

German Development Cooperation in Afghanistan: A way forward with(out) the Taliban?

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The dilemma faced by Germany in formulating its Afghanistan strategy amidst the Taliban's return to power and their oppressive policies towards women and minorities is explored by presenting two opposing rationales for German involvement in Afghanistan. On the one hand, a certain degree of engagement and dialogue with the Taliban could prevent further escalation by upholding political leverage and making the Taliban more predictive. On the other hand, engaging in dialogue with the Taliban risks compromising Germany's commitment to its Feminist Development Policy as well as legitimising the Taliban's Islamist and oppressive rule. Diplomatic engagement and support for Afghan-led peace processes are presented as alternatives. The discussion leads to three broader policy pathways for Germany, among which the resumption of bilateral and the strengthening of multilateral Development Cooperation (DC) with a strict conditionality on women's rights improvements is considered the most reasonable. With a strict non-legitimisation approach towards the Taliban regime at its core, this pathway calls for a joint EU positioning, continuous negotiations and a broad readjustment of DC funds towards low-risk-high-payoff sectors.

Keywords: *Development Cooperation, Afghanistan, Recommendations, Women empowerment, Taliban*

Background

The Taliban, an orthodox Islamic fundamentalist group (Schetter, 2022), took control of the Afghan state in 1996 after a four-year period of civil war. After their deposition by the US-led invasion in 2001, the Taliban operated for 20 years in the shadows of insurgency and regained power after the final withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2021 (Maizland, 2023). **As a result of their strict interpretation and resurrection of Islamic law, the socioeconomic situation of women, as well as other underprivileged groups and ethnic and religious minorities, worsened significantly** (AP News, 2022). Gradually, the Taliban closed schools for girls, banned women from certain jobs, imposed a dress code, restricted women's mobility, barred women from political participation and forbade them to work with development organizations (UNICEF, 2023).

Meanwhile, **Afghanistan is on the brink of economic and humanitarian crises**. The Taliban's struggle to stabilize the country's economy has exacerbated the already weak food security situation. Today, nearly 50% of Afghan households are food-insecure (WFP, 2023), with 84% of households headed by over-proportionally affected individuals (WFP, 2022). Germany suspended its bilateral development cooperation (DC) in 2021, while maintaining its Humanitarian Assistance (HA)

through a joint EU approach via multilateral bodies (European Council, 2023), has not yet agreed on a coherent Afghanistan strategy. The violation of women's rights is incompatible with German Feminist Foreign Policy. However, the mere humanitarian assistance will most likely not create the essential structures for sustainable development. The international community thus needs to consider other ways forward for rebuilding the country and supporting the Afghan population.

Germany is facing a normative dilemma and must forge links between its feminist policy cornerstones (rights, representation and resources) as well as an already severe humanitarian situation in Afghanistan (UN News, February 17, 2023). Besides, it seems unlikely that the Taliban will redirect their course of action. In contrast, their uncompromising actions have revealed their will and commitment to perpetuate their power ambitions (Ahmad, 2023), even though they are struggling to form a unified government and incorporate political ambitions by powerful local leaders (Schetter, 2022).

In the following, **we will consider possible options along the spectrum of non-engagement and closer cooperation with the Taliban regime** - without legitimizing or strengthening their oppressive leadership.

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Rationale for a collaborative development cooperation approach with the Taliban

The following chapter outlines central arguments and approaches in favour of closer engagement with the Taliban. Some argue that this approach would **provide opportunities for delivering humanitarian aid and supporting the Afghan population**. By engaging with them but also with other powerful and more progressive actors, **Germany could potentially ensure access to vulnerable communities, deliver vital supplies, and aid those in need**. The reality is, that the Taliban have neither formed a unified government nor obtained the full power of Afghanistan's whole territory (Schetter, 2022). Moreover, they strive, as many western countries, for eradicating the Islamic State (IS) movements in Afghanistan (Crisis Group, 2022). These might be promising entry points.

Furthermore, engaging with the Taliban could potentially **contribute to stability and security in Afghanistan**. Doing so can be seen as a pragmatic approach to maintaining order and preventing further violence or chaos (SIPRI, 2022). Hosna Jalil, former Dep. Minister of Women- & Interior Affairs in Afghanistan, argues that the involvement of additional voices from international communities are crucial for establishing clear red lines. While the German government can engage with the Taliban, it should **utilize its political stance as leverage to drive policy improvements and assert a strong voice** (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2023). Germany may push for the protection of women's-, minority-, as well as other human rights concerns, using its position to advocate for positive change. The Taliban's engagement and negotiation with women in the presence of European and international mediators can help change and challenge the Taliban's perceptions, policies, and worldviews, leading to a more inclusive and peaceful Afghanistan (Yousaf, 2022). Norway's inclusion of Afghan women in the "Oslo talks" is a positive example of such measures (Yousaf, 2022).

Dialogue is crucial for resolving conflicts and fostering understanding in Afghanistan to maintain communication with the Taliban being vital for preventing violence and exploring peaceful coexistence (SIPRI, 2022). Stability in Afghanistan is also significant in preventing it from becoming a safe haven for international terrorists, reducing recruitment and radicalization opportunities, and maintaining regional and global security (SIPRI, 2022). Following the costly lesson of the Afghanistan debacle, a cautious approach favouring civilian and diplomatic measures, as advocated by Rauch (2021), can promote peace and stability in unstable regions.

Cutting all the support towards the Afghan population, even those initiatives and projects which are implemented through NGOs will jeopardize efforts made by the organisations on site. It will also **accelerate the decay of Afghan institutions integral to any future effort to increase the overall well-being of Afghan society** (Bowden et al., 2022).

Hosna Jalil advocates for ongoing support while minimizing direct involvement with the Taliban (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2023). To achieve this, there are methods such as the **recently signed agreement between the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) and the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF)** to implement the Sustainable and Inclusive Transformation of Agrarian Economies in Rural Afghanistan (SITARA) project (IsDB 2023). As such, the German Government can address the crisis **without empowering the Taliban directly through financial assistance** (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2023). Keeping the communication channels with the Taliban open is imperative for the international community.

Engagement can lead to policy changes and secure funding aimed at gender equality, increasing women's access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities as well as addressing issues like violence against women. Yousaf (2022) advocates that aid agencies and international organizations must prioritize the inclusion of Afghan civil society members and women in policymaking processes.

Furthermore, Hosna Jalil emphasizes the need for facilitation among the various conflicting parties in Afghanistan and recognises **Germany's potential role in fostering such communication**. She argues that despite internal divisions, they are currently engaged in combating terrorism, although driven by their own agenda. Additionally, she acknowledges that the Afghan diaspora is fragmented, with various factions pursuing different objectives, and there are survivors who support anyone who supports their cause. This situation presents an opportunity for engagement due to the factionalism within the Taliban (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2023).

Rauch (2021) emphasizes the need for **increased diplomatic and developmental efforts, not only on the national but also on the regional level in Afghanistan, including negotiations with the Taliban**. Arne Strand of the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Norway presents two options - prioritizing the continuity and increased support for health and education, while also recognizing the importance of women's participation in public-private partnerships (PPPs) - as a viable avenue for development (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2023).

Rationale for a non-collaborative approach

Despite good reasons for more profound engagement in and with Afghanistan, parts of the Afghan diaspora and many other actors are more critical and fear contrasting, negative impacts, as outlined in the following. The Taliban have a history of human rights abuses, particularly regarding women's rights, freedom of speech, and religious minorities. As such, the Taliban's participation in talks and negotiations has been met with protests from Afghans in Europe, who argue that such initiatives legitimize their terrorist rule. Cooperation with the Taliban would **undermine Germany's commitment against these abuses and send a signal that Germany is willing to compromise on its own values** for the sake of short-term gains. It also stands in contradiction with the Foreign and Development Ministry and their feminist approach (AA, 2023). Engaging with the Taliban could be seen as a betrayal of the Afghan security forces and the Afghan people, who have been working towards a democratic and inclusive society. It could erode the trust and support that Germany has garnered from its Afghan partners over the years.

Deborah Düring, a member of the German Bundestag, asserts that **without shared fundamental values, it is not possible to work together effectively or even engage with the Taliban**. As an alternative she proposes Germany's current efforts on the ground, particularly focusing on **supporting projects where women are allowed to work. She suggests the allocation of flexible funds for local-level discussions and projects that enable women to receive salaries, ensuring their continued empowerment** (Heinrich-Böll, 2023). Germany must uphold its commitments to human rights and democracy, both domestically and internationally. Afghanistan stands alone as the only country prohibiting girls and young women from attending secondary school and higher education (OHCHR, 2023).

Moreover, evidence concerning the mere effectiveness of development cooperation is not fully apparent in Afghanistan. Marzi and Schönherr (2021) argue that DC between the United States and its allies in Afghanistan has been ineffective in the past. The authors debate that **DC has also helped foster corruption and political instability rather than reducing it**. As such, the lack of progress has led some countries, including Germany, to question the effectiveness of their involvement in Afghanistan (DW, 2021).

It follows that **diplomatic negotiations and engagement may be pursued without directly engaging with the Taliban**. In this scenario Germany could support Afghan-led peace processes, provide humanitarian aid, and closely work with multilateral regional and international organisations to avoid direct political engagement with the regime.

Possible solutions: DC in closer collaboration with the Taliban

Given the incontestable normative principle not to legitimise the Taliban regime, the German government has three strategic policy options to follow upon:

Option 1: Continuing and deepening Germany's current practice of focusing on humanitarian and transitional development assistance (combined € 1,1 billion in 2021 and 2022) and entirely replacing bilateral with multilateral international development cooperation and therewith bypassing the Taliban rule and avoiding legitimisation.

Option 2: Putting an end to all multilateral and bilateral development cooperation directed towards Afghanistan due to the Taliban regime's incompatibility with Germany's value-based and Foreign Policy.

Option 3: Resuming bilateral and continuing multilateral development cooperation with Afghanistan in conjunction with a strict and clear conditionality regarding both the non-legitimisation of the Taliban rule and the strengthening of women's representation, rights and resources.

Based on the following argumentation we argue for Option 3.

We do so because of the humanitarian disaster and an uncertain economic future in Afghanistan and as its people urgently need the international community to extend its efforts beyond HA. Since the large-scale suspension of DC and the exerted pressure on the Taliban regime did not stop the Taliban from increasingly restricting women's rights, **it is now important to change track**. Germany has invested over 2,4€ billion in DC (Deutsche Welle, 2021). To cut all finance would jeopardize the positive impacts made by Germany's DC. We argue that due to its economic power and its historical responsibility as a conflict party as well as the huge commitments in supporting the Afghan population, Germany should assume leadership together with its partners and discuss pathways for DC efforts in Afghanistan. Despite profound contradictions and resistance, a certain degree of engagement with the Taliban seems unavoidable. Arne Strand argues that humanitarian assistance should be extended to rural areas and emphasizes the importance of principal dialogue and the lifting of sanctions, with a common focus on addressing heroin production. Hosna Jalil suggests collaborating with existing platforms such as community development councils and engaging in local partnerships to minimize the Taliban's involvement and maximize the effectiveness of initiatives (Heinrich-Böll, 2023). Moreover, seeking to maintain some political leverage the German government should resume its negotiations with the Taliban.

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To underlie the proposed strategic orientation **the following policy recommendations should be pursued:**

- Form a unified EU-wide collaborative position towards the Taliban. For DC in Afghanistan to be predictable and future-oriented, joint public positions are indispensable. Forming a coherent bloc among European countries that are traditionally involved in DC in Afghanistan will shift political leverage and contribute to the creation of a negotiation platform.
- Resume and perpetuate negotiations with the Taliban under stringent conditions, following the example of the "Oslo Talks". To ensure inclusivity, any future invitation extended to Taliban delegations must be contingent upon the inclusion of female Afghan representatives.
- Create funds to ensure the maintenance of NGOs that pursue to work in Afghanistan.
- Hold out the prospect of resumed negotiations on bilateral aid. Elaborate entry points for engaging with local communities. Tie those to the lifting of the ban on women's employment in locally operating organisations. Within its monetary budget, Germany could incentivize the Taliban to take concrete steps towards the inclusion of women in the working environment and other sectors and set clear expectations and benchmarks.
- Start talks with the US government to discuss responsible ways of releasing Afghanistan's frozen access to its national reserves (over \$7 billion) in a controlled and conditioned manner. Price stability in local markets could be maintained, hence securing precarious livelihoods. Such a measure could help reduce overall aid dependence and avoid further migration and economic crises.
- The German government should adopt a more practical and modest approach by directing funds towards low-risk, high-reward sectors. Given that the agricultural sector employs a significant portion of Afghan women (over 64% based on World Bank, 2023), it is reasonable for Germany to reallocate its DC spending to support this sector. Investing in agricultural projects would

not only address the long-term hunger crisis but also empower rural female farmers, improving their social and economic standing in Afghan society. Additionally, focusing on the mental health of Afghan refugees in neighboring countries can be seen as a worthwhile investment.

- To ensure long-term sustainability, efforts should be focused on Foster Transitional Development Assistance (TDA). TDA in Afghanistan addresses urgent issues like hunger, poor public services, weak disaster risk management, and local conflicts. Germany should double its TDA contribution to €144 million and consider declaring Afghanistan a future Peace and Nexus Partner (BMZ, 2020).
- To guarantee that DC is effective in the future, it is necessary to direct efforts towards providing long-term and sustainable DC that is responsive to the needs and aspirations of local communities. This includes engaging in participatory approaches that involve community members in decision-making processes, ensuring their active involvement and ownership of development initiatives. Local and well-established citizen councils may serve as good entry points and cooperation partners, because the Taliban cannot easily circumvent them (Heinrich-Böll, 2023)

Conclusion and outlook

Without doubt, the German government faces a dilemma in formulating its Afghanistan strategy amidst the return of the Taliban and their oppressive policies. Two rationales for Germany's development cooperation with the Taliban are presented. Engagement with the Taliban could provide opportunities by contributing to stability and advocating for human rights. However, collaboration may compromise Germany's commitment to human rights and betray Afghan partners working towards a democratic society. A unified EU position, negotiations with the Taliban under stringent conditions, and allocating funds to sectors with low risk and high payoffs like agriculture as well as fostering multilateral DC are crucial. TDA is proposed to bridge the gap between immediate crisis response and long-term stability and empowerment of Afghan women.

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