



## Supporting Sustainable Transition in Afghanistan: A Provincial Perspective

**Jonathan Moss**

As we enter 2011 it is a good time to consider what more needs to be done to promote sustainable transition in Afghanistan. Critical to a successful transition will be getting international support right at the provincial level.

If money really is a weapon system then it is time for the International Community (IC) to start accounting for the ammunition – at the very minimum to ensure we are doing no harm. Rather than contributing to international objectives, excessive spend focused too narrowly on selected districts may become a driver of instability and put at risk the transition process. The future lies in the government of Afghanistan running a national management cycle of planning, budgeting, execution, auditing and reporting that is responsive to local needs and touches people in their daily lives. The capacity deficit is great and time is short. Now is the last chance to focus on what is needed to sustain the state post transition.

### **The Lottery of Aid**

At present there is a massive disparity in how IC development aid is distributed and spent across Afghanistan. The majority of funding is targeted by donors' at the most insecure provinces. For example, almost 70% of US Government sub-national funding is currently directed at the 94 Key Terrain Districts identified by IJC. Additionally international funding to other programmes such as Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development's National Area Based Development Programme (NABDP) has become skewed to more problematic provinces (Kandahar, Helmand) leaving more permissive areas in the cold. This may well have reduced the impact of the NABDP nationally by putting a programme designed for a permissive environment into a context where it cannot track the implementation of projects. NABDP has not only been obliged to de-prioritise peaceful areas; its funding may actually have become a driver of instability in less secure areas – a classic case of inflicting harm through good intentions<sup>1</sup>. If we look at the case of one small district in Helmand we see that in 2010 donor funding amounted to in excess of \$3,000 per capita– in a country where annual per capita GDP was in the region of \$850. This distortion of the local economy of course creates a wide range of difficult to quantify second and third order effects.

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<sup>1</sup> NABDP Review UNDP December 2010

## **Making the Change: Growing Capacity for a Post Transition Environment**

Genuine transition implies that the Government of Afghanistan is capable of planning and prioritising to deliver an adequate level of basic service delivery in an accountable manner that can underpin and support the emerging political settlement – and which is affordable in the long-term.

At national level, the government has to be able to articulate and implement a policy framework that acknowledges the diversity of the country and the fragility of security. There seems no reason why this cannot be achieved within the context of a Unitary State. However, efforts to date – such as the Afghanistan Sub-National Governance Policy – seem to fall short of delivering what is really needed.

### *Making Themselves Heard: Representation and Local Accountability*

At provincial level the government needs to promote and develop the capacity of the Provincial Administrations to undertake robust, needs-based planning and budgeting and the capacity to implement and deliver. A key aspect of this will be improving responsiveness of government through promoting the role of representative bodies. These need to encompass Provincial Councils, District Community Councils, and the myriad traditional and customary networks that pre-existed the modern administration, all of which can have a key role to play in linking people to their government.

## **Changing the Focus of International Effort**

At provincial level it will be vital to ensure that local needs are translated into budget allocations as part of the national annual planning and budgeting cycle of government largely driven by the Ministry of Finance (MoF). This chimes with the recent focus on “one key capacity – three levels: centre, provinces and major cities”.

At present there seems to be a disconnect between the need and desire to put the Afghan government centre stage and to practice an equitable, needs based resource allocation country-wide, and a situation where the majority of international resource is being expended in less than 30% of districts.

Why is there such a disparity between future intent and the current situation? There are a number of possible explanations – but the most likely is that there is a dissonance between the prevailing practice of population-centric COIN and the requirements of transition.

## **COIN Myths: Competition and Freedom of Choice**

Many grass-roots COIN practitioners point to the critical need to deliver essential services in the wake of operations in order to convince the population to side with the government and win the competition with the “shadow government” for service delivery. Moreover they point to the consent winning nature of quick impact projects – in short spending money saves soldiers lives.

In the light of transition planning it is necessary to re-visit some of those assumptions and causal linkages upon which our COIN practitioners are basing their daily decisions. This is hard given the lack of a firm evidential basis for decision making...

### *Services Matter*

Emerging evidence from Helmand does appear to underline the importance of public service provision in improving the perceptions of government – but it also suggests that the relationship between services and stability is far more complex than that.

For example recent progress assessments in Helmand indicate that we should re-examine the notion that government is in competition with a shadow state. On the contrary, the data suggests that where people are in a position to exercise freedom of choice there is no question that they opt for the government offer. But the fact is that many people do not feel the freedom and security to make that choice. Thus the life choices of the population are de facto determined by whoever happens to be on their street corner with a Kalashnikov. The inference is that it is possible to invest significant funds in service delivery as part of a tactical stabilisation effort and yet still face a population that is unable to benefit from that investment unless we have also addressed community security.

The notion of a competing Taliban shadow government is also worthy of closer examination. Anybody who has sat with provincial administrators and heard them speak of their time working under Taliban masters in the late 1990s will find it hard to imagine that Taliban shadow government could ever be in a position to over-match what the government can offer even now. Lack of capacity for sustainable service delivery is thankfully not just a challenge for the government.

### **How Much is Enough?**

The inference from this evidence is that the steady state level of government service delivery needed to keep people confident and supportive of government at district level may be lower and more affordable than many COIN practitioners imagine. The question of how much is enough is always going to be difficult to answer – but the emerging evidence suggests the bar may be lower and more achievable than we suppose. So the population of Nad Ali district will not be won over by spending on a government funded leisure centre in the wake of an operation, but may be by the experience of greater security and a voice in how the Government meets its real needs in the medium to long term.

### *Know Your Enemy*

We often fall into the trap of looking at the insurgency through a Taliban lens. In practice it appears that the Taliban are but one element in a complex web of conflict, where the enemies of the people may be Taliban, foreign fighters, political and tribal figures, war-lords and narcotic producers and of course the Government of Afghanistan.

Aside from the Taliban and an ideologically driven minority we may simply be facing a chronic deficit in the rule of law in which age old conflicts continue to be played out, sometimes inadvertently abetted by ISAF and fuelled by international stabilisation spending. In this case some of our approach to COIN might actually inflame the situation as our development funding fuels local conflict dynamics, by creating perverse incentives in the societal system.

## **Where Next?**

So what are the areas where we need to refocus our efforts to support sustainable transition?

Crucially, we need to recognise that the future lies in the government of Afghanistan running a national management cycle of planning, budgeting, execution, auditing and reporting that is capable of being responsive to local needs and diversity within the context of the unitary state and the constitution. The focus needs to be on supporting the government to spend its budget – as opposed to substitution of government by donor assistance off budget.

In practice this means that the Government must sort out and synchronise its planning and budget cycles and the international community then in turn needs to focus its support on building key capacity and making available real government discretionary on budget funds in order to utilise the capacity that is developed, thereby building and reinforcing experience and skills in the Afghan system ahead of transition.

The current national budget process is here found wanting, in the sense that little funding is actually expended on service delivery at the local level. That which is, is not equitably distributed across the population. Moreover budget execution rates are generally low - money allotted is simply not getting spent.

### *Local Matters*

More work is needed not just to fix the current system but also to ensure that it supports the population and connects with the representative bodies existing at provincial level and below. As things stand this suggests that ministries need to spend more time on policy development in Kabul and less time on implementation. Instead, ministries need to devote resource to growing the capacity of their provincial directorates to input to planning and budget processes and to execute what is decided.

If the international community's focus shifts to supporting the government in managing its resources then we also need to re-examine the way in which we have historically focused on a few key districts. The lowest tier of government with the mandate to input to planning, budgeting and implementation is the province – not the district. As donors we must learn to distinguish between centrally planned services that appear in a district (schools, clinics, roads etc.) and those services that have to be planned and delivered at district level – of which there appear to be very few.

So, outside of the capital it is the Provinces and municipalities that offer the greatest opportunities to improve the quality of service delivery – not the districts. At district level all we

and government need to focus on is basic governance infrastructure and a small staff of officials whose primary role is to link the people in the district to the province and thereby ensure that they receive basic services in accordance with their articulated needs within the context of national policy and the available budget.

For transition itself, we therefore need to focus on supporting the provincial administrations in key areas such as planning, budgeting, implementation, reporting and effective donor co-ordination.

The Helmand on-budget District Delivery Programme funding mechanism, supported by Denmark and the UK, offers a model that combines support to planning and budgeting with actual funds and forges close linkages between communities and government through a robust participative planning process driven by the provincial governors office – working across all directorates engaged in district level service delivery. As a result, District Delivery Programme in Helmand looks set to double the amount of on-budget funding available to government for the coming year.

Obvious areas of focus at provincial level include:

- the Sector Services Department within the Provincial Governor's Office (PGO) – which can provide a mechanism for cross government planning for service delivery at the local level that feeds both a multi-year Provincial Strategic Plan and a strong annual Provincial Development Plan.
- The PGO, which needs to understand basic planning for service delivery and how to effectively engage with local representative bodies to ensure that services planned are responsive to local needs. In this respect the Sector Services Department also has a key role to play – every district administration is supposed to include a Sector Services Manager who can assist in ensuring the provincial planning and budgeting processes are rooted in district realities.
- The Directorate of the Economy, which has to deliver a PDP that is realistic in time for it to feed the national budget cycle. The Directorate of the Economy is also important in its role as the secretariat to the Provincial Development Committee (PDC) – the link to provincially based bilateral donors.

If government is to take the lead and be self sustaining it has to be capable of providing guidance and direction to local bilateral donors at the provincial level. This means being able to establish, update and utilise a comprehensive record of all investments undertaken locally, both on budget and off budget. In Afghanistan the Directorate of the Economy has the responsibility for this work. One priority for government might be supporting the early implementation of a Provincial Infrastructure Management Information System (PIMS) in the same way that they have implemented AFMIS for the Ministry of Finance.

### *Becoming Greater than the Sum of the Parts: Ministerial Synergies for Delivery*

Moreover there is an important national policy piece to ensure that Independent Directorate of Local Governance supports the delivery of Provincial Strategic Plans that in turn can be used to

inform the Ministry of Economy Provincial Development Plan planning cycle which has to synchronise with the annual spending round and budget cycle – thus Independent Directorate of Local Governance, Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Finance need closer cooperation. There is not long to achieve this in the context of the transition time line – bearing in mind that the budget preparation cycle is probably at least 15 months long prior to the start of a spending year. Planning work at provincial level probably needs to start by January in 1389 (now) to feed into budget for the FY 1391.

For their part, donors need to align their approval processes to those of the Afghan government. In particular, this means a conscious decision by donors to end the uncoordinated donor activity at district level that characterises some key terrain districts – where neither government nor the IC really have a complete picture of what is going on, and where most of what is going on is not sustainable because it is not synchronised with the Afghan planning and budget cycle or government policies on service provision.

### *One Key Capacity*

Across the service delivery directorates at provincial level there is a need to develop capacity for budgeting, procurement and project management. In most cases it has been some years since provincial directorates have had to spend development budget to deliver and sustain infrastructure associated with service delivery. Consequently they have neither the current skills nor corporate memory on how to do the job effectively.

The starting point is perhaps to challenge ministries with the prospect of real money and then to work through the implications in terms of procedure, capacity and accountability<sup>2</sup>. Whilst there are likely over 30 spending units of government in any given province there are only a relatively small number which are directly engaged in basic public service delivery. The District Delivery Programme experience in Helmand suggests that government believes that maybe 12 or 13 Directorates need to draw down on budget funds to support service delivery for a District Delivery Plan. Of the key delivery ministries there are probably 4-5 on which the IC should be focusing its attention.

### **Five Steps to Transition**

So, as we contemplate transition what are the key challenges we must address?

First, how to move from uncoordinated bilateral international investments that are driven by well intentioned tactical stabilisation and COIN agendas in order to focus on how we support the government to deliver what is strategically necessary. In some KTDs this means a radical reduction of spending and IC staffing to match the government steady state. Outside KTDs there are probably strong arguments for adopting a more equitable approach to resource allocation driven by a sustainable public policy agenda.

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<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Education is the exception that proves the rule. Elsewhere MRRD and Health have largely substituted for capacity by contracting out delivery. In the case of MRRD in Helmand AFMIS accounts suggest that this is an expensive and unsustainable option.

Second, we must re-align our civil surge to support the “one key capacity”. This means smaller district based stabilisation teams and more emphasis on provincial capacity with stronger provincial technical assistance teams that are integrated with national technical assistance programmes in support of ministries. In many cases this will require donors to revisit current programming and programmes in procurement, to ensure that this can happen.

Third, we should reconsider our approach to national priority programming to look at how we use programmes to build capacity – as opposed to the sort of expensive capacity substitution evident in Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and the National Solidarity Programme. We also need to move from focussing too heavily on selected ministries to a whole of government multi-ministry approach.

Fourth, we should look at how we approach on budget funding. Ideally the proportion of government discretionary funding should increase to match the capacity growth in planning, budgeting and resource management. After all there is little point in focusing on the “one key capacity at three levels” if there is no money to spend.

Finally it will be important to emphasise the critical role of local accountability in bolstering the legitimacy of government. The key bodies at the sub-national level are the Provincial Councils and the District Shuras and Municipal Councils. The current interpretation of the Sub-national Governance Policy by the Independent Directorate of Local Governance fails to acknowledge the importance of these institutions and puts too much emphasis on future elected village councils. Any construct of planning and budgeting must have local accountability hardwired into its design. It is this aspect which has the potential to form the vital missing link between COIN driven stabilisation and government funded service delivery.

We have time to make the progress necessary to achieve what is needed for sustainable transition – but to get there it requires some fundamental behaviour changes not just within the government of Afghanistan – but also within the donor community.

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