



What Makes This Time Different?

AREU Director Dr Paula Kantor Responds to the Kabul Conference

Press Release, 22 July 2010

On July 20, the Government of Afghanistan hosted the Kabul International Conference on Afghanistan, where it renewed its commitment to deliver security, services and economic opportunities to the Afghan people, and international delegates renewed their support to the Afghan government. As the ninth in a series of international conferences on Afghanistan since 2001, how was this one different?

In fact, the content of the Communiqué does not appear to have changed substantially from previous conference statements. Therefore, the key requirement for change is a significant increase in political will to improve the lives of Afghans through delivering on prioritised commitments, and to delink development and military interventions.

How new is the Communiqué?

Many of the commitments in the Communiqué are laudable: security, economic development, public sector reform and accountability, and improved access to justice. But the same commitments have been made repeatedly since 2001, often in well-thought out and well-articulated statements.¹

Three specific examples of restated commitments in the Communiqué of the Kabul Conference are:

1. **Establishing merit-based appointments:** Merit-based appointment procedures have been on the agenda since 2001, and numerous efforts to implement such procedures have met with limited results.² The Communiqué again commits to implementing them, but with no reference to past attempts or recognition of the need to ensure that definitions of “merit” fit Afghan realities.
2. **Establishing subnational governance structures:** The Communiqué commits to implementing the Sub-National Governance Policy over the next 12 months, setting an ambitious timeframe for a complicated set of political processes. This includes establishing district boundaries and clarifying enduring contradictions and ambiguities about the role of different local governance structures, which have not been resolved despite previous commitments to do so.³
3. **Anti-corruption and reform measures:** A stronger emphasis on anti-corruption and reform is an encouraging sign, but will only gain real significance when reflected in changes on the ground. Key indicators of progress would be when those guilty of corruption are being prosecuted (including those in positions of high authority), and when Afghans can access services through reliable and transparent processes.

This repackaging of past commitments without acknowledging their previous failings could lead Afghans to conclude that the conference’s Communiqué will be like many other such documents: words on paper. Only results from implementing these agendas can prove otherwise.

What is not in the Communiqué?

The Communiqué is as noteworthy for what it does not say as for what it does. The real and urgent issues facing Afghanistan and leading to a crisis of confidence among many Afghan people are not strongly addressed by the Communiqué. Specifically, it does not address:

1. **The current political and security context of Afghanistan:** In Afghanistan, insurgency is at a new height, as is the presence of international forces.⁴ Unfortunately, increasing military operations creates new risks for civilians. The

¹ Prior statements and policy commitments include the Bonn Agreement of 2001, the Afghanistan Compact of 2006, and the Hague Statement of 2009.

² Martine van Bijlert, *Between Discipline and Discretion: Policies Surrounding Senior Subnational Appointments* (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

³ Hamish Nixon, *Subnational State-Building in Afghanistan* (Kabul: AREU, 2008).

⁴ See The ANSO Report Issue 53 (1-15 July 2010), <http://www.afgns.org/2010/THE%20ANSO%20REPORT%20%281-15%20July%202010%29.pdf>.

Communiqué regrets the loss of civilian life, but otherwise its strategies for reform and development assume a degree of security and stability that is not present in many parts of the country. Likewise, its peace and reintegration plan assumes a national political consensus that has not been forged.

2. **The need for justice with peace:** The Communiqué contains little to alleviate fears that peace may be pursued at the cost of justice—and particularly at the cost of human rights, women’s rights and the rights of victims of the current and past conflicts. The Action Plan for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation—the strongest joint commitment to just reconciliation and part of the 2006 Afghanistan Compact—is not mentioned and is at risk of being set aside entirely.⁵
3. **The desire of all Afghans for a better quality of life:** Despite some gains in access to health, education, water and other basic services, many Afghans today are no better off economically than they were in 2004, and many are worse off.⁶ This trend is not primarily because of insecurity, but is related rather to increasing pressure on scarce resources, drought, limited economic opportunities, inequalities and abuses, and limits to informal social coping mechanisms. The Communiqué does not acknowledge these pressing realities, and its focus on growth does not ensure that the poor and most vulnerable will benefit from the Kabul Conference process. Further, focusing development aid and governance reform in areas of military priority can feed perceptions of inequality and do little to contribute to long-term peace.
4. **Constraints, priorities and long-term engagement:** While ambition is laudable, there are clear constraints and obstacles facing the government in delivering on its promises, and there is a need to focus on quality and transparency in any actions undertaken. This requires setting priorities, addressing these constraints in planning, and recognising that objectives such as structural reform, rural development and the creation of economic opportunities will take time, patience and long-term commitment.

Going beyond words—how can the Kabul Conference process make a difference in Afghan lives?

As there is increasing talk of international military withdrawal and political settlement, it has never been more crucial to strengthen the legitimacy of the Government of Afghanistan in the eyes of the Afghan people, safeguard gains in human rights, and find the political will to push through important reforms. However, the Afghan government and the international community need to look beyond yet another “critical year” to establish long-term, realistic plans informed by the successes and failures of the past nine years of effort.

Three key recommendations for the Afghan government and its international partners are:

1. **Demonstrate political will to see through key reforms:** The people’s trust depends on seeing results: for example, seeing that officials guilty of corruption are prosecuted and that subcontracting arrangements that deliver poor quality outcomes are ended.
2. **Prioritise and monitor commitments:** The commitments in the Communiqué must be prioritised according to the Afghan people’s needs and priorities, and translated into activities leading to positive outcomes that can be monitored and that Afghans can see. The Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board needs to better hold all actors accountable for progress.
3. **Decouple aid from the military strategy:** Development assistance should be based on people’s needs and established good practices; tying it to security objectives undermines this principle and weakens national unity by seeming to reward insecure areas.

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research organisation based in Kabul. AREU’s mission is to inform and influence policy and practice through conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning. AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations.

⁵ Emily Winterbotham, *The State of Transitional Justice in Afghanistan* (Kabul: AREU, 2010).⁶ See “Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectories” case studies on Badakhshan (Kabul: AREU, 2009), Sar-i-Pul (Kabul: AREU, 2010) and Kandahar (Kabul: AREU, 2010). Also see: *Assessment of Development Results: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2002-08* (Evaluation Office of UNDP, May 2009).

⁶ See “Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectories” case studies on Badakhshan (Kabul: AREU, 2009), Sar-i-Pul (Kabul: AREU, 2010) and Kandahar (Kabul: AREU, 2010). Also see: *Assessment of Development Results: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2002-08* (Evaluation Office of UNDP, May 2009).