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Humanitarian Aid Delivery in Contemporary Afghanistan

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The Afghanistan Research Network is supported by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) for the benefit of developing countries. The information and views set out in this publication are those of the authors. Nothing herein constitutes the views of FCDO. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

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Hila-Nawa Alam is an Afghan-German development practitioner with two decades of work experience globally. She has worked with the United Nations in different functions in Beirut, Kabul, and Vienna. In Afghanistan, Hila has been active on the grassroots level with civil society and local NGOs since 2003, most notably by founding a school sponsorship program for formerly street-working children. Hila has also worked across Afghan national institutions where she focused on aid effectiveness and technical cooperation management. In addition to that work, she also headed a bilingual elementary school in New York. Hila holds an MSc in Social and Economic Sciences from Vienna University and is a senior fellow with the think tank 'Open Diplomacy' in Paris. In her current role as Director of Humanitarian Relief with Uplift, Hila is overseeing the design, planning, implementation, and monitoring & evaluation of the organization's Humanitarian Fund.

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Design: Smith Design Agency

Submitted March 2023, published June 2023.

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Key Takeaways

- ▶ A principled, transparent, and robust aid approach from the donor community is lacking in Afghanistan, increasing the risk of mismanagement and reducing impact.
 - ▶ The local (and rural) capacity built over the past 20 years is still functioning. The community development councils (CDCs) could and should be better utilized to deliver humanitarian aid more effectively in Afghanistan.
 - ▶ Strengthening the capacity of existing local non-governmental grassroots and community-driven initiatives for delivering assistance effectively and directly to communities maximizes impact and reduces aid diversion.
 - ▶ The areas of nutrition, health and livelihood are among the most critical right now as millions of Afghans face emergency levels of food insecurity, with female-headed households bearing the brunt of it.
 - ▶ Aid is extremely fragmented in today's Afghanistan, driven in large part by the current absence of a trusted counterpart government. A coordinated approach, with a simple set of core principles, should be developed for coherence, synergies, and avoidance of duplication.
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Abstract

Humanitarian aid delivery in contemporary Afghanistan is confronted with vast challenges that call for pragmatic and urgent solutions. While Afghanistan's poverty has already been chronic after four decades of conflict, the poverty rate has skyrocketed since the Taliban takeover: from 47% in 2020, to 70% in 2021, and then to 97% in 2022 (UNOCHA, 2023). Effectively, this means that in today's Afghanistan, almost all families possess less than the minimum amount of resources required to meet the most basic needs, such as food and shelter. International relief organizations are facing a plethora of predicaments in this new reality: the absence of a trusted counterpart government, aid diversion, hijacking of the aid discourse / politicization of aid (i.e. girls' education, female NGO ban), a collapsed banking sector, U.S. sanctions on individuals within the de-facto government, and inhumane mobility restrictions on Afghan women, to name only a few of the most prominent issues. In light of this challenging context for humanitarian relief efforts, this paper reviews the current initiatives of an Afghan-led humanitarian non-profit organization and how they compare to other modalities of aid delivery. The paper concludes with the following key messages for policy makers: (i) The local (and rural) capacity built over the past 20 years is still functioning; community-based structures should be better utilized to deliver humanitarian aid more effectively, (ii) A principled pro-poor approach de-coupled from political negotiations should be developed, and (iii) Core principles for humanitarian actors on community-driven development should be established.

Introduction

The sudden overthrow of the Afghan Republic on 15 August 2021 paralyzed the country and its citizenry overnight. Sanctions against individuals within the Taliban, the freezing of Afghanistan's state assets, and the subsequent collapse of the banking sector had a significant impact on Afghan citizens. A plethora of uncertainties also arose within the donor community on how to proceed in the country. As a result, an already extremely challenged citizenry suffering from protracted conflict, drought, and Covid-19 experienced an abrupt halt of assistance and was projected to face universal poverty (UNDP, 2021).

Prior to the collapse of the Afghan Republic, around 75% of government spending came from aid assistance and aid contributed to around 40% of the country's GDP (Cordesman, 2022). Following the collapse, all public services and payments came to a standstill, including the salary payments of Afghanistan's teachers. While donors tried to wrap their heads around the future of aid in Afghanistan, humanitarian funds were initially channeled through the World Food Program (WFP) which administered food and cash delivery across the country. Funds previously directed into the country's national budget by the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) were halted entirely in the immediate aftermath of the collapse. Three months later, the World Bank announced that USD 280 million of the ARTF would be repurposed to WFP and UNICEF by the end of 2021 (World Bank, 2021).

Since December 2021, \$1.8 billion in aid money – approximately \$40 million per week – administered by the UN has entered the country through cash shipments. This cash is held in a vault and later disbursed as local salaries or delivered across the country to service providers and implementers. While the UN recently published a statement (UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2023) on its cash shipments, broader transparency on disbursements and overheads is not publicly available. The risk of mismanagement appears vastly increased compared to when an imperfect but functioning Republic government was continuously attempting to improve centralized aid coordination.

A principled and robust aid approach from the donor community that could replace the former government's public finance tracking system with oversight of the current UN- and NGO-driven model is still missing today.

The decline of Afghan agency around how international aid is being conducted is coupled with the high risk of aid diversion through the de-facto authorities. In the first five months of 2022 alone, the UN reported 138 incidents of aid interference by the Taliban (UNSC, 2022). Real figures are likely to be significantly higher. Additionally, the ban on older girls and women in education has made the donor's dilemma of how to aid the suffering poor without legitimating an abusive and unrecognized regime even more acute. A declaration by the Taliban in December 2022 that all female NGO staff were banned from working, ostensibly due to apparent non-compliance with the Taliban's dress codes, again led to a widespread pause in international assistance despite the ongoing humanitarian crisis (Roberts, 2023).

In this challenging context for humanitarian relief efforts, this paper reviews the current initiatives of the Uplift Afghanistan Fund ("Uplift") and how it compares to other modalities of aid delivery. Uplift was established in the wake of the crisis after August 2021. The organization has sought to deliver humanitarian assistance via a widespread community-level development infrastructure that was carefully nurtured during the Republic years and that continues to exist in the country. It has gathered skilled development practitioners and Afghan experts to not only help in the ongoing humanitarian emergency, but to also imagine better ways of doing aid and development, despite the odds and beyond the noise of politics and negotiations.

In light of the new realities, Uplift's founders and experts felt compelled to create a solid platform with international accountability that enabled them to deliver effective aid while upholding principles of respect and compassion, as well as dignity, ownership, and self-determination. Uplift's focus is strictly on the most marginalized and those suffering systematic deprivation, such as women and girls, ethnic minorities, the displaced, the disabled, the elderly, and the extremely poor. Are there ways to deliver aid effectively to these very vulnerable, often forgotten, and politically invisible Afghans given all the constraints of cost, time, mobility, political meddling, that make up today's aid environment?

I am writing this paper from my perspective as Uplift's Director of Humanitarian Relief and our more than one year of experience of providing aid in today's post-Republic Afghanistan. It draws insights from our engagement and impact assessments of selected projects.

Alternative ways of delivering Humanitarian Assistance

Uplift's approach is to systematically strengthen the capacity of existing local non-governmental grassroots and community-driven initiatives for delivering assistance effectively and directly to communities. By working directly with frontline communities, this approach minimizes risks of aid diversion and ensures legal compliance with US & other donor requirements in this new, politically constrained environment in Afghanistan. This approach stems from the firm belief that local Afghans are not only capable of delivering effective support to their peers in need, but that they are also the best-positioned to decide for themselves and their own communities how the aid should be applied. Afghan agency and capability, however, has to be actively re-asserted in an approach that is not solely donor-dictated, especially given the complexity of the current setting and the unpredictable rule of the de-facto authorities.

In addition to food and cash assistance in emergency relief, Uplift has also been supporting community-driven education programs for girls, cash-for-work initiatives, digital aid for single female-headed households, micro-grants and vocational training for vulnerable women, children's wards at hospitals, educational and economic opportunities for Afghan refugees in Pakistan, and more. Uplift's network of donors includes U.S. based philanthropic institutions and individual donors, often from the Afghan-American community. Uplift is registered in the U.S. but not locally in Afghanistan, as a local registration would require the employment of a country director and would involve some level of coordination with the local authorities. Indeed, not being registered in Afghanistan has certain advantages in the current context. In particular, not being on the de-facto authorities' radar means there is no need to provide justification about our female staff which, including a team of enumerators, accounts for half of all current employees. Our employees in Afghanistan work mostly from their homes, and at this time only the male employees are visible in rare field visits. The majority of Uplift's experts work entirely pro-bono and only a small number of core international team staff is provided a lean salary to be able to sustain a full-time working schedule. All local employees in Afghanistan and Pakistan are being duly paid.

As is the nature of sanctions regimes, U.S. and U.N. sanctions against members of the Taliban gravely complicate the flow of aid into the country, sparking immense hesitation to doing business (including non-profit assistance) with the sanctioned country to minimize the risk of legal consequences. As a U.S.-based and U.S.-registered non-profit, Uplift naturally falls under U.S. jurisdiction. At the end of 2021 and in early 2022, the U.S. Treasury's Office for Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) issued 12 General Licenses, which are formal exceptions to the sanctions, detailing what is allowed within the realm of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. But despite these General Licenses, compliance questions are still not always entirely clear.

In preparation for aid initiatives that are designed and implemented by the local grassroots organizations, Uplift swiftly and thoroughly carries out several steps that are not only required from a compliance perspective, but are also part of its established systems for accountability and transparency. This system includes working with a dedicated legal OFAC compliance memo and seeking additional legal counseling (if required) to verify that all of our supported initiatives indeed fully conform with the sanctions regime. Uplift's vetting process and procedures before partnering with a local grassroots organization are:

- ▶ Specially Designated National (SDN) check of the local partner organization's leadership and funds recipient to ensure their assets are not blocked through the U.S. Treasury's SDN list
 - ▶ If required/uncertain, additional review of activities towards OFAC sanctions compliance
 - ▶ Peer review of the local partner organization's project proposal and budget
 - ▶ Technical interviews carried out by Uplift core team members
 - ▶ Assessing project budget and local market prices by local Uplift M&E team
 - ▶ Legal grant agreement between Uplift and the local partner organization
 - ▶ Hawala funds transfer to Afghanistan
-

Impact Assessments

Uplift-supported programs undergo thorough Monitoring and Evaluations (M&E) and auditing carried out by our local M&E specialists. In addition to standard M&E, Uplift also undertakes different types of empirical evaluations assessing the impact of the respective initiatives, including randomized control trial impact assessments and qualitative research studies. One objective is to analyze which modality of aid is proving to be the most effective, and to understand the perception of beneficiaries and perspectives of aid providers and other stakeholders. Many of Uplift's programs were first handled as pilot programs with the aim of learning more about their viability and effectiveness. The conclusions of the impact assessment inform the future scaling of these programs, also paving the way for larger scale evaluations with the assessment tools created and tested in the pilots. Assessments are developed in close collaboration with the respective implementing partner.

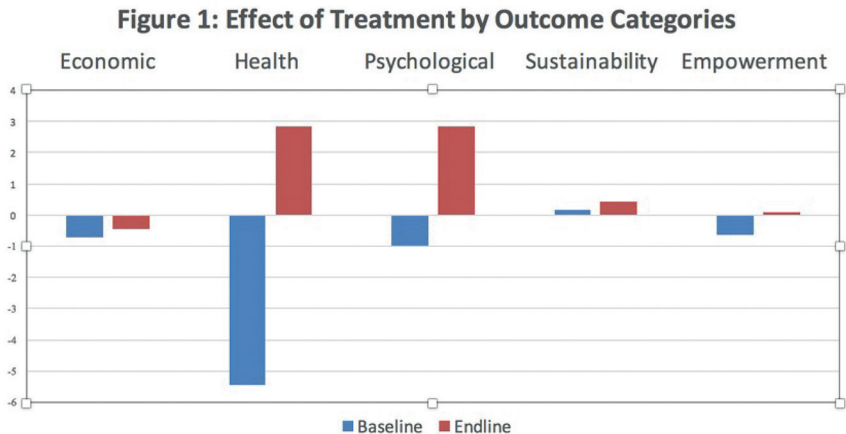
Below is a brief summary of the impact assessment of one of Uplift's initiatives, two Cash-for-Work (CfW) pilots in Jowzjan and Kunduz that were implemented by a key local Uplift partner organization, the Community-Driven Development Organization (CDDO), through the respective Community Development Councils (CDCs). In collaboration with the research group Evaluasi, Uplift designed lightweight and adaptive randomized control trial impact evaluations that were tailored to operational realities and necessary timelines of the pilots. In these studies, Uplift did not measure the material impact of the public works projects on the communities as a whole, but rather the effect the pilots had on the laborers who were the direct beneficiaries. Baseline and endline surveying took place in treatment and control groups, measuring individual-level outcome categories.

Together with CDDO, 298 individuals were ultimately identified for the study in a lottery selection system. Half (149) were assigned to the treatment group in each community and the other half were assigned to the control group. CDDO took baseline measurements of both groups prior to CfW implementation and took endline measurements of both groups after CfW implementation. The five individual-level outcome categories that were measured were: (i) Economic improvements, (ii) Health improvements, (iii) Psychological improvements, (iv) Sustainability improvements, and (v) Empowerment improvements. Findings of the analysis were produced in two forms: regression analysis of each outcome module included on the survey instrument, and the mean differences for individual questions.

The results shown in the figure below display each index as the dependent variable in a regression model to determine the effect of being in the treatment group, aggregated across module questions.

Figure 1

Effect of Treatment by Outcome Categories



Based on the still small sample sizes of this (and all of Uplift's assessments so far), conclusions rely on aggregate interpretations. However, they do provide indications and have already shown statistical significance of positive impact in specific areas. The preliminary evidence is that the pilot had important positive impact on the beneficiaries across at least two outcome categories, health and psychological improvements. While the findings are suggestive rather than conclusive, the impact observed for these modules is sufficiently large to strengthen the confidence of these conclusions. At scale, Uplift may discover that related CfW activities do indeed positively influence the other outcome categories as well.

Delivering Aid through the Community Development Councils

“Community-based development models have been used with success in a variety of fragile, conflict, and sanctioned countries. Organizations such as the World Bank, ADB, UN-Habitat and others have been using community models in a variety of contexts where government capacities and presence are weak or under sanction” (Guggenheim et al, 2022).

Pre-collapse, the National Solidarity Program (NSP), later Citizen's Charter (CC), was Afghanistan's most far-reaching national rural development program, covering around 90% of the country. A central aspect of these programs were the Community Development Councils (CDCs), democratically-elected councils within the respective communities that were formally non-governmental (although funded by the national development programs coordinated by the previous government). The CDCs' rationale was to create a representative and democratic decision-making structure at the community level. They were representative of all community members, including women (who previously made up approximately 50% of the CDCs) and youth. By working through these CDCs, the community members were given a direct role in deciding about and prioritizing among development projects, mostly in thematic sub-committees (agriculture, infrastructure, health, youth, etc.) (Katz, 2017).

As the most large-scale national rural program in post-2001 Afghanistan, the NSP's/CC's, and in extension the CDCs impacts were assessed in numerous studies. Positive impacts described included (i) increased access to drinking water and electricity, (ii) improved acceptance of democratic processes, including increased number of village members who would like to challenge or change leadership decisions, (iii) improved opinions about women's political and social participation, including increased enfranchisement, increased access to goods and services, increased access to counseling and support networks, increased mobility outside of villages, and (iv) increased perceptions of economic well-being (Beath et al, 2013).

With the collapse of the Republic, the CC ceased to exist as a government program; however, the community councils and the developed expertise persevered. According to Uplift's local partners, the de-facto authorities have not demonstrated widespread opposition towards the CDCs, nor do local experts seem to anticipate such opposition developing in the medium term. In part, this may be because the CDCs are formed by community members themselves, which gives them local legitimacy. The Taliban are familiar with these structures, both from their previous rule and from the insurgency years, so the CDCs appear not to be solely or intensely associated with the previous Republic and its national programs as such.

One of Uplift's local partner organizations is an NGO established following the fall of the Republic and comprised of former directors and technical staff of former national programs like the NSP and the CC. Its aim is to support the effective delivery of aid through the community mechanisms. Through this partner, many of Uplift's programs are successfully implemented with the help of the CDCs and their social organizers. From the perspective of Uplift's humanitarian and development work for marginalized communities in post-Republic Afghanistan, it is significantly advantaged by working through this system which provides access, equitable beneficiary selection, and accountability. For instance, shortly after the recent ban on female NGO employment, which left many international NGOs and the U.N. uncertain as to how to continue, Uplift's local partner promptly proposed to engage elderly female community members in the CDC system to facilitate aid delivery to Afghan women and provided Uplift, and its other partners and donors, with a detailed strategy on the best way forward.

One of many examples where we found the involvement of the CDCs to be extremely valuable was the emergency response to the survivors of the devastating earthquake in summer 2022 in Khost and Paktika. Uplift had raised funds to very swiftly (within days) equip 170 affected families in Paktika with care packages including gas cookers and other mobile cooking equipment, food items, bottled drinking water, and more. Relief efforts in the area seemed scattered and extremely hectic, with instances of aid confiscation reported from the gateways to the affected villages.

Observations made during this initiative included: (i) casualty numbers appeared highly exaggerated by the local authorities, likely in an attempt to generate higher donor contributions, (ii) villagers from unaffected communities were blocking the roads and were requesting to receive aid; without the close coordination with the respective local communities the risk of theft and looting would have been high, (iii) during door-to-door surveys it was found that some of the households received food packages and tents up to more than five times, (iv) unaffected households from other communities traveled to affected areas in an attempt to receive aid, and (v) many of the people that evidently received aid from other agencies denied having received aid and were requesting more. Uplift's aid within this initiative, however, evidently reached the selected survivors, largely – as we believe – due to engaging the community members and the CDCs themselves in the entire process of beneficiary selection, aid delivery, and subsequent auditing.

Advantages of working through the CDCs

- ▶ Knowledge of poverty and food insecurity levels among community households
 - ▶ Equitable and comprehensible beneficiary selection procedures
 - ▶ Participatory approach empowering the communities in decisions on their needs
 - ▶ Low cost of delivery and fast implementation due to established delivery systems
 - ▶ Inclusion of women, girls, and youth
 - ▶ Inclusion of marginalized groups, including the elderly and the disabled
 - ▶ Accountability, Afghan agency and self-determination
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Limitations of working through the CDCs

From Uplift's perspective, working through the CDC structure is highly advisable in the current environment. At the same time, other community-driven approaches by experienced local grassroots have also demonstrated to perform well, particularly in specific sectors such as community-based education. While the CDCs might be best positioned to represent all members of the community, including parents of school-aged children and teachers, they don't possess the level of technical expertise that certain specialized local organizations have. Where specific grassroots organizations possess specialized expertise, collaboration with CDCs may nevertheless still be very desirable, depending on the nature of the engagement and the group of beneficiaries. For example, the CDCs may still add significant value by facilitating the negotiation of access and coordination, thereby reducing the risk of project disruptions (or worse) by the de-facto authorities or malicious individuals.

Recommendations for International Organizations and Policymakers

The principal takeaway from one year of humanitarian assistance with Uplift is that the local (and rural) capacity built over the past 20 years is still functioning. The CDCs could and should be better utilized to deliver humanitarian aid more effectively in Afghanistan. While the CDC structure might not be entirely perfect, and working through them may not be feasible in every geographic location of the country or in specific thematic areas, they are still among the most thorough and well-established rural delivery mechanisms coming out of 20 years of international investment in the former Afghan Republic. In addition, drawing from Uplift's experience, we urge fellow humanitarian actors in Afghanistan, including the key operating institutions like the UN, to consider the following:

► **Develop a principled pro-poor approach, de-coupled from political negotiations**

There is still a lot of uncertainty and turmoil in the development community, and humanitarian aid in Afghanistan continues to be politicized. The de-facto authorities are systematically erasing Afghan women and girls from public life, creating immense needs for mindfully planned assistance to women at the grassroots level. The areas of nutrition, health and livelihood are among the most critical right now as millions of Afghans face emergency levels of food insecurity, with female-headed households bearing the brunt of it. Aid delivery to women, as well as to the extreme poor, should be made more resilient to external shocks by working through experienced local mechanisms and structures like the CDCs. Humanitarian aid should not be halted, nor should it be made conditional on the policy announcements by the de-facto authorities.

► **Establish core principles for humanitarian actors on community-driven development**

Aid is extremely fragmented in today's Afghanistan, driven in large part by the current absence of a trusted counterpart government. In this context, the agency of Afghans has to be safeguarded in order for assistance to be sustainable. Community-driven development should be given priority. A coordinated approach, with a simple set of core principles, should be developed for coherence, synergies, and avoidance of duplication. Pragmatic and consistent information sharing mechanisms among all humanitarian actors in-country are also necessary.

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About Us

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civiness Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University.

PeaceRep is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK.



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