

## On Shaky Grounds

# COVID-19 and Afghanistan's Social, Political and Economic Capacities for Sustainable Peace

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## Foreword

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Throughout most of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted lives across Asia and will transform the social, economic and political conditions for the coming decade. The challenges imposed by the virus exceeds people's immediate physical health to also threaten their economic existence, education opportunities and ability to meet the fundamental needs of themselves and their families. Local communities, governments and international actors have pursued a range of strategies to cope with and mitigate the overwhelming number of parallel crises. Some of these efforts could have lasting repercussions for international, State–society, intercommunal and personal relations, far beyond the end of the pandemic.

Afghanistan, where state capacity and societal cohesion are fundamental conditions for maintaining any possible benefits of the Afghan peace negotiations, is no exception to this. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc throughout the country and continues to be a significant stress test for Afghanistan's already-weak institutions, both in terms of performance and legitimacy. At the same time, it has dramatically increased economic and social pressures on marginalized and vulnerable communities such as returnees, families depending on remittances, internally displaced persons and prison inmates. In the past months, poverty and unemployment as well as gender-based violence and discrimination have increased. Has COVID-19 devastated Afghan society's potential for peace and reconciliation?

The pandemic's regional and global impacts have further exacerbated the crisis within Afghanistan. Travel restrictions, border closures and a dramatic decline in work opportunities for Afghans abroad have set back Afghan ambitions for economic self-reliance. Moreover, financial crises in donor countries are likely to accelerate the ongoing withdrawal dynamics of the international civilian and military stakeholders and exacerbate pre-existing donor fatigue. Will a post-COVID-19 Afghanistan find itself out in the cold?

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) has been working since 2002 with Afghan civil society organizations, government authorities and other stakeholders to build up capacities for social justice and inclusion that we deem essential for the country's transition to sustainable peace. The systemic implications of this unprecedented crisis put these capacities at risk beyond today. Hence, an in-depth assessment of the impact is as needed as scenarios for future developments and recommendations for all stakeholders on how to mitigate the multiple crises the pandemic has created and how to rebuild Afghanistan's social, political and economic capacities for peace.

FES is grateful to the authors of this unique report—Lucile Martin and Saeed Parto from Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO). Their report provides readers with valuable insights into the way COVID-19 has affected critical sectors of the Afghan economy and society and State–society relations as well as the multifaceted relationship between international partners and Afghan stakeholders. Their recommendations and suggestions for further work, both in research and practice, entail a clear vision for a possible path forward for Afghans and their international partners just ahead of the 2020 Afghanistan Conference in Geneva.

**Dr Magdalena Kirchner**

Resident Director

FES Afghanistan

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# Executive Summary

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In Afghanistan, the COVID-19 pandemic coincides with ongoing political, economic, social and environmental crises. It is testing the fragile governance and socioeconomic structures and raises questions regarding how the conflict dynamics and the nascent intra-Afghan peace process will be affected.

Creating conditions for sustainable peace requires addressing the legacies of the conflict, all exacerbated by the pandemic, as well as the longer-term prospects for a broad range of rights, needs and societal priorities of all citizens. The sustainability of a negotiated peace with the Taliban will be a function of success or failure in creating conditions that restore confidence in the economic, social and political institutions and eliminate the incentives for a continuation or recurrence of conflict.

Internally, the impact of COVID-19 has underlined and reinforced the structural inequalities and governance deficiencies. Externally, the pandemic has created uncertainty concerning the modalities of international aid for recipient countries, such as Afghanistan. Combined, the internal and external implications of the pandemic have added to Afghans' and international donors' growing vulnerability, insecurity and frustration with the dysfunctions of governance. The current conditions raise important questions about how and under what conditions aid should be provided to Afghanistan, with or without a peace agreement with the Taliban.

Arguably, the new conditions that have emerged under the pandemic create opportunities for a re-examination and reorientation of development aid modalities. Reintroducing stability in an environment characterized by decades of conflict and uncertainty will require a change in mindsets of national and international stakeholders.

Reverting to aid modalities in play before the pandemic and the intra-Afghan peace talks and expecting better results is not a viable option for international assistance. The systematic pause forced by the COVID-19 pandemic, the forthcoming end of current donor grant pledges by the end of 2020 and the prospects or lack of prospects of a negotiated peace with the Taliban have created unique opportunity for new approaches to development and humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.

This unique opportunity should be used to design interventions for generating outcomes and impact towards the practice of good governance. Key to such efforts are Afghanistan's nascent and aid-dependent civil society organizations.

Empowering and enabling civil society to assume its legitimate place in the practise of good governance will require moving away from a model resting quasi exclusively on upward functional accountability to international donors by civil society organizations as the fund recipients. This entails introducing and strengthening aid models that incorporate downward strategic accountability, whereby international donors and their aid-receiving civil society organizations jointly account to ordinary citizens as the ultimate beneficiaries of interventions.

The sustainability of interventions is a function of the degree to which a given intervention manages to resonate with factors that support change and has the wherewithal to overcome elements or factors that resist change. In economic development, efforts to strengthen the economy to yield longer-term socioeconomic benefits are, therefore, a function of identifying and strengthening pre-existing, resilient and productive entrepreneurial activity rather than broad interventions designed on open-ended or vague notions, such as "supporting the private sector" in Afghanistan.

Similarly, the sustainability of a political settlement with the Taliban will be a function of the degree to which aid modalities support integration, in the event of a peace agreement, through interventions aimed at generating productive economic activity and incentives for the fighters to become civilians. This will also require supporting incentives for civilians to come to a peaceful accommodation with the ex-fighters, based on shared economic interests.

This paper is intended to contribute to reflective discourse among Afghans, particularly civil society, and the international donors with long-term commitments to assist Afghanistan. The findings are based on an analysis of the available data from secondary sources and data from primary sources collected through interviews with

key informants in government, civil society, national and international non-government organizations and the donor community.

The analysis is divided into three main parts. With the pandemic as the backdrop, the first part examines the impact of COVID-19 on economic activity, gender dynamics and social cohesion, paying attention to how the pandemic has affected NGOs and State–civil society relations. The second part examines (a) the intersection of the pandemic and Afghanistan's war economy and (b) the impact of the pandemic on the intra-Afghan peace dialogue. The third part deals with the extent to which these two dynamics bear on decision-making on aid modalities among international donors. The paper's conclusion points to key questions that need to be addressed by the current or future government in Afghanistan and the international donor community in the immediate, medium and long terms.

## Findings

### ***Economic impacts of COVID-19***

- In many ways, COVID-19 has exacted economic consequences similar to those that occur in a conflict, including loss of livelihoods, inflation in the price of basic supplies, reduced domestic revenue and increased levels of dependency on international support.
- At the macro level, non-agricultural economic indicators contracted in the first half of 2020 as a result of the reduced global economic activity, combined with domestic structural deficiencies in the Afghan economy.
- At the micro level, those who have suffered the most from the economic consequences of the crises includes micro and small enterprises with limited or no capital, NGOs and the vast majority of workers involved in the informal economy, including day labourers.
- The institutionalized prevalence of rent-seeking behaviour and endemic corruption at all levels and in all sectors are likely to channel efforts and resources away from tackling the pandemic to unproductive and destructive economic activity.

- Community networks, which constitute the main coping mechanism for households during various crises, are likely to be heavily strained by prolonged economic hardship due to the pandemic. This will increase the risk of the most vulnerable or affected resorting to nepotistic networks of powerholders for assistance.
- There is some evidence of resilience in economic activity, particularly in clustered micro and small enterprises mostly concentrated in population centres throughout the country. These clusters are unique in their built-in sustenance arrangements based on networks of traditional guilds and trade associations.

### ***COVID-19 and gender dynamics***

- Women and girls are among the most vulnerable under the pandemic. While restrictions in women's access to rights and participation in society go well beyond the implications of the pandemic, there are worrying signs that the sense of emergency for dealing with COVID-19 overlooks women's specific needs and the pursuit of gender equality more broadly.
- Women and girls have less access to health care and information, limiting detection and treatment of coronavirus cases. As primary caregivers to dependants in the household, women and girls are among the most vulnerable to coronavirus infection.
- Gender discrimination and institutionalized misogyny translate into high risks of gender-based violence and abuse in a context in which access to protection services for survivors is limited. Many women's organizations with mandates to provide social support to women and children report having to interrupt their activities because of the pandemic.

### ***COVID-19 and social cohesion***

- At the community level, networks of support and cooperation appear to have been sustained. This includes extended networks of family and friends, neighbourhood support and traditional modes of assistance by wealthier members of a community

to the more vulnerable neighbours. In urban centres, new forms of mobilization through social media have emerged in response to the pandemic. The scope and effectiveness of these networks, however, are uneven and volatile.

- At the national institutional level, there has been a lack of accountability by officials regarding the handling of resources to manage the pandemic. The public views institutional officials as either serving their personal interest or as more concerned about reporting to international donors as a means to ensure the inward flow of international funds rather than serving their constituencies.
- The already weak trust in the government's ability and legitimacy has weakened further in response to reports of misappropriation of resources intended to address COVID-19.

#### ***COVID-19 and NGOs***

- COVID-19 has raised unprecedented operational, technical, financial and safety challenges for national NGOs.
- Local NGOs report facing challenges in adapting their modes of operation to pandemic conditions and finding the necessary resources for doing so.
- For NGOs that provided direct support to communities, limitations on physical interaction has undermined their standing in the communities.
- The vast majority of NGOs in Afghanistan are dependent entirely on donor funding. With the bulk of international aid for NGOs aligned with activity-based budgets, the inability to carry out activities as planned has meant the loss of access to operational funds.
- Competition among NGOs over resources has been exacerbated by concerns about decreases in international funding. Heightened competition among NGOs runs the risk of undermining efforts to mobilize for and collaborate on how best to ensure that voices of citizens are heard during the intra-Afghan peace talks.

#### ***State–civil society relations beyond COVID-19***

- The crisis, due to the combined impact of the pandemic, internal political strife and the start of

the intra-Afghan peace talks, have underlined the divide between the State and civil society, with the government deciding and civil society organizations mostly protesting.

- The government has been reluctant to share information about its actions to address the pandemic.

#### ***COVID-19 and the war economy***

- Afghanistan has not completely transitioned out of a war economy. There have been improvements in human capital development and macroeconomic management. There are also systemic institutionalized rent-seeking working through kleptocratic and nepotistic networks, parallel structures of governance that challenge and undermine the government's ability to govern and high-return illicit economic activities.
- For those who profit from the war, the continuation of the conflict is economically more profitable than political stability.
- Without clear prospects for licit and stable sources of income to replace livelihoods drawn from armed conflict, narcotics and a range of criminal activities, reintegration of the fighters will be a daunting task.

#### ***COVID-19 and the intra-Afghan dialogue***

- The pandemic has added another layer of complication to the already-difficult conditions under which the intra-Afghan peace talks were to take place.
- The United States continues to grapple with pandemic-related domestic public health issues and political crisis while remaining the actor with the most interest and influence in the peace talks with the Taliban. Troop withdrawal by the United States ahead of the scheduled timetable, as a means to offset the negative image of mismanaging the pandemic for election purposes, presents an insurmountable risk for Afghanistan to reach an equitably negotiated peace agreement with the Taliban.

### **Accountability in international response: Moving forward**

- Regardless of the outcome of the peace negotiations, international donors are likely to remain central actors of governance in Afghanistan, and their funding decisions and actions will continue to affect the structures and activities of the State, operations of NGOs and the conditions of citizens at large.
- With the conflict parties recognizing the need for sustained international aid, international donors have leverage to influence the setting of an agenda for peace and thus to call for clear provisions on the fundamental rights of citizens.
- The global impact of the pandemic, however, has placed additional strain on the ability of international donors to support Afghanistan. This raises important questions about the future of development and humanitarian aid programming and whether and how its modalities could be rethought to focus on impact and sustainability.

### **Ways forward**

What can help in decision-making in the current circumstances is an objective reflection on how to do better by doing things differently. Major factors in the current circumstances are the ongoing conflict, attempts at bringing peace, aid dependency of the Afghan government and non-government actors alike and the pandemic placing unprecedented pressure on the already-weak structural and institutional arrangements. Compounding these factors is endemic corruption, deep-rooted misogynous views of women in society, environmental degradation and threats from climate change, the latter being the main driver of internal displacement. Faced with these major and interrelated factors, none of the stakeholders, internal or external, can expect to continue the same as before and achieve better results.

A sea change is needed in the mindsets of multiple international stakeholders to move from addressing emergencies using the age-old aid modalities and upward models of accountability towards more downward and strategic accountability, so that interventions resonate

with the experiences and practical needs of those they aim to benefit, and effect change rather than impose.

Faced with the inability or unwillingness of the government to effect an inclusive, transparent and accountable mode of governance in all matters pertaining to the peace negotiations and fighting the pandemic, civil society writ large and the international donors that support them have a unique opportunity to do new things and expect better results. To this end, the following objectives need to be met:

1. Use the COVID-19 crisis and the peace negotiations as opportunities for practising good governance in aid decision-making and provision and public policymaking.
2. Define new modalities and priorities for international aid in Afghanistan beyond the intra-Afghan peace process and the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Support resilient, productive economic activity.
4. Enable and empower civil society beyond their current status as local implementers to active governance stakeholders.

Meeting these objectives will require efforts to generate dialogue on how best to address the following questions in the short, medium and long terms:

#### **Short term**

1. Despite the persistence of corruption, institutionalized patriarchal arrangements and social fragmentation, how can international aid better address the immediate needs of Afghans in their diversity with interventions to combat COVID-19?
2. Despite the persistence of corruption, institutionalized patriarchal arrangements and social fragmentation, how can international aid better address the immediate needs of Afghans in the peace process?
3. In interventions relating to the pandemic and the peace process, what combination of aid provision should be the aim, from on-budget funding and off-budget funding through multilateral mechanisms (such as the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund) to the direct funding of national non-government entities?

**Medium term**

1. How would a peace agreement affect the modalities of international aid provision for Afghanistan?
2. Specifically,
  - a. if there is a peace agreement, how would the decisions regarding assistance in the short term (above) translate into longer-term aid provision?
  - b. if there is no peace agreement, how would the decisions regarding assistance in the short term (above) translate into longer-term aid provision?

**Long term**

1. How can relations between stakeholders in development be more efficient and effective through better information sharing, coordination, cooperation and collaboration towards creating conditions conducive for sustainable peace in Afghanistan?
2. What can be done to shift the focus from upward functional accountability to downward strategic accountability?

# 1. Introduction

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COVID-19 has had far-reaching implications for all aspects of social, economic and political life. In Afghanistan, the pandemic has coincided with the ongoing political, economic, social and environmental crises. With a fragile peace process under way, the pandemic exerts significant additional pressure on an equally fragile mode of governance and the structures through which it is exercised. Not unlike 19 years ago, the questions remain as to “who defines peace, who is part of the dialogue, and whose voices are listened to or heard?” (Atmar and Goodhand, 2002, p. 65).

Sustaining peace requires consistent attention across all sectors and at all levels, beginning “with identifying those attributes and assets that have sustained inclusive development, social cohesion, the rule of law and human security” (IPI, 2017, p. 2). In emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the pressure to

take immediate action often results in losing sight of the longer-term implications of actions taken (Scarry, 2011).

For four decades, citizens of Afghanistan have been consistently forced to think and act in various states of emergency—due to conflict, natural disasters or political and economic uncertainty. Additional layers of emergency and uncertainty caused by the pandemic increase the strain on the already-weak institutions of governance and the vulnerable majority of citizens.

These uncertainties are compounded by a peace process that thus far lacks two key elements of the necessary ripeness as a precondition of constructive peace negotiations.<sup>1</sup> First is a recognition by all sides that the protracted conflict cannot be absolutely won by any of the parties. The consequence of this recognition is a significant reduction in armed conflict or a full ceasefire



*Closed central market on the banks of the Kabul River, April 2020*  
Photo © FES / Mariam Alimi

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Zartman, 2000, p. 291; see also APPRO, 2018.

as a precondition for having peace talks. While there is implied or actual admission by the Afghan government and its international military allies that they cannot win the war against the Taliban, the Taliban have made no such admission to date.

Second is an allusion to or existence of a mutually perceived way out of the conflict, with all sides seeing that a negotiated solution is possible and that a framework, satisfactory to all parties, can be found or established to begin a dialogue for peace. This second condition has yet to be met. There have been no indications that such a framework is being developed, and there is scant information on an agenda or agendas for sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

More generally, the cessation of hostilities and the signing of a peace agreement are the first milestones to achieving peace. For peace to sustain, it will be crucial to create social and economic conditions that will reduce the distributional inequalities, generate employment and set up the foundation for transitional justice and the rule of law (UNDP, 2008). So far, socioeconomic considerations have remained outside of formal discussions on peace. They are nevertheless essential to avoid the recurrence

of conflict, achieve societal integration of fighters and support demilitarization and demobilization.

Afghanistan relies heavily on international donor funding for the functioning of its state institutions. The functions of numerous humanitarian and development NGOs are also based on funding support from international donors.

The global impact of the pandemic is likely to affect donor support after grant pledges come to an end in December 2020 (World Bank, 2020).<sup>2</sup> Changes in the modality and amount of international aid to Afghanistan will bear significant consequences for Afghanistan's ability to recover from conflict, develop and stabilize.

The paper examines the impact of COVID-19 on capacities for sustainable peace, focusing on the multifaceted consequences of the pandemic in the economic, social and political arenas at the national level, how the pandemic intersects with the peace process and the implications for international stakeholders. The paper concludes with recommendations for ways forward in assessing and addressing the governance implications of COVID-19 and its impact on the peace process.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Interview, multilateral agency 2, 12 August 2020; interview, donor country representative 1, 17 August 2020.

<sup>3</sup> This paper draws on interviews with representatives of government, civil society, Afghan NGOs, international NGOs and the donor community; Eliadis and Martin, 2020; APPRO, 2020.

## 2. Responses to COVID-19 in Afghanistan: An overview

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As of 3 September 2020, Afghanistan had reported slightly more than 38,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19. This is considered to be well under the actual figures, and there continue to be high levels of anxiety and speculation about the consequences of widespread transmission of the virus throughout the country (ICCT, 2020).

The success of interventions to address the pandemic will depend on the quality of the evidence informing the responses and the extent to which the data represent differences in gender, age and disability (*The Lancet*, 2020). It will also depend on the ability of national and international aid and development actors to consult and coordinate to ensure a coherent and holistic response.

### 2.1 Government response

Shortly after the outbreak of COVID-19 in late February 2020, the government took measures to contain the spread of the virus, centring its response on immediate health and sanitary needs. A High-Level Emergency Committee was established to address emergency health needs, and an eight-point Country Plan developed (ICCT, 2020). Border crossings were closed, and schooling was suspended. By late March, a nationwide “measured lockdown” was in place to restrict movement in affected areas, with a ban on intercity travel, closure of non-essential businesses and public spaces, schools remaining closed after the winter break and Friday prayer gatherings cancelled (OCHA, 2020b). Despite these measures, there remain serious concerns about the continued spread of the virus in the coming months. Now at over eight months into the pandemic, an already-stretched public health sector continues to face difficulties in providing adequate medical care to patients affected by the virus. The capacity for testing for COVID-19 remains very low and concentrated in urban centres. Health infrastructure is insufficient, necessary materials and intensive care

equipment are lacking, health staff—and particularly female doctors and nurses who attend to women—are unevenly available throughout the country. And there



*Citizens testing for fever, Kabul, April 2020*  
Photo © FES / Mariam Alimi

is persistent unavailability of sufficient quality medicine and equipment. As in other countries, health staff in Afghanistan are also at high risk of exposure to infection (OCHA, 2020c).<sup>4</sup> Compounding these conditions is the inability or unwillingness by the public to follow public health advice issued by the health authorities. This is partly due to the fact that, for many Afghans, living conditions are not conducive to taking full safety measures such as increased personal hygiene and social distancing. As a result, infection cases often go undetected and are not treated. Those in need of medical care unrelated to the virus refrain from visiting health facilities due to risks of becoming infected. Also, the focus of health officials and staff on addressing COVID-19 has meant that other health needs are insufficiently attended.<sup>5</sup>

The more vulnerable are particularly affected. Daily labour often is the only source of income for many families. Not going to work due to illness often means not being able to feed the household.<sup>6</sup> The internally displaced and

<sup>4</sup> Interview, government 1, 10 August 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Interview, government 1, 10 August 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, civil society member 4, May 2020; interview, international development agency 1, 28 August 2020.

returnees living in highly concentrated areas face high risk of contamination, and access to health services is limited for most people in both rural and urban settings (GPC, 2020). The urban poor live in densely populated areas, with limited or no access to basic amenities, proper hygiene or health care, while rural dwellers have limited or no access to basic amenities.

These conditions particularly affect women, whose ability to access health care was already disproportionately limited in pre-pandemic conditions. There is, in addition, the social stigma associated with being infected by the virus, often resulting in denial and thus not ceasing daily interactions.



Public transport, Herat, April 2020  
Photo © FES / Mohammad Aref Karimi

## 2.2 International response

In the wake of the outbreak of COVID-19, the international community stepped in to provide additional support to Afghanistan in three ways:

- i. Reprioritizing the allocation of funds that remain to be disbursed until the end of 2020 to meet immediate needs stemming from the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>
- ii. Increased levels of humanitarian assistance to respond to the immediate impacts of COVID-19.<sup>8</sup>

- iii. Support for COVID-19 response and recovery through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and multilateral entities, including the United Nations and the World Bank.<sup>9</sup>

Response plans published to date demonstrate a recognition of the need to address the broad consequences of the pandemic in terms of health, human security and economic development

Most of the responses of an immediate nature will conclude by the end of 2020, with the World Bank and the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund ending in 2021 and 2022. The prospects of international support beyond the immediate crisis, however, are unclear (World Bank, 2020). With the pledging conference planned for November 2020 in Geneva, there is a high level of uncertainty and anxiety concerning the extent to which donor States will be willing and able to continue committing financial support to Afghanistan at similar rates as in the past.

The economic and social consequences of COVID-19 in donors' domestic contexts are likely to increase pressure on budgets available for international cooperation. As a representative for an international entity put it, "Afghanistan is not the only country hit—all countries are affected. Development and humanitarian efforts cannot, like in normal times, focus on one crisis zone because all zones are in crisis, and it is likely budgets allocated to international aid in Afghanistan will shrink."<sup>10</sup>

It is unrealistic to think that Afghanistan will be able to address the multiple humanitarian and development challenges it faces without sustained external assistance in the long term. Continued support will be needed for the government to function (despite major concerns about administrative corruption) and for civil society organizations that provide services for the most vulnerable or with mandates for strengthening civic space and acting as watchdogs of government action.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, multilateral agency 2, August 12, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, international development agency 2, September 10, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Interview, donor country representative 1, August 17, 2020; interview, international development agency 2, September 10, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, international country representative 1, August 17, 2020.

## 3. Beyond the health crisis: Economic and social implications of COVID-19

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There are severe implications of the pandemic for human security, economic development and social cohesion (UNDP, 2020; World Bank, 2020). As the impact of the virus unfolds, the consequences continue to magnify and exacerbate pre-existing structural inequalities and vulnerabilities among the different segments of the population.

Civil society, arguably a crucial actor in efforts to strengthen solidarity, reduce inequalities and support good governance, has also been weakened by the pandemic. New constraints brought on by the virus on mobility have had adverse impacts on the delivery of aid and development programmes on which much of the population relies. Interventions and monitoring visits, particularly in remote areas, often have had to be suspended (WHO, 2020).

### 3.1 COVID-19 and human security

Prior to the pandemic, Afghanistan already displayed alarming rates of poverty and food insecurity. In 2016, an estimated 55 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line, and nearly 45 per cent were considered food insecure (CSO, 2017). Current projections estimate the deterioration of the economy will result in an increase of up to 72 per cent in poverty rates in 2020, with direct effects on access to amenities and services, including food, shelter, health care and education (World Bank, 2020).

The growth in poverty rates and lack of alternative sources of income are likely to increase the number of households that rely on unprotected, unskilled, low-wage sources of income—all subject to high seasonal variations.

The insecurity and uncertainty that go hand in hand with informality and underemployment have drastic effects on the well-being of households due to income insecurity and thus unpredictability in their ability to purchase food.

These conditions constrain longer-term decisions on proactive health care and education (Schütte, 2009).

In rural areas where the drought of 2018–2019 had devastating effects on access to livelihoods, the effects of the economic crisis generated by the pandemic are likely to deplete people's ability to cope seriously. The people most vulnerable to the virus (older persons and chronically ill persons) and dependants (children and people with disabilities) are also highly vulnerable to any deterioration of existing coping mechanisms.

Loss of income is compounded by rising prices of basic items. In the first half of 2020, disruptions in regional trade led to food shortages and inflation in the prices of staple food commodities, such as flour, wheat, rice, sugar, pulses and cooking oil.<sup>11</sup> Food insecurity is expected to reach emergency levels in 2020 (IPC, 2020; figure 1). The pandemic also affects children, with repercussions in malnutrition, heightened risk of neglect, exploitation, violence and abuse (STC, 2020). Child labour, already used as a coping mechanism by a large number of vulnerable households, is at risk of increasing (UNICEF, 2020; figure 2). With 3.7 million children out of school prior to the pandemic, 60 per cent of whom were girls, Afghanistan is among the countries with the highest risk of school drop-outs as a result of COVID-19 (Wagner and Warren, 2020).

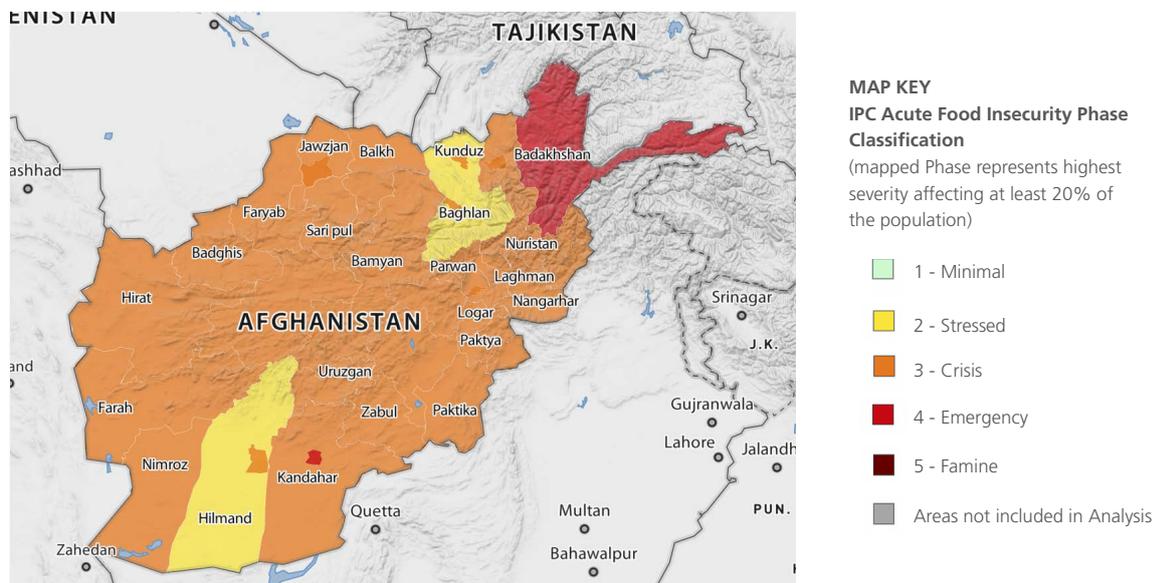
The vast majority of students who had been on winter break when the pandemic broke out have remained away from school. Alternative services provided through the Ministry of Education's COVID-19 response plan, including self-directed learning, distance learning through television, information and communication technology and face-to-face instruction in small groups have been largely ineffective.<sup>12</sup> The majority of teachers and students have had no access to the Internet, stable electricity or television. This has meant that most students could not follow courses provided on the education

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<sup>11</sup> Market price of cooking oil increased by 30 per cent between March and August 2020, for example (WFP, 2020a).

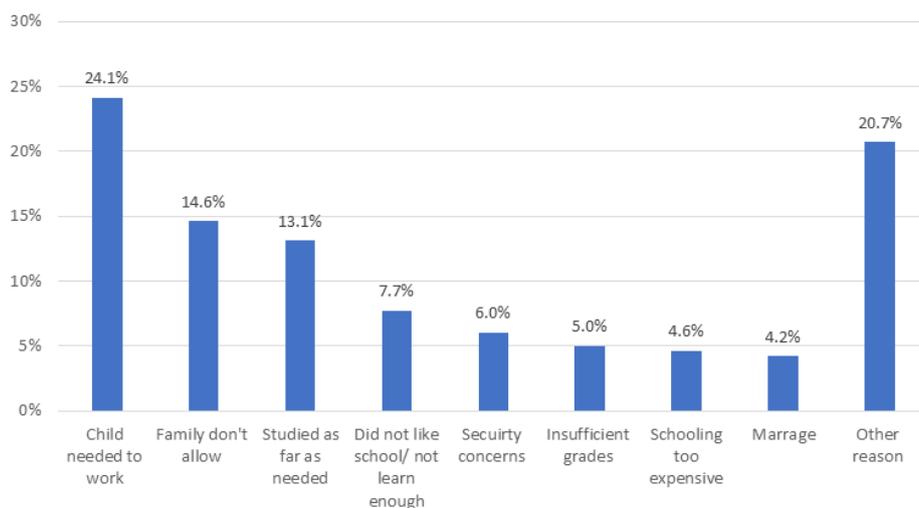
<sup>12</sup> Interview, government 2, 12 August 2020.

Figure 1. Projected food insecurity situation, June–November 2020



Source: IPC Global Support Unit, <http://www.ipcinfo.org/>

Figure 2. Population age 6-24 who stopped education in 2016, by main reason for not attending (%)



Source: Central Statistics Office. 2017

channel of the Ministry of Education.<sup>13</sup> With plans for teacher recruitment and student registration delayed, the confinement period is likely to have long-term effects on the education system and its availability for the most vulnerable.<sup>14</sup>



Boys selling candy on the streets of Kabul, April 2020  
Photo © FES / Mariam Alimi

The economic burden of the crisis is likely to increase harmful practices, such as early marriage for girls and child labour for boys. As a coping strategy, many low-income families are opting to secure immediate financial relief through receiving a bride price (UN WOMEN, 2020a). The practice of *badal* (marrying a brother and a sister from one family with a sister and a brother, respectively, in another family to avoid paying the bride price and economizing on wedding costs) is also likely to increase.

### 3.2 COVID-19 and the economy

Productive economic activity can contribute to strengthening the potential for peace and avoiding the persistence of conflict (UNDP, 2008). In many ways, COVID-19 has displayed economic consequences similar to those that occur in the case of a conflict, including loss of livelihoods, employment and income sources; inflation in the price of basic supplies; reduced domestic revenue; and increased levels of dependency on international support. The implications of COVID-19 for an already-weak economy, combined with persistent

conflict, political uncertainty and enduring development challenges, increase vulnerabilities and the risk of reverting progress made to date (World Bank, 2020).

### *Afghan economy before COVID-19*

In 2019, Afghanistan had displayed positive trends in macroeconomic indicators, raising hope about a stabilization of the economy and a transition out of government dependency on international grants. Government fiscal performance had improved, inflation had stabilized, the agriculture sector had reported growth of 7.5 per cent while the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries had noted that exports were increasing (World Bank, 2020).

These improvements rested on fragile foundations, however. Public spending, overwhelmingly provided by international donors, remained dominated by the security sector, with low allocations to essential services such as health and education—rendering them even more unprepared to absorb shocks (World Bank, 2019). Since 2001, aggregate growth, largely concentrated in donor-driven sectors, has failed to create conditions conducive to long-term sustainable jobs. Hasty privatization in a context in which institutions remained weak and inadequate to manage the market economy resulted in the capture of benefits by well-connected groups of individuals and networks who had gained their power in the war (Fishstein and Amiryar, 2015). Engrained rent-seeking behaviours among state and non-state actors alike undermined accountability towards the citizens and encouraged the establishment of patronage networks and corrupt clientelist structures (Kühn, 2007).

The persistence of conflict and its disabling impact on infrastructure and markets has prevented the formal economy from taking root and stabilizing, while there has been significant growth in illicit economic activity, notably the drugs trade (Galdo and Rama, 2020). Entrepreneurs typically behave according to “the rules of the game”, or the reward structure of the economy. When the reward structure is based on rent-seeking as the main

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid; interview, national NGO 1, 13 August 2020.

determinant in securing wealth and power, the result is the reallocation of entrepreneurship from productive activities to unproductive and, often, destructive activities (Baumol, 1990).<sup>15</sup>

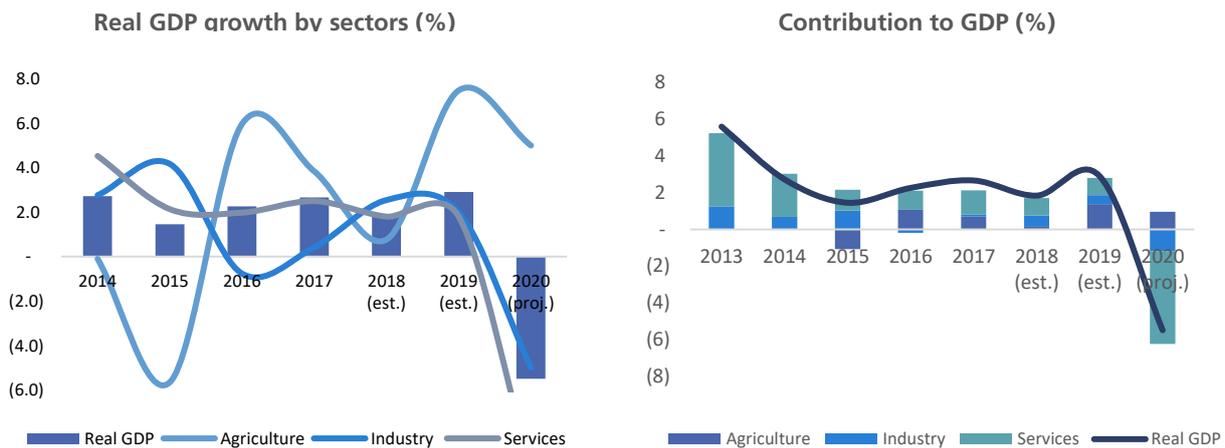
**Economic impacts of COVID-19**

The combination of the global economic impact of the pandemic and domestic structural deficiencies renders the outlook for the Afghan economy in light of and after COVID-19 very bleak. By the third quarter of 2020, the improvements reported in 2019 had been halted or reversed. The deterioration of supply chains and the disruption of regional and global trade networks had

government to fund itself and increase its reliance on foreign aid.

The lockdown imposed on non-essential businesses to contain the spread of the virus has had severe, and sometimes fatal, consequences for small and medium-sized enterprises. Loss of income, combined with minimal savings and investment, has forced numerous small enterprises out of business. The Federation of Afghan Craftsmen and Traders estimated that 30 per cent of its members were unable to recover from the lockdown and went bankrupt because of the immediate loss of revenue.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 3: Economy contraction by sector (%)**



Source: World Bank 2020.

adversely affected production. In the first half of 2020, the non-agriculture economy experienced significant contraction (World Bank, 2020; figure 3). Improved government performance in revenue mobilization has been swooped, with a sharp decline of more than a third below the target level in May 2020 (World Bank, 2020). These developments undermine the ability of the

Day labourers have even less capacity than the craftspeople and traders to cope with the consequences of the lockdown due to having no protection at all (OCHA, 2020d). For the many who rely on diverse and multiple sources of income derived from daily labouring jobs as a coping strategy, the loss or reduction of economic activity

<sup>15</sup> Productive activities encompass tasks that generate positive sum return and create individual and social value. Unproductive activities refer to tasks that appropriate or redistribute value with zero sum return and for individual interest. This includes buying and selling, rent-seeking, tax evasion. Socially destructive activities refer to illegal and

underground activities such as drug dealing, smuggling, extortion and investing in warfare (Baumol, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> Interview, August 2020.

has clamped shut opportunities to seek and secure income.

The impact of COVID-19 is even more severe in the absence of a social safety net, typically provided by the State. Social protection mechanisms through, for instance, income support and social pension, and economic support through fiscal exemptions are non-existent in Afghanistan, where the government fiscally constrained and domestic revenue mobilization is insufficient (UNDP, 2020). With 30 per cent of government spending allocated to security—a proportion unlikely to change as Western troops continue to withdraw and the Taliban refuse to de-escalate the violence during peace negotiations—there is limited room for reallocation of public spending to address the immediate and longer-term financial hardships caused by COVID-19.

Lack of state support forces people to look for alternative sources of security and livelihood within their close community and extended family.

***While community networks appeared to have filled some of the gaps in social support systems immediately after the virus outbreak, the widespread persistence of the economic impact of the pandemic is likely to strain the ability of family or community networks to provide support***

### ***Looking for economic resilience***

Addressing the multifaceted economic impact of COVID-19 will require adjustments in the short term to address emergencies such as treating the sick, in the medium term to compensate for the loss of income of the many borderline low-income families who can no longer earn a living and in the longer term to increase the resilience of productive economic structures (OECD, 2020). As part of the efforts to address the medium- and longer-term needs, it would be crucial to identify and strengthen sources of licit and productive economic activity.

A major type of licit, resilient and productive economic activity is represented by micro and small-sized enterprises in geographically identifiable clusters within most population centres throughout Afghanistan. Clustered

micro and small-sized enterprises have persisted for generations, with some having their origins in ancient times. These clustered enterprises produce goods and services in a variety of areas, such as carpentry, ironmongery, saffron processing, dried fruits and nuts processing, coppersmithing and mechanical, electrical and electronic repairs. These clusters have stood decades of conflict and associated shocks and continue to persist, providing livelihood from licit and productive economic activity for many households.



*Shoe shiner, Kabul, April 2020*  
Photo © FES / Mariam Alimi

The resilience of clusters rests on built-in sustenance mechanisms in the form of apprenticeship arrangements, lending and borrowing among cluster members, a structured network of cooperative action in the form of traditional guilds and trade associations and access to a steady market for their goods and services. The potential synergy of clustered enterprises for sustainable economic development in the longer term strongly suggests that clusters need to feature more centrally in economic policymaking and development planning in fragile and conflict environments. In Afghanistan, clustered enterprises have remained largely outside the economic policy discourse of the government and international donors, with the notable exception of GIZ, which has, since 2011, been providing formal training for master craftspeople and apprentices (Parto, 2015).

That said, COVID-19 has also affected clustered enterprises in unprecedented ways. The apex organization for micro and small enterprises, the Federation of Afghan Craftsmen and Traders, has called on the government to

support these entrepreneurs affected by the pandemic in the form of loans without interest and financial support to those forced out of the market.

Provision of financial support for small enterprises has been practised in several countries to address the immediate impact of COVID-19 on business activity. If similar actions are taken in Afghanistan, a major recipient of such assistance should be the micro and small-sized enterprises.

Interventions along these lines will require much coordination and dialogue between formal state structures, representative organizations and networks of workers and enterprises and NGOs that support micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and informal workers. Interventions will also need to take into account the protection of workers and their households from exposure to the virus and provide income and food security to compensate for adverse impacts of the pandemic on economic activity (ILO, 2020). A difficult trade-off between revenue mobilization and subsidies to micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in the form of alleviation of taxes and deferral of payments for public services will also need to be considered.

***Though difficult, efforts should be made to ensure that specific assistance provided to address the impacts of COVID-19 will increase resilience rather than further increase aid dependency or feed the spiral of rent-seeking.***

This requires targeted, integrated approaches that link stakeholders throughout value chains within national networks and enable them to strengthen these relationships.<sup>17</sup> One-time assistance through the provision of capital, whether in the form of cash or in-kind, could prove inefficient and even damaging if not supported by existing human capital, supplemented with capacity exchange and integrated into a value chain network.

In the longer term, interventions should be designed to strengthen productive economic activity, as opposed to unproductive or destructive forms of economic activity.

This is perhaps the most challenging because it must deal with structural deficiencies already aggravated by the pandemic.

Efforts to mobilize new sources of revenue, such as extraction of minerals, can be a means to finance economic recovery through foreign investment. However, these efforts also bear high risk of increased corruption, rent-seeking and, ultimately, conflict recurrence (UNDP, 2008). Transparent and accountable management and equitable revenue distribution are therefore critical to ensure that the exploitation of natural resources contributes to peace rather than undermines it.



*Woman weaving. Balkh. November 2018.*  
Photo © Oriane Zerah

### 3.3 COVID-19 and gender dynamics

As caregivers, homemakers and workers, women, and girls have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 (GIHA, 2020). Afghanistan's patriarchal social norms translate into strong forms of gender discrimination. With COVID-19, there has been a high risk of increased gender-based violence and abuse at home, with severe limitations on mobility and access to essential services, such as health care and education outside the home (UN WOMEN, 2020a). Gender inequalities aggravate the risk of contamination for women, who have less access to information and restricted access to health care, which limits the detection of infection among women. This is compounded by the limited number of female health personnel. The diversion of already-limited health

<sup>17</sup> Interview, international development agency 1, August 28, 2018

resources towards the fight against the pandemic places additional strain on resources available for essential services for women, including prenatal and postnatal health care and family planning (UN WOMEN, 2020b).

Access to protection services for survivors of gender-based violence, whether government or non-government, has been further limited by the consequences of the pandemic (UN WOMEN, 2020c). Confinement orders and the closing of schools increase the burden of childcare and domestic work in the household. For some working women, this situation has resulted in a suspension of their professional activity to attend to dependants at home.<sup>18</sup>

Many women's organizations that provide social support to women and children in communities have interrupted their activities as a result of the pandemic, both because of the added burden of care provision at home and constraints in coordination and access to resources, typically provided by international donor organizations.<sup>19</sup>

While restrictions in women's access to rights and participation in public go far beyond the implications of COVID-19, there are alarming signs that the sense of emergency resulting from the pandemic will contribute to neglecting provisions for gender equality (UN WOMEN, 2020d; 2020e).

Whether aimed at crisis response or long-term recovery, all interventions will need to incorporate gender-in-conflict analysis to take into account how interventions affect women and men and their interactions differently and how to mitigate the negative impacts that further destabilize the potential for social cohesion (GSDRC, 2012; Zuckerman and Greenberg, 2004).

Beyond the pandemic emergency and in relation to the peace negotiations with the Taliban, Afghanistan needs to remain committed to its National Action Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 and related resolutions to support the implementation of the Women, Peace and

Security agenda through women's full participation and voice in negotiations at all levels.

Implementation of the provisions in the National Action Plan would go a long way in providing and protecting women's indispensable roles in peace negotiations, conflict resolution, dealing with COVID-19 emergencies, prevention of violence against women and addressing the specific needs of girls and women in relief and recovery efforts.



*Woman with her children begging on the streets of Herat. Herat, April 2020.*

*Photo © FES / Mohammad Aref Karimi*

### 3.4 COVID-19 and social cohesion

Social cohesion is the outcome of recognized interdependence and resultant behaviour of individuals according to a set of mostly intangible rules that govern all interactions and transactions within a community. As such, social "is the 'glue' or the 'bonds' that keep societies integrated."<sup>20</sup> When there is social cohesion, society or community displays interdependence among its members; tensions and conflict based on wealth, ethnicity, gender and religion are rare; and there is evidence of strong social bonds, such as civility, mutual aid, responsive democracy and the rule of law (Fonseca and others, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Interview, national NGO 2, 11 August 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, national NGO 2, 11 August 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Larsen, undated.

Measured against what constitutes social cohesion, Afghanistan as a whole lacks the glue that binds diverse groups of citizens together based on a recognition of interdependency, commitment to mutual aid and solidarity at the national level. This is attributable to the relatively recent factor of decades of conflict and much older factors arising from ethnic, linguistic and religious divisions.

At the community level, however, and in situations in which there is shared language, ethnicity and religion, structures of solidarity have been maintained even during the conflict, constituting an important coping mechanism for many households within those communities.

Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on social cohesion in Afghanistan requires examining how the pandemic has affected mutual support mechanisms, social bonds, solidarity networks and institutional arrangements at the community level. At the national level, the examination should focus on how changes in social cohesion at the community level translate up to the national level, particularly in terms of how decisions are made at the national level to allocate resources to combat COVID-19 at subnational levels.

A first observation is that community-based networks of support and cooperation appear to have been sustained and, in some cases, adapted to provide assistance to the most in need among community members. This support is mostly provided within and through extended networks of family and friends by the wealthier and healthier members who provide direct assistance, such as food supplies, to the most affected by the pandemic or its economic impact.

In some neighbourhoods the traditional exchanges of cooked meals, halted because of concerns of contamination, were replaced by donations of staple food items from one family to the other. There are also reports of neighbours organizing solidarity networks to assist affected households by donating food and medication.<sup>21</sup>

Individual initiatives of solidarity were also observed among craftspeople and women making protection material available for all and some landlords waiving rent. In addition, there have been broader initiatives to draw attention to the needs of the most affected through media campaigns (The New York Times, 2020).



*Civil society activists distributing masks, Herat, April 2020  
Photo © FES / Mohammad Aref Karimi*

Other support, such as transfer of remittances from abroad, has been maintained through informal financial service providers (hawaladars).<sup>22</sup> It is unclear whether this was the case beyond urban centres, however, with reports of alternative sources of income through remittances and cash-based assistance via money transfers having been stymied by the closure of the financial service providers (OCHA, 2020d).

New, more informal, networks of solidarity have also emerged through the mobilization of Internet-based social media, which is used to identify and provide support to those who have lost their source of income. Charity foundations and individuals have published online announcements of food supplies donated by traders, Afghans living abroad and the general public and that the supplies are ready for distribution to those in need. The postings have also asked for assistance in identifying individuals and households who could donate food surpluses.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Interviews with members of civil society 1, 2 and 3, 23 August 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with civil society member 2, 23 August 2020. Confirmed by civil society member 1.

<sup>23</sup> Interviews, members of civil society 1 and 2, 23 August 2020.

The extent of the reach and the degree of organization of these networks, however, is uneven. In Kabul, for instance, the networks seem most effective in the western neighbourhoods of the city, where the assistance provided goes beyond the extended family and ethnic networks, calling for additional research on the factors supporting and affecting the effectiveness and extent of solidarity mechanisms.<sup>24</sup> The absence of social security schemes, such as health or life insurance, also generates high levels of anxiety among employees, adding pressure on family or community-based solidarity networks to sustain shocks that could arise from the pandemic.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond community-based networks, there are alarming signs of the potential for divisions within society. One such example is the stigmatization of returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan as “importers of the virus” (The New York Times, 2020). In urban centres, petty criminality, which had been curbed during the lockdown, soared immediately after the lockdown was lifted.<sup>26</sup> There are significant concerns about criminal actors taking advantage of the climate of fear to pressure and extort people (Watkins, 2020).

At the national institutional level, the already low level of trust in the government among the citizenry has resulted in heightened concerns over the ability of the government to manage aid distribution to address COVID-19, with allegations of no transparency and misappropriation of earmarked funds. The government’s provision of basic food items channelled through mosques and the distribution of free bread were welcome as an essential emergency measure. But the modalities of distribution generated new apprehensions about heightened risks of contamination as crowds gathered to pick up the food items. As reported by a member of civil society, “The general impression is that, if the spread of COVID-19 was limited until then, the disorganized manner in which bread was distributed, with people packed in front of

bakeries, definitely [resulted in the] spread [of] the virus to the entire city.”<sup>27</sup>

There are also concerns about corruption and misappropriation of earmarked funds by powerholders, particularly at the provincial level, and how these funds are secured through nepotistic politics at the national level.<sup>28</sup> Allegations of corruption in the spending of the COVID-19 response budget are compounded by moves to capture the aid process by provincial authorities (Tolo News, June 29 2020).

***Restoring trust in political and social institutions will depend on the extent to which the current model of upward accountability from national governance actors to international donors is balanced by one of downward accountability towards citizens.***

Downward accountability is also conducive to the practice of good governance, potentially resulting in more legitimacy for the national government.

### 3.5 COVID-19 and NGOs

COVID-19 raises unprecedented and new short-term operational, technical, financial and safety challenges for the functioning of NGOs. Their traditional modes of operations, based on interpersonal interactions, have been disrupted. Switching to online interactions for community mobilization, training and data collection has proved challenging.<sup>29</sup> Many local NGOs do not necessarily have the resources to have constant access to the Internet and Internet-based tools, nor the skills and know-how to conduct virtual engagement or advocacy. Their stakeholders and target communities often lack adequate access to stable electricity, Internet services and spaces where physical distancing could be ensured.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, not visiting constituents in person is likely to raise questions about the commitment of NGOs to

<sup>24</sup> Interviews, members of civil society 1, 2 and 3, 23 August 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Interview, national NGO 2, August 11, 2020; interview government 1, August 10, 2020; interview government 2, August 12, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Interview, civil society member 1, August 23, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Interview, civil society member 2, August 23, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Interview, civil society member 3, August 23, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, national NGO 1, August 13, 2020; interview, private sector 1, August 11, 2020

<sup>30</sup> Interview, National NGO 2, August 11, 2020; Interview, International Entity 1, August 11, 2020.

their target communities and to increase feelings among the target community members that they are being abandoned.<sup>31</sup>

Since the pandemic took hold, most local NGOs have experienced delays in receiving donor funds and hence delays in implementing their planned activities.<sup>32</sup> Where funding has not been an issue, “project budgets could not be spent because activities in the field could not be carried out. This was a significant challenge because donors were concerned about their allocated project budgets not being spent.”<sup>33</sup>

Because it has not been possible to carry out field activities and because most donors only release funds in line with activity-based budgets, many NGOs operating on project funds have had to lay off their staff.<sup>34</sup>

An emerging trend towards short-term emergency funding and multilateral funding schemes, amplified since the outbreak of COVID-19, leaves many development, rights-based and policy-oriented organizations without sufficient resources to continue their work.<sup>35</sup> The pandemic’s economic and social consequences at the global level further increase the prospects of a decrease in off-budget funding directed towards NGOs. Due to domestic financial pressures in donors’ home countries, the already-intense competitive environment in which project-funded Afghan NGOs operate is likely to become more competitive for fewer resources. More competition among NGOs is likely to reduce the tendency to coordinate, cooperate and collaborate and thus lessen the coherence of actions by NGOs. This will affect their collective ability to emerge as independent institutions of governance providing oversight and advocacy and ensuring transparency and accountability towards good governance.

In immediate terms, adaptive internal measures will be essential to protect the health and well-being of organizational personnel and immediate and indirect beneficiaries of projects. In the longer term, external adjustments are also needed for a reorientation of activities and strategies to meet the new needs and challenges of a changed operating environment.

As active members of civil society, NGOs have a social responsibility to participate in the defining of an agenda for peace and ensuring that the voices of citizens and their organizations are heard in their diversity as part of the peace process.

***Beyond the (albeit important) priority to secure funding, it should be of utmost urgency that civil society organizations mobilize, minimize rivalry and engage in a dialogue on the expectations of a peace agreement, regardless of the pandemic.***

### **3.6 State–civil society relations beyond COVID-19**

Good governance entails, among other things, an enabling environment for open and free engagement between the State and civil society. This, in turn, requires a citizenry capable and willing to engage with public officials and institutions in policy processes, a State responsive to the needs of citizens and committed to keeping them informed about and engaged in public decision-making and a legal and regulatory environment supporting rights-based claims.

Despite some achievements in establishing the legal and policy frameworks and functioning state institutions, key elements of good governance have been weak or lacking in Afghanistan since 2001, particularly in terms of law enforcement, policy implementation and the transparency and accountability of state institutions (Parto, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Interview, National NGO 2, 11 August 2020; Interview, Private Sector 1, 11 August 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Interviews, National NGO 1, 13 August 2020; National NGO 2, August 11, 2020; Private Sector 1, 11 August 2020; Multilateral Agency 1, 11 August 2020; Multilateral Agency 2, 12 August 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, National NGO 1, 13 August 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews, National NGO 2, 11 August 2020; National NGO 1, 13 August 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, National NGO 2, 11 August 2020.

Relations between the State and civil society over the past 19 years have been characterized more by mutual distrust than constructive engagement (EEAS, 2019; USAID, 2016; Durand, 2015). Despite commitments by the National Unity Government (2014–2020) to protect civil society’s operating environment, repeated concerns have been expressed in recent years about the shrinking space available for civil society (EEAS, 2019; IWA, 2020a). To date, civil society has also been unable to coordinate efforts to engage the government constructively and effectively on the many challenges Afghanistan faces (EEAS, 2019).

The advent of COVID-19 has highlighted the structural weaknesses of Afghanistan’s system of governance, particularly regarding accountability of state authorities to their public. Pressured by the prospect of declining grants, government institutions have focused their efforts on maintaining donor relations rather than sustaining and strengthening coordination with civil society.<sup>36</sup>

A telling sign of the lack of institutionalization of accountability and transparency is that none of the legal orders, directives and decrees taken by the Administrative Office of the President to address COVID-19 has been made publicly available. Information related to the spending of COVID-19 funds has been published partially, with reports of intimidation against those who have requested more information (IWA, 2020b).

The restructuring of the government at the time of the pandemic outbreak has raised additional concerns about accountability and oversight of government action. The dismantling of the Ministry of Finance by decree in February 2020, with its core functional areas brought under the direct supervision of the Office of the President, is likely to further undermine already-weakened legislative oversight, reduce public accountability and strengthen

the centralization of power within the executive (Byrd, 2020a; IWA, 2020c).



*Anti-corruption mural: “Procurement money is your money; cut off the hands of the corrupt”, Kabul, 2018.  
Photo © Oriane Zerah*

At the operational level, COVID-19 has slowed the administrative functions of the government; monitoring has halted, and efforts towards longer-term strategies have been put on hold. The necessary technology is not available within the government infrastructure to fully ensure a transition to virtual communication and service provision.<sup>37</sup>

Constraints imposed on interpersonal interactions to contain the virus have contributed to sectoral isolation within the government and between government institutions, the private sector and civil society.<sup>38</sup> Government representatives report weakened relations between ministries and with subnational ministerial branches, rendering coordination more difficult.<sup>39</sup> For international donors, the ability to support government institutions has been lessened because “virtual meetings could only insufficiently make up for trust-building and dialogue that takes place in face-to-face interactions”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Interview, national NGO 2, 11 August 2020; interview, civil society member 1, 23 August 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, government 2, 12 August 2020; interview, multilateral agency 1, 11 August 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Interview, private sector 2, 12 August 2020; interview, government 1, 10 August 2020; interview, government 2, 12 August 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, government 1, 10 August 2020; interview, government 2, 12 August 2020

<sup>40</sup> Interview, multilateral agency 1, 11 August 2020; interview, international development agency 1, 28 August 2020.

At the strategic level or the long and medium terms, emergency concerns related to the pandemic and the peace dialogue carry the risk of overlooking priorities set out under the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework, the Sustainable Development Goals, various national priority programmes and commitments made by the Afghan government under international treaties and conventions, such as UNSCR 1325, and subsequent resolutions on Women, Peace and Security.

There is much uncertainty about the prospects for civil society organizations, including national and local NGOs, under a government heavily influenced or fully run by the Taliban (APPRO, 2020). The overwhelming majority of

NGOs in Afghanistan has operated on funding provided by international donors since 2001. Nothing is known about how the Taliban view NGOs with mandates driven by adherence to international human rights, inclusion and equity.

COVID-19 has alerted countless NGOs to what could be expected due to external shocks to the operating environment. A full—or mostly—Taliban government will represent another major external shock to the operating environment for civil society organizations. While these groups chart their way out of the constraints of the pandemic, the longer-term focus should be maintained on a post-peace operating environment and its specific challenges.

## 4. Intersecting crises and the peace process

The consequences of the pandemic and the ongoing conflict mutually reinforce each other. With more than half of the country's districts outside of state control and with unpredictable population movements as a result of insecurity driven by natural disasters, poverty and conflict, the government's ability to monitor and control the pandemic is heavily strained (UNDP, 2020). The impacts of the pandemic on economic resilience and social cohesion are even more severe in an ongoing conflict with no immediate prospects for peace. Ongoing population movements throughout the pandemic have had devastating consequences for the distribution of aid and access to health care (WHO, 2020).



Helicopter landing.  
Photo © Oriane Zerah

### 4.1 COVID-19 and the war economy

Despite the overthrow of the Taliban in late 2001, Afghanistan has never completely transited out of a war economy. While there have been notable improvements in human capital development, increased access to services and infrastructure and macroeconomic management, the protracted conflict has sustained systemic rent-seeking, institutionalized misogyny and an unwillingness or inability to bridge the significant intracommunity divides that persist based on ethnicity, language and religion. These attributes also impede efforts towards peace.

Parallel structures continue to challenge and undermine the government's ability to govern, while criminal activity feeds on a general climate of pessimism, fear and uncertainty to extort money and assets from helpless citizens. Thriving in this environment is also the high-return illicit economic activities centred on the drugs trade (Kühn, 2007). Organized elites continue to benefit from conflict and instability, providing protection in exchange for services and/or in-kind or cash returns and distorting systems of acquisition of assets and resources (Newman and Keller, 2007). The pervasiveness of a war economy has translated, at least in part, into the institutionalization of kleptocratic and nepotistic networks. In case of shocks and crises such as those associated with COVID-19, and in the absence of alternative forms of formal, licit support through government or humanitarian and development channels, these networks offer alternative coping mechanisms for citizens in need of assistance or survival.

*For those who profit from the war, from power holders to commanders and fighters, the continuation of the conflict is economically more profitable than political stability, especially if a civilian economy offers few perspectives of stable employment and income—a situation exacerbated by the economic consequences of the pandemic.*

By stopping to fight, fighters not only risk losing a source of income but they also risk a loss of social status and recognition based on being associated with bravery in combat and ability to fight and handle weapons, rather than being a civilian with no security or power.

### 4.2 COVID-19 and the intra-Afghan dialogue

COVID-19 emerged in the midst of a political crisis and as a fragile peace process was under way. On 29 February, the Taliban and the United States signed the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, with commitments by the Taliban to participate in intra-Afghan peace talks scheduled to start on 10 March.<sup>41</sup> The intra-Afghan talks

<sup>41</sup> For the full text of the "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan", see [www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf).

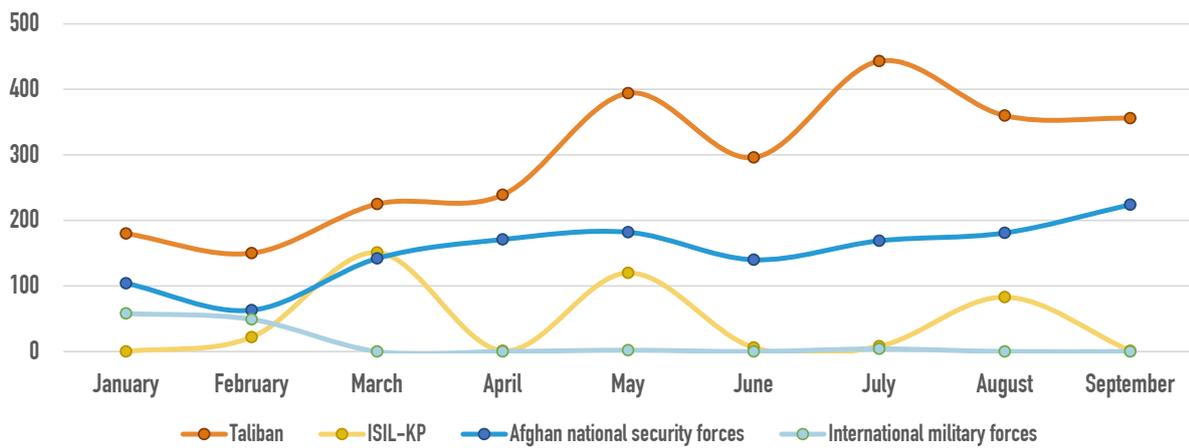
have been delayed due to disagreements over the timing for and the number of prisoners released, refusal by the Taliban to de-escalate armed conflict and disagreements over the protocols governing the talks—all compounded by COVID-19 related complications.

Adjustments for pandemic conditions will likely slow down the intra-Afghan dialogue and affect its modalities. The number of delegates in face-to-face meetings between the Taliban, the government and other relevant stakeholders, subject to COVID-19-related restrictions, will need to be scaled down. Side meetings and informal dialogues involving international and regional stakeholders and Afghan groups are also likely to be affected (Rubin, 2020). The outcome of the process will

depend on who can influence the process and to what extent, despite the pandemic conditions.

Unabated armed conflict is a major impediment to the peace process. With 3,458 civilian casualties documented in the first half of 2020, Afghanistan remains one of the deadliest conflicts in the world for civilians (UNAMA, 2020; figure 4). As the United States grapples with public health and political crises at home, the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan is expected to take place ahead of schedule (Deutsche Welle, 2020). The longer the conflict and bloodshed continue, the more difficult will be the task of finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

**Figure 4: Civilian casualty timeline by party to the conflict. 1 January to 30 June 2020**



Source: UNAMA 2020.

## 5. Accountability in international response: Moving forward

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The global impact of COVID-19 places an unprecedented strain on the ability of international governments to support Afghanistan. Diplomatic missions in Afghanistan have scaled down, with the vast majority of international personnel shipped out of the country to minimize the risk of exposure to COVID-19. This situation affects the modalities of development and humanitarian aid provision and interactions between international and local stakeholders.

Similarly, the pandemic-related limitations are likely to undermine ability by international stakeholders to remain closely engaged with the troubled intra-Afghan talks as part of the peace negotiations with the Taliban. Even if there are accountability mechanisms for funding and other resources earmarked by international donors in support of the peace process, they will be difficult to oversee and enforce.

### 5.1 Rethinking modes of engagement

Development policies in Afghanistan are formulated and implemented at the intersection of interactions between the government, international donor States, multilateral agencies, private sector contractors, international NGOs and local NGOs, with ordinary citizens as the ultimate beneficiaries. These interactions are based on asymmetrical relations of power and interdependency, institutionalized through sets of structures and tools developed in the wake of the Bonn Conference of 2001 (Martin and Parto, 2020; Kühn, 2007).

International aid, which accounts for more than 75 per cent of the public spending and a large portion of off-budget programmes, gives significant leverage and a potentially central role to international actors in the nature and direction of policymaking for development and responses to opportunities for peace.

***With or without peace, international donors are likely to remain as central actors of governance in***

***Afghanistan as their funding decisions and actions affect the structures and activities of the State, the operations of NGOs, the citizens at whom interventions are directed and the dynamics of interactions between them.***

The fact that the negotiating parties in the intra-Afghan peace talks have recognized the need for receiving sustained international aid to support development will continue to give international donors leverage when insisting on commitments by all parties to clear provisions in any peace agreement on fundamental rights of all citizens.

### 5.2 Towards balanced accountability

The modalities of international aid delivery in Afghanistan are best characterized as an upward model of accountability because the vast majority of local NGOs are accountable to international intermediaries, such as international NGOs and private sector development contractors who, in turn, are accountable to international donors through their headquarters outside Afghanistan (Martin and Parto, 2020; Ebrahim, 2003). At the same time, government actors are primarily concerned with cultivating and maintaining donor relations to ensure the continuation of the flow of aid funding from international donors rather than investing in something that might resemble the public good (Kühn, 2007).

Dependent on directives from their headquarters, donor representatives based in Afghanistan have little or no flexibility to take the initiative and experiment for more impact. Duplication and poor coordination are results of an inherent inability or unwillingness to share information, coordinate, cooperate and collaborate. Periodic attempts by some donors to better coordinate are typically limited to information-sharing about ongoing and planned activities rather than seeking to maximize synergy or devising a common strategy for joint action towards a common objective.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Interview, international development agency 1, 28 August 2020.

The most recent example is the funding modality to support the peace process. Multiple international and national NGOs have been funded to work on peace process-related issues. However, there is little or no evidence of attempts by the donors to demand coordination among their fund recipients or between the fund recipients and other civil society organizations, including other NGOs. The result is haphazard messaging via Twitter and training and other events organized for selected groups of individuals. The fact that the funding of such initiatives will conclude at the end of 2020 further raises questions about how donors intend to constructively engage civil society on peace beyond that date.

The current modality of aid funding in Afghanistan is the product of the focus by international donors on functional accountability to account for the use of resources, such as inputs and outputs, and reporting on meeting procedural and administrative requirements rather than strategic accountability processes focused on aid effectiveness and institutional change.

The current arrangements consolidate and reinforce aid dependency of local and international NGOs and lessen the ability and willingness to dissent from donor-imposed priorities and modes of operation. Reporting on inputs and outputs, although important, needs to be accompanied with reports on outcomes and impacts. The current arrangements leave little or no room to question the effectiveness of donor-supported interventions or advocate for alternative types of intervention (Martin and Parto, 2020; Ebrahim, 2003).

The potential decrease in international aid after 2020 raises important questions about the future of development and humanitarian aid programming and whether and how its modalities could be rethought to facilitate cooperation and collaboration and shift focus from activities and outputs to impact and sustainability.

International assistance to Afghanistan for combating COVID-19 provides an opportunity for a critical examination of the aid modality and reformulation of relationships between international donors, the government and NGOs, including multilateral agencies and private sector contractors (Byrd, 2020b). Such an examination would focus on instituting a balanced

approach that incorporates mechanisms for downward and strategic accountability.

In the short term, evaluations, currently used almost exclusively for upward accountability from NGOs to donors, could be fruitfully used for downward accountability, making NGOs more accountable to the communities they serve and donors more accountable to NGOs. In the longer term, social audits incorporating stakeholder dialogue at all levels can contribute to improved performance: internally, in terms of monitoring performance and increasing organizational learning, and externally, by improving accountability towards stakeholders downstream to communities and upstream to donors. These efforts would need to aim at generating reliable and verified evidence rather than disseminating “success stories” and unverified anecdotes (Ebrahim, 2003).

Focus on downward strategic accountability will require long-term investments by international donors in financial and human resources of local NGOs to capacitate both local and international donors in developing, revising, integrating and/or strengthening systems for analysing and reporting on efficiency, effectiveness and impact. In addition, local actors, whether government or non-government, need to work towards a mutually recognized “common good” as the focus of their collective activities rather than how much funding they can secure (O’Brien and Evans, 2016).

Admittedly, given the weak mode of governance in Afghanistan, working towards the common good is much easier said than done. There is, however, no escaping from having to define the common good, particularly given the prospects of a peace agreement with the Taliban and what it would entail in terms of aid modalities by donors in Afghanistan. Defining the common good is essential to restoring and improving the legitimacy of the actors of governance, such as the international donors, the government and civil society organizations.

The prospect, or lack of prospect, of peace in Afghanistan overshadows all efforts, including those centred on addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the peace process and efforts to mitigate COVID-19 present unique opportunities for working towards a

common good based on popular sovereignty, whereby all efforts are concentrated on engaging with citizens and winning their consent (Patrick, 2006). Applying popular sovereignty to managing COVID-19 and the peace process in Afghanistan would necessitate input and active participation from Afghan NGOs, the private sector, formal and traditional religious authorities and various forms of community-based organizations (APPRO, 2020).

## 6. Conclusion

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The common threat posed to all by COVID-19 makes the need for the definition of a common good even more pressing. The pandemic has reinforced structural inequalities and systemic deficiencies. Measures to strengthen solidarity, reduce inequalities and political infighting and to support good governance are more urgent than ever.

The concurrence of COVID-19 with the intra-Afghan peace process reinforces fears of growing vulnerability, insecurity and frustration with dysfunctions in governance systems, including modalities of international aid to Afghanistan. The temptation to resort to response mechanisms akin to firefighting and focusing almost exclusively on the immediate consequences of the pandemic and national security are likely to increase (Hearn, 2016).

However, and regardless of the outcomes of the ongoing peace process and the potential for a second wave of the pandemic, the large array of rights, societal priorities and socioeconomic needs of citizens will have to be addressed to minimize the potential for a continuation or recurrence of conflict.

The two most pressing pressures for Afghanistan are the pandemic and the uncertain prospects of a peace agreement with the Taliban. Both these needs would be better addressed if there is the cessation of hostilities and a ceasefire in the conflict.

In immediate terms, a ceasefire would ensure that social, economic and public health vulnerabilities will not be further exacerbated. In the longer term, a sustainable peace agreement could create opportunities to strengthen governance mechanisms across all sectors.

Given the peace process and the intra-Afghan peace talks, it is incumbent on civil society to mobilize, collectively advocate for and work towards a notion of the greater good for Afghanistan. International donors, however, would need to continue providing guidance, mentoring and support for such efforts.

For international donors, the pandemic and the peace negotiations combined represent an opportunity for devising closer, symmetrical collaboration with civil society and its organizations based on a notion of downward and strategic accountability. This type of collaboration would need to serve as a means to integrate civil society and its various organizations in a stable system of governance in the long term.

## 7. Ways forward

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New conditions that emerge under crisis can reorient ways in which politics evolve and policies are formulated and implemented. Peace and conflict in Afghanistan cannot be thought of independently from the legacies of the past and the longer-term socioeconomic and development challenges the country will continue to face, all of which have been magnified and exacerbated by the pandemic.

Given the complexities and uncertainties of the current circumstances, making specific recommendations on what various actors should or could do is difficult and perhaps not fruitful because they would be underlining the importance of information-sharing, coordination, cooperation and collaboration on key issues, such as the peace process, addressing the extraordinary pressures of the pandemic and focusing on strategic and longer-term prospects for Afghanistan.

What can help in decision-making in the current circumstances is an objective reflection on how to do better by doing things differently. Major factors in the current circumstances are the ongoing conflict, attempts at bringing peace, aid dependency of the Afghan government and non-government actors alike and the pandemic placing unprecedented pressure on the already-weak structural and institutional arrangements. Compounding these factors is endemic corruption, deep-rooted misogynous views of women in society, environmental degradation and threats from climate change, the latter being the main driver of internal displacement. Faced with these major and interrelated factors, none of the stakeholders, internal or external, can expect to continue the same as before and achieve better results.

To do things differently and have better results, a sea change is needed in the mindsets of multiple international stakeholders to move

from addressing emergencies using the age-old aid modalities and upward accountability to models that incorporate downward and strategic accountability, so interventions resonate with the experiences and practical

needs of those they aim to benefit, and effect change rather than impose.

Faced with the inability or unwillingness of Afghanistan's government to effect inclusive, transparent and accountable modes of governance in all matters pertaining to the peace negotiations and fighting the pandemic, civil society writ large and the international donors that support them have a unique opportunity to do new things and expect better results. To this end, the following objectives need to be met:

1. Use the COVID-19 crisis and the peace negotiations as opportunities for practising good governance in aid decision-making and provision and public policymaking.
2. Define new modalities and priorities for international aid in Afghanistan beyond the intra-Afghan peace process and COVID-19.
3. Support resilient, productive economic activity.
4. Enable and empower civil society beyond their current status of local implementers to active governance stakeholders.

Meeting these objectives will require efforts to effect dialogue on how best to address the following questions in the short, medium and long terms.

### Short term

1. Despite the persistence of corruption, institutionalized patriarchal arrangements and social fragmentation, how can international aid better address the immediate needs of Afghans in their diversity of interventions to combat COVID-19?
2. Despite the persistence of corruption, institutionalized patriarchal arrangements and social fragmentation, how can international aid better address the immediate needs of Afghans in the peace process?
3. Specifically, in interventions relating to the pandemic and the peace process, what combination of aid provision should they aim at, from on-budget funding and off-budget funding through multilateral

mechanisms (such as the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund) to direct funding of national non-government entities?

### **Medium term**

1. How would a peace agreement affect the modalities of international aid provision for Afghanistan?
2. Specifically:
  - a. If there is a peace agreement, how would the decisions regarding assistance in the short term (specified here) translate into longer-term aid provision?
  - b. If there is no peace agreement, how would the decisions regarding assistance in the short term (specified here) translate into longer-term aid provision?

### **Long term**

1. How can relations between stakeholders in development be more efficient and effective through better information sharing, coordination, cooperation and collaboration towards creating conditions conducive for sustainable peace in Afghanistan?
2. What can be done to shift the focus from upward functional accountability to downward strategic accountability?

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