



WORKING PAPER AUGUST 2021

**PUNCHING ABOVE ITS WEIGHT OR RUNNING WITH THE  
CROWD? LESSONS FROM SWEDEN'S DEVELOPMENT  
COOPERATION WITH AFGHANISTAN 2002–2020**

Adam Pain



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with the Crowd?

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Cooperation with Afghanistan  
2002–2020

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Working Paper August 2021

to

the Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA)

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### **Acknowledgements**

I am very grateful to all my informants for this study for the insights that they offered, the time they gave me and for the feedback they gave me on the final draft report. I thank also the EBA reference group Markus Burman, Mats Hårsmar and Johan Schaar for the careful reading that they gave of the first draft of this report and for their suggestions. Needless to say, I owe many debts in the writing of this report to those who I have worked with over the last twenty years in Afghanistan.

Please refer to the present report as: Pain, Adam (2021), *Punching Above its Weight or Running with the Crowd? Lessons from Sweden's Development Cooperation with Afghanistan, 2002–2020*, EBA Working Paper August 2021, The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), Sweden.

This report can be downloaded free of charge at [www.eba.se](http://www.eba.se)

Cover design by Julia Demchenko

## Acronyms

AAN	Afghanistan Analysts Network
ADB	Asian Development Bank
APSM	Afghanistan Peace Support Mechanism
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
ARTF	Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund
BMZ	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
CDC	Community Development Councils
CC	Citizen's Charter
DAC	Development Advisory Committee
GIRoA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
ILO	International Labour Organisation
MES	Medium Small Enterprises
MFA	Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development
MSIA	Marie Stopes International
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
OECD	Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development
SCA	Swedish Committee for Afghanistan
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
ToC	Theories of Change
WAW	Women for Afghan Women



# Contents

<b>Contents</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Foreword by EBA</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Sammanfattning</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>2 Methods</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>3 Swedish Development Cooperation with Afghanistan 2001–2020</b> .....	<b>23</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	23
3.2 Aid Flows to Afghanistan, Donor Fragmentation, Policy Making and Implementation Practices .....	24
3.3 Swedish Strategies of Engagement in Afghanistan.....	25
3.4 Swedish Aid to Afghanistan: Funding Levels and Programmatic Content .....	29
3.5 Lessons from Programme Evaluations .....	31
Interventions and Theories of Change.....	33
Assessment of Projects in Relation to the DAC Criteria.....	37
Modalities of Engagement: Multilateral Versus Others .....	40
3.6 Summing up .....	44
<b>4 Taking Context into Account</b> .....	<b>46</b>
4.1 Introduction .....	46
4.2 Narratives of Afghanistan .....	47
4.3 Rural Transformations and the Economic Market Place .....	52
4.4 Capacity Building.....	56
4.5 Addressing Rights and Gender Equality .....	60
4.6 Insights from Zardozi on Building Freedom to Act .....	63
4.7 Summing up .....	66
<b>5 Conclusions</b> .....	<b>68</b>
5.1 Introduction .....	68

5.2 Lessons from Sweden’s Development Cooperation with Afghanistan: 2002–2020 .....	69
5.3 Implications for Future Swedish Development Cooperation with Afghanistan .....	72
<b>References.....</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>85</b>



## Foreword by EBA

In November 2020, EBA contracted Adam Pain to undertake a desk study focusing on overarching tentative conclusions and lessons learned from Sweden's development cooperation with Afghanistan since 2002 and how lessons drawn could or should impact Sweden's engagement looking ahead. Little did we know about the speed and scale of changes in Afghanistan in the months to come.

While Afghanistan is Sweden's largest country programme, Sweden is a relatively minor donor, at most providing 2.6 per cent of the overall Afghanistan aid budget. Together with a crowded field of donors, often with incoherent objectives and programme designs, the author argues that any assessment of Sweden's contribution must be hedged with a great degree of uncertainty. Still, he concludes that the greatest results have been achieved in interventions addressing "bounded problems" such as infrastructure while results in interventions focusing primarily on behavioural change or seeking to build capacities have been more limited.

Pain argues that while the future Swedish portfolio will likely continue supporting the government, multilateral agencies, and NGOs, a more relevant and coherent portfolio requires a better understanding of the complexity of the Afghanistan context, in particular on how the existing social order works and where the room for manoeuvre lies. He calls for less ambitious goals and more focus on "good enough" change to bring about incremental improvements.

It is our hope that this this working paper will be of use to colleagues at the MFA and Sida, but also to civil society organisations and anyone interested in the effectiveness of aid in challenging environments.

EBA working papers are shorter studies of questions of limited scope or that complements a regular EBA report. Working papers are not subject to a formal decision from the expert group but instead reviewed by the secretariat before publication. The authors are, as with other EBA publications, responsible for the content of the report and its conclusions.

Stockholm, August 2021

Jan Pettersson, Managing Director

# Sammanfattning

Denna underlagsrapport går igenom de lärdomar som kan dras av Sveriges utvecklingssamarbete med Afghanistan från 2002–2020 och analyserar konsekvenserna av dessa för Sveriges framtida engagemang i landet. Underlagsrapporten har författats vid en tidpunkt då talibanernas övertagande av landet kulminerat med intagandet av Kabul den 15 augusti 2021.

Sverige har haft en lång historia av engagemang med Afghanistan. Denna går tillbaka till bildandet av svenska Afghanistankommittén (SAK) 1980, som kom till som ett svar på den sovjetiska invasionen av landet. Sedan 2002 har Sverige fokuserat på stöd inom grundutbildning, grundläggande sjukvård, mänskliga rättigheter, jämställdhet och ekonomisk utveckling. Mellan 2001 och 2020 har Sverige utbetalat totalt 1732 miljoner USD i bistånd till Afghanistan (nästan 14 miljarder SEK). 390 miljoner USD (3,6 miljarder SEK) har anslagits för perioden 2021–2024. Även om detta åtagande gjort Afghanistan till Sveriges största enskilda landprogram, så har Sverige förblivit en mindre aktör i den samlade biståndsbudgeten i Afghanistan, med mellan 1 och 2,6 procent av den totala finansieringen.

Det finns en god överensstämmelse mellan de slutsatser som kan dras från generella välfärdsindikatorer, en meta-utvärdering av 148 utvärderingsrapporter om resultaten från internationellt bistånd, utredningen om Sveriges engagemang i Afghanistan (SOU 2017:16) och Sidas egna utvärderingar: I huvudsak har resultaten av utvecklingssamarbetet varit svaga, insatserna har fungerat bättre vid tillhandahållande av grundläggande infrastruktur, skolor och utbildning men lite har uppnåtts när det gäller att bygga kapacitet och förändra beteenden.

Sverige har, liksom andra länder, haft sin egen styrning av biståndet till Afghanistan, med svenska målsättningar och prioriteringar. Man har dock inte intagit den tydliga, principfasta roll som man gjort historiskt. Afghanistan har utgjort en betydande utmaning för givarsamfundets engagemang. De förutsättningar som i andra länder tidigare möjliggjort en resa mot dagens liberala demokratier finns för närvarande inte i landet, detta har gjort ett traditionellt utformat bistånd mindre ändamålsenligt. Detta, nivån på de finansiella flödena och bristande samordning och samstämmighet mellan insatser gör det inte orimligt att hävda att stora biståndsvolymer och kriget mot terrorn tillsammans snarare bidragit till än motverkat korruption och underminerat all potential till hållbarhet. Afghanistan har i bästa fall haft en ”prekär suveränitet”. Sverige som

enskilt land har haft begränsade möjligheter att genom biståndet kunna påverka dessa systematiska skevheter.

Det internationella biståndet i Afghanistan har främst utformats kring en ”substantialistisk” agenda. En sådan kännetecknas av att försöka uppnå förutbestämda, breda målsättningar som exempelvis ”fattigdomsminskning”, ”jämsköldhet” och liknande. Utgångspunkt har varit externt uppfattade brister, underbyggda av antaganden om linjära orsakssamband som representerats i resultatramverk och förändringsteorier. Det har funnits en tendens att motivera insatsers relevans utifrån (förvisso existerande) behov snarare än förutsättningar att nå uppsatta mål. Fokus har legat på mekanismer, mallar och teknokratisk utformning för att hantera komplexa sociala problem av slag som externa aktörer har små förutsättningar att förstå eller påverka. Policynarrativ med fördefinierade lösningar på utifrån uppfattade problem har baserats på en begränsad förståelse för hur Afghanistan fungerar och hur interventioner i praktiken griper in i existerande samhällslogik. Det har funnits en tydlig inkonsekvens mellan å ena sidan avsikten i viktiga interventioner och å andra sidan afghanska individers och hushålls motiv och förmåga att agera på det sätt som givarna väntar. Svenskt utvecklingsamarbete är inte immun mot denna kritik.

Den västerländska interventionen i Afghanistan har genom sitt stora bistånd och sina motstridiga mål bidragit till att befästa en miljö där personliga nätverk, ofta baserade på släktskap eller etnicitet genomsyrar formella institutioner, ekonomi och vardag. Dessa nätverk reglerar åtkomst till resurser på alla nivåer i samhället. Mycket av bistandsprogrammeringen på sektornivå har utgått från att det varit möjligt att mobilisera ett individuellt aktörskap från kvinnor och män för att därigenom finna en väg ut ur befintliga socialt inbäddade och strukturella begränsningar. Kapacitetsbyggande insatser har utgått från antaganden om att det är tillräckligt att utrusta människor med kunskaper och kompetens för att driva organisatorisk förändring. Insatserna har då bortsett från vilka förutsättningar som krävs för att använda nya färdigheter, liksom från den logik och de incitament som styr befintliga praktiker och arbetssätt. De flesta afghaner lever under villkoren av *beroendebaserad säkerhet* för att upprätthålla frihet från osäkerhet. Detta inskränker starkt deras handlingsfrihet. Begränsningarna är flera, på hushålls- och bynivå, på den lokala marknaden och bortom.

Den svenska regeringens styrning av biståndet, bland annat genom biståndsmyndigheten Sida, sker genom så kallade strategier. Sedan den

första strategin för Afghanistan år 2002, har fem strategier beslutats. Överlag har målsättningarna i dessa varit mer ambitiösa och fantasirika än strategiska, och ambitionerna har ökat över tid. Men det är oklart hur man i strategisk mening avser arbeta mot målens uppfyllnad. Strategierna lägger större vikt vid resultat inom ”fattigdom”, ”rättigheter” och ”kvinnor” än vid förutsättningar för att nå resultat inom dessa områden. De saknar innehåll som lärdomar från tidigare strategier och från kontextuella förändringar i landet. Den senaste strategin från april 2021 skiljer sig till exempel inte mycket från de tidigare, trots att USA:s planer på militärt tillbakadragande då var väl kända. Detta behov av ett strategiskt omtag utgör också en möjlighet att justera Sveriges engagemang i Afghanistan.

Ett behov av justering rör synen på statens ledande roll. Om vi har lärt någonting av tidigare erfarenheter så är det att utifrån drivna förändringar varken skapar legitima eller kompetenta stater utan snarare blir en del av problemet. Det fortsatta behovet av engagemang med den afghanska staten måste balanseras av ett arbete för att bygga mer lokal ansvarighet, något som är mer anpassat till hur landet fungerar i verkligheten.

En ytterligare faktor är biståndsnivåerna. Afghanistan är Sveriges största samarbetsland och vissa delar i utvecklingen tyder på att biståndet skulle kunna öka. Men ett ökat svenskt bistånd till Afghanistan lär inte minska utmaningarna med biståndsberoende, hållbarhet och korruption. Lösningar på sådana utmaningar kan bara skapas genom Afghanistans egen möjlighet att generera egna statsinkomster med ägarskap över sina finanser.

Sida kommer sannolikt behålla bistånd via såväl den afghanska staten och multilaterala organisationer som till Svenska Afghanistankommittén (SAK) och andra civilsamhällesorganisationer. Oavsett vilken regering som styr Afghanistan kommer den vara i behov av bistånd för att uppfylla grundläggande funktioner och Sida har här en roll. I vilken utsträckning Sida lyckas arbeta för ökad samstämmighet med andra givare och ansvarighållande av afghanska statstjänstemän är dock oklart.

Denna underlagsrapports huvudsakliga budskap är att Sverige bör utveckla sin förståelse av grundläggande kontextuella frågor och låta dessa styra den framtida utformningen av det svenska biståndet. Gömt i ljusan dag har en sådan ”relationell” praktik – som denna studie menar är en relevant och effektiv väg framåt – funnits i delar av det svenska utvecklingssamarbetet. Denna har tagit större hänsyn till kontext och process, och arbetat iterativt i den komplexa dynamik som skapar social förändring. Snarare än att använda samarbetsorganisationer som

instrument för att uppnå förutbestämda förändringar, har Sida här utvecklat långsiktiga och stabila relationer med organisationer som delar de principer och den sociala förändringsagenda som är kärnan i Sidas engagemang. Exempel på detta är Svenska Afghankommittén (SAK) och Marie Stopes International (Afghanistan). I underlagsrapporten diskuteras även ett exempel på en organisation som arbetar med kvinnors ekonomiska egenmakt. Samtliga dessa organisationer arbetar på ett adaptivt sätt med gradvis förändring utifrån djupgående kontextuell förståelse av befintlig praxis och de är mer inbäddade i lokala förtroendeförhållanden. I alla de tre fallen har organisationerna en tydlig och distinkt identitet, de vet hur de ska arbeta i den lokala kontexten och de har ett starkt institutionellt minne. Detta är ett tillvägagångssätt Sida bör uppmuntras att utveckla mer explicit som en del av sin portfölj. Ett sådant angreppssätt är också ytterst relevant i den nya kontext som nu växer fram.

## Summary

This report reviews the lessons that can be drawn from Sweden's development cooperation with Afghanistan from 2002–2020 and the implications of these for Sweden's future engagement with the country. It has been written at a time of the rapid takeover of the country by the Taliban culminating in their seizure of Kabul on 15 August 2021.

Sweden has had a long history of engagement with Afghanistan that dates back to the formation of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) in 1980 in response to the Soviet invasion of the country. Since 2002 it has focused on support in primary education, basic health care, human rights, gender equality and economic development. Between 2001 and 2020 Sweden has disbursed a total of 13.633 bn SEK (USD M 1732.1) in aid to Afghanistan and 3.592 bn SEK (USD M 390.0) has been allocated for the period 2021–2024. While this commitment by Sweden has made Afghanistan Sweden's largest country programme, it has remained a minor player in the overall Afghanistan aid budget, providing just over 1 to 2.6 percent of funding.

There is a consistency between the conclusions that can be drawn from the overall welfare indicators for Afghan citizens, a meta-review of 148 evaluation reports on the results from international development assistance, findings from Sweden's own inquiry into its engagement in Afghanistan in 2015 and Sida's own evaluations: in essence the results of development assistance have been poor, working best in the provision of basic infrastructure, schools and education but achieving little in terms of building capacities and changing behaviours.

Sweden, like other donors, has had its own country strategies stating Swedish objectives and priorities, but it has not leveraged a distinctive and principled position as it had done in the past. Afghanistan has been challenging for donors to engage with. The conditions that allowed states in the past to transition to the liberal democracies of today do not now exist, challenging the aid programming orthodoxy. Together with the level of funding and the inconsistencies of the overall intervention, it would not be difficult to make the case that the overall level of aid to Afghanistan coupled with the war on terror, has fuelled corruption rather than the opposite, and undermined any potential for sustainability. Afghanistan at best has had a 'precarious sovereignty'. On its own there is little that

Sweden could have done through its programming to address these perverse incentives in the system.

International aid interventions have been primarily structured around a 'substantialist' agenda. Such an agenda is characterised by ambitions to achieve general and wide targets, such as 'poverty reduction', 'gender equality' and the like, while focusing on the perceived deficits of the country and underpinned by linear-cause effect assumptions as represented in results frameworks and theories of change. There has been a general tendency to frame the relevance of interventions in terms of need on which most interventions score well but they fail to be effective. There has been a focus on mechanisms, templates, and technocratic formulations to address complex social change issues that outside actors cannot pretend to fully understand or negotiate. They have worked to a set of policy narratives that have pre-defined solutions to the assumed problems. But they have been based on a limited understanding of how Afghanistan works or how interventions actually engage with the logic of existing practice. There has been incoherence between the design intentions of core interventions and the motivations and abilities of Afghan individuals and households to act in the manner expected of them. Sweden's development cooperation is not immune from this critique.

Instead the western intervention in Afghanistan has contributed through excessive aid and conflicting objectives to consolidating an institutional environment where personalised networks often based on kinship or ethnicity permeate formal institutions, the economy and everyday life. These networks regulate at all levels access to resources. Much of the programming across the sectors has assumed that it will be possible to motivate agentic behaviour by women and men out of existing socially embedded structural constraints. Capacity building has assumed that equipping people with skills and competencies is sufficient to drive organisational change. But this takes little account of the conditions which allow such new skills to be expressed or the rationale and incentives underlying existing practices. But most Afghans live under conditions of dependent security in order to gain freedom from insecurity. This constrains their freedom to act. The constraints are multiple, at household and village level, at local market level and beyond.

Swedish aid is governed by strategies from the Government. The instructed party (e.g. Sida) then translates the strategy into an operational plan. Over time Sweden's country strategies for Afghanistan have become more and more ambitious in terms of goals. But it is far from clear that

the statement of these goals is based on a strategic sense of the necessary sequential steps that need to be taken to build towards these goals. The strategies focus on results in relation to ‘poverty’, ‘rights’, or ‘women’ rather than the processes that might be required to move towards those results. They do not appear to provide a forum for critical reflection on either what has been learned from past strategies or of the dynamics of change in Afghanistan, as the issuing of the latest strategy in the immediate aftermath of the US withdrawal suggests. The strategy clearly needs rethinking which is a potential opportunity to recalibrate Sweden’s engagement with Afghanistan.

One element that is going to have to be addressed is the direct ‘statist’ approach. If we have learned one thing, it is that external interventions do not build legitimate and competent central states but become part of the problem. While the need for engagement at the centre will of course remain, this needs to be balanced more with a contextually grounded approach that helps build a more local and accountable state. This speaks more to the reality of how Afghanistan actually works.

There is a further consideration and that is the level of funding. Afghanistan is Sweden’s largest aid programme and there are mechanisms in place which will encourage increases in the level of funding. Increasing Swedish funding to Afghanistan may not be helpful in addressing the challenges of aid dependence, sustainability and reduced corruption. The solution to these ultimately lie in Afghanistan and the ability of the state to generate its own revenue and have authority over an increasing share of its budget.

Sida is likely to maintain a portfolio that support both government and multilateral agencies as well as the SCA and other relevant civil society and NGOs. Whatever government there is in power, it is going to need contributions to enable it to fulfill its basic functions and Sida will have a role in this. Whether and to what extent Sida is able to leverage greater coherence with other donors and hold public officials to account remains unknown.

The main message is that Sweden should develop a different understanding of key contextual issues and ensure that future programming addresses these. However, hiding almost in full sight has been a rather different practice in elements of Swedish aid which can be termed ‘relational’, which this review suggests is both more relevant and effective as a modality. This has given a greater focus to context and process, and has worked iteratively with the flow of the more contingent,



contextual and complex dynamics of social change. Here Sida, rather than using recipient organisations as instruments to achieving predetermined changes, has developed long-term and relatively consistent relations with recipient organisations that share the principles and social change agenda at the heart of Sida's commitment. Examples of this include the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan and Marie Stopes International (Afghanistan). A case of another organisation that works in similar ways with women's economic empowerment is discussed. All clearly work in an incremental manner based on a deep contextual understanding of the existing logic of practice and are embedded in local trust relations. It also has to be said that in all three cases the organisations have a distinctive identity, they know how to work within the context, and they have deep institutional memories. It is an approach that Sida should be encouraged to develop more explicitly as part of its portfolio. It is also highly relevant to the new context.

# 1 Introduction

On Wednesday 14 April 2021 the US President formally announced that the United States would withdraw troops from Afghanistan. This would take place on the 20th anniversary of the al-Qaida attacks in the US that led to the US overthrow of the Taliban (Worden *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, on 11 September 2021, the NATO-led military operation in Afghanistan will be phased out.

On 29 April 2021 the Swedish Minister for International Development Cooperation announced a new development assistance strategy for Afghanistan for the period 2021–2024. He noted that Sweden would not allow the troop retreat to lead to the world abandoning Afghanistan. He added *‘it is important to show that we want to continue to stand together with the Afghan people and contribute to positive development. It is our most important message that we have the determination to continue to work for the rights and security of the Afghan people at a time when there is concern that the outside world will abandon them’*.<sup>1</sup>

However, by Sunday 15 August 2021 the Taliban completed their rapid takeover of Afghanistan with the occupation of Kabul, experiencing little resistance. President Ghani was reported to have left the country. On Monday 16 August the Swedish government announced that it would as a result reduce its aid to Afghanistan.

The decision by the US to withdraw the military intervention was not because the stated goals of the intervention as it developed in Afghanistan — a transition to security, a political settlement, peace and strong socioeconomic development — had been achieved. That clearly has not happened. While writing this report, the Afghan government was rapidly losing authority over large swathes of the country (Clark and Ali, 2021) culminating in the capture of Kabul. But for the US these goals were not the ends in themselves but were seen as a means to gain national and international security<sup>2</sup>. Rather the unilateral withdrawal by the US reflected the Biden administration’s view that US foreign policy choices needed to be more responsive to and central to its domestic policy mandate.<sup>3</sup> The decision has received critical reaction from many quarters, both from

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<sup>1</sup> Biståndsministern: Sverige överger inte Afghanistan - DN.SE, accessed 21/05/04

<sup>2</sup> Crocker, R (2021) The Once and Future Afghanistan. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/04/29/once-and-future-afghanistan-pub-84435>

<sup>3</sup> Gaston, S. (2021) The Roots of the Allied Military Withdrawal from Afghanistan Start at Home, <https://bfpg.co.uk/2021/04/military-interventionism-afghanistan/>

more realist positions — ‘we are not ending the war; we are leaving the battle space to our adversaries’<sup>4</sup> as well as from those who point to how it essentially undermines any ongoing peace processes and any incentives for the Taliban to engage in power sharing. The immediate prospects are unclear but the speed with which the Taliban has taken power points to the possibility of political deals being struck both locally and at much higher levels (van Bijlert, 2021).

It need not have been like this. There were opportunities in the early 2000s to bring ‘moderate’ Taliban into peace processes but these were vetoed by the US and resisted by the Northern Alliance who were in opposition to the Taliban and dominated the interim government. The limitations of the original Bonn agreement<sup>5</sup>, the confounding of a war on terror with a state building project, the creation of a rentier state through excessive aid (Suhrke’s ‘more is less’ argument (2006)) — have all been cited as the ‘sins of omission and commission’ (Goodhand and Sedra, 2007:57) in the Afghanistan state building project. Even five years after 2001 it was clear that the project was in trouble (Suhrke, 2006), highlighting ‘the limitations of an orthodox development model’ as a state building modality (Goodhand and Sedra, 2007:57). The transitions to security, a political settlement and strong socio-economic development have not been achieved and while there have been gains if anything now the condition of Afghanistan may be worse than it was in 2001, although different. A *de jure* state may have been re-formed with the trappings of democracy, but in effect post 2001 has seen the rise of an informal and shadow state<sup>6</sup>. Informal power relations dominate and are diffused through complex patronage networks and secured through access to an informal economy, of which the opium trade is but one, albeit significant, dimension. A variable pattern of localised and extended non-state regimes<sup>7</sup> has been created.

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<sup>4</sup> Gaston, S. (2021) The Roots of the Allied Military Withdrawal from Afghanistan Start at Home, <https://bfp.org.uk/2021/04/military-interventionism-afghanistan/>

<sup>5</sup> The Bonn Agreement signed on 5 December 2001 provided the basis for re-establishing the State of Afghanistan. An Afghan Interim Authority was inaugurated with a six-month mandate and this was then followed by a national meeting or *Loya Jirga* which led to the appointment of a two-year Transitional Authority. After this there was a national election for the selection of the first President.

<sup>6</sup> Used here for a context of civil war where the state is wholly informal (Wood and Gough, 2006) it has also been applied to more formal states (Harriss-White, 2003:89) where it ‘comes into being because of the formal state and it coexists with it’.

<sup>7</sup> Regimes, either formal or informal in the sense that Wood and Gough (2006:1698) apply the term, are “rules, institutions and structured interests that constrain individuals”.

Sweden's commitment to Afghanistan predates 2001. It gave humanitarian support in the aftermath of the Russian invasion in 1979, primarily through the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA). That support continued after the Soviet withdrawal and gave Sweden a reputational legacy that continues to carry weight today. Sweden has been committed to Afghanistan's reconstruction process since 2001 although not necessarily to the process and agenda led by the US. The country is likely to remain Sweden's most significant cooperation partner in terms of development funding. The newly announced country strategy (MFA, 2021) shows strong continuity with the past and while it may be important as a statement of principles, the goals it sets are multiple and aspirational. There is a continued focus on strengthening human rights, democracy and gender equality, education, health, peace and economic development with an added focus on climate issues and natural resources. But in what senses is the country strategy a 'strategy' and a good guide as to how to achieve these goals and are they now relevant? And to what extent does this continuity with the past and the ambitions of Sweden's future engagement with Afghanistan draw on the lessons of its past development assistance, broader lessons from the reconstruction process, the current context of Afghanistan and likely future trajectories? These are the issues that this paper selectively addresses in this review of Sweden's development cooperation with Afghanistan for the period 2002–2020.

In September 2018, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) commissioned a meta-review of evaluation reports published between 2008 and 2018 that assessed the results of specific international development assistance to Afghanistan. The aim of the review was to collect and summarise the experience of donors in Afghanistan with the intention to see what could be learned about what worked and what did not work, which approaches were and were not effective and what the impacts and unintended consequences had been. The review identified 148 evaluation reports that met its inclusion criteria. These were grouped into those that by design looked for causal relations between interventions and impacts (the so called rigorous impact evaluations), country level evaluations by bilateral donors based on desk studies and interviews designed to assess the OECD DAC evaluation criteria<sup>8</sup>, performance audits undertaken by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), evaluation reports from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in relation to the large infrastructure

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<sup>8</sup> Relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact

projects that they supported and various other reports from multinational organisations and NGOs.

The conclusions of this review were sobering. While it noted the various achievements in relation to improving access to basic health services and primary education, clean drinking water and improved basic infrastructure in Afghanistan it concluded:

*'the international community has repeatedly overestimated its own capacity and the capacity of its Afghan partners to bring about rapid social change. What has worked best are modest, locally embedded projects with immediate, tangible benefits. What has rarely worked are complex projects aimed at building capacity and changing behaviour. More specifically, interventions in basic health and education, and in improving basic livelihoods, led to results. Interventions in building capacity for the administration, or in sectors such as the rule of law or gender, rarely worked'* (Zürcher, 2020:8).

These findings reflect what has been found in many of the evaluations of Sida funded projects. Sweden's own inquiry into its engagement in Afghanistan 2002–2014 (Sweden, 2017) concluded that overall the objectives of Swedish support had largely not been achieved. It noted that security and stability in the country was still poor, poverty levels remained high but there had been some improvement in terms of building a democratic society and in improving the position of women. It concluded that Swedish engagement had not been sufficiently cohesive and had lacked strategic coherence.

These observations could be seen as a preemptive conclusion of this review and sufficient grounds to argue for re-thinking the modalities of future Swedish development cooperation with Afghanistan. The takeover of power by the Taliban will now require this. It is true that in terms of what might be termed Sweden's 'substantialist' agenda (see Box 1, Eyben, 2010) which frames aid in terms of things such as 'results', 'poverty', 'rights' and 'women', Swedish aid has been ineffective. But hiding almost in full sight has been a rather different practice in elements of Swedish aid which Eyben has termed 'relationism', which this review will suggest has been more effective. This has given a greater focus to context and process, and has worked iteratively with the flow of the more contingent, contextual and complex dynamics of social change. So can we account for the relative success of the more instrumental interventions and the apparent failure of more ambitious ones seeking to engineer social and economic change? And does this mean that the more ambitious ones are beyond Sweden's reach or need to be addressed in a different way? This review will argue that there are modalities that Sida is already pursuing that could be given more weight in the programming that are more likely to lead to the changes it wishes to support. That programming needs to

engage more critically with contextual conditions in pursuing its social agenda, focus more on process and work more for incremental change.

Somewhat perversely most evaluations of donor and Sida funded projects have almost always described them as relevant even if they have been ineffective. This review will suggest that this has simply been a response to another item on the substantialist agenda — that of ‘need’ or ‘deficiency’. Afghanistan has been seen as a country where so much is lacking. But this report will argue that a more systematic and analytical unpacking of relevance and coherence is required to ground programmatic assumptions and inform ways of working. This in turn would suggest that less weight is given within the Swedish aid portfolio to working with organisations as instruments of change towards preset goals. Rather Sida should work more with organisations that it trusts and whose principles are consistent with Sweden’s. This is a relationist approach that is well attuned to the discretionary nature of Afghan society and fits well with Sweden’s long term commitments to Afghanistan<sup>9</sup>.

#### **Box 1: ‘Substantialism’ and ‘Relationalism’**

This report draws on two concepts deployed by Rosalind Eyben (2010) to characterize contrasting approaches in development aid practice. The first she labels as a ‘substantialist’ perspective. This tends to be framed in pre-conceived categories such as ‘poverty’, ‘rights’, or ‘women’ that can be seen to be the desired results or outcomes of development interventions. This perspective is often a feature of results-based management designs. The second approach she describes as a ‘relationist’ that is inclusive and focuses much more on processes, complexity and context — the ways of engaging rather than the results as such. This is more akin to approaches such as problem-driven iterative adaptation (Andrews et al., 2015). ‘Substantialism’ and ‘Relationalism’ are not necessarily mutually exclusive approaches and may well have similar goals, even if the means of reaching them are seen to be different. In terms of Afghanistan a ‘substantialist’ approach tends to focus more on the country’s apparent deficits and needs, the interventions required to address these and aid effectiveness in terms of results and impact. In contrast a ‘relationalist’ approach, while sharing many of the principles enshrined in a ‘substantialist’ approach, works with contextually specific processes and complexity focusing more on incremental change by local actors.

This report will primarily focus on the issues of relevance and coherence in programming in relation to the effectiveness of Swedish aid although in so doing it will also address issues of gender equality and economic development. It proceeds by outlining briefly its methods and approach.

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<sup>9</sup> Informant 10

The third section presents a summary review of Swedish Development Cooperation with Afghanistan and the lessons that have been drawn from it. The fourth section builds on the key findings from this review to elaborate a contextual understanding of Afghanistan drawn from a wider reading of the literature and the dynamics between intervention practices and contextual conditions. This leads in the fifth section to an identification of some of the key policy challenges that lie ahead in terms of development assistance and the key lessons to be drawn for future Swedish cooperation with Afghanistan.

## 2 Methods

This desk review has been based on a number of sources. First it has drawn on the official documentation related to Sweden's Afghanistan country strategies and Sida's evaluation reports. An interest should be declared here in that the author contributed to a number of these evaluations. Second it has reviewed a wider set of secondary literature drawn from other third country programme reviews of assistance to Afghanistan and notably from the UK and the US. Third it has drawn into the review a wider set of more academic literature drawn from research on Afghanistan and other conflict settings. Again an interest should be declared here in that the author has worked closely with the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) since 2001 and had been actively involved in research on Afghanistan's rural economy and policy making and practice. If anything this background has encouraged a more 'theory' based approach to this review. Finally some 12 interviews (by Zoom) have been held with key individuals who have been engaged in Afghanistan. These include current and former Sida and Ministry for Foreign Affairs officials, past and present Swedish Committee for Afghanistan officials and a range of other observers and researchers. None of the comments or contributions from these individuals are attributed but simply listed as informant 1, informant 2, etc. A full list of the informants is attached in Annex 1.



## 3 Swedish Development Cooperation with Afghanistan 2001–2020

### 3.1 Introduction

Sweden has had a long history of engagement with Afghanistan. This dates back to the formation of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) in 1980 in response to the Soviet invasion of the country. Primarily funded by Sida for humanitarian purposes, the SCA established itself as one of the key NGOs working in the country up to 2001 primarily in the areas of basic education, health and agriculture. It has continued to be a significant component of Sida's support to Afghanistan to the present day.

With the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the Swedish Government sought to build on its previous humanitarian engagement and over time its programming interventions shifted from a humanitarian focus to more of a development and state building agenda. However it had to reposition its engagement not only in terms of programme purpose and content but also to address a new reality: a government that had the expressed ambition to function as a modern state but could not do so, a crowded and competitive field of donors, international agencies and NGOs positioning Sweden as a minor but respected player in an ambitious but ultimately flawed and 'failed' reconstruction and state building agenda. Irreconcilable goals and means involved in fighting terrorism, addressing an insurgency, responding to the opium poppy economy and liberal state building have generated conflicting objectives and practices by donors and government alike leading to perverse outcomes (Pain, 2012) and resulting in a rentier state (Clark, 2020). How has Sweden positioned itself and responded to a challenging and dynamic political landscape, while adhering to its principles but seeking to punch above its weight, with what effects from its development assistance and what has it learned from this engagement?

This section addresses these questions. It first characterises Afghanistan's political and aid landscape before moving on to consider Sweden's programme content as shaped by a series of strategy documents, its mode of operation and the findings from a series of evaluations of its programme components. It concludes by assessing the lessons that have and have not been learned from Sweden's engagement.

## 3.2 Aid Flows to Afghanistan, Donor Fragmentation, Policy Making and Implementation Practices

As Clark (2020) notes building on earlier findings by Pain (2012) it is all but impossible to assess with any degree of accuracy the total financial flows to Afghanistan since 2001. The expenditure of military forces, the diverse range of donors, different types of aid both on and off budget has contributed to an ‘overall lack of transparency ...in terms of what has been spent on what and where’ (Pain, 2012). But it is clear that military funding at least between the period of 2000 and 2009 dwarfed official development assistance (ODA) comprising some nearly 90.0 percent of the estimated expenditure of USD 274.7 billion in aid and military spending (Pain, 2012:8). During this period the Kabul government raised just 1.2 percent of total resource flows in the country. While aid and military spending has slowly fallen since the 2009–12 US military surge and domestic revenues have slowly risen to provide a modest contribution (Byrd, 2015), overall the level of external funding has led to the consolidation of a rentier state, (Clark, 2020), the consequences of which we discuss later.

Financial flows have been one dynamic. A second has been the crowded field of donors working in each sector, working to different agendas and principles. Byrd (2007) makes the general point:

*Difficulties in aid management and coordination have been exacerbated by the following factors. First an enormous number of donors active in Afghanistan – according to the Government as many as 62 including non-governmental donors. Second a number of these donors – of the order of half-dozen or more – are major players in terms of the amount of assistance that they provide and/or as actors on the world stage. There is no ...natural dominant or “lead” donor in the development sphere’*

According to Poole (2011) drawing on OECD DAC data at that time the Education sector had at least 23 donor relationships and Health 17 with respectively 8 and 4 donors providing some 90 percent of the funding. Moreover there was selectivity in terms of how funding was allocated geographically between provinces and there is evidence of higher levels of funding by government and donors in insecure provinces compared to more secure provinces. Belay (2010) also found considerable disparities in health funding levels between provinces and little relation between provincial health indicators and resource flows.

A third consideration has been the way in which donors have worked to very different objectives and theories of change in programme designs. Wilder (2007) points to very different cultural models of the role of the police between German and US-funded programmes with obvious implications for the values and role of policing and training models. There were very different policy narratives driving programme design in agriculture and rural development between the US which was much more private sector focused with trickle down effects on poverty, and others who had more of a ‘developmentalist’ perspective (Pain and Shah, 2009). Equally different models and practices of decentralisation have led to incoherence (Lister, 2006). Perhaps there has been no greater incoherence than in the efforts to address the opium economy where not only were there sharp divisions between policy approaches of the two major players, the US government and the British Government (Pain et al., 2021) but there was also major divisions between different branches of both governments as to approach and strategy (SIGAR, 2018; Berry, 2019). This diversity of approaches, geographical selectivity of funding and myriad of actors often in the same district is an important confounding effect that programme evaluations rarely take account of.

Given this ‘mess’ and ‘confusion’ of confounding factors, any assessment of Sweden’s contribution through its funded activities to its stated goals for Afghanistan must be hedged with a great degree of uncertainty. Moreover, these considerations raise doubts as to how useful it is to assess the effects of the islands of Swedish funded projects and programmes without taking full account of immediate contextual factors. So, what have been the goals of Swedish engagement in Afghanistan?

### **3.3 Swedish Strategies of Engagement in Afghanistan**

There is a recognized process by which formal country strategies are developed. First the MFA issues an instruction to Sida laying out the guidelines or ‘entry values’ that Sida should follow in order in developing a basis to inform the strategy that the MFA will write and issue. In the case of the most recent Afghanistan strategy, the MFA issued the instruction to Sida on 29 May 2019 to prepare the necessary background documentation. Accordingly Sida prepared a 20 page document (Sida, 2019) in response to the instructions it had received laying out what it terms the strategic considerations, the focus of the support areas, a

description of the strategy context, the positioning of Sweden and implementation processes. This was submitted to the MFA on 9 September 2019 and as we have seen the new country strategy was announced on 29 April 2021. Now that the formal strategy has been issued, Sida will then translate the strategy into an operational plan. We focus first on the formal strategy documents.

Six formal so-called ‘strategies’ for development cooperation with Afghanistan have been elaborated from 2001 to 2024 and issued by Sweden’s Ministry for Foreign Affairs (Table 1). The qualification over the labelling of them as ‘strategies’ lies in the fact that these are not primarily strategy documents that engage in prioritisation, sequencing of actions or assessment of constraints in relation to goals. Rather at best they are statements (and re-statements) of principle, they tend to the aspirational and could be read as a wish list of all good things that the Ministry would like to see happen. While they may in a sense set the framework within which Sida can structure its interventions, they do not appear to provide a forum for critical reflection on either what has been learned from past strategies or of the dynamics of change in Afghanistan, as the issuing of the latest strategy in the immediate aftermath of the US withdrawal suggests. The new strategy includes no consideration of the import of this military withdrawal. Over time Sweden’s strategies have become more and more ambitious in terms of goals. But it is far from clear that the statement of these goals is based on a strategic sense of the necessary sequential steps that need to be taken to build towards these goals. The strategies focus on results in relation to ‘poverty’, ‘rights’, or ‘women’ rather than the processes that might be required to move towards those results.

The first four strategies including the revision for the period 2012–2014 are relatively lengthy documents that elaborate the broad principles of engagement, the areas of focus, a context analysis, some of the implementation challenges including the somewhat understated observation on *‘donor congestion and fragmentation of development assistance which makes coordination and harmonization a major challenge’* (see MFA, 2012: 14). It is clear from all these four texts that there was full awareness of Sweden’s secondary role in terms of the volume of assistance that it provided and also a desire to position its contribution to best effect. But Sweden, as with other donors, in their commitment to multilateral action followed the lead of the key actor.

There is an observation made by the UK House of Lords Committee in its report (2021) on the UK and Afghanistan that has relevance here:

*‘The UK’s interests in Afghanistan are not unique and distinct: they are bound up with those of its allies, led by the US. The UK has had limited opportunities, and has shown little inclination, to exert an independent voice and, along with other NATO allies, has followed the US’s lead. This is regrettable ....the Government should seek to reinforce the need for a multinational approach’ (Paragraph 46)*

It is a comment that might be made of Sweden’s engagement as well and one informant<sup>10</sup> noted that in their view Sweden *‘had run with the herd’* rather leveraging a distinctive and principled position as it had done in the past, for example, in relation to Vietnam. As we shall see there are elements of Sweden’s position that clearly do reflect its principled stand over issues of human and gender rights and these are a constant in all the country strategy documents and a theme of project evaluations. Moreover the relative distribution of Swedish funding between its multilateral support, support to the SCA and to other organisations is probably unique amongst donors in the proportion it has given to a country based NGO. But a question to which we will return arises as to whether or not the lessons that could be drawn from its funding modalities have in fact been drawn and leveraged to best effect.

There is also a consistency in programme content across the first three strategy periods with a shift from humanitarian to development support and a focus on education, health, working with government through multilateral agencies (e.g. UNICEF, UNDP etc.) and the World Bank administered Afghanistan Trust Fund (ARTF). In addition as noted a strong advocacy for human rights and democratic governance has been central to Sweden’s agenda.

In 2007 however the newly elected Swedish Government, formed of liberal and conservative parties, took the decision, somewhat against earlier principles of engagement, to target some 15–20 percent of Swedish development cooperation to four of Afghanistan’s Northern provinces (Balk, Sar-i-pul, Samangan and Jowsjan). This was done to link development aid to the activities of the Swedish Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) which the Swedish Government had fielded in support of the NATO effort. This continued until 2014 when the Social Democrats returned to Government. The revised strategy for 2012–2014 appears to have been a partial response to the changing circumstances of Afghanistan and the military surge (and rise in funding levels). It also led Sweden to increase its annual contribution and it aimed to provide 50 percent of this

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<sup>10</sup> Informant 9

through government channels. A commitment to private sector development at the central level which had emerged in the 2009–2013 strategy was adjusted to focus more on the north.

It is not difficult to find in the narratives of these four strategies a growing concern from 2001 not only with the challenges of donor coordination and aid effectiveness but also doubts about government capacity and increasing concern over human rights and security.

**Table 1: The periods of Sweden’s Afghanistan country strategies**

2002–2004:	Country Strategy for development cooperation with Afghanistan, extended to 2005
2006–2008:	Country Strategy for development cooperation with Afghanistan
2009–2013:	Strategy for development cooperation with Afghanistan
2012–2014:	Revised development cooperation strategy: Afghanistan
2014–2019:	Results strategy for Sweden’s international development cooperation with Afghanistan, extended to 2020
2021–2024:	Country Strategy for development cooperation with Afghanistan

The Fifth strategy (2014–2019) marks something of a shift in both style and substance, even if the priority areas showed continuity with the past. The shift in terminology from a strategy for development cooperation to a results strategy was not trivial and emphasised, even if only at an aspirational level, the changes that development cooperation was aiming to contribute to. But at seven pages, significantly shorter than the earlier strategy papers, there was no space or thought given to reflect on past lessons, current challenges or elaborate strategic considerations. Indeed in the specific of the meaning of strategy, all of these documents are rather more outline priority areas than strategies in relation to achieving goals.

The instructions given by the MFA to Sida in 2019 (MFA, 2019) for background documentation in relation to the development of a new strategy of cooperation with Afghanistan and its release of that strategy in 2021 revealed a strong continuity with the past, following a similar format from the past, even if it is not now framed as a results strategy. But the stated aspirations of what Swedish cooperation should aim for in six thematic areas — peaceful and inclusive societies, human rights, democracy and the rule of law, gender equality, education and health, inclusive economic development, sustainable livelihoods and an increased focus on climate issues and natural resources indicate an expanding

agenda. But again it did not appear to take account in any explicit way of the lessons to be drawn from the evaluations of results from Sweden's engagement so far, the consequences of donor engagement in Afghanistan over the previous two decades or the current context of Afghanistan. Indeed, as with the 2014–2019 cooperation strategy there is little indication that the most recent strategy document is in any senses a strategy in the accepted meaning of the term. Rather it states aspirations that Afghanistan should 'skip straight to Weber'<sup>11</sup> (or Sweden) (Pritchett and Woolcock, 2002) without any substantial assessment of where Afghanistan is now, the steps that will be needed to move in that direction or the potential impediments to those change processes.

If the formal strategy documents are brief and prescriptive, then it is possible that analysis and learning is to be found in the background or basis for the strategy prepared by Sida. While the nature of the instructions given to Sida could be seen as restricting the scope for critical analysis, a reading of the Sida background document for the MFA (Sida, 2019) suggests that the ambitions of the document are somewhat limited and it is more operational in intent. It is in every sense a 'substantialist' agenda. Much of it is descriptive, emphasising the deficits or needs of the country and the challenges that are to be faced. While it states (Sida, 2019:20) 'that systematic learning related to the implementation of the strategy will be prioritized' there is no explicit reference to past systematic learning from the Sida programme.

### **3.4 Swedish Aid to Afghanistan: Funding Levels and Programmatic Content**

Between 2001 and 2020 Sweden has disbursed a total of 13.633 bn SEK (USD M 1743.6) in aid to Afghanistan. A total of 3.592 bn SEK (USD M 390.0) has been allocated for the period 2021–2024. The allocation rose gradually from annual levels of 212.25 M SEK (20.53 M USD) to 389.13 M SEK (57.58 M USD) in 2007. Since 2011 the annual budget has exceeded 744 M SEK (100 M USD) and peaked at nearly 1290 M SEK (150.00 M USD) in 2018.<sup>12</sup> At the Tokyo conference in 2014 Sweden entered into a ten year commitment in terms of levels of funding to

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<sup>11</sup> Drawing on Max Weber who in his classic (1922) *Economy and Society*, argued that modern state institutions would be based on rational legal authority exercised by a competent neutral bureaucracy.

<sup>12</sup> [Sweden aid to Afghanistan via all partners in all sector categories year 2020 | Openaid.](#)

Afghanistan and stood by that commitment at the 2020 Geneva pledging conference when some major donors reduced levels of funding and backed off from even committing to a full four year funding cycle (Ruttig, 2020). While this commitment by Sweden has made Afghanistan Sweden's largest country programme, it has remained a minor player in the overall Afghanistan aid budget, providing just over 1 to 2.6 percent of funding. Awareness of this position and a principled commitment to supporting government processes have been important influences on how those funds have been disbursed to support Sweden's priority areas of education, health, democracy and human rights.

In summary, although the proportions have varied year by year, on average up to 50 percent of Swedish aid has gone to support multilateral agencies (primarily of the UN) and the Afghanistan Trust Fund<sup>13</sup> (ARTF), up to 25 percent has gone to support the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) and up to 25 percent has been used to provide direct support to civil society actors and NGOs. During the period when 15 percent of Swedish funds were targeted to the four Northern provinces, the areas of support were not changed but directed through existing partners' programmes in these provinces. In the case of the ARTF, Sweden asserted its right to preference some of its funding to these provinces, even though this went against Swedish stated principles.

The level of support to the SCA deserves comment and has been a distinctive feature of Swedish Aid. At the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan a number of solidarity groups were formed in the west with a singular focus on Afghanistan. Over time these grew into country-based NGOs working in humanitarian and, after 2001, development issues. Examples include Afghanaid in the UK and DACAAR (Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees) in Denmark. But the SCA is unique in both the level of secure funding that has been provided by its home government (at present about 60 percent of SCA's budget), its basis as a membership organisation (3000 members), its size (over 6,000 Afghan employees), its presence (in 17 Afghan provinces) and its reputation. Its contribution to providing basic services, particularly in education and health is well recognised.

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<sup>13</sup> The ARTF was established in 2002 as a multi-donor trust fund administered by the World Bank on behalf of donors to provide on-budget financing to support the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's development priorities and is the single largest source of funding to the Government.



With respect to the 25 percent of funding that has provided direct support to various civil society actors who work in its domains of interest, these include for example Marie Stopes International (Afghanistan), Women for Afghan Women (WAW), Free and Fair Election Forum Afghanistan (FEFA), the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN). In addition, it has supported the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Save the Children. What is notable is that much of this has been long term funding over several funding cycles, an attribute to which we will return.

### 3.5 Lessons from Programme Evaluations

The official publication site<sup>14</sup> for evaluations of Sida programmes in Afghanistan has seventeen separate evaluations listed although the total number of reports is greater than this as there are some duplicates on the website. Two of these evaluations are of Humanitarian support and are not considered further (see Table 2); eight of the evaluations relate to programmes supported through multilateral agencies and include a review of the ARTF; three of the evaluations are of the SCA in 2002, 2008 and 2014 and three more of the evaluations are of civil society or NGO programmes supported by Sida funding. There is a final report which is a synthetic review of the lessons to be drawn from seven of the above evaluations as indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Evaluation Reports of Sida funded projects by year of evaluation and modality**

Year	Humanitarian Evaluations
2005	Support to Internally Displaced Persons — Lessons from Evaluations: Synthesis Report of a Joint Evaluation Programme
2005	Humanitarian and Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan 2001–2005, from Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom: A joint Evaluation
Multilateral support including ARTF	
2013	*Review of the DDG Humanitarian Mine action Support to the National Strategy through Clearance and Enhanced Quality Project (October 2010–September 2013) (DDG)
2014	*Evaluation of the Afghanistan Sub-National Governance Programme (ASGP) Phase II

<sup>14</sup> <https://publikationer.sida.se/English/publications/publicationsearch/?q=afghanistan&page=1&sort=date>

2015	*Evaluation of the UNOPS program Rural Access Improvement Programme Phase 1–111) (RAIP)
2015	Review of Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, ARTF, Internal and External Studies and Evaluations in Afghanistan. (ARTF)
2016	Review of the UNICEF programme Basic Education and Gender Equality in Afghanistan 2013–2015 (UNICEF)
2019	Evaluation of UN Women Country Programme in Afghanistan (UNW)
2019	Evaluation of ILO Roads to Jobs, Afghanistan (ILO)
2021	Evaluation of the EU Afghanistan Peace Support Mechanism (APSM)
<b>Evaluations of the SCA</b>	
1997	The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan. A joint EC-Sida evaluation of support to the health and education sector programmes (SCA1)
2008	Sida’s Support to the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA2)
2014	*Organisational Evaluation of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA3)
Evaluations of Civil Society and NGO support	
2014	*Evaluation of Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN)
2014	*Evaluation of Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)
2014	*Evaluation of Women for Afghan Women-Family Guidance Center and Shelter in Mazar-e-Sharif (WAW)
<b>Synthetic review</b>	
2015	Review of Sida’s Support to Afghanistan — Lessons and Conclusions from 7 Evaluations

\* Indicates the seven evaluations covered in the 2015 Review of Sida’s Support to Afghanistan – Lessons and Conclusions from 7 Evaluations

As part of the 2015 synthetic review a table was developed comparing key aspects of the seven projects reviewed (Pain et al., 2015: 8) with respect to timing, location of the projects, the use of the OECD/DAC (Development Advisory Committee) criteria and the extent to which the evaluations addressed poverty, gender and conflict sensitivity. This original table has been expanded (Table 3) to incorporate the key features of all the evaluations.

**Table 3: Comparative aspects of the Afghanistan Projects Reviewed**

Project (Table 2)	Time-Period	Location	DAC Criteria*	Poverty	Gender	Conflict Sensitivity
<b>Multilateral</b>						
DDG	2010–2013	Northern	All five	Yes	Yes	Yes
ASGP	2012–2014	4 Northern Provinces	All five	N/A	Yes	N/A
RAIP	2017–2015	4 Northern Provinces	All five	Yes	Yes	Yes

ARTF	2002– 2014	National	Not explicit	Yes	Yes	Yes
UNICEF	2013– 2015	10 Most deprived Provinces 4 Northern Provinces	All five	Yes	Yes	Yes
UNW	2014– 2017	2 Northern Provinces	All five	Yes	Yes	Yes
ILO	2015– 2018	2 Northern Provinces	Relevance Effectiveness Sustainability	No	No	No
APSM	2019– 2020	National	Relevance Effectiveness Efficiency	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Swedish Committee</b>						
SCA1	1994– 1997	10 Provinces	All five	No	Yes	No
SCA2	2006– 2008	16 Provinces	Effectiveness Efficiency Sustainability	No	Yes	No
SCA3	2010– 2014	North Eastern Provinces	Only Sustainability	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Civil Society and NGO</b>						
AAN	2011– 2014	National	Not efficiency	N/A	N/A	N/A
AREU	2002– 2013	National	Not efficiency	N/A	N/A	N/A
WAW	2008– 2013	Mazar	Not efficiency	N/A	Yes	N/A

\* DAC's five evaluation criteria at that time were relevance, effectiveness, cost efficiency, impact and sustainability. However, in 2019 these were adapted and an additional criteria (coherence) added. These are discussed later. N/A = not applicable

## Interventions and Theories of Change

A first observation that might be made is that the evaluations can offer only a partial and somewhat incomplete picture of the scope and modalities of Sida's support to Afghanistan. In part this is an issue of the diversity of timing, location and scope of the evaluations. There are also cases where there are no formal evaluation reports of long-term support to an organisation. An example is the Marie Stopes International organisation which a separate EBA analysis on how Sida managed risk (Gulrajani and Mills, 2019) took as a case study. The report has some rather interesting observations, to which we return later, on the informal

and discretionary elements of engagement and learning between desk officers and the project which are simply not captured in formal evaluation documents.

A second observation concerns the disjuncture between project or programme islands and national processes. Drivers of poverty, conflict or gender inequality have complex cross scalar dimensions which projects cannot address. There are also the disparities between what national level figures might say about the dynamics of poverty change and the specifics of what is happening in a particular location. The Inquiry into Sweden's engagement in Afghanistan was correct in pointing to the fact that 'objectives were not fulfilled at all in terms of poverty reduction' (Sweden, 2015:11) although that does not mean that specific Swedish interventions did not have particular poverty reducing effects in a certain location. The more general point is that a focus on higher level outcomes as a result of a specific intervention is not necessarily a good guide to lower level changes that might be happening and could be seen as precursors to more secular change. The ambitions for change have perhaps been pitched too high and expected too quickly. They reflect a mindset that focuses on results and the 'effectiveness' of aid (Eyben, 2010).

Given the absence of strategic analysis and argument in the country strategy papers noted earlier, the justification and rationale in a project or programme design assumes particular significance. It is here that one might hope for a more considered and analytical case for the intervention and assumptions about possible causal relations between the problem framing and the suggested response. Of course in interventions that are of a more instrumental<sup>15</sup> nature — for example the building of health clinics or schools or roads — and directly influencing change, they can readily draw on a relatively uncontested or a 'bounded' problem such as the lack of health or school facilities and there is acceptance of what the solution would look like.

But the moment interventions have ambitions beyond service delivery and seek to address 'unbounded problems' (Chapman, 2002) that are complex, disagreements over diagnoses and solutions arise and solutions can become part of the problem (Pritchett and Woolcock, 2004). A case in point, which is discussed in the next chapter is the National Solidarity Programme (NSP). Equally the different objectives and solutions deployed by different donors to address the same issue and discussed in

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<sup>15</sup> This categorization of instrumental, conceptual and capacity building draws from Pain et al. (2015: 33).

Section 3.2 reflect unbounded and different problem definitions. Interventions that seek to reframe debates or contribute to policy through conceptual thinking or aim for capacity building (and most of the Sida funded projects have at least two of these three ambitions) face this challenge. Current development practice frames the thinking (diagnosis and solution) in terms of a Theory of Change (ToC) which is seen to provide the rationale and foundation for project design, implementation and evaluation. These usually assume a linear set of cause-effect relations and sufficient knowledge to engineer the desired result.

The review of the seven projects found (Pain et al., 2015:44) that the ToCs, taking them on their own terms, were generally weak and often not explicit. They tended to be generic and carry multiple assumptions limiting the plausibility of the ToC and its logical pathways (see Annex 4 of Pain et al., 2015 for a comparative analysis of the seven projects ToC). The review concluded that the ToCs were trying to achieve too much, were poorly attuned to context and paid little attention to how change processes might evolve and be sequenced. As the review concluded:

‘The more general observation can be made that while many of the projects had clear instrumental intentions they have also had ambitions to bring about behavioural change which have not always been defined in intended outcomes and therefore not monitored. This suggests that part of the challenge is that interventions are seeking to stimulate different changes simultaneously. Some are trying to deliver tangible outputs in the short term (DDG, RAIP). Others are trying to contribute to ongoing processes or to broader social and political transformations (ASGP). Yet others are seeking to improve socioeconomic welfare, governance or social cohesion (conflict mitigation) through the same intervention at the same time (SCA, WAW) with a universal theory of change that does not make explicit or explain the assumptions and causal links between these actions’ (op. cit:44).

There have been five evaluations (see Table 2, ARTF, UNICEF, UNW, ILO and APSM) undertaken since the 2015 review, all related to Sweden’s multilateral channel of support. As with the seven projects described above the additional projects included elements to varying degrees of instrumental intervention, capacity building and ambitions to reframe debates. While the ARTF review did not specifically address a ToC, implicit within the objectives of the ARTF was the aim to bring external funding on-budget and give the Afghanistan Government a degree of authority over its own budget. However, as the evaluation report noted

there is an inherent contradiction in this. In practice donors have influenced investment choices and the GIRA has had limited ability to generate domestic revenue thereby limiting its authority and ownership of the ARTF. In the case of the UNICEF evaluation there was no ToC for the project and it had to be constructed from a Country Action Plan but even then there were weaknesses and ambitions for change beyond the sphere of control and influence of the project. Similar issues were noted with respect to the evaluation of UN women (UNW) where again a ToC was crafted out of a strategic plan that had a level of ambition to bring about change that was seen to be unrealistic given the complex and deep-rooted drivers of gender inequality in the country.

For the ILO evaluation the report describes a ToC but does not appear to unpack or question some of its underlying assumptions as to the ways in which commodity markets work in Afghanistan. Finally, the most recent APSM evaluation drew specifically on a ToC constructed by the EU in the project design and this provided the basis against which the project was evaluated.

A number of preliminary conclusions can be drawn at this first stage. First in general, if one uses the project ToCs as a guide to intervention logic and the assumed causal relations between interventions and desired changes, they do not provide any obvious rationale or link between Sida's aid portfolio in Afghanistan and the Country Strategy. In terms of the thematic areas they are all entirely consistent with the Country Strategy thematic priorities, but they do not provide a basis from which to construct a strategic logic to Sweden's overall intervention.

Second the mix of ambitions in the project designs that range between the instrumental, capacity building and conceptual are usually not articulated and tended to be conflated. This leads, as we shall see below, to ambitions for change that are well beyond the capacities of the project to achieve and within the time frames of the intervention. Third, and this is returned to in the next chapter, most of the project designs are driven by an idea or model of an ideal end state. But rarely in their design or conception, other than in pointing to an assumed deficit or deficiency in the state of affairs, do they bring theory or research informed understanding of Afghanistan into the design or assumptions of the models of change. This brings into question the extent to which ToCs do have sufficient knowledge or plausibility in relation to actual contextual conditions.

## Assessment of Projects in Relation to the DAC Criteria

As noted in Table 3, most of the project evaluations were undertaken with respect to all or some of the DAC criteria of relevance, effectiveness, cost efficiency, impact and sustainability.

A striking feature of all the project evaluations is the extent to which they all give a strong positive score to the relevance of the intervention e.g. a response to the question of whether the intervention is doing the right things. As Zurcher et al. (2020) found in their assessment of the 148 evaluations, all the projects they reviewed were assessed as relevant. But then, as with the Sida funded projects here, many of the so-called relevant projects were rather less effective in terms of achieving what they were designed to deliver<sup>16</sup>. As Zurcher et al. observed (op.cit: 16) this brings into question the usefulness of the assessment when it is simply defined in terms of meeting a need. And Afghanistan is seen to be a bottomless pit of ‘need’ or deficits.

The revised DAC criteria (OECD, 2019) of relevance<sup>17</sup> includes ‘design’ as a key aspect of relevance that needs to be considered. This draws attention to the necessary qualities of the intervention in terms of it meeting relevant priorities, in its underlying ToC, means of implementation, risk and context analysis. As we will argue in Chapter 4 there are grounds for questioning many of the implicit ToC in the Sida projects and their theory of action bringing into question the extent to which they are really relevant. This responds to the suggestion of Zurcher et al. (2020) that relevance has to take account of the probability of success given the conditions under which it is implemented. This positions relevance as something of a ‘gatekeeper’ criterion (Samoff, 2021) and if relevance to context is not robustly assessed and established, it cannot be expected that the other DAC criteria will be met.

Related to relevance, the OECD (2019:8) have introduced the new criteria of ‘coherence’ into its evaluation framework to address an element that had not been considered before. This is divided between internal coherence which needs to consider the synergies and interlinkages

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<sup>16</sup> However a recent report by SIGAR (July, 2021) while pointing to the weak strategic evidence base, flawed performance indicators, shaky programmatic assumptions and complex problems addressed by US funded activities in Afghanistan, saw the danger of USAID M&E practices increasing the risk of doing the wrong things perfectly.

<sup>17</sup> Defined as ‘the extent to which the intervention objectives and design respond to beneficiaries, global, country, and partner/institution needs, policies, priorities, and continue to do so if circumstances change’ (OECD, 2019: 7).

between the intervention and other interventions carried out by the same institution or government and external coherence in terms of the consistency of the intervention with other actors' interventions in the same contexts. While none of the evaluations considered coherence as a criterion of assessment, there are grounds for believing that if they had, most projects would have scored poorly on this element. As we have seen Afghanistan has been characterised by incoherence between actors undermining complementarity, harmonisation and co-ordination. While resolution of this incoherence is clearly beyond the remit of Sweden alone, it is not evident that a recognition of this incoherence has informed Sweden's strategic engagement. This after all has been a significant obstacle to the Afghanistan reconstruction process which might instead have given pause for thought on how to engage.

However Pain et al. (2015) were specifically asked to review the extent to which there was the potential for synergies between Sida's different projects and programmes — that is whether the Sida programme as reflected in these seven projects was greater in its effects than the sum of its individual parts. The fact that there were concerns within Sida over synergies between its programme elements should be noted. But the review concluded that while there clearly was potential for synergies both within and between projects, these had not been realised. As the report put it:

*'None of the evaluations addressed issues of synergies and in none of the project reports seen by this review were there any specific references to any of the other projects and what they are doing. Each of these projects appear to have operated as 'islands' of intervention in Afghanistan'* (Pain et al. 2015:22).

As the review noted this raises the question of what Sida is learning from these projects in relation to the achievement of Sweden's country strategy goals both in relation to the results that are being achieved and about the processes of achieving those goals. If, as all the evidence suggests, the results have been rather less than hoped for, it invites a critical inquiry as to why that might be so and how things might be done differently. None of this is to suggest that there are not active processes of learning going on by individuals or teams within the Sida programme, but there is no clear evidence of this being an institutional process.

No specific comments will be made on the efficiency element of the projects but in line with the findings from Zurcher et al. (2020) project implementation in Afghanistan has been challenging leading to many delays and resulting in costly projects.



The findings of the 2015 review of Sida projects concluded that those projects with a more instrumental focus were more likely to be effective and achieve greater results than those that focused on capacity building or contributing new ideas or to policy. These conclusions were confirmed by the Zurcher et al. (2020) review: *‘In general, smaller, modest participatory projects with an instrumental focus were more effective than large complex projects aimed at building capacity and changing behaviour and discourse’* (Zurcher et al., 2020: 16).

The evaluation of sustainability was considered in 12 of the 14 evaluations (see Table 3) but there are a number of confounding factors that make its assessment challenging. The strict DAC definition of sustainability is ‘the extent to which the net benefits of the intervention continue, or are likely to continue’ and this requires assessment of the financial, economic, social, environmental and institutional capacities needed to sustain net benefits over time. Given the level of dependence of Afghanistan on external funding and its institutional dysfunctions it is a moot point what value an assessment of sustainability has in such a context. The seven project reviews had mixed findings with respect to sustainability. It noted that three core dimensions of sustainability could be considered — integrated by design at the outset and including an exit strategy, financial sustainability and institutional sustainability. None of the projects showed evidence of having all three elements in place and nor was it clear that these could be realisable.

On the additional three elements that many of the Sida evaluations considered — contributions to poverty reduction, strengthened gender equality and conflict sensitivity — both the project specific evidence and the broader country level data indicate that little progress has been made in these dimensions. Projects on poverty alleviation have largely treated poverty as a generic condition and even where a specific focus was included in the project design (DDG and WAW) there was no analysis of its spatial or social dimensions or careful disaggregation into issues of physical security, food security, income security or access to public goods for example. Considerations of poverty have thus fallen far short of Sida’s own multidimensional perspectives (Sida, 2017). On gender in general projects lacked a systematic engagement and were modest in their achievements with respect to gender mainstreaming or women’s empowerment (or integration) and they saw gender primarily as being about women. To a limited extent the work of WAW, DDG and SCA addressed more of a transformatory agenda addressing the structures that underlie gender inequality but no project could claim a strong practical emphasis on human rights.

Finally, with respect to conflict sensitivity considerations in the interventions, there was a complete lack of assessment of the impacts of interventions on conflict — or contributions to conflict resolution. Indeed the evaluations were rather silent on conflict issues except in the case of the WAW where addressing gender based violence was a key consideration and in the case of DDG and RAIP who handled it more as an operational issue, and identifying and managing risks in relation to implementation. It should be noted that more recently Sida has developed a toolbox to support the systematic analysis of conflict.<sup>18</sup>

## **Modalities of Engagement: Multilateral Versus Others**

Swedish support to Afghanistan has been divided between its multilateral cooperation and its direct support to civil society actors. The multilateral cooperation has been shared between contributions to the ARTF and funding of other multilateral programmes, most notably those of the U.N. The support to civil society actors has been divided between support to the SCA and support to a range of other activities. There are some lessons that one might draw from the effectiveness and results of these different modalities.

With respect to multilateral support the principle of contributing to pooled funding for the government through the ARTF mechanism has been seen both to help give government ownership over aid flows and help support building government capacity. The objectives of ‘ownership’ and ‘capacity’ have a strong substantialist element to them and the government has not had full authority. Since the ARTF was established in May 2002 it has been one of the largest sources of funding for government operations and by 2017 some USD 10 billion has been paid into the fund. The ARTF has had two funding channels — a recurrent window to support basic government functions and services including salaries and an investment window to fund priority projects within specific sectors aligned to the GiRoA’s National Priority Programmes. However between 2002/03 and 2008/09 there was a rise from 7.5 percent to 47 percent in the proportion of funding that donors expressed a ‘preference’ for to be allocated to a specific programme (Pain and Jensen, 2015:10) reducing the government’s influence over fund allocation. There have been consistent concerns over the monitoring and account of ARTF funds, particularly of

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.sida.se/en/for-partners/methods-materials/peace-and-conflict-toolbox>

its recurrent budget and of the results and outcomes of ARTF funded projects (Pain and Jensen, 2015; SIGAR, 2018). The need to continue to support the basic functions of government remains (Roberts et al., 2020). Equally the reduction of this need depends on the ability of government to raise domestic revenue which will be the only means by which it will gain authority and ownership of its budget. Revenues have slowly grown from just 3 percent of GDP in 2002 to some 14 percent before the Covid-19 pandemic struck. As the Taliban gain control of key border points, a key source of government revenue from cross border trade will disappear.

Sida in support of its thematic priorities has also provided funding to several of the UN agencies including UNDP, UNICEF, UNOPS, UNW and ILO. The evaluations of these programmes point to some major issues over the relevance of some of the activities. In the case of the support to sub-national governance through the UNDP, technical approaches to deal with what are fundamentally political issues of devolution questioned the relevance of the programme (Bryld et al., 2014). For the UNICEF supported programme on Basic Education and Gender Equality the review faced major challenges of access to relevant data and was puzzled why UNICEF had not been more effective as an actor in focusing on a rights based approach to quality education (Holmberg et al., 2016). In the case of the review of UN Women Country Programme there were evidently concerns over the management of the programme leadership, the spread and ambitions of activities and the limited effects. It is difficult to avoid the sense that the bureaucratic rigidities and lack of competence in general by the UN, as one informant put it<sup>19</sup>, rendered cooperation with these agencies particularly unfruitful.

For support to UN programmes that had more instrumental dimensions —notably the support to road building programmes in northern Afghanistan — it was evident that this had made a significant contribution to the development of rural road infrastructure (Pain et al., 2015) although the findings were more reserved over the achievement of broader objectives related to access to social services and markets and the creation of employment activities. However the review of a subsequent ILO programme on roads to jobs made strong claims for the effectiveness of a market system development approach, although as it admitted there was less evidence of systemic change in the market systems of commodity value chains that were being supported.

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<sup>19</sup> Informant 9

Sida's support to the SCA has been long term and has amounted to some 25 percent of its aid budget to Afghanistan since 2001. While Sida is not the only funder of the SCA it has long been the most significant one. The SCA since 2001 has primarily focused support and service delivery to basic education and health services with a thematic focus on disability. It is generally assessed as having significant effects in improving girls and boys access to education, it is widely respected by the Afghan authorities and has retained the ability to be an effective field organisation. As the 2014 evaluation (SCA3, see Table 2) noted

*'the effectiveness and efficiency of the SCA approach is seen as more than satisfactory. The ability of the organization to engage in useful development operations in highly isolated and marginalized communities is notable. Government officials, with few exceptions, showed a high degree of knowledge of and appreciation for the work SCA was conducting in their areas'* (Lundberg et al., 2014:6)

There has been a consistent wish from Sida, as reflected in evaluations of the SCA in 2008 and 2014, to move the SCA from more of a deliverer of services to one engaged in capacity and institution building at provincial and national level, gaining greater Afghan ownership and ensuring sustainability in the sense of SCA phasing out its support. The 2014 evaluation focused particularly on issues of organisational change, sustainability, capacity building and its application of a human-rights based approach to development notably with respect to rights for children, people with disabilities and addressing gender inequalities. SCA has effectively resisted this and in the view of one informant<sup>20</sup> was right to do so. A second informant<sup>21</sup> saw the SCA as a key to engagement in Afghanistan given its realistic objectives. As the 2014 evaluation acknowledges, SCA's strong focus on quality service delivery has enabled it to build strong relationships with both the communities it works with and government. The review recognised this as a strength but also argued that it could be seen as a constraint in slowing progress towards more fully engaging through a human-rights based approach to development. But much depends both on expectations on the rate and process of social change that can be achieved and the means by which these goals can be achieved. A focus on getting the rights institutions in place may not be a good guide as to how to get there, an issue to which we will return.

A greater insight into how Sida has engaged with supporting a rights-based approach in a potentially contentious area can be found in its support for

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<sup>20</sup> Informant 4

<sup>21</sup> Informant 5

the Afghanistan country office of Marie Stopes International (MSIA). Here it has supported a project that has aimed to promote sexual and reproductive health rights over four phases since 2008 and it has come to be the major donor. Interestingly these insights come not from a formal evaluation of the programme but from an EBA commissioned review of how Sida manages risk in fragile states (Gulrajani and Mills, 2019) and this project was selected as a case study. From modest beginnings but focused closely in the field on maternal and child health care the project has incrementally grown in scope to handle more sensitive issues in relation to rights. Crucial to that growth has been the ability of the Afghan leadership of the project to work closely with local religious leaders at a personal level and through local agents of change that have gradually been able to achieve higher level effects that might not have been possible otherwise. A growing trust<sup>22</sup> between Sida and the MSIA project management has been a key element of the commitment that Sida has given to the project.

One suspects that many of the same ingredients are to be found in the relations between Sida and the SCA (and with other Afghan NGOs that Sida supports) which may account in part (combined with its constituency of Swedish membership) for the long term support that the SCA has gained. While SCA is undoubtedly a Swedish organisation the fact that almost all of its 6000 thousand staff are Afghan probably makes it culturally more of an Afghan organisation than a Swedish one. This counts in the field and undoubtedly gives it the ability to negotiate and build relationships over time.

These considerations of the modalities of engagement raise questions about different ways of engagement in Afghanistan and the means by which the specific goals of Sida are pursued. They also point to the importance of investing in understanding Afghanistan. In common with most agencies and donors, the Swedish Embassy in Afghanistan has been relatively limited in size, has had a high staff turnover and the limits on mobility in Afghanistan have not been conducive to building a deep understanding of the country that is needed to be effective. They also draw attention to some of the questions that evaluations by and large do not address and bring into focus the extent to which Sida is learning from its

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<sup>22</sup> As Onora O'Neill (2002: vii) reminds us trusting is not a matter of blind deference but of placing — or refusing — trust with good judgment. So we need social and political institutions that allow us to judge where to place our trust.

different modalities of engagement. These are returned to in the final chapter.

### **3.6 Summing up**

Afghanistan has undoubtedly been challenging for donors to engage with both because of the incoherence of the international intervention and for the challenge that the country has offered to aid programming orthodoxy. Given the level of funding and the inconsistencies of the overall intervention, it is not surprising that these have contributed to corruption and undermined any potential for sustainability. Aid interventions have been primarily structured around a substantialist agenda underpinned by linear-cause effect assumptions as represented in results frameworks and theories of change. They have focused on mechanisms, templates, and technocratic formulations to address complex social change issues that outside actors cannot pretend to fully understand or negotiate. Where interventions have addressed what can be termed as bounded problems that can be responsive to specific technical interventions there have been results. Where ambitions have sought to address unbounded problems or things such as poverty, rights, gender equality or good governance the results have been meagre.

The discussion has suggested that despite the claims made by many evaluations of the relevance of the intervention this has been simply defined in terms of need — the many deficits that Afghanistan is assumed to contain — rather than an understanding of the ways things work in Afghanistan. Sweden's aid programme has not been immune from this gloss over complexity in its ambitions to move Afghanistan towards more of 'a Sweden'. But, and this is a paradox of Sweden and its aid programme there are some significant elements within the programme that point to a different modality of engagement that appears to be not formally acknowledged but has kept the collaboration on track. To understand why that is, requires a greater understanding of Afghanistan as it is now, its history and the consequences of the overall aid intervention over the last 20 years. It also necessarily requires a deconstruction of some of the imaginaries used to frame Afghanistan. These imaginaries are constructs used to legitimate action. They lead to stories that have shaped and informed the policy narratives for Afghanistan. They have worked to represent and identify solutions to pre-defined problems and sought to persuade audiences and stakeholders of their veracity (Bacchi, 2016; Mosse, 2010). A classic example is the imaginary of the 'narco-frontier'

widely deployed with respect to Afghanistan even though it deeply misrepresents the situation (Goodhand, 2021). It has though been a powerful imaginary used to legitimate certain actions. However, as the next section will argue, many of the imaginaries imposed on the country have been based on a limited understanding of how Afghanistan works or how interventions actually engage with the logic of existing practice.

## 4 Taking Context into Account

### 4.1 Introduction

Sweden's new strategy for 2021–2024 for Afghanistan seeks to build a peaceful and inclusive Afghan society, a democracy based on the rule of law and human rights, gender equality, increased access to education and health, inclusive economic and sustainable development based on sustainable use of natural resources at a time of climate change. The achievement of such goals might be seen to recreate another 'Sweden' — an imagined ideal state to which Afghanistan should seek to aspire. But this goal of 'skipping straight to Weber' (Pritchett and Woolcock, 2004) is not a good guide as to how to get there or helpful in mapping the best route given how affairs stand in Afghanistan now. Nor does it address whether the conditions that allowed states in the past to graduate to the liberal democracies of today, exist now. A discussion of Afghanistan's context gets a scant three paragraphs in the new Swedish strategy with a selective summary list of problems that justify the stated goals. The Sida (2019) background to that strategy does not offer much in addition. We need more than this. Account has to be taken not only of Afghanistan's longer-term trajectory — history matters — but also of the consequences of the western intervention since 2001.

Different 'imaginaries' are needed to address Afghanistan's past, present and future to help shape support. In the next section we summarise the long and problematic trajectory of state building in Afghanistan including the consequences of the reconstruction efforts since 2001. This leads into three sections that address selected key areas of interest in relation to Sweden's priorities — the rural economy, supporting capacity development and issues of rights and gender equality and suggest different ways in which they might be thought about. It draws on research evidence to develop a different understanding of key contextual issues that future programming will need to address. It concludes by presenting a brief case study of a women's economic empowerment programme that offers insights into some of the key challenges of intervening in this area and of how this can be done.



## 4.2 Narratives of Afghanistan

Most of the narratives of Afghanistan start with 1978 and do not take account of events before then, although implicit in the language of ‘reconstruction’ used after 2001 is an assumption about what was there before. A more critical account of conditions in Afghanistan before 1978 — and the 1978 coup should be seen as a direct outcome of unresolved contradictions and tensions rather than an unexpected event — would note what Cramer and Goodhand (2002: 904) have termed ‘*the long and decidedly conflictual experience in state formation and failure in Afghanistan*’. The brutal period of state formation under Abdur Rahman in the late 19th century, and the part played by external actors, most notably the British and Russian Empires, in the creation of Afghanistan’s identity as a buffer state, have left a profound legacy of distrust in the Afghan state, which the contemporary state has yet to address.

Indeed, the failed reform attempt of the 1920s — most notably by King Amanullah — deepened the gulf between the urban ruling elite and the predominantly rural population. The state failed to achieve a compact with its citizens and the landscape outside of the capital remained largely illegible to government. As Barfield (2018) has noted an Afghan political culture emerged of a highly centralised Durrani state with the power held in the hands of the ruler thus limiting the scope for effective political opposition and did little to address underlying discontent by ethnic minorities. Moreover (Barfield, 2010) strong regional identities have persisted, structured around distinct ethnic identities and the ancient urban centres in Herat (west), Kandahar (south), Balkh (north) and Kabul in the east.

This centralisation of the state was reinforced by its rentier status (Rubin, 1995). The central state gathered only a very limited amount of its revenue through direct taxation of land. Instead, it secured its funding through indirect taxation of key agricultural exports, oil-based products and foreign aid. Where it did intervene heavily in the rural landscape, it did so as a classic interventionist developmental state with heavy external funding as in the Helmand irrigation scheme (Cullather, 2002).

A narrative of 20 years of war from 1978 to 2001 and its destruction and devastation erases this historical legacy, ignores the social changes that occurred within that period and the incentive structures that evolved, giving rise, literally, to the blossoming of the opium economy (OPE). As Cramer and Goodhand (2002) have argued the nature of the conflict

mutated during the 20 years, generating very specific legacies and social consequences, not least in the mobilisation of ethnic identities. Starting with the Soviet era (1978–89), there was massive growth in the formal economy, including the sector based on natural gas, and investment in urban education. At the same time, there was a rapid increase in funding for defence and for a war machine to counter US support for the Mujahideen resistance groups, often formed on the basis of ethnic identity. This had serious ramifications for the rural sector, including actual physical destruction, largely by the Soviet Army, which bombed an estimated two-thirds of villages (Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, 1988), destroyed irrigation structures and devastated rural physical capital. This led not only to the collapse of agricultural production but also to massive displacement of the rural population, who became refugees in Pakistan and other countries in the region.

This period, however, also saw the planting of the seeds that led to the transformation of the rural economy. The funds that external agencies provided to the resistance movement resulted in the rapid monetisation of the economy although this did not displace a strong subsistence component that still persists. However the resource flows fuelled a war economy and laid the foundations for the development of criminalised trans-border networks involved in the arms trade, smuggling and money laundering (Rubin, 2000). Furthermore, they helped to integrate Afghanistan into a ‘regional conflict complex’ with networked actors working across Afghanistan’s borders in arms transfers, as armed groups and in illegal trafficking and trade (Cramer and Goodhand, 2002: 886).

Following the departure of the Russians in 1989, though, two key processes played themselves out. At the local level, many returnees to Afghanistan simply rebuilt their lives from the rubble of their villages, slowly redeveloping their houses and irrigation systems and re-establishing their orchards. Against this picture of resilience amidst instability must be set the emergence from 1992 onwards of the ‘commander’ economy, driven by the collapse of external funding sources and reliance on rural resource extraction, deepening engagement with illicit trade and an expanding war economy. Competing localised sources of power gradually led to the emasculation and complete breakdown of a central state authority (Duffield, 2001). It was in this chaos that the Taliban regime emerged and through a near monopoly of violence established itself as a de facto authority, based, as Ottaway notes (2002: 1003), on raw power, but with a limited institutional base.

In this context, markets and trading regimes flourished, structured around the war economy, a black economy and a coping subsistence economy. Rubin (2000) describes a USD 2.5 billion trading economy supplemented with aid from Pakistan, local taxes on opium and services and possibly as much as USD 1 billion in remittances. Important outcomes of this were the deepening of an informal economy, the marginalisation of Kabul with regard to the major regional centres of Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Mazaar, reinforced by a developing opium economy that provided resources directly to regional players. The strengthening of these regional centres meant that they were characterised more by their outward economic linkages with neighbouring countries than their linkages to Kabul. This economic orientation has remained since 2001 and has been consolidated by the rise of regional power holders.

The start of the constitutional process of state building after the defeat of the Taliban in 2001 was the convening of main elements of the anti-Taliban faction in Bonn, Germany leading to the Bonn Agreement of December 2001. Hamid Karzai was subsequently appointed (in late December) as head of the interim administration. As has been widely stated, the Bonn Agreement essentially represented a division of the spoils among anti-Taliban factions, with the (predominantly non-Pashtun) Northern Alliance in the ascendancy. It was not a peace agreement (Suhrke, 2018) since the Taliban were excluded and it was subject to the US military imperative of a war on terror. The consequence of these arrangements has been to thwart the emergence of peace and to subordinate any state building process to the logic of the war on terror.

The possibilities therefore for external aid to support the formation of an Afghanistan state according to a western democratic model have not only been confounded by an incoherent agenda post-2001 but also by Afghanistan's troubled history. As the Economist observed '*in pursuit of a Utopian ideal — to eradicate terrorism — America sought to produce an unprecedented Afghan state while fighting an unwinnable war*'<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, as Tilly reminds us (1985) war-making and state making were mutually reinforcing processes in western state formation. Over centuries the need for capital and means to coerce required European rulers to negotiate settlements with warlords, landlords, traders and merchants. These in turn led over time to sets of arrangements and institutions that came to comprise the social contract between the state and its citizens including the monopoly of violence by the state, the right to tax and so forth. Democracy co-emerged out of these

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<sup>23</sup> The Economist, 10 July 2021: 'What a way to spend \$2trn'

formations processes. This process of negotiated settlement never emerged out of the Afghan rentier state which became insulated from the need to seek domestic legitimacy. The conditions for such state formation processes do not now exist and as we have seen, state reconstruction as an international agenda has not provided a solution either.

As widely recognised the international intervention after 2001 endowed Afghanistan with a ‘precarious sovereignty’<sup>24</sup>. Not only did the level of funding perpetuate the past and create an extreme form of rentier statehood but the degree of intervention by external actors, both military and development oriented, severely compromised the possibilities for an Afghan government to gain authority. As Mukhopadhyay commented<sup>25</sup> survival in the presidential palace after 2001 has required, given the limited space to manoeuvre, a politics of survival through the manipulation of relationships and political choreography to manage competition between local power holders and powerful warlords. The ability of the palace to control provincial and district governorships was central to this performance. This has been the politics of coalition formation and brokering for survival. It has not provided the basis for supporting elite bargains to reduce violent conflict, build formal peace agreements and transition out of conflict (Cheng et al., 2018). The seizure of power by the Taliban has now provided for the moment a military solution and may now lead to a reduction in violence. But any peacebuilding process is going to need to be ‘*an incremental, step-by-step process towards [a] political settlement ...which builds stability, confidence and legitimacy in phases over time*’ (Larson and Ramsbotham, 2018).

There have, over the last twenty years, been some political gains and to some extent the cooperation of key power players has been secured through granting them access to political privileges and economic resources. Moreover, there is now a broad popular sentiment for elections (Larson, 2021), peace and support for a republican state (Mukhopadhyay, 2021) although how this will be realised now is unclear. And as President Ghani recently commented, the military withdrawal does finally give ‘*an opportunity for the Afghan people to achieve real sovereignty*’<sup>26</sup> although he did not envisage the Taliban takeover. However as long as Afghanistan remains a

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<sup>24</sup> Dipali Mukhopadhyay ‘The Palace Politics of Precarious Sovereignty’, 2021 Anthony Hyman Lecture, May 5<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Dipali Mukhopadhyay ‘The Palace Politics of Precarious Sovereignty’, 2021 Anthony Hyman Lecture, May 5<sup>th</sup> 2021

<sup>26</sup> Ashraf Ghani ‘Afghanistan’s Moment of Risk and Opportunity: A Path to Peace for the Country and the Region, Foreign Affairs, May 4, 2021. [President Ashraf Ghani on What U.S. Withdrawal Means for Afghanistan | Foreign Affairs](#)

rentier state, dependent on external resources, accountability to its citizens will remain limited. But this does suggest more of a bottom up engagement with civil society as an entry point for seeking stronger state capacity (Levy and Fukuyama, 2010) rather than the top down central state capacity exercise that has largely characterised efforts so far. This may well have to emerge out of more regional political settlements.

The response by the West and many Afghans to the Taliban takeover has been one of alarm and fear pointing to their past record and portraying them as inflexible fanatics. The Taliban have indeed been violent and brutal. But that is not all that they are. Ashley Jackson makes the point drawing on detailed fieldwork on how Afghan civilians live with the Taliban:

*‘The Taliban has...a well-established culture of negotiation .....pragmatic deal-making has allowed the Taliban to strike bargains with civilians, forge alliances and even co-opt and capture essential services delivered by the Afghan government. The ability to bargain has been absolutely essential to their ability to expand and maintain territorial control. The Taliban can be fierce and ruthless negotiators, but they also have a strong capacity to compromise. ...When Taliban ideology conflicts with the group’s ability to achieve their objectives, it is the ideology – not the objectives – that ends up shifting’ (Jackson, 2021:214)*

Now that the Taliban are faced with the task of government they will have to come to terms with the fact that the Kabul (and Afghanistan) of 2021 is not the Kabul or country of 1996. Attitudes and values have changed since then and they are going to have to negotiate and compromise if they are to govern.

Yet one should not underestimate the consequences of the incoherence of the reconstruction agenda in terms of its effects on the political and economic market places (de Waal, 2015) at national, provincial and district level. In their pursuit of a war on terror, the US military formed alliances with key political power holders who had strong connections to the various illicit economies. Many of these will now be seeking accommodation with the Taliban. This has meant that the incentives that have driven political and economic behaviour have been deeply at odds with the assumptions and design of western interventions to build a meritocratic and rule-based society. The objective of the reconstruction project was to build a capable, accountable and largely self-sufficient state. But the western intervention as a whole has instead helped drive a

personalised<sup>27</sup> rather than disciplined or rule-based order. The result is that in both the political and economic market places, personality based networks permeate formal institutions, the economy and everyday life, regulating access to and the distribution of resources (Jackson and Minoia, 2018). In a context of limited generalised trust, personalised relationships that are often volatile, provide the foundations of bargains and transactions at all levels.

This has had political and economic consequences in that it has encouraged predation, rent seeking and limited investment in public goods with consequences for economic growth. As one Sida funded study put it the state of Afghan politics and markets is *'the outcome of illicit and aid driven elements and the outcomes of decades of war, low state capacity and foreign interference and aid dependence'* (Ghiasi et al., 2015:ix). Understanding these rules of the game in Afghanistan's social order is central to understanding why many of the western interventions have failed to achieve their objectives. But taking into account the ways in which things do work suggests a different basis on which to engage with the incentives that drive actual behaviour. They also provide a framework to account for why interventions that have been more instrumental in nature or relationship based (or both) have been more effective and relevant than those that have sought to build capacities or re-engineer markets.

### **4.3 Rural Transformations and the Economic Market Place**

Agriculture has since 2001 been at the centre of efforts to build Afghanistan's economy as shown by the trail of policy documents prepared by international organisations, government and line ministries (Zezza and Migotto, 2007). All shared a vision of agriculture, albeit a market driven as the engine of growth for Afghanistan that would promote its economic development, provide the employment that was needed and reduce poverty. For all, a core assumption was that agriculture was the main source of livelihoods for a majority of the population. Sweden's new strategy also shares this assumption stating that *'more than half of the population is estimated to be directly dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods'* (MFA, 2021:3).

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<sup>27</sup> The term 'personalized' or 'personality' based is used here rather than relationship based in order not to confuse the exclusionary dimensions of Afghan networked society with the concept of 'relationism' used earlier.

But the rural-urban distinction is a simplification and this assumption is difficult to reconcile with findings that suggest the majority of rural households do not grow enough to feed themselves (Grace and Pain, 2004), the level of inequality in land ownership particularly in irrigated areas and the frequency of landlessness which can range from 40 to 85 percent of households according to village circumstances (Pain and Sturge, 2015; Pain and Huot, 2018). The evidence suggests that only a minority of households are in a position to derive their livelihood solely from agriculture through owning land or livestock even if a greater proportion gain some of the income from agriculture. While sharecropping may provide some access to land for the landless its non-commoditised basis points to the significance of patron-client relation in the rural economy and labouring opportunities are limited and seasonal. For many, remittances from non-farm work are a key to survival and point to the significance of seasonal and long-term migration to maintain the rural household.

So the puzzle is more that despite the limited opportunities in the rural economy, most Afghanistan households still live in rural areas even if their means of living straddle the rural-urban divide. Few households can be said to have wholly agriculturally based livelihoods. The reasons they stay, as the evidence from one long term longitudinal study shows (Pain and Huot, 2018), is for a dependent security gained through tightly embedded social networks which provides the necessary access to credit, assets and marriage arrangements. What is striking about the rural economy is the extent to which it is fundamentally un-commoditised. The ability to access land is accounted for more by patron-client relations and non-contractual obligations than market forces. Capitalist processes of land accumulation and dispossession have not taken place. This is a heavily social embedded rural economy that has enabled survival under conditions of acute risk.

Nevertheless since 2001 there has been a range of projects designed to develop the agricultural economy. These have ranged from the Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Programme (AREDP), the Afghanistan New Market Development Project (ANMDP), the Comprehensive Agriculture and Rural Development Facility (CARD-F) and of course the ILO Road to Jobs market system development funded by Sida.

But as the 2014 Agriculture Sector Review (ASR, World Bank 2014) tacitly admitted in its report title — *Revitalising Agriculture for Economic Growth, Job Creation and Food Security* — agriculture's contribution to employment and wellbeing has fallen far short of expectations. In common with the orientation of most agricultural and rural policy outputs in Afghanistan, the ASR's perspective was to the future. There was little retrospective

analysis as to why after 15 years it was back at the drawing board making the same claims and seeking the same means to realise the assumed potential for agriculture which had manifestly not emerged. The model of agrarian transformation and *‘higher yields in agriculture, access to non-farm rural income-earning activities, migration of family members to cities and transition to wage employment’* has persisted as the route to prosperity for Afghanistan’s rural population (Pain, 2019).

The means by which transformation will be brought about are seen to include: *‘paying attention to production risk management, by investing in climate-smart agriculture, by promoting agricultural trade and by integrating smallholders into the value chains of commercial agriculture’* (ibid.). While the state is seen to play a lead role in coordinating strategy to encourage growth it is expected that it should work in partnership with the private sector and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in market led solutions. This perspective pays little attention to the conditions under which past agrarian transformations such as Green Revolutions came about (such as in India in the 1960s and 1970s), where the state played a key role in providing support to smallholders against market risks, and national markets were often protected from global competition (Dorward et al., 2004). In addition, a precondition for the Green Revolution transformations were substantial prior investments in infrastructure and rising urban demand to fuel supply — conditions that do not exist in Afghanistan.

But the agrarian transformation model and many of the projects designed to develop commodity value chains also pay little attention to the way in which actual commodity markets work in Afghanistan. All agricultural commodity markets in Afghanistan, both legal and illegal (Minoia and Pain, 2017) are heavily regulated by social institutions and operate in the interests of powerful players. There are multiple forms of exclusion based on gender and ethnicity and they are key sources of risk to the poor.

There are of course particular challenges for an agricultural, market driven, economic transformation. Development has come late to Afghanistan and it is certainly ‘behind’ both in its state formation processes, in its economic development and achieving good welfare outcomes for its citizens. A historically informed view might give weight of explanation to its enduring position in the borderlands of geography and power, squeezed by bigger geo-political interests that have led to its emergence as a buffer state.

The normative view would be that Afghanistan had simply come late to the processes of structural transformation that have characterised the development of other countries (Losch et al., 2012) and can now catch up, albeit with limited state support. This has been the assumption of the



intervention model applied to Afghanistan which has simply taken as truth that the transitions of the past are possible in the present. The persistent narrative of agriculture as the driver of Afghanistan's economic development, visible in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework 2016 and bolstered by the World Bank-led ASR, assumes that Afghanistan can follow the model of agriculturally led development and agrarian transitions that have happened elsewhere in the past (World Bank, 2009). 'Late' therefore is simply a question of catching up through a turbo-charged fast-track intervention.

But the conditions of the past are not those of the present and Afghanistan comes to the normative development transition narrative with some singular disadvantages. For a start, its demographic transition has already taken place, in contrast to earlier agrarian transitions as in Europe where the demographic transition followed the agrarian one. The safety valve that was present in the past to dispose of surplus population, that of international migration when some 60 million people between the period of 1850 and 1930 migrated out of Europe, (Losch et al., 2012) is no longer available. In the past the west enforced captive markets through colonial empires, but under conditions of globalisation Afghanistan is severely handicapped in its economic competitiveness (Chang, 2002) and faces challenges from its neighbours which a free trade policy only exacerbates. Moreover, the broader conditions for agricultural growth do not exist, a challenge that donor hostility for state support to agriculture compounds.

Above all Afghanistan is not yet at peace and both political and economic transitions into a less violent state of affairs are going to be uneven processes. The extreme level of military and aid funding to Afghanistan after 2001 that drove a reconstruction economy based on services and rent seeking did little to help. Indeed what resulted was a volatile growth that has offered little decent work or employment. Greater attention to the politics behind growth and its distribution is needed (Williams et al., 2011). Far more consideration of the informal means by which markets are regulated — in which access to informal credit is a key element — has to be given, along with close attention to the politics of markets (Mallet and Pain, 2018). But above all in relation to rural poverty, the greater need is with respect to employment generation through large-scale, labour intensive infrastructure<sup>28</sup> in urban and rural areas and ensuring food security, given its long-term consequences for health, educational achievements and productive capacity (Pain, 2019).

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<sup>28</sup> To which the ILO project discussed in Chapter 3 may have made a modest contribution

## 4.4 Capacity Building

The synthetic review of seven Sida funded projects (2015) noted that capacity development was a component of all the projects and this was largely focused on building individual capacities. For those such as WAW and SCA capacity building largely worked with their own staff and to some extent on the clients or the target group that they engaged with. For those projects that had worked with government such as ASGP or RAIP again the focus has also been primarily on individual rather than organisational or institutional dimensions of capacity (procedures, incentives and resources). Sida has also through its multilateral programme contributed to capacity building exercises such as the National Solidarity Programme (NSP). Funding for capacity building has been a major part of seeking to build the Afghanistan state and much of it has gone to fund the building of their technical capacities. Weaknesses in capacity, most notably in terms of the ability to deliver basic services, have often been framed as both a cause and consequence of state weakness and have been central to the state building agenda in Afghanistan. Yet as Zurcher et al. (2020) found, and consistent with the findings of Pain et al. (2015) the results of all this capacity building have been limited. In part this reflects the nature of 'lack of capacity' as an 'unbounded problem'. As we shall see in the discussion of the NSP below, western and rural Afghan notions of the meaning and practices of capacity differ sharply leading to incoherence between design intentions and everyday life.

The new Swedish strategy talks in terms of 'building' a peaceful and inclusive society and thus implicitly a state with the capacities to deliver the essential services. Capacity building is likely to remain a key means of intervention but the issue remains as to how it could be made more effective. In order to examine some of the limitations of past capacity building practices we draw on a study of the National Solidarity Programme (Pain, 2018) and broader conclusions on these activities in conflict states from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (Denney and Mallet, 2017).

Afghanistan's National Solidarity Programme (NSP) has been widely claimed as one of the success stories of post-2001 Afghanistan state building efforts and was rolled out over three phases to cover around 36,100 designated communities (MRRD, 2015). The core of this massive community development exercise (with a total budget of USD 2.7 billion over its three phases) and a flagship programme of the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development (MRRD) has been block grants and the

formation of Community Development Councils (CDCs). The objectives of the programme have been to *'build, strengthen, and maintain CDCs as effective institutions for local governance and social-economic development'* (MRRD, 2015:12) and introduce principles of democracy, participation and accountability. Broad claims have been made for the role and success of NSP including that *'community-driven development strengthens state-society relations in Afghanistan'* (World Bank, 2011). The same report asserted that *'democratically elected gender balanced councils [have built] representative institutions'* [ibid]. But as the final report of the randomised impact evaluation of NSP noted, reflecting the ambitions of some for NSP to reorder village governance<sup>29</sup>, the creation of CDCs by NSP has had few lasting effects on the identity or affiliation of customary village leaders (Beath et al., 2013).

The introduction of new institutional arrangements such as the CDCs do not displace what was there already but operate subject to pre-existing ones. Villages found ways to manage the new CDCs to make the new organisational arrangement coherent with prior arrangements; elections were managed — for example through the widely reported means of block voting — so that the CDCs incorporated older forms of legitimacy and authority, and informal networks and patronage relations with the external world were maintained by the village customary authority in parallel to the CDCs to ensure access to resources and the maintenance of relations with district and provincial authorities. There was of course considerable variability between villages as to the way in which this was done and much depends on the nature of the village leadership and its elite.

The evidence pointed strongly to the enduring role of village customary authority to ensure to varying degrees the collective wellbeing of the village, as well as to maintain external connections with the district and beyond. Villages were networked to the district and beyond through these connections that function on a personalised and patronage basis. Other forms of organisational logic such as CDCs have been introduced into villages and have had variable effects. But what underpins village governance and its variable nature and performance is a different logic to that which has been introduced. In some circumstances it may become more overtly democratic in form — holding elections, for example, with turnover of CDC membership. However, the context of risk and uncertainty that characterises the wider institutional landscape in which the village and its households must survive ensures that customary authority endures through its ability to forge and maintain relationships with that wider world.

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<sup>29</sup> As a key architect for the NSP programme and current President of Afghanistan wrote in 2008 *'[t]he intent of [NSP] was to address the process of democratization from the ground level up, in parallel to the process of constitution making and rule writing at the center'* (Ghani and Lockhart, 2008: 206–208)

There were several dimensions of incoherence between the design intentions of NSP and the motivations and capacities of households or individuals to act in the manner expected of them by NSP. Three are noted here. A first is the assumption that households and individuals are autonomous, as expressed in the notion of ‘citizens’ which carries with it presumptions of freedom to act and express choice. Not only is that freedom limited or constrained for many household members (wives, daughters, daughter-in-law and sons) but many households are locked in dependent relations with others (and at times subject to them, as in relations of tied labour, ‘*hamsaya*’). They are not autonomous and the capacity for voice is limited.

A second aspect that should be noted about the assumptions of the NSP and its successor, the Citizen’s Charter, is about building what it calls a compact between the state and its citizens. In other words it envisaged what might be seen as the classical western social contract between the individual, as citizen, and the state. But Afghan villages are characterised more by a collective rather than individualised social contract where legitimacy and authority are earned and reputation gained through performance. The challenge that the NSP and CDC faces but did not appear to address, is how to shift from a logic of collective contract at the local and accountable level to the abstract and generalised contract between individuals and the state.

There was a third incoherence between the design intentions of NSP (and the CDC) in the assumed relations of accountability. There is an assumption in the documentation that ministries such as the MRRD, the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and the Ministry of Education (MoE) will be in a position to deliver in an unfettered manner services directly to CDCs on the basis of their demands and can be held accountable by CDCs for this delivery. It is claimed that ‘*operational coordination will be through provincial government...who will define targets and evaluate the previous year’s progress...[and] clear roles and responsibilities will be defined for the provincial and district governor’s office*’ (GIRoA, 2015:6)<sup>30</sup>. The evidence on how provincial and district governments actually function in relation to service delivery is a direct challenge to this assumption. A study (AREU and World Bank, 2016) of the variability in service delivery in basic health and education outcomes points to the significance of the nature of secondary political settlements at the provincial level and the forms of rent seeking practised as key determinants of what services are actually delivered. Service delivery is thus subject to provincial and district political interests rather than the reverse. The evidence on the critical role of personalised connections

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<sup>30</sup> GIRoA, (2015):Concept Note: Citizens Charter: 6

between village and district in terms of service delivery is consistent with this. Not only do villages vary in their behaviour but so too do districts and provinces for similar reasons.

The evidence on how villages work and the contexts in which they engage point to multiple but variable levels of incoherence in accountability between leaders and members of CDCs. On the one hand, there is what is demanded of them by the NSP. On the other, what is expected of them both in terms of collective accountability within the village and by the village in terms of the everyday complex and shifting relationships that have to be managed at the district, province and beyond. The NSP has expected a discipline-based individualised (as citizens) technocratic accountability between the CDC and its funders. It speaks to a sanctions-based model of democracy (through voting) that characterises western democratic states.

But the customary village leadership which is strongly represented in CDC has a strong motivation driven by collective pressure to pursue connections through personalised networks in order to survive in a system characterised by patron-client networks. This works to a different model of political representation, what Mansbridge (2009) has termed a 'selection model' whereby political leadership is self-motivated and its interests are consistent with those of its constituency. Position is achieved by reputation and performance and accountability is more deliberative and leadership can be removed (Pain, 2018). How can the CDC be expected to build impartial technocratic linkages with line agencies at the district level when it knows that the *malik* can through personalised relations more quickly leverage resources for the village — even if that requires something in return? This is not going to change quickly or easily and formulaic programming will not make it any easier.

These findings from the NSP programme are consistent with the findings of a broader review of capacity development in conflict settings in relation to service delivery (Denny and Mallett, 2017). First that training is the default tool of capacity building on the assumption that what is missing is knowledge or skills, and capacity building programmes tend to favour tangible and quantifiable approaches to training. Second capacity building is treated almost entirely as a technical exercise but ignores the incentives that shape individual and group behaviour and the distribution of power in formal and informal institutions. Third capacity development tends to focus on formal institutions and usually those of government and often ignores other capacities that people and authorities have to gain access to services. As is clear from Afghanistan there are multiple levels of authority. Fourth capacity building tends to focus on individuals and at best on

organisations. It assumes that somehow these will naturally add up to build better systems. While they may engage more with the hardware of capacity (formal regulations, mechanisms and procedures) they very rarely address the software aspects of system capacity related to power relations, informal institutions and social interactions.

In sum much of the programming in capacity building has assumed that equipping people with skills and competencies is sufficient to drive organisational change. But this takes little account of the conditions which allow such new skills to be expressed or the rationale and incentives underlying existing practices. Changes in capacities is an incremental process that needs to work within the existing logic of practice rather than driven by pre-conceived templates as with the NSP programme to democratise village life.

## **4.5 Addressing Rights and Gender Equality**

There is a relatively recent review of progress on gender issues in Afghanistan (Parkinson et al., 2016) in various domains that have been addressed by gender programming. On women's leadership and the public participation of women, it was found that there was indeed a significant presence of women in representative bodies (parliament and provincial councils) at levels over and above the established quotas for representation. But these representatives had not established a collective presence as strong advocates of women's rights, partly reflecting the personality based nature of Afghan politics. In formal employment in the civil service, the proportion of women is still low and few are found in senior positions in government. The cultural constraints have remained significant. Women have been included in key peace building structures but their interests appear to have carried little weight in the key peace talks. Women are equally underrepresented in the formal justice system. Afghanistan remains a dangerous place to be a woman and there is an endemic environment of structural and physical violence directed towards them, both from the general insecurity but equally from families and communities.

However there have been major gains with respect to access to health and education. Maternal mortality rates have fallen at least fourfold since 2002 although they are still high by international standards. The Basic Packages of Health Services (BPHS) for primary health care has been coherently supported by various donors and this has contributed to this outcome.

However health care costs remain a significant burden on poor households who often seek recourse to the private sector because of concerns over the quality of public health delivery and in part because in other areas of health provision for women there are major gaps. With respect to education enrolment, the gap between girls and boys has narrowed since 2002 although the rate of change has fallen in the last decade. But major concerns remain over the quality of education. In terms of engagement in economic activity, this has steadily been increasing and by 2016 women were estimated to constitute some 29 percent of the labour force. But the obstacles women face both through structural barriers (lack of land ownership, education and access to finance) and social norms are major.

If one were to paraphrase the outcomes for women, again it is the more instrumental interventions such as the provision of schools and health services that have had the greater positive outcomes. Those interventions more concerned with capacity building and advocacy have made little headway against the considerable obstacles that exist. Yet the promotion of women's rights has been a major objective of most donors and considerable effort and funding has been invested in gender mainstreaming and supporting the role of key government institutions and gender units to push the agenda forward. In part the challenge is with the agenda itself which has been seen as an external imposition and at times resented even by Afghan women as portraying them as victims. In part, and related there has been a broader institutional politics and the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWAs) has never carried much weight in government either politically or in terms of resources and it has been seen as relatively ineffective. Equally gender units inserted into Ministries have remain isolated and unable to engage in a system that has operated to a different logic.

There is a need to consider how Afghanistan's context engages the human rights agenda. We draw here on the conceptual framework of welfare regimes (Gough and Wood, 2004), and the notion of an 'informal security' regime. This is used to make a crucial distinction between 'freedom to' and 'freedom from' linked to the idea of 'autonomous security' and 'dependent security'.

The 'ideal' type is the welfare state regime of the western world where according to their various persuasions, states, to different degrees, protect and secure labour from market forces. Households achieve formal welfare through a mixture of market and state protection mechanisms. Implicit in this welfare state model is the separation of state from market and

individuals, the existence of boundaries, rules, rights and obligations which establish degrees of order, fairness and predictability. In most welfare regimes the state either through direct provision or as regulator of the market provides or guarantees security and order and the provision of basic needs. This security is seen to provide enforceable entitlements and give rise to autonomous security in that the individual can act, within the rules, to further his or her interests. This is the normative position associated with rights and provides the basis for the 'freedom to act'. This approach is embodied in the UN Human Development index in its comparison of states.

In contexts where the state is weak and the market has reduced or little formal regulation, and in an environment characterised by acute risk and uncertainty, the search for security is paramount and households have to seek it and welfare through informal means. This is done primarily through the institutions of the community and household. This, as in Afghanistan, is the informal security regime and what characterises it is the pervasive existence of deep patron-client relations structured by strong hierarchies and inequalities of power. Extreme leakiness between institutions, a characteristic of informal security regimes, blends the informal with the formal and provides individuals and communities opportunities to promote, secure and reward self-interests in the market or state, and thereby gain and consolidate position and reinforce patronage.

A characteristic of informal security regimes is the context of acute risk and uncertainty generated by the failure of the state to function effectively and impartially. These risks are covariant and idiosyncratic but are also structural as caused by inequalities and exclusion. Taken as a whole the risk environment leads to the creation of chronic uncertainty where the future is heavily discounted for survival in the present. Under conditions of weak state and market failure the only source of socio-economic security and 'freedom from' threats is to be found in the social relationships that can be established within the household and community. This can come at the cost of autonomy. While these social relationships may provide informal, non-codified rights and security, they require for the poor, as Wood puts it (2003), a Faustian bargain whereby short term security is traded for long term vulnerability. This 'adverse incorporation' (Wood and Gough, 2006:1699) perpetuates clientelism. The search for security thus is not in relation to the 'freedom to act' but seeking 'freedom from' threats, risks and hazards (Wood, 2004). The absence of 'freedom from' insecurity severely limits or undermines the 'freedom to act'. Further the reliance on household and the community to provide that security, makes that security dependent on others, and constrains individual autonomy.



While individuals, households and communities may indeed be able to take action to gain relative protection and security in the short term, their capacity to envisage and plan for a longer term is severely constrained. But this does not necessarily change the core circumstances of dependent security characterised by a constrained risk pool, short term horizons and limited choice. Shifts in any of these dimensions would indicate a move along the spectrum from dependent to autonomous security and from ‘freedom from fear’ to ‘freedom to act’. It is on that spectrum that the effects and impact of interventions to ‘empower’ and support ‘agency’ can be assessed.

## 4.6 Insights from Zardozi on Building Freedom to Act<sup>31</sup>

Zardozi<sup>32</sup>, formally registered as an independent Afghan NGO in 2006, has its roots in an embroidery income generating project for Afghan refugee women in Peshawar that was established in 1984 by the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees. The Zardozi Programme established in 2008, funded by donors<sup>33</sup> has worked since then with poor Afghan women linking them to local markets. In 2010 it established a membership based grass roots business support organisation called Nisfe Jahan. Working in the four major cities of Kabul, Jalalabad, Mazar and Herat and their peri-urban areas, its primary focus has been on supporting the economic empowerment of women living in poverty through providing training and services and other support to link these women to markets. In its most recent round of funding it has focused on its long term commitment to women’s economic empowerment, the social empowerment of women through leadership development and civic education through Community Business Centres it has established. In addition it has developed and supported a group of local gender activists or *Kadar* to strengthen links between community institutions and local authorities and to actively work on the rights and protection of women and girls.

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<sup>31</sup> There are parallels to be found in the SCA supported midwifery programme where young trained women returned to work in their communities as midwives (Informant 1).

<sup>32</sup> <https://zardozi.org/>

<sup>33</sup> Zardozi has had a number of substantial projects funded by different donors but regrettably is has not secured long term funding.

Zardozi has long recognised (Everdene, 2014) the challenges that poor women face as micro-entrepreneurs (MSEs)<sup>34</sup> and that what often motivates such women to start business activities is the lack of adequate support from a male provider. Their move into being economically active requires a process of negotiation within the household and incremental change in order to secure additional income for the household. Such activities often do not fit with family or cultural or family norms. Gaining additional income by these women often does not necessarily create greater autonomy for them but it may open up more space within the household. This includes slowly gaining more mobility under less restrictive conditions, gaining greater physical and emotional security, authority within the household and securing greater financial autonomy.

Negotiating a degree of greater autonomy in the household and freedom to act is one matter, accessing hostile and exclusionary market structures is a further challenge. There is almost no support for women in market systems that largely confine them at best to neighbourhood markets. As Jones (2021:15) characterises the situation *‘supporting functions including training and market access do not exist, market players are missing, gendered social norms restrict women’s business activity and the value chain from inputs support through production to consumer markets does not include women’s businesses for the most part’*.

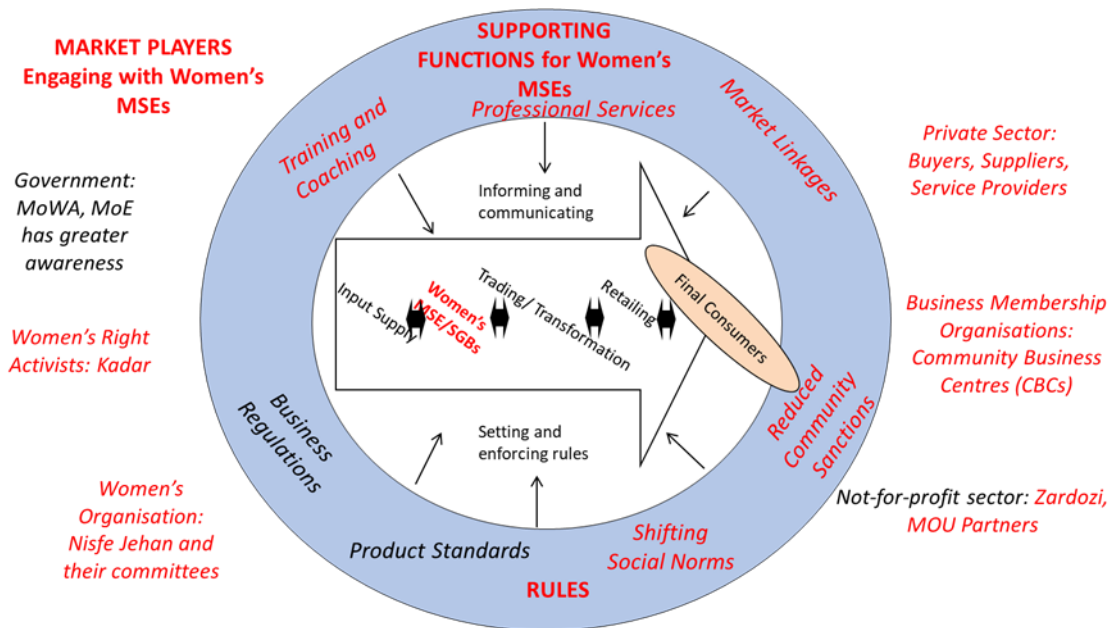
As Figure 1 summarises, Zardozi’s support has been targeted to address precisely these structural weaknesses in the market systems. Over time, and these are not changes brought about by simply focusing on skills training or short term project funding, it has been effective in supporting this group of women to have a profitable engagement in market systems across a range of activities from home-based enterprises (MSEs) to those that are small and growing businesses (SGBs) who have responded to opportunities in national and export markets (Jones, 2021:18). While the numbers are relatively small in relation to the total population of women, some 4500 clients of Zardozi (out of its total portfolio of 7750 clients) are on average generating a monthly income of Afs 1,468. For those running a beauty parlour or shop, average income can rise to Afs 4,992 to 4,368 respectively (see Jones, 2021: 24). Zardozi has been notably successful in supporting women to address the social barriers that they face. This has

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<sup>34</sup> Micro-entrepreneurs are defined as ‘necessity entrepreneurs’ in contrast to what are termed small and growing businesses (SGBs) whose owners have the drive and capacity to expand their businesses (Jones, 2021:9).

been done through the recruitment of a cadre of activists (*Kadar*)<sup>35</sup> who work with support from Zardozi within their immediate communities and families to support women negotiate the challenges they face and lobby for greater support for services from relevant authorities. They have been remarkably effective in doing so.

**Figure 1: Targeted Women's MSE Market System after Zardozi Intervention**



Source: Jones, 2021:16

As the findings of the evaluation (Jones, 2021) made clear the results from Zardozi although modest in scale are significant in terms of what has been achieved in supporting the development of a more gender-equitable and gender responsive market system. It has taken place against the odds of restrictive social norms, gender-based violence, extreme poverty, lack of support, limited formal capabilities and absent public goods. Women have started to ‘latch onto the opportunities offered by Zardozi , ...starting and growing businesses, ...taking leadership roles as managers of home based community business centres, workshop owners that employ other women, Kadar activities, and leadership of the Nisfe Jahan’ (Jones, 2021: 4). But as Jones emphasises the pace of change is incremental — ‘this is happening one woman, one household and one community at a time, and finally the market is shifting, women are empowering each other through

<sup>35</sup> Zardozi found that its own Afghan staff has limited effects in trying to fulfill this role but using volunteer activist women in their own communities where they could not be ignored has had a major effect (Informant 7).

*in-person and digital networks, and there is a growing commitment from private and public sector institutions’; (op.cit).*

But what the evaluation report also makes clear through its careful exploration of the relevance and coherence of Zardozi’s intervention, the criterion of relevance was not assessed on the basis of need. Rather it was explored in relation to an analytical understanding of market constraints for women in Afghanistan and an iterative design of continuous reflection and learning that needed to respond to those constraints. While Zardozi itself may not have had the particular analytical model of the market system in mind in shaping its intervention, its long term grounded experience and learning of what worked and did not work has made it a highly relevant intervention. In so doing it has also achieved what might be termed internal coherence in its interventions but also been consistent with wider agendas and principles. There are lessons to be learnt from this approach by Sida in terms of the pace, stages and sequencing of change in addressing markets, poverty and gender equality.

## **4.7 Summing up**

The western intervention in Afghanistan has contributed through excessive aid and conflicting objectives to consolidating an institutional environment where personality based networks permeate formal institutions, the economy and everyday life. These networks regulate at all levels access to resources. The rural economy is heavily socially embedded and structured more by patron-client relations and non-contractual relations to enable survival under conditions of acute risk. This is not a rural economy where market forces are waiting to be liberated to drive a transformation. The structural conditions will not support that. Instead the rural is becoming something of a poverty trap.

Villages are embedded in networks of personalised relationships that provide access to district level and beyond, secured to varying degree by village customary authority. Programmes such as the NSP that have sought to ‘democratise’ village life through elections and shift behaviour through the formation of committee and other technical procedural approaches have been unable to shift the logic of existing practice. A similar conclusion could also be drawn from the effect of much of the gender focused programming.

Much of the programming across the sectors has assumed that it will be possible to prize agentic behavior by women and men out of existing

socially embedded structural constraints. But most live under conditions of dependent security in order to gain freedom from insecurity. This constrains their freedom to act. The constraints are multiple, at household and village level, at local market level and beyond. But it is possible, as the Zardozi example shows, through local embedded action to find room for manoeuvre and gain greater incremental freedoms both at the household level and beyond. This is where the opportunity lies in future Sida programming.

## 5 Conclusions

### 5.1 Introduction

This desk study has aimed to provide an overall assessment of the results of Sweden's development cooperation with Afghanistan from 2002–2020. It has been based on a review of the cooperation as framed by a series of country strategy papers developed by the MFA, from an assessment of various evaluations of specific projects and programmes funded by Sida and from evaluations undertaken by other donors of projects in Afghanistan. The findings from these reviews were examined in the light of an analytical account of selected aspects of Afghanistan's context that relate to key priorities in Sweden's strategy for Afghanistan. This juxtaposition has been used to question some of the normative assumptions implicit within the cooperation programme. A key argument that has been made is that the essence of Sweden's approach at least in terms of its public representation could be described as 'substantialist' in its focus on the objects of 'poverty', 'rights', 'gender' and goals set in terms of positive improvements in these dimensions, laying the ground as it were for an instrumental engagement in programming. However in practice and this is not sufficiently highlighted there is also an important strand of what has been termed relational practice working with key trusted partners.

This concluding chapter first summarises a set of lessons that could be drawn from Sweden's development engagement with Afghanistan and then considers the implications of these for future cooperation. The seizure of power by the Taliban clearly requires a major rethink with respect to Sweden's engagement with Afghanistan. The Taliban have now achieved political dominance and they undoubtedly would like international recognition and continued funding to support the state. A careful reading of the evidence (Jackson, 2021) suggests a willingness and ability of the Taliban to negotiate and compromise. What is less clear is what they might be willing to forego in terms of their policies to secure that recognition and funding and whether or not that provides any degree of leverage by donors and other external actors.

## **5.2 Lessons from Sweden's Development Cooperation with Afghanistan: 2002–2020**

An account of the lessons to be drawn from Sweden's development cooperation with Afghanistan has first to recognise the extremely challenging context of the aid landscape in the country after 2001. Dominated by a major player whose primary objective was a war on terror, other goals such as peace-making, state building or social and economic development were in practice secondary and incommensurate with that primary objective. It was a classic policy trilemma (Rodrik, 2010) as it is not possible to simultaneously pursue a war on terror, state building and democratisation let alone tackling an opium economy and economic development (which makes it something of a 'pentalemma') at the same time. All good things do not come together and trade-offs have to be made. Moreover the level of aid funding and incoherence between donor activities in combination with the war generated perverse incentives that consolidated the tendency and consequences of what has historically been a rentier state. It has, to put it mildly, been an extremely difficult operating environment for even a principled donor and a relatively minor player in terms of funding levels such as Sweden.

Sweden had however some advantages in terms of its long-term humanitarian engagement in the country through the SCA, dating back to the 1980s, which should have given it a robust understanding of the context it was engaging in. It is a moot point as to why Sweden having recognised the emerging incoherence of the reconstruction effort, did not more explicitly address the trade-offs, choices and prioritisation that it would need to make in its programme. It would not be difficult to make the case that the overall level of aid to Afghanistan coupled with the war on terror for which there has been little accountability, is exactly what has fuelled corruption, lack of sustainability, aid dependence and the creation of a rentier state. On its own there is little that Sweden could have done through its programming to address these perverse incentives in the system.

Sweden's stated goals in the country strategy papers have supported a consistent primary focus on education, health, gender, rights and poverty since 2001. It has also demonstrated a commitment to multilateralism, in part a pragmatic choice for a small donor. It has provided consistent

support to pooled government funding (the ARTF) and other multilateral activities through the UN agencies. It has also, and somewhat uniquely provided a level of support to a Swedish NGO, the SCA that has focused on service delivery in education and health as well as to other NGOs or civil society organisations working in sectors relevant to Sida priorities.

But it is difficult to argue that Sida's intervention has added up to a coherent whole where the sum is greater than the parts. While almost all evaluations of Sida's programmes have concluded they were relevant interventions, an assessment in common to most donor evaluations of their projects, the results have been much more disappointing. While there have been gains in Afghanistan for example with respect to public good provision and access, in particular by women, outcomes in terms of poverty reduction and economic development, let alone peace and security have been meagre. The greatest results have been achieved in interventions that have responded to bounded problems such as lack of roads, schools and health facilities. These in turn may also contribute to change process in behavior and values but through a more contextually grounded, incremental process. Where interventions have had least results is where they have sought to build capacities, change behaviour or advocate for change.

As noted above Sweden's country strategy has been 'substantialist'. In its focus on the desired end state of Afghanistan with Sweden's support, Sweden has tended to frame its understanding of Afghanistan in terms of deficits and shortfalls in relation to that desired end state. This has the effect of defining relevance simply in terms of need rather than, for example, in terms of relevance of the design of the intervention in relation to the context and its modalities of implementation as the updated DAC criteria (OECD, 2019) suggests. A focus on meeting needs has lent itself to various forms of technocratic intervention and simplistic linear theories of change that take no account of the context in which these interventions are engaging or to actual social change processes.

As the analytical review in Chapter 3 indicated, many Afghan's live under conditions of dependent security. There are several reasons for this: the rules of the games in Afghanistan's existing social order, the realities of the rural economy and a context where the absence of freedom from fear severely limits freedom to act or agency. The processes of social change that enable people to move to a little more freedom to act are complex, contingent and incremental. But as the example of the Zardozi market programme shows it is possible both to support and gradually negotiate



greater freedom to act for women within households and to address some of the weaknesses in markets structures that can allow women greater engagement. But this requires a programming approach that is both principled and relationist in its approach.

What has become clear in the process and writing of this review, is that there are some strong elements of a relational approach within Sida's programming. They are somewhat hidden from view. The formal project evaluations speak more to a substantialist perspective in their focus on aid effectiveness. Even the evaluations of SCA in this regard tend to view SCA from this perspective and only somewhat in passing refer to the ways in which SCA engages on education and health issues. Yet it is clear that in many respects – and this has emerged more from the interviews than its formal documentation – that the SCA works very much in a relational way. It is also clear that there is a substantial reserve of trust between Sida and the SCA, no doubt bolstered by the membership basis of the SCA which explains the long term and consistent relations between Sida and the SCA. Exactly the same relationship seems to have developed between Sida and the MSIA. This needs to be more explicitly acknowledged and addressed in programme design and contribution management (Alexius and Vähämäki, 2020).

What this points to is an approach where there are shared principles between Sida and the SCA and MSIA. But rather than Sida seeking to impose a predetermined specific change in which its partner is simply treated as an instrument to that change (although at times there may have been elements of this in Sida's relationship with SCA), the relationship has worked in a different way. The organisation has been able to pursue a social change agenda consistent with Sida's own values and mission and to do so in a way that is incremental, contingent and based on a deep contextual understanding that is embedded in local trust relations. Much the same thing might be said about the way Zardozi operates. It also might be noted that in all three cases the organisations have a distinctive identity, they know how to work within the context from long experience and they have deep institutional memories, features that are notably absent from many international organisations. It is an approach that Sida should be encouraged to develop and work with more explicitly.

## 5.3 Implications for Future Swedish Development Cooperation with Afghanistan

It has to be emphasised that the future for Afghanistan remains deeply uncertain and the rule that has just emerged may be deeply inimical to western liberal sentiment. But Sweden's future engagement must be built on learning lessons from the past.

A starting point in terms of the implications of lessons from the past and engagement in the future is the country strategy papers. To an outside observer these strategy papers are a puzzle and the most recent strategy is the strangest of all in terms of content and its engagement with ground realities, although the political message of continued support to Afghanistan is understood. The strategy clearly needs rethinking which is a potential opportunity to recalibrate Sweden's engagement with Afghanistan. One element that is going to have to be addressed is the direct 'statist' approach. If we have learned one thing, it is that external interventions do not build legitimate and competent central states but become part of the problem. While the need for engagement at the centre will of course remain, this needs to be balanced more with a contextually grounded approach that helps build a more local and accountable state. This speaks more to the reality of how Afghanistan actually works.

The strategy papers have also not been in any accepted meaning of the terms strategies in that they are statements of aspiration and focus. Over time they have become more ambitious in scope and in some ways even more detached from the reality of Afghanistan. In their focus on outcomes they give no consideration as to the means or routes by which these can be achieved. Nor do they appear to draw lessons from the past. They may well serve a public purpose of stating Sweden's principles but these are not a good guide to action. But it could equally be suggested that this broad framing of ambitions left Sida scope to be innovative and argue its case about the modalities of intervention and the nature of incremental change. It is not clear that Sida has done that.

The ambitions of the strategies are most certainly well beyond what Sida could contribute effectively and creates expectations that are unrealistic. At the very least they should be narrowed in scope to a focus on public goods delivery in health and education and gender and rights

programming. To these should be added a focus on job creation to address acute rural and urban poverty. These will have long term dividends.

There is a further consideration and that is the level of funding. Afghanistan is Sweden's largest aid programme and there are mechanisms in place which will encourage increases in the level of funding. An issue that is going to have to be addressed is the relation between funding levels and its effects in supporting a rentier state. Long term resolution of the challenges of aid dependence, sustainability, reduced corruption ultimately lie in Afghanistan and the ability of the state to generate its own revenue and have authority over an increasing share of its budget. Increasing Swedish funding to Afghanistan may not be helpful in addressing this challenge.

But this focus also requires an acceptance that rather than heading for the ideal outcome (gender rights as in Sweden for example) there will be a long incremental process of working through good enough change (what Rodrik, 2008, calls second best institutions) to get there. The process of moving from 'freedom from fear' to 'freedom to act' requires multiple cross-scalar social change processes that, as Sida is well aware, it is in no position to engineer. We have seen the limitations of the western effort to bring about change in the statutory context within which Afghans live. But we have also seen, through examples of Sida funded programmes, how it is possible to work more contextually with the informal and social conditions that can improve human security and wellbeing. Sida could invest more in supporting and learning from such approaches and use that learning to inform a wider practice. This will be even more relevant to the new context.

Sida is likely to maintain a portfolio that support both government and multilateral agencies as well as the SCA and other relevant civil society and NGOs. Whatever government there is in power, it is going to need contributions to enable it to fulfill its basic functions (Roberts et al., 2020) and Sida will have a role in this. Whether and to what extent Sida is able to leverage greater coherence with other donors and hold public officials to account remains unknown.

Sida may remain committed to funding at some level both the ARTF and the programmes of multilateral organisations such as the UN depending on how the Taliban government takes shape. On the ARTF which as noted has been the dominant channel for Swedish funding, there are two questions. If it remains in some form, the level of funding that Sweden provides should be open to question unless key issues of monitoring and

accountability are addressed given the persistent questions that have arisen over the nature of the ARTF in both supporting a rentier state and fueling corruption. If it changes, perhaps induced by regime change, should its role be reduced to simply supporting the provisioning of the basic public goods of health and education?

With respect to the UN, as the evaluations show, their performance has been distinctly lackluster reflecting both the bureaucratic nature of the UN, the capacities of its staff who often have limited understanding of the context and the short term and technical nature of their programming. While the UN may have scope to deliver on responding to bounded problems — road or school construction, delivering on basic health provision or for example humanitarian programming, their organisational culture does not lend itself to addressing unbounded problems. Inevitably Sida is likely to continue to work with the UN in an instrumental manner in areas where it judges the UN can deliver.

Can the UN be made more effective in relation to Sida funding and can Sida be more demanding of the UN? That depends on the extent to which Sida is prepared and able to be more exacting in terms of its expectations of what UN supported projects should deliver. This would require at the least more critical demands being made in terms of project design and assumption, monitoring of processes of change, in evaluations of programmes and follow up on those evaluations.

The opportunity to be more adventurous and exploratory lies in Sida's programming with the likes of the SCA and MSIA, and Sida needs to seek out more such organisations to work with. Sida has shown strengths in building long term and consistent relations with the SCA and MSIA. In turn these have shown success in building processes and outcomes that are consistent with Sida's principles. Sida could do more in developing this portfolio<sup>36</sup> and be more willing to experiment in different areas with organisations that share its priorities and principles.

But greater emphasis is needed on learning from programmes. This will require that more attention is given at the outset to relevance and coherence in project and portfolio design, monitoring and evaluation. It will require an institutional understanding of the complexity of the Afghanistan context that does not just focus on its deficits but also how the existing social order works and where the room for manoeuvre lies.

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<sup>36</sup> A review of Dutch aid in conflict settings also strongly recommended investing in open relationships with long term partners and using these as a basis for learning (IOB, 2019).

To do that, Swedish institutions (the MFA, Sida and the Embassy in Kabul) will need to invest more in gaining and using that knowledge.

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# Appendix

## List of Interviewees

Anna Åkerlund, Policy Unit, Sida

Sipi Azarbajani-Moghaddam, Consultant

Kate Clark, Afghan Analysts Network

Bengt Ekman, formerly Sida and Swedish Committee for Afghanistan

Anders Fänge, formerly Swedish Committee for Afghanistan

Sara Ulväng Flygare, Sida

Michael Frühling, formerly Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Ashley Jackson, Overseas Development Institute, London

Anna Lindstedt, Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Börje Ljunggren, formerly Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Maria Lundberg, Sida

Samuel Persson, Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Andreas Stefansson, Swedish Committee for Afghanistan

Per Trulsson, Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Kerry Jane Wilson, formerly Zardozi