



## ***Challenges in Delivering Humanitarian Aid under Taliban rule***

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*Summary report*

Ever since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021, humanitarian NGOs have had to navigate through the Taliban regime and its restrictions. The country's humanitarian crisis is extremely high: the country is ravaged by natural disasters such as devastating earthquakes and floods, poverty and food shortages. Ahead of the Dutch House of Representatives briefing on the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan (29 May), KUNO and Save the Children co-organised a working session to take stock of the challenges in delivering humanitarian aid in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Despite barriers, humanitarian actors can still operate at scale, but to what extent can NGOs engage with the Taliban?

Short introductions by:

- **Arshad Malik**, Country Director for Save the Children in Afghanistan
- **Willem Reussing**, Director Operations of HealthNet TPO
- **Niloufar Rahim**, Chair of the Keihan Foundation

These experts engaged in critically constructive dialogues under the Chatham House Rule with humanitarian professionals (international and local staff) from different international NGOs and local organisations.

**Arshad Malik**, Country Director of Save the Children, started the session by emphasising that engaging with the Taliban is necessary to continue providing humanitarian aid. He advocated for principled engagement, adhering to humanitarian principles: also under the Taliban regime, Save the Children managed to deliver humanitarian aid in a principled manner, in a neutral and impartial way. Given the Taliban's control over aid delivery, negotiations are essential. Without engagement or if they [humanitarian organisations] speak out against them, access to the Afghan people would be impossible. Speaking out would only harm those we aim to help, it would compromise the education of the thousands of young girls who receive education in Afghanistan through Save the Children.

Malik pointed out that restrictions on aid in Afghanistan are not always clear-cut. For instance, despite the ban on female aid workers, many female staff members continue to work in certain areas. The narrative around these restrictions is often incorrect and not universally applicable. He highlighted the importance of understanding these nuances. In negotiations, NGOs may lose leverage if they state certain claims that (some of) the Taliban would deny - f.e. that not a single female is allowed to work. Recognising these complexities is crucial for effective humanitarian engagement.

**Niloufar Rahim**, Chair of the Keihan Foundation, shared insights from her Afghan-Dutch organisation, which provided medical aid supplies and education in Afghanistan until the fall of Kabul. Previously, Keihan collaborated with Afghan ministries, but new Taliban laws have halted their medical training programs. Niloufar highlighted that as a small organisation, Keihan faces different and more risks compared to larger INGOs, which have a stronger position and more resources to continue their work. Even if they get financial support there is still a big security issue for students and trainers and there is no reliable network left in the country to set something up again.

Despite these challenges, she emphasised the necessity of engaging with the Taliban, acknowledging their current hold on power in the country. Niloufar stressed the need for creative solutions to support Afghan civilians without endorsing the Taliban regime. The focus must remain on finding ways to deliver aid effectively under the new circumstances.

**Willem Reussing**, Director of Operations at HealthNet TPO, explained that his organisation, which employs only Afghan staff in Afghanistan, has been negotiating with the Taliban since their takeover to maintain access and continue their programs. Willem stated that after 21 August 2021, the approach in Afghanistan changed to humanitarian assistance, whereas the country was in a development phase that did not end just by the change of regime. He emphasised that it is possible and needed to adhere to humanitarian principles during these negotiations. Additionally, he noted the importance of terminology, suggesting that sometimes simply renaming aspects or even whole titles of a program to align with Taliban terminology can create opportunities. Nevertheless, Willem underscored that NGOs are left alone in the discussions with the Taliban. UN organisations and/or donors do not take up the role of negotiations with the DFA on humanitarian principles, international standards and humanitarian access. This is all left to the organisations they contracted to implement the projects.

Additionally, Willem cautioned that it is crucial to remain vigilant about the Taliban's influence on programs. This influence can manifest in the conditions they set or the terms they include in memorandums of understanding (MoUs). Furthermore, he stressed the need for donors and (international) NGOs to be cautious of potential aid diversion. Willem stated that female staff has no obstacles to work as well as training for females is provided without any objections.

### **Challenges and solutions**

In the conversation after the introductions, several issues were touched upon. Overall, those present highlighted that the narrative suggesting it is impossible to operate in Afghanistan post-Kabul's fall is misleading. Participants emphasised that international NGOs and NGOs can still operate in Afghanistan, despite the challenges. Participants pointed out that while every conflict is unique, there are numerous contexts where humanitarians must and do negotiate with armed powers to gain access. There are always situations with de facto and non-facto governments. Moreover, government actors express concerns about financial income for the Taliban in the form of taxed money that is going into Afghanistan for humanitarian aid. Participants also agreed with each other in saying that this is not unique to the context of Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, flexibility for aid organisations differs per province, and certain challenges can be addressed through principled engagement and, when necessary, by adapting programs—such as hiring female local staff or consultants when their female staff were restricted and adjusting terminology. The type of language used can significantly impact local authorities' acceptance. (e.g.,

MHPSS, and GBV centres, since the Taliban may not agree with using these terms). Renaming a 'Women's Meeting Centre' into a "Women Friendly Health Centre" can be instrumental in continuing support programs for women. Importantly, MHPSS programs outside the healthcare system are sometimes also not accepted by Taliban authorities since this type of support does not align with their cultural or social customs.

### **In need of more support from the donors**

Furthermore, all speakers and some participants expressed the urgent need for support from the Dutch government (and other donors), which is currently lacking due to their fear of engaging in dialogue. Re-engagement with the Taliban is crucial. Although the Taliban is not recognised as the government, avoiding dialogue and remaining inactive is counterproductive.

It is also noticeable that the Dutch government's written strategy on Afghanistan from 2022 has not been updated. Additionally, ACBAR and the UN are paralysed in political discussions when they should be representing and supporting NGOs. There is too much fear among donors that engaging will appear as sympathy or support with the Taliban. The political will from the international community is nearly non-existent, with donors even "over-correcting," while they are doing the opposite in other contexts. Pragmatic engagement for the support of the Afghan people does not equal internationally recognising the Taliban as the government.

This "policy of isolation" by the donors is unsustainable, and we must be cautious that it does not push the Taliban further away from engaging in dialogue with European countries. Currently, risks are being pushed onto NGOs, and without engagement, there is a higher chance of aid diversion. Lastly, one participant stressed that the Netherlands could contribute effectively by supporting agriculture and water management, sectors in which it excels.

It is important to convey this message to the government actors. On the 29th of May, a few days after this working session, the round table discussion on the future of Afghanistan took place. The meeting was hosted by the Committee on Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of the Dutch House of Representatives.