

AFTER THE TROOPS WITHDRAW



Six key priorities for international aid in Afghanistan

NATO foreign and defence ministers are meeting in Brussels on April 18 and 19 to plan conferences in Chicago (May) and Tokyo (July) that will shape security arrangements and international aid in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of western troops in 2013 and 2014.

Islamic Relief, one of the leading international aid organisations operating in Afghanistan, believes there are six key priorities for current and future humanitarian and development aid that donor governments need to seriously address at the Chicago and Tokyo conferences and beyond.

1. Improve food security and combat malnutrition and poverty

In a country where 42% of the population live below the poverty line and an estimated 9 million people do not have enough food to feed their families, food security is the number one issue. A quarter of children die before the age of five, and poverty is killing more Afghans than armed conflict. Life expectancy and rates of malnutrition and food insecurity should be to the fore in gauging the effectiveness of international aid to Afghanistan, and food security programmes should command the biggest share of aid in the short to medium term.

2. Increase agricultural empowerment and income-generating projects

The Afghan economy is hugely reliant on farming – 85% of the population depend on agriculture and livestock for their livelihoods. It's a precarious life when your country has suffered eight droughts in the past 11 years, and yet agricultural extension services are woefully underfunded. The agricultural sector needs stronger support to enable rural communities to get the best out of marginal land and grapple with the challenges of climate change. This should be coupled



▲ Zahra, 30, learned to read through Islamic Relief's home-based literacy programme in Bamyan. It is liberating for her to be able to read simple things such as sign boards and the destinations of buses. She can also read the vaccination cards of her three sons – Javed, Hamid and Wahid – and help them with their homework.

with new income-generating and livelihood projects, help with marketing, skills training and opportunities for adding value to products in order to diversify people's livelihoods.

3. Invest in education for all and protect women

In Afghanistan a woman dies in childbirth every 29 minutes and many girls and women are denied access to education – particularly in isolated rural areas. The key to addressing these issues is systematic investment in maternal and child health services and support for culturally sensitive community education programmes. One of Islamic Relief's most successful projects in Afghanistan is a home-base literacy and numeracy education programme that delivers one-to-one education in women's homes. Projects like this acknowledge the practical and cultural constraints on women travelling long distances. As well as improving literacy, numeracy and life skills, the women involved are more likely to prioritise sending their daughters to school.

4. Develop local capacity and support community participation

The most successful and enduring initiatives to tackle poverty involve the poorest communities in designing and delivering their own development projects. A good example in Afghanistan is the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development's National Solidarity Programme (NSP). Under the NSP, communities elect their own representatives to form community development councils that have a strong say in decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods. It is also important to strengthen civil society to help ensure that government is accountable and responsive. Community participation is a key ingredient of Islamic Relief's work in Afghanistan, and we believe a much greater proportion of international aid should be invested in programmes implemented by community-based organisations with the support of national and international NGOs.

5. Improve cost effectiveness and transparency in aid delivery

In some aid programmes in Afghanistan, as much as 40% of funds may not reach the people who need them because of a reliance on expensive consultants and the administrative burden of contracting and sub-contracting services. Where funding is limited, it is imperative that international aid is spent in a more cost-effective way. When an international non-government organisation can build a school for \$50,000 that would cost \$200,000 if it were built by international agencies, serious questions need to be asked about donors' funding choices and the future role of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. Islamic Relief is increasingly mainstreaming community accountability in all its programmes, and we believe more aid should be channelled through international and local NGOs with a good track record in cost-effective and accountable community development.

6. Ensure plans for refugee returns are realistic and properly resourced

As many as 2 million refugees who have returned to Afghanistan in the past ten years are deemed by the UN not to have successfully reintegrated into Afghan society. The lessons of previous return and repatriation programmes need to be learned before detailed plans are made for returning some of the 3 million refugees still estimated to be living in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Any return must be voluntary and with dignity, and managed in conjunction with a comprehensive strategy for internally displaced people. Targets for refugee returns should be realistic and returns should be staggered and carefully planned, acknowledging that most remaining refugees have become adjusted to living in urban communities and many do not want to return to Afghanistan.



▲ *Golda Bai*, 65, draws water from a well provided by Islamic Relief in 2010 in the northern province of Balkh.

ISLAMIC RELIEF IN AFGHANISTAN

Islamic Relief has worked in Afghanistan for 20 years, assisting over 2 million people. We have responded to all major disasters and initiated a broad variety of development programmes that address people's basic needs. These include the kind of food security, agriculture, education and livelihoods projects advocated in this briefing.

More information

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