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Setting the scene for Afghanistan's reconstruction: the challenges and critical dilemmas

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ABSTRACT *The current round of fighting in Afghanistan is only the latest twist in a protracted conflict in which the focus of the international community has tended to fluctuate, depending on prevailing geopolitical agendas. Now in its third decade, the war has resulted in massive population displacement, both internal and external, casualty figures in excess of one million, and a serious deterioration in conditions for the civilian population. This paper takes as its starting point the events of 11 September 2001, which led to the recent dramatic changes in Afghanistan, including the Emergency* Loya Jirga *and other constitutional developments envisaged in the Bonn Agreement. By way of essential background, the paper then offers a brief introduction to the country; it describes the way in which conflict began and traces the various different phases of the war from the late 1970s to the present day. In so doing, it seeks to outline the global and historical context of the current crisis in Afghanistan. It considers the challenges that need to be addressed in order to achieve effective post-conflict reconstruction and development. Finally, it offers a brief overview of current UN plans for Afghanistan's reconstruction and outlines a number of critical dilemmas facing those involved in their implementation.*

The Afghan war, like many protracted conflicts, displays a remarkable tendency to mutate in character. This has been particularly true in the past year, following an extraordinary series of events that few could have predicted.

In recent years, with the support and collusion of both the Taliban regime *and* the Mujaheddin regime that preceded it, Afghanistan had become the base for the Al-Qaida network. Large numbers of foreign nationals, from Pakistan, Chechnya and many Arab countries, had come to Afghanistan, attracted by the particular brand of radical Islam and to undertake military training in camps run by Al-Qaida. (Many of these camps had originally been established with Western assistance, as part of the covert support provided to the Mujaheddin during the Cold War.) This situation first came to prominence in 1998 following terrorist attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, when the USA launched retaliatory missile strikes on Sudan and Afghanistan. However, the events of 11 September 2001 (resulting in the total destruction of the World

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Trade Center in New York, the partial destruction of the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and the deaths of nearly 3000 people) were of an altogether different scale and significance, striking as they did at key symbols of US military and economic power, on the American mainland. They were immediately attributed to the Al-Qaida network and, following Taliban refusal to hand-over the Al-Qaida leadership, a military campaign aimed at the overthrow of the Taliban regime, and in support of the Northern Alliance, commenced on 7 October 2001. Hundreds, probably thousands, of Afghan civilians were killed, as a result of the use of overwhelming US military power and aerial bombing aimed at ensuring minimal US fatalities.[1] Taliban forces retreated from Kabul on 13 November 2001.

Shortly after these events, UN sponsored talks on the future of Afghanistan were held in Bonn from 26 November to 4 December 2001. The talks resulted in the establishment of a 30-member Interim Authority, which included a number of warlords. Chaired by the Pushtun leader Hamid Karzai,[2] this became with immediate effect the repository of Afghan sovereignty, representing Afghanistan in its external relations and occupying its seat at the United Nations; an Independent Commission was also established charged with convening an 'Emergency *Loya Jirga*' (a Pushtu term, meaning a 'Grand Assembly of Elders'). This took place six months later, in June 2002, and was opened by the former King, Mohammed Zahir Shah, who had returned to Afghanistan in April 2002, after nearly 30 years' exile in Italy.[3] The Emergency *Loya Jirga* was in turn charged with agreeing the membership of a broad-based, multi-ethnic Transitional Administration to lead Afghanistan 'until such times as a fully representative government can be elected', which is to be no later than two years from June 2002. In addition, the Bonn Agreement makes provision for the establishment of a Constitutional *Loya Jirga*, to be convened within 18 months of the establishment of the Transitional Administration, in order to adopt a new constitution for the country.

Considering the events of the past 23 years, and those of the past year, there is a striking contrast between the determination and intentionality that characterised the West's pursuit of its strategic interests in Afghanistan during the cold war period and since 11 September 2001, and its effective disengagement, with the resulting political vacuum, which was allowed to continue unchecked during the interim period, from 1992 to 2001. The West's approaches to addressing Afghanistan's problems, and its attempts to encourage democratisation, need to be seen against the conflicting factors of a strong culturally rooted governance system and a weak state emerging from 23 years of conflict. The result has been a disturbing tendency by the West to 'bend' its own rules and concepts of democracy when this is felt to be necessary to maintain Afghan support and so ensure its own wider geopolitical and strategic objectives are met. During the Cold War, humanitarian assistance was given not simply on the basis of humanitarian principles, but in order to further the political objective of overthrowing the Soviet-backed regime, irrespective of the human rights or gender policies of the Mujaheddin warlords (Strand, 2002). So, too, in the changed post-11 September environment, the imperative is to ensure the continued prosecution of the 'war against terrorism' and the successful implementation of the Bonn

Agreement, even if this requires collusion with known war criminals and the blurring of certain humanitarian principles and codes of practice.

The Bonn Agreement also makes provision for a Judicial Commission, with responsibility for rebuilding Afghanistan's justice system 'in accordance with Islamic principles, international standards, the rule of law and Afghan legal traditions', many of which appear to be in conflict. It seems that little has been learnt from the past and that compromise, driven by self-interest, continues to characterise the West's dealing with Afghanistan. In the current climate, it could be argued that the emphasis is on 'Afghanising democracy', rather than 'democratising Afghanistan'.

The emergence of the contemporary conflict

To be accurate, any analysis of the Afghan conflict needs to be underpinned by an understanding of the history of state formation and of societal–state relations. Some general facts and figures about the country are presented in Figure 1. Afghanistan was a monarchy from 1747 until 1973; however, the legitimacy of the state has always been somewhat precarious (Maley, 1998). The country's present borders were established when the so-called great powers sought to establish a buffer state between the then British and Russian Empires and, in the view of some analysts its identity is more indicative of the strategic needs of former imperial powers than it is of any social or political structures within the formal borders of the state (Rubin, 1995).

War is not a phenomenon unique to Afghanistan's contemporary history. Since independence in 1919, conflict has existed between modernisers and more conservative Afghan factions, complicated by rivalries between the Pushtun and non-Pushtun ethnic groups. The history of the country illustrates that, although those who held power claimed to represent the majority, their principal policy was one of 'divide and rule'. The same policies characterised the communist regime that ruled the country from 1978 to 1992, with the establishment of different ethnically based militia groups. Throughout its history and up to the present day, Afghanistan's neighbours have influenced and imposed regimes inside the country, while the ordinary Afghan people have had little opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes that have affected their lives.

Although the Afghan state that developed in the first half of the twentieth century was weak and dependent on external resources, the socioeconomic components of Afghan identity and the sense of Afghan nationhood are much more deeply rooted in history than the structures of the Afghan state, and it is this sense of nationhood that has come to the fore in numerous popular uprisings throughout history, galvanised by the threat of external aggression or invasion.

By the early 1970s urban elites were gaining access to education and concepts of society that transcended both the local village-based hierarchies and those of the Islamic clergy, leading to growing tensions between traditionalists and modernisers (Fieldon & Goodhand, 2000). As tensions grew within Afghanistan, so too did external pressures and influences upon the country. In the post-second world war period, the USA emerged as the new and ascendant superpower, assuming many of Britain's former colonial roles in the world. As a result the

Afghanistan is a largely mountainous country located at the western edge of the Himalayan massif. The Afghan population is comprised of six major ethnic groups: the Pushtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkomans and Baluch. Most people follow the Sunni faith and Islam has been regarded as a unifying factor, particularly during times of conflict against external aggressors. However, there have been tensions between the Sunni majority, and the roughly 15%, mainly Hazara, Shia minority. A majority of the population is engaged in subsistence agriculture and, before the Soviet invasion of 1979, an estimated 85% of the population lived in rural areas. However, significant changes have occurred as a result of both internal and external displacement in the intervening years. The last official (but only partial) census in Afghanistan was conducted between 15 June and 4 July 1979 and there is an urgent need for more accurate and up-to-date data.

Land area (sq km)		652 100
Population		25 000 000 (Source: UNOCHA)
Population growth rate (annual % 2000)		2.6% (Source: World Bank)
Population density (people per sq km)		40.7 (Source: World Bank)
Urban population (% of total)		21.9 (Source: World Bank)
Number of refugees in Pakistan		2 000 000 (Source: UNHCR)
Number of refugees in Iran		1 500 000 (Source: UNHCR)
Numbers of internally displaced persons		1 100 000 (Source: UNOCHA)
Numbers killed in war		1 500 000
Mine affected areas (in sq km)		55 000
Landmines		approx. 10 million
Life expectancy at birth (years)		40 (Source: UNDP)
Maternal mortality (per 100,000 live births)		1,700 (Source: UNICEF)
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)		257 (Source: UNICEF)
Adult Illiteracy rate	Overall:	64% (Source: UNDP)
	Women:	78.1% (Source: World Bank)
	Men:	48.1% (Source: World Bank)
Primary school enrolment ratio:	Girls:	3% (Source: UNICEF)
	Boys:	39% (Source: UNICEF)
Percentage of the Afghan population malnourished		70% (Source: UNDP)

(Source: World Bank Web-Site, October 2001)

Figure 1. Afghanistan facts and figures.

'Great Game' of the previous century was replicated once more, this time between an expansionist USSR looking south, and the USA as it looked north from Pakistan, keen to influence events in Iran, Central Asia and China. During this period Afghanistan received sizeable quantities of development assistance from the USA, in addition to significant volumes of both development and military assistance from the USSR.

In 1973 the King was overthrown by military officers under the command of his cousin, Daoud. Those favouring a faster approach to reform found a vehicle in the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) which, in 1978, seized power in a second military coup. The following year, in response to increasing fears of Islamic resistance both within Afghanistan and in the newly declared Islamic Republic of Iran, the USSR invaded the country in support of the PDPA government.

From Jihad to the Taliban

Like many complex and protracted conflicts, the Afghan conflict has mutated over time. Atmar *et al* (1998) and Atmar and Goodhand (2001) have identified a number of distinct phases to the conflict and these are described below:

From late 1979 until February 1989 Soviet military forces occupied Afghanistan, during a period marked by fierce resistance from Afghan fighters, known as the Mujaheddin, backed mainly by the USA and the Pakistani Intelligence service, the ISI. Initially the Afghan resistance was largely rural, as the countryside was subjected to massive destruction and Soviet forces carried out aerial bombardment and military offensives in heavily populated areas. Many were killed and hundreds of thousands became homeless and displaced as villages were reduced to rubble and waves of refugees fled Afghanistan. Some three million settled in camps along the Pakistani border, while a further two million fled to Iran. The Pakistani authorities encouraged organisation of Mujaheddin parties within the camps. A 'Commissariat for Afghan Refugees' was established but, to be eligible for support, refugees had to be registered with one of seven Afghan Sunni military parties to which Pakistan had accorded its formal approval, thereby ensuring the politicisation of refugees and the provision of aid to them (Fielden, 1998).

Numerous international nongovernmental organisations established operations in Pakistan at this time; most were based in the North West Frontier city of Peshawar. From here they provided humanitarian assistance to refugees and, increasingly, sought to channel aid to those areas of Afghanistan under Mujaheddin control. During this period, assistance was heavily politicised and support to the 'just cause' of the Mujaheddin took precedence over issues such as gender, drug production or human rights abuses. The 'aid practice' established in this context was characterised by free handouts and an absence of monitoring. There was also a naïve trust in military commanders, on whom agency personnel relied for access and security guarantees; they were viewed as representatives of the people and were, therefore, beyond reproach (Strand, 2002).

This phase also witnessed the large-scale erosion of rural Afghan society and its institutions, as villages emptied and existing village hierarchies were eroded by massive displacement. As a result, authority was derived principally from the wealth and power of local warlords, a situation that was perpetuated by the Peshawar based 'aid industry'.

After nearly a decade of occupation, the Geneva accords of 1988 led to the withdrawal of all Soviet forces in early 1989 but, despite being hailed as a success, the accords had failed to address adequately the issue of the post-occupation period and the future governance of Afghanistan. The assumption among most Western diplomats was that the Soviet-backed government in Kabul would soon collapse; however, this was not to happen for another three years. During this time the Interim Islamic Government of Afghanistan (IIGA) was established in exile. The exclusion of key groups such as refugees and members of the Shiite community, combined with major disagreements between the different Mujaheddin factions meant that the IIGA never succeeded in acting as a functional government.

In 1992 UN-negotiated plans for President Najibullah, the last communist-era president, to step down and a transitional authority to take over were thrown into disarray. Mujaheddin groups formed an alliance with a renegade government commander in the north; they entered Kabul and seized power but with no united or coherent strategy for running the government. Within a matter of months, incompatible goals and an aversion to power sharing between the different Mujaheddin factions led to the collapse of their coalition as a new phase in the conflict began.

Abolition of the Ministry of Defence, previously a force for unification, had resulted in different cities and provincial areas coming under the control of individual warlords. Front lines changed frequently between the warring factions, as the coalitions between them shifted. Kabul was carved up along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines, largely between Hazara and non-Hazara (Shia and Sunni adherents of the Islamic faith). Terrible atrocities were committed and large numbers of Kabul's inhabitants were either internally or externally displaced. This was a tragedy that was allowed to unfold unhindered by international interest or intervention. An Amnesty International report at the time referred to a 'human rights catastrophe' of 'appalling proportions', but when copies were distributed to members of the US Congress, they were simply disregarded—'There was no interest' (*New York Times*, 5 February 1995).

What began as a struggle against occupying Soviet forces mutated into an internal power struggle as the different factions within the Mujaheddin regime fought each other. Those institutions that were left continued to disintegrate and an institutional vacuum became entrenched. It was into this vacuum that the Taliban emerged towards the end of 1994, as the conflict mutated still further, with the different factions becoming proxies for the interests of their own regional power sponsors, namely Pakistan and Saudi Arabia on the one hand, and Iran, Russia, India, and the central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on the other.

The Taliban's arrival on the Afghan military scene in Kandahar coincided with an initiative by the government of Pakistan to dispatch a trade convoy through Afghanistan, via Kandahar and Herat to Turkmenistan (Marsden, 1998). The Taliban, covertly supported by Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence Agency, were well armed and had the support of a population disgusted with the behaviour of local warlords. Initially their role was perceived as securing the main transport routes and removing or disarming the different Mujaheddin checkpoints. However, after their capture of Kandahar, they advanced with relative ease, facing little opposition as Mujaheddin forces either fled or joined them. Herat fell to their control in 1995, and a year later they took Kabul.

The Taliban fighters were largely drawn from Pushtun youths who had spent most of their lives in the refugee camps of Pakistan. The Taliban movement was seen as a way of asserting Pushtun power, to counter the Tajik, Uzbek and (Iranian-backed) Hazara/Shia forces of the Northern alliance. In addition it was perceived as a vehicle for asserting the conservative Pushtun values they had absorbed in the *madrassas* (Qur'anic Schools) that had given them what little education they had (Rubin, 1997).

Most international scrutiny of the Taliban focused on their particular interpreta-

tion of Sharia law. However, although on paper they appeared to have shown little interest in government administration, as Strand has noted, the Taliban managed to establish a system of government that successfully extended their control further into the countryside than any previous administration was able to do. In a system based on the bureaucratic principles and routines of the pre-communist era, they embodied a continuation of existing ideological orientations and organisational patterns that proved efficient for the purposes of tax collection, army recruitment and general governmental control (Rubin, 1998; Strand *et al*, 1999).

The Taliban's values clashed, in particular, with those of Heratis and Kabulis accustomed to a recent tradition of relatively modern urban lifestyles. Television, music and photography were all banned, as were games, kite flying and numerous other popular leisure activities. The lives of urban women and girls were particularly severely affected. They were instructed to wear the all-enveloping *chaddari*,[4] forbidden to study, forbidden to attend schools or university, forbidden to work (other than in the health sector) and were forbidden to leave their homes without a male relative. The Taliban were largely sustained by Pakistan (one of only a handful of countries to accord them official recognition) and initially by Saudi Arabia, both of whom saw them as a means to advancing their own agendas. By mid-2001 the Taliban controlled more than 90% of Afghanistan and the overall situation in the areas they controlled was one of relative peace, in the sense that factional fighting had ceased. However, despite constituting the *de-facto* government of the country, they were never accorded official international recognition, and their draconian policies, particularly those relating to women, earned them the opprobrium of most of the international community and of world opinion (Rashid, 2000).

The challenges of Afghan reconstruction and development

A number of acute challenges face those involved in the task of reconstructing Afghanistan. When war broke out in 1979, the country was already one of the world's poorest nations. The prolonged conflict, now in its third decade, has inflicted severe wounds on the country and the Afghan people. Even the most cursory glance at the list of development indicators for Afghanistan confirms the scale of the challenge to be addressed. In 1995 Afghanistan was ranked 170 out of 174 in the UNDP's *Human Development Index*, making it one of the least developed countries in the world. The continuing drought, the high numbers of Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries and of internally displaced persons only adds to the enormity of the reconstruction challenge, a situation that is further exacerbated by an unsettled military and political environment and by competing regional and international interests that threaten to influence both the process and the outcome.

Perversely, however, perhaps the biggest problem facing those charged with the task of Afghan reconstruction is that rebuilding has been embarked upon not on the basis of the real and acute need to rebuild, nor as part of a carefully planned, integrated process, following an internal peace agreement involving all parties to the conflict. On the contrary, it has been initiated as part of a rushed

'knee-jerk reaction' by external actors to the sequence of events that followed 11 September 2001. With the Cold War over, Afghanistan was effectively neglected by much of the international community and, since 1992, the UN Consolidated Appeals for Afghanistan remained consistently under-funded, sometimes severely so (Atmar & Goodhand, 2001). However, only two weeks after the overthrow of the Taliban, a UN/World Bank/Asian Development Bank-sponsored consultation was held in Islamabad (from 27 to 29 November 2001) followed by a major intergovernmental meeting on Afghan reconstruction held in Tokyo in January 2002. All relevant UN agencies and INGOs/NGOs were engaged in a scramble to submit plans, budgets and proposals, based on desk studies and inadequate assessment missions, fearful of being marginalized by the assumed and imposed urgency of the process. In the preface to the UN Coordination Office for Afghanistan's document, *Immediate and Transitional Assistance Programme for the Afghan People 2002* (ITAP), the authors comment: 'It is important to note that this process has been fast-tracked in order to present the ITAP in the margins of the Ministerial Meeting in Tokyo. Thus unfortunately, consultations with partners are incomplete ....' (ITAP, 2002: 5). In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that agencies engaged primarily in emergency and humanitarian relief operations were concerned to downplay talk of reconstruction and development, for fear of loosing ground to other development-based actors.[5]

In many countries emerging from war, overt armed conflict may come to an end while low-level violence continues for many years, involving former factions, demobilised combatants, bandits or militias. It is unlikely that Afghanistan will prove to be any different in this respect. At the time of writing US, Afghan and other coalition forces continue to fight remnants of the Taliban and Al-Qaida, in what some commentators increasingly refer to as a guerrilla war, with no indication of an early end to the campaign.[6] In addition, there are growing tensions between rival warlords who form part of the new administration. Unidentified gunmen in Kabul assassinated Vice President Haji Abdul Qadir[7] in July 2002, while President Hamid Karzai narrowly escaped assassination in Kandahar on 5 September 2002. While 'postwar' situations can be clearly defined, 'post-conflict' situations cannot. There are two schools of thought, therefore, concerning the timing of reconstruction and development activities. The first is that peace is a precondition for reconstruction and development. The second is that, through the initiation of reconstruction and development activities at an appropriate time during the conflict, the seeds of long-term recovery will be sown. Evidence from world-wide experience supports the second theory, provided the challenge of rebuilding itself (the debate, planning allocation of resources, initiation of partnerships, implementation and impact) is approached as a national project, accessible to public discussion and participation, set to heal inter-community wounds and restore dignity, trust and faith in the system.

One of the main tasks facing the Afghan people remains that of negotiating peace with all parties and achieving consensus as to how they wish to be governed. It may be an admirable sentiment that the 'UN presence is based on having a "light footprint" within the country' (ITAP, 2002: 11) and rightly does not include any structural involvement in shaping the future governance system of the country. (The *governance* component in ITAP is concerned with re-

establishing the rule of law by strengthening the justice system and law enforcement agencies and with administrative capacity building.) Yet the UN could still have a critical role in guaranteeing the time and space for this crucial process to proceed. However, the 'Guiding Principles' set out in the UN Immediate and Transitional Assistance Programme for the Afghan People 2002 seem to proceed from the assumption that the peace process is already guaranteed. They state somewhat optimistically, that 'Peace and stability are at last in sight for the Afghan people' (ITAP, 2002: 6), while the continuing war in certain parts of the country or acts of political violence in Kabul are dismissed as 'areas of insecurity and volatility' presenting a residual 'security' problem. Thus, in its guiding principles and sectoral strategies, 'peace-building' is seen more in the light of capacity building and education for future conflict resolution without being assigned any specific activities or budget, neither is there much reference to the peace-building implications of other planned sectoral activities. The whole thrust of the document is towards rapid implementation of programmes devised to restore 'normal life' (ITAP: 6) to a nation which is still in the process of deciding the norms by which it wishes to be governed. In its haste to be seen to be active, the UN intervention runs the risk of pre-empting national strategy planning that should be proceeding alongside the ongoing negotiation of peace.

Reconstruction, as the first step in a long-term recovery process, entails economic, social and psychological readjustment, that is, the full range of integrated activities and processes that have to be initiated in order to reactivate the development process that has been disrupted by the conflict: restoration of the physical infrastructure and essential government functions and services; institution building to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of existing institutions; the structural reform of the political, economic, social and security sectors. However, post-conflict reconstruction can still prove ineffective if it is not also guided in its practice by a 'conflict transformation' perspective, giving it scope fundamentally to change the focus and aim of postwar reconstruction, in order to direct its work towards peace building and the threefold goal of *hope, healing and reconciliation* (Barakat & Hoffman, 1995).

The UN's characteristic sectoral approach (entailing separate programmes of activities with separate budgets, allocated to separate UN agencies), even in the initial ITAP document, shows serious evidence of fragmentation and contradiction, where, as we have seen, an integrated and holistic approach is needed. For example, Food Assistance (relief aid) and Food Security (agricultural and rural economic recovery) are still regarded as separate 'sectors' despite the long history of misdirected food aid seriously damaging postwar agricultural recovery. These two sector plans similarly make no connection with other sectors such as Mine Clearance and Employment that have significant repercussions for the recovery of agricultural land and livelihoods. More than that, while Food assistance plans to rebuild infrastructure on a 'food for work' basis, Employment plans to pay (presumably the same rural populations) for the same tasks. The evidence would seem to suggest that, as an assistance community, our actions are predicated on what is familiar and what we know best, rather than on what is actually needed.

This fragmentation extends to the now institutionalised UN practice of

allocating resources and responsibility for categories of needy persons to separate agencies. Thus 'reintegration' of refugees and IDPs is dealt with separately from 'reintegration' of demobilised combatants, despite the fact that they are likely to be returning to the same rural and urban 'communities' that are the subject of other programmes. In that resident population, women and children are recognised as vulnerable 'categories' but the old and many thousands of disabled are passed over in silence (see Miles in this issue). Similarly, the Gender sector, rather than mainstreaming gender relations (the relationships between women and men in family, community, work and education) in all the recovery activities, is concerned exclusively with women as a 'category' to be singled out 'in isolation from their wider social, cultural and family context' (see Barakat & Wardell in this issue).

It is suggested (perhaps rhetorically?) that the coordination of these disparate plans and myriad activities is the responsibility of the still precarious and unrepresentative Afghan Transitional Administration, but in practice there is a Coordination sector and the UN Coordinator's Office (UNCO), is the hub of the coordination effort while the governance sector perceives there is a need to develop administrative capacity in the Transitional Administration and key ministries in order to 'enable Afghan authorities to assume greater ownership of externally assisted programmes' (ITAP, 2002: 47).

In fact, despite references to capacity building and treading 'with a light footprint' in Afghanistan, there is surprisingly little reference to any specific Afghan institutions, such as government ministries, having a significant role in the sector plans. Only the Shelter, Housing and Urban Renewal sector lists two ministries as leading the sector collaboration. The Food Assistance sector mentions no government or nongovernmental Afghan institution, although it does refer vaguely to 'capacity building'. Other plans mention ministries almost in passing. For example, the Ministry of Education (in many societies one of the largest and most politically sensitive institutions of government), faced with the task of meeting the needs of 1.5 million children and thousands of young people excluded from basic education, is not mentioned specifically in the plans except as being offered capacity building in NGO and agency coordination, and some re-equipment. The reason appears to be the perceived lack of capacity, as well as the haste not just to implement immediate measures for humanitarian relief and security, but also to re-establish a visible normality in Afghanistan. The plans are thus running ahead of Afghan preparedness and pre-empting the process of national negotiation and decision making. The next significant challenge in this area is to begin the process of building government capacity and finding personnel that have the competence and authority to act as counterparts in more than name and political correctness.

Building peace requires sound foundations based on a commitment to righting wrongs and achieving an acceptable level of social justice and accountability. From this perspective, reconstruction, too, should have a corrective dimension that promotes socioeconomic change and not just the restoration of the status quo, if it is to secure not only the successful implementation of initial reconstruction activities but, more importantly, sustain that investment into the future.

Critical dilemmas for Afghan reconstruction

Preparing for Afghanistan's reconstruction, particularly in the current political climate, therefore presents a number of acute dilemmas for a broad range of stakeholders in the process, not least for Afghans themselves, and it is these dilemmas that are examined in depth by the authors of the following articles. The concluding section of this paper aims briefly to outline the nature and extent of the problems and draw some conclusions for a general approach to the tasks ahead, while recognising that the central dilemma is, of course, that in post-conflict reconstruction there is no 'right' solution or 'perfect formula'. The best that the actors in the situation can hope to do is to steer a course that does the least harm, by learning from past efforts.

As indicated above, reconstruction is by definition a long-term, developmentally driven process. If it is to be effective and sustainable, it first of all requires long-term political commitment to the process from both international and national actors (Barakat & Chard in this volume). However, a word of caution is needed here. While it is vital that Afghans take centre-stage in the decision-making processes concerning their reconstruction, it should not be assumed that there exists a national consensus concerning a vision for the nation's future reconstruction and development priorities. Herein lies another dilemma facing the country: there has been no neutral space for debate to enable such a vision to emerge, or for intellectuals and development professionals to gather, to think, to discuss and to plan. 'The creation of political space is essential' (see Thier & Chopra in this issue). The danger of the 'Bonn quick-fix' is that it may have helped to encourage the perception that such a vision exists, alongside a coherent administrative system. The reality is rather different. Afghanistan today is a huge, shifting kaleidoscope of differing expectations and regional aspirations, which has been shaped by the collective experience of 23 years of war (see Suhrke *et al*).

At the same time there are also dangers in assuming that current levels of international political support and commitment to the rebuilding of Afghanistan will continue indefinitely, or at least for long enough to assure the internal political process. Evidence from previous crises elsewhere in the world would suggest that, as the media spotlight moves on to other more topical issues, and as political agendas and administrations change, so funding pledges made at the height of a crisis may be conveniently forgotten, either for political or budgetary reasons. At the time of writing, members of the new Afghan Transitional Administration are already complaining that pledges made at the Tokyo conference on Afghanistan's reconstruction have failed to materialise and that UN programmes in support of returning refugees have had to be curtailed.[8] It is apparent, however, that there are insufficient lobby groups present in the relevant international capitals capable of applying pressure, asking pertinent questions and ensuring that donors are held accountable.

While such external lobbies are important, there is also a risk inherent in the external perception of war-torn societies. In recent months the West has become all too familiar with the images of destruction and devastation broadcast from Afghanistan. There is a danger that such scenes may be perceived by outsiders,

with little knowledge or understanding of Afghan history and society, as representing a form of *tabula rasa*, or blank sheet on which no vestige of the former order exists and onto which they can simply impose their own externally devised solutions (see Leslie & Johnson). The author's experience in a number of war-torn countries would suggest that the first step in the initiation of any reconstruction and development process is a recognition of people's resilience and impressive abilities to survive the hardship of conflict by employing various coping mechanisms (social, economic and political), many of which may not be clear to outsiders and as such cannot easily be understood and valued. Such coping strategies will have served them well, especially in an environment in which the little state assistance that existed will probably have evaporated. Despite the continued fighting and turmoil of recent years, there are community-level structures and other components of Afghan civil society that have both survived and been invested in[9] (see Goodhand). It is important to recognise the value and potential of such coping strategies and to acknowledge that they can be harnessed as a starting point for reconstruction. (For example, the underground, home-based female schooling initiatives, which flourished under the Taliban regime (see Barakat & Wardell), could be built upon rather than assuming there has to be a return to the status quo ante.

It is certainly true that, too often in the past, committed monies have remained unspent because of a cited 'lack of capacity' and that 'useful assistance begins by recognising and valuing the strengths of the disabled person or disabled country' (see Miles). Nevertheless, this vital potential will not be transformed overnight into effective decision making and management of the recovery process. This means that, while the international donors are motivated to contribute most in the initial postwar period, the recipient nation will have a very low initial capacity to absorb this level of funding effectively, but will require large sums for investment at a later stage as capacity and development priorities are established.

Rather than pledging money, with a requirement that it be spent within an unrealistic given time-frame, an alternative strategy is required, such as some form of Joint Reconstruction Fund into which committed monies could be placed and earn interest. Such a fund would allow Afghans time to think through their own development priorities, rather than accepting blueprint, template solutions imposed by outsiders 'telling Afghans what they "should do" instead of looking at what they "can"' (see Nancy Hatch Dupree). It is certainly important that they be given time to learn lessons from the past and to make decisions for themselves within time-frames that suit them, rather than being forced to adapt to the procrustean constraints of budget deadlines determined by accountants in Brussels, London, Washington or Tokyo (See Barakat & Chard).

Another critical dilemma presents itself in the way in which economic reconstruction is approached. In the perception of some agencies, if relief is simply 'scaled-up' this will help in the process of rebuilding a war-torn nation. However, such an approach will not help to rebuild an economy. It is important to warn against the simplistic view that postwar reconstruction can be confined to issues of physical reconstruction. More diverse, interconnected strategies are required: support for livelihoods, small communities, demobilised soldiers, women, people with disabilities, cultural heritage, and structures of governance

—all are vital to the assistance and reintegration of different war-affected groups (see Özerdem). This is not to imply that expenditure on physical infrastructure is not required—it is, but this should not be at the expense of spending on human skills development; both areas will need to be addressed with equal vigour and determination.

Damage to infrastructure after conflict is often the result of neglect and looting as much as it is to direct war targeting; consequently even if a facility is not destroyed it is likely to have been looted of much of its equipment and materials. However, simply repairing damaged facilities or restoring looted equipment seldom results in sustainable solutions to a country's infrastructure needs. Achieving sustainable infrastructure will assist in the attainment of durable peace only in so far as it contributes to the re-establishment of livelihoods and the connection of disparate ethnic or religious groups, in ways that provide net benefits on a long-term basis. Conversely, the degradation of such infrastructure will limit the potential for local communities to become effective and so reinforce existing divisions. 'Dissatisfaction with … economic outcomes … can also turn into security risks' (see Özerdem).

Obviously, adopting this kind of integrated approach requires much greater understanding and coordination than has been achieved in the past. On the practical front of strategy planning and implementation, there is a need to review and learn lessons from the experiences of external assistance to Afghanistan over the past 10 years. A distinctive feature of humanitarian input during this period has been the mutual shortcomings in accountability. The inadequate levels of accountability to Afghans by international donors have been matched by a corresponding lack of accountability for the way in which aid has been utilised. This has led to a clearly discernible pattern of behaviour, with blame being laid at the door of the international community when things go wrong, accompanied by misappropriation of resources. While this impasse can be overcome as Afghan civil society begins to assume responsibility for decision making on reconstruction, learning to take both praise when things go well and also criticism when they go wrong, such a change in attitudes on both sides has to be developed in the course of the practical measures being taken to secure immediate survival and well-being.

On the economic front yet another critical dilemma concerns the introduction of a free market. There was, of course, already much informal free trade throughout the years of communist government in Afghanistan. However, experience in postwar situations elsewhere suggests that the enforced embedding of neoliberal economics, as an offshoot of democratisation programmes, may not necessarily serve the long-term interests of the country. National resources may be exploited by multinational corporations intent upon maximising profit, with no interest in providing a firm and durable socioeconomic base for the country (Rashid, 2000). The increase in disposable income for a tiny minority, combined with the abolition of many import controls, may lead to a corresponding increase in the range of consumer goods available, with energies focused on the marketing sector. Similarly, the introduction of cost-recovery schemes in health care and education, combined with the curtailment or abolition of even very limited welfare provision, may serve to entrench poverty and increase indebtedness, as

people borrow in order to pay for health care and education (Barakat & Deely, 2001).

The spread of reconstruction benefits between the poor rural majority and the competing claims of the more vocal, visible and accessible urban minority presents another significant dilemma for Afghanistan's new government and their donors. There will always be persons and groups sho have built wartime systems to exploit opportunities in the war economy, although a continuation of such vested interests serves only to widen the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', both within the war-affected areas and between the war-affected areas and the rest. The lack of reconstruction activities at the village and community level, and people's direct influence over these, will only further widen the gap. There is, then, a need to decentralise reconstruction activities. Afghanistan's population remains roughly 75% rural;[10] consequently it is vital that neither Kabul, nor the other strategic urban centres become the sole beneficiaries and every effort should be made to maximise the benefits and coverage of all the different geographical regions, with a view to reaching the majority of the population that continues to be rurally based. However, decentralising in the context of an insecure and historically weak central authority also carries with it the risk of fragmentation. It cannot be assumed that there will be high levels of acceptance and adherence to government codes and guidelines.

Underlying all the conflicting demands discussed so far is an implicit need for detailed knowledge and understanding of a very complex and rapidly changing reality. Although many of the problems facing post-conflict societies existed before the outbreak of conflict, the consequences of conflict can radically alter the political, demographic and economic structure of a country. For example, more households become headed by women, certain intellectual and entrepreneurial sections of society will have migrated and populations been prevented from returning home, creating new ethnically polarized zones. The range of changes brought about by the conflict needs to be identified and incorporated in any rehabilitation strategy. Berg Harpviken (this issue) emphasises the 'vital role of systematic information' in the highly successful Afghan mine clearance programmes and it is clear that all ongoing support for reconstruction and development efforts should be based on an accurate assessment of the genuine need for assistance to the most vulnerable in society, as this is where relief subsidy should continue. There is also an acute need for reliable and up-to-date base-line data, as a basic prerequisite for defining needs, and for planning, designing and evaluating reconstruction interventions. Obtaining such information is fraught with difficulties and requires great flexibility and creativity (see also Barakat *et al*) but acting without this understanding carries much greater dangers.

Finally, in tackling each of these dilemmas, those involved in post-conflict reconstruction have consciously to aim to bypass warlords and conflict entrepreneurs and to promote actions that strengthen moves towards peace. More than providing a unique opportunity for planning experiments, initiating reconstruction activities can also be important for the strengthening of civil society. In an overtly politicised environment, reconstruction can contribute to the creation of 'politically neutral' spaces for civil society to mature and to contribute positively

to any ongoing peace negotiations or processes. It is of critical importance that civilians be centre-stage in the decision making on Afghanistan's reconstruction. The international community has an obligation to be seen to reward peace, not war.

Conclusions

What broad lessons can be learned from this situation analysis of how reconstruction in Afghanistan might be approached? It is important to repeat that there are no magic solutions. Reconstruction must necessarily be a continuous and prolonged process of negotiation between diverse internal interest groups and between them and political actors. With regard to the latter and with particular concern for a sustained peaceful settlement, the country must be seen in its regional context, not just its relationship with powerful Western and international donors. It is apparent that little real thought has been given to what the regional and international role for Afghanistan might be in the future. The West's starting point thus far appears to be one of opportunistic self-interest, with the perceived added benefit of controlling the drug trade while gaining access to central Asian oil and gas supplies, rather than being predicated on any coherent vision for reintegrating Afghanistan into the world community of nations.

As regards the practical approach to the reconstruction process, we can usefully review lessons learned from development experiences in Afghanistan and elsewhere going back to the 1960s. In this respect it is essential to gain and share as much knowledge and understanding of the material, social and political realities of the country as possible, in order to develop strategies that meet perceived needs and aspirations which can be successfully implemented. Failed projects and unequally distributed benefits may fuel conflict. For this reason, the disbursement of funds should be timed to match the growth of internal policy consensus and capacity to implement. Physical and economic reconstruction should not run ahead of political and social processes.

Finally, a way must be found to demilitarise Afghan society, not merely in its institutions but in its mind-sets, by creating space for the growth of civilian authority and mechanisms for civil representation.

Notes

1. Marc Herold, a US economics professor at the University of New Hampshire, carried out a systematic independent study into civilian casualties in Afghanistan. Based on corroborated reports from aid agencies, the UN, eyewitnesses, TV stations, newspapers and news agencies around the world. Herold estimated that at least 3767 civilians were killed by US bombs between 7 October and 10 December 2001, an average of 62 innocent deaths a day (Seamus Milne, *Guardian*, 20 December 2001).
2. Hamid Karzai is a Pashtun tribal leader from the same clan as the former Afghan king, Zahir Shah. He was born on 24 December 1957 in Kandahar, was educated in Kabul, and went to university in Simla, India. In 1982 he joined the struggle against the Soviets, eventually becoming Director of Operations of the Afghan National Liberation Front (ANLF). He speaks English fluently and served as a deputy foreign minister in Afghanistan's first Mujaheddin government in 1992.
3. Zahir Shah was born in Kabul in 1914, and educated in France. He was only 19 when in 1933 he became King following the assassination of his father. During World War II he succeeded in maintaining both Afghanistan's neutrality and its borders. Following the war, recognising the need for modernisation, a series of gradual reforms was introduced and, in 1964, a new constitution provided

for free elections, a parliament, civil rights, emancipation for women and universal suffrage. However, these reforms met with opposition from traditionalists in Afghan society and in July 1973, while he was in Italy receiving medical treatment for an eye condition, the King was overthrown in a coup orchestrated by his cousin, Mohammed Daoud. Since then he has lived in exile in a villa outside Rome.

[4] In Afghanistan the Persian/Dari term *chaddari* is more widely used than the Arabic/Urdu term *burqa*.

[5] At an Emergency Health Coordination meeting on Afghanistan, attended by the author in Geneva, 10 December 2001.

[6] See Damian Grammaticas, BBC Online News, 17 July 2002.

[7] See BBC Online News, 2 July 2002, 6 July 2002.

[8] See 'Aid donors "failing Afghanistan"', BBC Online News, 6 May 2002; 'Cash shortage threatens Afghan aid', 29 May 2002; and 'Afghan plea over reconstruction', 25 July 2002.

[9] Over the past seven years the Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit (PRDU) at the University of York, UK has identified gifted students from war-torn societies around the world and over 100 students have now completed the one-year PRDU Masters programme in Post-war Recovery Studies. This strategic investment in people has been critical in qualifying a number of Afghan students (funded by Al Tajir Trust, Association for Cultural Exchange, Barakat Trust, and Norwegian Church Aid) for key leadership positions, including ministerial posts in the new Afghan Transitional Administration.

[10] It is impossible to give exact figures for the rural and urban populations given the lack of accurate recent data. Prewar statistics indicate the population was 85% rural. However, the combination of massive displacement from the countryside during the Soviet occupation, and the preference for many recent returnees (originally from rural areas) to settle in urban centres, suggest a revised figure of 75%.

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