Addressing environmental issues in a post-conflict situation: The case of Afghanistan

ABSTRACT: The Taliban regime was toppled by US military intervention a month after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. This paved the way for the signing of a United Nations sponsored agreement between the various Afghan factions later that year. Since then the international community has pledged billions of dollars for Afghanistan’s reconstruction. While the stated objective is to transform Afghanistan into a democratic, stable and peaceful country, much remains to be done. The international actors and the Afghan authorities face many challenges in their endeavour to transform this fragmented country into a unified nation, where peace and stability prevail. It is furthermore doubtful that the neo-liberal economic agenda being imposed on Afghanistan, will on its own promote long-term sustainable development. Most observers predict that inequalities and poverty will remain entrenched for the foreseeable future, and that effective governance will be elusive as long as insecurity persists and state authority remains weak.
Every great European or Asian conqueror seems to have marched their armies through the valleys, deserts and mountains that today form part of modern Afghanistan. Due to its pivotal and strategic position in Asia, at the junction of the Indian, Persian Turkish and Mongol worlds, Afghanistan has often been referred to as a ‘highway of conquest’, and its territory and people have fallen victim to waves of conquerors and been integrated into much larger empires. Afghans still nowadays speak of Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great, and Tamerlane, as well as various Moghul, Sikh and Persian rulers as if they had just passed through. As a result, Afghanistan has always been a melting pot of races and cultures with little unifying factors and subjected to powerful external influence.

Contemporary Afghanistan only came into existence as the direct result of the ‘Great Game’. This cat and mouse game played out in the nineteenth century between competing and expansionist Imperial Russia and British India, was responsible for the demarcation of Afghanistan’s present borders. Neither power was able to completely subdue the various Afghan tribes and eventually agreed to the creation of a buffer state separating their respective empires. In 1919, the country attained international recognition, following the third and last so-called Afghan War with Britain, and gained complete independence that same year. However, the drawing of borders and international status does not make a nation. In many ways, Afghanistan was an artificial and foreign creation whose frontiers brought together diverse and often antagonistic people and tribes. Afghanistan had never been, according to Elliot, a united nation but ‘a historically improbable amalgam of races and cultures, each with its own treasuries of custom, languages and visions of the world…an impossible place to understand as a whole.’

The name Afghanistan simply means ‘land of the Afghans’. For a long time, outsiders used the word Afghan to refer to the Pashtuns, the ethnic group comprising roughly one-third of the country’s population. The Pashtuns themselves say that Allah after having created the world had a pile of rocks left from which he made Afghanistan. This local legend about the country’s creation still rings strangely true nowadays. Indeed, Afghanistan’s very existence seems slightly arbitrary and owing much to after-thought. Officials of the British Raj called Afghanistan a purely accidental territory. One of these officials, Sir Mortimer Durand, was tasked, in the late nineteenth century, with drawing the border that today separates Afghanistan from Pakistan - the infamous Durand Line. He drew it ‘with a cavalier flourish’ that sliced through tribes and villages and ended up cutting the Pashtuns’ ancestral territory in two.
During the same period, the king of the Afghans, Abdur Rahman Khan simply called his country Yaghistan, or 'Land of the Rebellious'. This rather appropriate description has proven repeatedly true as witnessed by many recent would-be invaders. Similarly to other colonial creations, Afghanistan ended up trying to build a nation from a highly diverse and complex mix of people with deeply established ethnic rivalries and loyalties. While trying to build a nation, the country also had to contend with the geopolitics of the Cold War, culminating in the 1979 Soviet invasion. Almost 25 years of internal conflict followed, resulting in over a million Afghan deaths and many more refugees.

Renewed fighting and instability

Following the withdrawal of the Soviet army in 1989, America and western powers in general lost interest in Afghanistan. Confident that the balance of power had been restored, the US withdrew its involvement and Afghanistan fell off the map. Despite earlier promises made to the Afghans who fought against the Soviet occupation, there was no concerted effort to rebuild the country's ravaged society or economy. As Misra points out, 'self-serving external powers who had used Afghanistan for their own designs conveniently forgot about its needs'. Soon after the Soviet retreat, a bitter and devastating civil war engulfed the country. Afghanistan turned yet again into a battleground where those same mujahideen who had fought against the Soviet army, under the command of various warlords, competed for power and territorial control. The carving up of Afghanistan resulted in complete anarchy with no central governing structure. The country basically disintegrated into a multitude of fiefdoms with ordinary Afghans bearing the brunt of the country's decline. The overall instability prevailing in the country triggered some level of renewed interest among international and regional powers.

The United States, western powers and regional players, especially Pakistan, were deeply concerned with Afghanistan's instability and in particular by the potential destabilising impact it could have on the wider region. The Afghan chaos was also seen as a major obstacle to the development of trade routes and the export of natural resources from Central Asia's newly independent republics to western markets via Pakistan's harbours. Central Asian states are believed to have some of the last large unexploited oil and gas reserves in the world. By the mid-1990s, the scramble for a share in this bounty was well underway. A US company, UNOCAL was looking into the feasibility of constructing a pipeline through Afghanistan. This would have offered an alternative to exporting oil resources via the former Soviet Republics. Both Zalmay Khalilzad, who later became the US Ambassador in Kabul, and Afghanistan's President, Hamid
Karzai, played a significant role in the negotiations between UNOCAL and the Taliban in the mid-1990s.\textsuperscript{18}

However, none of these projects could be implemented as long as the country was in the grip of warring and divided feudal-like warlords. Pakistan was particularly eager to stabilise its unruly neighbour and to install a friendly regime in Kabul. To this effect it provided support to the Taliban, which Islamabad had in any case been nurturing for quite some time. Pakistan had been host to millions of Afghan refugees since 1979, and ‘it provided them with succour, and indoctrinated them with radicalism’.\textsuperscript{19} The young and alienated Afghan men stranded in the refugee camps were literally children of the jihad who had known nothing but war. They were basically rootless and receptive to the radical version of Islam they were taught in the network of madrasas (Quranic schools) set up for their benefit along the border with their home country.\textsuperscript{20} They were later sent back to Afghanistan were they formed the core of the Taliban movement. The soon-to-be new rulers of Afghanistan ‘brought with them an Islamicist fervour previously unknown in Afghanistan, traditionally a place of religious moderation’.\textsuperscript{21}

The rise of the Taliban

Right from the beginning, the relationship between the Taliban leadership and the Pakistani authorities was one of mutual benefit, and would continue to be so until the dramatic events in New York. According to Human Rights Watch, Pakistan solicited funds for the Taliban; bankrolled their operations; provided diplomatic support; trained Taliban fighters; planned and directed offensives; facilitated shipments of arms and fuel; and, on several occasions, provided apparently direct combat support.\textsuperscript{22} Benazir Bhutto, the former President of Pakistan, publicly referred to the Taliban as ‘our boys’.\textsuperscript{23} In an effective military campaign, the Taliban movement headed by Mullah Omar, managed to take control of most of Afghanistan and brought some semblance of security and order.\textsuperscript{24} It is however, doubtful that the Taliban, ‘a bunch of illiterate small-town mullahs and religious students’ would have been able to capture 90 percent of the country within four years, without the military, intelligence and logistical support of Pakistan, and the financial backing of Saudi Arabia and the United States.\textsuperscript{25} Afghanistan’s strategic position between Central Asia and international markets meant that the Taliban’s tight control over most of the country and the return of stability and security, even if imposed through harsh and brutal means, was greeted with relief and cautious optimism. They were seen as useful and the US State Department indicated that it saw ‘nothing objectionable’ in the Taliban’s version of Islamic law.\textsuperscript{26} Another American diplomat asserted that: ‘The Taliban will probably develop like the Saudis did. There will be Aramco, pipelines, an emir, no parliament and lots of Sharia law. We can live with that’.\textsuperscript{27}
The arrival of the Taliban on the Afghan scene, their constant brandishing of the Quran, and their restrictive interpretation of Islam, should hardly have come as a surprise to informed observers. The introduction of a fundamentalist version of Islam began as a CIA-initiated move to unite Afghans against the occupying Soviet armed forces.\(^{28}\) Following the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979, the US National Security Advisor, Zbgniew Brzezinsky, was seen posing for photographers with mujahideen fighters and shouting: ‘Allah is on your side’.\(^{29}\) At the same time, fundamentalist Afghan ‘freedom fighters’ were being feted at the White House and other western capitals.\(^{30}\) While America never officially recognised the new Afghan regime, it continued to provide vital support through its traditional allies in the region, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. This ambivalent relationship dictated by the laws of realpolitik lasted until the first major terrorist attack by al-Qaeda on US interests in Africa and the Middle East in the late 1990s. Al-Qaeda had settled in Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban’s rise to power and provided its leaders with both military support and financial backing. The Taliban movement and bin-Laden’s group had established a relationship that was useful to both, although it was also most probably unbalanced and ambiguous. After 9/11, the US government requested the extradition of bin Laden and his acolytes. An ex-Taliban interviewed by Christina Lamb, remembers:

‘We laughed when we heard the Americans asking Mullah Omar to hand over Osama bin Laden. The Americans are crazy. Afghanistan is not a state sponsoring terrorism but a terrorist-sponsored state. It is only Osama bin Laden that can hand over Mullah Omar not vice versa’.\(^{31}\)

**The Taliban’s demise**

While the Taliban’s climb to power in the late 1990s was swift, so was their demise. On 11 September 2001, the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York came crumbling down following the most devastating terrorist attack on the United States. These events would quickly prompt a new wave of conflict and turmoil for the people of Afghanistan, a country that had already experienced 23 years of war.\(^{32}\) The clouds of dust had hardly settled in New York that US warplanes were dropping tons of bombs over Afghanistan with a view to annihilate the Taliban regime and flush out Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda operatives from their mountainous lair in the south of the country. It was the events of September 2001 rather than developments inside Afghanistan ‘that finally sealed the fate of the Taliban and ushered in a new phase of the war’.\(^{33}\) After the terrorist attacks on the United States, the Bush administration and its allies were quick to demonise the Taliban regime. The military intervention in Afghanistan could not just be seen as simple retaliation. It had to be scripted as a humanitarian war aimed at liberating the Afghan people from ruthless and brutal rulers.\(^{34}\) A different scenario simply never was an option.
Politicians, the military establishment and most of the media in the West sold the intervention to their public opinions as a just and moral war. The Taliban were portrayed as the personification of evil, and the Afghan population as its victims in need of liberation. In the aftermath of 9/11, ‘the war on terror conveniently also became a war for the liberation of a people, its morality so hard to challenge that scarcely a voice was raised against it’. Even fewer observers bothered to remind their western audiences that the Taliban had in the past enjoyed the active support of America and its regional allies, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Events unfolded quickly. On 7 October 2001, a US-led coalition commenced military action in Afghanistan. Its stated aim was to eliminate the al-Qaeda terrorist network and topple the Taliban regime that harboured Osama bin Laden and his supporters. The Taliban rule collapsed just two months after September 11. A ‘peace’ conference, sponsored by the United Nations, was held in Bonn, Germany, on 5 December 2001, and approved a broad agreement for the establishment of an Interim Administration under the authority of Hamid Karzai. The Taliban did not take part in the Bonn talks. While some observers interpreted the rapid crumbling of the Taliban as a sign that peace would soon follow, others rapidly realised that even in those early stages the seeds of future conflicts were already being sown. They predicted that the lack of attention to the need for peace and reconciliation between the warring parties, and the imbalance between the participants, would lead to further and renewed conflict and insecurity. Five years later, the Taliban fighters are still active in the country and recently fighting has resumed with new vigour, particularly in the south-western provinces of Afghanistan. The country is still at war, and lately, peace has become seemingly even more distant. As Sir Olaf Caroe wrote in 1958: ‘Unlike other wars, Afghan wars become serious only when they are over’.

**Improvising Afghanistan’s reconstruction**

Clearly, ordinary Afghans have had little say in the dramatic events that have repeatedly engulfed their country and shaped their destinies. Today, their country is one of the poorest in the world with one of the lowest human development indexes, and faces a delicate process of political normalisation and national reconciliation, together with serious reconstruction and development challenges. Depending on whom you speak to, the likelihood of rebuilding the country in a way that is consistent with the principles of sustainable development ranges, from extremely slim to potentially feasible under the right circumstances.

The circumstances that prompted the 2001 military intervention and the way it has been conducted will to a certain degree influence the chances of building a sustainable Afghan society. Despite promoting the military campaign as a humanitarian intervention and a ‘just war’, it seems
rather obvious that the intervention was mainly triggered by a desire for retaliation and as an act of punishment.\textsuperscript{43} Its main objectives were to destroy the Taliban regime and capture bin Laden and its al-Qaeda fighters. There was no agreement or consensus among the coalition partners and the international community as to what should happen once the Taliban regime had disintegrated.\textsuperscript{44} As a UN senior official put it: ‘The Americans had a clearly limited agenda, a military agenda, which was to topple the Taliban, but they had not put enough thought into the more difficult task of what would come after’.\textsuperscript{45} Improvisation seemed to be the rule and in the ensuing post-Taliban power vacuum, warlords from various factions were able to re-establish control over territories they had previously occupied.\textsuperscript{46} The US relied on these allies to help it hunt down remnants of the Taliban and provided them with arms and financial support.\textsuperscript{47} As one observer wrote:

‘America’s new allies, however, included some of the same men who had wreaked havoc in Afghanistan before the Taliban came to power, and many of them were almost as radical in their ideology as the Taliban themselves’.\textsuperscript{48}

It is in this unsettled context that a United Nations-sponsored conference on Afghanistan was held in Bonn in late 2001. Various anti-Taliban groups met in the German city under extreme political pressure from the US and other interested parties.\textsuperscript{49} The outcome was the creation of an Interim Authority but without any agreement among the warring parties to lay down their arms. A decision was also made to set up an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) whose presence would however, be limited to Kabul and its vicinity.\textsuperscript{50} Finally, the stipulation in the Bonn Agreement that militia troops present in Kabul should leave the city upon the arrival of the international force was never enforced.\textsuperscript{51} No meaningful disarmament process took place either. Consequently, the security situation in most parts of the country remains volatile to this day. According to most observers, this is partly the result of the over-reliance by the US army on local warlords and its unwillingness to commit sufficient ground troops in the early stages of the campaign. Five years later, this attempt at nation building on the cheap still reverberates negatively. In a country like Afghanistan, scarred by decades of conflict, reconstruction challenges were always going to be daunting and complex. Nevertheless, it seems fair to state that due to the lack of a long-term and coherent plan, ‘opportunities have been lost, goodwill squandered, and lessons of history ignored’.\textsuperscript{52} This lack of planning is particularly apparent in the field of natural resources management and the closely linked issue of building sustainable livelihoods. Generally speaking, war and conflict are not compatible with establishing sustainable development or promoting environmental protection.\textsuperscript{53} In the case of Afghanistan, the ongoing insecurity combined with weak governance structures and the lack of resources and capacity mean that effective sustainable development strategies and environmental policies will be
particularly difficult to implement. This will have long-term negative consequences in a country where the vast majority of the population relies on natural resources for its survival. The failure to effectively address issues pertaining to natural resources management is thus of particular concern and will require urgent attention and more efficient planning by both donors and national authorities.

Despite a rather inauspicious start regarding Afghanistan’s reconstruction process and the many challenges that still remain, various elements and Afghan characteristics could potentially play a positive role in the country’s recovery process. Among these, a strong sense of common identity and the unifying force of Islam. I will further explore these two aspects below.

**Afghan diversity and identity**

Afghanistan is about the size of France, with an estimated population of only 25 million people. Afghans can be divided into eight major ethnic groups. In the east and southeast are the Pashtuns who make up an estimated 38 per cent of the population. In the north, we find the Tadjiks, who constitute about 25 per cent of Afghanistan’s people. West of the Tadjiks, live the Uzbeks, comprising 10 per cent of the population. The mountainous centre of the country is home to the Hazaras, representing more or less 20 per cent of the country’s inhabitants. The balance consists of Turkmen, Aimaks, Baluch and Kirghiz (see map on page 49). These major groups are often further divided into sub-ethnic and sub-tribal groupings. Each of the major groups, except for the Hazaras, also has ethnic links to neighbouring countries. Indeed, there are more Pashtuns in Pakistan than in Afghanistan. Afghans are famous for their fiercely autonomous and independent character, which is partly the result of their country’s geography. Its terrain is spectacularly varied, ranging from mountains with peaks culminating above 7,000 metres, interspersed with fertile valleys, to inhospitable deserts. The country’s landscape, combined with a lack of infrastructure and communications, makes it difficult and arduous to travel around and many areas can only be reached by foot, horse or donkey. As a result, ‘individuals often live and die in their home valleys unaware of others around them’.

Afghanistan is often described as a ‘combustible ethnic mix’ and has throughout its history witnessed repeated patterns of fission and fusion, when allegiances have shifted and power relations between the various ethnic groups have been altered, often resulting in conflicts. Ethnic diversity and antagonisms, as well as the country’s ethnic links with neighbouring nations, have frequently been used by outside powers to trigger conflict inside Afghanistan. In fact, ‘divisions among the Afghans virtually invited competitive foreign interference’. In spite of the current emphasis on ethnicity, fuelled in large part by outsiders and local political leaders for economic
and military purposes, a sense of national identity, of belonging, of being Afghan does exist. Most Afghans’ primary loyalty though, lies at the local level. According to Oliver Roy, while ethnic identities are important, they never prevail over this primordial identity, nor do they undermine a sense of common Afghan identity.

In spite of the obvious manipulation of ethnicity by internal and external players, no similar ethnicisation of the Afghan masses has taken place. Although at times acrimonious in their interaction, Afghanistan’s various groups and sub-groups have traditionally managed to reach some form of accommodation in resolving conflicts, through an informal balance of power. This was made possible by a high degree of local and regional autonomy. But almost 25 years of uninterrupted conflict, the country’s increased exposure to the outside world and foreign influence have put strains on these traditional arrangements. Unsurprisingly, Afghans often found themselves in opposite camps at times of external threats or national crisis, and ended up fighting
each other.\(^{52}\) In the words of a young Afghan, ‘there were tribal differences, ethnic differences, yes – but they were secondary. We were all Afghans, and that was the important thing. The war has changed all that’.\(^{53}\)

**The centrality of Islam**

Another element of cohesion among Afghans is Islam. Almost all Afghans are Muslims - Islam is an integral part of the society’s identity and value system. Eighty per cent of the people are Sunnis and belong to the Hanafi School, the most tolerant of the four schools of Sunni Islam. Most of the remaining 20 per cent are Shia Muslims. Despite the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam by both the Taliban and some conservative elements within Afghan society, tolerance underlies the practice of Islam in Afghanistan.\(^{64}\) For most Afghans, religion is a private affair conducted at home or within their community or village, not something to be dictated by the state. To many Afghans, the Taliban religious decrees smacked of an alien and uncommonly zealous mentality. Afghans in general ‘do not make an issue of being Muslims…and abhor any tendencies toward fanaticism’.\(^{55}\) The brutality of the Taliban and their narrow interpretation of Islam can be explained through the socio-economic context in which they grew up and from the harsh realities of civil war.\(^{56}\) The Taliban came from the south of the country or from refugee camps in Pakistan. Nearly all of them came from Pashtun-dominated areas. Outside these areas, the Taliban’s ‘appearance, dress, tribal origins, language, customs and interpretation of religion’ were regarded as strange and foreign.\(^{67}\) In fact, many Afghans viewed the Taliban as a puppet regime dominated by Pakistan and al-Qaeda Arabs.\(^{68}\) This partly explains why their regime was toppled so easily.

Due to its centrality and the way it infuses many aspect of Afghan society, Islam could play a major role in securing peace and stability for Afghanistan. It will also be pivotal in determining the country’s governance structure and in defining the functioning of its political system. Some argue that Islamism is the only social force ‘pervasive and powerful enough’ to forge an Afghan state.\(^{69}\) Historically, Islam has been a crucial unifying factor and a major political tool for decision makers in Kabul and in the provinces.\(^{70}\) As Norchi points out, ‘Islam has been the expression of Afghans’ common interest in the context of historically distant and weak central governments’.\(^{71}\) Those who support the reconstruction process in Afghanistan will need to take this into account and be careful not to impose solutions and systems, which are solely the product of Western tradition and ideology. Western powers might also need to reconsider their often-superficial understanding and negative view of Islam.\(^{72}\) If the objective is to build a democratic society in Afghanistan, neither ethnic diversity nor Islam should be considered as insurmountable obstacles. Islam’s tradition of consensual decision-making and strong civic institutions suggest that democracy is
not quite the alien transplant its detractors make it out to be.\textsuperscript{73} It is more the West's insistence on a single version of democracy that seems to be the problem. Many observers also consider that ethnic pluralism, if properly managed, can be seen as a safeguard from the worst abuses of tyranny and majority rule.\textsuperscript{74} As explained later, Islam's relationship to nature and its holistic approach to the environment \textsuperscript{75} could potentially play a useful role in establishing some degree of environmental governance and protection in Afghanistan.

Reconstructing Afghanistan: challenges ahead

Rebuilding Afghanistan and transforming a war-torn country into a stable and functioning state that provides basic and adequate services, as well as justice and security to its citizens, is a daunting and complex task. Although interdependent, political and institutional reconstruction is certainly more complex and time consuming than hard infrastructure delivery. As Heffron puts it, 'political and economic relations and the fabric of lives are not as easily rebuilt or replaced as roads'.\textsuperscript{76} Establishing strong, efficient and legitimate state institutions that are able to deliver and provide a modicum of support to fragile livelihoods will be far less easy and will require more than just donor funding and support. The task is made even more difficult by the fact that international aid is notoriously supply-driven rather than triggered by demand.\textsuperscript{77} Many projects and programmes funded through development aid tend to fulfil objectives deemed necessary by donors, rather than respond to the actual needs of those directly affected by them. Very often, expatriate experts lack the interest or understanding of the social, cultural and political situation prevailing in the country, and care more about implementing the development policies of their donor country.\textsuperscript{78}

Also problematic is the fact that most of the funds allocated for Afghanistan end up being channelled through international agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with Afghan authorities having little say over how these funds will be disbursed and for what purposes they will be used.\textsuperscript{79} Compounding these problems is the added confusion of actually knowing who is going to fund what, where and when. Many donor agencies in the beginning refused to pool their money into a joint trust fund for the whole of the country.\textsuperscript{80} Donor countries seem to have their respective pet projects, and while all of them want 'to send children back to school; no one wants to pay military salaries'.\textsuperscript{81}

Finally, international personnel tend to dominate policy development and decision-making processes. This is partly due to the lack of capacity, real or perceived, within the Afghan administration. According to the World Bank, the Afghan state, after more than 20 years of war, 'had become virtually non-functional in terms of policymaking and service delivery, although the
structures and many staff remained. Consequently, donor agencies had to figure out how to channel large amounts of foreign aid into a country where the national government had little authority, while at the same time preventing ‘the dissipation of aid through corruption, favouritism, or incompetence’. Some progress has been achieved, and the institutional vacuum has been filled to a certain degree. The donor community has also lately demonstrated a greater willingness to provide Afghan authorities with easier access to and control over international financial resources. This is partly due to the Afghan government’s success in developing the right systems to manage international funds. For instance, an internal coordinating body, the Afghan Assistance Coordination Authority (AACA), has been established and is responsible for approving, coordinating, and monitoring all programme support to Afghanistan. By mid-2003, the Afghan government was able to oversee the coordination of international aid.

Considering the volatile environment in which the reconstruction effort is taking place, the fact that the country has so far not reverted to full-scale civil war, is cause for guarded optimism. It is doubtful, however, that this state of affairs will last if the benefits of even partial peace do not outweigh the ‘benefits’ – at least for some – of renewed war. Many have made huge profits during the past decades of unrest, both in terms of political power and territorial control, as well as financial gains. Thus the international community and the Afghan government need to fulfil the dual objective of providing better livelihoods for the majority of Afghans while also keeping potential spoilers at bay and/or incorporating them into the new power structure. Reconstruction and development activities need to be kept on track in the hope that they will promote the resolution of still simmering conflicts, and sow the seed of long-term and sustainable recovery. Without a rapid and broad-based improvement in the appalling living conditions of most Afghans, peace and stability will remain elusive.

Afghanistan and a strong state

While the situation is certainly complex and fluid, the UN and other international agencies, in their haste to restore visible normality in Afghanistan, are doing a bit of everything in an often fragmented and contradictory fashion. For instance, elections have been held and institutions, albeit fragile, have been created, but disarmament and demobilisation activities are not taken place at the same pace. This situation could spark renewed violence if the institutions put in place are not sufficiently strong or considered legitimate enough to take action and enforce decisions. Reconstruction and development projects are also being implemented without having in place a proper and comprehensive strategy that will promote long-term sustainable development and not just the restoration of the status quo. United Nations agencies and
international donors have stated in a series of official documents that the end objective is to promote sustainable development. Assuming that the international community is serious and fully dedicated to this objective, in order for sustainable development to become a reality, the policies and strategies devised for Afghanistan will need to promote long-term economic growth, support social development, particularly in the fields of poverty alleviation, health and education, and ensure the protection of the environment and the proper management of natural resources.

Analysing the various development plans and strategies tabled so far, it seems that the emphasis is squarely on triggering economic growth and supporting the private sector, while hoping that the expected benefits will eventually trickle down. For sure, issues of poverty reduction and social development feature prominently in the various strategies. Environmental protection and natural conservation also receive the odd mention. All considered however, the development agenda being promoted (as will be elaborated below) is mainly based on neo-liberal policies and includes, the accelerated privatisation of state assets and industries, the elimination of subsidies, and a reduced role for state institutions. This agenda is being pushed through despite the fact that similar economic policies have often failed in other developing countries.

The strategies developed by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), supposedly in close collaboration with national authorities, repeatedly state that market forces and the private sector should be the central engine for delivering sustained growth, not the state. The development framework entitled: ‘Securing Afghanistan’s Future’, drafted in partnership between the Government of Afghanistan, the UN, World Bank, IMF and Asian Development Bank, states that: ‘The private sector must be the driver of economic growth, so removing obstacles to private sector development is an urgent priority’. The State is only seen as playing a facilitating and supporting role. The National Development Framework (NDF) for Afghanistan drafted in 2002, even positions the private sector as a provider of basic services such as health and education. In a country like Afghanistan where state institutions far from having too much control, have in fact too little influence, one could argue that what the country needs at the moment ‘is not less state but more’. For many observers, a stronger state is a pre-requisite for ensuring that some of the potential benefits of economic growth are more broadly and equally redistributed. In order to achieve this goal, strong, well-staffed and properly funded state institutions are necessary. While the NDF does refer to the regulatory role of the state, little attention has been given to this aspect so far.

---

Privatisation is also heavily promoted by the IFIs, and is seen as a vital component of Afghanistan’s economic recovery. Afghanistan is expected to support the rehabilitation of key state-owned enterprises, particularly in the energy and mining sectors, with the help of international firms and development funds, before selling them to private companies. In parallel to this process, the Afghan government is also required to lift trade barriers and liberalise its capital and financial markets. The NDF promises not to screen foreign investment companies, to apply low company tax rates, and to establish a free trade regime with low and predictable tariffs.

The development of a strong and vibrant private sector, able to trade freely and with a minimum of red tape, could arguably have a positive impact on a country’s development potential. But hasty reforms without an adequate regulatory framework in place might spell disaster, particularly for the most vulnerable elements of the population. At present, it is doubtful that selling off the country’s assets cheaply will lead to growth. Removing trade barriers will open up the country to foreign competition and most probably be disastrous for local companies unable to compete with cheaper foreign imports. While free trade might be beneficial to rich countries, dismantling all barriers in the early stages of development is not the way to encourage growth. Most countries that have been successful in developing their economy ‘have done so behind barriers of protection’, and have only lifted these gradually as development progressed. Finally, the premature liberalisation of financial markets before the country has a stable economy will most likely attract ‘hot money’ and speculation from foreign banks with possibly only marginal long-term development benefits.

In sum, Afghans have had little influence over the economic policies being elaborated for their country. Right from the start, even before the Bonn Agreement was signed, external advisers from the IMF, the US Treasury and other financial institutions moved in to promote their own brand of economic policies. No real debate has taken place among stakeholders as to what type of economic model should be adopted. Hardly any thought was given to the possibility of developing alternative models that might be better adapted to the Afghan context and deliver greater returns for ordinary Afghans. The same neo-liberal policies, applied elsewhere in developing countries, have simply been copied and pasted onto the Afghan canvas. The fact that such a strategy might not serve Afghanistan’s long-term interests was not taken into account. Not unrelated as some point out is ‘the extent to which policy was set by people who knew nothing about Afghanistan’. Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. It has a rudimentary economy and, in many ways, still lingers in a pre-industrial age. Nevertheless, it is being force-fed an economic recipe that sometimes barely works in highly industrialised nations.
Building a sustainable future

International Financial Institutions are not the only actors providing advice on development strategies. Various UN agencies and NGOs promote plans and projects more in line with the objectives of equitable and sustainable development. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for instance, states that: ‘Afghanistan is not a normal underdeveloped country that needs fast recovery growth based on market forces' and highlights the need to address deeply entrenched inequalities.\(^{109}\) It seems however, that the pro-poor strategies promoted by development agencies, as well as the policies tabled by environmental organisations, end up being watered down and receive inadequate funding once the implementation phase starts.\(^{110}\) This is possibly due to the fact that most foreign donor countries see the economic and financial sectors as being central to any development strategy. The social and environmental aspects are often deemed to be peripheral or secondary. At this point in time no model exist to challenge liberal capitalism at the global level.\(^{111}\) Consequently the strategies being applied in Afghanistan follow that same pattern and tend to dedicate less attention and support to the environmental and social dimensions of development.

One of the sectors likely to be negatively affected by this trend is the natural resources sector, particularly with regard to the exploitation of timber, gems and natural gas. These sectors are already mostly under the control of criminal elements, traffickers and warlords. The same people also tend to occupy official posts within the central or provincial administrations, or are able to influence policies and decisions. They are thus ideally placed to take advantage of the new rules of the game.\(^{112}\) Their activities are likely to mutate from a criminalized war economy into a cosmetically altered peace economy. The current forms of exploitation of valuable natural resources allow those with power and influence to become rich without investing much in return.\(^{113}\) Consequently their activities do little to foster long-term economic growth, or for that matter sustainable development.

Decades of violent conflict have left Afghanistan’s natural resources base heavily degraded, caused widespread environmental damage, and profoundly reduced the country’s institutional and human capacity to address these issues. Given that 80% of the population lives in rural areas and is directly dependent on natural resources for livelihoods,\(^{114}\) the restoration of ecosystems and the sustainable management thereof are crucial and will require long-term commitment and financial support from the international community.\(^{115}\) Addressing environmental problems will need to go hand in hand with humanitarian aid and development efforts, so as to avoid further or renewed instability and upheaval.\(^{116}\) Efficient and equitable water resources management is of particular importance in a country with low and erratic rainfalls and where large areas qualify as
arid or semi-arid. Marsden describes the country as being ‘effectively a mountainous desert in which river valleys and the occasional oasis permit a limited degree of cultivation’. Water is crucial for the agricultural sector, which is either rainfed or irrigated through modern or traditional systems. Large ‘modern’ irrigation schemes, such as those of the Helmand and Nangahar River valleys, have in particular been adversely affected by the conflict. Government agencies in charge of maintaining these systems have been unable to do so, due to lack of staff, equipment and finances.

The war has also had negative effects on traditional canal irrigation systems. Typically, a mirab or water master manages these systems at the village or local level. Usually elected by farmers, the mirab makes key decisions concerning water distribution, operations and overall management, and acts as the link with government authorities. Many rural areas have witnessed a complete breakdown of this traditional management system. Mirabs have stopped operating and have been replaced by local warlords who have imposed their own management system and frequently do not respect established water rights. The severe drought of 1999-2001, the worst in the last 50 years, has accelerated the collapse of already fragile water management systems. The drought has affected most of the country and about half the population, either directly or indirectly. The Helmand River, in the south of the country, dried up for the first time in living memory and the water table sank to an all time low. Food insecurity rose dramatically, livestock was decimated and land productivity was seriously reduced.

The central role of natural resources

With 80 per cent of the population dependent on agriculture, but with only 12 per cent of the total land area being arable, it is vital that efficient and sustainable agricultural and natural resources management methods be put in place. At present, irrigation systems only operate at efficiency rates of about 25 per cent. Consequently, considerable scope exists for reducing water wastage and increasing the size of the irrigated areas. Productivity levels in both the rainfed and irrigated farmlands are also low compared to regional averages, indicating substantial scope for improvement. While the recent drought and the war have negatively impacted on Afghanistan’s agricultural sector, unsustainable practices and management techniques have created even further problems. Most Afghan farmers are unaware of the improved water management techniques that would help them to optimise crop production while saving water resources. In addition, they also tend to grow water intensive crops in water poor regions. Finally, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), water extraction is taking place in a totally uncoordinated and unmanaged manner. Millions of dollars are being wasted to fulfil immediate humanitarian needs without considering regional impacts or long-term
hydrological consequences. For instance, in Farah province, the construction of deep wells, has caused the drying up of hundreds of karez, the traditional underground irrigation canals, leading to serious disruption of local livelihoods and triggering disputes over water rights.\textsuperscript{127}

Farming activities and the agricultural sector, including livestock, are closely connected to natural resources management and the various ecosystems that make up Afghanistan (see map on page 58 for land use patterns). They are directly impacted by and influence other areas of the natural environment. Agriculture is dependent on water, but in turn also influences the quality and quantity of water available, through for instance, the use of pesticides or fertilisers, or the way water resources are harvested. The quality of soils also has a determining effect on crop yields. In turn, land usage techniques and the types of crops being planted will have an impact on the soil quality. Considering the centrality of water and land resources for Afghans and the country’s development, it is urgent that these be addressed in a comprehensive and coordinated manner. Among the many issues hampering the development of a productive and healthy agricultural sector, we find: unsustainable water resource management and usage, limited access to credit, lack of access to improved farming technologies, limited private sector involvement in input and service delivery, and lack of land security and tenure.\textsuperscript{128}

Forests and woodlands are another natural resource that has been negatively affected by the war and the lack of environmental control and management (see map on page 58 for forest cover). In certain provinces between 50 and 70 per cent of forest cover has been lost.\textsuperscript{129} At the present rate of deforestation, it is estimated that no forests will be left in the next 25 years.\textsuperscript{130} Trees are being cut to provide fuelwood and building material, but large tracks are also being cut to generate immediate profits for a small minority of warlords, timber barons and foreign traders.\textsuperscript{131} The central government, despite issuing a ban on uncontrolled logging, does not have the means to enforce this. Local communities who used to manage their forests have also mostly lost control over these resources, often to local commanders. The forestry sector could become a major source of revenue for the country if properly managed. Trees, such as pistachio and fruit trees, are also valuable to local communities, both as a source of food and income. In addition, woodlands fulfil an important ecological role. They help maintain biological diversity, are critical to the survival of wildlife, and play an important role in stabilising soils, reducing erosion and maintaining riverbank stability.\textsuperscript{132} Again, as with water and agriculture, a concerted effort is needed in order to protect the remaining Afghan forests.
Although the majority of Afghans live in rural areas, the urban population has increased dramatically in recent years. In 1970 Kabul had a population of 400,000 inhabitants. In 2003 the population in the city is estimated at 2.8 million people. Most other cities in the country have experienced similar growth rates. Despite low levels of consumption and production, waste management has become a glaring environmental and human health issue. Afghanistan has no proper sanitary landfills, and most of the waste is simply disposed off at unmanaged dumpsites or along the roads. Reliable water supply is also virtually non-existent and often polluted in Afghanistan’s urban centres. In 2000, according to UNICEF, only 17 per cent of Afghans had access to safe water and only 10 per cent had adequate sanitation. Throughout the country, sewerage and waste water systems, when they exist, end up discharging their untreated effluents in rivers. The journalist and traveller Christina Lamb on a visit to Kabul a few years ago remembers how she and an Afghan friend suddenly stopped talking and covered their noses and mouths as they crossed the Kabul River.

'I tried not to breathe in the nauseating odour from the almost dry riverbed into which people had evidently dumped their waste. Once the river was shining blue, there had been gardens all along the side...but the grass had died, the trees been cut down and the banks had become a sprawling bazaar of the old and rotten.'
Urban dwellers are also exposed to numerous toxic and carcinogenic air pollutants. These pollutants stem mainly from an estimated fleet of around 600,000 vehicles, most of them concentrated in the cities and operating on low-grade diesel. Most of the growth in urban population is due to rural-urban migration. Most migrants hope to find better living conditions in cities and escape rural hardships and insecurity arising from environmental degradation. Unfortunately for them, the situation in cities is hardly any better if not worse than in the countryside. As elsewhere in the world, urban centres will also be responsible for most of the economic output and activity. Providing a safe and healthy environment for city dwellers is thus matter of urgency.

**Promoting environmental education and governance**

The challenges facing Afghanistan’s reconstruction process are multiple and complex. Ensuring that natural resources are properly managed for the benefit of all and halting environmental degradation, are just two aspects of the multi-faceted reconstruction agenda. They are however, central and crucial for the country’s development and the future survival of its people. Education and the dissemination of information pertaining to natural resources and environmental management will be an important element in bringing about a greater awareness and understanding of these issues among the population. Local and traditional decision-making structures and institutions should be made use of or rehabilitated when they no longer function properly. As mentioned earlier in this article, Islam is fundamental to Afghan society, and in a country where most people live in rural areas and where as many as two-thirds are illiterate, the village mullah and other religious structures, might well be an effective way of disseminating information.

Islam could also be instrumental in promoting environmental protection and respect for the natural environment. The Quran mentions the environment and the natural world in many of its verses. Several verses are very specific and address particular environmental issues. For instance, the Quran deals with the hydrological cycle and the fundamental role water plays in sustaining life on Earth. It also states that pastures, woodlands, forests and wildlife cannot be privately owned or monopolised. In Islam, all species have a right to live and flourish, not because of their potential use to humans, but in their own right. The Quran points out the absurdity of the anthropocentric worldview by stressing that man is only a small part of the universe. Although, according to Islam, God granted humans stewardship of the Earth, this does not entail ownership. Humans do not have the right to exploit or use nature unwisely, and according to the Quran ‘each generation is entitled to benefit from them but is not entitled to own them in an absolute sense’. 

59
Ensuring a greater dissemination and understanding of the Quran’s teaching with regard to environmental issues by for instance, training religious institutions and leaders, could have a positive impact on how ordinary Afghans deal with environment-related issues. In many ways the teachings of the Quran are infused with the principles of sustainable development and modern Islamic scholars, it is suggested, could interpret the ecological principles of the Quran so as to adapt them to contemporary environmental issues.  

Crucial to promoting environmental protection and laying the foundations for effective environmental governance will be to establish governmental authority over the whole country. In order to achieve this objective, government authorities in Kabul and their administrative extensions at the provincial and local levels, will need to deliver services and safety to their citizens in order to establish some level of legitimacy. In a country like Afghanistan, war-torn and fragmented, the task is particularly difficult and far from successful. International insistence on rolling back the state is not a very encouraging sign. At this point in time, further downsizing the public sector could be politically risky, as this sector represents an important source of employment and is key in implementing recovery programmes. Maintaining an adequate state apparatus should however not be equated with building up a bloated and ineffective bureaucracy. Getting the balance right will partly determine the relevance and level of legitimacy that the state enjoys among the Afghan population. There is an urgent need to reconnect individuals and institutions.

In order to achieve this, the state needs to be seen as a reliable partner that has the ability to deliver on the ground. This is particularly vital in the field of natural resources management and environmental restoration. Many environmental problems and solutions are local in nature, but need effective coordination, both financial and technical, at the central level. The Afghan government needs to be seen as delivering to its people. Most of the work cannot just been left for NGOs and international development agencies to do. Afghan capacity needs to be urgently increased so that it can gradually take over from the international community, or at the very least, contribute in a meaningful way to the development effort.

Re-uniting the centre and the periphery

Afghanistan has a strong tradition of localised and personalised rule. Over time, powerful regional interests have developed that have prevented the creation of effective national institutions. Due to the difficult terrain, the lack of reliable communication systems and infrastructure, and repeated conflicts, many areas have long been used to operate beyond the reach of authorities based in Kabul. For many observers, all politics are local in Afghanistan. Various leaders, in the recent
past, have tried to either centralise or modernise the state apparatus. Until now, centralisation has often meant the concentration of power in the hands of a narrow minority, and subjugation of opposition by force. Modernisation, on the other hand, was mainly based on co-opting autonomous local authorities through patronage.\(^{150}\) Both moves eventually failed. Throughout its history, Afghanistan has witnessed an ongoing struggle between centre and periphery, between a modernising state and local communities attempting to remain beyond the central government’s sphere of influence.\(^{151}\) The last 23 years of turmoil and conflict have created an even stronger degree of regional autonomy. The regional character of Afghan politics cannot be ignored neither can the need for a more effective central government.\(^{152}\) The difficult task facing both Afghans and the international community is to launch a dual and simultaneous process of centralisation and regionalisation, where participation at the local level can flourish and an adequate level of central coordination exists and is accepted. Achieving this objective in the field of natural resources management could have a potentially long-lasting positive effect in winning over a majority of Afghans and re-instilling a sense of confidence in national authorities. The sustainable management of natural resources and the implementation of environmentally sensitive policies are central to Afghanistan’s recovery. They will have a direct and positive impact on issues such as, food security, water availability and quality, rural livelihoods, human health, agricultural productivity and others. All of these are crucial to reducing poverty and bringing about a minimum level of development.\(^{153}\)

In this context, it is worrying that Afghanistan has had little latitude to chart its own development path or formulate policies for managing its economy. The fact that the country is heavily dependent on international financial and technical assistance should not mean that the process of policy-making should be taken over by outsiders.\(^{154}\) However, this is exactly what has happened. Also worrying is the lack of imagination when it comes to policies dealing with the environment and the promotion of sustainable development. Many of the recommendations made in the various strategy papers and policy documents are often simply quick fixes that mainly promote rebuilding what has been destroyed. These policies will most probably only bring about short-term changes with little prospect for long-term sustainable development.

For instance, in the transport sector heavy emphasis is put on rehabilitating and building new airports. By 2015, the country should have 30 airports among them five international airports.\(^{155}\) But in a country where few people can afford air travel, repairing damaged airports will have little positive impacts for the majority of poor Afghans.\(^{156}\) On the other hand, developing the public railway system could be beneficial to the population at large. But so far, railways are only seen as a means to support the exploitation of ore and coal deposits. The development plans devised by the Government of Afghanistan and its international backers do not consider a rail passenger
service\textsuperscript{157} despite the fact that it would be of greater benefit to ordinary Afghans and have less of an environmental impact than the present fleet of battered and polluting buses that commute between the various urban centres. According to the World Food Programme, railways in Afghanistan could move 10 times faster and transport 50 times more cargo than roads.\textsuperscript{158} While mass-transit and environmentally friendly modes of transport, such as electric trolleys in cities, are mentioned in some of the development plans, their feasibility rests on continued economic growth. While economic growth has been high over the last years, albeit starting from a very low level, Afghanistan will still be a very poor country for many years to come.\textsuperscript{159} Consequently, it seems very unlikely that the Afghan Government will be able to finance an efficient public transport network in the near future without financial support of the international community. Taking into account the economic agenda being imposed on Afghanistan, it is highly improbable that a comprehensive public transport network will be developed despite its many advantages in terms of human health, social development and environmental protection.

The same logic seems to prevail in the energy sector. While the various development strategies mention that energy resources should be developed on a sustainable and environmentally friendly basis, they also clearly mention that, ‘the Government has assigned high priority to developing the oil and gas sector as significant sources of the country’s energy’.\textsuperscript{160} It also highlights the need to rehabilitate some coalmines. No mention is made, except in documents produced by specialised agencies such as UNEP and various NGOs, about the need to develop renewable energies.\textsuperscript{161} The Government also envisions major hydroelectric developments that are completely outdated, fail to take into account potential damage to the environment, and ignore the needs of downstream users. No mention is made of small-scale hydroelectric dams.\textsuperscript{162} One wonders why large, expensive and polluting projects always seem to attract the necessary financing, while small-scale, more affordable, greener projects that bring benefits to those with the greatest needs mostly fail to attract the necessary funding. The usual criteria of quick return, profit making and business as usual may be offered as an explanation.

The development of proper and effective environmental governance in Afghanistan still remains somehow distant. Although a National Agency for the Protection of the Environment (NEPA)\textsuperscript{163} has been set up and various Ministries, dealing with issues ranging from water management to agricultural development, exist and operate at the provincial level with various degrees of success, the country is still far from having a fully operational system in place. Also, while environmental laws have been enacted \textsuperscript{164}, the means to implement these are extremely deficient. Before environmental governance can really become a reality, basic good governance and rule of law will have to become the norm. This is particularly difficult in a country where neither the army nor the police exert much control over the most of the territory.\textsuperscript{165} The security
situation is still very tenuous and in recent months the Taliban have increased their military activities. Much will depend on the willingness of coalition forces to remain in the country and on the international community's long-term commitment to provide assistance.

In conclusion, Afghans as well as international agencies and governments face a difficult task and a rather delicate balancing act. Foreign armed forces need to provide an adequate level of security and safety but without coming across as an army of occupation. Democratic values need to be promoted but without being seen as purely western imports and without clashing with traditional Afghan and Islamic values. The central government needs to be strengthened while at the same time allowing regional and local voices to be heard. The reconstruction agenda should not be hijacked or dictated by external experts. All these challenges will require dedication, long-term commitment, flexibility and a high degree of ingenuity and adaptability. As mentioned throughout this article, it is unlikely that the one-size-fits-all, neo-liberal development model being imposed on Afghanistan at this point in time, will achieve stable, long-term sustainable development. Then again, this might never have been the prime objective.
Notes

30 Ibid.
34 Ibid., p. 84.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., p. 86.
70 C Riphenburg, Afghanistan’s Constitution: Success or Sham? Middle East Policy, 12(1), 2005, p. 33.
74 Ibid.
85 Ibid.


102 Ibid., p. 185.

103 Ibid., p. 186.

104 Ibid., p. 187.

105 Ibid., p. 180.

106 Ibid., p. 181.


110 Based on personal experience as a UNEP official during similar needs assessments and costing exercises in Sudan and Liberia.


116 Ibid., p. 104.


120 Ibid., p. 4.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
127 Ibid., p. 57.
130 Ibid., p. 6.
135 Ibid., p. 32
142 Ibid.
143 IUCN - The World Conservation Union & Meteorology and Environmental Protection Agency of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (MEPA), Environmental Protection in Islam. Gland: IUCN, Environmental Policy and Law Paper, nº 20, 1994, p. 3.


162 Ibid.


164 Ibid.