



Highlights Expert Roundtable ‘Initial SRoL Lessons From Afghanistan’

- An Expert Roundtable took place on October 18th, where experts on Afghanistan stepped into dialogue with Dutch policy makers to distill initial SRoL lessons from past SRoL efforts in Afghanistan.
- Participants’ advise included:
 - Make strategic decisions between support to Afghans, encouraging stability and/or opposing the Taliban. Scenarios without the Taliban in power are unpredictable and additionally, the Taliban is susceptible to incentives. Using (realistically limited) influence to make this situation work was encouraged.
 - The Afghan people are currently showing resilience, so strengthen such grassroots efforts to bargain with the Taliban and link those needs to higher level diplomatic nudges.
 - An integrated and coordinated approach only works with long-term development and political goals in the lead and military objectives supporting that vision.
 - Make sure not to only support a thin layer of urban elite civil society; be inclusive in helping people to navigate formal and informal authorities, but also in keeping lines of communications open with those opposing you.
- These advises are considered by the MFA in the ongoing reviews the Ministry on its efforts in Afghanistan.

On Thursday October 18th, the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law facilitated a roundtable where a group of experts on Afghanistan stepped into dialogue with policy makers from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The goals were to 1) support evidence-based Dutch positioning on the range of long-term implications for SRoL in Afghanistan; 2) explore what lessons should be drawn for Dutch SRoL efforts broadly and 3) form a basis for more ‘existential’ follow-up discussions at senior level on the implications for how the sector does SRoL policy and programming in general.

Dutch policy perspective

The MFA identified its activities in five tracks: 1) Increased humanitarian aid; 2) Potential, temporary support for basic services under strict conditions; 3) Look at possible continuation of programmes by current development partners (as development aid is currently put “on hold”); 4) Explore potential additional support for human rights organisations and 5) Reception of refugees in regional countries around Afghanistan.

The Dutch MFA currently seeks, in close cooperation with likeminded countries, to define under what (EU shared and realistic) conditions development could continue. Important examples are that support should not be delivered via the Taliban and that women’s rights should be prioritized in all programming. Additionally, questions the MFA grapples with include how to stimulate local ownership better and how to engage in future development work without working directly with the de facto authorities.

Current situation

Until August 15th, 75% of the government’s budget was donor-sponsored. That flow has halted, evoking a.o. food insecurity and dysfunctional banks. Information is scarce overall, but messages confirm that people are prosecuted under the vague category of ‘having worked with foreigners’ and Taliban chain of command is chaotic, making their commitments less reliable. There are no big signs of spillover in the form of for example migration yet.

A big question of course is whether countries will recognize the Taliban and the effects of that decision on reaching the Afghan people in these difficult times. Another is whether the Taliban can



consolidate itself as a power, including accountability mechanisms. The involvement of regional players has to always be taken into account in these dynamics.

SRoL lessons for Afghanistan

For defining conditions to development, the most important, obvious question participants put forward is what your goals are. Does ‘the West’ want to immediately support the Afghan people, does it prefer stability or does it want to oppose the Taliban? Participants argue it’s worthwhile engaging with the Taliban and handing a ‘cheat sheet’ with practical steps on governance and justice, including clear red flags.

The experts estimate that the currently defined conditions on development might not be the right ones if the MFA is pushing for better accountability mechanisms and local decision-making. In that case, strengthen current grassroots efforts to negotiate with Taliban (on justice, water, services etc.) and domestic accountability. Pressure on the formal justice system is for example likely to increase, due to appeals by citizens and organizations against decisions from the last regime, possibly enlarging intercommunal tensions.

Then, the MFA is urged to connect those grassroots needs to ‘Doha level’ negotiations. Try to differentiate those conditions on higher political and lower development levels, where there is more room for engagement to prevent destabilization. It was also mentioned this should however be done realistically; EU influence is limited, especially with powerful, unpredictable regional actors. Be proactive and use the incentives you have bilaterally and multilaterally to influence the situation of e.g. current reforms in the informal justice system.

Implications SRoL Sector

For a successful integrated approach, again, the experts stressed that the basic question of what the Dutch goal is, is key. They argued that in Uruzgan, some parts within the Dutch apparatus wanted stability, some pursued versions of state-building and others preferred needs-driven development.

The experts see results for Afghan civil society, which currently demands accountability and justice; action on helping communities to engage with authorities helped. Some experts did note a gap in related values between city and countryside, or intergenerational. Parts of the urban elite whose goals and capacities were supported by development cooperation, are leaving the country whereas the countryside leaders are stepping up to the current challenge. Other participants state the rural-urban division is not as clear though; they are thoroughly interconnected. Nonetheless, it did lead to the advice to invest more in traditional and informal authorities, to close the center-periphery gap and ensure more long-term results that might not be the most immediate ones.