

CONFLICTOLOGY IN PRACTICE




Afghanistan and the Peace Through Development Paradigm: A Critical Assessment

Katharina Merkel

Submitted: December 2010

Accepted: March 2011

Published: May 2011



Abstract

A plethora of academic literature indicates that, in the post Cold War political landscape, poverty and development deficits are key in sparking civil conflict. Out of this recognition a new paradigm has emerged which underpins the idea that, by working to overcome these deficits, the risk of conflict can be essentially reduced and/or mitigated. The 'peace through development' paradigm supports the assumption that development and security are essentially intertwined. In this paper I discuss the challenges and opportunities associated with the paradigm within the Afghan context, addressing the two core questions: (1) how are poverty and development deficits connected to violence and conflict? and (2) what are the prerequisites for development to play a conducive role in the peacebuilding alchemy? This paper argues that at large, sustainable peace in Afghanistan can only be achieved through sustainable development. However, it also recognises the tremendous challenges faced to fully capitalise on the peace dividend that development might be able to provide, and at the same time develops a roadmap for more conflict-sensitive development programming.



Keywords

peacebuilding, development, conflict resolution, poverty, Afghanistan, horizontal inequalities

INTRODUCTION

The 'peace through development' paradigm raises hopes and fears: the hope that development can provide a viable peace dividend to conflict-torn nations but also the fear that insensitive development programming might exacerbate tensions where they already exist. When exploring the role that development might play in preventing and mitigating conflict, several interlinked questions need to be addressed: What are the incentives for violent behaviour? How are poverty and wider development deficits connected to violence and conflict? How do development organisations interact with conflict dynamics? Which development policies and practices are conducive or not to the peacebuilding process?

When looking at mobilisation variables for violence, the rhetoric often employed in the Afghan context is that of religious fundamentalism. However, this paper questions the assumption that fundamentalist Islamic beliefs or, in other words, ideological grievances, are per se the source of the conflict. In Afghanistan, an impoverished country, with a major youth population, widespread hunger, and pervasive economic deprivation, in which an estimated 40 percent of the population remains unemployed despite billions of dollars in development aid that have been poured into the country, we may also need to look at the economic agenda to grapple with the phenomenon of conflict. While some of the poorest nations in the world with a long and proud history of peaceful coexistence provide evidence that poverty per se is not a source of conflict, the poverty-



violence link has become one of the major findings in the ever-growing literature investigating the causes of civil war (Miguel, 2007).

Recent academic research suggests that poverty is key in sparking civil conflict and a plethora of literature analyses patterns in different civil war settings. Yet, to date, much of this research has focused on Sub-Saharan Africa, where there is a major concentration of civil wars, and surprisingly little has focused on Afghanistan and its renewed insurgency, which has been gradually scaling up since 2005. This knowledge gap might in part be due to the fact that Afghanistan does not constitute a typical civil war setting, given its unique combination of internal and external conflict lines. Moreover, knowledge gaps might be further sustained by the inherent difficulties of conducting research in areas ravaged by insurgency. However, understanding the relationship between poverty and violence and the interaction between aid/development and conflict is essential for both development and security, to ensure that policies and interventions are based on sound analytical foundations. By assessing some of the basic assumptions underlying the peace through development paradigm within the Afghan context, this paper highlights and fills current gaps in the literature, thereby bringing the debate on the overlapping agendas for peace and development into the realm of state-building in Afghanistan.

1. INCENTIVE SYSTEMS FOR VIOLENCE

Undoubtedly the motivation of participants in violent situations is at the root of any armed conflict, and a better understanding of the processes and circumstances that make young men in Afghanistan ready cannon fodder for the insurgency is urgently required. While the war in Afghanistan has captured the attention of political leaders around the globe, surprisingly few attempts have been made to academically study the mobilisation variables of the Taliban and other militant groups such as the Hezb-i-Islami and the Haqqani Network. While searching for the roots of religious extremism, scholars mostly investigate the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism as its apparent consequential branch, on the global level. Yet religious extremism also needs to be understood in its own context.

A study commissioned by the Department for International Development (DFID), one of the few scholarly attempts to study radicalisation variables of Taliban and Hezb-i-Islami combatants, came up with some interesting results. According to the study, young men in Afghanistan become Taliban combatants for many reasons, religion being only one of them, “but their peers then radicalise them into presenting their cause only in terms of jihad and only

with reference to Islam. In other words, the real process of radicalisation appears to happen after they have become Taliban combatants” (Ladbury, 2009, p. 4-5). The DFID study thereby draws a line between mobilisation and radicalisation factors and religious beliefs only seem to account for a small percentage of combatants being mobilised. So what is it that drives young men to join the insurgency in the first place? According to Ladbury’s study, mobilisation is based on a number of personal reasons, ranging from financial needs to status and self-protection, in combination with larger structural grievances. This suggests that, while economic factors are low on the list of possible radicalisation variables, they might indeed be high on the list of motivational factors.

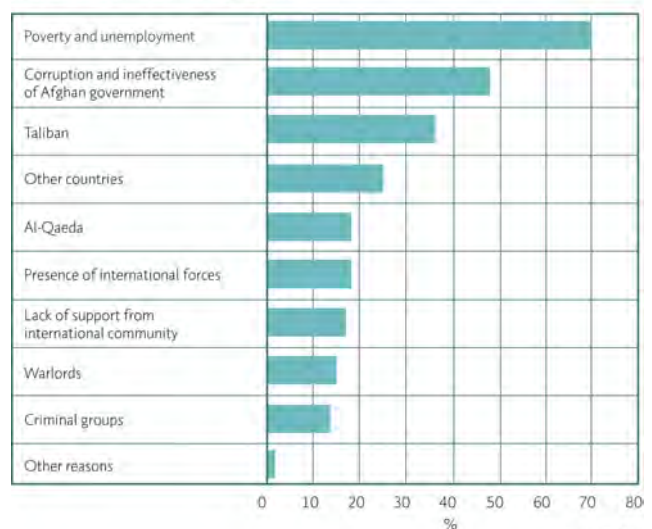
“We thank God that the fighting we saw during the Taliban does not exist now, even though they still do suicide attacks. The main harm of the current conflict is poverty and unemployment. If there are employment opportunities for the people, there won’t be killings” – a woman from Kabul.

“If people are employed, the fighting will end” – a man from Kandahar.

“If people are unemployed they are capable of everything” – a man from Parwan.

The above quotes support the broader research findings of a study released by the UK-based aid agency, Oxfam, in 2009, which found that an overwhelming 70 percent of Afghans consider poverty and unemployment to be the major factors that fuel the fighting in Afghanistan today. Two out of three respondents felt that addressing poverty and unemployment is essential to establish security and to bring lasting peace to the country.

Where blame for the conflict lies
Responses of 704 Afghan men and women

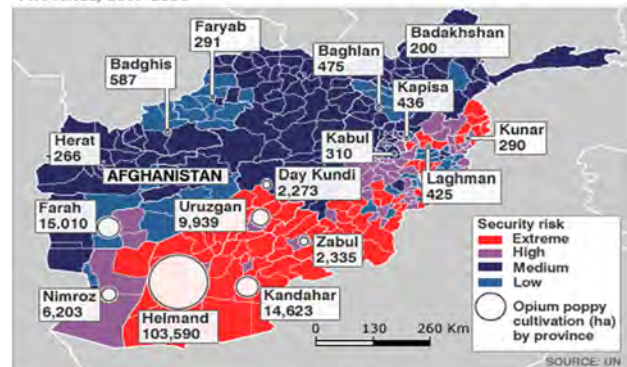


Source: Oxfam

If economic characteristics indeed provide such powerful explanatory variables for the conflict, the failed reconstruction attempts of the past decade might have a considerable role in the recurring violence. Statistics suggest that around 50 percent of all post-conflict countries relapse into conflict within only a decade, and with conflict recurring they may easily fall into what Collier et al. (2003) consider “the conflict trap”, a cycle of war and economic decline. Collier (2004, p.2) therefore argues that “the most common legacy of war in fact is more war” and with a history of nearly 30 years of recurring violence, Afghanistan provides a grievous example. Have failures to kick-start economic development in the immediate aftermath of the conflict a role in the recurring violence? Have failures in the transition from relief to long-term development perpetuated the causes of the conflict? It is possible to conclude that at least in part they have. When, in 2001, the Taliban were ousted from power, most Afghans were eager to work for the future of their country and desperately waited for job-creation and development to kick in. Until 2005, there were very few attacks on the ISAF troops, but half a decade into the painfully slow reconstructing process, the insurgency again gained traction (Lopez, n.a.). It was a time when the world community was channelling much of its attention towards Iraq and when way too little was being done to alleviate Afghanistan from its misery. The immediate years following the ouster of the Taliban had presented a narrow window of opportunity during which the tangible benefits of reconstruction could have rallied the Afghan population to support the government (Lopez, n.a.). Yet reconstruction did not happen and this created a sense of hopelessness and despair among many Afghans. With few licit livelihood opportunities, the Taliban and other militant groups became last resort employers, and many young men were left with the impression that there were no options other than gun toting.

Lack of opportunities for gainful employment and a meaningful role in society also make adolescents in Afghanistan vulnerable to the lure of participating in criminal activities. In large swathes of Afghanistan, the political economy now centres on militancy, crime and the narcotics trade, all being elements that prosper under conditions of conflict and that may feed back to their sources. The war economy has a destabilising effect on the country which further undermines reconstruction efforts. The insurgency is strengthened through income from poppy production and smuggling, and the opium trade therefore has a critical destabilising effect on the country. The UN map plots the direct correlation between poppy production and political insecurity in Afghanistan:

SECURITY MAP AND OPIUM POPPY CULTIVATION IN AFGHANISTAN BY PROVINCE, 2007-2008



Narcotics have, over time, changed the nature of the conflict itself and today the insurgency and the opium trade need to be understood as a single phenomenon (Peters, 2009). NATO military intelligence suggests that as few as 5 percent of insurgent commanders now fight for ideological reasons, and Peters (2009) therefore argues that insurgents tend to behave like “mafiosi” rather than “mujahideen”. Yet it is vital to understand that regular crime, just like the insurgency itself, allows different groups to wage war and to profit or just to cope and to survive. Peacebuilding strategies need to remove their ability to fund themselves, yet aggressive eradication strategies have mostly been counterproductive (Peters, 2009). Without offering realistic economic alternatives to farmers, they are likely to be driven to seek protection from anti-government groups. Small farmers cannot easily shift to alternative crops, so poppy eradication could severely exacerbate rural poverty, with greater backing for militant groups as a possible result. A successful transition from war to peace economies is vital to create stability, and providing licit livelihood opportunities is therefore a crucial step towards the institutionalisation of peace.

It is vital to understand that different kinds of economies have different kinds of actors with different motivations. This provides a powerful window of opportunity, since well-targeted development efforts have the potential to capitalise on the difference between criminal and insurgent groups by addressing the development needs of more moderate factions. Peace in Afghanistan is unlikely to be obtained unless the underlying crisis of poverty and chronic hunger are addressed and it is therefore reasonable to argue that the way to sustainable peace is through sustainable development. Yet this is only true if development is perceived as a realistic pathway out of poverty and only sustainable, dignified, non-violent employment opportunities can provide a viable peace dividend. If cash-for-work programmes are, for instance, not followed by realistic long-term livelihood opportunities, they might easily frustrate the ambitions of young men. For development to play a catalytic role in the peacebuilding alchemy, a more critical assessment of different development efforts is therefore urgently required.



2. AID, DEVELOPMENT AND CONFLICT

Development programmes have all too often perpetuated the causes of a conflict, and while development might be able to provide a powerful incentive for non-violent behaviour, the reverse might also be true. Development aid and programmes may exacerbate conflict where it already existed and failed projects can cause tensions between villagers and others, especially in Afghanistan's fragile post-conflict environment. Development organisations in Afghanistan, whether they like it or not, participate in the conflict due to the vast sums of money they pour into a reality characterised by political turmoil. Afghanistan's over-dependence on development aid means that the way development aid is spent has enormous effects on the lives of almost all Afghans and this has very clear policy implications. As elsewhere in the world, in Afghanistan there needs to be a more critical assessment of development efforts and **more** attention should be given to how development aid is distributed and delivered. If development programmes incite more rage than appreciation, they will not only fail to create a peace dividend, but might even increase support for militants.

In particular, there needs to be a more critical assessment of the costs and benefits of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) which are closely associated with military occupation and are therefore frequently attacked (Zakhilwal et al., 2005). Development projects that are often attacked place villagers in danger and loss of civilian life can further increase backing for militant groups. There are alternatives to the PRT model for operating in insecure areas, in particular through greater community participation and contracting. It is widely recognised, for instance, that projects constructed by the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), a national development programme implemented by the government of Afghanistan which works with elected village councils to determine what projects the community needs most, have been far less frequently attacked than development projects that involve foreign troops (Lopez, n.a.). Decentralisation coupled with community contracting has allowed for high project implementation of NSP projects, even in areas ravaged by anti-government insurgency. Unlike most large donor projects, the projects implemented by the NSP do not have security regulations that require heavily armed guards, an important feature for a nation that perceives the presence of foreign troops as occupation. The World Bank further estimates that projects set up by the NSP are on average 30 percent cheaper than those by foreign organisations (Lopez, n.a.). Foreign government development initiatives often involve excessive profits to contractors and international consultants are often paid between \$200,000 and \$500,000 per year. An estimated 40 percent of the development budget is spent on

foreign consultants and therefore ultimately does not reach those in need (Waldman, 2008).

The direction that money flows may undoubtedly increase or reduce support for the peacebuilding process. Social peace is threatened when distributional problems are severe and unequal aid distribution might be exploited by leaders of different factions. While leaders of armed groups may have ambiguous political motivations, their followers may primarily be motivated by grievance about their economic or social position. People's well-being stems in part from the well-being of their identity group – groups with shared relevant bonding and categorising identities. Group affiliations can occur along a number of identity lines and inequalities in political power may translate into similar inequalities at the economic and social fronts. Horizontal inequalities, may they be real or perceived, can be an important factor behind group mobilisation for violence (Stewart, 2006). Identities in Afghanistan are shared primarily through ethnic ties, and also through salient ways, such as rural/urban divides. Developmental disparities between rural and urban Afghanistan remain formidable and while up to 80 percent of the Afghan population live in rural areas, and despite poverty being significantly more severe in rural Afghanistan, development efforts have long been concentrated in the big cities. Income inequality, commonly measured by the Gini coefficient, is a powerful explanatory variable for the occurrence of civil conflict, and even scholars who tend to dismiss a direct link between poverty and conflict mostly agree that economic injustices might create inter-group hostilities which, in turn, can be linked to certain political outcomes.

According to World Bank figures, lagging regions – regions with a GDP lower than the national average – have experienced more than three times the number of terrorist incidents per capita, compared with leading regions in a country. This is, for instance, true for the federally administered tribal areas, Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province in Pakistan (Ghani, 2010). "In Nepal, a higher poverty rate at the district level is associated with significantly more civil war deaths, in the ongoing Maoist insurgency there" (Miguel, 2007; p.56). Yet when we look at wealth distribution in Afghanistan by province, there is no suggestion that poverty is confined to or even more severe in areas now characterised by intense militant activity. The Bamyan and Badakhshan provinces are among the poorest but at the same time among the most secure regions in Afghanistan. However, looking at wealth distribution in rural and urban areas, the link between poverty and conflict becomes more apparent. Progress in rural Afghanistan has been slow to kick in and peace in rural Afghanistan is uneasy if not virtually non-existent. The higher level of insecurity in rural Afghanistan can clearly not only be attributed to poverty, however, rural neglect and wider developmental deficits might well play a considerable role in the continuing instability in rural areas.



The relationship between Kabul and rural Afghanistan has long been marred by deep mistrust and the continued lack of cohesion with rural areas provides a very powerful bottom-up incentive to engage in violence. Overcoming the historic volatile mistrust of the rural people as well as the self-serving image of Kabul is therefore a crucial challenge in peacebuilding and state-building in Afghanistan (Zakhilwal et al., 2005). Until most of the population sees significant improvements in their own villages, peace in Afghanistan will remain an illusion. Through participatory rural development approaches and non-partisan investments in rural areas, Kabul might be able to win the confidence of the rural community, while at the same time harnessing the potential of rural development to fight extreme poverty. Boosting living standards in rural areas can send an important message that Kabul has good intentions to address “issues of bread and butter”, thereby increasing its recognition as a legitimate authority. As Fick et al. (2010, p.2) note; “in order to be successful, the Afghan government and its global partners must provide a vision for the future that is powerful enough to change people’s behaviour”. It is essential to include those who have historically been excluded and give them a stake in developing the future of their nation, to gain wide support for the peacebuilding process. In Afghanistan, the ‘peace through development’ paradigm can only prove successful if the crucial role of rural development is recognised.

3. CONCLUSION

Discussions on Afghanistan all too often centre on terrorism, but this seems to be by far not the most pressing issue for ordinary Afghans. While security is a major concern, an Afghan definition of security would need to entail a concept much wider than protection from terrorists, let alone the mere prevention of a global jihad. Security from an Afghan standpoint needs to entail a definition that figures broadly within the concept of human security, a life “free from want” and “free from fear”. Human security encompasses not only protection from physical violence but also protection from other threats, including, but not limited to, economic insecurity, food shortage, health risks and environmental

degradation. Undoubtedly, security conceived in the sense of human security, cannot exist as long as the people of Afghanistan are incapable of making a decent living and feeding their families in a dignified way. Similarly, it is easy to argue that peace, in the sense of positive peace and not conceived as the mere absence of overt physical violence, cannot exist as long as Afghanistan continues to rank among the lowest on the human development index. Yet, there is strong evidence that poverty is not only a threat to human security and positive peace but is also directly linked to participation in violent situations.

The lack of licit livelihood opportunities and economic inequities between rural and urban areas provide very powerful incentives to engage in violence and the poverty-conflict links need to be better understood and accounted for. Development can be an explicit strategy to influence the course of political violence, and external assistance has the potential to either alleviate or worsen the conflict. More effective investments in sustainable development are required, in particular in programmes that address the underlying causes of militancy. Militant groups have pockets of popular support among the poor and vulnerable sections of the Afghan populace, in particular in rural areas where development deficits remain formidable. The poor in Afghanistan have very few opportunities to develop their full potential and to play a meaningful role in society, and they therefore feel excluded from the system. Addressing their development needs is essential to persuade them to support the system and to become productive members of society. The Afghan government must demonstrate that it is able to provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for its own population and that it is willing to give its citizens a stake in the future of their country. More attention should be given to economic concerns in order to reduce the economic incentives for young men to join the ranks of militant and criminal groups. “Development and security can be mutually supportive, and training people to create economic opportunities is a useful tool in countering insurgencies” (Fick et al, 2010; p.1). Yet this is only true when development actors are aware of the long-term impacts of their interventions, and development policies and practices need to drastically change their nature to become sensitive, sustainable and participatory, if they are to play a catalytic role in the peacebuilding alchemy.

■ Cited Works

COLLIER, P. (2004). “Development and Conflict” [online]. Oxford University Press.
<<http://www.un.org/esa/documents/Development.and.Conflict2.pdf>>

COLLIER, P.; ELLIOTT, V.L.; HEGRE H. [et al.] (2003). *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and*

Development Policy. The World Bank and Oxford University Press.

FICK, N.; LOCKHART, C. (2010). “The Economic Imperative: Stabilizing Afghanistan through Economic Growth” [online]. Center for a New American Security.



<http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/Economic%20Imperative_FickLockhart_April2010_code507_policybrief.pdf>

GHANI, E. (2010). "Conflict and Development: Where is Conflict Concentrated in South Asia?" [online]. The World Bank Blog.
<<https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/conflict-and-development-where-conflict-concentrated-south-asia>>

LADBURY, S. (2009) "Testing Hypotheses on Radicalization in Afghanistan: Why do men join the Taliban and Hizb-i-Islami? How much do local communities support them?" Independent Report for the Department of International Development (DFID). [Online].
<<http://d.yimg.com/kq/groups/23852819/1968355965/name/Drivers%20of%20Radicalisation%20in%20Afghanistan%20Sep%202009.pdf>>

LOPEZ, R. (n.a.). "Afghan Exit Strategy: Understanding the National Solidarity Program (NSP). By Afghans, for Afghans" [online]. Jobs for Afghans.
<<http://jobsforafghans.org/nsp.pdf>>

MIGUEL, E. (2007). "Poverty and Violence: An Overview of Recent Research and Implications for Foreign Aid [online]. Berkeley University.
<http://www.econ.berkeley.edu/~emiguel/pdfs/miguel_rcps.pdf>

OXFAM (2009). "The Cost of War. Afghan Experiences of Conflict, 1978-2009" [online].

<<http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/afghanistan-the-cost-of-war.pdf>>

PETERS, G. (2009). "How Opium Profits the Taliban" [online]. United States Institute of Peace.

<http://www.usip.org/files/resources/taliban_opium_1.pdf>

STEWART, F. (2006). "Policies towards Horizontal Inequalities in Post Conflict Reconstruction" [online]. United Nations University.

<http://www.hicn.org/papers/Stewart_philadelphia.pdf>

WALDMAN, M. (2008). "Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan" [online]. ACBAR.

<<http://www.acbar.org/ACBAR%20Publications/ACBAR%20Aid%20Effectiveness%20%2825%20Mar%2008%29.pdf>>

ZAKHILWAL, O.; THOMAS, J.M. (2005). "Afghanistan. What Kind of Peace? The Role of Rural Development in Peacebuilding" [online].

<http://www.nsi-ins.ca/english/pdf/Afghanistan_WKOP.pdf>

■ Recommended citation

MERKEL, Katharina (2011). "Afghanistan and the Peace Through Development Paradigm: A Critical Assessment" [online article]. *Journal of Conflictology*. Vol. 2, Iss. 1. Campus for Peace, UOC. [Consulted: dd/mm/yy].

<<http://www.uoc.edu/ojs/index.php/journal-of-conflictology/article/view/vol2iss1-merkel/vol2iss1-merkel>>

ISSN 2013-8857



This work is subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivative-Works 3.0 Spain licence. It may be copied, distributed and broadcasted provided that the author and the source (*Journal of Conflictology*) are cited. Commercial use and derivative works are not permitted. The full licence can be consulted at: <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/es/deed.en>>



About the author

Katharina Merkel
kathamerkel@gmx.de

Since 2010, Katharina Merkel has been a consultant to various organisations in Kabul, Afghanistan, amongst them the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. She holds a Degree in Business Management from Staffordshire University and graduated from the Campus of Peace and Sustainability at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya.



**CAMPUS
FOR PEACE**

