



WHAT IS FUNDAMENTALLY ACHING IN AFGHANISTAN ?

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As is usually done in polite society, the potential donor and the needy recipient first praise what has been achieved with funds so far before getting to the onerous task of negotiating for more money. As speech after speech reminded us at the June 12th conference in Paris where the Afghan government request an additional \$50 billion for the next five years, the Afghanistan of today is not the same devastated country that the Taliban regime was running before the 2001 intervention. Thousands of kilometres of road have been constructed, six million school children are now sitting behind desks, five million refugees have been repatriated from Pakistan and Iran, vaccination campaign has been successful, and women who choose not to wear, or are not forced by their male relatives, their burqas can now opt for multicoloured scarves. There is a constitution that diplomatically combines the tenants of Islam with that of liberalism, the country is run by an elected President, whose powers are checked by a so-called independent judiciary and strongly contested by a lively parliament. So much for democracy. As for the other pillar which now seems to define modernity in this age of globalization, the private sector is blowing its whistle as the “engine for growth”. And all this was achieved because interests converged: Afghans expected that the world will wake up to its moral obligation to help after abandoning them in the 1990s, and the international community saw its own interests in the stabilization and reconstruction of the country when it was deemed that an unstable Afghanistan would be “dangerous” for the rest of the world.

But let us hold the applause: These achievements fall in the “after 2001” zenith, which is not the same as the present nadir. The present narrative is mostly about the revival of the Taliban and their deadly challenge to the more than 53,000 NATO troops, Operation Enduring Freedom American forces and the Afghan National Army and Police. It is a narrative of recurrent suicide bombings, of widespread corruption, of opium production amounting to half of the country’s GDP, and of the misuse, both by national institutions and the international community, of the 15 billion dollars that has already been spent on the country. At the Paris conference, every speech ended with a warning that the job is far from done and at the very least, everyone’s credibility is at stake in Afghanistan.

And then, the blaming game started, as prelude to bargaining, and much of it was of course about the problem of aid effectiveness so far. When 90 percent of all public expenditures depend on international assistance, the stakes were high.

Donors, including bilaterals and international financial institutions, pointed their long fingers, united for once, at the staggering problem of widespread corruption, weak budgetary execution, inefficient delivery, financial mismanagement, inability to raise taxes and incomplete administrative reforms. They are worried about absorption capacity.

Afghan government officials, if they had prepared themselves by reading the recent Oxfam/Acbar damning report on Aid Efficiency released in March, could have retaliated by reminding donors that only \$15 billion of those pledges have been disbursed so far, and out of those, 40 % has returned to donor countries in corporate profits and consultant salaries. So technically, a good percentage of what they were asking now was not new money. They could have lamented that two thirds of foreign assistance bypasses the Afghan government completely, over half of all aid is tied to procurement of sources from own donor countries. Far too much aid has been prescriptive and driven by donor’s own priorities, rather than theirs, and the under-resourced agriculture sector will be a prime example. They could have also point their fingers, although a shorter and more timid one since they were in the needy seat, at the lack of coordination, transparency and accountability of donor aid. A timid voice could have also, but didn’t, remind everyone that the last time they met in London, the outcome document known as the Afghanistan Compact had 77 measurable benchmarks for the Afghan government but none for donors. They did however, request loudly that aid should be provided to the government core budget. They finally got \$20 billion, and it is not even clear how much fresh money that was.

These technicalities were all negotiated in Paris around the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, a plan for reconstruction of the security, development and governance priorities for the next five years, which the government and donors have been involved in preparing for the past two years themselves. Let alone what was actually spent on the international consultants that zoomed to Kabul to work on this so-called preparation process, the product nonetheless is a heavy 500 plus page document, written in that grand language of international bureaucracy, with phrases such as “the ANDS is a Millennium Development Goals-oriented plan that will serve as the country’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper”. Nothing wrong with a five year plan, but the question remains as to whether this so-called Afghan document which proclaims the Afghanization of the development process, is known, or even understood by ordinary Afghans. True, the preparation process, both of this document and of the Paris donor meeting, included a large number of consultations with civil society actors, both national and international NGOs, and sub-national institutions. These consultations led to a vast number of recommendations, lobbying, organization, discussions, true to the nature of activism in civil society. In the language of development assistance, the box of “bottom up” consultation was ticked.

And yet, how much have, at the end of the day, years of strategizing, advocacy, and planning changed the every day life of ordinary Afghans? The Afghan population may not understand the technical documents but is well aware of civilian deaths, of the misuse of funds, of promises unkept by both sides, by prices skyrocketing. Until they see tangible results in their every day lives, the Afghan population will not buy into all these grand bargains. And in that very lies the real culprit of why things are not settled in Afghanistan, once and for all.

While donors and western educated Afghan government officials sat in Paris negotiating over *crème brulée*, it may have been appropriate to remind them that 2/3 of Afghans are illiterate, that more than three quarters live in rural areas, very far from urban centers which have been the recipient of aid, and not all are planting poppies or standing in line to join suicide bombing expeditions. In fact, it is the ordinary Afghan that really wants things to work, not because of some instrumental reason of regional instability, international terrorism, institutional failure, or failed models of development, but because they simply want a better life. And simply put, their lives in the past seven years have not improved tangibly. Perception studies, including one that was recently carried out jointly between Sciences Po and the University of Kabul, echo back incessive complaints about insecurity: Not just of the traditional kind, although

violence and terrorism does fare quite high on every day concerns, but also and especially in the larger sense of lack of economic security, access to adequate food, housing, health care, etc.

When they consistently ask for jobs, they are not only crying out for economic security for their children, or for alternatives livelihoods that would stir them away from illegal activities and crime, but because they, ultimately, want to be part of the reconstruction of their country. Their human resources are their best contribution to the grand bargain, and without which, the bargain itself falls apart. When they ask for education, of all levels and not just infrastructure for primary schools, they are saying loud and clear that they need to have the information and the ability to understand the terms of that grand bargain and of its values: democracy, private sector-led development, conflict management, globalization, etc etc. From their dissatisfaction stems a deeper malaise: the stinking feeling of injustice, emanating from a historical wrong of abandonment, of unkept promises, of hugely differentiated salaries, of uncontrolled corruption , so manifestly visible in the form of kitch mini palaces being constructed in the midst of garbage festered streets of Kabul, where invalids of past wars beg.

There is no denying: the malaise points to a serious, far reaching problem: that of erosion of trust. Although the mistrust between the donors and the government will steal the day in Paris, the most problematic one for everyone is the erosion of trust between the Afghans and their state.

Naturally, it is the so-called spoilers of peace, be they called insurgents, Taliban, Al Qaeda, terrorists, or by any other evil name, who benefits from this growing sense of dissatisfaction and mistrust. If national and international institutions cannot deliver basic goods, local warlords can find local solutions, even if they are illegal. And a marginalized, dissatisfied and needy population provides a sympathetic pool for recruitment. Surely the experience of warrior refugees stemming from camps in Pakistan during the Soviet invasion could not be forgotten so fast.

Assuming the international community is ready to hear the alarming message that trust has been eroded to dangerous levels, what can it really do? Surely trust is more easily broken than restored. It must start perhaps by revising its own role in building and not breaking that trust that should be forged between the state and society. The list of technical issues that the

international community can do and should do for Afghanistan is not short. But fundamentally, until three crisis are resolved, this list will grow even longer in the future.

First, the international community should deal with the crisis of state legitimacy. Afghans, no matter how entrepreneurial in spirit, need an authority to put order, to take control, and to provide. Local populations may privately bemoan external actors for the inefficient intervention, but they would primarily blame the state and their government for losing control. During times of crisis, authority and discipline become inevitably coveted, and the incapacitated state becomes as evil in collective consciousness as the predator state. Ancient regimes are then vindicated: During the Taliban there was at least security, and during Najibullah, the government at least controlled prices of primary goods in the market. Let there be no hesitations, the state is needed in Afghanistan and the international community cannot substitute it. And state building starts by improving the legitimacy and efficiency of the government which then translates into its authority. Aid that undermines this authority can do harm. The way that the government has handled aid, with a skilled combination of corruption and lack of capacity, has discredited it in the eyes of the population. But this is far from a good thing, especially in the long term.

Second, rushed timing should give way to slower pace that can bring in a lot more Afghan "buy in". Time used to seem urgent back in 2001 at the Bonn Conference for immediate deployment of international troops, instant democracy, abrupt opening up of market forces, and short term projects designed to show rapid results. In this rush to provide quick fix solutions, the national context and the nature of Afghan society was largely ignored: A context populated by a traumatized, poor, largely traditional, often conservative, incapacitated but very proud nation. What was the use of formal, often modelled after Western institutions of democracy when the culture of democracy remained largely ignored and when literacy levels were so high? When traditional institutions were, if understood, used only nominally? When the Afghan way of political representation through political parties, even if they had often been manipulated by ethnic and clan interests, remained largely ignored and representatives of more than 95 political parties were not allowed a seat or a voice formally in the legislature? What was the use of a liberal market economy when national production had been put to a stand still, while a most lucrative drug economy happened to be illegal and very receptive to informality. The market was captured through rampant monopoly and speculation, imports zapped up local incentives, and prices skyrocketed. When instant trade was prioritized over long term agriculture, the every day bread became tied to volatility of global food crisis and Pakistani politics. The substantive

price increases of this spring can manifest itself in riots if not additional recruitment by insurgencies of very dissatisfied people. Emergencies that we have to deal with today could have been prevented if, in the past seven years, the pace had been in fact slower. Massive and sustained investment in agriculture through irrigation and dam constructions, in job creation through public works, and in the education system and quality at all levels, and not only through infrastructure building for primary schools, are long term projects long overdue that could prevent future vulnerabilities.

Third, is the imperative to better understand Afghan society and let its true nature come forth, even if it may not be modelled after the expectations of external agents of “modernization”, the hidden word behind all the talk about “reconstruction”. Ultimately, the Afghan society is inherently and fundamentally characterized by two deeply engrained traditions: collectivism, whether it be manifested through extended households, clans and tribes, and religiosity. In its wide range, traditional civil society, including tribal leaders, local councils (shuras/jurgas), religious actors (ulemas), and religious institutions such as the mosque and the madrassas provide moral authority. They have considerable potential to strengthen bonds in society, serve as local information brokers, perform social security functions through charity and redistribution of resources within the community, and even provide security. It should not be denied, Islam plays a primordial role in society and politics. Yet, donors have mainly supported formally established organizations with secular developments programs. Government officials and western donors are reluctant to engage with them for a variety of reasons: Lack of familiarity, stereotype of religious leaders and traditional institutions as militant extremist, the perception that they are opposed to modernization. Traditional and religious society, on its part, sees religion and tradition as protected domestic concerns where foreign intervention is not wanted. It is necessary to establish genuine dialogue in Afghanistan about the “modernization” project underlying the grand bargains and how it can reconcile with traditional society. That conflict is played out every day in the National Assembly. It is a genuine conflict and should not be avoided, denied or manipulated. Every society has to go through this battle, by itself, to pick and choose among the best values that work for it and to reconcile them. But caution is necessary: It is the Afghan state and civil society that need to take the lead in defining the relationships.. External actors have to understand how they work in the afghan context, but be very careful about judging it, or worse even, denying it or trying to eliminate it with its own understandings, and one may say prejudice towards secularism and modernity.

Fourth, the ownership of the peace process is ultimately in the hands of the Afghans themselves. This may be an obvious statement but it is not enacted. Negotiations with the Taliban is a case in point. For the moment, a variety of negotiations are carried out at in secret, by different parties, sometimes along contradictory dictates, and always unclear about what is the power that is going to be shared. It remained unclear as to WHO exactly should be negotiating with the Taliban and for what purpose. Shrouded in this ambiguity, peacemaking is not a national reconciliation the project that could be properly owned by the Karzai government. There needs to be a national campaign of peace, one that will surely be slow, embattled rift with ethnic, clan and language interest. But the international community should trust that the battle is now going to be using the political instruments of democracy, if it genuinely trusts democracy, and no longer in the battle field, if it genuinely believe Afghans. If the political project should be Afghan owned, so should be the military one. The Afghan army is suffering from lack of capacity, training and equipment, while the number of international troops increases. If there is one thing that every Afghan male has learned in the past two decades, that is war. Surely they know their territory, the tactics of their enemies, better than others? They should be trusted.

If you ask the parliament, the main problem is the legitimacy of sovereignty. Why is the timetable and the mandate of the presence of international troops on the territory of Afghanistan not put through a national vote? Of the fact that the country which was supposed to gain sovereignty, still has its economic policies dictated from the outside, its security provided by international forces without a national mandate voted in its national parliament, its peace being negotiated by others, the institutions of democracy not really used or meaningful.

Ultimately, these underlying questions, fundamentally related, are all about the problem of ownership. If the international community continues to think instrumentally about Afghanistan, and by extension, of the Afghan people, equating its engagement there with curbing the roots of terrorism, or of testing models of democracy and market economy in post conflict situation, success will not be achieved. The cycle of mistrust should be broken. There is no alternative anyway. Peace cannot be achieved without them.