

Afghanistan:

Failing state, failing cooperation?

Six years after the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan is a long way from political stability and economic progress. The decline of state influence continues, especially in rural areas; because of the security situation, aid organisations are drastically cutting back their programmes and military considerations are taking on overriding importance.



Photo: DW/HH

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In the last year progress towards political stability and economic development in Afghanistan has fallen far short of the expectations of the government of President Hamid Karsai and the international community. Outside the capital, Kabul, and in the country's northern provinces – previously considered peaceful – the security situation has deteriorated significantly. There has been an increase in attacks by armed and politically, religiously or criminally motivated groups on targets associated with the police, the military and the government; the number of politically motivated suicide bombings involving extensive civilian casualties has risen to an all-time high. Despite the massive international military presence, the government has been unable to assert the state's monopoly of force on any substantial scale. The attacks by foreign soldiers on strongholds of Al Quaida or the Taliban result in civilian casualties; more and more voices are now protesting against the intervention of western forces.

In rural areas, in particular, discontent among the population is growing. In the past, military intervention has led to major losses among non-combatants. In addition – despite initial successes in the areas of nutrition, education and health – the gap between the visible development taking place in Kabul and other urban centres and living conditions in rural areas has continued to widen. The promised improvement in the situation of the rural population has failed to materialise.

All the parties involved in development cooperation set out with the hope that intensive input of personnel and funds would quickly improve the economic and social situation; hindsight reveals this expectation to have been over-optimistic. We must once again acknowledge that a devastated country that has been traumatized by decades

of war cannot be developed from outside in the space of a few years. Many government and non-government donors wanted to make a mark in too many places, hoping to thus generate a powerful development dynamic. The realisation that processes of change must build on careful analysis of the initial situation and take place on an appropriate time scale was too often overlooked; rapid success was sought in an effort to justify the massive influx of development funds.

We need an about-turn in development cooperation with Afghanistan. Emphasis must be placed on strengthening the responsibility of Afghans for their own development, increasing international coordination among donors and funding the development of state institutions such as an independent judiciary, an incorruptible police force and fully functioning ministries. We need visible success in creating the physical infrastructure – roads, power, and water supplies. And we urgently need to improve the living conditions of people in rural areas in terms of food, education and health care.

That is easier said than done: the security situation is deteriorating rapidly, corruption is widespread. And these are not the only factors that make development difficult: there is a shortage of skilled workers, and fully functioning state structures are a rarity at both national and regional level.

In 2001, collectively intoxicated by heady goals and full of planning euphoria, we all chose to overlook these problems – entranced by the dream of being able to haul a country out of the Middle Ages and into the modern era in a short space of time. Once again we have learned our lesson: it doesn't work! Here are some points to help shape our thinking and planning for the future:

- We need patience and a sense of proportion in planning and evaluating support measures. Afghanistan is the poorest and worst resourced country in Central Asia – long-term programmes of minimum complexity and with a high degree of flexibility have the best prospects if they are not to join the list of development failures.

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- There is no comprehensive development plan for Afghanistan. Regional, religious and ethnic factors need to be taken into account, particularly in connection with sensitive issues such as the role of women or the development of democratic institutions.
- Despite the weaknesses of administrative structures and antiquated traditional institutions, we must work within this framework to bring about the transformation of society. Parallel structures have never yet proved sustainable, and they provoke local resistance that could be avoided by acting in ways that are more socioculturally acceptable.
- The goal of civil development must be reflected in the provision of funds. Set against the military budget of more than 500 million euros per year, 80 to 100 million euros for development cooperation is a relatively modest sum. It is true that the Afghan administration is not yet in a position to spend these funds in an appropriate and targeted fashion. But there are foundations that operate in a professional manner, church organisations and NGOs, which could carry out projects and programmes without political posturing or partisanship – focusing directly on the needs of the population.
- Inadequate security is one of the obstacles to the implementation of development measures. This is the view of most of the aid organisations active in Afghanistan; they therefore support the continuing presence of ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) troops deployed by the United Nations. However, this does not mean that the insidious dominance of military issues is accepted unreflectingly.

And yet this is precisely what we are currently witnessing: the “Provincial Reconstruction Teams”, whose work combines elements of foreign policy, security policy and development policy, are increasingly being driven by military considerations. They are deployed where the security interests of the Afghan government and of foreign troops need to be protected – and those involved in foreign policy and development settle in alongside them. In other words: development cooperation tends to take place not where development considerations most urgently dictate but where security factors decide.

Even worse: where the military intervenes, development workers get caught in the sights of armed opposition forces. They work in close proximity to the soldiers. The involvement of soldiers in “development measures” in the name of “civil-military cooperation” creates a grey area in which civil workers and military personnel can no longer be clearly distinguished from each other. This is not only dangerous for the development workers; it is also security



Photo: DWHH/Meissner

The security situation outside the Afghan capital Kabul has deteriorated significantly.

nonsense, for what radical fighter is going to be fobbed off with a new well?

Prospects for peace, reconstruction and development in Afghanistan will only succeed through a change of strategy: a stronger emphasis on civil development, more open dialogue with all areas of society in Afghanistan, and greater integration of neighbouring countries by the international community.

Zusammenfassung

Sechs Jahre nach dem Sturz der Taliban ist Afghanistan weit von politischer Stabilität und wirtschaftlichem Fortschritt entfernt. Der Zerfall des staatlichen Einflusses vor allem in ländlichen Gebieten setzt sich fort, Hilfsorganisationen schränken ihre Programme wegen der Sicherheitslage drastisch ein, militärische Überlegungen rücken in den Vordergrund. Um dem entgegenzuwirken, muss ein neuer Ansatz in der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit gefunden werden. Militär und zivile Helfer müssen unabhängig voneinander auftreten, soziale und kulturelle Aspekte des Landes in die Planung der Projekte mit einfließen.

Resumen

Seis años después de la caída del régimen Talibán, Afganistán está muy lejos de lograr la estabilidad política y el progreso económico. La influencia estatal continúa desmoronándose, sobre todo en las regiones rurales, y las organizaciones de ayuda restringen drásticamente sus programas debido a la crítica situación de seguridad. Con ello, los asuntos militares han pasado a primer plano. A fin de impulsar un cambio de esta situación, es necesario hallar un nuevo enfoque en la cooperación para el desarrollo. Los militares y los cooperantes civiles deben intervenir en forma independiente y no conjunta, y los aspectos sociales y culturales del país deben tomarse en cuenta en la planificación de proyectos.