

Working on conflict

A summary of an assessment for ActionAid Afghanistan

Summary

This is a summary of a review carried out for ActionAid Afghanistan (AAA) by Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU) about the potential for programmes and activities on conflict in Afghanistan. As this review indicates many of the core parts of Afghan identity, society, political and economic life are conflictual. This is further complicated by the variety of peoples, cultures and economic livelihoods across the country. This means that single interpretations of conflict are unlikely to be comprehensive enough to give a solid understanding of the range of conflicts that are ongoing. However playing on the strengths of rights-based NGOs it should be possible through sustained relationships with communities at a grass root level to develop a nuanced understanding of conflicts and potentially how to address them. However they must be able to take in to consideration the wide range of factors in Afghanistan that causes conflict as well as understanding their impacts, both long and short term and start to unravel them so that programme interventions can be designed to address the conflict drivers.

Drivers

In assessing the historical and recent causes, and long and short-term effects of conflict it is necessary to rationalize the areas we are discussing. These can broadly be split in to five groups; Statehood; Social identity; Poverty; Armed groups; Licit and illicit trade.

Statehood

The conflict of the last 30 years has also led to a deterioration and degradation of effective state institutions in most parts of the rural Afghanistan. However by rebuilding the state the international community and international military forces are also in the process of rebuilding a key driver of conflict in Afghanistan: the Afghan state. The nature of the Afghan state has never been categorically defined – it is still being contested on daily basis and has been contested for several hundred years. The aims of the international community are therefore hindered, from a ‘good governance’ perspective, by the poor quality of governance provided by Afghan institutions (security related or not). However the Afghan state has its own agency in the current rebuilding process which is still dominated by a number of factions who have a stake in conflict and the Afghan state continues to be a primary driver of instability in some areas which is associated with criminality, corruption and predatory activity.

Social identity

Social identities, based on ethnicity, *qawm* or sub-tribe are particularly strong and provide numerous potential cleavages for conflict. But social identities do not just provide a narrative for the larger conflicts; they permeate all levels of conflict from within families, between families and within communities up until national and sub-regional identities. Further ethnic identities are often the top-layer of a number of lower order identities, including tribe and sub-tribe as well as religious affiliation. Conflicts within and between communities are often driven in part by these identities, or belligerents are mobilized along those lines. The larger conflicts that rage over the nature, or existence of the state, are often super-imposed over existing rivalries and local networks of power and social identity. These are causes and drivers of conflict with a long-term horizon, and new conflicts can alter, reform and re-mould these identities in new ways which can create further rounds of conflict and levels of complexity. The international community has seemed to play down the realities of ethnicity in its engagement in Afghanistan, while it remains a key factor, in Afghan eyes,

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in the appointment of officials particularly in the security related ministries. In the current context there seems to be a re-emergence of ethnicity as a mobilising factor – possibly as a result of the democratic model of governance which is now being promoted.

Ethnicity is however not monolithic and throughout the conflicts of the last 30 years commanders of different factions have worked with and for commanders of other ethnicities for a variety of reasons. Ethnic mobilisation of the electorate seems to be strong but again not cohesive enough to rule out leaders making compromises with other groups to further their goals.

Poverty

Poverty is a complex and subtle driver of conflict. Historically poverty in and of itself was not a driver of open conflict; the poorest most marginalised parts of the country have often been havens of security. However poverty is causing a larger number of Afghans in to potentially conflictual relationships with local power holders. Two trends are particularly concerning, the ability of armed groups and opium producers to pay for fighters / harvesters – providing a cash income that is hard to rival in a context of rising food and fuel prices; and increased pressure on land and resources which can lead to (ethnically based) conflicts. The practical challenges facing economic development in Afghanistan are significant and it will be years before the development of some sectors will begin to be felt. Vulnerability looks set to remain an underlying driver of conflict, though reducing vulnerability may not lead to reduced conflict.

Armed groups

Armed groups in Afghanistan include socially organised formations, politically orientated parties as well as state institutions – the lines between which are often blurred. Personal weapon ownership has a long history and could be used in local conflicts, though their use was normally proscribed by social conventions. The channelling of vast weapons supplied to the Mujahedeen and government backed militias in the 1980's means that weapon ownership was then not just socially acceptable as before, but essential for individual family and group safety. The control of armed groups has then moved away from strong social structures such as the tribe or central government and moved in to the independent armed group. Current attempts at disarming groups through the DDR and DIAG programmes have largely been ineffective in reducing the number of weapons in circulation and seem to be undermined by international military forces preference for using and employing informal militias for a range of tasks including both static defence and offensive operations. The presence of such a large volume of weaponry and a general acceptance that weapons can buy power, protection and influence will be a continued driver of conflict.

Licit and illicit trade

Trade in Afghanistan is extensive – however even the trade that is legal is often traded informally. State actors are largely unable and unwilling to police and tax trade, licit or illicit, and it remains a significant gap of governance. This is however how state-citizen relationships have worked in Afghanistan for centuries, and it has suited both the state and citizens at varying times. It means however that attempts by the government to 'reform' the social contract, including the provision of services which it must pay for through taxation, is likely to be conflictual. Trade is flourishing at the moment and attempts to manage it, or reduce the illegal parts, could be damaging to state stability and increase local level conflicts as parties seek new accommodations with local state actors (possibly through corruption).

Approaches

In a sense there are three levels of conflict resolution activities in Afghanistan, those promoted by the state, those used by communities and those promoted by civil society. Those favoured by the state, including the formal justice sector, are often perceived to be fuelling further conflict as levels of trust in the governance structures (police, army and judiciary) are very low. Equally those in communities are viewed with suspicion by some sections of the state, and by external observers for being arbitrary, at times unfair and not proactive. They do however have a significant amount of legitimacy within communities making the decisions and actions more acceptable locally. Civil society activities have been identified with both state sponsored formal mechanism for conflict resolution as well as community based interventions. The following table is a summary of some of the types of activities that are being carried out in Afghanistan. Important lessons learned from conflict programming include; 1) The need for much greater coordination between actors to avoid duplication; 2) Projects should also not be so small as to be largely irrelevant; 3) Projects can cause as well as mitigate conflict; 4) There seems to be community acceptance that whilst the informal justice sector or informal conflict resolution is often difficult to work with it provides the most stable environment to work within given the ongoing contestation over the state.

Type of activity	Potential impact	Institutional investment	
		Internal	External
Mainstreaming conflict resolution training in existing programmes (i.e. in CDCs)	Reducing or mitigating conflicts caused by the implementation of the National Solidarity Programme.	Yes, mainly for existing CDC trainers	Yes, for CDCs, adding at least one module of training
Initiating an independent programme working on one major conflict (provincial level) in an area of current operations.	Possibly reducing conflict between two factions within a province allowing development / humanitarian programming to be undertaken more effectively.	Yes, significant training and resource mobilisation for monitoring the conflict and acting on it appropriately	Depends on the conflict.
Work on policies of the Afghan and international governments which affect local, provincial or national conflicts.	This could be to work on a policy to reduce future conflicts, such as legal reform, disaster risk reduction or health policies.	Low, possibly just within senior staff.	Possibly high depending on how work is approached with the specific institution.
Implementing peace education	This could augment ongoing education programmes of an organisation lowering domestic violence, violence in schools and promoting non-violent conflict resolution amongst the target population.	Yes, training for internal staff, but can be relatively easily achieved.	Yes, both institutionally, with the Ministry of Education, and for school children.
Implementing peacebuilding activities alongside existing programmes	Reducing conflicts within local communities, and possibly between localised communities.	Yes, training for internal staff, but can be relatively easily achieved.	Yes, for community council members.

Challenges, gaps and opportunities

The overriding operational challenge for NGOs is that they are associated with the larger conflicts occurring in Afghanistan and they are targeted by some groups in the country. In addition development’s inherently dynamic engagement with communities can exacerbate existing conflicts and create new ones. Practicing Do no harm is very challenging in Afghanistan unless organisations deploy significant resources.

The context in Afghanistan, particularly the sources of funding, overlapping mandates and areas of operation and fluctuating relationship between NGOs and state and non-state actors are all problematic. The following table attempts to show what the challenges, gaps and opportunities are for working on conflict according to three interrelated approaches that are important for a rights-based NGO.

	Rights based approaches	Participatory approaches	Conflict resolution programming
Challenges	Human rights, and rights based approaches, may be resisted by some power holders leading to the potential for conflict in implementing some forms of conflict resolution (particularly with issues relating to women)	Participatory approaches are often well understood in Afghan culture with a preference for consensual decision making. This does not make decision equitable particularly problems the vulnerable and women.	Access remains the key challenge across all types of NGO programming.
Gaps	Rights based approaches are not often used in programming by Afghan organisations.	There does seem to be a gap in broadening participation beyond a community or village to bring in other actors such as the courts and formal system.	Mobilisation through conflict resolution programming requires access and increasing areas of the country remain closed to NGO activity.
Opportunities	Rights based approaches are often not well understood across the Afghan NGO sector and not all international NGOs subscribe to this approach either. There may be a role in improving or modifying some conflict methodologies implemented by other organisations.	There are well developed participatory conflict resolution programmes by other organisations and replicating them in new areas would be feasible.	Communities often have pre-existing skills in conflict resolution and training and capacity building for them to resolve their conflicts may be beneficial and in some areas has become self-sustaining.

Along with the approach specific concerns there were three other sectoral or organisational issues;

- NGO programming for working on conflict is not harmonised across the country, even within national programmes. There is a potential for a greater appreciation for lessons learned and best practice to be shared. There is considerable experience in a limited number of organisations for working on conflict and expanding capacity building and training of staff internally may be beneficial.
- Between NGOs there continues to be poor coordination. We have not found solid examples of organisations supporting each other in resolving conflicts and this may offer some opportunities.
- Coverage of programmes is often not national, especially on issues where a high level of expertise is required, namely conflict resolution programming and legal inputs in to land conflicts. For individuals and families there is a significant lack of information about how they can deal with conflicts non-violently.