



# **Snapshots of an Intervention**

**The Unlearned Lessons of  
Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance  
(2001–11)**

Martine van Bijlert and Sari Kouvo (eds)





Afghanistan Analysts Network

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The institutional structure of AAN includes a core team of analysts and a network of contributors with expertise in the fields of Afghan politics, governance, rule of law, security, and regional affairs. AAN publishes regular in-depth thematic reports, policy briefings and comments. The main channel for dissemination of these publications is the AAN web site: [www.aan-afghanistan.org](http://www.aan-afghanistan.org).

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# Foreword

The idea for this volume was born in the summer of 2010 during a discussion of the cyclical nature of many of Afghanistan's programmes. Years of following the international efforts had left us with an increasingly strong sense of déjà vu: another conference to demonstrate momentum, another strategy to surpass the ones before, another project that would come and go and be forgotten the moment its progress was no longer being reported on, only to resurface in a new guise a little later. In many cases it was all very understandable: the short rotations and limited mobility of embassy and donor agency staff, the pressures to spend and deliver and to come up with project-sized solutions for complex problems, the tendency to design programmes by brainstorm, the lack of institutional memory – it all meant that ideas often lacked the benefit of previous experience or solid understanding of the context. But it also meant that money and opportunity were being wasted in an overwhelming manner and that the Afghan people were left empty-handed, with promises of security, stability and reconstruction unmet.

One of the problems has been a lack of documentation, coupled with a general unwillingness to acknowledge and explore the shape and sources of the failure to effect real change. Other than the usual project documents – that are by nature designed to satisfy donor requirements and to prove that, despite difficulties, project objectives are being reached – there has been surprisingly little effort made to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated and that future planning benefits from past insights. Any suggestion that a new shiny programme very much resembles the old and discarded one has tended to be swept aside as unhelpful criticism.

Countless people have been involved in Afghanistan's bewildering array of policy planning sessions, scoping studies, pilot projects, technical assistance programmes, project management units, coordination mechanisms, implementation attempts, evaluation teams – both Afghan and international. It is useful to learn from what they now know. This edited volume is a collection of largely untold stories and untapped lessons. It is not comprehensive in any way, but we hope that these snapshots will inform future planning and programming and that they will inspire a greater willingness to look back and learn.

*Martine van Bijlert*

Martine van Bijlert

## Introduction

The decade of state-building, reconstruction and development assistance in Afghanistan has left many people confused. There have been undeniable changes: Afghanistan now has an election-based, market-driven political system and many socio-economic indicators are far better than they used to be under Taliban rule or during the civil war (although that is, admittedly, not a very high bar). There have been great, albeit unequal, opportunities in terms of education, employment and enrichment. But there is also a strong sense of missed and mismanaged opportunities, which many – Afghans and internationals alike – find difficult to understand: how could so many resources have achieved what feels like so little and so fleeting?

This edited volume explores the question by taking a closer look at a variety of key programmes and projects that were designed and implemented over the last decade, or more. It consists of a collection of 25 articles by analysts and practitioners with long histories in the country, who were closely involved in the programmes they describe. The contributions present a rare and detailed insight into the complexity of the intervention in Afghanistan – including the often complicated relations between donors and representatives of the Afghan government (with projects tending to be nominally Afghan-led, but clearly donor-driven), the difficulties in achieving greater coherence and leverage and, in many cases, the widely shared failure to learn the necessary lessons and to adapt to realities as they were encountered.

The experiences that the authors describe will probably sound all too familiar to anyone who has worked in post-conflict, aid-heavy contexts: the popularity of ‘trophy projects’ (Wiles), the proliferation of ‘encyclopaedic wish lists’ as a result of cumulative planning sessions (Leslie), the diplomatic wrangling to be given a seat at the table (Wilkens), the empty government buildings due to faulty planning (Horne), the frustration of trying to secure government buy-in for measures that threaten to disturb the political and economic status quo (Barr). They will also recognise the tendency for political expediency to trump long-term institution-building and accountability (Ruttig, Olexiuk, Kouvo) and the dubious role that post-conflict elections play in a country’s democratisation (Smith, Slavu).

The overarching lesson of the volume is probably that the key tools of the international assistance intervention – the protracted policy processes and coordination mechanisms, the large and inflexible assistance budgets, the focus on capacity building through mentoring and technical assistance – have proved to be very blunt indeed. There were successes to be found in the cracks, but mainly where a coherence of vision, realism and a fair amount of political will on the Afghan side ensured that good use was made of the resources provided.

The release of this book ahead of the Tokyo conference in July 2012 serves as a reminder of the recurring gaps between ambitious plans and conference statements on one hand and the subsequent realities of aid programming and implementation on the other. It is hoped this volume will help fortify the institutional memory of the donor community in Afghanistan, preventing future lapses and helping enable a greater capacity to learn world-wide. The lessons that have not been learned have relevance far beyond Afghanistan.

Martine van Bijlert

## OVERVIEW

### I. BUILDING POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Splitting assistance programmes along political, security and governance lines, the book first traces Afghanistan's rocky road towards stability in building the country's political institutions, starting with how the Bonn Agreement drew the outlines for a transitional post-Taliban government, moving to the Emergency Loya Jirga, the subsequent presidential and parliamentary elections of 2004 and 2005, and the attempts to pursue transitional justice and to build viable parliamentary and provincial government structures.

Thomas Ruttig, co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), whose history in Afghanistan dates back to the 1980s, starts off the volume with a closer look at the 2001 Bonn Agreement. He describes how the agreement and subsequent Emergency Loya Jirga, that laid the foundation for the current political system in Afghanistan, were initially met with great enthusiasm by both Afghans and internationals, but also how problems plagued each step of the process from the start. Voter registration became rife with fraud, the process of reintegrating militias was manipulated, and when factionalism became too great to overcome, the United Nations, empowered to ensure fair play, instead enabled the powerful to take over. The process, in many ways, seemed to reflect the widely held and patronising view that Afghans could not be trusted to choose their own democracy.

In the second chapter, which deals specifically with the Emergency Loya Jirga held in June 2002, Anders Fänge, who has also worked in Afghanistan since the early 1980s, provides a detailed and clear-eyed account of how the meetings were organised, from the choosing of delegates in the wake of the Bonn Agreement, to the holding of local meetings, which gave cause for hope until the national gathering took place and political dreams were trumped by factionalism and manipulation.

Two chapters deal with different aspects of the 2004 presidential elections, reflecting on the technical achievements and the political disappointments that give cause for reflection ahead of the next round of voting expected for 2014. Scott Seward Smith, a former political officer at the United Nations, argues that the 2004 presidential election – a logistical triumph against high odds – mainly served as a popular referendum on the Bonn Agreement and the country's new beginning. It was far less successful in establishing a strong base for Afghanistan's democratisation. Increasingly the main purpose of elections has become to simply uphold the constitution and in doing so to maintain the country's fragile political arrangements.

Catinca Slavu, an electoral consultant with experience in many countries, details the out-of-country vote that took place in 2004 among Afghan refugees living in Iran and Pakistan. She describes the inception, organisation and results of the programme and how it enfranchised many of those displaced by more than three decades of war: the out-of-country vote represented 10 per cent of the total votes cast. But the technical achievements

were done at disproportionately high monetary costs and for the wrong reasons, thus threatening rather than enabling true democratic process to take hold.

Marvin G Weinbaum reflects on the mixed success of the UN's programme to Support Effective Afghan Legislature (SEAL). The programme aimed to bolster parliament and provide a genuine forum for representative assembly and debate – a tall order in a country riven by divisions along ethnic, sectarian and clan lines and especially, as Weinbaum spells out, when donor funding stops and starts.

Sari Kouvo, co-director of AAN and human rights lawyer with expertise in the field of transitional justice, describes the attempts of the Afghan government and its international backers to deal (or not deal) with Afghanistan's legacy of atrocities committed during the decades of conflict. She focuses in particular on the trajectory of Afghanistan's Action Plan for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation, which was endorsed by the government but never seriously implemented. And although there were small victories, the author describes the launch of the report as one of those 'Afghan moments' when a 'step forward actually resulted in a marathon backwards'.

A contribution by Shahmahmood Miakhel, country director for the US Institute of Peace (USIP) and former deputy interior minister and governance advisor to the UN, illustrates how interventions that are nominally aimed at long-term institution-building are often in reality guided by short-term considerations and hobbled by infighting and unrealistic planning. The author describes the Afghanistan Stabilisation Programme (ASP), which was launched in 2004 to strengthen local governance and extend the reach of Kabul's authority into the districts. He describes the programme's plan, the establishment of an inter-ministerial task force, the lack of leadership and the all-too familiar political interference that led to only sporadic implementation on the ground.

## II. STRENGTHENING THE SECURITY FORCES

The second section of the book covers interventions in the security sector that were broadly aimed at building the country's security institutions, while dealing with the legacy of decades of war and weapons distributions. The attempts to provide the state with the monopoly on the means of violence were complicated by the fact that they took place in the context of an on-going military conflict.

The section's first chapter is by Steve Brooking, a long-time adviser to various Afghan security institutions in Kabul and the first UK official in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taleban. It describes the early days of NATO's mission in Afghanistan, detailing the Military Technical Agreement (MTA), the initially very limited area of responsibility and the succession of early lead nations. The author argues that the early involvement of ISAF, the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force, in Afghanistan was largely uncontroversial and that the main controversies are in hindsight – mainly over whether ISAF should have done more. It was, however, the author explains an alignment of disparate international and domestic interests that conspired to keep ISAF 'contained' during the early crucial years.

Antonio Giustozzi, long-standing researcher and author of several publications about Afghanistan, outlines the problems that have dogged the Afghan National Army (ANA) since the programme to build and train it came into force in 2002. In 'Marching in the Wrong Direction', the author describes how the initial focus on the army as a tool to re-centralise control over the periphery meant that it took years for the training to be adapted towards the army's actual tasks, as the insurgency was growing in strength. But even the remodelled ISAF training seems to have had only a limited impact, while the mentoring and partnering component has had mixed results and has in some ways resulted in greater dependency.

Former Canadian diplomat (also the first official from her country to arrive in post-Taleban Afghanistan), Eileen Olexiuk, describes the mechanics and unintended consequences of Afghanistan's Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme. She details how it was plagued by corruption, ended up empowering 'warlords', and did very little to effectively reintegrate former fighters – and attempts to draw lessons for future reintegration programmes, should a political solution to the current conflict be reached.

Alongside attempts to disarm and demobilise armed groups, a wide variety of new auxiliary armed groups was established, of which it was unclear whether the government would be able to control them. The initiatives, initially, tended to be modelled on idealised versions of community-based mobilisation, after which they were uncomfortably integrated into the formal police force. Mathieu Lefèvre, a former UN political officer who was

based in Zabul and Kabul, describes the two subsequent community defence programmes: the Afghanistan Public Protection Programme (APPP) and the Local Defence Initiative (LDI). The two are precursors of the current, and controversial, Afghan Local Police (ALP). Although the APPP/LDI/ALP are often touted, mainly by internationals, as effective and cheaper auxiliaries to the regular army and police, they have encountered serious problems of discipline, turf wars and a general lack of oversight.

Joanna Buckley, who worked as an adviser to the EU Special Representative and as a UN political officer, discusses the Focused District Development (FDD) programme, a massive effort to reform the lacklustre police training programme, based on a new approach and with a US\$2.5 billion infusion of cash. With its focus on the district level and emphasis on sustained mentoring, the FDD presented an important and welcome shift in attitude, but it did not meet expectations. The ambitions to implement holistic reform programmes turned out to be unrealistic and were quickly abandoned; suggestions on how the programme could be altered and improved were rebuffed as unwelcome criticisms.

Finally, in his second contribution to the volume, Steve Brooking describes the attempts by the Afghan government to control the proliferation of private security companies. This culminated in a blanket ban which was revoked under heavy international pressure. The controversy illustrates a fundamental underlying disagreement between the Afghan government and Western donors with regard to the desirability of private security arrangements, as well as the tensions involved in a nominal Afghan lead that is ignored when considered impractical.

### III. HOW THE AID ARCHITECTURE WORKED

The third and longest section of the book explores in more detail how the mechanisms of coordination and aid delivery have worked in practice. The first chapter by Anja de Beer, who worked for NGOs and the UN in Afghanistan since June 2001, details the origins of the current aid architecture – from the discussions in Washington in late 2001 when Afghanistan did not yet have a new government, to the various governing and coordination bodies set up in Kabul, each equipped with priority areas of work but hampered by a lack of leverage, a dearth of Afghan input and far too many meetings.

The former Swedish Ambassador to Pakistan and Afghanistan and AAN board member, Ann Wilkens, brings a colourful reportage to the book in a chapter that hones in on the diplomatic wrangling over who gets to sit at the table. She describes how an agreement between the Nordic countries to share a seat in the JCMB, the main donor coordination body, in the hope that others would follow suit and the effectiveness of the board would be increased, was sacrificed to considerations of national prestige.

Nick Horne, a former UN political officer who was among others based in south-eastern Afghanistan, discusses the dual role of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) as major development actors and a central part of the military counterinsurgency strategy. The author was impressed by the dedication of the staff in the four US PRTs he dealt with, but found the operating model of the PRTs to be ‘fundamentally flawed’, leading to poor value for money, corruption and no increased support for the Afghan government, despite this being one of the main aims.

Hamish Nixon, who spent five years in Kabul working on subnational governance for the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and the World Bank before joining USIP, discusses the confusion that ensued from a proliferation of programmes on the subnational level and the conflicting lines of authority within a highly centralised government system. The author describes how the establishment of the Independent Directorate for Local Governance, meant to integrate the diverging policies and initiative, did little to solve the confusion. On the international side the ‘increasingly desperate short-term counterinsurgency imperatives’ contributed to a further lack of vision and coherence.

While Afghanistan is witnessing one of the fastest rates of urbanisation in Asia, the ability to respond to this growth is sorely lacking. Author, architect and long-time Afghanistan resident Jolyon Leslie describes how attempts to arrive at a national strategy for urban development have resulted in a ‘tendency to present encyclopaedic wish lists’. While major problems – such as the continuing lack of basic services for large parts of the urban population and the prevalence of politically-backed land grabbing – remain unaddressed, much official energy is being spent on the establishment of a new ‘eco-neutral’ city.

The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) is widely acknowledged as one of Afghanistan's most successful interventions. Jennifer McCarthy, a development worker and researcher with years of experience in Afghanistan, explores what the widely acclaimed programme looks like at the micro-level. She describes the struggle of a family in Faryab as an illustration of how Afghanistan's participatory development model has not increased the agency and access to resources of the poorest families as much as it could have, and that a greater understanding of existing coping mechanisms could help to strengthen them.

Frauke de Weijer, who worked as a policy adviser in various Afghan ministries from 2002 to 2008, takes a brighter view and describes the process of capacity building within the Ministry for Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) as an early success. The main contributing factors identified by the author – juggling of competing demands and pressures, hand-picked capable managers and advisers, creative use of the often uncoordinated donor mandates – were ultimately all related to visionary leadership. In the absence of that, the disparate capacity building programmes and initiatives are unlikely to have much lasting impact.

Royce Wiles, who has worked as a librarian with the Kabul-based think tank AREU since 2003, describes the consequences of consistently undervaluing the importance of information management in most of Afghanistan's development projects. He focuses on the attempts to foster a stronger legal system with the establishment of the Independent National Legal Training Centre, and does so through the lens of the new law library. The author discusses, among other things, trophy projects, strategic opacity, the reluctance to share information and the tendency of projects to stagnate once they are handed over.

Andrew Pinney, a statistician and natural resource expert who worked in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2006 and helped develop the country's national household survey, describes the logistical and political obstacles involved in trying to organise Afghanistan's population census, which was envisaged by the Bonn Agreement to be held before 2008. The author discusses the sensitivity of population data, as it contributes to determining the composition of the Lower House, and points out that although the current estimates are fairly credible, the population is still so much in flux that all projections based on fixed growth rates are likely to become increasingly inaccurate as time passes.

Holly Ritchie, who has spent seven years in Afghanistan working for NGOs and as an independent consultant, focuses on entrepreneurship as a tool to help the poor. The author describes how the current approaches often entail throwing money at small enterprises without considering the traditional relational context. She challenges easy assumptions that market-based growth will automatically alleviate poverty or lead to improved political governance. Taking self-help groups in Balkh and Badakhshan examples, she advocates for grass-roots initiatives that facilitate gradual social and cultural change and that lead to more-inclusive economic development.

The volume closes with two chapters that provide a longer term overview. In a chapter on the history of drug control in Afghanistan, Doris Buddenberg, who has worked on this field since the mid-1980s, including as head of UNODC in Kabul from 2004 to 2006, explores Afghanistan's crop substitution and narcotics control programmes over three decades. She notes that not much has changed in terms of strategies and policy formulations and that the main dynamics remain the same: the higher the political instability, the higher the production of opium and the lower the implementation of narcotics control programmes.

In the last chapter of the volume, Heather Barr, a lawyer who has worked in Afghanistan for five years for the UN, describes the post-Taliban history of anti-corruption efforts in Afghanistan. She introduces the various bodies and initiatives in this sector and argues that the international support for Afghanistan's anti-corruption efforts illustrates the arc of international involvement in many fields: first, gradual awareness that spurs over-reaching measures, followed by cold reminders of the limits of influence, attempts at pragmatic partnership with the government, the recognition that 'shared goals' were not shared after all and, finally, resignation.