



Should Western donors provide aid to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan?

By Maria Siegmund
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In August 2021, the Taliban gained control over Afghanistan. Immediately after they claimed power, international [support from the World Bank](#) and [other Western donors](#) was suspended. This [poses a serious threat](#), as aid flows represented 42.9% of the country's GDP in 2020, and 75% of its public spending was funded by foreign grants. Over one year later, the crisis remains unsolved. Limited monetary support and disruptions of global agricultural markets through Russia's war in Ukraine present a continuing threat to economic stability, food security and health systems.

The past events have left the international community wondering how to help effectively. Concerns over the legitimacy of the Taliban government and the sanctions that followed make the provision of aid even more challenging. However, there are important differences in terms of the type of assistance. Some forms of [humanitarian assistance have kept flowing](#), while development aid has been cut until the Taliban ensures human rights and political freedom.

Given Afghanistan's dependency on aid, it is unclear if humanitarian aid alone is sufficient, and whether the international community should review its policies over aid flows and sanctions.

Providing aid to a non-recognised regime like the Taliban, which stands against many of the international norms that Afghanistan had committed to, is a delicate business. Many donors fear that it could be [interpreted as diplomatic recognition](#). Furthermore, given their fungibility, aid flows may end up inadvertently helping the Taliban to strengthen their grip on power and [solidify current totalitarian structures](#), retarding democratisation processes.

Meanwhile, the security of people working in the public sector, for NGOs or humanitarian interventions [has been compromised](#), leading to missing on-the-ground workers. Many left the country, went into hiding, or are not allowed to work any more. Additionally, restrictions

by the local authorities compromise program implementation - a case in point is the [constraints faced by female-headed households](#) to register for cash transfers. These challenges raise doubts about aid's capability to provide relief without worsening security issues.

Western donors could avoid some of these pitfalls by channelling aid through non-state actors, such as NGOs and international organisations. Over the last decades, an increasing number of NGOs have established [network and coordination mechanisms](#) in Afghanistan that are essential to its economy, political life and culture. Although many NGOs left the country, organisations such as the World Food Program and UNICEF [chose to stay and assist](#) in the distribution of humanitarian aid.

After reclaiming power, the Taliban encountered a country with a complex financial system that is highly dependent on international assistance, making aid flows also of critical importance to the Taliban's own political survival. Equally challenging is the departure of many skilled people from the country, which has [affected the institutional functioning](#) of the public sector. Western donors have, therefore, decided to [make aid conditional](#) on the Taliban's behaviour, in the hope of setting incentives to form a government which ensures human rights and political freedom for the Afghan population.

Previously, in the 1990s, donors used aid conditionality in the [Strategic Framework Process](#) for securing peace in Afghanistan. However, donors failed to understand the incentive system within the Taliban, which led to their [isolation and the strengthening of hardliners](#). Furthermore, assessment by the international aid community of the importance of aid (which builds the foundation for conditionalities) was not realistic, as it neglected [other resource inflows](#) such as from narco-trafficking. In short, the cutting of aid was less threatening and more limited in its leverage effect than expected.

Today, the picture is similar. While Western donors have stopped development aid and [frozen assets](#), humanitarian assistance is still flowing. Additionally, the Taliban could receive [funding from other sources](#), such as potential agreements with China and Pakistan. Although these inflows are unlikely to offset the restricted access to international markets and foreign aid, they set limits on the use of aid as leverage.

Meanwhile, humanitarian assistance alone cannot compensate for Afghanistan's dependency on international assistance, especially in the [provision of public services](#). Additionally, [liquidity problems](#) make it difficult for firms to pay salaries, while commodity prices and unemployment rise, and many are experiencing an abrupt drop in income and remittances. The political instability, unemployment, and insufficient educational

possibilities are especially problematic as they are the [fuel for opium production](#).

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is complex and intricate. While the reduction of foreign aid to prevent the consolidation of the Taliban government sounds logical, it ends up punishing the Afghan population. Afghanistan is too dependent on aid for the Taliban alone to be able to prevent a collapse of its economy and health system. However, the security situation poses a serious threat to the safety of aid and public workers, making it challenging to provide development aid without endangering additional lives. Western donors need to find solutions to enable additional aid and advocate for safe living conditions. These could include:

- Engaging with non-state actors to implement projects out of the interim Taliban administration's control, such as [projects](#) under the [expanded approach of the World Bank](#). Aid provision and projects should provide additional assistance to the rising number of people in need, and support on-the-ground organisations by providing funds for salaries, further training, and additional staff.
- Focusing on [donor harmonisation](#) by developing a joint strategy with a coherent agenda. Conditionalities should be based on realistic assessments of the importance of aid and take other potential financial flows into account.
- Reviewing existing policies such as sanctions and the freezing of assets to ease the economic situation in the short term, by enabling, for example, salary payments and remittances.
- Engaging in talks with the Taliban to enable safe working conditions for aid and public workers and all those whose lives are endangered because of their profession or gender. Here, the UN should take the role of an impartial and experienced reconciliation adviser. If the security situation improves, donors should again strengthen aid provision through non-state channels.

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