



GROUNDING INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHAN REALITIES

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on the occasion of the London and Kabul Conferences on Afghanistan*

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If the international community is to ensure that its aid effectively contributes to a stable, governable state, it must take a supportive role, so that Afghans can choose their own destiny. A heavily directive role is a path to dependence and resentment on the part of Afghans. If the international community listens as much as it speaks, and if it responds genuinely to Afghan needs and priorities, then the shoots of hope, already present, can grow.

AREU's basic contention is that a lasting and just peace in Afghanistan, the kind of peace that is a natural repellent to insurgency, can only come when international intervention is informed and driven by the social, economic and political realities that Afghans face. Decisions that are blind to these realities, and driven by the short-term political convenience of international leaders, are likely to fail both in their stated objectives of development, and in providing a foundation to counter terrorist threats. We observe that the international intervention in Afghanistan has become increasingly informed by "realities on the ground" and yet at the same time, such progress constantly risks being undermined by imposed ideologies and political pressures.

Many of the problems that the international community faces in Afghanistan arise from their own hastily-made decisions and short-term planning, driven by political expediency. And yet, the international community has been learning from its experiences, and from such learning there comes some renewed hope. The London and Kabul conferences on Afghanistan in early 2010 provide an important opportunity to nurture insights and further redress some of the problems created by earlier political short-sightedness. On the other hand, with impatient publics and increasing pressure for quick solutions, there is also a grave risk that the errors of the recent past will be repeated.

Since 2002, AREU has conducted numerous studies through which we have observed weaknesses characteristic in the approach of international intervention, as well as some heartening improvements. To consolidate the lessons gleaned from eight years of hard-won experience, AREU recommends that the international community pay attention to four strategic issues in shaping its engagement in Afghanistan:

- 1. Increase recognition of "on-the-ground" realities:** International intervention has often assumed Afghanistan to be a "blank slate." International engagement in Afghanistan has shown an initial, and at times willful, blindness to many of the existing informal or semi-formal mechanisms and practices that have carried Afghan society through the last few decades of upheaval and civil war. These include, for example, public administrative systems that have endured through various regimes, and informal credit systems.¹ Yet in each of these areas, policymakers have come to appreciate and respond to these existing systems, and have begun to use these understandings to support what is already working in Afghanistan.
- 2. Base policy on evidence rather than ideology:** Policy has often been driven by ideology or assumption rather than evidence. This is true of counter-narcotics policies that failed to recognise the great importance of opium poppy to rural livelihood security, and which inadvertently increased support for the Taliban by those who had no other means of livelihood in the face of poppy bans.² It is also true of economic policies that prioritised privatisation of national assets above more pressing structural reforms that were more likely to stimulate economic growth.³ Yet again, international policymakers, along with Afghan government officials, have learnt that these policies are not working and have begun to adjust them accordingly. This is great progress.

¹ See for example: Hamish Nixon, *Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan* (Kabul: AREU, 2008); Paula Kantor, *From Access to Impact: Microcredit and Rural Livelihoods in Afghanistan* (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

² Adam Pain, "Let them Eat Promises": Closing the Opium Poppy Fields in Balkh and its Consequences (Kabul: AREU, 2008); David Mansfield and Adam Pain, *Counter-Narcotics in Afghanistan: The Failure of Success?* (Kabul: AREU, 2008).

³ Anna Paterson and James Blewett, *Putting the Cart Before the Horse? Privatisation and Economic Reform in Afghanistan* (Kabul: AREU, 2006).

3. **Be cautious about concepts and assumptions:** The international community has often transported terms such as “democracy,” “gender equity,” and “merit-based practices” into Afghanistan without giving enough consideration to what these notions may mean in the Afghan context, and how they sit with Afghan values and culture.⁴ The recent elections and increased international emphasis on “corruption” provide important opportunities to revisit these concepts and ask crucial questions about what they mean to Afghans, and how Afghans want to enact them. For example, recent AREU research on Afghan perceptions of democracy found that Afghans in the study supported the idea of democratic government but did not appreciate some of the western values with which democracy is often associated. They wanted an Afghan democracy within the framework of Islam.⁵
4. **Take the longer-term view:** The international donor community often presses for fast and visible improvements in the areas of governance, development and security in Afghanistan. Such pressure has led to unrealistic national-level goals, without adequate means of implementing them. This has also led to a sidelining of sustained capacity-building efforts in favour of bringing in well-paid technical advisors who are temporarily embedded in ministries. Creating unreachable expectations and channelling funds through institutions that cannot competently dispense them tend to weaken rather than strengthen the Afghan civil service. The drafting of subsequent national policies has seen greater Afghan involvement, but this area remains a weak point for international engagement.

This does not mean that the international community should stand by in the face of impunity and malpractice. Afghan trust in the international community has been undermined when international leaders have supported the installation of discredited Afghan leaders because it has been convenient for them to do so.⁶ Afghan experiences with widespread malpractice in the contracting of reconstruction and development projects, often overseen by international agencies, have also contributed to scepticism about international integrity and intentions.⁷ If Afghans are to regain trust in the international community, they must be able to see that the latter adhere to principles of fairness and justice above their own interests and conveniences.

Many nations have committed troops to Afghanistan in the hope of seeing an improvement in Afghanistan’s domestic security, and thus reducing international terrorist threats. However, international military presence cannot address the root causes of insecurity in Afghanistan. An international preoccupation with military strategy has deflected attention from building up civilian institutions and developing the economy. The outcomes of international engagement, whether military or civilian, are subject to the political dynamics that tie together the social and economic fabric of the country. Civilian development can only contribute to stability if it is defined and legitimised from the perspective of the Afghan people—otherwise it is merely a foreign imposition that will lead to growing polarisation and conflict.

The London and Kabul conferences on Afghanistan in 2010 provide an opportunity for the international community to collectively reaffirm their commitment to move forward with what works, to listen and learn from Afghans, and to support Afghans in building up public institutions that are legitimate in their own eyes. It is in building steadily on these efforts, too long neglected in preference of quick-fix and military solutions, that the greatest hope for stability and collective prosperity lies.

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4 See Martine van Bijlert, *Between Discipline and Discretion: Policies Surrounding Senior Subnational Appointments* (Kabul: AREU, 2009); Anna Larson, *A Mandate to Mainstream: Promoting Gender Equality in Afghanistan* (Kabul: AREU, 2008); and Noah Coburn, *Losing Legitimacy? Some Afghan Views on the Government, the International Community, and the 2009 Elections* (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

5 Anna Larson, *Toward an Afghan Democracy? Exploring Perceptions of Democratisation in Afghanistan* (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

6 Rama Mani, *Ending Impunity and Building Justice in Afghanistan* (Kabul: AREU, 2003).

7 C. Johnson and J. Leslie, *Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace* (London: Zed Books, 2005).