



**LESSONS  
FOR PEACE**  
Afghanistan

**Expert note**  
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**Lessons for peace:  
engaging with  
Afghanistan after four  
decades of conflict and  
one year of new Taliban  
administration**

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# Introduction

ODI's *Lessons for Peace* (L4P) project was launched in May 2019, in the context of increased momentum behind US-Taliban talks and the prospect of an intra-Afghan dialogue. The project has provided evidence-based analysis, convened meetings, and conducted research for bilateral and multilateral partners supporting Afghanistan.

Much of L4P's initial efforts were focused on identifying lessons for future aid planning. Whilst circumstances on the ground in Afghanistan have changed dramatically over the lifetime of the project, the need to support international partners with sound, evidence-based lessons is still pressing. Just over three years since its inception, as L4P nears completion, this short paper first summarises the overarching lessons from the project that are most relevant for future international engagement. Section 2 then takes stock of the current challenges facing the country. Section 3 outlines eight steps the international community<sup>1</sup> can take in order to support future peace and the needs of the Afghan people, which build on our main lessons. These steps are:

1. Accept and work with the political realities that constrain engagement with Afghanistan.
2. Develop strategic coherence for action amongst international partners, based on a long view on how change takes place in Afghanistan.
3. Support development-oriented institutions needed for an effective state.
4. Contract directly with the local private sector and facilitate its development.
5. Provide operational and political support to local NGOs and CSOs.
6. Delegate aid coordination to multilateral institutions.
7. Rethink the strategy for women's education and empowerment.
8. Establish a new platform for dialogue with the Taliban on humanitarian and development issues.

These steps represent an incremental approach to engagement with the Taliban among OECD partners and multilateral organisations, and could support a transition from the current reliance on humanitarian aid to a more permanent national system of service delivery. The political and operational challenges this would pose should not be underestimated, and we draw attention to these throughout the paper and in the conclusion. But given the potential for a major humanitarian emergency and refugee crisis, increased violence, and the return of transnational terrorist organisations, we argue that international partners should attend to the lessons from past failures and attempt to meet these challenges head on.

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<sup>1</sup> This report, and L4P's work as a whole, is focused mainly on OECD bilateral partners and multilateral organisations. As such, unless otherwise specified, in this report we use these terms interchangeably with 'international community', 'international partners', 'partners', and 'donors'.

# 1 Overarching lessons from L4P

Much of L4P's initial efforts were devoted to examining the experience of Afghanistan's international partners over the previous two decades, and providing recommendations to strengthen aid effectiveness. L4P's analysis focused mainly, but not entirely, on development support provided by OECD partners and multilateral organisations, even though the effectiveness of this development and humanitarian support depended on parallel actions by diplomatic and security actors and the response of regional parties. Drawing on L4P research, we outline briefly the lessons we believe are most relevant for helping international partners avoid repeating mistakes. This section focuses on the international engagement before the Taliban takeover, and the remainder of the paper looks at current challenges and forward-looking recommendations.

**After 2001, parallel delivery structures continued to ignore Afghan sovereignty, authority and capacity.** There was a reluctance among international partners to seek and nurture the capacity that survived the previous Taliban regime, which many Afghans considered legitimate. The creation of parallel delivery structures undermined state capacity, neglected Afghan priorities, and was inefficient and financially unsustainable. This both created aid dependency and bred resentment among Afghans. In addition, the widespread use of off-budget channels by partners, particularly for short-term security objectives, severely impeded the influence of the national government (Roberts, 2021).

**Mutual accountability compacts had limited success due to difficulty in agreeing priorities among partners and with Afghanistan, and lack of partner accountability for commitments.** Mutual accountability frameworks, introduced in 2006 and in 2020, were intended to articulate shared goals between the international community and the Afghan people and government, mutually agreed targets, and systems for monitoring progress towards them. However, L4P research showed that these compacts had little depth of Afghan ownership, as

approval was often rushed through cabinet at the last minute before pledging conferences, without seeking broader support among the government, parliamentarians or civil society (McKechnie and Bowden, 2020).

**Partly as a result, international engagement was often short-term and reactive, rather than strategic.** Without shared measurable goals and plans for how to achieve them, the international community tended to focus on immediate problems that ignored long-term objectives to secure a stable political settlement, peace and increased prosperity. L4P research found that the international community consistently developed programmes and policies in Afghanistan with timeframes measured in months or, at most, a few years (Urwin, 2020). This resulted in military, diplomatic and development engagement based on short-term tactics without a long-term strategy (McKechnie and Bowden, 2020).

**There was a failure to understand Afghanistan's complex political economy.** Re-engagement of international partners with Afghanistan after 2001 came with preconceived ideas about sources of legitimacy (e.g. through the modern service-delivery state) and the nature of governance and public authority, and ignored patterns of authority grounded in historic, cultural, social, ethnic, regional, kinship and religious structures. For example, L4P research demonstrated that some Afghan communities felt that US-led governance and stabilisation interventions were divorced from traditional conflict-resolution practices, and from their everyday experiences of the conflict. The seeds of this were sown during the early intervention in 2001, which empowered warlords who lacked local legitimacy. This created perverse incentives and counterproductive effects (Amiri and Jackson, 2022). In addition, US military involvement in these programmes set the pattern for transactional politics and corruption because of the scale of the contracts involved and the economic rents that stabilisation funding created (Bowden and Siddiqi, 2020). Massive influxes of aid, particularly towards 'insecure'

communities, fuelled a rentier marketplace and often exacerbated instability. The result was corrosive: driving corruption, stoking competition over resources, and eroding customary institutions (Amiri and Jackson, 2022).

**Partners also lacked a clear picture of how the economic benefits of the conflict were distributed in Afghanistan, and the implications for peace**

L4P research also indicated the extent to which the engagement of international partners was based on faulty estimates of licit and illicit resource flows in Afghanistan. As the Taliban pushed towards victory in 2021, L4P published original research that used geospatial analysis and satellite imagery to map the economy of Nimroz, a strategically important province in the south-west of the country (Mansfield and Smith, 2021). The research indicated that US\$2.3 billion in legal and illegal goods were passing through the province each year. This vastly surpassed official figures, and pointed to the insignificance of international aid relative to the informal economy. These findings also indicated how the Taliban's subsequent capture of Nimroz, and other key border points and trade routes, would affect local powerholders and destabilise the political bargains

that were helping to hold the Afghan state together, while also generating revenues that could be used to mobilise support from the group's former opponents.

**The need to work 'with the grain' was critical, but often overlooked.** International engagement was most successful when it worked 'with the grain' of Afghan institutions, i.e. through a close understanding of, and alignment with, local governance practices, established patterns of authority and accountability, and elite incentives. Conversely, international engagement tended to fail where the partner-supported model collided with traditional Afghan power-sharing practices, and with Afghans' deep-rooted concepts of independence, shared Islamic identity, and resentment of foreign interference.<sup>2</sup> Working with the grain was most successful in the provision of public services but the dynamics of how such arrangements increased the legitimacy of the state, and the relations between national and local powerholders, is more complex. Typically, the international community and its Afghan allies sought to transplant the structures of liberal democracies, without sufficient regard for how political orders grow out of a country's long-established principles and historic practices and traditions.

<sup>2</sup> This is a common theme running throughout L4P reports and commentary looking at the donor record in Afghanistan on community development (Vincent, 2020), peacebuilding (Amiri and Jackson, 2022), and security (Roberts and Laws, 2021).

# 2 Taking stock of current challenges

## The window for engagement may be closing

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover, L4P provided reflections on how a longer-term, civilian-led engagement by OECD partners could unfold (McKechnie, 2021). Our recommendations included making a clear distinction between the government, state institutions, and the people of Afghanistan; striking a balance between humanitarian and development instruments; and looking for partners within the new administration with whom sustained engagement might be possible. We suggested these might be officials in Kabul who share development objectives and practice and who could potentially act as intermediaries with the political leadership, or local-level administrations willing to implement heterodox policies, e.g. with regard to girls' education.

A little under one year later, however, and the window of opportunity that previously existed for developing a mutually beneficial engagement with 'moderate' elements of the Taliban administration may be closing. The killing of al-Qa'eda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul in July 2022 has been a clear setback to the de facto government's attempts to achieve international recognition and support. The US and its allies interpreted al-Zawahiri's residence in Kabul to be a violation of the Doha Agreement.<sup>3</sup> Coupled with the Taliban's resistance to foreign pressure for women's rights to secondary education and employment, there is now a real risk of the country becoming 'a pariah state'.

It is easy to blame the Taliban for its readiness to use violence in pursuit of political objectives and to criticise its rigidity, but Afghanistan's current

predicament is in no small part due to 20 years of policy failures by its former partners (SIGAR, 2021; Malkasian, 2022; Petraeus, 2022; McKechnie et al., 2022a). The economic collapse that underlies the humanitarian crisis has also been influenced by the policy response to the Taliban's victory that abruptly cut off external aid and other financial flows, imposed sanctions, impeded central bank operations and froze Afghanistan's foreign reserves. While attempts at a mutually acceptable engagement with the de facto government might fail, the consequences of a protracted humanitarian crisis with uncertain consequences for forced migration and security suggest that some attempt at deeper engagement is still worthwhile.

## The risks of increased violence and instability

If state capacity to support core governance functions and service delivery is degraded still further from its current level, and discontent grows, divisions between the centre and the regions could well sharpen and lead to increased violence. As order begins to crumble, the authorities might find it harder to resist violent jihadi movements with international ambitions entering the country. The dynamics of how alternatives to the Taliban administration and changes within it could emerge as the state becomes more fragmented are highly uncertain and merit future research. Failure of the de facto government, coupled with foreign interference, could lead to a return to violent conflict. Renewed civil war would add to the suffering of the Afghan people, create an additional humanitarian burden for the outside world, and increase the pressure on

<sup>3</sup> Part Two, Section 1 of the Doha Agreement between the Taliban and the United States states: 'The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qa'ida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies'. The full text is at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>



Afghans to migrate to neighbouring countries and beyond. The loss of past investment in development, already occurring due to declining international assistance, freezing of reserves, and human and capital flight, would accelerate.

The US is key to any move to normalise relations with the de facto government (McKechnie et al., 2022). But given the febrile hyper-partisan politics in Washington, it now seems virtually impossible for the US to adjust its position on sanctions until after the 2024 presidential elections. However, a descent into chaos in Afghanistan within this timeframe could have even more harmful political consequences than preserving the status quo. Consequently, allies of the US should continue to press for limited engagement that reduces these risks and creates opportunities for responding positively to actions by the de facto government. An added complication, however, is that, due to increased tensions within the UN Security Council heightened by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the potential future role of the UN in Afghanistan is unclear. The coordination responsibilities, strategies and mechanisms of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) were based around a state-building model that is no longer viable, not least because the Taliban have a different model of governance.

## The challenges of 'humanitarian-plus'

In light of the above, the engagement of OECD DAC countries with Afghanistan is likely to be defined as 'humanitarian-plus' (even if presented publicly as limited to meeting 'basic needs'). Significant changes to this approach are unlikely, at least until after the new US Administration takes office in 2025. This means partners using humanitarian assistance for the delivery of public services and community development activities, primarily through UN agencies and implemented by NGOs. Although there may be little prospect of formal relations with the de facto authorities, some engagement will be necessary to facilitate humanitarian action, especially in this more enhanced approach. Even such limited engagement will be difficult without continuing adjustment to the sanctions regime. As

others have noted, such engagement is desirable if it staves off the collapse of the state, economy and internal security, which would have unpredictable consequences within and beyond Afghanistan's borders (Mohseni, 2022; Smith and Bahiss, 2022).

However, the dangers of over-reliance on humanitarian instruments for development, and indeed over-reliance on off-budget funding more generally, have been widely discussed, including through L4P research in 2020 into Afghanistan's aid requirements (Haque and Roberts, 2020). Humanitarian finance is episodic, short-term and unpredictable, and is poorly suited to either protracted crises or national development. In addition to the reluctance of partners to empower the de facto government, its inability to manage government agencies effectively, retain talent from the previous government, and manage budget execution weakens its case for closer alignment between its budget and partner support to a humanitarian-plus approach. Moreover, as noted above, bypassing national institutions accelerates their decay, and when Afghanistan's international relations are eventually restored, rebuilding those institutions will involve a huge cost and take many years. Balancing a humanitarian-plus approach and limited engagement with the authorities has other potential consequences. Unless managed carefully and in consultation with the incumbent authority, creating parallel structures might eventually clash with Afghan nationalist sensitivities and concerns over sovereignty; one of the pillars of the Taliban's legitimacy.

In addition, large humanitarian aid flows will be difficult to sustain. The 2021–22 Afghanistan humanitarian appeal for \$4.3bn resulted in pledges for only \$2.2bn, with little or no money going into the UN's Transitional Economic Framework (which added a further \$3.5bn to the humanitarian appeal). Prospects for humanitarian funding for Afghanistan are likely to become even worse in the future, a consequence of international attention shifting to other crises, and humanitarian funding fatigue more generally. The consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the prospects of debt crises during the worldwide post-COVID economic adjustment are likely to further compete with funding appeals for Afghanistan.

# 3 Possible futures

Against this backdrop, how can OECD partners and multilateral organisations best support the Afghan people? In our view, as long as sanctions and payments restrictions are unlikely to be lifted wholesale, the key challenge is to provide humanitarian aid that can transition in the future to more permanent national systems of service delivery. This would represent an incremental and flexible approach to engagement that would adjust levels and modalities of aid, as well as sanctions, in response to actions by the Taliban, and the changing needs of the people of Afghanistan.

Such an approach could include the following eight steps:

1. **Accept and work with political realities.** The de facto government currently has considerable local legitimacy in parts of the country, especially outside the cities, and nearly all Afghans want peace rather than another civil war. Change in Afghanistan is likely therefore to be evolutionary and incremental, rather than taking place through regime change. A smart humanitarian-plus approach should seek to support and empower the Afghan people to realise their development and social objectives, whilst avoiding, where possible, the reactionary elements most opposed to the values of the international community. It is not unusual to find parts of otherwise dysfunctional governments where some limited development cooperation is feasible with public or private institutions at the local or national level. In the case of Afghanistan, analysts have noted the differences within the de facto government on international engagement and policy. There are also local variations in policies such as girls' education (Jackson, 2022). A pragmatic, but still limited, engagement would respond to any incremental change in a pro-development direction.
2. **Develop strategic coherence, based on a long view on how change takes place in Afghanistan.** International partners should develop a new theory of change that avoids short-termism and excessive attention to security within their own

countries. Central assumptions in a new theory of change are likely to involve the stability of the new administration, potential for incremental change, and a slow transformation towards a more inclusive, less violent, and a more development-oriented state. Such a theory of change should go beyond purely development issues and encompass scenarios on the political and security development of Afghanistan and its regions. It should be oriented towards the wellbeing of the Afghan people, be acceptable to the de facto authorities and support any transition that would lead towards legitimate permanent institutions.

3. **Support development-oriented institutions needed for an effective state.** This involves preserving as much capacity inherited from the previous administration as possible, while advancing the transition from humanitarian to more sustainable Afghan-led service delivery. Such an engagement should seek to strengthen accountability of service providers to the Afghans who use them, and ensure that funds achieve their intended purpose.

Health services are an example where the model adopted by the previous government (essentially state-directed NGO service delivery, funded largely by partners) is being retained to some extent as the authorities seek to deepen their control and exert patronage. It would seem possible to fund this approach by more cost-sharing, combining state resources (derived from tax revenue) with partner funding that was disbursed directly to implementing NGOs. The special monitoring arrangements in the recurrent cost window of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), which involved external monitoring and auditing contractors, are an example of what might be adapted in a humanitarian-plus approach, and would seem to be consistent with the form (if not the substance) of Taliban anti-corruption policy. Funds could be sent from abroad through mobile technology directly to local workers and aid recipients, as well as hawala money-transfer dealers.

#### 4. **Contract directly with the local private sector**

and reinforce private-sector development more generally, to address the economic consequences of the sudden withdrawal of foreign assistance, the freezing of Afghanistan's foreign exchange reserves, and the collapse of the banking sector (all of which have contributed to the humanitarian crisis). While Afghanistan's long-term drivers of economic growth might be the extractive industries and realising its potential as a transit hub with South Asia, such industries that create economic rents and associated patronage can also help consolidate regimes with weak legitimacy and increase corruption and capital flight. Development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) may not be transformational, but does have potential to support basic incomes and services needed for an effective humanitarian programme. A strengthened private sector would be consistent with both a humanitarian-plus approach that sought minimal contacts with the de facto authorities, and the sustainable longer-term development of Afghanistan. There is some evidence from [Afghanistan and other countries](#) that the private sector can support peacebuilding and lobby for policy changes, although the positive impact of this is obviously context-specific (McKechnie et al., 2022). Pro-development private-sector development can, however, be difficult in fragile or post-conflict contexts as local firms may have been part of the old rent-seeking economy, or had to compromise with violent actors. Furthermore, there are likely to be issues that require coordination with the de facto authorities, e.g. access to land, road maintenance, logistics, water resources management.

#### 5. **Provide operational and political support to local NGOs and CSOs.**

NGOs are a key element in the humanitarian-plus approach and frontline actors in its implementation. But they are also politically vulnerable, and humanitarian principles such as impartiality are being challenged by Taliban officials over appointments and attempts to tax beneficiaries. L4P research in 2020 documented how the Ghani administration was working to gain control over the finances and governance structures of CSOs and NGOs (Bowden and Siddiqi, 2020). Similar regulations and conditions are now being imposed by the de facto authorities, alongside new requirements in the health sector

for foreign NGOs to have Taliban-approved Afghan partners. Many international partners have also placed new requirements on the NGOs they support, with little effort to make these consistent with each other.

For NGOs and CSOs to survive and be effective, they require new and more predictable funding mechanisms (including core funding), greater donor consistency and coherence on their reporting and management requirements, and improved coordination structures that enable the integration of NGO actions into a multi-annual strategy. UN and diplomatic support is needed in Afghanistan to facilitate solutions to NGO problems with the authorities. Since few OECD countries are represented in Afghanistan with the capacity to do this, the burden would fall on a rejuvenated and strengthened UNAMA to expand its role.

#### 6. **Delegate aid coordination to multilateral institutions.**

The development and management of a coherent, coordinated multi-year strategy for financing key services and institutions requires new aid coordination structures, and new financing and management structures that better recognise regional actors and financial institutions. Much of the past aid to Afghanistan has been ineffective, wasteful and exacerbated conflict, but the record of multilateral assistance linked to budget systems has been effective at a national scale, particularly in support of nationwide programmes (Haque and Roberts, 2020; Roberts and Russell, 2020). Although the UN, World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have different and sometimes dysfunctional governance structures, they also have international recognition and analytical capacity, and are likely to be more acceptable interlocutors for the Taliban than bilateral partners from countries which were security partners of the previous government.

However, to explore engagement with existing state structures and their officials at both national and local levels, the role of UNAMA as an interlocutor with the de facto authorities needs to be developed. As part of this, UNAMA's coordination function and structures will need to better incorporate the World Bank, the IMF, and other international financial institutions. This would strengthen its ability to facilitate partner re-engagement around a commonly accepted

framework, manage international funding, and ensure accountability. As we noted above, there is also a critical role for UNAMA in supporting CSOs throughout Afghanistan's regions. To do this effectively, UNAMA will also need to manage the potential conflicts of interest that may arise from the different priorities for resource mobilisation across UN agencies and other service providers.

**7. Rethink the strategy for women's education and empowerment.** One of the most visible and reported changes in Afghanistan has been to close down women's rights to education, employment and to access public spaces, especially in urban areas (DROPS, 2022). Afghanistan is now the only country in the world where government policy denies girls a secondary education. Groups of Afghan women have demonstrated bravely against Taliban policies that discriminate against women and girls, but have achieved little so far at the national level.

Internationally, Afghan women have long been portrayed as victims and used as agents for other agendas (Nemat, 2016). A new approach might be less declamatory and more context-sensitive and involve following the lead and supporting initiatives taken by women and their supporters inside Afghanistan, while maintaining pressure on the authorities. For example, some communities appear to have negotiated girls' increased access to secondary education, and it could be worth exploring new approaches to secondary and tertiary education that might involve covert support to clandestine schools and distance learning. This is not to downplay the importance of supporting human rights and the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan, but rather to emphasise pragmatic approaches that Afghan women believe could achieve positive incremental results.

**8. Establish a new platform for engagement with the Taliban.** An effective mechanism is needed for engagement with the de facto authorities as it is impossible to implement a humanitarian-plus programme without coordination with the authority on the ground. Such a mechanism needs to establish an informal dialogue on aid with the Taliban that seeks mutual understanding and finds openings for enhanced humanitarian and limited development opportunities. While placing a high premium on internal cohesion, the de facto government is not monolithic and contains elements where productive dialogue on development policy and aid might be possible. This is not without challenges, especially as commitments made by Taliban interlocutors with the international community might not be shared or implemented within the de facto government or accepted at the local level.

Despite these challenges, the current Doha discussions seem to be the best forum available for such a dialogue, using both the Qatari and UN good offices and bringing in the World Bank and IMF into a common multilateral framework. UNAMA's field officers could be useful interlocutors for dialogue with a broad range of Taliban leaders within its decentralised structure, and for facilitating engagements that respond to local needs and opportunities. However, partners also have concerns that limited technical engagement with the Afghanistan de facto authorities (including the signing of MoUs by UN agencies) could be used politically by the Taliban and third parties to imply international recognition. These concerns will need to be addressed as part of any incremental move towards engagement, clarifying that technical engagement targeted for the benefit of the Afghan people does not imply formal or legal recognition of the de facto authorities.

# Conclusion

ODI's L4P project was founded in 2019 amidst increased momentum behind US-Taliban peace negotiations, and the prospect of an intra-Afghan dialogue. The project focused much of its initial efforts on identifying lessons for future aid planning options for Afghanistan, on issues including humanitarian-development divides, the consequences of reducing aid flows, and development in conflict transition scenarios.

Whilst the situation in Afghanistan has changed dramatically over the three-year lifetime of the project, the importance of supporting international partners with evidence-based lessons is, arguably, more pressing than ever. Amongst other core lessons, L4P's work helped underscore the importance of understanding and engaging with local power dynamics and elite incentives, the need for strategic long-term planning, and the risks of trying to establish parallel service delivery structures that ignore Afghan sovereignty, authority and capacity.

In keeping with these lessons, this short paper has suggested international partners pursue a humanitarian-plus approach in Afghanistan, while also taking incremental steps to transition to more permanent national systems of service delivery. However, the political and operational obstacles to this should not be underestimated. Among a range

of conditions, humanitarian-plus engagement requires enhanced field presence across Afghanistan to understand the local context and to respond to opportunities when they arise. At a minimum, a strong presence of the UN, the World Bank, and IMF is needed, with staff on multi-year assignments who can develop local knowledge and relations with the key Afghan actors. However, as noted above, tensions among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, heightened by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, are a major impediment to agreement on the future role of the UN in Afghanistan. In addition, there are risks that relations between the de facto government and the UN and NGOs on service delivery could worsen sharply, with adverse consequences for the quality of essential services such as health care.

Although OECD politicians may wish to divert attention from past failures in Afghanistan, the potential for a huge and very visible humanitarian emergency and refugee crisis associated with a chaotic collapse of the state, civil war aggravated by rivalries among the great powers and the return of transnational terrorist organisations is unfortunately real. A pragmatic approach of limited engagement that builds upon humanitarian action and which provides incentives for positive change seems a much better alternative.

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