



# CMI *Policy Brief*

## Waging War while Building Peace: Lessons from Afghanistan

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The case of Afghanistan illustrates yet again that the signing of a peace agreement is no guarantee of peace. The ongoing War on Terror challenges fundamental issues of security, social and economic development and the development of a stable political framework, argues this CMI Policy Brief.



*Heavy weapons constitute a major problem in the peacebuilding process. (Photo: Arne Strand)*

### A limited peace agreement

The peace agreement signed in Bonn in November 2001 left unaddressed a range of contested issues, putting them off for negotiations at a later date. On the security side, a demobilisation plan was left out of the text, and the political framework was very narrow. Only groups that had sided with the international community in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) to defeat the Taliban and Al Qaida were allowed influence in the Afghan Interim and later the Transitional Administration (ATA). Under the direction of President Karzai these administrations formally assumed responsibility for implementation of the Bonn agreement, though it was the World Bank and International Donors that worked out their development strategies. The UN was tasked to assist them on political and economic development issues, and an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was mandated by the UN to provide security. Applying initially only to Kabul, ISAF was allowed later to expand operations beyond the capital. A two-year time-frame was set for the transition period, and despite major setbacks, the ATA and the UN sought to adhere to that deadline.

The peace agreement did not address contested issues.



## A multitude of conflicts – and their causes

Afghanistan has been through 23 years of war and civil war and belongs to a conflict-torn part of the world where democratic institutions and respect for human rights are in short supply. State authority is weak, if at all present, and traditional structures – elders, tribal and religious leaders with their ways of resolving conflicts – are often sidelined by young people armed with guns and financed by external sources. All parties to the conflicts in Afghanistan have committed severe human rights violations. The troubles are frequently said to originate with religious and ethnic differences, but appear less as a root cause than as a tool for mobilisation and justification for the parties.

Afghanistan is one of the world's least developed countries; it has extremely low literacy levels, especially among women, and extremely high infant and maternal mortality rates which set average life expectancy at just above 40 – though there is a total lack of reliable baseline data. Women's role in society is restricted by conservative religious and cultural practices. Poverty and conflict forced Afghans to migrate to neighbouring countries, where as many as six million of an estimated population of 28 million lived for over a decade. Much of the economy is dominated by illicit gem dealing, smuggling of consumer goods across Afghanistan's porous borders and production and smuggling of heroin, most of which takes place under the control of the notorious 'warlords' who at times operate with and at times defy the OEF and ATA. What with the determination of the Taliban and other military groups to overthrow the Karzai government, security is also compromised by the struggles between different warlords and a slew of unresolved conflicts. This overshadows the more positive developments, such as a thriving business community and education opportunities for an increasingly larger number of children.

The fact that Afghanistan has a divided, contested and weak national government makes establishing a political framework that much harder. As the government is a result of a political compromise, a number of persons who are alleged to have committed severe human rights violations holds positions in the ATA, as provincial governors or in the police forces. This has aroused public resentment and led to continuous cabinet infighting as the more western and reform-minded ministers have tried to curb their authority. The cabinet has ended up in a stalemate, making the implementation of major political and administrative reforms impossible, and severely limiting the powers of the ATA beyond Kabul. The prevailing lack of trust between the various military fractions has stalled the demobilisation process and the establishment of a national army. Military commanders are reluctant to give up their arms and allow their soldiers to enlist in the national army they see it weakening their military strength in a situation where their own future hangs in the balance.

## Peacebuilding – what is the status?

The term peacebuilding was introduced in 1992 with the launch of the UN's *Agenda for Peace*. Initially presented as a raft of resources and options available for the UN, gradually an understanding emerged that intervention strategies need to be tailored to the specific country and regions they are to be applied in. There is no blueprint or simple tool kit available, and peacebuilding involves providing security; establishing the socio-economic foundation and the political framework of long-term peace. If we turn to these three main areas of intervention in Afghanistan, we find very mixed results.

Peacebuilding is difficult after 23 years of war.

Afghanistan is one of the world's least developed countries.

The security threat is constant.

The government is divided, contested and weak.

There is no blueprint for peacebuilding

## Security

The OEF's overriding military objective – to hunt down terrorists – has sent conflicting signals to the Afghan parties to the conflict. On the one hand, the US has proclaimed their full political support of President Karzai's government, while, on the other, they continue to provide military support to commanders opposing that very government, helping them build a militia outside Afghan jurisdiction and turn a blind eye to commanders' involvement in drug production and local conflicts. This US policy, combined with intense rivalry and mistrust between Afghan commanders and the Tadjik-dominated Ministry of Defence's resistance to reforms to widen the ethnic powerbase, has hampered disarmament and demobilisation, both of which are seen as a prerequisite for free and fair elections. The end result is that a wide range of possible 'spoilers' of the peace process have increased their influence.

The US sends conflicting signals.

As warfare continues in major parts of Afghanistan, especially in the south and south east, many Afghans are questioning if efforts to improve security mainly benefit the 'west' and the Afghan President rather than the common Afghans. The deployment of international Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), containing civilian and military personnel, which provide humanitarian assistance and military support has not altered this picture. Different models have been developed for the PRTs. Those under ISAF command are more focused on security, while the OEF-led teams use their humanitarian cover not only to 'win hearts and minds' but more so for intelligence gathering. Attacks against and assassinations of humanitarian workers have therefore risen sharply as opposition forces and local communities get to view them as part of an OEF-led military/humanitarian strategy. In response, most NGOs have retreated from the South Eastern provinces, and Medicins Sans Frontiers abandoned its entire operation in Afghanistan.

The security of the Afghans is not secured.

## Socio-economic foundation

The ATA and donors have emphasised the need for rapid socio-economic development for the Afghans to quickly enjoy the peace dividend. A strategy to elect village development councils which can select and manage smaller projects has been spearheaded by the World Bank, where the aim is to furnish support to all Afghan villages over a four-year period. A range of other projects has also been initiated, many aimed at increasing the visibility and influence of central government beyond Kabul. While the ATA, especially the outspoken Minister of Finance, and the NGOs have blamed the rather slow pace of improvement in the socio-economic situation on the lack of donor commitment and funding availability, there appears to be a range of more complex factors inhibiting development. Security concern is certainly one, but more so is the lacking implementation capacity of the ATA and conditions set by some donors.

The conditions set by donors inhibit development.

Rather than building up a more competent civil service, the drive is on the rapid implementation and hiring of external consultants to oversee and direct the development process. This is not only an expensive and short-sighted strategy – it is barely suited to address the rampant corruption as the foreign consultants hardly understand the game they are set to oversee. The marked liberal policy that inspires such steps also lies behind the unevenly distributed development activities, with NGOs and private companies reluctant to bid for contracts in provinces and areas remote from the capital or where there is a large security threat. This in turn leaves Afghanistan with a number of 'rough provinces' where opposition to the Kabul government is easily stirred up as they see how much faster developments and improved services take hold in Kabul.

Foreign consultants do not understand the situation.

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An inclusive and participatory process is lacking.

The election process is marked by backroom deals.

Peacebuilding is a lengthy process.

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*The CMI Policy Brief aims at providing comments and analysis on current policy debates in the field of development and human rights informed by studies and reports at the Chr. Michelsen Institute.*

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## *Political framework*

The work undertaken to establish a political framework for the long-term peace is faced with similar problems. Given the strict adherence to the Bonn deadline, a number of the processes aimed at settling a political framework are now little more than formal talking shops, rather than the inclusive, participatory process charged with generating a more solid foundation for the new Afghan state and the democratisation promised the Afghans by the international community. A country where the terms 'political party' and 'democratisation' are frequently linked to oppression, violence and enforced ideology will necessarily need some time to get people to appreciate and support a new political framework, not least as powerful and well armed forces oppose such a development. Commanders and former leaders of the mujaheddin parties fear that their influence, built up during the war against the Soviet Union, might evaporate if people no longer can be forced or bribed to support them.

The rapidity of this process has not helped develop a sense of national ownership to the political process. The new Afghan Constitution approved in December 2003 by a Constitutional Loya Jirga was not subject to public debate in advance. The process now leading up to elections for President in October 2004 and a two chamber Parliament scheduled for spring 2005 is likewise marked by backroom deals. While a range of observers are urging for the elections to be postponed to allow for a more democratic process, there is strong external pressure for the presidential election to take place in advance of the US November elections. With commanders unwilling to disarm, reluctance among NATO members towards a major increase of ISAF forces, highly contested issues emerging on provincial boundaries compounded by the lack of a national census on population size, the elections might ignite more problems rather than bringing a more lasting solution closer.

## **Lessons**

The Afghan case demonstrates that the signing of a peace agreement is no guarantee for a smooth peacebuilding process. It serves only as a starting point for further negotiations over how the security apparatus, socio-economic developments and political institutions should be shaped. In Afghanistan, well-intended efforts in this direction have been compromised by the continued waging of war.

In short, recent Afghanistan history tells us that:

- Peacebuilding is a long-term process that needs gradual capacity building of individuals and institutions to ensure substantial influence over national political agenda setting. Capacity can not be bought, it must be built.
- Higher priority must be given to the development of a fair and needs-based socio-economic development strategy to avoid a sense of unfair treatment and the emergence of 'rough provinces/areas'. Leaving this to market forces alone is simply not a viable option.
- Civil society organisations must be involved in the peacebuilding processes, to ensure their support and strengthen their ability to safeguard the process against spoilers. Just allowing them to vote is not enough.
- Better understanding of the local context is a prerequisite, not least with the many international actors involved. Comprehensive information about people, conflict history, regional actors (state and non-state) and all stakeholders in the peace process should be made available before designing peacebuilding programmes. If basic facts are lacking, establish them with the collaboration of the national government or/and research institutions.

