

# INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AS PERCEIVED BY THE AFGHAN POPULATION

*Results of a long-term impact analysis in Northeast Afghanistan 2007–2013*

## Summary

How does the rural population of Afghanistan perceive the contributions made by international development cooperation (DC) with regard to security, social welfare and conflict transformation? Answers to this question can be found in the longitudinal impact analysis carried out from 2007 to 2013 in north-eastern Afghanistan by the Collaborative Research Center (SFB) 700 “Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood” at Freie Universität Berlin in cooperation with the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The study shows how volatile the environment is for DC and reveals how DC is perceived by the Afghan population. Furthermore, it describes how development cooperation can enable an environment that is conducive to stability and security.

The results of the study reveal two important trends. Firstly, a deterioration in the respondents’ sense of security as a reaction to the levels of increasing violence since 2007. In 2013, the majority of the respondents felt threatened by armed groups, especially criminal groups, the Taliban, and international security forces. Parallel to this, there was an increase in general scepticism of Western values and the presence of Western stakeholders.

Secondly, there clearly was progress in the region’s development. DC did reach the population throughout the entire period surveyed, despite the deterioration of security in the area. The local population predominantly agreed that DC had improved the provision of important goods and services. Although general conditions became more difficult, DC also strengthened the visibility and legitimacy of the Afghan state. Therefore, DC

contributed to one important objective of the international mission in Afghanistan.

## Background, purpose and relevance of the study

Commitments of up to €250 million per year make Afghanistan one of the most important partner countries of the BMZ. Even though impact evaluations in conflict-affected countries are logistically and methodologically challenging, it is therefore reasonable to ask what DC has been able to achieve.

The study sought to shed light on the effects of DC in Afghanistan and also to contribute to the further development of methodology for impact assessment of DC in conflict-affected countries. Among other elements, this longitudinal study is based on biennial surveys and qualitative data between 2007 and 2013. This enabled the researchers to draw a highly detailed picture of the continually changing environment in which DC has to operate. Further, perceptions among the intended recipients of DC could be evaluated systematically and over a long period. The survey data provide answers to questions such as: How much acceptance have DC experts and the international security forces earned for themselves? How does the Afghan population rate its security situation? How does it assess the performance of provincial and district administrations in Afghanistan? How does it value the DC received?

Thirdly, the data made it possible to apply statistical methods toward examining the effects of DC. The primary focus was on how it affects factors which help create an environment where stability and security become possible. Thus, the study

examined the effects of DC on the perceptions of security among the surveyed population, on the legitimacy of the Afghan state, and on the acceptance of international civil and military actors.

### Data

In the years 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2013, up to 3,000 Afghans in up to 120 villages were surveyed. Topics referred to by the questions included how the heads of household perceived the coverage and effect of DC, their perception of security and their attitude towards actors of DC, their attitude towards international and Afghan security forces, and their attitude towards the Afghan sub-national administration.

The villages chosen for the surveys are situated in the districts Imam Sahib, Aliabad, Warsaj, Taloqan, Yaftal and Jurm in the provinces Kunduz, Takhar and Badakhshan. Half of the villages were chosen randomly, the other half according to five criteria. In each village, a representative quota sample of households was chosen. One main means of gathering qualitative data was the use of 311 structured interviews. The data drawn made it possible to describe in detail the perception of the population and the continually changing environment in which DC operates.

## Development cooperation in a difficult and volatile environment 2007 – 2013

### Deterioration in the security situation and the perception of security

In 2007, DC took place in a relatively secure environment. However, between 2009 and 2011 the security situation deteriorated rapidly. The Taliban regained strength, as did other anti-government groups. This led to intensifying counter-insurgency activities, which in turn led to an escalation of violence which only began to gradually level off in 2011. This situation is reflected in the perceptions of security as reported by the households surveyed. Responding to the question of security in their village, 98.6% of the respondents in 2007 stated that the security had “somewhat” or “very much” improved. This value sank to 77.4% in 2009 and 17.5% in 2011 before rising back to 58.6% in 2013. Parallel to the perceived degradation of the security situation, there was also increased fear of violent actors. Whereas in

2007 the vast majority of the respondents (87.8%) did not feel threatened by any violent actors, in 2013 97.6% reported that they felt “somewhat” or “very” threatened by criminal groups and 76.1% by the Taliban. Furthermore, in 2013, 78.5% of the surveyed were also “very” or “somewhat” afraid of international armed forces. This is a clear indication that the international troops were increasingly being considered to be a warring party and therefore a threat to the civilian population.

### Development cooperation is reaching the population despite the difficult security situation

In spite of the clearly deteriorating surroundings, the results of the study indicate that DC was reaching the population during the entire period of observation. In every survey wave, it was asked whether DC actors had contributed to an improvement in the provision of goods and services in particular sectors in the past two years. In 2013, 72.3% of the respondents responded positively to this for the sector schooling, compared to 40.1% in 2007. The 2013 ratings for other sectors were (2007 values in brackets): agriculture: 70.9% (15.9%); income opportunities and job creation: 44.8 % (2.6%); electricity provision: 24.4% (12.2%); roads and bridges: 65.1% (61%); access to health services 60.4% (n/a); and drinking water: 53.4% (61.4%).

### Impact measurement

Can DC contribute to the creation of a stable environment? The data collected make it possible to identify the impacts of DC on the following areas:

- (1) acceptance of international civil and military actors,
- (2) legitimacy of the sub-national administration, and
- (3) perception of security or danger.

For this, different inferential statistical methods were applied (OLS and logistic regression models). In order to rule out spurious correlations, the data was controlled for other plausible factors that might influence the results, such as education, ethnicity, relative material well-being and village-level indicators. From 2009-13, the previous mean level of each variable was also taken as a control factor. Additionally, DC was operationalised in different ways: as number of projects, as perceived DC at community level, and as perceived DC at household level.

Among the surveyed population the data revealed the perception that high aid coverage was achieved during the whole observation period despite the difficult circumstances. This result is confirmed by other data. In interviews with DC-organisations and the village population, we asked about the number of projects from which the communities had benefited from. This data reveals that aid outputs (as measured by projects per community) remained relatively stable over the entire period, with the exception of the time between 2009 and 2011, when the poor security situation led to a significant (albeit short-term) decrease.<sup>1</sup>

### **Increase in legitimacy and visibility of the Afghan state**

Building up confidence in the new Afghan state is one of the most important tasks of international DC in the country. After more than three decades of war, in 2007 the state was barely present in rural Afghanistan. Thus, confidence in state administration was correspondingly low. When asked whether the sub-national administration was responsive to local needs, 68.2% said that this was “rarely” or “never” the case. In 2013 this value dropped to 58.5%. At the same time, 40.4% of the respondents in 2013 were of the opinion that the sub-national administration was responsive to the needs of the population “sometimes”, “often” or “always”. In 2007, this value was merely 29.4%. These figures prove that the Afghan state has slowly gained legitimacy and confidence, although it started at a very low level. This matches the observation that the state is increasingly being seen as providing basic infrastructure and services. Whereas in 2007 almost all progress was being attributed solely to international DC, in 2013 most respondents were of the opinion that their state was contributing to development progress as much as the international actors.

### **Impacts of development cooperation in Afghanistan**

The data collected also makes it possible to statistically estimate causal impacts. The following four causal impacts were identified:

- (1) International DC strengthens the legitimacy of the Afghan sub-national administration, increasing its capacity, and therefore achieving one of its core aims. Higher levels of DC correlate statistically with improved assessments of the sub-national administration.
- (2) Under specific circumstances, DC was able to increase the acceptance of international DC actors among the Afghan population. In 2007 and again in 2013, a positive relation can be seen between the level of DC received and the acceptance of its actors. However, this effect is not found in 2009 and 2011, when the security situation was significantly worse.
- (3) DC had no influence on the acceptance of international armed forces among the Afghan population: Higher levels of development cooperation did not lead to troops winning over the “hearts and minds” of the locals. Rather, the attitude towards foreign forces was determined much more significantly by the security situation. Increasing insecurity led to a rapid decrease in acceptance. Furthermore, acceptance of foreign forces also depended on the principles and values held by the respondents, which are generally beyond the influence of DC.
- (4) In 2011 and 2013 there is a positive association between DC and perceived security, but this association cannot be found in 2007 or 2009.<sup>2</sup> One possible explanation for the observable association between DC and better perceived security after 2011 could be that the ongoing cooperation with the Afghan communities signalled a long-term and reliable commitment from DC actors that would last beyond the withdrawal of ISAF which was announced in 2011.

### **Conclusions**

Long-term impact analysis yields insights into the impacts and the limits of DC in regions of conflict. One important result which this study reveals is the ability of DC to contribute to the visibility and legitimacy of the state, even in a difficult environment. The statistical analyses demonstrate that more DC can lead to a better assessment of the sub-national administration. An accepted and visible state is the most important prerequisite for the stabilisation of the country. In this regard, DC has indeed had a stabilising impact in Afghanistan. Therefore it is worth investing in DC measures which aim at increasing the visibility and performance of the subnational administration.

<sup>1</sup> On average, 218 projects were counted in each phase (here, phase refers to the two years leading up to the survey). For the period 2009-11, there were only 100 projects. The results show that in 2013 there are no more unserved areas. All villages in the quota sample reported that they had benefited from DC.

<sup>2</sup> Security was measured on the basis of the answers to the question “How would you rate the security of your household?” (“very secure”, “rather secure”, “rather insecure”, “not secure at all”, “don’t know”).

The study also shows that DC only has a limited effect on the acceptance of international actors. More DC can only lead to better public acceptance of civil actors if the environment is relatively secure. In an insecure environment, this effect cannot be demonstrated. There is no visible impact of DC on the acceptance of military actors. The idea that DC can “win over hearts and minds” cannot be confirmed by this study.

The data also does not come to the conclusion that DC contributes directly to an improvement of the security situation

in insecure areas. Therefore it would appear sensible to concentrate DC on those areas which can already demonstrate a certain degree of security. In areas such as these, DC can have a stabilising impact. In Afghanistan, as in other regions of conflict, it can be assumed that the security situation varies from province to province and even from district to district. A central future challenge for DC in conflict regions will be to conduct a systematic assessment of these regional differences and correspondingly increase the geographical specificity of DC provision.

## References

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