

## Pursuing aid effectiveness in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover

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**Introduction.** – The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 has dramatically worsened the humanitarian crisis of the country. In the summer of 2021, as U.S. troops left Afghanistan, chaos and fear seemed to rule the country. Hence, Afghanistan was hit by a devastating economic crisis, as well as food scarcity and human rights abuses. The international community has been urged to intervene in order to provide aid to civilians. However, as reported by Alesina and Dollar, the foreign aid's success is often hampered by the poor performances of the receiving governments or regimes<sup>1</sup>. The pattern of aid giving is often dictated by political and strategic considerations formulated by the receiving regimes<sup>2</sup>. This can potentially be counterproductive for the civil society's wealth. This is the case for Afghanistan, where the Taliban regime has been hindering foreign aid effectiveness in numerous ways. Firstly, donors have been discouraged in providing financial support to a despotic regime which violates basic human rights. Additionally, aid assistance provided to Afghanistan has often been misused by the Taliban. Therefore, the international community's attempts to support the civil society in the country have only partially succeeded. This paper will examine the approaches taken so far in providing aid assistance, analyzing their limits and potentials. Thus, innovative potential solutions for more effective aid will be proposed. After a brief background of the political situation in Afghanistan, the paper will deal with three issues that require international aid: economic crisis and food insecurity, women's rights abuses, and refugee crisis. The international response to the humanitarian crisis will then be scrutinized in an attempt to find new ideas for bettering the provision of assistance to the country at hand.

**Background.** – The Afghan political scenario has always been particularly controversial and complicated. A brief explanation of the historical and political circumstances, which led to the humanitarian crisis in 2021, will now be provided in order to facilitate the reader and contextualize the analysis of humanitarian aid assistance.

During the Cold War, Afghanistan was a Middle Eastern battlefield. In the mid-1950s, the conflict between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. began as a non-military competition, characterized by media propaganda, infrastructure investment, and technical assistance<sup>3</sup>. Over 3\$ billion in foreign aid were invested in the country. Only in the 1970s, did the competition between the two powers begin to manifest itself on a military level. In 1979, the Soviets entered the country and attempted to create a socialist state<sup>4</sup>. The

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<sup>1</sup> Alberto Alesina and David Dollar, "Who Gives Foreign Aid to Whom and Why?" *Journal of Economic Growth* 5 (2000): 55.

<sup>2</sup> Alesina and Dollar, "Who Gives Foreign Aid to Whom and Why?", 40.

<sup>3</sup> Nake Kamrany, "Afghanistan Under Soviet Occupation", *Current History* 81, 475 (1982): 219.

<sup>4</sup> Sam Ellis, "The Taliban, explained", *Vox*, November 11, 2021. <https://www.vox.com/videos/2021/11/11/22776772/taliban-afghanistan-mujahideen-history-takeover>

Soviet-Afghan War lasted ten years, until the Soviet troops left the country in February 1989. During the Soviet invasion, the Afghan economy faced a considerable setback. In fact, it has been estimated that the country had withstood an economic loss of \$2 billion per year as the economy had become strongly dependent on the Soviet Union<sup>5</sup>. On the bright side, important investments were directed towards the infrastructure sector. Hospitals, paved roads connecting cities, and airports were built. Furthermore, the education system was expanded by the Soviets from the elementary to university level<sup>6</sup>.

In this phase of the conflict, the United States intervened by financing resistance groups emerging from anti-communist groups (mujahideen), also supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. In 1989, as the Soviets gave up and left the country and the Afghan Communist government collapsed, the mujahideen did not stop their fight and unleashed a long civil war<sup>7</sup>. The Taliban, coming from the Pashtun ethnic group in Kandahar, led these groups and gained power and resources through the illegal opium trade and the collection of taxes in the countryside. Neighboring countries, especially Pakistan, also armed and funded the Taliban. The first Taliban government was established in 1996. The new leadership was characterized by its inexperience, a strong application of religious ideology to all aspects of life, and numerous violations of international human rights (in particular women's rights)<sup>8</sup>.

After the attacks of 9/11, a U.S. coalition invaded Afghanistan to persecute Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders, while also promising to rebuild the country and turn it into a democracy. Therefore, numerous other NATO Allies intervened to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for international terrorist groups. Taliban leaders fled to Pakistan as the U.S. kept attacking the Taliban fighters in the rural areas of Afghanistan. After the Taliban attempt to re-occupy the rural areas in 2004, the Obama administration responded by sending more troops in the territory until 2009<sup>9</sup>. In fact, between 2009 and 2020, the U.S. has greatly reduced the number of troops in the country<sup>10</sup>. In the meantime, the Afghans' distrust in the corrupted government favored the Taliban consolidation of power. In 2020, the Trump administration made a deal with Afghanistan to leave the country and the decision was finalized by the Biden administration in 2021<sup>11</sup>. After the U.S. decision in April 2021 to withdraw the troops in Afghanistan, the Taliban began threatening urban areas controlled by the government. Within days, the Taliban had occupied several cities across the country and, on August 15<sup>th</sup>, they had reached the capital, causing the Afghan government to collapse. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 created a severe humanitarian crisis. Thousands of people were evacuated but a huge number of civilians were prevented from fleeing the country. Millions stuck in Afghanistan are currently facing starvation as the most are on the brink of poverty. The resident representative for the UNDP in

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<sup>5</sup> Nake Kamrany, "Afghanistan Under Soviet Occupation", *Current History* 81, 475 (1982): 219.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Sam Ellis, "The Taliban, explained", *Vox*, November 11, 2021. <https://www.vox.com/videos/2021/11/11/22776772/taliban-afghanistan-mujahideen-history-takeover>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief*. Congressional Research Service, accessed December 16, 2021. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R45122.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Afghanistan has stated that an economic shock and humanitarian crisis of this magnitude have never been seen before<sup>12</sup>. The Taliban have also been threatening basic human rights on a daily basis, especially those of women. Urgent steps must be taken to address the current humanitarian crisis.

**Analysis.** – The paper will now proceed with the analysis of the humanitarian issues that the country is nowadays facing and the international community’s resulting response up until now. Through a critical analysis of the aid provided so far, new ideas and suggestions will be supplied in an attempt to achieving a more efficient assistance.

1. *Financial crisis and food starvation.*- When the Taliban took control over the country in August, world governments immediately blocked Afghanistan’s access to international funding and assets for a value of \$10 billion were frozen. This generated a collapse in public finances and numerous workers stopped receiving salaries<sup>13</sup>. As affirmed by the representative of the UN Development Program in Afghanistan, the country is probably experiencing the worst humanitarian crisis the world has ever seen. It has been estimated that 23 million people are in food starvation and 97% of the Afghan population is at risk of sinking into poverty<sup>14</sup>. Prices for food and essentials have risen exponentially, most banks remain closed, and the UN has documented limited access to cash and food<sup>15</sup>. These phenomena could easily turn into a widespread famine.

Different measures have immediately been put in place by the UN agencies and their donors in order to tackle the emerging humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. However, during the UN conference in Geneva in September 2021, the UN Secretary General affirmed that it is impossible to supply humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan without engaging with Taliban authorities. Obviously, the Taliban violations of human rights, the reigning corruption, and the misuse of donation funds greatly discourage donors<sup>16</sup>.

In October 2021, the UNDP announced the establishment of a People’s Economy Fund aimed at providing liquidity for Afghans. The UNDP is urging donors to collect resources for the newly instituted fund<sup>17</sup>. The objective is to provide cash in local currency to community groups. Financial assistance will also be provided to micro-

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<sup>12</sup> Saheli Roy Choudhury, “Afghanistan is facing the ‘worst humanitarian disaster we’ve ever seen,’ the UN says”, *CNBC*, November 12, 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/11/12/afghanistan-is-facing-a-humanitarian-disaster-un-says.html>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “Afghanistan: Taliban Block Female Aid Workers”. *Human Rights Watch*, last modified December 21, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/04/afghanistan-taliban-blocking-female-aid-workers>

<sup>16</sup> Natasha Turak. “Donors pledging billions in aid to Afghanistan face a challenge: Navigating the Taliban”. *CNBC*, September 17, 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/09/17/aid-funding-for-afghanistan-at-risk-of-taliban-misuse-corruption.html>

<sup>17</sup> “UN sets up trust fund for Afghanistan amid cash shortages”. *Aljazeera*, October 21, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/21/un-sets-up-trust-fund-for-peoples-economy-in-afghanistan>

enterprises<sup>18</sup>. Surely, the People's Economy Fund has the potential to tackle the problem of limited access to cash and food shortage the country is currently facing. However, two problems arise concerning the institution of this new Fund. Firstly, as previously mentioned, donors are skeptic about financing a fund that is unlikely to actually help civilians but could increase corruption in the country. Secondly, the Taliban could easily seize the cash from civilians and misuse it. It can also be argued that unstable cash flows, together with the restricted ability of Afghans to receive aid, allow the Taliban to manipulate impoverished people. For these reasons, it is recommended for donors to support international agencies and NGOs that can deliver aid in the form of food, medicines and other basic goods instead of injecting money in Afghanistan. Another possible solution would be relying on independent organizations to delivering aid in Afghanistan (an approach already taken by the U.S. government). As mentioned by Collier and Hoeffler, the response of the international community to development issues should be appropriate to societal needs. Donating cash to the Taliban would probably not benefit civil society while also further empowering the regime<sup>19</sup>.

The head of the U.N. Development Program has also recently declared that the United Nations holds \$135 million in the Afghanistan Central Bank meant to finance the humanitarian operations. However, it is unable to use it since the central bank, ruled by the Taliban, is not allowed to convert dollars into the local currency<sup>20</sup>. This crucially hampers the operations in the country and exacerbates the humanitarian crisis.

Humanitarian aid, aimed at tackling the food shortage, has also been given in the form of pre-packaged food. The provision of food is crucial for the Afghan population to survive winter and, compared to the injection of cash in the local currency, it is less likely to be misused by the authorities. Nevertheless, it is arguable that the provision of pre-packaged food alone is not enough to tackle the spreading famine. Supporting local agricultural livelihoods is an urgent need. The FAO has demanded humanitarian assistance to support farmers and protect their agricultural livelihoods from severe drought<sup>21</sup>.

2. *Violations of women's and girl's rights.*- Another concern that emerging from the Taliban takeover in August 2021 is related to the violations of women's and girls' rights. The Taliban have deprived women of the rights to education, work, free movement and participation to public life<sup>22</sup>. Freedom of movement has been restricted by imposing a male accompaniment on women. The new restrictions on women's mobility have caused a dramatic increase in job losses. Equal access to education has been dramatically impacted. In fact, girls can access secondary education only in seven provinces out of

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<sup>18</sup> "\$667 million funding call to help Afghans through economic crisis". *UN News*, October 21, 2021. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/10/1103632>

<sup>19</sup> Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Aid, policy and growth in post-conflict societies". *European Economic Review* 48 (2004): 1226.

<sup>20</sup> "U.N. has millions in Afghanistan bank, but cannot use it". *Reuters*, February 4, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> "Drought threatens the livelihoods of 7 million farmers in Afghanistan". *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, last modified December 21, 2021. <https://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/1436950/icode/>

<sup>22</sup> Stephanie Nebehay and Emma Farge, "Taliban rule marked by killings, denial of women's rights – UN". *Reuters*, December 14, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-rule-marked-by-killings-boy-soldiers-arrests-un-2021-12-14/>

thirty-four<sup>23</sup>. Violence against women and girls has perilously increased, generating a climate of fear. While before the Taliban takeover women represented 28% of parliamentarians, nowadays their political participation is non-existent<sup>24</sup>. Restrictions on women's rights have also challenged the humanitarian sector and their civil society. Girls are prevented from operating as aid workers, preventing female beneficiaries from accessing the services provided.<sup>25</sup> The operations of the women's civil society have been curtailed and around 70% of the organizations have stopped working<sup>26</sup>. The work carried out by the civil society organizations in contrast with the Taliban's position on women's rights, was severely hampered. Before the Taliban takeover, numerous NGOs working for the protection of women's rights were operating in Afghanistan. Because of the Taliban violations of women's rights, the intervention of humanitarian aid on this matter remains a rather complicated matter. Women, previously working for NGOs promoting female empowerment, are now persecuted by the new regime. The work of these organizations continues to be hindered and it can be risky for women activists.

Although international aid is nowadays especially complicated in this area because of the Taliban ideologies and practices, the international community should take action in protecting Afghan women. In order to preserve their rights, monitoring human rights should be of utmost importance to guarantee accountability to the law. Support services and safe spaces should be provided to women. Financial support should be provided to the remaining women's civil society organizations. Furthermore, the international community should encourage the new Taliban regime to safeguard women's rights through the provision of more financial assistance.

3. *Migrant crisis*.- The humanitarian crisis developed in Afghanistan ever since August 2021 is also responsible for displacing Afghans trying to seek asylum. Civilians escape from the food and cash shortage as well as from the threats posed by the Taliban to minority groups, women and human rights activists. Those who managed to flee the country were welcomed in emergency processing centers scattered around different countries<sup>27</sup>. The international response to the new migrant crisis has been diverse. Pakistan and Iran have temporarily accepted refugees in camps near the border until they will be able to return to Afghanistan<sup>28</sup>. Uzbekistan is hosting refugees temporarily before transferring them to third countries. The response within the European Union has been rather unclear. While some states, including Germany, France, Italy and Spain have evacuated and accepted Afghan refugees, others, such as Austria, Poland and Switzerland have declared that they will not accept new arrivals<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> *Gender Alert I: Women's rights in Afghanistan: where are we now?* UN WOMEN, 2021. Accessed December 22, 2021. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Gender-alert-Womens-rights-in-Afghanistan-en.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> "Afghanistan: How many refugees are there and where will they go?", *BBC*, August 31, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58283177>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Evidently, the international community has not yet established a clear strategy to welcome and host Afghan refugees fleeing from famine and violence. As Collier and Betts discussed in *Refuge*, high income countries often tend to respond to the migrant emergency by financing the UN humanitarian system. The financial aid is then spent to create refugee camps, provide food, shelter, and clothing<sup>30</sup>. This system is designed to be short-term, however, it often becomes permanent. The international community has not yet endorsed an adequate strategy for assistance outside the camps<sup>31</sup>. Therefore, as analyzed by the authors, the response of the international community ideated for a short-term emergency becomes the norm. Refugees stay in their “protected refugee situations” for decades with no hope for a stable and respectable future in the host country. While responding to the humanitarian crisis occurring in Afghanistan, it is fundamental for the international community to reconsider the issue of refuge not only as a humanitarian issue (that can be dealt with the supply of food, shelter and clothing) but also as a development impairment. New ideas for a more efficient aid provision in the field of refuge will now be provided.

Governments and UN agencies are urged to provide support to endangered civilians by expanding humanitarian corridors. As suggested by the WANA Institute, host states should receive incentives from the international community to open the borders and welcome more refugees<sup>32</sup>. Governments should also exploit their diplomatic influence on the Taliban to convince them to comply with their international human rights obligations as well as allowing civilians to leave the country. In fact, the Taliban control all main borders with the neighboring countries, often preventing people from reaching the airports<sup>33</sup>. Once arrived in neighboring or host countries, Afghans should receive adequate reception conditions. Funding should be mobilized in order to facilitate host countries in this process. Psychological support should be provided to the newly arrived and efforts should be undertaken to reunite unaccompanied minors with their families. Access to healthcare should be guaranteed to Afghan refugees, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Host countries should provide Afghan refugee children with quality and inclusive education without discrimination within three months of arrival. These initiatives should be financed by donor countries. Furthermore, it is advisable to create conditions that enable refugees to work and construct a new life.

**Conclusion.** – In conclusion, the work carried out by the international development community in Afghanistan after August 2021 has partly benefited civil society. Regarding the dangerous economic crisis and the relative food insecurity, it has been argued that the creation of a People’s Economy Fund, pumping cash in local value, can be risky as it could empower the Taliban at the expense of the population. It has been suggested that the provision of food, medical supplies and basic needs, together with the

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<sup>30</sup> Alexander Betts and Paul Collier, “Introduction”, in *Refuge rethinking refugee policy in a changing world* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>31</sup> Betts and Collier, “Introduction”, 7.

<sup>32</sup> “Forging New Strategies in Protracted Refugee Crises: Syrian Refugees and the Host State Economy”. *WANA Institute*. Accessed December 19, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> “Afghanistan: How many refugees are there and where will they go?”, *BBC*, August 31, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58283177>

support for the protection of livelihoods, can be more effective and secure for the population. The issue of women's rights is more complicated given the strong restrictions imposed by the regime. Nevertheless, a series of ideas to limit women's rights abuses have been provided. Finally, the measures taken by the international aid community with regard to the issue of the refugee crisis have been analyzed. On this matter, it has been argued that more effort should be taken on long-term projects, that create the fundamentals for the integration of refugees in host countries.

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