

# Confronting New Realities: Actions and Priorities for the International Community in Afghanistan



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This paper summarises the consultations, findings and recommendations of the workshops and published papers under the Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative (ASLI). The ASLI has been convened and supported by the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub (UKHIH) as a cross-think-tank project in partnership with leading think-tanks: the [Center for Global Development](#) (CGD), [Chatham House](#), the [Institute of Development Studies](#) (IDS), [ODI](#), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development–Development Assistance Committee (OECD–DAC).

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## 1. Context: Afghanistan after August 2021

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Even by the standards of its contemporary history, Afghanistan today stands at a dramatic crossroads, facing unprecedented socioeconomic, political, governance and security challenges. As one of the most aid-dependent countries over several decades, particularly since 2001, the United States led international military and civilian withdrawal precipitated the political and structural unravelling of the former Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, culminating in the collapse of the government as the Taliban<sup>1</sup> swept to power in August 2021.

The serious concerns across the international development and humanitarian communities about the situation in Afghanistan predate the crises that have unfolded since August 2021. Long-term economic and developmental stagnation, combined with the impact of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and violent conflict, have driven heightened levels of human vulnerability across the country. Efforts to avoid any severe reversal of the progress made over the past 20 years in promoting development, addressing human vulnerability, and preserving indigenous – and functioning – institutions have been hindered by the intersection of enduring and newly unfolding crises since the Taliban seized power.

The current arduous situation in Afghanistan, therefore, cannot be simply viewed as a humanitarian crisis only. The international community's policy responses should consider the wider spectrum of challenges. This requires a deeper appreciation of conditions on the ground, understanding the complexities of engaging with the new political and governance environment, and examining the changing nature of vulnerability in Afghanistan, among other pressing factors.

Against this broad background, the urgent need to provide policy direction concerning both engagement with, and developmental and humanitarian interventions in Afghanistan cannot be ignored. Inaction by the international community on engagement and intervention will further complicate the dire situation facing Afghan citizens and Afghanistan. Although other crises, such as in Ukraine, occupy international attention, the current situation in Afghanistan risks deepening into a multilayered and multifaceted set of crises that not only threaten Afghans' human security, but have the potential to spill over beyond the country.

<sup>1</sup> 'Taliban' is a loose term that describes the de facto coalition led by members of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. It includes members of the Haqqani network affiliated to, but not controlled by the Taliban, as well as appointments from other factions. The de facto government describes itself as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

## Timeline of key events and developments since August 2021

### 15 August 2021

The Taliban completes the takeover of power in Afghanistan by capturing the capital Kabul and seizing Arg, the presidential palace and symbolic seat of power in the country.

### 07 September

The Taliban announces the formation of an all-male interim administration consisting of majority-Pashtun hardliners, which restores the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Soon after the interim set-up is announced, the Ministry of Women's Affairs is shut down and the building is taken over by the Taliban's Ministry of Vice and Virtue.

### 15 September

The European Union (EU) sets out **five benchmarks** for engaging with a Taliban government.

### 17 September

The United Nations (UN) Security Council extends the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) until 17 March 2022 (*which was subsequently extended for 12 months until 17 March 2023*).

### 19 December

Pakistan hosts a special meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Islamabad to discuss the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. As the first major international conference on Afghanistan since the Taliban took power, the meeting is attended by the Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and delegates from the US, China, Russia, the EU and the UN. (*Muttaqi was absent from a subsequent OIC ministerial conference in March 2022 when the Taliban sent a less senior delegate.*)

### 27 December

The Taliban dissolves the Independent Election Commission, which was set up in 2006, and the ministries for peace and parliamentary affairs.

### 10 February 2022

A Taliban delegation is hosted by humanitarian non-governmental organisation (NGO) Geneva Call in Switzerland in what appears to be the movement's first official engagement in a Western country since taking power.

### 11 February

US President Joe Biden signs an executive order potentially allowing US\$7 billion in frozen assets belonging to Da Afghanistan Bank, the Afghan central bank, to be used for eventual distribution in Afghanistan and to settle litigation brought by the families of victims of the 9/11 attacks against the US in 2001.

### 23 February

A Taliban delegation meets with Afghan women and civil society representatives in Oslo, Norway; UN and US officials, among other Western government representatives, also meet with the Taliban.

### 23 March

The Taliban announces a ban on schooling for girls above grade six.

### 14 May

The first national budget under the new *de facto* Taliban regime is presented; it confirms a deficit of 44 billion afghanis (around US\$501 million) for the financial year.

### 16 May

Citing a lack of resources, the Taliban dissolves key institutions including: the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission; the High Council for National Reconciliation; the National Security Council; the Independent Commission for Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution; the Secretariat of the House of Representatives; and the Secretariat of the Senate.

## 2. Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative (ASLI)

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The ASLI seeks to leverage the collective knowledge and experience of institutional partners and builds on the active engagement of more than 150 participants in the workshops. Our goal is to make a coherent and evidence-based contribution to emerging and ongoing work aimed at addressing the current situation in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, there have been many attempts in Western donor countries to draw lessons from and retrospectively evaluate international engagement with Afghanistan. While these are valuable lesson-learning studies, the ASLI distinguishes itself by applying this learning to the current situation, considering the pathways for near- to medium-term engagement with Afghanistan.

### Workshops and Papers

The first workshop, led by Chatham House on 17 December 2021, explored four potential scenarios for Afghanistan's political, economic and security trajectory in 2022–23. The workshop set the scene for subsequent workshops by the other partners in the initiative. The related paper considers the unfolding situation in Afghanistan as initially envisaged in November 2021, and sets out four potential scenarios for the country over the ensuing 18–24 months. The rationale for setting out the potential scenarios was to acknowledge that engagement with the country needs to go beyond assisting with basic humanitarian issues. Scenario 1: Stuttering, was considered to reflect the current situation in Afghanistan whereby the *de facto* Taliban administration seems to have adopted most of the state structures and institutions of the previous government, ostensibly signalling early engagement with the international community. At the same time, however, the Taliban has dissolved several ministries (for women's affairs, peace, and parliamentary affairs) and major national institutions (including the human rights and election commissions). Nonetheless, the scenarios envisaged were conceived not only to elaborate on strategic issues, challenges and shifting dynamics that could impact overall international engagement but also to identify a realistic optimal scenario. Scenario 4: Progressing proved to be the most controversial among the

workshop participants, who viewed extensive international engagement with the Taliban in support of stability and to moderate the regime's behaviour as validating Taliban rule to the detriment of Afghans' human security.

The second workshop, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) on 28 January 2022, explored poverty, economy and food security, and structural vulnerabilities in Afghanistan. The related paper highlights several key messages. Chronic poverty and structural vulnerabilities form the basis of Afghanistan's current humanitarian crisis, and are historic problems. In the current context, the additional stress of liquidity and banking problems shapes the changing nature of poverty in Afghanistan, particularly among urban Afghans. Since overall improvements in tackling multidimensional poverty in Afghanistan have slowed in recent years, Afghans across the country are vulnerable to shocks (i.e. conflict, natural disasters and livelihood challenges). Meanwhile, agricultural productivity has decreased due to droughts and other environmental challenges, affecting rural areas in particular. Globally, Afghanistan is the country most severely affected by disasters in terms of their impact on the population. Yet, addressing the links between hazards and food security and other poverty indicators has not been made a key priority. Besides the need to account for urban poverty as a growing problem in the country, the challenge the international community faces is also in finding ways to develop projects and interventions that correspond with Afghans' everyday needs and vulnerabilities. There is an urgent need to resist the temptation to apply aid modalities that would inadvertently – or directly – lead aid agencies to substitute for government services. Despite the profoundly important role humanitarian support can have in the current situation, aid cannot substitute for functioning basic services and indigenous structures, especially those institutions that are still functioning. Participants in the IDS workshop argued that UN agencies cannot realistically achieve national coverage of health and education services outside government-run systems.

The third workshop, led by the Center for Global Development (CGD) on 9 February 2022, assessed options for future aid instruments and mechanisms to address the financial crisis in Afghanistan. The CGD report examines the causes and consequences of the financial crisis and lays out policy options the international community can support to enable urgent financial flows and restore the basic functioning of the Afghan financial system. The cumulative adverse impacts of an unprecedented liquidity crisis amplify current challenges in Afghanistan in several ways. Afghan traders and the private sector in general have been unable to pay for the food, fuel and imports that Afghans rely on. Loss of access to savings and salaries for those Afghans who have bank accounts has been compounded by Da Afghanistan Bank's inability to undertake dollar auctions as the normal mechanism to stabilise the value of the national currency, the afghani; this has led to sharply rising food and commodity prices. The CGD paper highlighted a recent survey by non-governmental organisation, the Norwegian Refugee Council, which showed that 85 per cent of the 72 humanitarian NGOs working in Afghanistan had some of their international banking transfers blocked, causing major hindrances to their activities. The CGD paper also examines prospects for expanding assistance beyond humanitarian relief. It discusses options for aid instruments and identifies key principles for a 'beyond humanitarian' aid approach, centred on the pragmatic expansion of government engagement, empowerment of local actors, and accountability structures that build trust and focus on results. Workshop participants identified the need for economic stabilisation to support humanitarian efforts as paramount.

The fourth workshop, led by ODI on 28 February, focused on options for collective action in Afghanistan. The related paper examines collective action – primarily among Western and other international partners – on how to engage with the current situation. It also provides definitional clarity for policymaking about what joined-up action for a common purpose and aligning incentives to this end means. In the past two decades in Afghanistan, collective action by Western donors focused on and was structured around aid 'effectiveness' (coherence and coordination), alignment with government priorities and burden-sharing among donors. The donors had planned for a transitional government. The changes in the 'authorising environment', exacerbated by the unexpectedly rapid takeover by the Taliban, pose significant challenges for international engagement. Meanwhile, as donors grapple with internal divisions over levels and conditions of engagement in Afghanistan, the Taliban is seeking alliances with other groupings. As a key outcome, the ODI-led workshop and paper have challenged donors' assumptions about collective action premised on effectiveness and alignment with Afghan authorities, stressing the need to shift given the current climate. The authorising environment has fundamentally changed, raising the question of how to foster collective action for effectiveness in a context where the principle of local ownership is deeply contested.

### 3. An Integrated Partnership

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The ASLI project is intended as an integrated approach by the partner organisations to examine the current situation in Afghanistan in depth and provide evidence-based policy pathways for the international community to follow. The contribution of each think-tank partner strengthens the overall cross-think-tank partnership.

The scenario planning was fundamentally conceived to elaborate on the strategic issues, challenges and shifting dynamics that will impact overall engagement with Afghanistan – especially by Western donors. As a result, by setting the scene for the subsequent workshops, the first workshop led by Chatham House underscored the strong opposition to any ostensible ‘normalisation’ of the *de facto* Taliban government. This negative view seems to persist even if international actors are engaged in Afghanistan in an optimistic scenario, where progress is made on security, economic and governance aspects that potentially leads to some form of international recognition. A key question that the international community must consider is how to strike a balance between the need for engagement that fosters positive structural changes in the Taliban’s style of governance, while simultaneously avoiding supporting and perpetuating a repressive regime.

The consultation with participants in the IDS workshop shed light on the availability of data on drivers of vulnerability in Afghanistan. Questions remain on the reliability of such data in general, but also on the impact of the Taliban takeover on analysis and data collection. For instance, rural poverty and food insecurity have long been discussed in the context of Afghanistan. However, how can international engagement and donor interventions also take into account the growth in urban poverty? Further, in light of the liquidity problems in the banking system, are farmers getting access to inputs or will there be further erosion of agricultural productivity? Trading of favours, reciprocity and social credit – whereby buyers can pay later because vendors know them – are traditional coping mechanisms, but the liquidity crisis is putting these under enormous pressure. Migration into urban areas for casual and manual jobs, especially during droughts, offers respite to Afghans whose lives depend on

agricultural income. Yet, with urban work also negatively affected by the economic and liquidity shocks, internal urban migration seems less likely.

CGD’s contribution to the ASLI offers deeper analysis, examining possible options for enabling financial flows into Afghanistan that go beyond humanitarian action. Workshop participants discussed a broad range of associated themes. The related paper further delves into evaluating modalities of past engagement and potential mechanisms for re-engagement with Afghanistan’s indigenous institutions, including civil society and possibly the *de facto* state authorities. Workshop participants identified several key questions for international actors to consider in relation to the nature of their own engagement with the Taliban and delivery of assistance in Afghanistan. The main concerns were over the relationship between donor-supported activity and what the Taliban funds with its own revenues. Is such activity additive rather than duplicative? Can it be conducted in a way that does not benefit sanctioned individuals? Will engagement with civil servants put them at risk; for example, by putting them in a position the Taliban leadership perceives as unaligned with or potentially threatening to its authority? Can implementation be monitored to ensure responsible use of funds and delivery of outcomes? The related CGD paper points out that all international short- and longer-term engagement in Afghanistan will need to centre on questions of how to expand engagement with local entities, including the authorities in power, to ultimately determine monitoring and accountability processes that focus on delivering results and building trust.

ODI’s contribution under the ASLI stresses examining the current conditions in Afghanistan, and learning from past international engagement with the country to establish pathways for collective action in changed circumstances, including a wholly altered authorising environment. Workshop participants and the related paper have underlined problems with parallel delivery structures that often risked ignoring – or in fact did ignore – Afghan sovereignty, authority and capacity. Abrupt changes in foreign aid and support can have a profound impact in aid-dependent contexts such

as Afghanistan. Yet a functioning central banking system and capacity within institutions such as the finance ministry were critical to effective management of international investments in the country. Although Afghan governments in the past faced their own problems of collective action, international engagement further complicated matters, being short term and reactive in nature rather than strategic. Consensus is emerging that international actors – and the Western donor community in particular – lacked sufficient understanding of the Taliban and Afghanistan.

## 4. Recommendations

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The current multiple crises in Afghanistan require sustained and meaningful engagement by the international community beyond the question of humanitarian needs. Other pressing global challenges are competing with Afghanistan for international attention, political will and resources, but inaction on the part of international actors most certainly risks exacerbating the crises the Afghan people and their country are experiencing.

The ASLI is a unique initiative that has mobilised global collective expertise to consider policy options for the extraordinary challenges Afghanistan faces. Our institutional consultations, workshops and subsequent papers form the basis for a call to action for the international community to prioritise engagement in Afghanistan beyond humanitarian action only. The following set of recommendations draws on the findings of the cross-think-tank partnership, highlighting the forward-looking, action-oriented and evidence-based approach we have taken.

- I. Any attempts to support a positive trajectory in Afghanistan cannot exclude the *de facto* Taliban authorities. This is especially applicable if 'progress' is defined as a pathway to some level of international recognition of the *de facto* government. The international community and donors should maintain a balance between the need for engagement that supports positive structural changes and the danger of supporting Taliban repression. Coherence and unity of voice among the international community are paramount needs of the hour in engaging the *de facto* state under the Taliban.
- II. To tackle the drivers of vulnerability in Afghanistan, the international community needs to refocus on its evolving nature in the country since August 2021. Dealing with vulnerability requires a clear shift in policy direction from the current focus on emergency response to longer-term commitment. Crucially, the shift in policy direction needs to steer humanitarian efforts towards supporting greater resilience, which would also ensure the sustainability of such interventions. Addressing vulnerability must not be at the expense of indigenous structures and institutions that have benefited from the international community's investments and capacity-building in Afghanistan since 2001. Systemic vulnerability should be met with systems responses: addressing symptoms rather than causes will only provide short-term fixes. Further, the international community should make decisions about foreign assistance based on an accurate understanding of the country's political economy and the prospects for successful conditionalities imposed on the Taliban. A crucial step would be to maintain sufficiently informed estimates of the actual revenues available to the Taliban, while also acknowledging that many in the movement believe they have won a war.
- III. Local Afghan institutions, such as community development councils (CDCs), must be protected and should receive medium-term support to reach rural and local communities. The international community and donors should ensure that engagement with CDCs does not increase their vulnerability to Taliban rule, and should be engaged as depoliticised and Afghan-/citizen-owned entities. To avoid past mistakes, including waste and reputational cost, international assistance should be accountable to the Afghan people. This could be achieved through existing networks of community councils, and civil society at local and provincial levels; and also by avoiding situations where international support for Afghan citizens becomes a political bargaining chip with the Taliban.
- IV. While immediate efforts such as stabilising financial systems and financial flows are essential, international actors need to plan beyond a single-year response to ease the prospects of intersecting multiple crises further expanding. Aid allocation is ostensibly a major challenge here. International actors should aspire to achieving long-term engagement in Afghanistan by fostering collective action and longer-term objectives.
- V. As illustrated by recent Taliban decisions, such as banning girls from secondary education, international actors have limited means of predicting and influencing Taliban behaviour.

This is arguably true whether positive or negative conditions confront the Taliban. However, workshop participants stressed the need for the international community and humanitarian actors to maintain dialogue with the Taliban to seek to understand its differences of perspective and deepen our understanding of its expectations.

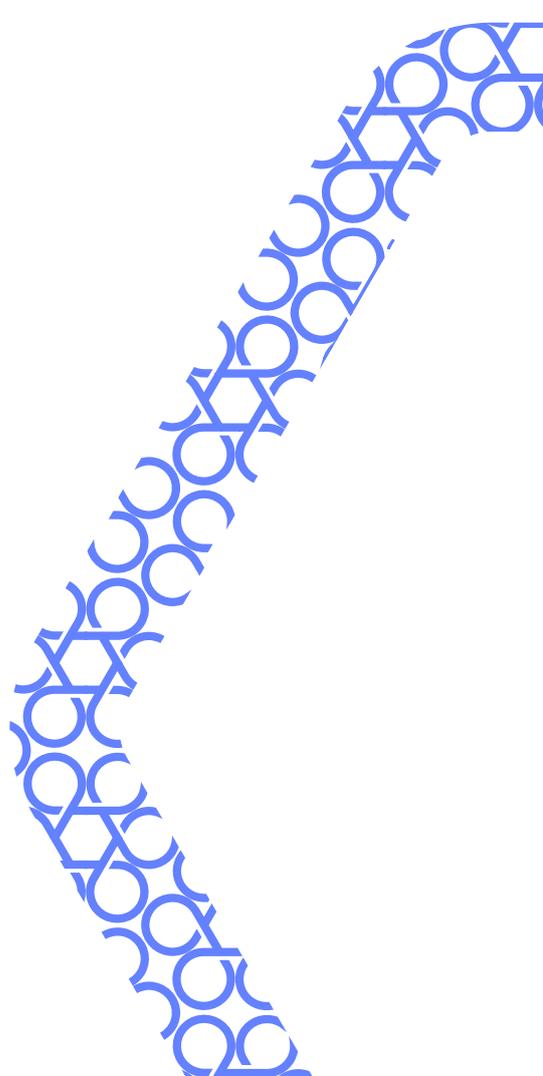
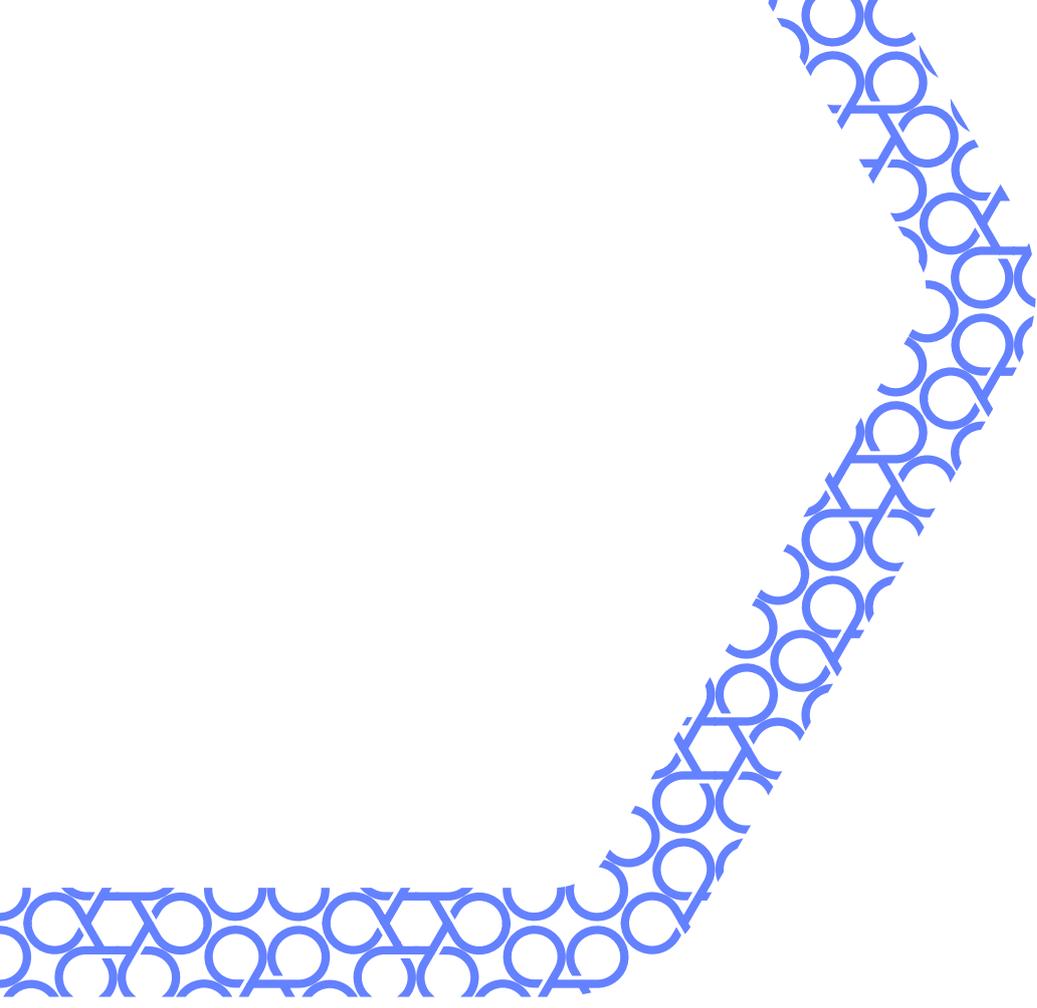
- VI. Ultimately, there is a need for international consensus on development engagement that addresses the underlying drivers of the current crises in Afghanistan, which are mainly developmental and fundamentally political. A humanitarian-only approach has serious limitations that could accelerate the decay of Afghan institutions that one day might need to be resuscitated, creating aid dependency and fuelling further Afghan resentment of overbearing foreigners. This effort to carve out a developmental approach must start in earnest, informed by the current context.

## 5. About ASLI

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A unique initiative, the ASLI has brought together and mobilised over 150 senior leaders, decision-makers, experts, researchers and practitioners from across the globe for extensive consultations. This diverse group, which includes participants from Afghanistan, has decades of experience – not only of Afghanistan but also of other global contexts. The central goal in convening the meetings was to discuss pathways for the current challenges in Afghanistan beyond humanitarian issues. Consultations were held between December 2021 and February 2022 in the form of four workshops convened by each of the ASLI partners. Each workshop was followed by a paper, enlarging on the recommendations and findings of the workshops and related papers.

The ASLI approach builds on the efforts of the UKHIIH more broadly in developing innovative thinking and processes to enable coherent and responsive engagement when crises arise. In developing effective and solution-oriented responses to crises, it is possible to consider a logical sequence that begins by envisaging potential scenarios that feed into analysis of human vulnerabilities in a particular context. Following on from the first two steps, there is a need to establish mechanisms for engagement and interventions. Finally, it is necessary to devise processes for collective action. The ASLI partnership was inspired by this four-step sequence of activities and outcomes. As a plausible modality for responsive action to other crises, it is possible that such a modality serves a great purpose.



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