

**A comparative study of Swedish and Norwegian Development Aid to
Afghanistan 2015 – 2021.**

A Report to the Norwegian Commission for Afghanistan 2015 – 2021

June 12, 2025.

Adam Pain

Summary

This report offers a comparative review of Swedish and Norwegian development aid to Afghanistan focusing on the period 2015- 2021, contributing to the Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan's evaluation of Norway's engagement in Afghanistan for this period. The comparison draws on an earlier study of Swedish aid to Afghanistan. There were strong similarities between the two country aid programmes in terms of their areas of focus, principles of engagement, the support that they provided to multi-donor trust funds and their commitments to their own national NGOs, particularly their Committees for Afghanistan.

The report discusses what can be learnt from comparisons in general and in this particular case. It draws on a taxonomy to look at the two countries' strategies and implementation practices in relation to harmonization, internal coherence, alignment with Afghan and local actors and the overall plausibility and fitness for purpose of their interventions.

With respect to Sweden and Norway it is the similarities that are striking rather than the differences, even if the cultures of the two different aid organisations are somewhat different. Sweden's aid organisation is more formal and hierarchical, and this is perhaps reflected in its more systematic documentation of policy and programme evaluations. Norway's aid organisation on the other hand has left less of a formal documentary trail so that policy and programming cannot easily be evaluated but with a smaller more relational aid administration, informal processes of learning should not be underestimated. However, both country programme policies towards Afghanistan have not been plausible or fit for purpose, seeing Afghanistan more in terms of its deficits or needs rather than understanding how Afghanistan functioned and building on what was there. Yet both countries supported their national Committees for Afghanistan who worked in a more processual way in specific contexts on incremental change, building on what was there. The pity is that the learning that could have been leveraged from this was not systematically done or demanded. It is concluded that systematic learning from programming implementation is still a work in progress for Norway's aid administration.

The goals that both Sweden and Norway set for development cooperation with Afghanistan as reflected in their various strategy documents were more a vision of what Afghanistan's future should be than achievable goals which could guide strategy and practice. They were not developed based on a deep or progressive understanding of Afghanistan's context, they appeared blind to the incoherence of the western intervention and its irreconcilable goals and neither country was in a strong position to assert its principles.

Afghanistan's government could be characterised for the period of 2001 – 2021 as being 'in office but not in power'. With a flawed and imposed peace settlement, without a monopoly of violence, subject to conflicting and irreconcilable agendas imposed by external actors and a rentier economy driven by external military expenditure and massive aid flows, it was a western state building project that was riddled with inherent contradictions. Both Norway and Sweden, as parties to that process even if as minor players, could do little to challenge, let alone mitigate or counter the perverse incentives of the system.

The report concludes with reflections on strategies and modalities for conflict contexts, potential lessons for small country aid programmes and asks to what extent good policy can be made and implemented for countries in conflict. It suggests there is a need to rethink policy approaches under such conditions. This would include using strategic foresight and scenario building to address uncertainty and focussing more on complexity and non-linear change.

Acronyms

ARTF	Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund
CDC	Community Development Council
DAC	Development Advisory Council
LOFTA	Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
NAC	Norwegian Afghanistan Committee
NCoA	Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan
NGO	Non-government organisations
NMFA	Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Norad	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
SCA	Swedish Committee for Afghanistan
SFMA	Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
TOR	Terms of Reference
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Contents

Section	Content	Page
	Summary	2
	Acronyms	3
I	Introduction	5
II	Why and how to compare?	6
III	The broader lessons on the impact of development interventions in Afghanistan	8
IV	Sweden and Norway's Aid to Afghanistan compared	11
	Principles of Engagement	11
	Comparing Sweden and Norway at the Strategic Level	12
	Comparing Sweden and Norway at the Implementation Level	16
V	Responding to the Review Question	21
VI	Wider Reflections	23
	Documentation	
Annex 1	Terms of Reference	
Annex 2	Informants	
Annex 3	Tables and Boxes	
Annex 4	Insights from Zardozi on Building Freedom to Act	

I. Introduction

This report was commissioned by the Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan (NCoA) which has been tasked by Royal Decree to prepare a comprehensive evaluation of Norway's engagement in Afghanistan from 2015 – 2021. The report aims to contribute to the evaluation by providing a comparative review of Swedish and Norwegian development aid to the country for this period¹ while considering the consequences of the Western intervention since 2001. The comparison draws on an earlier study undertaken by the author on Swedish aid to Afghanistan, hereafter referred to as the Swedish Lessons Report.²

The terms of reference (TOR) for the study (see annex 1) drew attention to the similarities between Sweden and Norway's assistance to Afghanistan, noting that both countries had supported multi-donor trust funds, focused on Afghanistan's Northern provinces and had provided long term support to their own country NGOs.³ They also emphasized the need for aid coordination and shared commitments to development priorities, notably on human rights and gender inequality. In addition to requesting that the report should provide wider reflections on the modalities of support, approaches to human rights and gender equality and the challenges of being minor players in a big international effort, the TOR asked that the report should compare Swedish and Norwegian aid priorities and channels, and undertake a review of these priorities including human rights⁴, gender equality, anti-corruption and education, so as to assess:

- 1) The extent to which Sweden and Norway achieved their stated objectives for the development cooperation with Afghanistan, and if any projects or priorities stand out as more suited to meet the goals set.
- 2) If Norway, as compared to Sweden, could have done more through its programming to address what the study on Sweden identified as the "the perverse incentives of the system» and to a lesser degree have "delegitimised the state".
- 3) If Norway, to the same degree as Sweden (and other donors) accepted or possibly challenged "a set of policy narratives that had pre-defined solutions to the assumed problems".
- 4) To what extent the two countries altered or changed their approach and programming to meet contextual challenges in the period 2015-2021.

This report draws on a range of Norwegian government documentation from its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA) and the Norwegian Aid for Development Cooperation (Norad) including evaluation reports and documentation from the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC) and

¹ While the time frame makes sense in terms of the reporting period for the NCoA, in practice a clear separation between before 2015 and after is not possible: it is not reflected in the documentation and the western intervention up to 2015 left a deep legacy.

² Pain, Adam (2021) *Punching above its Weight or Running with the Crowd? Lessons from Sweden's Development Cooperation with Afghanistan 2002-2020*. Working Paper to the Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), Stockholm

³ Both Norway and Sweden established Committees for Afghanistan, which have been central to each country's development assistance through NGOs to Afghanistan. The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) and the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC) were formed originally as activist member-led solidarity organisations for Afghanistan in response to the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979.

⁴ This report speaks to the full dimensions of human rights – from access to good food, clean water and a roof over one's head to rights to education, health, work and justice.

Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). These, along with additional sources and academic literature are listed in the bibliography. In addition, on-line interviews were held with six government officials and one NGO staff member, and an anonymized list is provided in Annex 2.

The report first explores the issue of a comparative study and how it can be approached before briefly characterizing the key features of the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan and Sweden and Norway's position in that. It goes on to summarise some of the broader lessons that have been drawn from a range of country, meta and thematic or conceptual reviews of the international intervention. These are used to situate the findings from the Swedish Lessons Report and set the basis for an assessment of Norway's development aid which follows. The report then returns to address the four questions identified above before concluding with a set of reflections.

II. Why and how to compare?

The motivation for the NCoA to commission this comparative review is not entirely self-evident and nor is it immediately obvious how any findings of differences and similarities can easily be leveraged into analysis and recommendations. Indeed, at first sight it is the commonalities between Sweden's and Norway's approach to aid in general and for Afghanistan – not for nothing are they part of a group of like-minded donors or Nordic+ - that are notable. Comparative analysis, however, if it is not to end up as simply illustrative, ahistorical and universalizing, requires an understanding of the context that generates the empirical examples of the comparison.

Yet comparison was at the heart of the Western development project for Afghanistan focusing on what the country was seen to lack in comparison say, with what Sweden or Norway had. The intention was to shift or progress Afghanistan closer to what Sweden or Norway are. One might imagine that the country contexts of Sweden or Norway and Afghanistan are incomparable. But from an analytical point of view the apparent differences between them in terms of outcomes, for example, should not mask the fact that a common analytical framework, such as the Welfare Regime Framework, can be brought to bear to contextualise, for example their settings.⁵ Indeed, there is much to be gained from analytically rubbing two contrasting as well as two similar contexts together.⁶

There are of course differences between Sweden and Norway in terms of their institutional contexts although in comparison with the USA, for example, they are more similar than different if one were to use the welfare regime comparison with respect to the relative role of the state and markets in providing welfare. Yet the two country histories – not least the different positions and experiences of the second world war – have left different legacies in terms of how each country positions itself in relation to the wider world. One cannot imagine, for example, that a review of Swedish aid to Afghanistan would have titled itself, as the report of the first Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan did 'A Good Ally'.⁷ Equally the position of Norway outside the EU in

⁵ See for example the Welfare Regime Framework: Wood, G. and I. Gough (2006) A Comparative Welfare Regime Approach to Global Social Policy. *World Development* **34** (10) 1696–1712

⁶ I have co-authored a textbook on Rural Development which is based on an analytical comparison between Afghanistan and Sweden (Pain, A and Hansen, K. 2019. Rural Development. Routledge)

⁷ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense. A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001 – 2014. Official Norwegian Reports NOU 2016: 8

contrast to that of Sweden within it has perhaps given Norway more room to manoeuvre on the political stage.

Yet the comments from informant interviews made it clear that there are significant differences in institutional cultures and practices between the two countries, possibly a historical legacy of different social structures with Norway being more egalitarian. There are the obvious differences in institutional arrangements and size in their aid administrations. Sida (the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) is relatively independent of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SFMA) and with a larger staff complement in comparison with Norad (the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation) which is much smaller and has had a shifting organizational relationship with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA). This has moved from independence to an advisory role for the NMFA although over time greater functional and budget responsibilities have been returned to it. There is also a less tangible dimension of institutional culture with Sweden’s aid administration being seen as more hierarchical, formal and structured while that of Norway’s being more informal and relational. While the size may be a contributing factor to the ability of each country’s aid administration to analyse, strategize, plan and monitor in relation to Afghanistan for example, it is not possible to provide any assessment of this. Yet the impression gained from the informant interviews⁸ was that Norway’s aid administration – the NMFA and Norad – was able to act as a single body with constant communication between embassies, the Ministry and Norad. It is less clear that is the case with respect to the SMFA and Sida.

So how then can we compare Sweden and Norway with respect to their thinking and practices in relations to their Afghanistan programming? This can best be done by looking at outcomes and this review draws on an approach and taxonomy developed by Blohm et al (2024)⁹ in relation to learning lessons about addressing peace and security in Afghanistan. Here (see Fig.1) it has been adapted to focus on questions of strategy and implementation in relation to the two country’s development interventions in terms of their harmonization with other international actors, the internal cross-organizational coherence with the respective aid administrations, the alignment of each country programme with Afghan local and national actors and critically the overall plausibility of strategy and implementation of the aid programmes.

Figure 1: A basic taxonomy for comparing Sweden and Norway’s development aid to Afghanistan

	Harmonization with international activities	Internal coherence cross government	Alignment with Afghan local and national actors	Overall plausibility/ fitness for purpose
Strategic level - Analysis - Strategy	With most important partner countries (US, EU, UN etc)	Ministry, Aid Organisation, NGO	Relations with central government	Strategic assumptions, theory of change
Implementation - Planning - Coordination - Monitoring - Feedback	US, EU and UN	Coordination/ learning between agencies	Relations with local government, NGOs etc	Country delivery mechanisms and learning

⁸ Informants 4 and 7 made this point.

⁹ Blohm, T., Rotmann, P., and Weigand, F. (2024) “Never say never” Learning Lessons from Afghanistan Reviews. Global Public Policy Institute. [»Never say Never:« Learning Lessons from Afghanistan Reviews](#)

There are of course substantial analytical, and evidence challenges in giving substance to the individual parts of the matrix. Harmonization for example is a slippery word, a mobilizing metaphor to which everyone may claim they subscribe to because it is seen to be a good thing, even if the reality is different. But the agenda in Afghanistan was in effect set by the big players who established the 'rules' but did not necessarily follow them. Indeed, if one digs below the surface what was more evident was the incoherence of conflicting policy stories and strategies whether it be in rural development, sub-national government or counter-narcotics¹⁰. To that is added the question of the evidence base (or documentation) in relation to strategic thinking and implementation by Norway and Sweden, a point to which we return.

But first we briefly summarise the broader lessons that have already been drawn from various reviews of the results of various country programme against which the results from both Sweden and Norway should be assessed.

III. The broader lessons of the impact of development interventions in Afghanistan

Norway's first Royal Commission on Afghanistan that reported in 2016, was the first review that in many ways set the tone for self-criticism that was to follow for other country reviews of their Afghanistan engagement. Its conclusion that *'overall, Norway's contribution did not make a significant difference to the international mission in Afghanistan'*¹¹ was widely seen as saying it like it is¹² even if it commended Norway's domestic goal of proving to be a good ally to the US and NATO. What is less clear is how the findings from this report were subsequently used in Norway's aid administration. The 2016-2017 report by the NMFA to the Storting (Norwegian parliament) had a brief ten lines on the report (p188) which on the one hand managed to excavate from it a positive spin - *'concrete results ...including in the areas of institution-building, education and health'* - and externalized the challenges in terms of *'the lack of a political solution to the conflict and ongoing corruption'* as the blockages to Afghanistan's development. The report concluded that it would be useful for future strategy.

The tone of some 16 other country and international organizational reviews that followed from the Norwegian Commission took an increasingly critical stance of what their interventions had not achieved and acknowledged failure. But that does not necessarily mean that learning from these reviews has taken place, and the right lessons have been drawn and will be subsequently applied. The report by Blohm et al. (2024) on learning lessons from Afghanistan Reviews, which primarily focused on the peace and conflict lessons, was aptly titled 'Never Say Never' reflected the view that one cannot take for granted that the challenges posed by Afghanistan between 2001 – 2021 will never be faced again.

The reviews that Blohm et al. (op. cit.) assessed varied in the extent to which they addressed the issues identified in columns 2-4 in Figure 1 but they noted the tendency of national reviews to be concerned with their own national intergovernmental coherence rather than international harmonization or local alignment. But the Blohm report also noted the tendency of smaller

¹⁰ See the Swedish Lessons Report p. 25

¹¹ The Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan (2016) *A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001 – 2014*, p.11

¹² See Ann Wilkens, (2016) [To Say It Like It Is: Norway's evaluation of its part in the international intervention - Afghanistan Analysts Network - English](#)

country reviews (p. 6) to ‘focus heavily on their failures and successes in harmonizing, coordinating, or aligning their efforts with other ...while larger countries reviews did not’. There may be a lesson in this with respect to the challenges of being a small player to which we will return in the final discussion. Blohm et al (2024) provide an assessment of the US views of their allies’ contribution:

‘Implicitly, at least, US policymakers and analysts seem convinced that the more than 50 allies who contributed to the war in Afghanistan were not decisive in determining what went well and what went wrong - the US role was simply too overwhelming to conclude otherwise’ (p12).

The conclusion that the Norwegian Commission report reached that ‘successful state-building during ongoing armed conflict is near impossible to achieve’ (A Good Ally, p14) reflects the broader argument about incommensurate goals being set. Danny Rodrik¹³ has framed this as the policy trilemma and argued that goals of a war on terror, liberal state building and democracy cannot all be achieved at the same time: any combination of two of them comes at the expense of the third. In that sense the goals of development aid by Norway were conflicted and unachievable from the beginning of the intervention.

A second core theme that Blohm et al. (2024) draw from the reviews is that of a failure to understand the context and learn from it, so there was a lack of plausibility and fitness for purpose in the efforts to bring peace and security. Levine and Pain (2024)¹⁴ from a review of programming in Afghanistan in areas such as market development, informal credit, community development councils (CDCs), rural diversity and post-harvest processing, made much the same argument. Interventions in development programming in Afghanistan had largely failed due to a failure to understand or address context¹⁵. They identified ten traps that aid programming had consistently fallen into including defining perfect solutions, avoiding social theory, seeing the problem through the eyes of the solution, using the same solutions everywhere (institutional monocropping) and forgetting that context always bites back (see Annex 3, see Fig 2). They argued that these traps in problem definition, context analysis and in managing and monitoring interventions were not due to lack of knowledge and information. Rather they were generated by the ways of thinking and working that are pervasive to aid bureaucracies.

However, modest interventions that focused on basic infrastructure or more instrumental interventions, such as school construction or road building – rather than those seeking to bring about behavioural changes as with CDCs - have been more effective. This was a conclusion from a review of lessons from seven of evaluations from Sida’s support to Afghanistan¹⁶ which were subsequently supported by a meta review¹⁷ of about 148 evaluation reports from a range of donors (there were none from Norway that met the inclusion criteria) which concluded:

¹³ Rodrik, D. (2011). *The globalization paradox: Democracy and the future of the world economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ [ten-traps-to-avoid-engaging-with-context-afghanistan.pdf](#)

¹⁵ This is not to be confused with the all too common culturalist view that Afghanistan could be explained in terms of its strong tribal structures.

¹⁶ Pain, A., Rothman, J., and Lundin, M (2015) Review of Sida’s Support to Afghanistan – Lessons and Conclusions from 7 Evaluations. Indvelop Sweden AB.

¹⁷ Zürcher, C. (2020) Meta-Review of Evaluations of Development Assistance to Afghanistan, 2008–2018. Chapeau Paper. Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) Germany

‘the international community has repeatedly overestimated its own capacity and the capacity of its Afghan partners to bring about rapid social change. What has worked best are modest, locally embedded projects with immediate, tangible benefits. What has rarely worked are complex projects aimed at building capacity and changing behaviour. More specifically, interventions in basic health and education, and in improving basic livelihoods, led to results. Interventions in building capacity for the administration, or in sectors such as the rule of law or gender, rarely worked’ (Zürcher, 2020:8).

As Zürcher et al. noted (2020:16) a striking feature of all the projects that they had reviewed was that many that had been termed as relevant, but many were also not effective in terms of achieving what they were designed to deliver. This brings into question the usefulness of the way that relevance is assessed when it is simply defined in terms of meeting a need. As the Swedish Lessons Report noted, the DAC criteria of relevance now include the elements of design and the qualities of the intervention needed in relation to a theory of change, taking account of context and the means of implementation. As Zürcher et al. found, in relation to both strategy and implementation of development programmes many of the theories of change and implementation practices were not plausible or fit for purpose and therefore by definition were not relevant. Programmes for capacity building, for example, were assessed (Zürcher et al: 17) as rarely succeeding given their tendency to focus on training, formal regulations, mechanisms and procedures but ignoring capacities related to power relations, social relationships and informal institutions¹⁸.

In view of these more general findings, the question arises as to the extent that strategy and programming by Sweden and Norway were able to rise above the limitations of development programming those other countries were encumbered with.

In some respects, the poor returns to the reconstruction effort can be accounted for by the crowded operating environment for donors in Afghanistan, with multiple donors working in each sector, working to different agendas and principles. The point made by Byrd (2007)¹⁹, and the challenges did not diminish over time, bears repeating:

‘Difficulties in aid management and coordination have been exacerbated by the following factors. First an enormous number of donors active in Afghanistan – according to the Government as many as 62 including non-governmental donors. Second a number of these donors – of the order of half-dozen or more – are major players in terms of the amount of assistance that they provide and/or as actors on the world stage. There is no ...natural dominant or “lead” donor in the development sphere’

A case in point was the education sector that had at least 23 donor relationships with 8 donors providing some 90 percent of the funding.²⁰ Moreover, there was selectivity in terms of how funding was allocated geographically between provinces and there were higher levels of funding by government and donors in insecure provinces compared to more secure provinces.

¹⁸ Denny and Mallett, 2017)

¹⁹ Byrd, W. (2007) ‘Responding to Afghanistan’s Development Challenge: An Assessment of Experience during 2002–2007 and Issues and Priorities for the Future’. Report SASPR-11. Washington, DC: World Bank.

²⁰ Poole, L. (2011) ‘Data on Aid Flows to Afghanistan’. Supporting Research for Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. Bath: Global Humanitarian Assistance oole

But donors programming in the same sector were often working to different objectives and theories of change, to the extent that they were defined. There were for example very different policy narratives driving programme design in agriculture and rural development between the US which was much more private sector and agribusiness focused with trickle down effects on poverty, while the UK had more of a 'developmentalist' approach, focussing on the role of the state and markets but with clear social objectives. In contrast the Ministry of Agriculture which nurtured a statist perspective drawn from the Soviet era.²¹

This diversity of approaches, geographical selectivity of funding and multiplicity of actors created a mess of confounding factors that would make it difficult for even the best designed programme to assess its results in isolation from everything else that were going on.

IV. Sweden and Norway's Aid to Afghanistan compared.

Principles of engagement

As the terms of reference for this report noted, what is striking about the modalities of the two countries aid programmes to Afghanistan is more their similarity than differences. Both had a broadly similar agenda in relation to aid coordination, development priorities and a particular focus on human rights and gender. But both were minor players in the overall effort but demonstrated a commitment to supporting the government through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and the multilateral agencies, directing some fifty percent of their aid through these channels. Both countries also shared a geographical focus, concentrating on the Northern (less conflict riven?) provinces where they also provided military inputs under the Provincial Reconstruction Team programme.

But they both also provided a considerable part of their funding support to their own national NGOs, notably the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) and the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC).²² The SCA receiving up to 25 percent of Sweden's aid (and the remaining balance of 25% of aid went to other civil society actors and NGOs) and was much bigger than the NAC²³ which received a smaller portion of Norwegian aid which it had to compete for against other Norwegian and international NGOs.

The existence of these Afghanistan specific NGOs in Nordic countries including Denmark²⁴ and their prominence as a political force and lobby on Afghanistan issues in their home countries and their long-term position in the country aid programmes is also notable feature that Sweden and Norway share, and it is perhaps insufficiently reckoned with. There were no doubt mutual interests served by both these NGOs and their government in maintaining this relationship. On the other hand, Afghanaid in the UK for example has never had such an influence and position in relation to the UK aid programme to Afghanistan. While there may be advantages and disadvantages for an NGO to focus on a single country, not least falling into the trap of pursuing a single cause and lack of comparative experience, they also potentially offered to Sweden and

²¹ Pain, A. and Shah, S.M. (2009) '*Polycymaking in Agriculture and Rural Development in Afghanistan*'. Policy Process Studies. Kabul: AREU

²² The Norwegian Church Aid and the Norwegian Refugee Council have as NAC engaged in Afghanistan since the 1980s, later joined by Norwegian Red Cross, Save the Children and several smaller NGOs.

²³ Informant 3 observed that at a time when NAC had 400 staff, the SCA had 6000; the NAC has grown since then.

²⁴ DACCAR or Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees

Norway a source of learning about context. It is a point that is returned to later in a discussion on whether the NAC (and the SCA) specifically leveraged its grounded experience into systematic learning about context and whether this was regularly drawn on by the Norwegian aid programme.

Comparing Sweden and Norway at the strategic level.

In undertaking the assessment of Swedish Aid the review was able to draw on six published strategies for development cooperation with Afghanistan between 2001 and 2024 that had been issued every 2-4 years by the Swedish MFA.²⁵ There is not a comparable legacy of documentation on policy with respect to the Norwegian Aid programme to Afghanistan.

There are the annual 'Proposals to the Storting' by the NMFA that are essentially budget proposals with some brief description of activities being supported in Afghanistan or generalized claims about outputs (see Annex 3, Box 1 for a selection of extracts from the 2015-16 report). Two more generic rather than country specific policy statement on the MFA's position in relation to women²⁶ and on human rights²⁷ are available but these are more framed in terms of principles and goals rather than any considered analysis of processes of change and how to support them. Such a focus would build understanding of existing institutional arrangements and seek incremental change in the direction of the overall goal, as Merilee Grindle (2007)²⁸ has argued with respect to governance. In response to the report of the Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan in 2016, a report as noted that was widely admired outside Norway, the NMFA in its report to 2016-17 had this to say (p. 168), giving a somewhat positive spin to results but silent on the lessons that it had drawn from the report:

'The report found that the assistance had contributed to concrete results during the mandate period, including in the areas of institution-building, education and health. At the same time, the report emphasized that factors such as the lack of a political solution to the conflict and ongoing corruption continued to hinder Afghanistan's achievement of sustainable stability and development. The knowledge we have gained through the NOU will be useful in connection with the preparation of the Government's comprehensive strategy for Norway's efforts in vulnerable states and regions'

The only formal Afghanistan specific Norwegian strategy that has been found is the Partner country strategy for Afghanistan was issued in 2020, which we return to below.

There can be no doubt that in terms of harmonization – the act of seeking to make different plans and objectives cohere with each other – both countries shared a common set of principles and operated according to it. The problem was that not all the donors in Afghanistan were working to the same rule book having different priorities, principles and means of achieving them. Thus, harmonization remained an ideal and a goal which was struggled towards but not achieved but largely due to factors outside the control of Sweden and Norway given the dominating interests and practices of the main player, the US. The one case where Norway

²⁵ See Swedish Lessons Report, Table 1, p28.

²⁶ MFA, 2007-08) On equal terms: Women's rights and gender equality in development policy. Report to the Storting No 11.

²⁷ MFA, 2014-2015, Opportunities for all – human rights as a goal and means in foreign and development policy. Report to the Storting

²⁸ Grindle, M.S. (2007) Good enough governance revisited, Development Policy Review, 2007, 25 (5): 553-574.

independently acted outside the ‘harmonization’ agenda and in pursuit of bringing the Taliban into peace talks is striking.²⁹ Not being a member of the EU gave it room for this manoeuvre.

In terms of internal cross-government coherence within Norway’s aid programme, there are differences between Norway and Sweden in terms of institutional arrangements and size. Sweden had an established separation between the SMFA and Sida with the SMFA issuing country strategy guidelines to Sida, while Sida designed and managed the aid programme. Given the limitations of the SMFA strategy guidelines (see later) it is far from clear the extent to which strategy and programmes were a coherent whole and synergistic in learning from each other. Norway on the other hand has had a somewhat unsettled organizational framework with Norad at times playing mostly an advisory role and not directly involved in strategy or management of implementation while the NMFA has been the major player in the aid programme. Recently most of the aid programme management has been handed back to Norad by the NMFA. But these arrangements during the period under consideration could potentially have supported internal coherence. Indeed, and as pointed out by several informants³⁰ the small size of the Norwegian bureaucracy and its more informal nature compared to Sweden meant that personal relationships played an important place in ensuring internal communication and possibly coherence in practice.

Both countries were also strong on alignment with national actors working closely with government departments and of course supporting it through the ARTF mechanism. The one difference in alignment may relate more to the position of the two country Committees for Afghanistan and their size. The SCA, as the larger and better funded of the two organisations, may have operated more independently of government in comparison with the NAC³¹, more running its own programmes rather than supporting government programmes.

But these issues of harmonization, coherence and alignment in which there are mainly differences of degree rather than categorical distinctions between the two country’s aid programmes, are in some respects secondary to the issue of the overall plausibility and fitness to purpose of the country strategies for Afghanistan, their assumptions and underlying theories of change (column 4 of Fig.1). In this respect the Swedish Lessons Report concluded (p. 26):

These are not primarily strategy documents that engage in prioritisation, sequencing of actions or assessment of constraints in relation to goals. Rather at best they are statements of principle, they tend to the aspirational and could be read as a wish list of all good things that the Ministry would like to see happen. While they may in a sense set the framework within which Sida can structure its interventions, they do not appear to provide a forum for critical reflection on either what has been learned from past strategies or of the dynamics of change in Afghanistan.... over time Sweden’s strategies have become more and more ambitious in terms of goals. But it is far from clear that the statement of these goals is based on a strategic sense of the necessary sequential steps that need to be taken to build towards these goals. The strategies focus on results in relation to ‘poverty’, ‘rights’, or ‘women’ rather than the processes that might be required to move towards those results.

The one formal Norwegian strategy document of 2020 starts with a background to the role of partner country strategies, provides a background to Afghanistan since 2001 and Norway’s commitments and then lists in section 2 ‘Strategic goals and priorities. These are essentially a list of desired outcomes and focus areas, such as ‘improved governance and strengthened

²⁹ See Norway MFA 2020 Partner Country Strategy for Afghanistan, p. 2

³⁰ A comment made by Informant 4 and 7,

³¹ Informant 3

social and economic development' (p3). With respect to the lessons that were drawn from the development cooperation with Afghanistan since 2001 it has the following to say (p. 6):

'Development co-operation has been reviewed and evaluated in the period 2002-18. Among the more general assessments are "Evaluation of Norwegian Development Cooperation with Afghanistan 2001-2011" (Norad's Evaluation Department Report 3/2012) and the Afghanistan Committee's report on Norway's efforts in Afghanistan from 2001-2014 (NOU 2016:8), which covered both civilian and military efforts. The evaluations conclude that the Norwegian aid effort has been relevant, adapted to Afghan needs and priorities and that many results have been achieved on effective channels and methods. Evaluations of Norwegian-supported programmes are generally good.....the aid portfolio is considered to be well composed and focused on the right issues. Norwegian aid is described as reliable and long-term. Stable main focus areas have contributed to this'

It is certainly true that for both Norway and Sweden the reliability and long-term nature of their Afghanistan aid programmes, a stable set of focus areas and a tendency to work with long term partnerships rather than on a fixed term contractor – supplier relationship has been a distinctive and commendable feature of their programming. In Norway it is evident that there have been strong relationships of trust that underpin the partnerships that the NMFA and Norad enter into.³² But the assessments of the lessons learned from the two evaluations cited is a very generous reading of what these reviews concluded and appears ignorant of the wider critical assessments of aid results in Afghanistan discussed earlier.

More to the point the strategy defines relevance in terms of meeting needs (or addressing deficits). But relevance as noted earlier and as the revised DAC criteria (OECD, 2019) states is more than this and "design" must be considered in relation to an underlying theory of change, the means of implementation, risk and context analysis: that is relevance must take account of the probability of success given the conditions under which it is implemented. The Zurcher et al (2020) review found that all 148 evaluations they assessed were claimed to be relevant but were less effective in terms achieved the results they sought. Relevance therefore needs to be treated as a critical gatekeeper criterion and if relevance to context is not strictly assessed and established, other DAC criteria are unlikely to be achieved.

This focus on goals that address needs or deficits in terms of pre-conceived categories such as "poverty" or "rights" or "women" is what has been termed a "substantialist" perspective.³³ It focusses on outcomes in terms of these categories or results that are to be achieved through a result-based design. While these categories speak well to principles or goals, they are not a good guide to developing robust theories of change. Theories of change should be just that: theory informed, context-based analyses of understanding of where things are now and why, what incremental changes will be required to move towards the idealized outcomes and what mechanisms or instruments of intervention can be used to contribute to this process. This is more of a "relationalist" approach which works with contextually specific processes and complexity focusing more on incremental change by local actors. The discussion of the Zardozi programme in the Swedish Lessons Report³⁴ is an example of how a programme based on an analytical understanding of market constraints for women established an iterative design of continuous reflection and learning to respond to those constraints and brought about slow progressive change (see Annex 4; sadly Zardozi is not effectively operational now).

³² Informant 6

³³ Eyben, R. (2010) Hiding Relations: The Irony of 'Effective Aid'. *European Journal of Development Research*, 22, 382–397

³⁴ Pain, (2021) pp62 - 66

To ground this in Afghanistan specifics, most rural Afghan men and women have lived and continue to live under conditions of dependent security in a context of acute insecurity where neither the state nor the market (as it does to varying degrees in the west) offers the freedom from insecurity. This is one of the reasons why the relationships that bind the extended family and community in Afghanistan are so important and make these institutions so central. But this dependent security comes at the cost of personal autonomy and the freedom to act and the transition out of “freedom from” to “freedom to” is an incremental process.

In sum, as judged by the content of Norway’s strategy statements for Afghanistan, as with the Swedish ones, it is difficult to find evidence that they are plausible in terms of being likely to achieve the outcomes they seek. As with the Swedish strategies, they are not clearly underpinned by a robust theory of change based on appropriate context analysis.

Policy documents are of course written for a variety of reasons to satisfy domestic political constituents and developing good policy may not necessarily be their primary aim. As always policy assessment requires consideration of what has been done in the name of policy and to understand this, there is a need to look at what is implemented.

Comparing Sweden and Norway at the Implementation level.

The Swedish review was able to draw on (a) eight external evaluations of Swedish support to multilateral organization including to the ARTF, all of them undertaken after 2013; (b) three external evaluations of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, the latest carried out in 2014; (c) three external evaluations of Civil Society and NGO support, all undertaken in 2014 and (d) one synthetic assessment undertaken in 2015 based on the lessons and conclusions from seven of the evaluations. All the reports of these evaluations were available on a website.³⁵

Norad has an open access archive of programme evaluations³⁶ but one does not appear to exist for the NMFA. This reflects that fact that Norad has long had an evaluation department and a programme of evaluations and there are regular reviews and evaluations. However, as far as Afghanistan is concerned and since 2015, only one published evaluation report has been found. The practice appears to have been that funded organisations such as the NAC commission their own evaluations of their Norwegian funded programmes and several evaluation reports were collected directly from them. The Norwegian Red Cross also has on their website a few evaluation reports. But no reports of evaluations of Norwegian support to either the trust funds or multilateral organisations were found.

The annual proposals to the Storting indicate the support that Norway provided both to the UNDP/LOFTA trust fund and the ARTF, reporting in 2014 that due to suspicions of corruption that support to LOFTA had been suspended for two years but had then resumed.³⁷ Norway’s funding to the ARTF was not earmarked, as it was partially by Sweden, as the annual Proposals to the Storting notes. So, it is not possible to define where Norwegian funding was allocated with respect to funding to Education or the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) for example. The MFA Proposals therefore draw on reporting by the World Bank to indicate what results have been achieved but this has had a strong tendency to focus on activities and outputs. Thus, for the NSP, the MFA proposals report results that are given in terms of number of Community Development Councils (CDCs) established and people reached with claims that this strengthens local governance. Similarly with respect to promoting “women’s social participation, capacity and competence” (MFA, 2015-16) metrics of the percent of women that

³⁵ [Publications on development cooperation | Sida](#)

³⁶ <https://www.norad.no/en/evaluations/evaluations/evaluation-reports/>

³⁷ However as Informant 7 commented if that had known then what they had subsequently learned about the extent of corruption in the funding to the police, it is likely that they would have stopped the funding.

the NSP programme reaches is reported as results and progress. The approach to reporting on education results is similar focusing on the number of schools constructed and attendance figures for boys and girls. This form of reporting does not provide a basis for a robust assessment of results in relation to Norway's goals interventions in these areas.

There are other external evaluations that can be drawn on with respect to the management and reporting of the ARTF, notably the report by ScanTeam (2012)³⁸ and the Sida commissioned review of the ARTF.³⁹ The Scanteam review was critical of the focus on output reporting by the ARTF and this led to the development of a Results Matrix. The 2015 review observed that the influence of donors on investment choices and the limited ability of the government to generate domestic revenue had restricted ownership of the fund by government. But it noted some progress on this Results Matrix and had this (p. 7) to say on outcomes:

- *Although anti-corruption measures are an integral part of the fiduciary management arrangements of the ARTF, anti-corruption has not been a programmatic focus and a broader dialogue has only just started. Given the governance environment of Afghanistan this is surprising,*
- *Income poverty and food insecurity-levels have not changed over the last decade. While the ARTF has not had an income poverty focus through its investment window it has contributed to widening access to public goods notably of education and health, with better health outcomes being achieved.*
- *While the ARTF now has a Gender Working Group, and investment projects have made efforts to mainstream gender and improve access for women, gender has only recently been addressed at the strategic level, and progress in achieving even the mainstreaming of gender has been slow. Promotion of wider dimensions of gender equality might be more effective outside the ARTF mechanism.*

The role of Norway and Sweden along with like-minded donors in pushing the ARTF despite World Bank resistance to take on board gender at a strategic level is one particularly notable aspects of Norway's influence on the management of the ARTF.⁴⁰ More generally the active engagement of Norway, along with Sweden in the ARTF mechanism speaks to an interest and ability to influence the direction of travel of the ARTF as a harmonization mechanism and bring their principles to bear on its operation.

The assessment of results from Norway's funding outside the ARTF to the NAC, other NGOs and Civil Society Organisations is more difficult to determine, in part because of the lack of published external evaluations of these, and these are agency specific. There is one exception, a Review of Norwegian-funded CDC projects in Afghanistan which is returned to below. There are as noted earlier evaluations commissioned by NGOs such as the NAC and undertaken by external evaluators. This report selectively draws on two of the reports provided by the NAC to explore what they tell us about monitoring and learning practices. There are also a few evaluation reports that fall after the 2021 cut-off date of this review or do not address the specific thematic areas of this review.

³⁸ Scanteam (2012): "ARTF at a Cross-Roads: History and the Future", Final Report, September [World Bank Project No.: 73145],

³⁹ Pain, A and Jensen, P (2015) Review of Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), Internal and External Studies and Evaluations in Afghanistan. Indvelop Sweden AB.

⁴⁰ Informant 2

The first two reviews are an organizational review commissioned by Norad of the NAC in 2018 and followed up on in 2022.⁴¹ The review aimed at assessing NAC's organisational structure and governance, finance and management systems, its capacity for results management and contribution to civil society strengthening. The last two aspects are focused on here, because of what they might reveal about the learning that comes from the NAC programme. At a general level NAC was assessed as having a reasonable results framework with sufficient high-level indicators, rather overburdened with comparatively low-level indicators and systems of learning that were not sufficiently formalized. In its follow-up in 2022, the review commented on the progress in rationalizing the programme but noted the lack of baselines and *'the time devoted to capturing the comparatively low-level information that is frequently funding-led rather than strategy-led'* (p.iii). Since then, the NAC has worked on developing its knowledge management functions responding to the recommendation that it needed to focus more on strategic monitoring and evaluation issues.

Taken together these observations could be read to suggest that monitoring for accountability to the funding – and therefore tied into a specific results framework – might have taken precedence over higher level learning (and reporting) not only about programmatic approaches to engaging in the specific contexts but also about processes of change. The comment on lack of baselines could be read in this light.

A Program Review of NAC's 'Integrated Rural Development (IRD) program'⁴² noted the many qualities of NAC that made it a learning organization but this operated primarily at an informal level and were not being systematically captured for programme practice. One of the consequences of this was that the dissemination of learning and experience beyond the local level was not taking place and being used to inform policy.

One external review⁴³ commissioned jointly by the MFA and Norad to assess Norwegian support to Community-Driven development projects in Faryab, Badakhshan and Ghazni provinces in Afghanistan by five NGOs. This review appears to be the only attempt by NMFA/Norad to build critical learning of a key area of intervention in relation to Norwegian goals implemented across a range of agencies. The review focused on levels of participation and inclusion in community development, the different approaches by the five implementing NGOs all working in Faryab province, results from the intervention and learning from it. As the title to the report suggests some NGOs worked more to a process whereby the community development was led by the community itself and others where the village or community was simply the location of a pre-conceived externally designed intervention.

While this review is more theory informed than any other evaluation of Norway's programmes in Afghanistan, there is a broader literature that it might have usefully engaged with⁴⁴ which was doubtful of the ability of community drive-development to generate long term social changes

⁴¹ Regan, J (2018) Organisational Review of Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC), FCG Sweden; Regan, J (2022) NAC – assessment of follow up on 2018 review, FCG Sweden.

⁴² ATR, (2018) Program Review of the 'Integrated Rural Development (IRD)' Program and Facilitation of Country Program Strategy, NAC.

⁴³ Strand, A., Hatlebakk., Wimpelmann, T. and Wardak, M. (2022) Community-Driven Development or community-based development? A review of Norwegian-funded CDC projects in Afghanistan.

⁴⁴ Elisabeth King, "A Critical Review of Community-Driven Development Programs in Conflict-Affected Contexts," International Rescue Committee and UKAid, London, 2013, 3.; Sheree Bennett and Alyoscia D'Onofrio, Community-Driven? Concepts, Clarity and Choices for CDD in Conflict-Affected Contexts (London: International Rescue Committee and UKAid, 2015). Sheree Bennett and Alyoscia D'Onofrio, "Community-Driven Development in Conflict-Affected Contexts: Revisiting Concepts, Functions and Fundamentals," Stability: International Journal of Security and Development 4:1 (2015): 19, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/sta.ff>>.

related to governance and social cohesion in a context of an insecurity regime. It can also be noted as discussed in the Swedish Lessons Report ⁴⁵ that the sanctions-based model of democracy (principle-agent theory) which informs the Strand et al. review is not the only model of political representation available. There is also a selection model whereby political leadership is self-motivated and its interests are consistent with that of its constituency⁴⁶; position is achieved by reputation and performance and accountability is deliberative. This speaks to the performance of customary leadership in Afghanistan villages. The heterogeneity of village contexts in Afghanistan in relation to political leadership is a key variable which explains the uneven effects of the NSP programme and why the gold standards of evaluation, the Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) are so inappropriate because they deliberately screen out village context.⁴⁷ While this perhaps is a side-discussion for this report, the more general argument that this usefully makes, is how important it is for debate about social theory to engage with and fully inform building understanding of context.

As the Strand et al review noted among its recommendations, there was a clear need to improve field monitoring and evaluation of the interventions, but this should not just be in relation to the programme objectives. In addition, it needs to consider how the interventions engage with and are shaped in turn by context and how this varies in such a heterogeneous landscape of villages.

One of the comments made in the review of seven Sida's evaluations was that the funding of a diverse range of projects was not based on a deliberate practice of building synergies and learning between the projects to promote higher level learning in relation to Sida's results strategy for Afghanistan.⁴⁸ While the grounds for making the same comment in relation to Norway's goals are not so strong in the absence of evaluation reports, with the notable exception of the review discussed above, there is little evidence that the various parts of Norway's portfolio of funding and the way in which it has been constructed has contributed to systematic learning processes either about context, theories of change or the resulting processes of change and outcomes.⁴⁹

So, what more broadly can be said about knowledge management and learning in relation to Norway's engagement in Afghanistan? There is little that can be specifically said in relation to the Afghanistan programme because of the absence of formal documentation. The interviews with informants evidence more informal processes – the lessons learned from the management of the ARTF for example now being applied in the Ukraine⁵⁰ and the introduction of in-time monitoring at a programmatic level, again in Ukraine. There is, however, some more formal documentation that looks at organizational processes of learning within the NMFA and Norad.

A notable one is the 2015 report by the Office of the Auditor General⁵¹ on assistance for good governance and anti-corruption in selected partner countries including Afghanistan. Its findings were succinct and blunt, noting poor goal achievement, poor planning limiting results and little learning.

⁴⁵ p58-59

⁴⁶ Mansbridge, J (2009) 'A "Selection Model" of Political Representation'. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17 (4):369–398

⁴⁷ See Pain, A (2018) Village Context and the National Solidarity Program in Afghanistan. *Asian Survey*, 58 (6) pp. 1066-1089.

⁴⁸ Pain, Adam., Rothman., Jessica and Lundin, Monika (2015) review of Sida's Support for Afghanistan – Lessons and Conclusions from 7 Evaluations. Indevlop Sweden AB.

⁴⁹ But as Informant 1 stressed the role of support for NGOs in learning from them and getting feedback on what was possible on the ground

⁵⁰ Informant 2

⁵¹ The Office of the Auditor General's investigation of assistance for good governance and anti-corruption in selected partner countries. Document 3:9 (2014-2015) Translated documented provided by the NAC.

There have been a series of evaluations of Norad by external parties looking at results management processes and what was being learned with Norad. The first in 2014⁵² drawing on an earlier study which noted the inability to reach conclusions about the results being achieved, found that systems and procedures in Norad were too fragmented and incomplete to generate high quality evaluations and compared poorly with other aid agencies. A second in 2017⁵³ noted that there was not a shared understanding of results-based management (RBM) across the aid administration leading to variation in how it was used, failure to balance accountability with learning outcomes and an absence of a results and learning culture.

A third report⁵⁴ examined the use of a portfolio approach⁵⁵ in Norway's aid administration. While it noted progress it also argued that there were still challenges in relation to the use of results evidence to inform portfolio level learning and management, the governance of the portfolios was not fit for purpose and budget structures worked against portfolio management. By the time of the fourth report⁵⁶ considerable progress in portfolio management was noted resulting from effective leadership. It observed however that results knowledge from monitoring and evaluations was being used less than professional and research knowledge, suggesting that insufficient learning from implementation and evaluations was being drawn into knowledge management.

It can be concluded that systematic learning from programming implementation is still a work in progress for Norway's aid administration, and that Afghanistan posed multiple challenges to gaining such learning.

V. Responding to the Review Questions

Four review questions were posed with respect to Norway's programming to address human rights, gender-equality, anti-corruption and education. Drawing on the review and discussion so far, these are now addressed.

- 1. To what extent did Sweden and Norway achieve their stated objectives for development cooperation with Afghanistan, and do any projects or priorities stand out as more suited to meet the goals set.*

The goals that both Sweden and Norway set for development cooperation with Afghanistan as reflected in their various strategy documents were more a vision of what Afghanistan's future should be than achievable goals which could guide strategy and practice. They were not developed based on a deep or progressive understanding of Afghanistan's context, they appeared blind to the incoherence of the Western intervention and its irreconcilable goals and neither country was in a strong position to assert its principles.

⁵² ITAD & CMI (2014) Can We Demonstrate the Difference that Norwegian Aid Makes: Evaluation of results management, Norad Evaluation Department, Report 1/2014

⁵³ ITAF with CMI (2017) Evaluation of the Norwegian Aid Administration's Practice of Results-Based Management, Norad Evaluation Department, Report 4/2018.

⁵⁴ Itad and CMI (2020) Evaluation of the Norwegian Aid Administration's Approach to Portfolio Management. Norad Report 2/2020

⁵⁵ 'Defined as the management practices and procedures used to design, plan, organise and coordinate a collection of interventions, grants and initiatives towards the effective and efficient delivery of specific development assistance objectives. It involves setting overall portfolio objectives and strategy, aligning resources towards these, and then using evidence to oversee and coordinate grants and initiatives, monitor overall progress, learn and adapt, and report' (ITAD & CMI, 2020:14)

⁵⁶ ITAD and CMI (2024) Evaluation of Norad's Use of Knowledge in portfolio management

The evidence on programming effects in general for the overall reconstruction efforts point to very limited results, with stronger outcomes for modest instrumental interventions, such as constructing schools, than for efforts to generate behavioural change. This reflects the challenges of engineering social change, and particularly within the time frame set by the overall intervention. But there are also severe limitations of programming approaches designed to address deficits (in rights, gender equality etc.) rather than invest in and support progressive change. The ambitions of both country's vision contributed to these approaches, and the lack of investment in deliberative learning from programming effects compounded it.

It follows that results in relation to human-rights, gender-equality and anti-corruption have been limited at a country level even though modest success can be claimed with respect to education⁵⁷. Yet, and in response to sub-question as to whether any particular projects stand out in relation to their suitability for the goals that were set, a positive answer can be given. As with Swedish support for the SCA, Norwegian support for the NAC and other NGOs who worked longer term in particular locations and followed a more relational approach in their development practice focusing on incremental change, offers a way of working from which Norway could have learned more. The pity is that while there were no doubt informal learning processes in these NGOs provided deep understanding of the context and the dynamics of change, more formal monitoring for accountability tended to be driven by results frameworks and programming did not sufficiently learn from the ways of working of these NGOs.

2. *If Norway, as compared to Sweden, could have done more through its programming to address what the study on Sweden identified as the “the perverse incentives of the system» and to a lesser degree have “delegitimised the state”.*

Afghanistan's government could be characterised for the period of 2001 – 2021 as being ‘in office but not in power⁵⁸. With a flawed and imposed peace settlement, without a monopoly of violence, subject to conflicting and irreconcilable agendas imposed by external actors and a rentier economy driven by external military expenditure and massive aid flows, it was a Western state building project that was riddled with inherent contradictions⁵⁹ and doomed for failure.

Both Norway and Sweden, as parties to that process even if as minor players, could do little to challenge, let alone mitigate or counter the perverse incentives of the system whatever their principles and practices of engagement. What stands out both for Norway's and Sweden's programming is the proportion of their funding and long-term support given to what this report has characterised as ‘relationalist approaches in the field working with contextually specific processes. What they both could have done more of was to learn from these practices and leverage that understanding into policy debates to question both their own and other's substantialist perspectives.

3. *If Norway, to the same degree as Sweden (and other donors) accepted or possibly challenged “a set of policy narratives that had pre-defined solutions to the assumed problems”.*

⁵⁷ See for example [World Report 2020: Afghanistan | Human Rights Watch](#); Parkinson, S., Rasic, D., Wafeq, M and Seraj, M. (2016) Afghanistan Gender Country Profile. Final Report, Kabul, USAID and EC;

⁵⁸ A term attributed to Normal Lamont in his resignation speech as Chancellor of the John Major government in the UK in 1993.

⁵⁹ Suhrke, A (2013) Statebuilding in Afghanistan: A Contradictory Engagement, Central Asian Survey, 32 (1) <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2013.834715>

If one is to take the statements of policy goals, such as they are, and programming design that resulted from them, then Norway, as with Sweden largely framed Afghanistan in terms of its deficits and what it did not have – a legitimate Weberian state, the rule of law, equality of opportunity and a prosperous population. All this is certainly true. But then Norway as with Sweden and others, did not seriously engage thoughtfully with context and fell into many of the programming traps common to the reconstruction effort⁶⁰ in Afghanistan.

And yes, the result was that the problem was seen through the eyes of the solution. Thus, the absence of formal village level institutions was interpreted as a lack of democratic process at the village level. Or the absence of formal microfinance structures was taken to indicate a lack of access to credit. But this perspective focussed on form and not function. A more careful look at how villages worked would have found different, but variable structures that generated accountability and supported the collective interests. And an understanding of the informal credit systems would have led to an appreciation of their widespread availability, accessibility and critical role in livelihood security. But the superimposition of Community Development Councils (CDC) on pre-existing village structures did not displace what was there, and CDCs were absorbed and functioned subject to existing practices, which in turn may have changed. Equally formal microcredit became parasitic on informal credit systems and functioned subject to them. Careful monitoring and learning would have learnt this and improved practice and design.

Norad's thematic areas approach might offer a route to thinking more deeply about conflict contexts, but country programme will need to draw on deep country specific understanding⁶¹.

4. *To what extent the two countries altered or changed their approach and programming to meet contextual challenges in the period 2015-2021.*

No evidence has been found of any significant shift in programming approaches after 2015. It perhaps could be more characterized as 'Try Again, Fail Again. Fail Better?'⁶²

VI. Wider Reflections

This review concludes with brief reflections on four issues: first with respect to the differences between Norway's and Sweden's development aid to Afghanistan in terms of strategies and modalities; second on the potential lessons on the role of small states development aid in future to contexts in conflict and war; third on issues of making good policy for such contexts and whether it is implementable and finally on rethinking policy approaches.

Contrasting Norway and Sweden's programming approaches in terms of strategy and modalities

At a general level it is the similarities between Norway and Sweden with respect to strategy, programming, priorities and practices that are more striking than the differences which are more of degree than absolute. Moreover, given the engagement by multiple agencies on issues of human rights and gender equality and the general metrics that have been used to assess change or results then there are multiple issues of attribution of outcomes to specific inputs or approaches by specific country programmes. Particularly problematic has been the expanding use of so-called success stories as a validator of good practice, reflecting more who is claiming

⁶⁰ See Levine and Pain (2023) op.cit

⁶¹ The comment was made by Informant 6 that effectively country specific knowledge is outsourced given the small size of Norad.

⁶² Cramer, C and Goodhand, J (2002) Try Again, Fail Again, Fail Better? War, the State and 'Post-Conflict' Challenge in Afghanistan. Development and Change <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.t01-1-00253>

success and driven by a results-based culture rather than a deeper understanding of the processes at play.

The national metrics of change in Afghanistan on the full dimensions of human rights – from access to good food, clean water and a roof over one’s head to rights to education, health, work and justice – are as is well known, not good with some improvements in certain areas such as education (for boys) and health. The failure of the western intervention to give sufficient priority to food security – surely one of the first responsibilities of an effective state – focusing more on market driven agricultural development is notable.⁶³

As noted earlier a human rights agenda in Afghanistan must take account of the fact that for most Afghans their socio-economic security in the context of a hostile wider world comes from the social relationships they establish within the household and the community, and the security and ‘freedom from’ wider threats, risks and hazards. It comes at the cost of personal autonomy. The absence of ‘freedom from’ insecurity places significant limits on the ‘freedoms to act’ which has been the focus of the western human rights agenda.

Yet there have been changes but not necessarily where agencies have been looking for results. As an illustration and a significant one and it bears reflecting on, is the evidence of the growing phenomenon of divorce in the period between 2001-2021 and women taking to the courts to seek it.⁶⁴ It is revealing about some of the gendered change that has taken place. But it also speaks to a need by external agency to be more alert to broader changes that are taking place in society and to think more critically how they can invest in building such understanding of these and support processes of learning.

Potential lessons on the role of small states development aid to contexts in conflict and war

The challenges for Norway (and Sweden) in the Afghanistan reconstruction effort are not underestimated and if as in the case of Norway the primary political objective was of being a good ally, then the pressures to ‘run with the crowd’ were clearly enormous. While both countries stuck to their principles and values (although there were debates about the military component of their interventions) the question arises as to whether they could have done more, as the Swedish Lessons Report put it to ‘punch above their weight’.

In some ways the ways in which both countries gave a key part of their budget to support long term programming at the field level based on relations of trust with key organizations was distinctive. But this could have been better leveraged through more systematic and deliberative learning and perhaps the lessons thought about and engaged in wider policy debates in a more strategic way. Inevitably aid programming has a dimension of managing relationships to it, balancing support and commitments to authorities and international agencies as well as NGOs but there is little evidence that Norway’s aid programme management was able to build synergies between these.

As one of the few countries whose aid budget has not been cut in recent years, and is even going up, a distinctive advantage that Norway could bring to future contexts of conflict and war is to provide investments in building better understanding of such contexts and showing how it can be drawn on.

⁶³ Pain, A (2019) [Growing Out Of Poverty? Questioning agricultural policy in Afghanistan - Afghanistan Analysts Network - English](#)

⁶⁴ Wimpelmann, T and Saadad, M (2024) ‘There is no compulsion in marriage’. Divorce and gendered change in Afghanistan during the Islamic Republic. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2024.2327508>

Can good policy be made for contexts in conflict and war and is it implementable?

This review has pointed, as others have done, not only to the incoherence of the international effort but also the limits of both Norway's and Sweden's policy practices in relation to Afghanistan. This encompasses both the more formal policy statement and the actions and programming carried out in the name of policy. As David Mosse⁶⁵ argued, good policy' defined as *'that which legitimizes and mobilizes political support'* cannot in fact be implemented with the institutions and the areas in which it works. Mosse was writing with respect to a long-term development project in India reflecting on the role of multi-layered complex relationships and the cultures of different organisations that in fact drove development practice and the practices of representing 'success' and 'failure'. As he observed, actual practice and how it was represented were two rather different things and policy or programme failure and success had little to do with its actual effects but more to do with how successful key actors were in telling good stories about what they were doing. As he put it *'projects do not fail; they are failed by wider networks of support and validation'* (op.cit :658).

The complexity of relationships and cultures of different countries and organisations were orders of magnitude greater in Afghanistan compared a rural development project in India. While the first report of the Norwegian Afghanistan Commission could be seen as have judged Norway's development results as a failure, it was the return of the Taliban to power in 2021 that provided the seal of 'failure' to the Western reconstruction effort. None of which is to say that 20 years of development aid did not have its effects. As the one example of the rising divorce rate indicated, and there are certainly many more, there were effects.

But the broader point is that there needs to be a much more critical culture in aid management that develops more realistic and modest policies, critically reviews assumptions, monitors and learns from what it does and systematically engages in understanding context.

Rethinking policy approaches

Much of the policy reasoning in aid programming in Afghanistan drew on what might be termed 'analogic reasoning'. That is policy models drew not only on a combination of the outcomes of development in the west (states, markets, rights etc.) and its specific institutional arrangements but also on the trajectories of state building that the west had followed. Afghanistan was then seen in terms of its deficits in relation to the west and policy reasoning implicitly set about trying to remedy those deficits and managing (or seeking to control) the risks associated with trying to reduce these deficits: a managerial approach to Afghanistan's future that was predetermined.

But conflict contexts are complex, and processes of change are non-linear and uncontrollable. The future cannot be pre-determined. A different policy approach could draw more on strategic foresight approaches and scenario building⁶⁶ learning from change process through relationist approaches to development aid practice. None of this is to deny the importance of principles in guiding that practice. But it will require a different way of working for aid management and the willingness to invest more systematically in understanding contexts such as Afghanistan.

⁶⁵ Mosse, D (2004) Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice. *Development and Change* 35 (4): 639 - 671

⁶⁶ See for example Balthasar, D (2024) Futuring Fragility: Embracing uncertainty, identifying opportunity, unlocking development. *Dev Policy Review*, 42 <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12779>

Bibliography

Documentation

Norwegian Government Documents

Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2007-08) On equal terms: Women's rights and gender equality in development policy. Report to the Storting No 11.

Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2014-2015), Opportunities for all – human rights as a goal and means in foreign and development policy. Report to the Storting

Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense. (2016) A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001 – 2014. Official Norwegian Reports NOU 2016: 8

Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2020) Partner Country Strategy for Afghanistan,

Evaluation Documents

ITAD & CMI (2014) Can We Demonstrate the Difference that Norwegian Aid Makes: Evaluation of results management, Norad Evaluation Department, Report 1/2014

ITAD with CMI (2017) Evaluation of the Norwegian Aid Administration's Practice of Results-Based Management, Norad Evaluation Department, Report 4/2018.

Itad and CMI (2020) Evaluation of the Norwegian Aid Administration's Approach to Portfolio Management. Norad Report 2/2020

ITAD and CMI (2024) Evaluation of Norad's Use of Knowledge in portfolio management

ATR, (2018) Program Review of the 'Integrated Rural Development (IRD)' Program and Facilitation of Country Program Strategy, NAC.

Regan, J (2018) Organisational Review of Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC), FCG Sweden; Regan, J (2022) NAC – assessment of follow up on 2018 review, FCG Sweden.

Strand, A., Hatlebakk., Wimpelmann, T. and Wardak, M. (2022) Community-Driven Development or community-based development? A review of Norwegian-funded CDC projects in Afghanistan.

Other Afghanistan Relevant Reports and Documents

Byrd, W. (2007) 'Responding to Afghanistan's Development Challenge: An Assessment of Experience during 2002–2007 and Issues and Priorities for the Future'. Report SASPR-11. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Blohm, T., Rotmann, P., and Weigand, F. (2024) "Never say never" Learning Lessons from Afghanistan Reviews. Global Public Policy Institute

- Denney, L. and Mallett, R. with Benson, M.S. (2017) *Service delivery and state capacity: findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium*. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium
- Levine, S and Pain, A (2023) Ten Traps To Avoid if Aid Programme is Serious About Engaging with Context. ODI/SPARC- Knowledge Org. [ten-traps-to-avoid-engaging-with-context-afghanistan.pdf](#)
- Pain, A. and Shah, S.M. (2009) *'Policymaking in Agriculture and Rural Development in Afghanistan'*. Policy Process Studies. Kabul: AREU
- Pain, A and Jensen, P (2015) Review of Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), Internal and External Studies and Evaluations in Afghanistan. Indvelop Sweden AB.
- Pain, A., Rothman, J., and Lundin, M (2015) Review of Sida's Support to Afghanistan – Lessons and Conclusions from 7 Evaluations. Indvelop Sweden AB.
- Pain, A (2019) [Growing Out Of Poverty? Questioning agricultural policy in Afghanistan - Afghanistan Analysts Network - English](#)
- Pain, Adam (2021) Punching above its Weight or Running with the Crowd? Lessons from Sweden's Development Cooperation with Afghanistan 2002-2020. Working Paper to the Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), Stockholm
- Poole, L. (2011) 'Data on Aid Flows to Afghanistan'. Supporting Research for Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. Bath: Global Humanitarian Assistance
- Scanteam (2012): "ARTF at a Cross-Roads: History and the Future", Final Report, September [World Bank Project No.: 73145],
- Zürcher, C. (2020) Meta-Review of Evaluations of Development Assistance to Afghanistan, 2008–2018. Chapeau Paper. Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) Germany

Academic Publications

- Balthasar, D (2024) Futuring Fragility: Embracing uncertainty, identifying opportunity, unlocking development. *Dev Policy Review*, 42 <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12779>
- Cramer, C and Goodhand, J (2002) Try Again, Fail Again, Fail Better? War, the State and 'Post-Conflict' Challenge in Afghanistan. *Development and Change* <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.t01-1-00253>
- Eyben, R. (2010) Hiding Relations: The Irony of 'Effective Aid'. *European Journal of Development Research*, 22, 382–397
- Mansbridge, J (2009) 'A "Selection Model" of Political Representation'. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17 (4):369–398
- Mosse, D (2004) Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice. *Development and Change* 35 (4): 639 - 671

Pain, A (2018) Village Context and the National Solidarity Program in Afghanistan. *Asian Survey*, 58 (6) pp. 1066-1089.

Rodrik, D. (2011). *The globalization paradox: Democracy and the future of the world economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Suhrke, A (2013) Statebuilding in Afghanistan: A Contradictory Engagement, *Central Asian Survey*, 32 (1) <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2013.834715>

Wimpelmann, T and Saadad, M (2024) 'There is no compulsion in marriage'. Divorce and gendered change in Afghanistan during the Islamic Republic. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2024.2327508>

Wood, G. and I. Gough (2006) A Comparative Welfare Regime Approach to Global Social Policy. *World Development* **34** (10) 1696–1712

Annex 1: Terms of Reference

Terms of reference – A comparative study of Swedish and Norwegian development aid to Afghanistan in the period 2015-2021

This terms of reference (TOR) provides a framework for the Researcher for a comparative study of Swedish and Norwegian development aid to Afghanistan on behalf of the Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan. The Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan is an independent commission. It has been tasked by Royal Decree to prepare a comprehensive evaluation of Norway's engagement in Afghanistan in the period 2015-2021.

Objective

The purpose of the study is to review and compare Swedish and Norwegian development assistance to Afghanistan, focusing on the period from 2015 to 2021. If and when relevant, lessons from the whole period of Western involvement in Afghanistan (from 2001 to 2021) may also be taken into account.

Focus and research questions

Swedish (through SIDA) and Norwegian assistance to Afghanistan (through the MFA and NORAD) have key similarities, and also some noted differences:

- Both countries funded multidonor trust funds (both supported ARTF, Sweden did not fund LOTFA), UN agencies and NGOs, with around 50 percent of the total aid provided for trust funds and the UN.
- Both countries focused on the Northern provinces of Afghanistan (both countries had PRT presence there);
- Sweden prioritized the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) for their NGO funding, Norway supported a broader range of NGOs and civil society and rights organisations;
- Both countries use similar language on development priorities, including an emphasis on human rights and gender equality;
- Both countries emphasized aid coordination and being part of Nordic+.

With the study on Swedish development assistance as starting point, the comparative study should review and compare Swedish and Norwegian policies, plans and ambitions for development assistance. Notably, it should compare Swedish and Norwegian aid priorities and channels, as well as conduct a more thorough review of selected priorities such as human rights, gender equality, anti-corruption and education, so as to assess:

1. The extent to which Sweden and Norway achieved their stated objectives for the development cooperation with Afghanistan, and if any projects or priorities stand out as more suited to meet the goals set;
2. If Norway, as compared to Sweden, could have done more through its programming to address what the study on Sweden identified as the “the perverse incentives of the system» and to a lesser degree have “delegitimised the state”;
3. If Norway, to the same degree as Sweden (and other donors) accepted or possibly challenged “a set of policy narratives that had pre-defined solutions to the assumed problems”;
4. To what extent the two countries altered or changed their approach and programming to meet contextual challenges in the period 2015-2021.

Some further issues may be considered for study:

- Reflections on any significant differences in Norway's and Swedish approach to - and results of - support to human rights work and gender equality;
- Reflections on different dilemmas and advantages/disadvantages of channelling support to the Afghan government versus to the UN and NGO sector;
- Reflections on civilian efforts and effects in light of overall international strategy, and support for the UNs UNAMA mission;
- Reflections on lessons learned for small states' future development aid to states and territories in conflict and war.

Methodology

The study will be carried out as a desk study of policy document and evaluations. The Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan will provide relevant documents that are not easily available in the public domain. The Researcher will also conduct in-depth interviews with key stakeholders like politicians, bureaucrats, practitioner and development aid experts. The commission will, if needed, assist in organising such interviews. All data shall be collected and analysed in accordance with ethical guidelines.

Deliverables

The expected outcome of the study is a brief written research report of approximately 15-20 pages, including a one-page summary of key findings, and an oral briefing.

The project start date is February 15th 2025. The final submission date of the report and the brief is June 1st 2025.

The payment will be made through bank transfer and is due within 10 days after the Commission's receipt and formal approval of the final deliverables.

Annex 2 Informants

Interviews:

Informant 1: Norad Staff Member, 250320

Informant 2: Norad Staff Member, 250325

Informant 3: NGO Staff Member, 250331

Informant 4: Norad Former Staff Member, 250403

Informant 5: Ministry of Foreign Affairs Staff Member, 250414

Informant 6 Norad Staff Member, 250414

Informant 7: Ministry of Foreign Affairs Staff Member, 250415

Annex 3: Figures

Figure 1. Ten Common Traps in dealing with context in fragile and conflict-affected places

The Traps	Features of the trap	How to avoid the trap
1. Designing perfect solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focusing on form rather than function; - Assumed western ideals are shared; - Ignoring costs of maintaining institutions; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on understanding functions, not form and how they may be spread across institutions; - Assume solutions will be adapted to fit; - Look for incremental improvements and expect imperfection
2. Avoiding social theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Problems and solutions are presented as a technical issue that does not require social theory; - Social theories not made explicit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Check you have an explicit social theory that explains how change will happen and how different people will respond - Start with the assumption that the intervention will fail and look for weaknesses in the links in the causal chain from intervention to impact
3. Seeing the problem through the eyes of the solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intervention design dominated by people who are experts in solutions from other contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop a robust problem analysis before even thinking of the solution; - Focus on functions that take place rather than specific institutions; - Do not use the phrase “lack of” if it is linked to a solution
4. Using the same solution everywhere (institutional monocropping)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assumed ‘solution’ from another context will apply; - 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Don’t start with the favourite solution on offer; - Question ideas of ‘best practice’ which favour universal technical solutions; - Seek a range of voice on problem diagnosis and avoid ‘Stakeholder consultations’
5. Forgetting objectives when designing the means	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Copying solutions from other contexts; - Ignoring the objective once the solution is chosen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design the intervention to meet its objectives in each context; - Be rigorous in testing the link between project outputs and the desired outcomes; - Make explicit the implicit assumptions and continue to scrutinize them; - Monitor the objectives and not just the project outputs
6. Not engaging with heterogeneity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ignoring agroecological, institutional and social diversity; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analyse diversity and ensure it is central to objective setting and a theory of change; - Avoid “success stories” and the use of arithmetic means; be alert to what RCT’s don’t tell you about context
7. Forgetting that context always bites back	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assuming a ‘tabula rasa’; - Ignoring how existing institutions will respond to the intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure a robust theory of change based on an understanding of functions, not form; - Assume that institutional ‘bricolage’ will take place and find ways monitor it;
8. Hanging on to what you can control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assume fixed designs or templates will be followed in the field 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognize there is a balance between discipline and discretion; - Accept that discretionary practices in implementation will happen and monitor and learn from them;

9. Monitoring processes, not outcomes	- Reporting on project deliverables because it is easy	- Disaggregate monitoring information; - Use monitoring to critically question theories of change and use it for implementation
10. Excluding context from monitoring and evaluation	- Removing context from monitoring and evaluation (e.g. RCTs) so that treatment effects can be seen; - Collecting data on pre-identified data	- Identify which contextual features to monitor and if these are not clear, rethink the role of context in project design;

Summarised from Levine and Pain (2024) [ten-traps-to-avoid-engaging-with-context-afghanistan.pdf](#)

Figure 2 Quotes from Proposal to the Storting (2015-16)

Good governance, human rights and democracy building In Afghanistan,

'The support to Norwegian and international NGOs and to civil society leads to good results, among other things by people becoming aware of their rights and being empowered to demand and practice them. In one NGO, training in organizational work was provided to over 12,000 representatives of local village councils. In the same initiative, 42 new youth groups with 1,700 members were established in Faryab province in 2014. To date, 538 such groups with 38,000 members have been established. The purpose is to strengthen and raise awareness among young people about participation in public activities. Considerable assistance was also provided in 2014 to strengthen public administration at district and provincial levels'

Gender equality and women's and children's rights (169/381)

Women and gender equality are essential issues in aid to Afghanistan and are central themes in dialogue with authorities and cooperation partners. Education and general competence development are important prerequisites for strengthening human rights and gender equality. The World Bank's multi-donor fund reports significant progress and good results in the work to promote women's social participation, capacity and competence. The Solidarity Project alone now reaches 27.4 million people, of whom 48.5% are women.

A project held dialogue meetings with male leaders, religious and traditional authorities and local authorities on women's social, economic and political participation, and in particular participation in peace processes. This has led to changed attitudes among many men, as documented by increased participation of women in economic and political activities. Gender equality measures have a significantly greater impact when the rights perspective is linked to improved living standards and increased income. In one measure, four resource centres for women were established, and around 2,100 women were supported in establishing various income-generating activities. In parallel with this work, capacity building and awareness-raising are ongoing.

Education

Since Norway's assistance to the World Bank's Multi-donor Fund (ARTF) is not earmarked, it is not possible to define how much of the Norwegian contribution goes to education. However, ARTF has several projects that, among other things, build and repair schools, support the establishment of local school committees, train teachers, and develop vocational education and higher education. Up to and including 2014, ARTF has built and rehabilitated 7,869 classrooms and in 2014, about 20,000 teachers received additional training and the total number of qualified

teachers in the country is now 191,000. The number of students present in classes has increased from 78 percent to 84 percent between 2010 and 2014. Through ARTF, Norway also contributes to higher education and universities as well as to the development of vocational education.

Rural development/ industrial development

The NGOs work with agriculture, animal husbandry, health, infrastructure, water supply, literacy, basic and vocational education, and renewable energy.

As an example, it can be mentioned that in 2014, over 117,000 recipients were reached with various measures. 313 water points have been built and put into operation for 33,500 people. 240 water sources have been rehabilitated and 1,400 bio-sand filters have been produced and distributed. 60 irrigation systems have been established for over 3,000 families. Over 5,100 farmers have participated in practical courses, including to spread the cultivation of saffron, which is considered to have significant potential. There have been more than 6,700 participants in health and hygiene training courses, and over 10,000 hygiene kits have been distributed and 935 latrines built. These activities have been implemented in close cooperation with local authorities. Before and after measurements are used to measure the effect of, among other things, health/sanitation measures, and the results are encouraging.

Annex 4: Insights from Zardozi on Building Freedom to Act for Women in Economic Activities.

(Source: Pain, (2021): *Punching above its weight or running with the crowd*. pp. 63 – 66).

Zardozi⁶⁷, formally registered as an independent Afghan NGO in 2006, had its roots in an embroidery income generating project for Afghan refugee women in Peshawar that was established in 1984 by the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees. The Zardozi Programme established in 2008, funded by donors⁶⁸ has worked since then with poor Afghan women linking them to local markets. In 2010 it established a membership-based grass roots business support organization called Nisfe Jahan. Working in the four major cities of Kabul, Jalalabad, Mazar and Herat and their peri-urban areas, its primary focus was on supporting the economic empowerment of women living in poverty through providing training and services and other support to link these women to markets. In its last round of funding it has focused on its long-term commitment to women's economic empowerment, the social empowerment of women through leadership development and civic education through Community Business Centres it has established. In addition it has developed and supported a group of local gender activists or *Kadar* to strengthen links between community institutions and local authorities and to actively work on the rights and protection of women and girls.

Zardozi had recognized (Everdene, 2014) the challenges that poor women face as micro-entrepreneurs (MSEs)⁶⁹ and that what often motivates such women to start business activities is the lack of adequate support from a male provider. Their move into being economically active requires a process of negotiation within the household and incremental change in order to secure additional income for the household. Such activities often do not fit with family or cultural or family norms. Gaining additional income by these women often does not necessarily create greater autonomy for them but it may open up more space within the household. This includes slowly gaining more mobility under less restrictive conditions, gaining greater physical and emotional security, authority within the household and securing greater financial autonomy.

Negotiating a degree of greater autonomy in the household and freedom to act is one matter, accessing hostile and exclusionary market structures is a further challenge. There is almost no support for women in market systems that largely confine them at best to neighbourhood markets. As Jones (2021:15) characterizes the situation '*supporting functions including training and market access do not exist, market players are missing, gendered social norms restrict women's business activity and the value chain from inputs support through production to consumer markets does not include women's businesses for the most part*'.

As Figure 1 summarizes, Zardozi's support has been targeted to address precisely these structural weaknesses in the market systems. Over time, and these are not changes brought about by simply focusing on skills training or short term project funding, it has been effective in supporting this group of women to have a profitable engagement in market systems across a range of activities from home-based enterprises (MSEs) to those that are SGBs who have

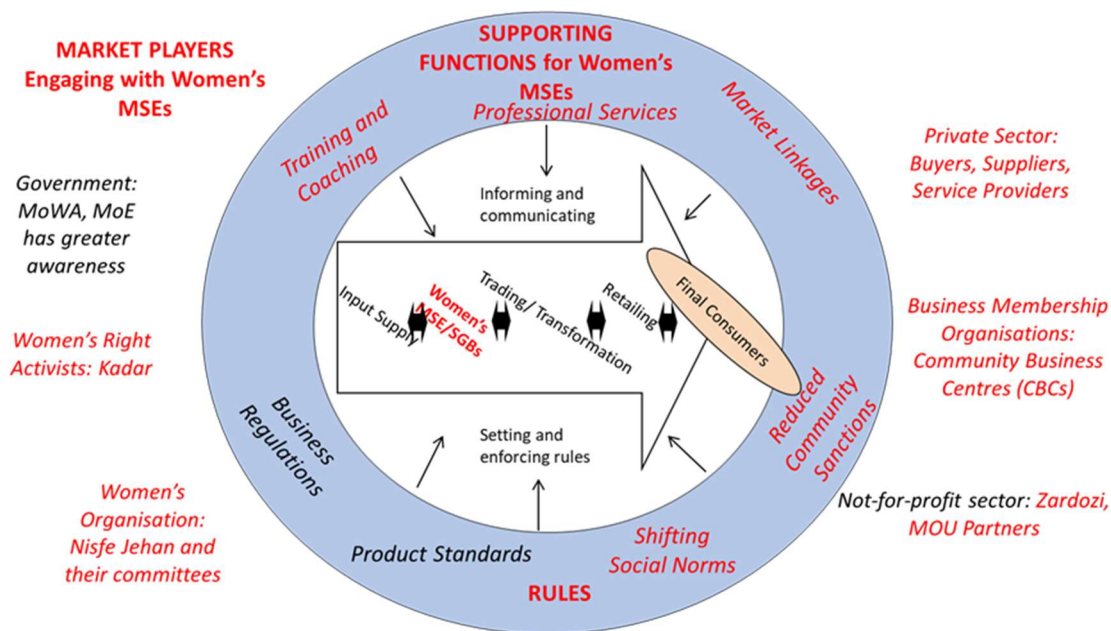
⁶⁷ <https://zardozi.org/>

⁶⁸ Zardozi has had a number of substantial projects funded by different donors but regrettably it did not secured long term funding and is now no longer operational.

⁶⁹ Micro-entrepreneurs are defined as 'necessity entrepreneurs' in contrast to what are termed small and growing businesses (SGBs) whose owners have the drive and capacity to expand their businesses (Jones, 2021:9).

responded to opportunities in national and export markets (Jones, 2021:18). While the numbers are relatively small in relation to the total population of women, some 4500 clients of Zardozi (out of its total portfolio of 7750 clients) are on average generating a monthly income of Afs 1,468. For those running a beauty parlour or shop, average income can rise to Afs 4,992 to 4,368 respectively (see Jones, 2021: 24). Zardozi has been notably successful in supporting women to address the social barriers that they face. This has been done through the recruitment of a cadre of activists (*Kadar*)⁷⁰ who work with support from Zardozi within their immediate communities and families to support women negotiate the challenges they face and lobby for greater support for services from relevant authorities. They have been remarkably effective in doing so.

Figure 1: Targeted Women's MSE Market System after Zardozi Intervention



Source: Jones, 2021:16

As the findings of the evaluation (Jones, 2021) made clear the results from Zardozi although modest in scale are significant in terms of what has been achieved in supporting the development of a more gender-equitable and gender responsive market system. It has taken place against the odds of restrictive social norms, gender-based violence, extreme poverty, lack of support, limited formal capabilities and absent public goods. Women have started to ‘latch onto the opportunities offered by Zardozi , ...starting and growing businesses, ...taking leadership roles as managers of home based community business centres, workshop owners that employ other women, Kadar activities, and leadership of the Nisfe Jahan’ (Jones, 2021: 4). But as Jones emphasizes the pace of change is incremental — ‘this is happening one woman, one household and one community at a time, and finally the market is shifting, women are

⁷⁰ Zardozi found that its own Afghan staff has limited effects in trying to fulfill this role but using volunteer activist women in their own communities where they could not be ignored has had a major effect (Informant 7).

empowering each other through in-person and digital networks, and there is a growing commitment from private and public sector institutions’; (op.cit).

But what the evaluation report also makes clear through its careful exploration of the relevance and coherence of Zardozi’s intervention, relevance was not assessed on the basis of need. Rather it was explored in relation to an analytical understanding of market constraints for women in Afghanistan and an iterative design of continuous reflection and learning that needed to respond to those constraints. While Zardozi itself may not have had the particular analytical model of the market system in mind in shaping its intervention, its long term grounded experience and learning of what worked and did not work has made it a highly relevant intervention. In so doing it has also achieved what might be termed internal coherence in its interventions but also been consistent with wider agendas and principles. There are lessons to be learnt from this approach in terms of the pace, stages and sequencing of change in addressing markets, poverty and gender equality.