws on findings from a series of interviews with women's Self-Help Group members conducted by NAC staff between 2017 and 2021. NAC's women's Self-Help Groups are community-based groups, organized in rural and hard-to-reach areas of Afghanistan to promote women's social, educational, and economic empowerment.

Quotes have been lightly edited for readability, and some basic grammar mistakes have been corrected.

2. What does conditionality mean for Afghanistan?

Conditionality can be attached to a number of issues ranging from corruption, human rights, anti-terror measures, holding of elections, inclusive government, etc. In our interviews, focus has been on human rights, women's rights, and anti-corruption, as these have been the conditions embedded in the Framework Partnership Agreement that has formed the basis of international cooperation with Afghanistan to date.

The practice of making aid and other support conditional is certainly not new globally, or to Afghanistan in particular. However, discussions about conditionality in relation to Afghanistan have profound urgency given that even when there were relatively unimpeded flows of aid, prior to the latest change in government, the country has been struggling under a series of compound humanitarian crises.

It is highly likely that the recent action of many donors to pause financial support to Afghanistan in response to the Taliban's takeover will cause the overall humanitarian crisis in the country to worsen dramatically. This situation poses a set of existential questions for humanitarian and development actors in terms of what conditions to set on humanitarian aid and other support for Afghanistan, how to set such conditions and how to enforce them with a new Taliban-led government that has not yet

clearly established its own governance rules and structures and which, in any case, is already widely considered as being repressive and in violation of human rights.

Should, for instance, programs be implemented only where female staff are able to come to work, and women can be beneficiaries? Could red lines be applied strictly locally based on dialogue with local power holders, or should all projects in the entire country be halted if there are undue restrictions in some regions? Should aid organizations generally, and NAC specifically, seek to maximize the window of opportunity allowed by women's ability to work in health and education, or immediately start pressing for female participation in other sectors as well?

"An explicit choice might be one of the following:

- to continue extending development assistance, even if that means 'complicity' with violations of human rights or even contributing to such violations. This would mean that the objectives pursued by the giving of development assistance are rated higher than the struggle for human rights;
- to state explicit conditions in the field of human rights, even if this means violating the sovereignty of the receiving country. It would be wise to reach agreement beforehand with other donor-countries, in order to avoid the danger of being put in a position of political isolation, as happened to the Netherlands in the case of Indonesia" Beahr (1997:374).

The price for humanitarian and development actors (beyond the financial costs) of averting, at least in the short-term, an even more disastrous humanitarian crisis than is currently faced in Afghanistan may indeed be complicity with or contribution to violations of human rights. This is arguably a price worth paying, but a painful and unpalatable one.

Then there is the question of basic human rights. This is not a question of two women for whom you can protest and demonstrate. We are talking about 50 percent of the population. This is something we have been talking about for ages. And you are heading towards a defeat of this magnitude. It is very hard to swallow that we should send this country back to an age the rest of us have left behind.

You can't stick to those principles [...] If you stay on the high ground, then stay on it, but they are not practical. The most practical is to ensure that the networks and capacity built on the ground remain as shock proof as possible.

For donors, it is likely that public perception in their home countries will play an outsized role in determining their approach to conditionality of aid for Afghanistan. This is a global phenomenon as Dasandi, et al (2021:2) note, "Concerns that reports of rights violations in recipient states negatively impact public support for aid have led donors to demonstrate increased willingness to suspend aid, particularly general budget support (GBS) – to states seen to be violating human rights..."

Although there is a lot of focus now on big donors and multilateral organizations and their approaches to conditionality, the roles of other development actors in these discussions, NGOs in particular, are also important. Organizations, such as the NAC, who work at sub-national levels in Afghanistan - in provinces, districts, and communities, will also be determining their conditionality. This represents a different type of localized engagement, including with Taliban leaders at local levels, than what happens at national and international levels. Although no less challenging, this local level engagement around humanitarian aid and development support provides, to a certain extent, opportunities for NGOs and local Taliban and other local governance actors to develop a mutual approach to conditionality and accountability that would, arguably, be more difficult to achieve at national and international levels where the issues are more abstract and disconnections between donors and beneficiaries greater.

NAC's experience, for example, of working effectively to provide support to communities in areas of Afghanistan that have long been under Taliban, or mixed control, speaks to the opportunities here. This is also backed from NGO experiences in other global humanitarian and development contexts.

3. The Afghan Partnership Framework Agreement (APF)

Relations between the fallen government in Afghanistan and the international community have been based on the Afghan Partnership Framework Agreement (APF). The future of the APF is unclear – most likely it will be set aside. However, any sort of future compact with Afghanistan should be better contextualized. Therefore, a few paragraphs on the APF are in order.

The document outlines outcomes and actions with targets to be reached each year between 2021 and 2024. The framework is based on the principles of country ownership, a focus on results, inclusive partnerships, and transparency and accountability to citizens. Conditionality is a core element.

In order to ensure transparency, the Government and its international parties are to undertake regular aid portfolio reviews. The review process will inform international partners' decisions regarding the renewal, level, and modality of aid support.

In a critique of the APF, McKechnie and Bowden described the conditionality-driven approach of the APF as “one-sided” and point out that “The long history of aid shows that donor-driven conditionality does not work, but that mutual accountability around country-specific commitments with ownership can” (2020: 6).

The authors point out that a partnership agreement “requires commitments from all parties, not only the host government”. Donors are, however, unlikely to commit to mutuality on this level with a Taliban-led government that they may not even recognize. The Taliban, on their side, may not support certain parts of the APF, particularly its approach to democratic legitimization of government, human rights and gender equality.

The partnership agreement is a farce. It is to protect the international community. All the conditionality is placed on the Afghans [...] The reason for all those imperatives is that there are home constituencies to cater to.

The APF is about meeting the criteria for IMF funding and make sure that the country remains qualified for IMF programmes. It is about measuring performance. It has nothing to do with partnership.

4. Developments within the Taliban

There is an on-going discussion on if, and to what extent, the Taliban has changed since the instalment of the previous government in 2001. One international expert describes two generations within the Taliban; an old guard which is more prone to moderacy and toleration and a new more hard-line guard. Organizationally, the Taliban has evolved from an insurgent group with “largely ad hoc” policies to a hierarchy with a “relatively uniform set of structures and clear roles”, albeit with significant variations on the ground (Jackson and Amiri, 2019: 4). In addition, a new generation of Talibs turns out to be savvy operators of social media.

“Taliban is not a cohesive group. [There is] political opportunism vs. Wahhabism and all kinds of variants in between.”

A 2018 report based on interviews with 162 Taliban and government figures and aid workers in 20 districts in seven provinces indicates that the surprisingly swift take-over by the Taliban of a number of strategic cities and areas has been preceded by the establishment of a “sophisticated system of parallel governance across Afghanistan”. A process of formalizing governance structures in the form of commissions for military, political, health, education and NGOs and the private sector started already in 2009 (Bowden and Siddiqi, 2020:10). The shadow government has aimed to discredit the previous government and provide an effective alternative system (Bazai, 2019: 344).

A new Taliban leadership under Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansur from 2010 had shifted from attacking foreign NGO operations to welcoming humanitarian workers and addressing issues such as protecting the civilian status of health workers and teachers. Pivoting from attacks to co-optation of international aid, the Taliban has also engaged in regular dialogue with the UN Humanitarian Coordinator and a number of international humanitarian organizations (Bowden and Siddiqi, 2020: 10). By 2011, the Taliban leadership had signed agreements with at least 26 aid organizations and elaborated a clear central policy for negotiating with NGOs” (Jackson, 2018: 8). The Taliban political commission's role was

enhanced by the establishment of an office in Doha in 2012, and a regular dialogue was established with the UN (Bowden and Siddiqi, 2020: 10). While unaccepting of foreign military forces on the ground, the Taliban has come to rely on aid agencies and their relationships with such agencies in order to enhance their international image and internal support. This provides international aid organizations with some extent of leverage that has been largely underutilized (Jackson and Amiri, 2019: 4).

Antonio Guistozzi points out that, "It is not clear how far back the Taliban will try to turn the clock". As they took over new territories, the following rules applied: "girls' education only in primary school, sanitised curriculums, women employed only in essential services such as education and health, no mixing of genders, a ban on women leaving home alone, enforcement of the burqa, no TV, no music, compulsory attendance at Mosques and so on" (2021). It is, however, likely that the new Taliban-led government will be pragmatic. They will also have to deal with a different Afghanistan than when they were previously in power, with an emerging generation of youth that was born and raised under a different regime. Although corrupt and malfunctioning, it has provided a modicum of freedom enjoyed by both women and men. The narrative of women's rights being a concern limited to Afghanistan's cities and urban elites is not substantiated by recent research (van Bijlert, 2021). However, the concept of what the concept of 'women's rights' constitutes needs to be clarified.

The extent of popular support for the Taliban is difficult to evaluate. According to some, the Taliban's reputation for being non-corrupt as well as its efficient parallel justice system makes the population sympathetic to the movement. However, this is not corroborated by our interviewees, who largely view the Taliban with fear and scepticism. While there are indications that the Taliban has softened its stance on women's rights, this is perceived by many as lip service only.

People are always aware and as you know that the districts are being occupied by Taliban nowadays. Nowadays the Taliban [make] local residents to provide them with food, clothes, and fuel for their motorcycles in the areas they control. The families have to pay 200 Afghanis every three days or provide food for Taliban where the Taliban have rule. People are living in a bad condition, they voted for this president [Ghani] but the president brought Afghanistan into this situation. I believe all people never wish to have this [now the previous] government nor the Taliban.

As we witness, the Taliban don't have respect for human rights and women rights, right to education and rights to live; the Taliban killed many civilians in Malistan [district in Ghazni province] and Ghazni City. Now, in Ghazni City most of the girls' and mixed schools are closed [...] this shows that their behaviour and thoughts have not been changed.

The Taliban are near us. We are under fire. And our hope is taken away from life. In such circumstances, schools have started, and a small number of students are coming to school with great fear. Some families do not send their children to school because they are afraid that their children will be harmed.

Girls will drop out of school, like in Kunduz province where girls have been barred from school. Young boys leave the country and immigrate to Turkey, Iran, and other countries. For example, most people are leaving our area. Talking about myself, if someone is willing to buy our home appliances, I am willing to sell at a very cheap price and move my family from this place to another place.

At that time [during the previous period of Taliban rule], we were doing silk work. I remember [that time] well, I was 11 or 13 years old, and I used to sew hijabs and sell them to provide for my family. We prepared food and we were away from school. And I think my children are going to have the same bad days. The Taliban are committing a lot of violence against the people. Men must have beards and women must not leave the house without a man to accompany her. [...] The Taliban recently took control of our area. And they started a house-to-house search, and they searched the house of the head of

the council and Shafi'i commander and others. If they had found the mentioned people, Taliban would have killed them for cooperating with the government. This has created fear in the hearts of the people. A large number of people in the area sell their property at a very cheap price. Most of the time, no one can be found to buy the property. People abandon their homes only with the necessary clothes and property to escape to a safer area.

5. Negotiating with the Taliban

Discussions between NGOs and the Taliban have generally taken place at community or district level with local community leadership as mediators. As the Taliban has gradually extended its control, relations with NGOs have deepened – although with local variations and differing levels of respect for the independence and neutrality of humanitarian activities. The Taliban has sought to present themselves as both controlling and directing resources, vetting activities and assuming a role as monitors to ensure that services are aligned with their interpretation of Islamic teachings (Bowden and Siddiqi, 2020: 10-11).

While NGOs have had some leverage in terms of their long-standing relationships with communities, Jackson and Amiri point out that they have not “always been able to use this leverage as strategically as they might have done”. Reasons are “fear for being ‘caught out’ for talking to the Taliban, competition for funding and distrust across the aid community [...]. This hampered information sharing and collective action, which could have strengthened their influence on Taliban policy” (Jackson and Amiri, 2019: 4). “Previous experience with Taliban has indicated that where local communities themselves make demands, for instance when it comes to allowing girls to continue in school, gains can be made (Jackson, 2018: 26.)

Give the message of being neutral and behave in a neutral way. Basically, don't assume if the Taliban have taken over that you can't operate. Keep a low profile, wait, and see. Most have experienced work with Taliban last time around. Having had local people negotiating on their behalf sometimes. There are one or two areas where we are getting reports of atrocities against Afghan women. Forced marriage. If that is going on, they have to be very careful about staying put. Taliban are announcing publicly that they will not attack international NGOs, but you have to take that with a pinch of salt. I think we have to see what they find. But negotiating and talking to the Taliban is just as possible as it ever used to be.

6. Some international perspectives on conditionality

The seven experts interviewed have differing views on conditionality. Civil society representatives call for a coordinated donor approach to what the conditions should be. Likewise, INGOs working in Afghanistan should work out their red lines. There is a clear perception that while the APF conditions aid, conditionality is mainly on paper, and that the various donors have attuned their application of conditions to meet other political goals. Criticism is directed at the APF for putting all the conditions on the Afghan government and none of the donors. It is also pointed out that donors have not been consistent in applying conditionality. There is reason for concern that donors will pursue opportunistic goals and make political decisions on how to repackage aid in a way that is perceived by home constituents as aligned with Western values.

I think there has to be donor coordination and collaboration on a whole range of issues from red lines to conditionality. Donors have had enough of what they saw as a lack of progress by the [Ghani] government and by the corruption.

It would be a major change if the donors would put out red lines and abide by them. So far, they have not done that.

From my perspective, [conditionality] is needed. There are clear demands to take strict anti-corruption measures. That the continuation of international aid is conditioned on certain principles is also an indication to the Taliban not to compromise on these principles and standards in reaching a settlement.

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONDITIONALITY AND CORRUPTION

One expert argues that conditionality should have been imposed at a much earlier stage. Whenever the issue of corruption was brought up, however, the issue was put off because the individuals in question were perceived as key allies. Personal interests and personal enrichment were set above the interests of the country and use, and abuse of government positions permeated the entire apparatus. While President Ashraf Ghani was perceived as a man of the West, he turned out to be either unwilling or unable to combat corruption in any meaningful way, as was his predecessor, Hamid Karzai. It would not be controversial to say that the international community largely ignored corruption from senior figures who were seen as important allies. Ghani also had a very problematic relationship with national as well as international NGOs, whom he saw as a destabilizing factor.

I have to say the Afghans are to blame for never having dealt properly with [corruption]. There are two reasons for that: They need allies around the country. And they are also terrified of being found with a bullet in their head. It's rough. But I have encountered so many crooks.

In the early days, there was no accountability. Scandals were well known, but nothing ever done. The donors knew it and did nothing about it.

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONDITIONALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

There are differing views among international experts as to what conditions and red lines should be, when it comes to women's rights. One view is that women's rights is a concern mainly among the urban educated elite, and that women's rights carry little weight in rural areas.

The issue of women's rights has been an issue for the larger cities [...] Outside, in the rural areas, you see none of that. There, women are treated mostly like before. Pressuring Karzai to make statements on women was almost impossible. If you look at what the various politicians are saying – whether they are government or not – what do you think Dostum thinks about the role of women? Or any of the other old warlords? Ismail Khan? What does he think? They don't care about that. They may put on a show when we meet them. They are in almost the same world as the Taliban – not quite, but truly not far from it. If anyone thinks that women's role in general has improved significantly, that is talking a big talk. Of course, schools and health are better, but when it comes to women's rights, we have talked this up in a way that doesn't correspond to reality.

The Afghans until this day do not understand why there is such an inordinate emphasis on this. [...] The way it is articulated and the vehicles that are used are not context sensitive enough. The Afghans find it very perplexing that they cannot feed people unless women are involved somehow in doing it. They don't get it. Hunger is hunger. You cannot differentiate it. Need is a need for an Afghan. The more you work on making those demands Afghan, the less they appear to correspond to the values of the constituency. The Brits and Germans have kind of achieved a relatively decent balance in their project design. In these projects, they state that where it is culturally possible, women will do such and such. The Afghans can live with something like that.

The gains of women are based on artificial construct. Women have been supported to a certain degree. Once that disappears, it will go backwards. Can the international community accept that and understand that in the long term, they will be able to look forward again? Afghans understand that it will get worse before it can be better. The broader issues of reducing violence and some elements of decision-making bodies that can be liaised with, they are more important right now.

However, the view of women's rights in Afghanistan as being foreign and elite and not relevant for most of the country is challenged by a number of Afghans and external experts. Indeed, claims of the divide between urban and rural women in Afghanistan in relation to women's rights have tended to be overstated. In the past, it was true that there were urban women who were patronizing towards women from rural areas, and who didn't understand and were unable to travel to rural areas. Some now say that this has changed, and that urban educated women in recent years have made successful efforts at widening their understanding and cooperation with their female counterparts on regional and local levels.

The marginalization Afghan women have typically experienced has also shaped perspectives on women's rights and empowerment, as a recent SIGAR report (2021: 6) on gender equality in Afghanistan notes, "Afghan women and girls endure some of the gravest hardship and disenfranchisement in the world, a fact that has contributed to one-dimensional perceptions of them. In fact, it is critical that international donors see Afghan women as partners and agents for change".

Some of our international friends tried to convince the rest of the world that Afghanistan is a backward, conservative traditional society, that urban women will not stay in Afghanistan and that the rural women don't have any problem with the Taliban, that is something that has unfortunately been sold to everyone which is not true. Because if you look at the report by Afghanistan Analysts Network released a couple of days ago about the hopes and desires of rural women. You go read it, to find what rural women want. Nobody wants to live under the Taliban regime. Every single one of the interviewed women wanted freedom of movement, to be able to move without necessarily carrying a male family member with them. So, this whole idea of 'oh! Afghanistan is a conservative backward society, that they will never come together, Taliban is the reality', well, that is not right.

Regarding the Taliban, some internationals have reached a conclusion that there are a couple of areas where there is no room for compromise and where a compromise can simply not be established, and so you have to choose one model or the other. This regards governance, the role of women, and freedom of expression. Some diplomats who have encountered Taliban directly, will privately say that they were evasive on these questions. When asked whether the Taliban would be willing to have free elections, they would get vague and refer to the Islamic state which is to be run according to Afghan principles and traditions. As soon as discussions got to these matters on a more detailed level, there appeared to be a gulf between the parties. The same applies to discussions on the role of women.

As the discussion proceeded, you could see what it was really about – there was always an emphasis that governance and the role of women should have Islamic jurisprudence, Afghan culture and Afghan traditions as their starting point. That is actually a strong cutdown of both women's roles and the freedom of speech.

In that respect, one expert argues that aid organizations should draw less attention to women's rights and rather ensure the integration of women's rights as a cross cutting issue, rather than a conditionality and a stand-alone activity. To what extent aid agencies are willing to design their programs to accommodate the Taliban will be an important issue to discuss. Should there be livelihood programs that are designed in such a way that women are enabled to work from home without having to leave the house? Should girls' education be confined to home schools? Should NGOs keep schools open if girls are not allowed to attend?

7. Some Afghan perspectives on conditionality

The following is a representation of Afghan perspectives on conditionality based on interviews conducted by NAC staff in July and August 2021. Going over the material used for this discussion note, there is broad support for conditionality among the interviewees. Two points should, however, be made.

Firstly, when asked about conditionality, it is not entirely clear how far interviewees felt that conditionality should be taken. Should it only mean that the government is held to account, or should it also mean that aid should in fact stop if certain targets are not met? Most likely, the majority would be in favour of the former approach, but answers might have looked different if interviews had been conducted right after the Taliban takeover, rather than before it. Secondly, interviewees had different ideas on what level of conditionality should be imposed. While overall supportive of conditionality as such, some said that there should be conditions for beneficiaries in programs, such as food for work. Others said that disbursements should be tied to implementation. So, while there was a wide support for some form of conditionality, conditionality was not necessarily perceived as donor conditions put on aid to the Afghan state.

One informant mentioned the possibility of placing the conditions on agriculture and farming programs that children are not taken out of school. Several informants pointed out that some aid interventions have made people “lazy”, and that aid should be given in return for work. Some informants also called for incremental and results-based financing. One interviewee specifically mentioned own contribution on project funds had created “ownership”. One informant wanted the UN to use conditionality to push the government to compose a government with representation from different ethnic groups. Another wanted conditionality attached to the rights of youth. While minority rights were not specifically discussed as an issue during the interviews, the issue was addressed indirectly, as when, for example, interviewees clearly associated ethnic discrimination in hiring processes as a form of corruption.

The overall impression from interview respondents is that while the notion of conditionality, in a broad sense, is positively viewed, fewer respondents seemed to think that conditions should be absolute. That being said, some interviewees explicitly stated that aid should in fact stop if certain conditions were not met. In any case, the material collected by NAC staff indicates that many Afghans want the international community to drive a hard bargain with the Taliban, and they do not want aid flows that are not closely monitored.

International organizations should have a source of pressure. For example, INGOs can say that we will work in this area if government does this and that before we implement a project.

Work with people, work with communities instead of working with companies, instead of paying a company, a contractor, a million dollars to do work that costs you 800,000 dollars to deliver 200,000 dollars. Why don't you work with the communities themselves? If you go to Jaghori [district in Ghazni province], if you work with communities, you'll see a huge impact. There are unions, there are associations, there are people, there are teachers, there are schools. You don't need to go with organizations who pay fancy salaries and then deliver nothing.

[...] they engaged with CDCs [Community Development Councils], and the civil society was also engaged for monitoring if there was corruption. There was little room for corruption, and they involved the people, the Mosque, everyone in the community to oversee the project, and it was successful. So, less money was spent on operationalizing this whole thing. [...] They should make the aid legitimate; we witnessed aid with no conditions and no monitoring over the past one and a half decades. Even if it was based on conditions, it was very limited. [...] I believe the aid must have conditions and measures [on] the type of aid, who to benefit, what would be the result [of the] aid and so on.

“[Conditionality] is a good idea but it needs to be defined specifically, like if we for example say human rights development or women's rights development, what do we mean specifically about that?”

A few interviewees did not support conditionality. They cited lack of security and lack of education as their main reasons for this. Some interviewees stated that aid should not be used to interfere with Islamic and traditional beliefs and thoughts. Others said that they would accept conditionality, as long as conditions are in line with Islam.

We know that it is not necessary in [the] current situation to discuss and support human rights. When people have job security and food security, laws and rules will be implemented properly.

Assistance or aid by condition means ransoming. [...] If condition means target, it is good and effective. For example, if actors deliver aid to the government in education and define the target (quality and quantity) of students to graduate from school or university, etc. If the conditions are human rights, gender, citizen's rights and women's rights, the biggest issue [is] that still a huge number of Afghan people do not understand [their own] rights as most percentage of Afghans are illiterate. So, how should they know about human rights, gender, and women's rights, etc.?

We hope the foreign countries provide humanitarian assistance for the people, but they mustn't interfere in the people's beliefs and thoughts.

We agree with the right of women and human rights by the law of Islam, and we accept all rules and conditions of international community which are not opposite with fundamental rules of Afghanistan. The international community should focus more on results and impact not about mechanisms of implementation. The Islamic system is the best one in the world, it is designed by the lord of human beings, which is suitable for people. The Islamic system defines the rights of children, youths, elders, women and men, father, mother and sister, husband and wife and it is the successful solution for life.

Sure, the respondents say that the aid should not be conditional, because aid is for the people and the people are not involved in corruption. So, if the UN and other partners want to see aid efficiency, they should deliver aid to the people directly. And they can do this by INGOs.

AFGHAN PERSPECTIVES ON CONDITIONALITY AND CORRUPTION

The dominate theme that emerges when asking about conditionality is corruption. A common perception of conditionality was related to a need for stricter monitoring of programs. As the situation currently unfolds, it seems clear that this will be extremely difficult. Lack of monitoring on behalf of the international community has been a constant issue, which was also brought up by several Afghan key informants in the qualitative interviews. Reduced presence on the ground makes possibilities for control even weaker. That could mean that community-based modes of monitoring should be looked into.

While corruption has been a rampant problem during the previous government, it is not clear how this will play out in a Taliban regime. In the interviews, corruption was a main motivator for interviewees to support conditionality.

While the Taliban is strongly associated with non-corruption and prides itself of their 'clean hands' in this, they will to some extent have to rely on existing structures that have high levels of deeply entrenched corruption and nepotism. How they will deal with these issues remains to be seen. One informant perceives the Taliban to be just as corrupt as the previous government.

From Taliban regime up to now, corruption has become a culture for Afghan people. For example, during the [previous] Taliban regime when they conquered an area, they stole everything, and it was a trophy for them, and this culture has transferred to the new regime as well people are stealing through corruption and it's a pride for them. The culture of looting transferred from the civil war area to the post-Taliban era and became institutionalized. Even the technocrats coming from the West to Afghanistan also became involved with corruption.

I think that if the UN, USA, European Commission, and other partners wish to support us honestly, they should provide aid and support us according to the humanitarian principles and role. They should deliver the aid to the vulnerable people from their own hands, it means that they should not give money or aid to the Afghan government. Because the government does corruption, and no one will receive the aid. The UN and other partners should deliver humanitarian aid to the people by their own agencies and national and international NGOs addresses, not from the government addresses, and the UN and other donors should supervise and monitor the process to be more effective.

It is noteworthy that corruption and lack of inclusion of ethnic minorities in government were linked to corruption or the quality of governance by several interviewees. While Taliban had drawn some support related to its implementation of justice in areas under their control, the image of them as being non-corrupt – or at least less corrupt – could be challenged if they are not willing to ensure an ethnically inclusive leadership.

Peace is not some political leaders' thing. Peacebuilding requires the national and inclusive participation of all groups of people including the minorities. The political parties' elders have ruined Afghanistan over the past 40 years, and they give up very easily on peace for their personal benefits and gains.

If all people from every ethnic group, religion, gender, and political background find themselves in the governmental structure, they would like to take part in the development process of their county. As a result, the government would be able to govern and develop the country.

After 2001, those who came to power and had position in the government were all unaware of the basics of administration. And these people distributed the power among their family members, relatives, and to their own ethnic groups. Those people coming from mountains having no idea of government administration and got power within the government structure and they saw that there is a large amount of money in doing fraud in the [Ghani] government, and the lack of security lead to poverty.

The government should be inclusive by all, it means that all political groups/parties, religious groups/Mullahs and others should have membership in that. Now, the [Ghani] government is just for one political group and one president. So, it is not acceptable for all Afghans. So, I think that if all people from different regions, races, languages, beliefs and ... have representatives in the government, then it will be acceptable for all.

The current [Ghani] government should improve and become strong and should also create unity among ethnic groups and prevent from nationalism and ethno-cism, all Afghan nation whether large or small ethnic groups must be involved in composition of the government."

AFGHAN PERSPECTIVES ON CONDITIONALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The issue of women's rights did not feature as prominently as corruption in the qualitative interviews. However, the issue is definitely high on the agenda. With the Taliban take-over on August 16th, the issue has taken on new momentum. As previously mentioned, there are varying perspectives on the centrality of women's rights in more rural areas. Based on NAC's own experiences, the interviews for this report as well as other recent reports, we cannot conclude that this is a concern only shared among urban elites.

The report, “Between Hope and Fear: Rural Afghan women talk about peace and war”, was published in July 2021. The report draws on interviews with 23 women from rural districts who, in fact, do not support the view that women’s rights is a particularly urban issue. Rather, the women interviewed placed great importance on the possibilities of getting an education, earning money, travelling freely and being able to participate in the community (van Bijlert, 2021).

Even relatively small instances of women’s rights being realised in rural communities in Afghanistan, have been shown to have value for the women, their families, and wider communities. This is backed by NAC’s own experience of working in rural and hard-to-reach communities. The following is drawn from interviews with participants in NAC’s women’s Self-Help Groups:

My husband is not working regularly, but after being a member of a Self-Help Group, I started a business of my own at home. I bake 40 loaves of bread every day and sell them in the local market. With the profit I gain from this business, I can afford to cover my children’s food, healthcare, and clothing. I am very happy that I am able to support my family through this job and I am listened to and respected in the family.

Access to education was a major issue when women’s rights were discussed. Interviewees expected that the Taliban would – at best – let girls complete the sixth grade, but also that some girls would drop out of school. A report on the Taliban shadow government pointed out that “the Taliban have hinted that they do not oppose girls’ education since 2011, and reportedly declared this position in 2015”. Yet realities on the ground seem to differ. Jackson points out that there has been little diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to adhere to this commitment (Jackson, 2018: 11-16).

In theory, the Taliban are open to girls’ education after puberty, based on four core conditions. “Any girls’ school must have a separate building, a perimeter wall, female teachers and a means of transporting the girls to and from school.” There may be additional demands for girls to wear a burka and not carry a cell phone. However, researchers for the quoted report were unable to identify a single girls’ secondary school open in an area of heavy Taliban influence or control. There is also lack of confidence in the local population. Even where the Taliban are willing to allow secondary education for girls, people are not willing to risk their daughters’ lives or engage with Taliban on the issue (Jackson, 2018: 14). Another issue is recruitment of female teachers, which can be extremely difficult: “Numerous instances of elders negotiating with the Taliban to secure girls’ education were documented. In case after case, when the elders approached the local Ministry of Education office to ask for female teachers, ministry officials told them that that they could not provide them” (Jackson, 2018: 10).

The government should be designed on the basis of justice, attention to the rights of women and men equally.

There are still extremist thoughts in our society that parents don’t allow their children to go to school, especially their daughters. Another reason they don’t allow their sons to go to school is poverty; parents send their children to go to work to help provide for the family.

I respect each and every political leader but so far, all their negotiations have no results. Why we don’t see a mother who has lost her son and women who lost her husband in [the] peace process? We claim that there are women’s rights and we have worked too hard in this field, but we see the women are symbolic at peace talks. We need to have people in [the] peace process who have lost their blood in this process, martyrs, people who fought against the enemies; they need to make the opposition understand how [many] sacrifices they have given.

The urban-rural divide was touched upon. Additionally, although many women do lead freer lives in the cities, the views regarding Afghanistan as still a “traditional” country are confirmed in the interviews, along with a concern that this needs to change.

Gender equality and women's rights are not considered mainly [by] our community, there are many organizations that are working [in] this field but haven't been able to bring great changes since our people are very traditional and they follow the old systems here. Also there have been clashes going on in the field and the organizations are not able to reach the districts and villages for conducting such activities. Mainly the gender, women's rights and children's rights are not being respected in the districts and villages which the organizations need to pay more attention to the district [rural areas] rather than towns [urban areas].

It should also be noted that the issue of women's rights is part of a broader set of challenges related to gender. Some interviewees have pointed out that young sons are taken out of school to work and make money, or that they are recruited as Taliban fighters – sometimes by force.

In the cities, poor families are deprived of education, because the economic situation of the families is not good, and they do not have access to basic daily needs. Therefore, the young sons of the families in urban areas have to work outside the home to be able to provide for the family. And the daughters of the family continue their education. But in remote areas, men are fanatical and do not allow women to go to school. Girls are forced into marriage at the age of 14. They say studying for women is not good for you.

Women's issues were also highlighted in focus group discussions in Badakhshan, Ghazni and Jaghori (district in Ghazni province). The concept of women's rights was seen as a value in itself. In addition, connections were made between women's rights and peace and economic growth.

Women's participation: women should have participation in all sectors and the discrimination against women should be reduced. Even when the Taliban come after peace process to the government, women should have [the]right to work outside and participate in all aspects and sectors.

Rule of law increases women's participation: when we have law and [the] law gives permission to all to engage and participate in decision making processes, all women would participate [in a] vote or poll.

Economic growth increases women's participation: when we have companies, they would give participation to women to work, which would increase women's participation in all aspects.

Women's participation increases coexistence: when women participate in different aspects, they would accept each other and all in diverse aspects of live and activities.

DED [District Education Departments] should ask schools to teach the importance of women's participation for students so that the new generation learn it.

Minorities and women should have rights [to] participate more in political actions and agendas.

Supporting women's rights is one thing – it is another is to agree that aid should be conditioned on them. However, there is in fact a fairly high support for conditions related to women's rights among our interviewees.

We don't know what will happen next. Assume that the Taliban and the government create [a] new regime and new government. Then the government should be recognized when it obligates and guarantees all the conditions. The international community should condition their aid; the condition should be, human rights, democracy, election, parliament, women's rights, child rights, civilian rights, and development. [...] If the next government does not obey and respect human rights and women's rights, the international community should not recognize it as a government.

I think aid conditionality is important, and not necessarily women's rights, but I think human rights in general. Because my right as a woman is vulnerable, but your right as a human being is equally vulnerable. I say yes to aid conditionality, it is one of the few leverages that we have left actually with the Taliban because everything else has been given up by some of our international friends already.

8. Conclusion

There is a broad support among our interviewees for conditions on aid. In addition, stronger monitoring mechanisms were called for. While corruption was a main concern, there is also support for women's rights being such a condition. We have not asked our interviewees about what women's rights should entail. Concerns raised in our material as well as in other reports are for women's access to school, work, and freedom of movement. Issues related to segregated classes, clothing and political participation are not unimportant, but one approach could be to focus on the former issues while making use of time and confidence building to gradually open the space for broader female participation. Based on our research women's access to work, education and freedom of movement seem to be the issues that rural women are also adamant about.

Other red lines might be related to a halt of targeted killings of minorities and civil society representatives and a minimum age on marriage. NAC needs to make principled decisions on which conditions are urgent, and which can wait. It should also be noted that men and boys are also facing undue restrictions under a Taliban regime. Boys are taken out of school to work, neither gender are free to dress and express themselves as they please, and it is hard to see how a forced marriage between a grown man and a frightened 12-year-old girl can be meaningful to any party. Child marriage is dehumanizing for all parties involved. A gender approach could be useful in identifying effective ways of dealing with the Taliban.

The Taliban have clearly stated their wish for Afghanistan not to be isolated, and they have recognized the need for aid. This gives the international community some leverage. This leverage should, however, not be overestimated. The Taliban are able to raise revenue from their control of border crossings and the opium trade. Also, it seems likely that foreign governments will not have a united front and certain governments, such as China and Russia, seem more than willing to provide funding and other support to a Taliban government based on their respective strategic interests, with little, if any, concern for human rights.

Several international organisations, including NAC, have already advocated for the immediate reopening of the Norwegian embassy in Kabul. Norwegian political parties are divided on the issue, and at the time of writing, elections are still pending. Opinion polls point towards a government composed of the Labour party, the Centre Party, and the Socialist Leftist party, that may depend on the support from the Red Party or the Green Party. Views on dialogue vary among the parties, where the Labour Party argues that any sort of official and formal dialogue should be put on hold until it is clearer how the Taliban will govern. The Socialist Leftist party, the Red Party and the Green Party are in favour of dialogue, while the other parties are more undecided. Subsequently, the need for diplomatic dialogue and the reestablishment of a diplomatic presence in Kabul should be a crucial point of advocacy.

The Labour Party has previously expressed that state-to-state support is out of the question at this stage, and that all aid should be channelled through UN and civil society organizations. Furthermore, aid should be mainly focused on humanitarian efforts, that are, in any case, unconditional and needs based. This approach leaves a number of questions unanswered, particularly regarding the health and education sectors, where thousands of jobs are tied to the state apparatus and where NGO services in these sectors have been contracted by the state. It is difficult to see how a willed collapse of these structures and return to humanitarian aid is a sustainable solution for the Afghan people. However, standing by the beneficiaries in such a context may imply some compromise.

What is important is that there is a principled approach to conditions based on a firm understanding of Afghan needs. Donor coordination will be of the essence. However, the donors need to keep the interests of the Afghan people at heart and maintain a consistent approach to conditions.

The debate on conditionality has implications for the nature of assistance and the distinction between humanitarian vs. development aid, where it should be acknowledged that NGOs have different interests. Whereas humanitarian aid can be largely channelled around the state, development aid will to some extent rely on state structures. At the same time, pivoting to humanitarian aid without looking to develop sustainable structures will push Afghanistan into an even deeper aid dependency. It is hard to see how this is in the interest of either Afghanistan or the international community.

Refusing to channel aid through the state would also entail the long-term shut-down of schools and hospitals, a situation which has already started taking place and erodes decades of investments in state structures. Food security and any sort of meaningful poverty reduction in Afghanistan will require a long-term approach. The agricultural sector needs to be looked into as an avenue for sustainable food production and livelihoods. This also requires a development approach. How aid is channelled, and the conditions attached to it, will be a crucial topic for advocacy in the coming months.

Prior experience indicates that donors will in fact not be well coordinated. There is also a chance that the majority of donors will pursue an approach that NAC deems as unproductive. In that case, it is hard to argue that NAC should keep silent on these issues. The interests of the beneficiaries should trump the need to support a coordinated donor approach that could lead to making things worse in Afghanistan. An important question for NAC to consider will be whether it is willing to break lines with other NGOs and advocate a different approach than the majority, if this is deemed to be necessary. In any case, the Taliban will be a main counterpart for the NAC. NAC has already dealt successfully with the Taliban in a number of areas where it works. NAC should, however, evaluate whether the organization's leverage has been put to maximum use, or if a more strategic approach could further improve access.

NAC is advocating a strong international presence in the country. In order to continue meaningful operations in the country, NAC should consider the following main advocacy points to the NMFA:

- Allow flexibility in dealing with the new Taliban-led government
- Avoid politicizing and securitizing aid
- Establish dialogue with the new Taliban-led government and maintain a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan
- Maintain high long-term development aid budgets, and not merely focusing on short term humanitarian support
- Whatever conditions the NMFA decides on, they need to be clearly communicated and consistently applied.

References

- Baehr, Peter R. "Problems of Aid Conditionality: The Netherlands and Indonesia." *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1997): 363–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993227>.
- Bazai, Fida et al. "The Rise of the Afghan Taliban". *Balochistan Review* (Vol. XL, no). Balochistan Study Centre, University of Balochistan (2019). <http://web.uob.edu.pk/uob/Journals/Balochistan-Review/data/BR%2001%202019/339-354%20The%20Rise%20of%20the%20Afghan%20Taliban%20,%20Dr.%20Fida%20Bazai.pdf>.
- Bowden, Mark, Siddiqi, Shirazuddin. «NGOs and civil society in Afghanistan.» Lessons for Peace Afghanistan, Overseas Development Institute (2020). <https://i4p.odi.org/assets/images/ODI-L4P-NGOs-and-civil-society-Bowden-Siddiqi-2020.pdf>.
- Dasandi N, Fisher J, Hudson D, vanHeerde-Hudson J. «Human Rights Violations, Political Conditionality and Public Attitudes to Foreign Aid: Evidence from Survey Experiments.» *Political Studies* (2021). [doi:10.1177/0032321720980895](https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720980895).
- Guistozi, Antonio, "The Taliban have retaken Afghanistan – this time, how will they rule it?." *The Guardian*, 16.08.2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/16/taliban-afghanistan-rule-hardline-coalition-powers>.
- Jackson, Ashley. "Life under the Taliban shadow government." Overseas Development Institute (2018). <https://odi.org/en/publications/life-under-the-taliban-shadow-government/>.
- Jackson, Ashley, Amiri, Rahmatullah. Insurgent Bureaucracy: «How the Taliban Makes Policy.» *Peaceworks*, no. 153 (2019). https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/pw_153-insurgent_bureaucracy_how_the_taliban_makes_policy.pdf.
- McKechnie, Alastair, Bowden, Mark. «Afghanistan Partnership Framework Conditionality without ownership; tactics without strategy?"Expert note, Lessons for Peace Afghanistan, Overseas Development Institute (2020). <https://i4p.odi.org/assets/downloads/ODI-L4P-APF-Expert-Note-McKechnie-and-Bowden.pdf>.
- vanBijlert, Martine. "Between Hope and Fear. Rural Afghan women talk about peace and war". Afghan Analysts Network (2021). <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/07/2021-Rural-women-peace-and-war-FINAL-website.pdf>.
- Bateman et al. "Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan". Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2021). <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-18-LL.pdf>.

About the authors

Tonje M. Viken is a partner in Conow. She is an experienced writer and researcher with a varied background from Norwegian organizations, academia and media as well as the UN. She has worked on a broad range of issues comprising of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and Norwegian development policies, humanitarian work, democracy and electoral systems. Viken has previously worked with advocacy, communications, research and journalism. She also has international experience, working with the UN in Afghanistan and Yemen.

Ian Kaplan has over 25 years of experience as a teacher, facilitator, university lecturer, researcher and education resource developer. His focus is on inclusion in education for those most marginalized and he has worked on education with communities, NGOs, multilaterals and government ministries of education in Africa, the Balkans, Europe, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia. Ian has also been working to support Afghanistan and Armenia in anti-corruption efforts. Ian currently works with the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC) as an education specialist.

Mustafa Himmati, Head of Knowledge Management in NAC

Nargis Mohammadi, former National M&E Focal Point in NAC

Quadratullah Rajavi, former Journalist and Content Producer in NAC

Hashim Rawad, National Program Coordinator and Researcher in NAC

