

Report shows Afghanistan mired in corruption

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Previous to the current mantra of the US-led occupation of Afghanistan as the “winnable war,” it was the “war for hearts and minds.”

Although hardly mentioned of late, it relied on the concept that the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 would lead to the reconstruction of the country’s battered infrastructure and civil society, and the stabilisation of its security.

After five and a half years, both these objectives are as far away as ever. Under the shadow of a foreign occupation and US/NATO-sponsored warlords, the mass of Afghans—who are both directly and indirectly increasingly supportive of the insurgency—have slipped further into urban poverty and rural destitution while a handful of corporate contractors, government officials and drug barons benefit from increasing social instability and an ever-expanding narcotics economy.

To give one example, a Working Paper was published in July, entitled *Corruption perceptions and risks in humanitarian assistance: an Afghanistan case study* by Kevin Savage, Lorenzo Delesgues, Ellen Martin and Gul Pacha Ulfat.

Delesgues is Director of Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA). Savage is a Research Officer with the Humanitarian Policy Group. Oxfam Afghanistan also supported the study, who in turn acknowledged Christian Aid’s Herat team for its support in the field research.

The report focused on the delivery of aid to a long-established, internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Herat in the period 2001 to 2003, as well as more general interviews in Kabul. The authors conclude, “the picture it paints is a devastating one.”

They write, “The intervention by the United States in 2001 and the subsequent fall of the Taliban hugely increased international attention on Afghanistan. This saw a massive increase in the number of organisations and the size of humanitarian assistance projects implemented in the country. Organisations already present in the country, heavily constrained and limited in their past work by the Taliban government, were now able to expand their scope, and many

more organisations came to Afghanistan to begin operations. There was also a huge increase in the amount of funding available for humanitarian assistance. Such assistance was desperately needed. Some 80 percent of Afghanistan’s population lives in rural areas where there is high pressure on arable land, as well as cyclical droughts and continual threats to livelihood assets from chronic political instability.

“In 2001, Afghanistan had been suffering the effects of countrywide drought since 1996, and localised natural calamities—earthquakes, floods, landslides, agricultural pests—which continue to place great strains on the population, particularly in the rural areas. The unprecedented drought left much of the population very vulnerable to food insecurity and caused large-scale displacement. Many thousands of people were in desperate need of assistance by the time of the intervention and the fall of the Taliban.”

After pointing out that many of the personnel and structures in the IDP camp at Herat remained as under the Taliban after 2001, the report states, “Although several studies have focused on humanitarian aid in Afghanistan before 2001, few deal with humanitarian aid, or indeed the issue of corruption in the humanitarian system, following the overthrow of the Taliban regime.”

The report reconsiders the apparent contradiction of the fortuitous position of aid agencies after the fall of the obstructionist Taliban regime and the futility of their efforts ever since.

“The resources that became available to resolve the conflict and rebuild the country seemed promising, but five years later, and despite considerable progress, the country remains one of the poorest in the world, with reports of chronic aid mismanagement, waste and corruption.”

Although, as the authors assert; waste and corruption are not synonymous, they insist that the two have often accompanied each other.

“The spending imperative was especially evident in the run-up to the 2004 Afghan elections and the need for the US in particular to present Afghanistan as a success story, especially in view of the ongoing conflict in Iraq.”

As examples of this, the report cites the construction of the USAID-funded Kabul-to-Kandahar highway, a campaign promise by President Hamid Karzai before the 2004 elections. The road was built in less than two years, but is already disintegrating due to poor design, bad planning and poor-quality materials.

Another example concerns the USAID's "Accelerating Success Initiative" under which US construction firm Louis Berger built and renovated 533 schools and clinics at a cost of \$226,000 each. The Afghan government could apparently have carried out the work for \$50,000 per building. Many of these buildings were later damaged during the winter because of poor design quality.

This practice became routine in occupied Afghanistan:

"Much of the post-war funding in Afghanistan has flowed through international NGOs, which have then subcontracted work to local organisations. This work is then sometimes subcontracted again. This results in a long chain of upwards accountability that is hard to monitor and offers many opportunities for corruption."

Noting that the number of registered NGOs increased 10-fold in just four years, it continues, "Afghan law has no room for not-for-profit charitable organisations, and the local NGOs receiving funding contracts to do this work have been considered private companies no different from standard profit-making businesses, and differentiated from non-operational 'social' organisations (which are registered with the Ministry of Justice).

"Many are in fact private for-profit contractors doing business with aid actors, such as building contractors. Others are businesses set up specifically to profit from aid contracts. Others are not-for-profit charities set up to implement aid work, more in keeping with the typical understanding of 'NGO.' Still others have been corrupt 'briefcase' NGOs set up specifically to defraud aid agencies and donors. Corruption, profiteering and profligate spending by NGOs have created a very negative perception of their work in Afghanistan, both locally and internationally."

The report states that there is now widespread resentment against the NGOs amongst Afghans. Aware that large sums of aid have been given over, the broad mass of the population have seen no improvement in their circumstances but can't help but note the vastly higher standards of living amongst NGO staff.

The report also mentions, although it does not detail, the official legitimising of corruption by US and UK authorities in their clandestine distribution of large sums of money to Afghan warlords in order to buy their support for the client government of Hamid Karzai—despite common knowledge that many warlords are involved in the drug trade.

In theory, it states, international aid agencies work under

the Department for Disaster Preparedness (DPP) and the National Disaster Management Commission (NDMC). But these in turn rely heavily on the local offices of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), which are subject to pressure from provincial governors and local warlords and who thereby "have tremendous power to control allocations of aid and its disbursement."

"...In Afghanistan, there is often a close connection between decision-makers and individuals with an interest in the decision. Most of the important warlords have a significant influence on the private companies working in the province."

The report's concluding remarks are inevitably a mixture of diplomacy and wishful thinking.

"While the study highlights how difficult it can be to operate and manage corruption risks in environments such as Afghanistan, it also shows that there are compelling reasons to improve how systems of control are managed and implemented. Large amounts of aid intended for suffering and vulnerable people flowed to powerful elites because they were able to exploit weaknesses in these systems. Investment in better controls and management might have prevented much of this abuse, and would undoubtedly cost less than the price corruption exacts in aid effectiveness."

There has been sparse comment in the media about the endemic corruption gripping Afghanistan. Among the few exceptions was a BBC World Service report in July that looked at how the widespread corruption (including the Ministry of Interior) is creating popular disillusionment with the central government.

The report can be heard on BBC.

On September 6, the BBC also carried a piece quoting the Afghan urban development minister saying that land is being appropriated illegally by powerful individuals at a rate of 2 square kilometres (0.8 square miles) a day.

The minister, Yousaf Pashthun, said former military commanders, members of parliament and senior officials are seizing land and then selling it illegally. The "land mafia" have stolen 5,000 square kilometers of land this year. Pashthun said one of the reasons very little is being done about the problem is that many people in positions of power, including the government, are involved in the land grab.



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