

Some Things Got Better - How Much Got Good? A review of 12 years of international intervention in Afghanistan

Author : thomas-ruttig



2013 marked the year in which the international community started to wrap up many of the initiatives to re-build Afghanistan – arguably the biggest international effort since the post-World-War-II Marshall Plan. But where did this effort leave the country? For AAN ’ s year-end piece, co-director Thomas Ruttig has summarised what has happened, what has been achieved – and what hasn ’ t – over the past 12 years. He looks at the security situation, the rule of law, the domestic political landscape, the economy, education, social protection as well as foreign aid and its impacts, and he assesses the factors shaping them. He has forensically picked his way through major studies and briefing papers, books and press releases, media reports on national and international institutions' programs as well as AAN ’ s own substantial body of work. One of his conclusions is that a multitude of problems remains – and as the Western approach became more and more militarised, some were even exacerbated. He also concludes, that the simplified optimism currently broadcast by foreign governments is likely to stand in the way of identifying priorities for post-2014 action.

(For an outlook into 2014, the year of many expectations and anxieties, AAN co-director

Martine van Bijlert will offer an editorial by the beginning of the year.)

On the security front, the entire NATO exercise was one that caused Afghanistan a lot of suffering, a lot of loss of life, and no gains because the country is not secure.

This statement by Afghan President Hamed Karzai was part of an interview with the [BBC](#) in October 2013. It has created as much outrage in the US and NATO as former protestant bishop Margot Käßmann 's assessment (in her 2010 New Year sermon) that “ nothing is well in Afghanistan ” (1) caused in Germany, my home country. Obviously, Karzai left out a good part of the truth here. First, his own government bears a significant amount of co-responsibility for the current dire state of affairs in his country and, secondly, the ‘ Afghanistan mission ’ is more than a military one – although this aspect has clearly and increasingly overshadowed institutional and economic reconstruction since it was launched in October 2001. Originally proclaimed aims like democratisation and the defence of women 's rights were subordinated to the ‘ war on terror ’ – just as the implementation of the 2001 [Bonn Afghanistan Agreement](#) was subordinated to President George W. Bush 's election calendar.

When it comes to security, the Afghan situation is characterised by the fact that the Taleban movement has not been defeated, let alone crushed. According to the March 2013 annual [Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community](#), the insurgents have remained “ resilient and capable of challenging US and international goals ” in Afghanistan. Although they have suffered significant losses as a result of drone strikes and capture-or-kill operations, their structures and ability to recruit are unbroken. They continue to operate countrywide, although in varying intensities, evade larger battles, refrain from making longer-term territorial gains and rely on means of asymmetric warfare such as IEDs, assassinations – including with suicide bombers – and pin-prick attacks against bases of the Afghan and NATO/ISAF forces and other installations; the latter aim more at creating media attention than achieving tactical gains. Steadily growing from 2002 to 2010, the intensity of fighting has not significantly decreased after the US troop surge started in 2010 - to the contrary. Already last year, Taleban activity has [reportedly](#) been “ jumping ” in southern Afghanistan. Similar developments have been observed in the northeast (see one AAN analysis for example [here](#)). Both areas were focuses of President Barack Obama 's ‘ surge ’ with 30,000 additional US soldiers.

2013 has probably been the most violent year since 2001. (We do not have final data yet, as NATO stopped releasing information on a regular basis under the pretext that, with the transition of security responsibilities, this was the job of the Afghan government. and only incomplete data has been coming from that side.) The number of war dead has increased again, foremost among the civilian population. According to the UN, civilian casualties have [increased](#) by ten per cent (to 2,730 dead and 5,169 injured) in the first eleven months of 2013 compared to last year. Most are results of Taleban attacks. Moreover, the Taleban now seem to attack in larger groups more often. They have increasingly attempted to take over district centres, mainly in peripheral areas, and test the power of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) that now operate on their own in most of those areas (more detail in our analysis [here](#)). (Currently, 84,200 ISAF soldiers [remain](#) in the country, 60,000 of them Americans.) According to

official Afghan sources, only five of the 416 district centres are under permanent Taliban control, but in many others government control barely reaches beyond the immediate centres. In the key Maiwand district in southern Afghanistan, for example (which is larger than Luxembourg), it ends two kilometres outside its central town, as the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) on 31 October 2013. The situation is similar other key districts, for example in Chahrdara in Kunduz province, from where the Taliban had been driven out almost completely earlier in 2010. Since the additional US ‘ surge ’ forces left the area (the last German soldiers withdrew from Kunduz in October 2013), the Taliban are back in control almost everywhere. And that ’ s not to talk – yet – of human security.

Imbalance between executive, legislative and judicial branches

The insurgency movement itself is more symptom than cause of Afghanistan ’ s internal conflicts. Afghanistan's state institutions continue to be weak. After the massive electoral fraud of 2009 and 2010, President Hamed Karzai, his government and the parliament have legitimacy deficits. The balance of power between the executive, legislative and judicial branches does not work. The executive – with the opaque structures at the ‘ palace ’ and a small group of so-called jihadi leaders-cum-ulema at its core – dominates and manipulates the other two. Parliament is fragmented, easily manipulated and weak as a result of the de facto, though not de jure, ban on political-party-based self-organisation. The judiciary is the most corrupt of the state institutions. As a result, the rule of law is weak. The powerful can put themselves above the law with impunity. Governance is conducted and positions are distributed through patronage, not on the basis of merit; or positions are simply sold, resulting in an ineffective government. The judiciary often only serves exclusive circles and victimises those excluded. Effectiveness decreases from the central to the provincial and district levels, with the latter lacking elected councils.

The constitution is often followed more in breach than in compliance. The original value of ‘ traditional ’ institutions like ~~the~~ ^{the} jirga or local councils – to provide halfway (that is, male-only) just and inclusive decisions – has been undermined because of the common practice of handpicking members. The president and his networks also dominate the ‘ independent ’ electoral institutions that are of key importance for the presidential and provincial council polls in April 2014.

Armed strongmen – warlords and commanders – have, contrary to the 2001 Bonn agreement, been disarmed only superficially or not at all. They sit in most key positions and [dominate](#) the parliament, the judiciary and the still-partly factionalised security forces as well as the country ’ s few functioning business sectors. Those who received financial means from the US in 2001 to fight the Taliban often invested in the drug trade (find examples [here](#)) and, starting from there, gradually took over licit sectors of the economy, such as the import-export business, construction, and the real estate, banking and mining sectors as well as the contract economy fed by the billions of military, aid and reconstruction money flowing in from abroad. Early on, they remobilised old or recruited new fighters with that money and pushed through their bulk integration – i.e., with the old militia structures – into the ‘ new ’ armed forces. This kind of behaviour widely shaped that of the new political forces returning from the diaspora who, like the Karzai family, created their own militias and business empires. Their new military and financial force empowered them to win seats in the parliamentary elections in 2005. They

then forced President Karzai, who had run for president and won on a reform and end-the-warlord-alliance platform in 2004, into renewing alliances. The unofficial jihadi leaders became the most powerful circle of advisors to the president, dominating public discourse and punishing each dissident thought or movement as ‘ un-Islamic ’ . Early on, cases of precedence were created. (2)

This is underpinned by a so-called ‘ amnesty law ’ for war crimes and mass human rights violations jointly passed by parliament in 2010 by former mujahedin, communist and even Taleban politicians. It has resulted in overall impunity. Karzai and his warlord allies have prevented the publication of a “ mapping ” report of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) that documents those crimes (see media reporting [here](#) and reactions of human rights groups [here](#) and [here](#)). In summer 2013, Karzai replaced some of the most independent AIHRC members (our analysis [here](#)). These developments also heavily influenced the ‘ fourth estate ’ , the media that is often, but partly wrongly, perceived as more free and diverse than in neighbouring countries. The shrinking independent media, in particular, have come under increasing pressure from the powerful, and as a result, they often exercise restraint and self-censorship (our latest analysis [here](#)).

The polarisation of the domestic political landscape

With the withdrawal of NATO combat troops looming at the horizon, political networks compete and cooperate for political influence and access to the diminishing external resources. They have developed mafia-like structures, particularly when [linked](#) with the drug economy. Some observers speak of “ [state capture](#) ” others about a (still factionalised) “ [power oligarchy](#) ” . On Transparency International ’ [corruption perception index](#), Afghanistan was ranked bottom in 2013 among the 177 countries researched (jointly with North Korea and Somalia).

The domestic political landscape is polarised in two ways: militarily between the government, its forces and its mainly Western allies on one side and the insurgents (Taleban, a wing of Hezb-e Islami and smaller groups) on the other hand; politically between a loose coalition supporting President Karzai and opposition groups originating from the mainly Islamist 1980s and 1990s civil war militias. The lines between camps remain blurred, however. Both camps increasingly define themselves using ethnic criteria – Pashtuns (and associates) against non-Pashtuns with some Pashtun dissidents.

The political polarisation will also come to bear in the April 2014 presidential election, given the absence of sufficiently independent institutions and a body of arbitration. The basis for renewed manipulations in 2014 already exists since President Karzai rejected the cancellation of older, fraud-prone voter registrations cards and their further increase by a new round of voter registration in 2012–13 and with the large discrepancy between the estimated number of voters and the number of distributed voter cards. Immediately before the 2010 poll, [there were](#) 17.5 million distributed voter cards, a figure we already then [called](#) “ amazingly implausible ” . At the same time, the IEC estimated 12.5 million voters (see p 22, [here](#)) and the UN [estimated](#) 10.5 million. According to UNDP ’ s election project in Afghanistan ELECT II (updated 22–30 November 2013), now 3.2 million new voters were added, putting the total number to an unbelievable 20.7 million – with a total population of 27 million given by [Afghanistan ’ s Central](#)

[Statistics Office](#) in mid-2013 and half being of non-voting age, that is, under 18 years. (3)

In this polarised political and military environment, little space remains for the weak, divided but – immediately after 2001 – highly motivated pro-democratic forces that were hoping for the democratic countries' support. By now, they have practically given up on participating in the current political system. (Among the original 27 presidential contenders for 2014, only one represented a new pro-democratic party, but he was one of the 17 candidates disqualified by the election commission.) Furthermore, the government was able to split some major civil society coalitions and to co-opt parts of them.

ANSF, ALP and the (lack of) security

Politically, the withdrawal of NATO combat troops and the end of the ISAF mission are no longer, as originally, 'conditions-based', i.e., linked to concrete progress in stabilisation, institution building and reconstruction (see our report [here](#)). Demands for reform addressed at the Afghan government were practically dropped; in July 2013, the Afghan government had only [fulfilled](#) three of the 17 benchmarks set by the Tokyo donor conference the year before. In building the ANSF, quantity tops quality. By the end of 2014, the ANSF is to reach its target strength of 352,000, costing 4.1 billion dollars annually (after 2017, the size of the ANSF will be gradually reduced again). So far, international donors have pledged over 2.8 billion dollars by the end of 2017; the Afghan government [is to raise](#) at least an additional 500 million dollars annually. (President Karzai refusal to sign the US-Afghan Bilateral Strategic Agreement puts those pledges in jeopardy.)

But there are many problems with the quality of the ANSF. Its fighters' motivation remains low, its composition is ethnically unbalanced and it lacks logistical abilities (our analysis [here](#)). The procurement procedures are corrupt. The Ministry of Interior – known for its systematic sale of positions – has, [according to](#) the oversight body Sigar, completely stopped its anti-corruption reforms. Desertions and other forms of attrition are high and combat losses [rising](#). (After 2001, the US government cancelled conscription in Afghanistan, against the will of President Karzai, and, as a result, both undermined the ANSF's recruitment capacities and the role of the armed forces of bringing young men from different ethnic background together.) As a result, one third of all ANSF personnel must be replaced every year. Networks linked to the former civil war militias penetrate the army and police; soldiers and policemen often are more loyal to their former armed factions than to the central government.

The simultaneous establishment of the militia-like Afghan Local Police (ALP) shows that Western donors mistrust the regular ANSF – and their own success stories about them. The ALP with its 23,551 fighters in 115 areas of the country (as of July 2013), composed of former civil war militias that have escaped disarmament and insurgents that have switched sides (although this had originally been forbidden), is already the fourth militia generation since 2001 (our report [here](#)). It increasingly has become a problem itself. "In public, the Pentagon has portrayed the Afghan [local] police force as a success", the Los Angeles Times wrote, [saying](#) that in a report to Congress on progress in the war, the Pentagon asserted that "overall security has improved in most villages" where ALP units patrol. But, the daily added, according to a secret study commissioned by the US Special Forces command in Afghanistan that trains,

monitors and supplies the ALP, every fifth ALP unit is involved in the drug trade, the extortion of illegal taxes, land grabbing, murder, rape, running secret detention facilities and violent internal power struggles. AAN [reported](#) in an analysis from September that in Kunduz, “ the creation of the ALP in communities where social fractures or ethnic frictions are salient has fostered rather than appeased tensions [and] the population is caught between the lines of fire of two warring parties. . . . The confrontation between the ALP and the Taleban adds a layer of conflict in the quasi-civil war being staged in Kunduz ” .

The Karzai statement on security that opened this dispatch is remarkable, too, because of its deep discrepancy with the optimistic spin that is heard from Western politicians and that often enough fully ignores parts of reality. Lately, British Prime Minister David Cameron [declared](#) “ mission accomplished ” , at least for the British troops, with a “ basic level of security ” having been achieved in Afghanistan. In October 2012, for example, the ISAF spokesman in Kabul [claimed](#) the Taleban were “ clearly losing that fight ” . In the US, the narrative about Afghanistan is less unanimous: while Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in October 2004 still [spoke about](#) “ remnants ” of the Taleban who would not be “ a serious threat over a sustained period of time in Afghanistan ” , ISAF commander General Joseph Dunford [admitted](#) this year that the fight against “ the insurgency will not be completed in December 2014 ” .

Reforms, successes – and simplified optimism

For sure, there has been progress in Afghanistan since the US retaliated militarily after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, triggered the overthrow of the Taleban regime, secured the support of its NATO allies as well as a UN mandate and promised reconstruction and democratisation as aims of its intervention. The population got rid of the Taleban regime that had increasingly become unpopular, including among Pashtuns - the same regime that had helplessly stood by and watched the growing social problems in the internationally isolated country. There are today more social services, a better infrastructure and more freedoms. However, when it comes to rights and freedoms, in particular, much of the progress remains on paper only and difficult to claim in practice. As AIHRC commissioner Soraya Sobhrang [said](#) in an interview in 2011:

We have achieved much, no one can close their eyes to this: our constitution, the growth of civil society, the support of the international community, the development in the private sector, the re-opening of the schools and universities, even positive discrimination, the role of women in the electoral process, in parliament and even the cabinet. . . . Article 22 of the constitution stipulates that men and women are equal before the law. But we are not satisfied that things have become better compared to before; things are still not where they should be.

As long as the government is weak, as long as there is no good governance, as long as corruption is rampant, as long as warlords and commanders stand at the top of the state, as long as the culture of impunity continues to exist – parliament even has issued an amnesty for itself – and as long as transitional justice, a government duty, is given to oblivion, as long as outside Kabul neither security nor government authority exist, as long as girls are not able to attend school, as long as women and children are trafficked, forced marriages flourish, sexual harassment peaks and the number of self-immolations and suicides is growing and the future

looks very bleak, women ' s rights also will be neglected. Yes, we have laws, but only on paper, they are implemented.

Moreover, many achievements are fiscally unsustainable and have already started to crumble after the withdrawal of troops began (read [here](#) and [here](#)) and the related “ aid bubble [burst](#). Afghan exports, and economic activity in general, are falling; unemployment and criminality rates are rising (read [here](#), respectively [here](#)). Even official US oversight bodies are [discovering](#) more and more failed US aid projects while other projects cannot continue for the lack of resources from or interest by the Afghan government (examples [here](#) and [here](#)).

In the rights field, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights pointed out while visiting Afghanistan in September 2013 that she is [concerned](#) that the “ the momentum of improvement in human rights may have not only peaked, but is in reality waning ” . And the ‘ Afghanisation ’ of election institutions has not led to better quality (read a few our analyses [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

Additionally, Islamist forces – not only the Taleban but also some in the Afghan government and parliament – increasingly call achievements in the rights sector into question (see some of our analyses [here](#) and [here](#)). Therefore, many of the often-used statements of progress that relate to human security remain simplified. One example is the often-repeated reference to the “ three million ” Afghan girls who were “ attending school ” again. It remains underreported, though, that 68 per cent of all pupils – among them 82 per cent of all girls – leave before finishing grade six. That, compared to boys, twice as many girls (22 per cent) do not attend regularly. That, in primary education, the girl-boy ratio was in recent studies at 0.63, in secondary education it was dropping to 0.48 and in the lycees to 0.38. That only one third of all schools on those three levels are girls ' schools. (There is no co-education.) That there was no girls'lycee in 80 per cent of all districts and no secondary school for girls in almost half of all districts. According to the World Bank, only 12 per cent of university students were women in 2012, one year earlier 88 per cent of all women were illiterate. In 2010, Afghanistan had the second-lowest level of gender equality worldwide (rank 176) according to UNESCO data that is based on official government information. There were no data in the reports for 2011 and 2012 anymore. Apparently, Kabul stopped reporting in this area. (4) It is also telling that – although maternal mortality has halved over the past years, a huge achievement - still 18,000 Afghan women [die in childbirth](#) annually; this is six times more than the total number of civilians killed in the war in the same period and one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world.

Although 1.9 billion dollars of foreign money increased the number of schools from 7,650 in 2004 to around 16,000 in 2013, 47 per cent of all schools (in 2011) did not have their own building, 40 per cent no clean drinking water and three quarters no sanitary facilities. The number of teachers even decreased. In 2011, there was one teacher for every 44 students; by 2013 it has sunk to one for every 64. In 166 of the 416 districts, there was no single female teacher. And this says nothing yet about the quality of teaching. Absentee rates among the meagrely paid teachers remain high and there is an acute lack of teaching materials. Even at universities, methods and curricula are out-dated (see also this AAN [analysis](#) of the reasons for student protests):

Teaching itself [is] largely confined to the delivery of lectures, which the students are expected to memorise and conform to at examinations, and academic sources were rarely updated. . . . Some of the material is 30 years old. Teachers have inherited it from their teachers.

Below-standard universities produce a high number of graduates who neither can find jobs in the state sector nor will be able to run an administration in the twenty-first century. And the numbers of young people aspiring for higher education continue to grow: in 2013, countrywide 190,000 students [competed](#) for 34,000 [slots](#) at the country ' s public universities entrance examinations. (There are currently further 54,000 students at 76 private sector higher education institutions.) According to its [National Higher Education Strategic Plan](#) for the period of 2010–14, the government expects the figure to rise to 600,000. The many extremely good Afghan students who have chosen to study abroad (or are forced to do so because they come from refugee families), are good not because of but in spite of the quality of the Afghanistan ' s education system.

A social gap unprecedented in the country ' s history

On the economic side, the World Bank measured “ remarkable growth ” of nine per cent annually on average since 2002 – until it dropped to 3.1 per cent in 2013. The Gross National Product (GNP) per capita has risen almost fivefold to 591 dollars since 2001 but still trails neighbouring countries like Pakistan (1,201 dollars) and Nepal (653). On the UN Human Development Index Afghanistan was [ranked](#) 175 among 186 countries in 2012, slightly rising on the scale. However, only the main protagonists of the quasi-oligarchic patronage systems have profited from the resulting wealth, with insufficient trickle-down, causing a social gap unprecedented in the country ' s history.

This is also reflected by the UN ' s multidimensional poverty index that puts Afghanistan at 96 among 105 developing countries in 2011. According to government [data](#), 36 per cent of the Afghan population “ cannot meet their basic requirements such as access to food, clean water, clothing and shelter ” . Between 25 and 30 per cent are undernourished and cannot meet their minimum calorie requirements ([here](#) and [here](#)); more than 60 per cent [suffered from](#) low dietary diversity and poor food consumption ” . Among children, 60 per cent are [malnourished](#). According to government [sources](#), only 27 per cent of the population has access to safe drinking water and five per cent to hygiene facilities. In many parts of the country, people live in a subsistence economy. Many survive through participating in the drug economy or remittances from relatives working abroad. The drug economy is worth some 15 per cent of the Afghan GNP; 14 per cent of the population are involved. (5)

Over-proportional aid spending through military channels

Even Western governments admit that Afghanistan ' s economic growth is unsustainable and has been stimulated by external resources (see for example [here](#)). According to the World Bank, 85 per cent of the Afghan budget come from abroad; 1.6 of the 3.7 billion dollars the government spends flow into the security sector. With the forthcoming withdrawal of combat troops, however, those resource transfers [are expected](#) to shrink, with repercussions for the economy and employment. American aid money channelled through USAID already shrank

from 4.5 to 1.8 billion dollars between 2010 and 2012. Overall, humanitarian aid spending dropped by half in 2012 (see [here](#) and [here](#)). As a result of generally decreasing economic activities, Afghanistan ' s exports and state revenues dropped in 2012; in 2013 private investments dropped, too. Also, [according to](#) the World Bank, the pledges of additional 16 billion dollars for 2012 to 2016, together with earlier pledges for the ANSF, are “ roughly equally divided between civil and security aid ” . The bank projects that the annual budget gap of more than 20 per cent till 2025 will mainly affect the civilian sectors.

Numbers about the aid money that has already flowed into Afghanistan differ according to sources and definitions. Many donors are opaque, and not every pledge is turned into an actual disbursement. [According to](#) the International Crisis Group (ICG), between 2001 and 2011, 57 billion dollars of aid money were spent for Afghanistan (against 90 billion pledged), 29 billion of which were spent on the ANSF. Canadian development experts write that 42 billion dollars have actually been disbursed in that period. (6) The independent Global Humanitarian Assistance (GHA) institute [saw](#) 26.7 billion dollars in aid spent in Afghanistan between 2002 and 2009, and 62 billion pledged for 2002–13.

Apart from the endemic corruption in the Afghan administration, on the donor side a lack of effectiveness in spending and distributing the aid money and the militarisation of aid have a negative effect. The latter is reflected in over-proportional aid spending through military channels such as PRTs. Aid organisations [estimated](#) that by 2009 humanitarian and development aid worth 17 billion dollars has been delivered by international military forces; this would be 65 per cent of all aid. Through the Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP) set up for US PRT commanders, about 1.5 billion dollar were [spent](#) from 2004 to 2011. According to the ICG, those expenditures [exceed\[ed\]](#) the Afghan government ' s total spending on health and education ” . The different means at hand of various nations ' militaries also exacerbated imbalances between the provinces where they were based, a problem [flagged](#) early on. In 2010, leading aid organisations, too, [sounded the alarm](#) about the militarisation of aid to Afghanistan:

As political pressures to “ show results ” in troop contributing countries intensify, more and more assistance is being channelled through military actors to “ win hearts and minds ” while efforts to address the underlying causes of poverty and repair the destruction wrought by three decades of conflict and disorder are being sidelined. Development projects implemented with military money or through military-dominated structures . . . are often poorly executed, inappropriate and do not have sufficient community involvement to make them sustainable. There is little evidence this approach is generating stability.

On some key problems, such as war-related internal displacement, when coherent policies needed to be developed, action was scarce and time was wasted (see our analysis [here](#)).

“ Spending on Afghanistan does not mean spending in Afghanistan ”

Looking at the overall costs for the war, the gap between military and civilian spending increased. A report commissioned by the umbrella organisation of NGOs working in Afghanistan, ACBAR, [said](#) that while “ the US military is currently spending nearly \$100 million a day in the country . . . the average volume of international aid provided by all donors since 2001

is woefully inadequate at just \$7 million per day ” . According to the Global Humanitarian Assistance institute the spending for the ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom military operations represented 84.6 per cent of all spending on Afghanistan by 2010.

The US Congressional Research Service [put](#) the overall costs of the US for “ aid and combat expenses ” between late 2001 and 2011 at 440 billion dollars. The US think tank CSIS [put](#) the “ all direct spending on the war ” in 2001–13 (including war costs, reconstruction and economic aid funds) at 641.7 billion. For 2001–12, CSIS sees the overall spending for the military (through the Department of Defense) at 416.2 billion dollars and for the civilian sectors (through the Department of State and USAID) at 25.2 billion dollars; this is a ratio of 16:1. For Germany, for example, this ratio was 9:1 [according to](#) the independent Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung in 2010, while official figures [put](#) it at 2.5:1, with an annual spending of 1.02 billion Euros through the Ministry of Defence and 430 million Euros from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Development and Economic Cooperation.

Moreover, as the World Bank points out (see [here](#), pp 29-30):

Spending “ on ” Afghanistan does not equal spending “ in ” Afghanistan. . . . Most aid (both civilian aid and security assistance), including the amount contracted in-country, has a low domestic economic content [this is the part remaining in the recipient country] limiting its impact on the economy. Much either never comes in or flows directly out through contracting international providers of goods and services, imports, and the expatriation of profits.

For more detail, the World Bank report quotes a 2008 study of the Peace Dividend Trust (PDT) according to which the domestic aid money channelled through trust funds (into which usually various donors pay and that are usually administered by the government in Kabul) and in direct budget aid is between 70 and 80 per cent, while local or international contracts are only 35–50 per cent respectively 10–20 per cent are achieved. The World Bank concludes:

In other words, only 38 cents of every aid dollar spent in Afghanistan actually reaches the economy through direct salary payments, household transfers, or purchase of local goods and services. . . . Much [aid] either never comes in or flows directly out through contracting international providers of goods and services, imports, and the expatriation of profits.

The World Bank specifies that the PDT study does not include spending on security, adding that “ it is estimated that the domestic content of aggregated aid flows is only about 14–25 percent ” . This is 25 cents per dollar at best. Sarcastically put, this way of ‘ giving ’ aid is nothing more than self-help for the economies of donor countries.

Militarisation of aid and its dismal ‘ domestic content ’ are also a result of the increasing privatisation of aid, meaning: in addition to genuine, recipient-oriented development actors, governments also allow more and more profit-oriented companies to compete for development programmes and projects (see this phenomenon described by two leading aid organisations [here](#) and [here](#)). In Afghanistan, mega-contracts for infrastructure projects have been made with private companies that often give multiple subcontracts; the results are sub-standard implementation, bad or unaccounted spending and exaggerated overhead costs (see

analyses [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) and examples [here](#) and [here](#)). It also gave rise to the phenomenon of “ for-profit aid organisations ” on which [according to](#) the New York Times, the US government started to rely on for the implementation of projects in high-risk areas. An independent study has [shown](#) that such projects are particularly vulnerable to waste and corruption. The same goes, according to the International Crisis Group report, for the US CERP projects. The US also has been [unable](#), at least for a long time, to create a “ centralised database of CERP and USAID projects despite repeated recommendations ” . Although for example the Louis Berger Group, one of the largest contractors. was known for overpriced and badly managed projects and [criticised](#) for its “ disasterous[sic] performance ” in 2006 already [grew](#) to become “ by far [the] largest recipient of USAID funds in Afghanistan between [fiscal years] 2007 and 2009 ” – before running into [criminal prosecution](#) in 2010.

Do-no-harm has been harmed - and other conclusions

The war in Afghanistan has become a prime example of how increased militarisation and privatisation of aid have systematically undermined development principles, such as the do-no-harm principle, to support the most needy first (not necessarily those living in the most insurgency-affected areas) and to prioritise beneficiaries ’ interests over the political and economic interests of the donors. This approach has not only furthered corruption in Afghanistan but also undermined the legitimacy of the Afghanistan mission among the populations of donor countries.

Many of Afghanistan ’ s problems are of a structural nature and cannot be expected to be solved in the short term. However, with the amount of resources invested in Afghanistan over the past decade – arguably the biggest international effort since the post-WWII Marshal Plan – progress achieved since 2001 is modest. “ Our assessment is that not enough progress has taken place. Millions of Afghans are still unable to meet their minimum basic needs ” , Nipa Banerjee, the former head of Canada ’ s development programme in Afghanistan, concluded in April 2013 in the article already quoted. Setting the post-2001 agenda and often having effectively disempowered the Afghan government, Western governments bear the main responsibility for reconstruction aid being made a sub-function of the counter-insurgency strategy. Much of the aid money was either wasted or ineffectively used, democratisation stopped early on, the role of the UN as a multilateral and political instrument of constructive intervention was undermined and the ground was prepared for the return of the socially regressive ideas of old and new jihadists.

As problematic as the military intervention in Afghanistan has turned out to be, the end of the ISAF mission and its replacement by a pure training mission comes too early, given the state of Afghan institutions, including the armed forces. Many of the deeper lines of conflict existing in Afghanistan have not been tackled (some have not even been noticed) – from ecological and demographic aspects to the economic marginalisation of the country in the neo-liberally globalised world. Afghanistan ’ s internal conflicts about modernisation have repeatedly surfaced over more than a century, often violently, and will continue to fester. Given the latest developments, they will play out in an environment that has been further militarised. The gradual disengagement of the West will expose Afghanistan more to the wants of its immediate and further neighbours who consider the country as cynically as many Western actors do: as an

arena for their rivalry over regional predominance, as a provider of mineral resources or jihadist bogeyman to justify their own repressive policies at home. In this context, the multitude of unresolved problems that are structural and cannot be tackled by Afghans alone requires continued international priority engagement.

For the Afghan civilian population one thing counts most: as the war in their country is continuing and has even escalated, the chances of the Taliban returning to power – either by military means or political power-sharing agreement – have not diminished. That renders vulnerable much of the progress made: access to education, health and infrastructural facilities as well as to legal rights as citizens of a sovereign country.

Presently, the political transition process, with the presidential election in 2014, stands on a shaky foundation. Governments “ would do well to plan for a messy election ”, my AAN colleague Martine van Bijlert [wrote earlier this year](#), “ rather than simply hope for the best ”. It is also not good enough to hope that, after most foreign troops have withdrawn, Afghans will be able to solve problems among themselves. Afghanistan ’ s institutions, including those for internal conflict regulation and self-healing, have been uprooted in a ‘ Central Asian Thirty Years War ’ and the playing field between the actors is far from level, precluding a just solution. A ‘ Central Asian Westfalian Peace ’, however, is not in sight.

This is an updated version of an article for the German international policy magazine WeltTrends (<http://welttrends.de/>) that will appear in February 2014.

(1) Ironically, it has meanwhile been [repeated](#) by former German social democrat chancellor Gerhard Schröder who, in 2001, led German troops into the ISAF mission proclaiming his country ’ s “ unfettered solidarity ” with the US after the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

(2) One example is the 2003 case of Mir Hossein Musawi, editor-in-chief of the Kabul newspaper Aftab, who accused the so-called jihadi leaders of using Islam as an “ instrument to take over power ” and to establish the “ rule of the mullas ”, calling this “ holy fascism ”. “ Fashizm-e muqadas ”, in Aftab (Kabul), 21 Jauza 1382 (1 June 2003), p 3. After accusations of insulting Islam, Musawi was forced to flee abroad.

(3) UNICEF [estimates](#) 32.4 million, with 17.2 million being under 18.

(4) Figures compiled from the following sources: BRAC: Afghanistan: [Education](#); High Stakes: [Girls ’ Education in Afghanistan](#), Joint Briefing Paper, Oxfam et al., 2011; Sean Carberry: [‘ Are Afghanistan ’ s Schools Doing as Well as Touted? ’](#), National Public Radio, 24 October 2013; Ahmad Ramin, [‘ World Bank Study Reveals Low Female University Enrolment ’](#), ToloNews 31 August 2013; [‘ Afghanistan ‘ Clears Big Obstacles ’ in Girls ’ Education ’](#), BBC 16 October 2012.

(5) Between 2006 and 2011, the gross profit from the drug economy remaining in Afghanistan

was given as three billion dollars per year; after export, it was worth 65 billion dollars. See: Bill Byrd, [Changing Financial Flows During Afghanistan ' s Transition: The Political Economy Fallout](#) ”, USIP Peace Brief 157, 11 September 2013; UNODC [Afghanistan Opium Risk Assessment 2013](#); Ben Farmer, [Opium Crop in Afghanistan Heading for Record Levels](#) ” Daily Telegraph, 15 April 2013.

(6) Nipa Banerjee and Yiagadeesen Samy, “ Afghanistan ’ s Transformation Decade: A Bumpy Road Ahead ” The Ottawa Citizen, 19 April 2013 (not online, in the author ’ s archive).