



BUREAU FOR RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT (BRD)
دبیا ودانولو او پراختیا موسسه

POVERTY IN AFGHANISTAN; A HUMAN RIGHTS PROSPECTIVE

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About Organization

The Bureau for Reconstruction and Development (BRD)

1. Organization Back Ground

BRD was set up in 2002 by local Afghans to provide services in the areas of human rights (advocacy and education), capacity building of CSOs, local NGOs and government departments. The organization aims to create an environment in which Afghans are able to improve their standards of living through an equitable and sustainable use of resources and to contribute towards the development of a strong, viable and pluralistic civil society in Afghanistan.

1.1. BRD's Vision

BRD's vision is of an Afghanistan where all the population live with improved livelihood, social justice, integrity and prosperity, where human rights and rights of women are recognized, upheld and respected, where citizens have an active role in determining the values, direction and governance of their communities and country, for the benefit of all.

1.2. BRD's Mission Statement

- To create an environment in which men and women are able to improve their standards of living through equitable and sustainable use of resources.
- To facilitate the process of community development in BRD's target areas through programmatic and institutional intervention.
- To improve service delivery by building the institutional capacity of the public and Non-Profit sector to facilitate the process of long-term development in Afghanistan.
- To enhance the skills and knowledge of local communities on human rights and democracy to ensure their active participation in the development of a viable civil society in Afghanistan.

1.3. Our Key Programs

- Human Rights Education and Advocacy
- Civil Society Education and Training
- Capacity Building of Government
- Local Economy Development through Vocational Training and Income Generation.

1.4. Our Strategy and Approach

BRD provides quality services to the Afghan community for the development of a sustainable society. Our work is guided by our Vision, Mission and Core Values. Our approach to development is the Rights Based Approach; The guiding principle for BRD work in Afghanistan remains the rights-based approach to human development. Poverty most often stems from the denial of human rights – through discrimination, marginalization. BRD approach is stand on the right based principles, accountability, empowerment, participation, non-discrimination and attention to vulnerable groups.

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POVERTY IN AFGHANISTAN: A HUMAN RIGHT PROSPECTIVE

1. OBSTRUCT

Denied access to certain human rights, such as the right to food, health, shelter, education, security; discrimination of women, children and vulnerable groups; lack of judicial remedies and power to participate in political decision-making, all contribute to escalate and keep people in poverty and thereby deny them a life in dignity, as recognized by the international human rights regime.

On the other hand, increased respect for human rights, e.g. the right to health, education and political participation can contribute to lifting people out of poverty and create an atmosphere conducive for sustainable human development. Human rights therefore play a crucial role in the fight against poverty and for a sustainable human development, including the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals.

It is widely accepted today that changes in a society have to come from within and cannot be imposed from the outside. We can find many examples of development efforts that have failed, as the ultimate recipients (the poor individuals) have had limited access to decision making processes during assessment, planning and implementation of programmes aimed to benefit them.

Hence, it is both important and necessary to emphasize the needs and interests of people living in poverty by recognizing that people living in poverty have the right to, in a Non-discriminatory way, participate in and contribute to processes of relevance for their own development, as well as holding decision-makers accountable for their actions.

This, in effect, means that it is unrealistic to attempt to curb poverty in isolation to efforts designed to tackle abusive structures and institutions of power, that it is necessary to expand the choices available to the poor, and to include them in socio-economic assessment, implementation, and evaluation processes. It is equally important that resources are allocated equitably and that the security concerns of Afghans are addressed.

According to the UN Report¹ the abject poverty remains widespread in Afghanistan; it is closely related to inequality and frequently accompanied by a sense of powerlessness and exclusion. Add conflict to the mix, and addressing poverty becomes an even greater challenge. This is the situation in Afghanistan. Poverty, and its multiple ramifications, scars the lives of millions of Afghans. As elsewhere, poverty is multi-dimensional and can be traced to different sources and processes. Poverty is neither accidental, nor inevitable in Afghanistan: it is both a cause and consequence of a massive human rights deficit including widespread impunity and inadequate investment in, and attention to, human rights.

¹ UN Report HUMAN RIGHT DAIMENSION OF POWERTY IN AFGHANISTSN MARCH 2010

2. BACK GROUND

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. Since the Soviet invasion in 1979, it has been the scene of a series of conflicts that have continued for three decades. Poverty in Afghanistan is widespread throughout rural and urban areas. Its estimates that 42 per cent of the country's total population lives below the national poverty line. Another 20 per cent of the people live just above that line and are highly vulnerable to the risk of falling into poverty.

The 2007-2008² National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) found that 7.4 million people – nearly a third of the population – are unable to get enough food to live active, healthy lives. Another 8.5 million people, or 37 percent, are on the borderline of food insecurity. Around 400,000 people each year are seriously affected by natural disasters, such as droughts, floods, earthquakes or extreme weather conditions.

The poor in Afghanistan are amongst the most impoverished in the world and statistical averages hide differences,³ for example, between men and women, or between nomads and those who are settled. Such differences are critical to understanding “who is poor and why?” in order to identify the human rights factors which come into play in creating and sustaining poverty. Notwithstanding the many constraints inherent in an insecure environment, greater efforts are needed to secure disaggregated data by ethnic or tribal group, age, urban, rural, informal and formal settlements, disability, sex, nomadic and settled. Similarly, indicators to measure the impact of poverty reduction interventions must show who is being empowered to enjoy the benefits of development, who is left behind, and the reasons for this.

Inequitable⁴ Allocation of Resources If the international community provides aid for their own purposes, priorities, and choices, it is simply not productive. Aid agencies are making similar complaints; according to one aid agency, the trend is to fund high value projects that are often “implemented through large for-profit private companies, linked to military and political priorities, and targeting geographical areas where the donors have a military presence or political interest. The development and humanitarian needs of the Afghan people are not being met, despite significant donor funding to Afghanistan.” Overall, such modus operandi makes it difficult to meet the population's actual needs.

The inequitable allocation of development funding to the various provinces in Afghanistan has been a long-standing concern. At the 2008 Paris Conference on aid effectiveness, it was urged that “the benefits of development must reach all provinces equitably.” However, a significant proportion of Government and donor funds and resources continue to be channeled to conflict areas, in particular through the PRTs, resulting in stable areas receiving much less. Development funding is also ignoring parts of the country with true economic potential, where relatively stable conditions would allow donor agencies to develop critically needed services and infrastructure.

² National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA)

³ UN Report on Human Rights Dimension of Poverty in Afghanistan March 2010

⁴ ACBAR Falling Short Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan March 2008

Aid is delivered through a range of mechanisms that serve different strategies, some of which are not necessarily consistent with the Afghan Government's priorities. One such example is the controversial "Hearts and Minds" strategy, which forms part of the operational guidance to the US military and does not appear in any of the Government's strategic planning documents.ⁱ Significant spending is channeled through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), a key "Hearts and Minds" actor.

There are many factors from human rights perspective, which all the efforts for eradicating poverty in Afghanistan, which are discussed as below;

3. CONTRIBUTING FACTOR OF FAILOR OF ERADICATING POVERTY

1) Abuse of power is one of the key challenges in the way of eradicating poverty in Afghanistan, where miss-us of power by the power holder in Afghanistan is usual practice. Preference has given to the personnel interest over national interests through influencing the decisions. Dealing with the individual power holders, based on the personnel relation and political objectives, ignoring the institutions, mechanism and structures, is another practice used by some of the international partners which paved the way for impunity and corruption, lengthen the way towards reaching to the culture of accountability and transparency.

According to the UN report⁵ the abuse of powere is one of the important factors and a key driver of poverty in Afghanistan. The way power-holders emerge and how they use their power, in particular with respect to the use of resources, entrenches social exclusion, perpetuates unequal access to social justice, and undermines efforts geared to the enjoyment of human rights.

In the Afghan context where unequal relations of power are a key feature of the decision-making process and the State is, mostly, not beholden to Afghan citizens, the environment is ripe for those in power to advance their own desires. Corruption influences the way decisions are made and defines public institutions' priorities. As a consequence, social exclusion is sustained because priorities are determined by those with power and not by the marginalized. As the Afghan context shows, corruption is also implicitly encouraged when there is no genuine means for affected individuals to call the Government to account or to demand transparency.

2) Corruption is the most discussed aspect of the abuse of power the diversion of resources, including those allocated by the international community in Afghanistan. In 2005 Afghanistan ranked 117 out of 159 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Index. Four years later, Afghanistan was assessed as the second most corrupt country in the world, just ahead of strife-torn Somalia.*

In 2010, the United Nations Office⁶ on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that Afghans paid USD 2.5 billion in bribes over the past year.** One Afghan out of two had to pay at least one bribe to a public official. This amounted to an average of USD 158 paid per capita, ina country that has an annual GDP per capita of USD 425, thus "a crippling tax on People who are already among the worlds poorest."

⁵ UN Report Human Rights Dimension of Poverty March 2010

⁶ UNODC Report 2010

3) The Lack of choice is another key factor of poverty in Afghanistan. As mentioned in the UN report⁷, that poverty seriously limits the ability of a vast majority of Afghans at the individual or household level, to live a dignified life including the ability to make choices that match their aspirations. “The defining feature of a poor person is that they have very restricted opportunities to pursue their well-being. Poor Afghans have very few choices or options in life, in particular when it comes to finding ways to overcome poverty.

The human development⁸ focuses on enlarging people's choices so that they can lead the lives they value, expanding their capabilities, enhancing their freedoms and enabling them to enjoy their human rights. This means putting people at the centre of development efforts, ensuring that they themselves become agents of change and that they are able to live in an environment conducive to the full development of their potential.

Human development aims to ensure that everyone has certain basic capabilities, such as leading a long and healthy life; having a livelihood with dignity, free of insecurity; engaging in productive work; accessing information and communicating freely; and participating in the political and social life of one's community.

Development projects⁹ are often implemented to serve political and military agendas; they rarely take into consideration or respect choices made by Afghans, even when they have been consulted. Recently, a report on USAID funding concluded “the vast majority of USAID funds are invested in programs that are designed from cubicles in Kabul by officers who are rarely able to get out from behind the USAID and Embassy compound walls due to security concerns.”

4) Exclusion and discrimination is continued to affect the life of poor and marginalized afghans. Social and cultural, as well as some legal, norms perpetuate and are seen to justify continued discriminatory practices that disenfranchise large segments of the population. Effective poverty reduction requires addressing the various factors that make Afghans poor or vulnerable to poverty and should not be limited to addressing levels of income.

While up to two-thirds of the Afghan population is deprived of its entitlement to enjoy a secure and dignified life, certain groups and individuals, by virtue of their status, suffer disproportionately. Exclusion and discrimination play a significant role in maintaining poverty in Afghanistan. Such deliberate and systemic marginalization is particularly significant and harmful for certain groups of Afghans including the following:

4.1) the rural population, which accounts for 74 per cent of Afghans, face particular challenges. It is estimated that the proportion of poor households among those that own land is 26 per cent, while amongst those that rent, sharecrop or have a mortgage on their land, the proportion is 42 per cent.ⁱⁱ While it is evident that land is a direct source for the provision of food, it also provides one of the few safety nets available to Afghans. Those who own land have the confidence to borrow from shopkeepers or relatives. Accordingly, landless Afghans have more difficulties getting credit, be it money or material goods.

⁷ UU –Report on Human Rights Dimension of Poverty in Afghanistan. March 2010

⁸ UNDP – The State of Human Development and the Afghan MDGs.

⁹ ACBAR – Report on Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan Flling Short March 2008

4.2) 54 per cent of the Kuchi are deemed to be extremely poor, making them the poorest group in Afghanistan.ⁱⁱⁱ Their nomadic lifestyle makes them particularly vulnerable to poverty and a host of risk factors. As described by a Provincial official, “the Kuchi are at risk of harm from scorpion, snake, and wild animals as well as rain, flood, cold, heat and other weather changes because of their lifestyle.”^{iv} A combination of factors, including their cultural identity, and their dependence on livestock and migration, sets them apart from sedentary communities who constitute the majority of the Afghan population, this contributes to a high and systematic level of discrimination that is a factor in the widespread poverty that characterizes the Kuchi.

4.3) The 2007-08 NRVA indicates that 1.6 per cent of the Afghan population has a disability, which is significantly lower than the estimated average of 10 per cent per any given population.^v However, this percentage only includes people with severe disabilities, and it is understood that about one in five households includes a person with a disability. In addition, the statistics do not provide information about the number of people with disabilities who do not survive due to lack of access to essential services. 13 per cent of disability is attributable to the armed conflict, including mines and remnants of war while another third is caused by illness and ageing. Being disabled in Afghanistan means stigmatization and social exclusion.

4.4) Afghan women face enormous obstacles to receiving an adequate education, to holding gainful employment, and to accessing health care. Although the GDI acts as a useful indicator for revealing inequalities between women and men, it is not sufficiently comprehensive to reveal the human rights violations or the lack of access to justice suffered by women, as well as their limited role in governance and decision-making. Thus, it does not give a full picture of the impact of the paucity of the rule of law on women's lives.

Gender inequalities demonstrated by statistics pertaining to health, mortality rates, education and literacy reflect institutionalized and discriminatory norms and practices; Afghan women and girls have much less choices in life than men and boys. Maternal mortality in Afghanistan is the second highest in the world, with approximately 25,000 deaths annually. This is the highest single cause of death in Afghanistan.

5) Insecurity is a constant in the lives of Afghans; armed conflict compounds and exacerbates poverty and inhibits or halts development programmes. Conflict breeds the conditions for local disputes to be “resolved” through violent means. Notwithstanding widespread acknowledgement that a militarized approach is not a solution to the crisis in Afghanistan, investment in issues such as poverty alleviation or justice, that are of priority concern to Afghans, is extremely limited.

Armed conflict has impacted the lives of almost all Afghans, namely 96 per cent of the population.^{vi} This is a staggering statistic that includes deaths, injuries, disability, and destruction of homes, assets, and livelihoods that are essential for survival. The ICRC study also shows that 76 per cent of Afghans were driven from their homes and 6 per cent became separated from their own families during the long years of war.

The immediate and direct impact of the armed conflict in terms of civilian casualties has received a growing amount of attention in different policy circles as the death toll has continued to rise in recent years.^{vii} Almost half of the Afghan population has reported loss of family members as a result of the many years of fighting. Some of the most deadly tactics used in the current phase of the conflict include the use of improvised explosive devices, air strikes, suicide attacks, and night raids.^{viii}

In addition to the cost in lives, Afghans have suffered from loss of livelihood and disruption of access to education, healthcare, and other essential services. In some locations, schools have been closed, clinics are inaccessible, and roads can only be used with caution. The conflict also impacts on the capacity of Afghans' partners to address humanitarian and development needs: the number of local NGO staff killed in violent incidents fell in 2009 but, nonetheless, 19 NGO staff - all Afghans - were killed and 172 incidents were recorded. In 2008, 38 aid workers died in violent circumstance. Reduced fatalities largely reflect tighter security measures, including self-imposed restrictions of movement and changes in security policies by most of the NGOs working in Afghanistan.

Women and children – the “unseen victims” of the Afghan conflict – bear a huge burden when a family loses its chief breadwinner: “[m]any families have lost a male member of their family leaving orphans, widows and families without support. In many cases, these families have lost their breadwinners and now, their women and children are begging on the streets. Given the social and cultural norms that obtain in Afghanistan, when insecurity restricts access to local services such as education or health care, women and children face additional threats to their well-being as alternatives are not, in general, available to them.

4. CONCLUSION

Understanding the human rights dimension of poverty is critical to the identification of underlying structural problems and processes that, left unaddressed, run the risk of undermining poverty reduction initiatives. A human rights perspective and analysis helps ensure that causes, and not just consequences, inform the design and implementation of programmes geared to the alleviation or elimination of chronic poverty. A frank examination of issues concerned with the nature and use of power, resource allocation, insecurity, and decision-making that adversely affects the lives of the poor points to the necessity of addressing structural inequalities that perpetuate and exacerbate poverty in Afghanistan.

As mentioned the un report¹, many Afghan power-brokers rarely make decisions that are in the best interests of the wider population including the poor. Indeed, too often they use their position to advance their own individual interests to the detriment of the public good. Deeply entrenched impunity coupled with weak or dysfunctional democratic processes and cultural norms that keep women and others on the sidelines, at the local and national level, helps perpetuate abusive power structures.

The twin evils of impunity and injustice affect the lives of Afghans in ways that have a direct bearing on their ability to expand choices and access opportunities to reduce deprivation as well as their marginalized and impoverished status. Large segments of the Afghan population are effectively disenfranchised and marginalized; their voices are rarely heard. Women, the landless, Kuchi nomads, and people with disabilities are particularly discriminated against in today's Afghanistan.

Poverty in Afghanistan does not occur in a vacuum. Ongoing policy discussions at the international level have significant implications for Afghans who struggle to survive below or just above the poverty line. The pursuit of military or other strategies that ignore or exacerbate the plight of the poor are questionable from any perspective. Such approaches, whatever their short-term outcomes are also likely to undermine or thwart stabilization or peace consolidation efforts.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) The Government of Afghanistan and its international partners should strengthen development policy, and implement strategies, that adopt a human rights-based approach so that the specific needs and conditions of poor Afghans are addressed because ;

A human rights-based approach is a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights. It seeks to analyse inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress.

Mere charity is not enough from a human rights perspective. Under a human rights-based approach, the plans, policies and processes of development are anchored in a system of rights and corresponding obligations established by international law and this helps to promote the sustainability of development work, empowering people themselves— especially the most marginalized—to participate in policy formulation and hold accountable those who have a duty to act.

- 2) Measure the impact of poverty reduction initiatives by using the full and non-discriminatory enjoyment of human rights as an indicator for progress. In this regard, poverty reduction impact assessments should analyse how strategies and initiatives were developed and undertaken, as well as whether they contributed to the realization of human rights. Through inclusive and transparent processes, decision-makers should be held to account by the population.
- 3) As a matter of priority, address impunity and corruption through fair and transparent processes, including the prosecution of corrupt and abusive officials. In this regard, Afghans and their public institutions, including Parliament, the media, and civil society organizations, should scrutinize the actions of the Government and its international partners to promote greater transparency and accountability.
- 4) Define development initiatives in line with the priorities of the poor and not those of short-term military and political agendas.
- 5) The Afghan Government and the international community in particular should empower the Afghan civil society and the media to effectively play the role of watchdogs, provide social audits, and influence the policy decisions taken by the government and the international community.

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