

Navigating the Humanitarian Landscape in Afghanistan

A Journey through Change and Challenge (2017-2024)

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The humanitarian landscape in Afghanistan has undergone seismic shifts from 2017 to 2024, a period marked by both profound challenges and resilient efforts to foster development. This article explores the complexities and transformations within Afghanistan's humanitarian and developmental sectors, drawing from extensive experience in capacity building, emergency response, and collaboration with national NGOs and governmental entities. The narrative traverses the era before and after the rise of the de-facto authorities, reflecting on the evolving dynamics and enduring obstacles in navigating Afghanistan's humanitarian terrain.

Pre-De-Facto Authority Era: Foundations and Progress

From 2017, the humanitarian sector in Afghanistan operated within a framework shaped by a fragile but functional government and an international community striving to address acute needs while laying the groundwork for long-term development. During this period, my role focused significantly on capacity building for national NGOs, aligning with the broader aim of creating a robust, self-sustaining humanitarian ecosystem.

One of the key interventions was with the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR), where we contributed to vocational training unification initiatives under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) with the EU support (<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/launch-first-online-vocational-training-linkage-platform-afghanistan>). The focus was on equipping individuals with practical skills to enhance livelihood opportunities, thereby addressing immediate economic needs while fostering longer-term resilience. This collaboration exemplified a comprehensive approach to capacity building, integrating training programmes with local needs and ensuring alignment with national policies. The entire initiative was jeopardised and is now at a standstill following the fall of Kabul; it is no longer a priority.

Furthermore, our engagement with Women Saffron Enterprises in Goryan, Herat, highlighted the critical intersection of gender and economic development. By supporting women-led enterprises, the initiative aimed not only at economic empowerment but also at fostering gender equality within a traditionally patriarchal society. This project underscored the importance of incorporating gender-sensitive approaches in humanitarian interventions, recognising that women's participation is crucial for sustainable development.

In collaboration with ACBAR (Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development), significant strides were made in enhancing the institutional capacities of national NGOs. The Twinning Programme, which focused on building the capacities of Afghan NGOs to meet UN-OCHA AHF standards, was pivotal. This programme aimed at strengthening organisational practices, ensuring better coordination, and improving the quality of humanitarian responses. The emphasis was on creating a collaborative environment where local organisations could play a more active role in shaping and delivering humanitarian aid.

Transition to De-Facto Authority: Challenges and Adaptations

The transition to the de-facto authorities in August 2021 marked a profound shift in Afghanistan's humanitarian landscape. On 15 August 2021, the day I took my last flight with my colleague, under the looming possibility that it might be our final departure (<https://forhumansecurity.org/stranded-on-the-runway-in-kabul/> by Amina Agha). The emergence of the Taliban as the governing entity introduced a new set of dynamics, characterised by uncertainties and a significant reconfiguration of operational contexts. The impact on humanitarian work was immediate and multifaceted, necessitating rapid adaptation and strategic recalibration.

One of the most pressing challenges was navigating the shifting regulatory environment and adapting to the de-facto authorities' policies. Humanitarian organisations faced new restrictions and had to negotiate terms of engagement that aligned with the changing political landscape. This period saw an increased focus on ensuring compliance with the de-facto authorities' guidelines while striving to maintain the efficacy and integrity of humanitarian interventions.

Capacity building continued to be a priority, but the focus shifted towards enhancing the adaptability and resilience of national NGOs in a more restrictive environment. Training programmes were adjusted to address new challenges, including understanding and navigating the regulatory landscape imposed by the de-facto authorities. Support was also directed towards fostering collaboration among NGOs to ensure a unified approach in responding to the evolving needs of the population.

The humanitarian sector had to contend with operational restrictions affecting the delivery of aid. The shift in governance impacted logistical operations, access to affected populations, and the ability to conduct needs assessments. These constraints underscored the importance of developing innovative approaches to reach those in need, such as leveraging technology for remote monitoring and assessment.

Emergency Response and Developmental Focus: Bridging Immediate Needs with Long-Term Goals

Navigating the humanitarian landscape required a dual focus on emergency response and developmental goals. The immediate aftermath of the transition to the de-facto authorities saw an acute need for emergency assistance, including food security, healthcare, and protection services. Coordinating these efforts was essential to address urgent needs while ensuring that humanitarian principles were upheld despite the new challenges.

In this context, my role involved working on strategic plans to integrate emergency interventions with long-term developmental objectives. For instance, the focus on WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), Education, Livelihood and Nutrition remained critical, with strategies developed to ensure that emergency responses also contributed to building sustainable systems. The aim was to create a synergy between short-term relief and long-term development, ensuring that emergency interventions laid the groundwork for future resilience.

Following the establishment of Taliban governance, Afghanistan faced profound challenges due to restrictive decrees that significantly disrupted humanitarian efforts and societal structures. Humanitarian access became severely constrained as new regulations impeded the delivery of aid, exacerbating the ongoing crisis. Gender inequality intensified with restrictions on women's employment and education, severely impacting their economic participation and societal roles. The imposition of stringent media controls stifled free expression and limited transparency, further complicating the dissemination of crucial information. Additionally, the unstable security environment heightened risks for aid workers and disrupted operations. Education for girls suffered markedly, with decrees prohibiting secondary schooling and leading to widespread school closures. In response,

community-based schools emerged as a pragmatic solution, striving to provide educational opportunities within a constrained environment, albeit under challenging circumstances. These developments collectively underscore the complex interplay between governance changes and their profound impacts on humanitarian and educational sectors.

The Role of Evidence-Based Storytelling and Advocacy

In an environment characterised by significant changes and challenges, evidence-based storytelling became a crucial tool for advocacy and communication. Sharing impactful stories and data-driven insights helped in raising awareness, garnering support, and advocating for the needs of affected communities. My experience in developing resources, case studies and multimedia content was instrumental in highlighting the realities on the ground and the impact of humanitarian interventions, specifically GWM (Ground Water Monitoring) data digitization and dissemination.

Creating compelling narratives that respected local sensitivities and adhered to ethical communication standards was paramount. This approach ensured that the stories conveyed were both impactful and respectful, fostering greater understanding and engagement among stakeholders and the international community.

Looking Forward: Towards a Resilient Humanitarian Framework

As Afghanistan continues to navigate its complex humanitarian landscape, the focus must remain on building a resilient and adaptive humanitarian framework. This involves not only addressing immediate needs but also fostering long-term development and resilience. Strengthening the capacity of national NGOs, advocating for ethical and effective humanitarian practices, and maintaining a focus on the rights and needs of vulnerable populations are essential components of this framework.

The experience from 2017 to 2024 underscores the importance of adaptability, collaboration, and a commitment to humanitarian principles in the face of evolving challenges. By leveraging past experiences and insights, the humanitarian sector can continue to make meaningful contributions towards a more stable and prosperous Afghanistan.

The journey through Afghanistan's humanitarian landscape from 2017 to 2024 reflects a period of significant transformation and challenge. From the foundational work with national NGOs and government entities to the adaptation required in response to the rise of the de-facto authorities, the experience highlights both the resilience of the humanitarian sector and the ongoing need for strategic adaptation. As the situation continues to evolve, the lessons learned and the strategies developed will be crucial in shaping a path forward that prioritizes the needs of Afghanistan's most vulnerable populations while fostering long-term development and stability.

--KHARKA Ravi, PhD Research Scholar.