Assessing Democracy Assistance:

Afghanistan[1]

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This report is FRIDE's contribution to a project entitled 'Assessing Democracy Assistance' that is being carried out by the World Movement for Democracy. The project aims to gather views on how democracy support can be improved and its impact enhanced. Other case studies and a synthesis report can be found at www.fride.org.

Project Report
Assessing Democracy Assistance

This report summarises the findings of research into local views on how international democracy support could be improved in Afghanistan.[2] In doing so, it addresses the underlying questions of whether, how and to what extent that support is appropriate or even possible in the current context of increasing insecurity. It collates data from 40 interviews with civil society actors, political parties, NGOs, academics and donors in Afghanistan on the contribution of international democracy assistance to the promotion of a democratic politics in the country. Findings do not present an optimistic perspective: for many respondents, 'true' democracy does not currently exist in Afghanistan. They believe that so-called democratic institutions are merely facades serving to placate donor requirements. Others feel that donors must continue to support substantive democratisation regardless of the shortcomings of previous efforts, taking the opportunity to reassess the ways in which this support is given.

Only a small sample of democracy assistance recipients were interviewed for this study, therefore the findings present a limited perspective of the overall picture of assistance. However, the data collected provides valuable indicators of the ways in which assistance is received, and offers suggestions of possible improvements to democracy assistance programming. These include:

[1] The project 'Assessing Democracy Assistance' is supported by the United Nations Democracy Fund, the UK Department for International Development, the Arab Democracy Foundation, the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, the National Endowment for Democracy and the Smith Richardson Foundation.The research methodology for this report is explained in an appendix at the end of the main text. Responsibility for this report and the views expressed are solely those of the author(s), and do not necessarily represent the positions of either FRIDE, the World Movement for Democracy, or the funders.
[2] Based on research conducted for the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit in 2009 and 2010, on perceptions of democracy in six provinces (publication forthcoming). However, the negative perception of the international presence should not necessarily be interpreted as signaling a desire for international forces (or development agencies) to leave: this is a prevalent opinion, but is not universally held.

1) Smaller amounts of funding over longer, more consistent periods; core funding instead of project-based allocations;
2) Less donor dictation of agendas for democratisation programmes;
3) Increased engagement with civil society actors under the 'civil society' umbrella – not merely a limited group of civil society organisations (CSOs) already known to donors, but new groups and political parties;
4) A coordinated vision among donors of aims for democratic governance in Afghanistan, and a strategy through which to achieve it.

The extent to which these and other improvements can be realised depends on the developments in international engagement in Afghanistan over the next 18 months. This includes changes in the relationships between the Afghan government and other internal actors (e.g. ethnic group leaders) following the expected draw-down of troops and the potential identification of a political settlement with insurgent groups. The current environment of increasing insecurity, along with an alarming move toward control of democratic processes by the President, are the most significant hindrances to the provision of democracy assistance.

Democracy: the state of play

Democratisation in Afghanistan post-2001 has been promoted as part of the overall international intervention, which has encompassed both state building and military activity. As specified in the Bonn Agreement, Afghanistan's first presidential elections were held in 2004 as an internationally-led effort to promote the legitimacy of the new government. These elections, along with the parliamentary and provincial council polls that followed a year later, were well-attended and considered a success by independent observers.

At that time, however, international actors paid comparatively little attention to the promotion and implementation of substantive democratic values such as rule of law, access to justice, governmental accountability and freedom of expression. More recently, fraudulent elections in 2009 and 2010 have statistically demonstrated how the absence of these fundamental values is affecting the population's ability – and willingness – to participate in selecting a government. As the security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated and international military activity has correspondingly increased, Afghans have come to view foreign efforts with skepticism and distrust.Taliban propaganda and the daily realities of existence in a conflict zone have encouraged the belief that the increased international military presence contributes to greater insecurity rather than reducing it. [1]

It is important to note that the word 'democracy' has contentious connotations in Afghanistan. This is partly due to its frequent association with the communist, secular rule of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) during the 1980s. Since the Bonn Process concluded in 2005, Afghans have also come to associate 'democracy' with unmet expectations of improved economic development, rule of law and security. 'Democracy' (often said in English) is perceived by many Afghans to be an alien concept; one which has been largely promoted by outsiders with ulterior motives in establishing a presence in the country.[3]

This is not to say that 'democracy' per se has been entirely rejected by Afghans. In many cases, views of democracy depend on individuals' own definitions of the concept – and their definitions of what it is or should be in the Afghan context. For many, a system based on popular participation in choosing the government is acceptable and desirable, as long as it upholds Islamic principles and is fundamentally 'Afghan' in its realisation.[4]

[3] A. Larson, 'Toward an Afghan Democracy? Exploring perceptions of democratisation in Afghanistan', Kabul: AREU, 2009.
[4] Ibid.

This presents a problem for both Afghan and international organisations assisting democracy promotion in the country. International assistance is viewed with suspicion by many Afghans due to its association with foreign (and military) policy more generally. Democracy assistance in particular is often perceived as a mechanism for promoting Western values in Afghanistan, to the detriment of Afghan cultural norms and Islamic principles. Although donors often have their own, differing definitions of democracy assistance, there is a sense among Afghans that the donors' combined and primary focus is on imposing liberal principles such as free market economics and gender equality. These concepts are both controversial in Afghanistan for different reasons: the former due to a widespread preference among urban Afghans for a state-regulated market (perhaps as a result of largely positive retrospective views in urban areas of the Soviet economic model implemented in the 1980s); and the latter due to conservative backlash against gender equality, but also the concern among liberals that 'moving too fast' to promote women's rights might provoke conservatives further and actually hinder significant gains for women. It remains necessary to clarify what form a specifically Afghan democracy might take, and how to promote it sensitively in order to encourage a democratic political system to take root without compromising or challenging the population's identity as Afghans or Muslims.

Donor activities

Since the intervention to oust the Taliban in 2001, a large number of donors – multilateral, bilateral and independent or NGO-based – have supported the establishment of democratic governance in Afghanistan. Activities that fall within the category of 'democracy assistance' are wide-ranging and extend from funding and providing technical assistance for elections to supporting the development of political parties. Other common forms of assistance include encouraging a free press, supporting sub-national governance structures and promoting women's education. As a result, it is difficult to ascertain exactly how much money is being allocated to democracy assistance. Donors themselves do not always categorise funds according to this label, so figures given below for each donor are explained in terms of the particular activities they support.[5]

Multilateral donors

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

In 2001, the United Nations took responsibility for overseeing the Bonn Process through a number of different agencies, primarily the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA). UNAMA has a comprehensive mandate but its main purpose is to facilitate state building through dialogue and mediation rather than implemented activities. As such, it is not a donor and does not have funds to allocate to other implementing agencies. Other UN agencies do function as donors, however. The largest of these is the UNDP, whose activities are most closely related to democracy-building in Afghanistan. The United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) also supports governance and democracy related programmes and coordinates to a certain degree with UNDP in these areas.

UNDP had a disbursement target of USD 750 million in 2010, making it the second largest donor (if multi- and bilateral donors are considered together) to Afghanistan behind the United States.[6] This funding is split between several national-level programmes, including ELECT (support to the Afghan elections), through which it has functioned as a coordinating body for all donor funding to elections in 2009 and 2010; the Afghan Subnational Governance Programme (ASGP), through which it supports Afghanistan's Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) in implementing the recently created Sub-National Governance Policy; Accountability and Transparency Project (ACT); and Support to development of a more Effective Afghan Parliament (SEAL) among others: approximately 20 programmes at the time of writing. All programmes comprise a mixture of

[5] A total of 42 countries have a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, thus it is not possible to detail all of their activities here. The democracy-related programmes of principal donors and a selection of smaller ones are discussed here as an example.
[6] See UNDP newsroom, 'UNDP Results in Afghanistan', available at http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/2010/november/undp-in-afghanistan.en?g11n.enc=ISO-8859-1. This document also details the funding amounts UNDP receives from individual bilateral donors.

technical and financial assistance, largely aimed at the Afghan government, and focus primarily on capacity building. As there is a significant overlap between the amount UNDP spends on democracy assistance and allocations by bilateral donors, the two cannot be simply added together to reach an aggregate sum of all spending.

The considerable size of UNDP programmes does not necessarily imply that they impact democracy building the most, or the most effectively. Indeed, their very scale necessitates a cumbersome bureaucratic system, leading to significant delays in funding and difficulties for recipient organisations. One international recipient of assistance from UNDP reported having to change their programme entirely as a result of the late stage at which they received funds. A donor representative spoke of the lack of efficiency in UNDP programming, citing a problematic relationship with the organisation: 'We have had real issues with UNDP and have had several fights over funding with them. There is a very big question mark over the cost-efficiency relationship in their work.' The same respondent labelled the ELECT programme as 'a failure' which had been 'very costly and completely short-term'.

When asked why, in spite of these difficulties, donors continued to fund UNDP programmes, most of those interviewed referred to necessity: as a donor it can be difficult to work with the government, and UNDP already has the mechanisms in place to do this. They have an established network to implement nationwide programmes, and can absorb significant amounts of funding at any one time. Donors often seek out organisations with this kind of capacity (for example, to receive amounts above USD 1 million) in order to reduce administration and circumvent limited staffing. Nevertheless, it is clear that there are significant problems with such a large and cumbersome operation, not least that bureaucratic procedures appear to consume more resources than the delivery of programmes.

European Union (EU)

The Delegation of the European Union to Afghanistan has had a diplomatic presence in the country since 2002. The EU plays a role similar to that of a bilateral donor in Afghanistan, with the European Commission (EC) allocating a considerable amount of funding to development and humanitarian assistance each year. In 2009, development assistance alone totalled USD 314 million (EUR 219 million), of which USD 285 million (EUR 198.82 million) was disbursed.[7]

Three focal areas for EC funding are rural development, governance and health. Of the total amount of funding between 2007 and 2010, 40 per cent was allocated to governance programmes.[8]

Alongside contributions to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), the majority of EC funds to governance are currently allocated to the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA), a multi-donor trust fund which supports rule of law, improvements to policing and access to justice. The EC has identified two major areas of focus within the field of democratisation, namely rule of law (with a specific emphasis on the justice sector, along with supporting elections and subnational governance strengthening) and public administration reform (PAR).[9]

Another key function of the EU in Afghanistan is that of facilitating donor coordination among EU member states. According to one representative, this has improved greatly in recent years, particularly since the July 2010 Kabul Conference. By focusing on the government's priority national programmes for development, the conference also provided a mechanism through which coordination between donors and the government could be improved. Essentially, however, coordination among donors or between them and the government happens when the political will to coordinate exists – a factor not enforceable by the EU or any other body. Furthermore, the EU has relatively little influence over the activities and policies of the biggest bilateral donor to Afghanistan, the United States.

[7] Figures throughout this paper are approximate and are converted into USD according to exchange rates at the end of the years specified.
[8] See http://ec.europa.eu/delegations/afghanistan/eu_afghanistan/development_cooperation/index_en.htm and 'Afghanistan Country Strategy Paper 2007–2013', p. 19. See also http://ec.europa.eu/delegations/afghanistan/documents/eu_afghanistan/csp_afg_07-13_en.pdf
[9] Afghanistan Country Strategy Paper, 2007–2013, op. cit., p. 22.

Bilateral donors

Donor	Total average spending in 2009–2010 (USD)	Democracy / Governance spending in 2009–2010 (USD)
US	4 billion	387 million (including elections)
UK	254 million	76.2 million
Canada	207 million	Up to119 million[10]
Denmark	90 million	18.4 million
Switzerland	17 million	6.5 million

United States/USAID

As in many development contexts, the United States is the biggest and most powerful donor in Afghanistan. Its contribution to development aid there dwarfs that of other bilateral donors, and is greater than its assistance in other areas: of all USAID missions globally, USAID Afghanistan is the largest, with over 20 per cent (USD 4 billion) of the global USAID budget (approximately USD 21 billion in 2009) allocated to its activities.[11]

In 2009, USAID allocated USD 209 million to democracy and governance projects in Afghanistan. This included its support for civil society through the I-PACS (Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society) programme and a media development initiative, among many other mechanisms[12]. By June 2010, 151 grants had been made through this programme to Afghan CSOs, totalling USD 10,247,374.[13] In addition to democracy and governance projects, a separate allocation for elections was created in 2007, and in 2009 this amounted to USD 178 million (8 per cent of the annual total budget for USAID Afghanistan). This fund included the Support To the Electoral Process (STEP) programme, implemented between 2008–2011 by IFES and Counterpart International as a way to promote civic education and capacity building within the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC).[14] Funding for rule of law and support to the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) are categorised separately, but could both be considered part of the total support to democratisation. Having said this, some projects categorised under the 'democracy and governance' umbrella only have tenuous links to democratisation – road-building, for example – and thus the term needs to be interpreted liberally.

The vast majority of USAID democracy assistance funding is allocated to programmes implemented by contracting agencies and grantees. These contractors include ARD, DAI, Chemonics, Counterpart International and Checchi Consulting. Grantees have greater levels of autonomous control over the way funds are spent. These include the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).

UK/DFID

UK funding to Afghanistan is largely channelled through the Department for International Development (DFID). In the fiscal year 2009–2010, the total spent in Afghanistan was USD 202 million (GBP 133.367 million), with a further USD 1 billion (GBP 710 million) allocated for 2009–2013.The average annual allocation is therefore approximately USD 254 million (GBP 177.5 million).[15]

[10] This figure is an approximation based on the total amount of Canadian funding allocated to elections and national institutions over three years (2009-2011) – USD 357 million (CAD 355 million) – divided by three. See also http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/canada-afghanistan/priorities-priorites/institutions.aspx?lang=en
[11] See http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/Page.Budget.aspx
[12] See http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/Page.Budget.aspx
[13] I-PACS fact sheet, available at http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/Activity.25.aspx.
[14] STEP fact sheet, available at http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/Activity.107.aspx
[15] DFID country plan, 2009, p.7, available at http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/ASHU-7RL7XQ-full_report.pdf/$File/full_report.pdf.

In 2009–2010, 30 per cent of the budget was allocated to governance,[16] which includes electoral support (through the UNDP ELECT programme), institution building and anti-corruption initiatives. DFID provides funding to implementing agencies (multilateral organisations, contractors, NGOs and CSOs) which conduct programmes in line with DFID's key priorities. The largest recent contribution from DFID to the field of governance was an allocation of USD 35.7 million (GBP 23,600,000) over a four-year period (end 2010–2014) to UNDP's ASGP. Other contributions include USD 14.4 million (GBP 9,500,000) over four years to the Governor's Performance Improvement Programme (GPIP), a project implemented by The Asia Foundation focusing on improving the performance and service delivery of provincial governors in Helmand, Herat, Panjshir and Khost. A further USD 10.6 million (GBP 7 million) has been allocated to supporting UNDP's ELECT programme until July 2011; and approximately USD 9.1 million (GBP 6 million) pledged to support UNDP's ACT project until March 2012. Smaller grants have also been allocated to Afghan organisations and international NGOs working in the field of governance. Although DFID allocates a significant proportion of its funds to national programmes, it has a particular focus on Helmand, the province in which UK troops are primarily located.

Canada/Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)

Afghanistan is the largest single country recipient of Canadian aid, receiving USD 207 million in development and reconstruction funds in 2010.[17] To date, a significant amount of this funding has been allocated to democracy assistance in Afghanistan: 'Advancing Afghan capacity for democratic governance' is the fifth of six Canadian priorities in the country. Programmes supported by CIDA in this area include those categorised under assistance to 'national institutions', the largest of which is currently electoral support through UNDP ELECT (USD 20.4 million, or CAD 25 million from 2008-2011).[18] Another significant area of assistance is CIDA's support to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), established in 2002. The most sizable of all donors to the Commission, CIDA has allocated USD 5.7 million (CAD 7 million) from 2008–2011. CIDA also supports UNDP's ASGP with a grant of USD 4.1 million (CAD 5 million) for five years (ending in 2012).

CIDA often forms partnerships with smaller organisations working in Afghanistan, particularly with regard to increasing women's participation in public life. Among donors to Afghanistan, Canada is known for its emphasis on this thematic. CIDA has a USD 2.9 million (CAD 3.5 million) Responsive Fund for the Advancement of Women, which aims to support projects run by Afghan NGOs to encourage the development of women's human capital. Through the National Democratic Institute (NDI) it supports a programme to encourage women's political participation at the provincial level (in six provinces). In 2009–2010 CIDA allocated USD 2.1 million (CAD 2.2 million) to a UNIFEM programme supporting female candidates in the recent elections.

As other donors have done, Canada has also channelled much of its development assistance (up to 50 per cent) to the province where its troops are stationed, in this case Kandahar. This will change in 2011 as Canadian troops are scheduled to withdraw – development aid will likely be reduced to USD 100.1 million per year and will focus on national programmes only.[19]

Nordic countries

The Nordic countries are represented in Afghanistan by the embassies of Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland. Although entirely separate in their operations and programming, these countries often work together owing to their similar policy priorities. One example of this collaboration is the forthcoming 'Nordic+' programme to fund and strengthen Afghan civil society to advocate for improved governance, currently being planned by Denmark, Norway, Sweden and DFID. Other countries have shown interest in this initiative. This group already has a seat on the steering committee of UNDP's ELECT programme, and can often generate greater leverage as a combined bloc than as individual actors.

[16] See http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/departmental-report/2010/dfid-in-2009-10-revised-6-sept-2010.pdf p50

[17] See http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/ACIO-8BNH8T?OpenDocument

[18] See http://www.afghanistan.gc.ca/canada-afghanistan/projects-projets/dev.aspx

[19] See http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/ACIO-8BNH8T?OpenDocument (accessed 03 January 2010).

One Nordic country particularly active in Afghanistan is Denmark: its total budget in 2010 was approximately USD 90 million (DKK 479 million). This figure includes the USD 55.1 million (DKK 315 million) disbursed by the Danish Embassy according to three key pillars of assistance – education, livelihood and statebuilding. It also encompasses USD 13.3 million (DKK 75 million) allocated to the 'Regions of Origin' resettlement programme; USD 1.8 million (DKK 10 million) for the border regions in Pakistan and approximately USD 6.2 million (DKK 35 million) allocated to humanitarian aid. The remaining USD 7,8 million (DKK 44 million) is distributed between Danish NGOs working in Afghanistan including DACAAR, Danish De-mining Group, Mission East and the Danish Afghanistan Committee (DAC).

In terms of Denmark's pillars of assistance, democracy falls into the statebuilding category, which itself has four components: good governance and anti-corruption; democracy; human rights and civil society; and stabilisation and police training. The sub-theme of democracy building comprises support to UNDP ELECT; funding for the Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) to undertake electoral monitoring and observation activities; financial assistance to the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) to encourage women's participation in elections and to support women legislators elected to the new parliament; and core funding for the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)'s research programmes on governance and related issues.

Switzerland

Unlike the other donors discussed, Switzerland does not have a diplomatic or military presence in Kabul. Instead, it allocates funds entirely through its aid agency, SDC. This allows a certain separation of diplomacy and development assistance, which is arguably impossible for any other donor at present.

Switzerland has three categories for its programmes in recipient countries: priority countries, which receive around USD 31.9 million (CHF 30 million); special programmes, which receive approximately USD 15.9 (CHF 15 million) per year; and countries in which only humanitarian assistance is given and the amount of funding depends on the individual case. Although Afghanistan is a priority for most other donors, it falls into Switzerland's 'special programme' category. Swiss development funds to the country total approximately USD 17 million (CHF 16 million) per year, of which USD 3.2 million (CHF 3 million) is allocated to humanitarian aid and the remaining USD 13.8 million (CHF 13 million) to development assistance. This larger amount is then split evenly between two main areas of focus: livelihoods, and governance and human rights.

Within the governance and human rights area, SDC has focused primarily on supporting multilateral national-level programmes: UNDP ELECT, UNDP ASGP and UNDP's National Institution Building Programme (NIBP). The agency has become widely respected for its work on human rights, a key focal point. Along with Canada and the Nordic countries, Switzerland has played a considerable role in helping to coordinate donor assistance to the AIHRC, in establishing a human rights unit within the Ministry of Justice and in supporting Afghan civil society in raising public awareness of human rights issues.

General issues faced by bilateral donors

Only a small sample of donor activities has been outlined above, but there are some more general issues affecting diplomatic actors across the board. The most notable of these is the way in which, in Afghanistan, development assistance is increasingly tied to military objectives. More than any other donor, USAID aligns its development aid to foreign policy goals, effectively streamlining its political and development objectives. In practice, this results in implementers having to align their activities with US strategic interests in terms of programme location, for example. One implementing agency representative working on a sub-national governance initiative talked about having to shift their focus to the south and east of Afghanistan, and to specific areas within these regions, in order to coincide with priority districts identified by USAID:

> 'Over the past two years, USAID has prioritised a coordinated effort. They want a focus on the south and east, and within these areas they have priority districts. We [grantees] are all encouraged to work in these districts'.

This was not presented as a problem by the agency in question, but it demonstrates the extent to which democracy assistance is linked to donors' broader political goals.

The move towards combining development aid with military goals has been particularly evident in DFID policy in recent years. This is due to a number of changing variables – not only the changes taking place within British politics, but also the changing environment in Afghanistan: the move from a largely unnoticed post-conflict context to a conflict setting in which a high-profile war is taking place has inevitably attracted increased public scrutiny of government spending in the country. Insecurity affects all aspects of international engagement in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it is critical to note the shift in direction in the aid allocations of major donors: there is now a much greater overlap between assistance promoting democratisation and the broader political goals of donor governments. Again, this is a result of the understanding that politics and security are intimately related, and of a commitment to a whole-of-government approach.[20] This realisation has also taken the form of governance units being established within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In practice, however, as one respondent from Afghan civil society commented, foreign policy and democratisation are uneasy bedfellows, as the necessary expediency of diplomatic engagement does not always lend itself to the uniformity of approach and the national ownership required for long-term democratic institution building.[21] Donors' domestic politics do not directly contribute to the delivery of Afghan-centric development.

The relationship between military operations and development funding is often portrayed negatively by NGOs, think tanks and academic institutions due to its tendency to blur boundaries between military engagement and the aid/development community. This is often seen as endangering the lives of civilians and the activities of CSOs. The attempt to streamline different aspects of engagement is a deliberate move on the part of donors, however: DAC principle 5 states that there is a need to 'recognise the links between political, security and development objectives',[22] and USAID has recently expressed its intention to further align its activities with US foreign policy.[23]

This has been echoed by many other donors' movements towards whole-of-government approaches which focus on the interrelatedness of security and governance. This is particularly evident in the UK approach where DFID, the FCO and MOD work closely together. The ultimate result of this approach is still unknown, but it has quickly become apparent that diplomatic missions are inseparable from the activities of their respective aid agencies. Although USAID is an entirely separate agency from the US Embassy in Kabul, working on a different structural model to that of the UK, their programmes nonetheless overlap significantly in terms of content and priority locations. Another effect is that funding has been channeled more consistently to insecure provinces where troops are stationed, to the detriment of provinces where, until recently, security levels had been relatively high.[24] From a different perspective, it could be said in some cases that the relationship between civilian and military activities is not sufficiently coordinated, and a general paucity of communication between the two leads to the overlap of programmes.

Another factor affecting democracy assistance provided by most bilateral donors in Afghanistan concerns the common practice of 'contracting out' the implementation of programmes, either to large multilateral organisations such as UNDP, or to smaller contractors, grantees, NGOs or CSOs. Programmes are usually implemented in this way because local or locally-based implementing agencies are likely to have a better grasp of and access to the environment for which programmes are designed, as well as greater technical knowledge of the area of assistance in question. Logistically speaking, it is much easier to contract project implementation out to a smaller organisation.

[20] In the UK mission to Afghanistan, this takes the form of a Conflict Prevent Pool (CPP), a fund through which some FCO, MOD and DFID activities are jointly financed. For more on CPPs, see J. Goodhand with P. Bergne, 'Evaluation of the Conflict Prevention Pools: Country Case Study 2, Afghanistan Study', DFID, 2004, available at http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/evaluation/ev647afghanistan.pdf .

[21] This is also noted in DFID's 'Working Effectively in Conflict-affected and fragile situations', briefing paper, p. 2.

[22] DFID Practice Paper, 'Working Effectively in Conflict-Affected and Fragile Situations: Briefing Paper C: Links between politics, security and development', March 2010, available at http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sid/EGUA-83GQFC/$file/dfid-building-peaceful-states-C-mar2010.pdf?openelement .

[23] A. Wilder and S. Gordon, 'Money Can't Buy America Love', *Foreign Policy*, 1 December 2009, available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/12/01/money_cant_buy_america_love

[24] Ibid.

The logic behind contracting out is clear, but the practice faces numerous problems, especially in terms of coordination between the donor and implementing agencies. As one representative of a grantee agency working on behalf of USAID stated:

> 'Staff time [at USAID] in country is over very quickly – I'm on my fourth counterpart in 18 months – and this affects their ability to oversee our projects and to advocate on behalf of our programmes in the state department, as they don't know much about them.'

Moreover, Afghan CSOs are often selected and contracted by the agencies, rather than by USAID directly. This adds a further link to the chain of accountability and increases the distance between donor and recipient. Local recipients also view this practice as an example of misdirection of funds, the money is seen to be spent on international contractor salaries rather than being allocated directly to the CSO:

> 'USAID do not fund us directly, they give money through NDI, TAF and some American NGOs, and then these organisations give a small amount to us. They take out and cut down our salaries; they think that because we are local we don't need high salaries. If USAID funded us directly then I would be able to find well-qualified staff [and offer them] good salaries to work here. When they give money to NDI, NDI takes a big cut for themselves – so how can they still expect so much from us? Denmark and Germany give us direct funding which is much better.'

However, the reasons why donors contract out projects deserve further consideration. Due to the vast size of the USAID mission to Afghanistan, contractors are hired for practical purposes in order to outsource some of the bureaucracy involved in implementing programmes. The accounting processes of international agencies are also often more reliable and detailed than those of Afghan CSOs. Contracting agencies' overheads are high due to the security situation in Afghanistan and the difficulty in retaining international staff. Furthermore, a sufficient level of technical expertise is difficult to find in Afghanistan, hence it must be brought to the country through organisations like NDI and IRI. These factors help explain why international programmes can seem costly at first glance. A distinction also needs to be made between the relatively small, not-for-profit implementing agencies like NDI, IRI and IFES and the much larger for-profit contractors such as DAI, Chemonics and AECOM, whose budgets are considerably bigger, less publically accountable and prone to having high 'burn-rates' (in order to demonstrate their organisations' financial absorptive capacity, without necessarily considering whether funds are well-spent).[25]

USAID funding patterns are likely to change significantly, however, as the agency has recently lowered the threshold of funding allocations from the previous minimum of USD 500,000 to USD $50,000 in their Governance Annual Program Statement, one interviewee commented. This will allow more grants to be made to smaller, local organisations.

Another issue with the donor tendency to 'contract out' the implementation of projects to private organisations or NGOs is that this practice is often seen by members of the Afghan government as a way to avoid the direct funding of government programmes for development. Although this is justified by donors in terms of it being easier to hold smaller non-government agencies to account for their spending, it nonetheless marginalises the (arguably more sustainable) programmes of the Afghan government. Having said this, bilateral donors are generally moving in the direction of direct funding. More than 50 per cent of total Danish funds in 2009 were allocated through government channels (approximately the same percentage as that allocated to the government by DFID), and USAID has expressed commitment to allocating 50 per cent of all assistance through the Afghan government by 2012. This demonstrates an acknowledgement of the way in which the current heavy reliance on contracting is not without fault. However, it is problematic in the current environment of escalating corruption in the Afghan administration, as will be discussed below.

[25] *Christian Science Monitor*, 'Afghanistan War: How USAID Loses Hearts and Minds', 28 July 2010, available at http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2010/0728/Afghanistan-war-How-USAID-loses-hearts-and-minds.

A final point worth considering is that due to the size of some donor agencies and their diplomatic missions (such as USAID and DFID), bureaucratic procedures can be time-consuming. Additionally, most key funding decisions are made in home countries, extending the administrative process. Smaller donor agencies such as Denmark have the advantage that their embassy in Kabul is a part of a decentralised system of managing development assistance, and can thus make rapid decisions on whether or not to fund certain projects. This is generally appreciated by recipient organisations. Considering the long delays to funding and consequent problems in retaining staff reported by recipient agencies (when referring to practices of other donors), Kabul-based decision-making is not insignificant in terms of the benefits to local organisations.

The small scale of Swiss donor assistance to Afghanistan is a limitation in terms of reach and breadth of activity, but according to one representative, this is not necessarily entirely negative:

> 'Our funding for Afghanistan is quite substantial in comparison with our spending in other countries, but compared to other donors in Afghanistan we are tiny; we are playing with giants. But we invest time in going deeper than other donors … and we focus on niches like donor coordination and human rights.'

Although the size of a donor budget appears to buy space at the decision-making table, in terms of policy and donor-government relations, it is not always directly proportional to 'impact'. According to the Swiss and other smaller donors, such as the Nordic countries, a small amount of money can contribute significantly to democratic development if allocated appropriately. This practice also contrasts with the tendency among other multi- and bilateral donors to attempt to address all areas of assistance, with very little prioritisation.

The examples of donor assistance given in this section illustrate the current scale of donor operations in Afghanistan. They demonstrate the extent to which, for most donors, development assistance is tied to diplomatic (and military) objectives. They also indicate the comprehensive nature of programmes, which cover broad areas of development assistance and have substantial areas of overlap. Donor coordination appears to have improved recently: talk of 'harmonisation' as detailed in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness has increased, and a concerted effort was made to align with the Afghan government's National Priority Programmes following the Kabul Conference in July 2010. Having said this, the broad spectrum of activity covered by each donor generally signifies a lack of depth and time spent in each thematic area, with most programmes based on 6–18 month project-based engagements with contracting agencies or NGOs.

Independent/NGO-based donors and agencies

Several hundred international NGOs and development agencies are active in Afghanistan, and a considerable number are involved in promoting democracy or democratic processes. It is therefore not possible to catalogue all of their activities here; a select sample has been chosen to give a general picture of key contributors.[26] Most of the organisations listed below both undertake their own activities and channel funds to smaller, local organisations. As such they function to a certain degree as 'middlemen', not donors, as they accept funds from donors for certain programmes, but not end-recipients either, as they often contract out the implementation of these programmes to local NGOs or CSOs. USAID contractors are not included in this sample, as their contributions to democracy building – while the most sizable in terms of scale and funding – are included under the section on USAID assistance above.

OSA/Soros Foundation

The Open Society in Afghanistan (OSA; formerly the Foundation for Open Society in Afghanistan) works on two thematic areas: the promotion and protection of civil and political rights and the promotion of good governance. It functions primarily by allocating grants of up to USD 100,000 to local organisations for the implementation of programmes in these fields. It also provides technical assistance to civil society by organising conferences and training programmes abroad for Afghan civil society representatives, and bringing international experts to Afghanistan to provide training. Importantly, OSA is currently directed by an

[26] Other organisations which also work in the field of democracy assistance in Afghanistan include NED, providing grants to CSOs; USIP, working primarily on informal justice; Democracy International; Global Rights; and Rights and Democracy.

Afghan who has made sure to consult civil society when compiling the organisation's strategic plan. This is one means of carrying out a needs assessment and incorporating local input.

The Asia Foundation (TAF)

TAF is one of the largest independent organisations operating in Afghanistan, functioning as a partner agency for many international donors. Its spectrum of activity is vast: projects within the governance field are diverse, ranging from a women's access to justice programme, to a fund to encourage better performance of provincial governors, and elections observation through the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL). TAF also spearheaded support to the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) to produce the Subnational Governance policy, the foundation document for UNDP's ASGP programme. TAF is highly involved in providing technical assistance to government ministries and has many international advisors who work within different ministries in capacity-building roles.

National Democratic Institute (NDI)

NDI has been working in Afghanistan since 2002 and has a comprehensive democracy assistance programme. Its activities vary, but have included voter and civic education; candidate training; electoral observations; technical and capacity building support for parliamentarians and provincial council members; sub-national governance assistance; a parliamentary internship programme for students and political party development. NDI's parties programme has helped to build the capacity of parties represented in parliament – generally those with established support networks, but without the means to organise effective, unified political activity. NDI has developed close relationships with these parties and a number of political actors across the spectrum, making it well-placed to implement democracy assistance programmes. It also works closely with FEFA and has allocated grants to this organisation for election-related activities. NDI is funded primarily by USAID, through the Consortium for Electoral and Political Process Support (CEPPS) arrangement in coordination with IRI and IFES.[27] It also receives grants from other donors, which have recently included Canada, UNDP and NED.

International Republican Institute (IRI)

Like NDI, IRI is also an implementing agency for USAID funds for democracy and governance. Its areas of focus have included the support of independent candidates in elections and developing caucuses of independent MPs in parliament around issues-based themes. IRI has also concentrated on the development of national social networks, such as the Afghan Youth National Social Organisation (AYNSO) and the Movement of Afghan Sisters (MAS). It has supported the growth of these organisations by facilitating meetings, providing technical assistance and encouraging links between social networks and parliamentarians. IRI also has a sub-national governance programme concentrated in key priority districts outlined by USAID in the south and east.

International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)

The IFES also benefits from CEPPS funding and works closely with NDI and IRI in Afghanistan. Among these agencies, IFES took the lead on civic education during the recent elections and works hard to encourage civil society's development. Since it began operating in Afghanistan in 2002, IFES's other projects have included supporting electoral law development and providing assistance with elections logistics.

The State University of New York (SUNY)

SUNY primarily focuses on its Assistance to the Afghan Parliament (APAP) programmes. These include four key sectors: an institutional development unit, a legislative unit, an outreach unit and a budget unit. The APAP projects have included establishing a budget office within parliament, providing vital budgetary information to MPs, coordinating with the Ministry of Finance and producing the APAP Legislative Newsletter. Published weekly and available to the public, the newsletter outlines parliamentary activities.

[27] For more on CEPPS, see http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/Activity.60.aspx

German Political Organisations

Three organisations affiliated with German political parties are based in Kabul and active in promoting democracy assistance in Afghanistan: The Heinrich Boll Foundation (HBS), associated with the Green Party; the Freidrich Ebert Foundation (FES), associated with the Social Democrat Party; and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS), linked to the Christian Democrats. HBS focuses on women and their political participation in particular. FES has worked with youth- and democratically-oriented political parties, encouraging young leaders, while KAS has sponsored research into democracy-related subjects. In addition to these institutions, the Hans Seidel Foundation (HSS) also has a small presence in country, running programmes to promote adult political education and dialogue, with one Afghan member of staff and a German representative based in Islamabad. Given their affiliations, these organisations have an advantage over other implementing agencies in that they are able to openly define a political agenda for their work and align programmes with their parties' priorities. This is not the case for other agencies, whose remits are largely limited to 'technical assistance'. This can prove a hindrance when the very nature of democracy assistance is of course highly political.

Local views

Due to time and security limitations, it was not possible to interview a wide range of civil society actors across Afghanistan. Most respondents were based in Kabul. This affects the data as many were able to converse fluently in English, and largely favoured the idea of international support for democracy building in Afghanistan, despite being critical of the means through which this support is delivered. However, their positive attitude could be related to the fact that most civil society respondents rely on the international community for funds, and fear that showing negativity in interviews might affect future funding.

Nevertheless, the data collected presents a largely representative picture of civil society in Afghanistan today: a civil society that is for the most part Kabul-based, English-speaking and donor-dependent. The current form of civil society in Afghanistan developed in response to post-2001 democratisation efforts. As a result, it needs to be considered as a new phenomenon, the components of which rarely transcend ethnic or other social boundaries.

In order to select respondents for this study, the researcher used a broad definition of 'civil society', which incorporated representatives of Afghan NGOs, political parties, youth groups and think-tanks.[28] International non-government agencies were also interviewed, but were not categorised as 'civil society' given the emphasis on 'local' views in this section.

With this focus on Afghan perspectives in mind, it is important to note that some decisions made by international actors regarding policy or programming (for example in terms of what to prioritise, when) remain unknown to recipients of assistance. The notion of a programme's 'success' is often relative, depending on what expectations were held and by whom. For example, if a national programme in civic education is implemented and has more uptake in some locations than others, then those in the places where the programme was least effective may not have a sense of its overall national impact. The opinions presented below are therefore not an objective gauge of 'success', but instead offer an important indicator of some Afghan perspectives on democracy assistance; perspectives that are all too often overlooked.

The views outlined below are divided into three categories: those of micro-, meso- and macro-level assistance. Micro-level assistance refers to projects which allocate USD 500,000 or less to individual Afghan agencies as implementing partners. The section on meso-level assistance incorporates local perspectives of coordinated donor assistance programmes and approaches to democracy promotion that involve more than one donor and more than one recipient – for example in funding elections, and in promoting a distinctly liberal model of democratisation with an emphasis on women's rights. Assistance at the macro level denotes the larger statebuilding and stabilisation agendas within which democracy assistance forms a small component.

[28] One limitation of the research was that non-Kabul-based civil society members – including members of the NSP Community Development Councils – were not targeted specifically as respondents, due to the lack of time available to conduct research in rural areas. This is recommended as an area for further study.

This structure allows a focus on the intricacies of local level democracy assistance followed by a gradual broadening of perspective in which wider issues of context are discussed.

Individual recipients: perspectives on micro-level assistance

Donors often provide democracy assistance to Afghanistan by supporting Afghan CSOs and NGOs to implement short-term projects (lasting six months to a year) promoting different aspects of democratic development on a relatively small budget (usually under USD 500,000). Agencies such as the FEFA, the Afghan Civil Society Forum (ACSF), the AIHRC, the Civil Society and Human Rights Network (CSHRN), Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA) and the AWN are some of the main recipients of this type of donor funding and technical support.

One of the most critical factors determining the growth and activities of civil society in Afghanistan is that all CSOs are funded almost entirely by international donors. There is no official internal source of funding for these organisations, either from the government or the private sector. Reflecting the broader picture in Afghanistan in terms of aid dependency, CSOs are for the most part entirely reliant on international funds for day-to-day running costs.
This dependency has a significant effect on the activities of CSOs, which are often deliberately aligned with donor priorities in order to secure funds. Agendas are often designed around the areas of interest outlined by donor agencies. One representative of an Afghan organisation working on human rights commented on this, reflecting the views of many others interviewed: 'We have to adjust our projects to [the donors'] preconceived ideas, which are not necessarily priorities in Afghanistan.' This criticism of donors' misaligned priorities was common among respondents and reflects the extent to which donors are perceived as 'pushing' an agenda which is not necessarily appropriate to the country.

By far the most common complaint among civil society actors interviewed was that the majority of donors allocate funding on a project-by-project basis. This means that CSOs have to work to deadline on specific, short-term democracy assistance projects, which often end without any subsequent follow-up. As most CSOs receive no core funding from internal sources, they often lose staff at the end of each project and need to recruit and retrain different staff when the next project is secured. This is particularly notable in the field of electoral support. One respondent working for an electoral observation organisation described the problem thus:

> 'Donors are only interested in us during elections. CSOs usually lose their sustainability and their qualified staff when projects end. It's too hard to stay alive. Fortunately for us there was still some commitment from the internationals in between elections and we could keep going with very small salaries. But this is the main critical point which affects the development of organisations and the sustainability of democracy. If some organisations get more and more experience and then die, what is the result? Democracy in war-torn countries needs sustainability and CSOs need a permanent role to sustain democracy […] The capacity of organisations is not developing as we have to start from zero every time we lose funding. The main reason for this is donor policy'.

This case highlights the tension between encouraging the development of civil society by providing core funding for day-to-day costs, while simultaneously encouraging dependence on foreign funding for these expenses. One example of a compromise reached was given by another CSO representative working on human rights and women's education. This organisation receives a small but continuous grant from the NED, which is renewed annually:

> 'The grant we receive from [NED] is not as much as the money we receive from the other organisations but it is continuous – they give us USD 140,000 per year which is very good. This is much less than the other donors but we can design our own activities and they have a wide choice of activities that we can choose to include in supporting democracy. They are flexible – every year we submit our planned programmes and we change them if necessary but they usually support us. They have supported the publication of our Sadaf women's magazine for five years now.'

Another CSO gave a similar account of the core funding they received from the Norwegian Embassy, which emphasised the importance both of sustained funding and the ability to define their own agenda:

> 'The Norwegians are very flexible – we tell them what we do with the money, of course, but they don't worry too much about how the funds are spent. This helps toward maintaining our independence. This year is the second year in the second set of core funding from the Norwegians – each set of funding lasts for three years and now amounts to about USD 350,000 per year'.

Comparatively small-scale but reliable funding therefore appears to be the preferred and most useful method of donor funding from the point of view of recipient agencies. Nonetheless, there is a fundamental problem surrounding sustainability: if and when this funding decreases or disappears – a likelihood in the mid- to long-term – it is highly probable that Afghan CSOs will also disappear unless a local source of funding can be found. If these organisations – along with political parties – are to play a meaningful role in the democratisation process, their ability to develop a stable source of income is critical. Perhaps even more important, however, is the possibility to act independently of the donor agendas that currently define the scope of their work.

Combined donor activities: perspectives on meso-level assistance

At the meso level, there have been some coordinated attempts between donors to support specific kinds of democracy assistance, such as the organisation and funding of elections in 2004–05 and 2009–10. These two sets of elections were conducted in different ways. In 2004–05, responsibility for implementing the polls lay solely with the Joint Electoral Management Board (JEMB), a body comprised of Afghan and international members overseeing an internationally-led process. In 2009–2010, the implementation of elections was handed over to the Afghan Independent Elections Commission (IEC) which took full responsibility for the orchestration of the polls. In spite of this, the second round of elections was also largely funded by international donors, due to the Afghan government's inability to raise sufficient funds itself. This was arranged through a multi-donor fund coordinated by UNDP ELECT.

The main election-related concern expressed by local actors was that of inconsistent funding. Funds were only available before elections when interest was at a peak, dropping to minimal support for civic education and awareness-raising between polls. As one respondent involved in electoral observation stated:

> '[The international community] does not see that this is also about the process behind elections. There are no funds for post-election activities and this is why each election is not better than the previous one. There is no support for lobbying or rule of law. In Afghanistan elections are considered the main principle for democracy. The international community just sees elections and nothing else. If they see a good election they think we have democracy, and if they see a bad election with no rule of law they lose faith in democracy'.

This phenomenon is not limited to Afghanistan: democracy practitioners and assistance implementers tend to measure the quality of a country's democracy primarily by the procedural proxies generated by elections (voter turnout; number of female voters; extent to which elections are considered 'legitimate' by outside observers).[29] Nevertheless, this primary focus on elections is particularly problematic in Afghanistan due to the population's relative lack of familiarity with electoral procedures and the novelty of universal suffrage. Continuous public outreach programmes could therefore be seen as highly important in the Afghan context. Moreover, as the respondent above indicates, donors seemed to expect a smooth transition when handing over the reins of electoral implementation to IEC staff, even though the latter had not been provided with sufficient capacity-building training during the 2004–2005 elections or between 2005 and 2009. As one representative of an international implementing agency noted, 'there is too much money in elections administration, observation, and auditing and not enough in building the long-term capacity of democratic institutions, both governmental and non-governmental'.

[29] For more on procedural definitions of democracy, see C. Tilly, *Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 8.

Another factor highlighted by local recipients of meso-level international democracy assistance concerned the perceived Western values promoted by the donor community as a whole. Donors were often grouped into one category by civil society representatives interviewed, and donors' different approaches to democracy promotion were rarely distinguished. Instead, there is a general sense that 'the foreigners' have a specific agenda regarding the promotion of liberal democratic values, and furthermore that these values do not necessarily coincide with Afghan cultural norms.

The most often cited example of these values was the donors' attitude towards women and their role in public life. As the following two quotes from members of Afghan civil society illustrate, many local respondents felt that donors' strong emphasis on active female participation in society was not appropriate in the Afghan context:

> 'To approach democracy, there are two methods. The first is to copy the democracy of western countries, and the second is to go our own way according to our own culture. For example in Afghanistan, the first step of democracy should not be the freedom of women. Sometimes the name of democracy itself becomes a reason for insecurity […] People think that if you bring democracy their daughters and wives will go to nightclubs and drink wine.'

> 'None of the donors have studied us Afghans or the Afghan context in its reality. I had the same feeling at the end of the Russian regime here – when the foreigners come, they talk about things which are not acceptable in our society. I have worked all my life on women's issues here but I have always thought that saying 'women, women, women' was the wrong way'.

This sentiment has been further exacerbated on occasions when donors have put pressure on the Afghan government to change policies seen as detrimental to women's human rights. One example of this is the international reaction to the Shiite Personal Status Law which forbids (*de jure*) Shia women from leaving home without obtaining their husbands' permission.[30] The apparent clash between cultural sensitivity and promoting so-called universal democratic values presents a dilemma for donors, who cannot reasonably or justifiably ignore the plight of women in Afghanistan and at the same time claim to be promoting 'democracy'.[31]

Competing definitions of 'democracy' existing in Afghanistan are partly responsible for Afghan mistrust of the concept. The English term is more frequently used than an approximate translation ('*Mardum Salari*' [Dari] or '*Woleswaqi*' [Pashtu]), suggesting that the word is instantly associated with foreign imposition. Second, as previously mentioned, it is also widely associated with the secular policies of the Soviet-backed PDPA, whose regime was eventually deposed by the conservative *Mujahideen* who reacted against enforced secularism and claimed Islam as their political motivation. Many Afghans see 'Western' or secular democracy and Islam as fundamentally opposed.[32] Finally, since 2001 in particular, 'democracy' has come to signify a *laissez-faire* approach, based on the widely-cited viewpoint that 'anything goes, because this is a democracy'. This essentially implies that democracy means unlimited freedom resulting in immorality and a lack of adherence to social norms and values. Given this understanding of democracy it is possible to see why there is a certain resistance towards the onset of liberal democratisation, which has coincided with decreasing security and escalating corruption. There is a considerable fear of both social disorder and a rejection of norms and rules, especially religious ones. This presents another dilemma for donors: the more their efforts are understood as a challenge to Islamic and Afghan identities, the more resistance they will generate.

[30] For a detailed account of the process behind the passing of this law, see Lauren Oates, 'A Closer Look: The Policy and Law-making Process behind the Shiite Personal Status Law', Kabul: AREU, 2009.

[31] For more on the debate (in Afghanistan and elsewhere) between 'meddling' or cultural imperialism on the one hand, and the argument for international actors promoting a concept of universal women's rights on the other, see D. Kandiyoti 'Political fiction meets gender myth: post-conflict reconstruction, "democratization" and women's rights', in A. Cornwall, E. Harrison and A. Whitehead (eds.), *Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges* (London: Zed Books, 2007), p.192.

[32] Larson, 'Toward an Afghan Democracy', op. cit.; and Larson, forthcoming (AREU), 2011.

As such, there is an urgent need for donors to clarify and communicate their motivations to the Afghan public. This seems an unlikely priority in the current context, even if it were to prove convincing. Furthermore, the fundamental issue remains: as a result of domestic politics, the overlap of aid with foreign policy, a lack of understanding of the Afghan context and a primarily secular approach to democracy building, there are some donor aims which inevitably do challenge Afghan and Islamic perspectives. However, overcoming these differences appears to be low on the list of donor priorities in the broader context of stabilisation and troop draw-down.

The broader statebuilding and stabilisation agenda: perspectives on macro-level assistance

Underlying many of the respondents' views on the micro- and meso-level assistance provided by international donors is a concern about the broader picture of international involvement in Afghanistan. With 2010 named a 'critical year' for assistance[33] prior to the nearing potential draw-down of international troops likely to begin in 2011, civil society actors sense an imminent international exit. Given that most CSOs are entirely dependent on international funds, this is a significant concern, as one respondent explained:

> 'I went to a conference in Germany and the commander of the German forces in Afghanistan was there. He said he was under pressure from the German people and that they had achieved a lot and that they were now trying to find a way out. I asked, 'did you achieve what you first came here to achieve? And if not, why are you leaving?' Afghan citizens are confused by the international community's activities in Afghanistan. We thought that the international community loved democracy, peace and stability. But we have seen them give bribes to the Taliban not to shoot them. We have seen that the insurgents don't shoot international soldiers, because they have been paid bribes, but they blow up ANA troops. Afghan people are confused: does the international community really want democracy, peace and stability or do they have another deal here?'

This suspicion concerning the 'real' agenda of international donors reflects a widespread belief among Afghans that promoting democracy or development is peripheral to a more sinister desire to occupy Afghanistan or exploit its natural resources. Otherwise, so the theory goes, a more concerted effort would have been made and democracy and development 'achieved' by now. As one respondent from a political party stated, 'the international donors' role has been OK but they could do anything if they really tried. If they wanted to do something it would be easy for them'. The implication here is that international actors are not really interested in promoting democracy in Afghanistan at all.

Evidently, this perspective is fuelled by the increasingly anti-Western discourse heard in the public sphere in Afghanistan from both the Taliban and government propaganda. Speculative and unfounded as these perspectives may be, it is clear that international actors have sent mixed messages regarding their commitment to democracy-building in Afghanistan, as an Afghan think-tank representative described:

> 'Because the international community doesn't have long-term interests, it doesn't want to open up complicated issues. [Donors] have engaged in what is easiest, and most convenient, making deals within and outside the system. One of the major problems is that the international community has lost its moral authority here. People expected the international intervention to bring rule of law, although maybe not in so many words. This has not materialised and people have seen the robbers and criminals empowered by the international community'.

Early expectations of what the international intervention could achieve in Afghanistan were undoubtedly untenably high. However, events including the success of prominent warlords in parliamentary elections and their subsequent guarantee of immunity from prosecution and unfinished disarmament processes have demonstrated that the effort to promote democracy has been half-hearted at best. As one donor representative reflected:

[33] DFID, 'Where we work: Afghanistan', 2010, available at http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Where-we-work/Asia-South/Afghanistan/

> 'We have created the outer manifestations of democracy, such as elections and parliament, but we have completely failed to enable these manifestations to seriously play their role. Successful elections have to coincide with disarmament – and if we don't have this, we can't have a real democratic process.'

The coexistence of democratic institutions with local militias has been actively encouraged by some international donors in the last 18 months as a means to promote local security.[34] This is both a contradiction in terms and an uncomfortable thorn in the side of democratic development, especially when violence escalates in the run-up to and aftermath of elections.[35]

Finally, the data obtained reveals a sense that there have been significant missed opportunities since 2001. This is notable in the way respondents talk about how the situation has changed in recent years, and how at first there was a much wider acceptance of international presence and assistance to the democracy-building process. The following two representatives of civil society organisations expressed this sentiment in a way that reflected others' views also:

> 'At the beginning the international donors' role was good, it was perfect, but as it went on it became less successful. They could do better. They have had a lot of achievements, such as the Constitution and the elections, encouraging the participation of women – but there are many challenges. Corruption, warlords grabbing people's land, fraud in the elections. Elections are part of democracy but not if we don't have democratic elections. The international community had a key important role at the beginning and in the middle of this process – they need to have more impact now. The presidential election of 2009 was very symbolic. If after identifying the fraud the international community had not supported corruption, they would have had a re-election. They should have had this; it would have been better'.

> 'Many opportunities have now been missed. 2002–03 was the perfect time for reform in the judiciary, for example, and in the police – for democracy and rule of law. It was thought by Afghans that democracy would bring peace and justice, but now we have neither. All these issues are interlinked, however – you can't wait for war to finish before starting development. [But] because of the way the intervention was handled initially, Afghanistan will now need long-term support. If the international support ends in July 2011, the country will collapse'.

This sense of a good start followed by critical missed opportunities is prevalent among respondents. They explained it in terms of a diversion of funds to Iraq, an assumption that the Taliban had been defeated, or a naiveté in approaching Afghanistan as a *tabula rasa* on which new democratic institutions could simply be installed to replace previous outdated mechanisms of governance. Whatever the actual reasons for these oversights, however, perspectives on the macro-level assistance to Afghanistan among local respondents are not hopeful – as if the democratic experiment will soon be running on borrowed time.

Factors weakening the impact of democracy aid

A number of factors weakening the impact of democracy assistance have already been discussed above: the lack of a coordinated vision for democratic development, missed opportunities early on in the intervention, the coinciding of democracy assistance with international military action and the lack of clarity over definitions of democracy. By far the biggest and most debilitating obstacle, however, as identified by respondents for this study, is a problem affecting every aspect of international assistance in Afghanistan: the lack of security. This is all-pervasive and has specific effects on democracy assistance: from the prevention of freedom of speech due to fear of violent repercussions, to the unequal playing field created by key players carrying arms; from the rejection of the word 'democracy' due to its dangerous associations with the West, to a narrative of insecurity preventing women's participation in the public sphere. What is more, an environment of increasing

[34] For example in the Local Defence Initiatives (LDIs).

[35] In the run-up to the 2010 elections, it became clear that a number of candidates were using their connections to local armed groups to intimidate other candidates, a practice easily disguised in the context of widespread AOG activity. See N. Coburn, 'Parliamentarians and Local Politics in Afghanistan: Elections and Instability II', Kabul: AREU, 2010.

insecurity understandably affects individual priorities; and if it is safer to stay at home than to cast a vote, then most people will choose the former. Security coincides with poor socio-economic conditions, meaning that there are other, greater priorities for many Afghans than the development of democracy in their country.

There are also institutional and technical factors which serve to dilute the impact of democracy assistance more specifically. Political parties in Afghanistan – and issues-based blocs in general – have very few incentives to promote democratisation themselves. Parties are not institutionalised in the modern sense; the most influential are ex-military factions whose support bases are largely generated through ethnicity and patronage networks.[36] Parties do not stand on solid, distinguishable platforms. Furthermore, membership of a party is not a requirement for electoral candidates under the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system. As a result, the lower house of parliament (*Wolesi Jirga*) is largely made up of 'independent' MPs who are officially unaffiliated to a party or bloc but have informal connections to various influential individuals, to parties or to the government. This hinders the ways in which issues are brought to the parliament for discussion.

Without issues-based blocs that cut across ethnic lines, political competition is often considered a worrying development by Afghans as it signifies potential conflict between groups.[37] This was the case in early 2010 when a sizable number of parliamentarians appeared to be publicly rallying against the government. This was seen by many Afghans not as a positive step towards achieving the necessary checks and balances on executive power, but rather as a problematic symbol of disunity and conflict.[38] While understandable given the history of violent political opposition in Afghanistan, this could also potentially be a major hindrance to the promotion of competitive democracy.

Another hindrance which deserves further attention is the lack of political will on the part of both international and national actors to commit resources to ensure the quality and sustainability of democracy building. For most international donors in Afghanistan, engagement is currently a matter of great political significance in their home countries, with increasing attention being paid to the activities undertaken. Correspondingly, there is a heightened pressure to streamline operations and cut back on 'peripheral' activities.[39] Furthermore, the promotion of democratic development anywhere in the world is uncomfortable, hazardous and messy. As one international USAID recipient stated, 'it's not just a case of "congratulations, you're a democracy" – we need to keep working at this all the time. We might still be fighting over campaign finance reform, for example, 200 years down the line. We're not going to get it right first time'. In the context of an approaching exit, or at least a reduction of support, however, 'getting it right' or even 'getting things in reasonably good shape' are arguably no longer donor priorities. Instead, 'getting things good enough to leave' appears to be the current target.

Perhaps more significantly, there is also a debilitating lack of political will within the Afghan government to promote substantive democratisation. Notwithstanding the considerable occurrence of fraud in the 2009 and 2010 elections, there has also been rapid progress towards executive control over the process of elections, such as President Karzai's decree in early 2010 on the electoral law, ensuring that all members of the Electoral Complaints Commission are selected by presidential assignment. This is a worrying trend threatening to undermine advances made. In an interview for this study, reflecting the views of a number of respondents, Dr Abdullah Abdullah – the main opposition candidate for the presidential race in 2009 – described a lack of political will at the top as the key obstacle to democratic development:

> 'The main obstacle is that there is no commitment [to democracy] from the leadership, from those calling the shots. Karzai does not believe in democracy – he used it as a banner and disregarded it when it no longer served his purposes. But in a centralised system, everyone looks to him'.

[36] For more on Afghan parties, see T. Ruttig, 'Islamists, Leftists and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan's political parties and where they come from', 1902–2002', Kabul: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2006.
[37] Larson, 'Toward an Afghan Democracy?', op. cit.
[38] M. Hassan Wafaey and A. Larson, 'The *Wolesi Jirga* in 2010: Pre-election politics and the Appearance of Opposition', Kabul: AREU, 2010.
[39] As indicated by UK Defence Secretary Liam Fox, following a recent visit to Afghanistan. See T. Coghlan, 'Afghans accuse Defence Secretary Liam Fox of racism and disrespect', *The Times*, 24 May 2010, available at http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article7134622.ece.

Evidently, it is to be expected that the president's main opponent would speak out against him in this way, but the same view has also been expressed by numerous analysts, observers, MPs and civil society members in Afghanistan.[40] It was also made strikingly clear in the President's unconstitutional attempt to postpone the inauguration of the new parliament in January 2011.

Finally, compounding the problem of a lack of will to promote political accountability within the Afghan government is the comparable lack of will to address financial and administrative accountability. 'Corruption' is a term heard often in Kabul. What it actually means depends upon the context in which it is used, and for Afghans at least it has a number of different manifestations ranging from low-level bribery for administrative services, to large-scale siphoning of public resources, to the extortionate salaries paid to international consultants.[41] In the last two years, however, corruption has become a key donor priority. At the time of writing, USD 50 million was being contributed by donors to UNDP's ACT programme, supporting the newly established High Office of Oversight (HOO).[42] Nevertheless, according to anti-corruption CSO IWA, this sum was not having the impact intended:

> 'The HOO now has about 150 nationals working for it, 20 internationals – and it has produced nothing. Its 'monitoring' hasn't achieved anything. The only thing it has achieved has been to reform vehicle registration and even that is not really working. The leadership is not motivated to fight corruption. The leadership is totally loyal to Karzai. There's lots of money, big cars and consultants being poured into the HOO but it won't help. The cars are just being used by the family of the leadership'.

The results of these anti-corruption initiatives will have a considerable impact on the development of democratic governance, as they are directly related to the extent to which the government is willing to be accountable to its citizens. Without commitment from the highest levels, and without the incentives for those at the top to engage in promoting the transparency and accountability necessary for substantive democratisation to take place, the prospects for democratic governance remain slim.

Views on diplomatic back-up to aid programmes

Views on diplomatic support to democracy building varied among respondents, but a significant number referred to the lack of coordination between donors. This was seen to contribute to the mixed signals sent out by donors regarding their commitment to democratisation. The lack of a clear, coordinated agenda for strengthening governance in the country was mentioned frequently. One representative of an international implementing agency receiving USAID funds talked about this in terms of a lack of vision:

> 'The main problem is that we don't have a clear vision of what we want to do in the field of democracy and governance, or that we are not committed to one [...] More than anything, the problem is the lack of vision, and we're just throwing stuff against a wall. I'm not sure why. People say it's because the donors can't agree, but I've heard some donors want the US to take the lead. It is like the US is trying to be accommodating, but this just results in there being no unified vision. There should be a plan of what needs to happen in year 1, year 3, year 5, year 10 etc., improving different streams of governance over 10 years. This would be better but there is no such direction in the current intervention.'

A local CSO representative also reiterated this point by stating that 'the interests of different countries make the policy in Afghanistan go in the wrong direction. There is no agreement between the donors about what should be done here'. Without a macro-level strategy outlining targets in different areas of governance, there appears to be a mixture of different approaches thrown together with no clear guidance or end-goal – nor even a sense of what level of democratic governance would be 'good enough'. This also allows duplication

[40] For example W. Maley, 'AAN Guest Blog: Making Elections Count', 20 October 2010, available at http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=1239; and A. Larson, 'The *Wolesi Jirga* in Flux: Elections and Instability I', Kabul: AREU, 2010.

[41] M. Gardizi, K. Hussman and Y. Torabi, 'Corrupting the State or State-crafted Corruption? Exploring corruption and sub-national governance', Kabul: AREU, 2010.

[42] While ACT was initially designed with other components, it has recently transferred its entire focus to the institutional support of the HOO.

of projects, as shown in an interview with a member of parliament. She told of how, in the run-up to the 2010 parliamentary elections, she had been contacted by different donors three times in the space of one month to ask if she would take part in training programmes covering the same theme.

In addition, local respondents stressed the need for international staff to be familiar with the complex and unique context of Afghanistan. They explained that given the high turnover of staff in international donor agencies, the general understanding of the political environment in Afghanistan within these agencies was significantly lacking. The importance of donors seeking advice from CSOs was emphasised.

CSO representatives often expressed a view that donors should improve their understanding of the Afghan context through more frequent meetings with members of civil society. However, donors often perceive CSOs as partial, aligned with a particular ethnic or political group and representing only a segment of the Kabul elite. There is a degree of mistrust which affects donors' willingness to solicit policy advice from these organisations.
Nevertheless, there is a case for increasing the extent to which donors listen to a wider range of civil society actors in order to strengthen the dialogue between the two groups. One respondent summarised it thus:

> 'The donors should listen to civil society more than they do. They should engage with us more on how we see their work in Afghanistan. There are very few opportunities for us to tell them about current issues in Afghanistan. We don't just need money; we need political and moral assistance. Sometimes CSOs are just seen as looking only for money. But we have views [and] ideas that need to be valued alongside those of the powerholders that the international community chooses to listen to'.

Indeed, this view – that donors do engage with the actors in power much more than those without it – was widespread in interviews. It seemed many CSOs see themselves as marginalized from the decision-making process on a number of issues. Related to this is the way in which the better-known, long-established CSOs were always the ones invited to participate in workshops or to bid for proposals:

> 'Many civil society organisations have good intentions but they don't meet the language requirements of donors, and they have to be good English speakers and also have the contacts. It's really hard work to actually get the contracts. Donors want high-profile organisations, which the new organisations are not."

This observation is supported by the fact that the same CSOs take the lead in the implementation of donor democratisation programmes. Again, however, there is the problem of a lack of exposure and a lack of access, in the context of increasing insecurity. Diplomatic staff are rarely able to travel far from their walled compounds in Kabul, and members of CSOs who are unknown to embassy staff are rarely granted access to these compounds themselves. This problem is compounded by the 'turf wars' existing between CSOs and the general lack of collaboration between agencies. A huge number of CSOs have formed since 2001 and have split many times as a result of leadership disputes. They often have very similar names, acronyms and programmes, making it difficult to distinguish between them. Like political parties, CSOs tend to be determined by the personality of the leadership rather than their focus on a specific agenda. Parties have even less exposure to diplomatic assistance than CSOs, however, as donors cannot appear politically partisan in their allocation of support.

Case study: International assistance to parliament

Many different examples could be used to demonstrate the way in which democracy assistance has been provided to Afghanistan. The specific case of assistance to the Afghan parliament has been chosen here, however, as it provides an example of assistance to a contained group of people from a variety of donors over a specific time period (2005–2010). It also provides a snapshot of the workings of Afghan politics in an increasingly insecure environment. In doing so, it highlights some of the contextual problems that donors face in the implementation of democracy assistance.

Based on a model of parliament used in the 1960s in Afghanistan, the current parliament is a bi-cameral institution comprised of the lower house (*Wolesi Jirga*) and upper house (*Meshrano Jirga*). The lower house is comprised of 249 directly elected MPs, who represent Afghanistan's 34 provinces and its nomad (*Kuchi*) population, and who are generally elected as 'independents' as opposed to party members. In a new development, 68 seats are constitutionally allocated to women through a reserved seats system. The upper house is comprised of senators selected by the president (one third), members of provincial councils (one third) and members of district councils (one third) – although as district councils are yet to be established, at present two thirds of the *Meshrano Jirga* are provincial council members. Both houses of parliament fit into a political system that is strongly presidential, in that while the lower house is able to reject bills with a two-thirds majority, the powers assigned to the president are considerable and presidential decrees can potentially override legislative decisions if made during the parliamentary recess. This is partly due to ambiguous articles in the Constitution, but it nonetheless demonstrates the powers of the executive in the Afghan system.

Since its inauguration in November 2005, the *Wolesi Jirga* in particular has been the subject of considerable international attention. Programmes to support the capacity building of parliamentarians and the institutional development of parliament were numerous in the first year of its operation. Organisations working in this field at that time included UNDP SEAL, UNIFEM, SUNY, NDI, IRI, FES and Global Rights,[43] with programmes ranging from study trips abroad for MPs, to internship programmes within the parliament for university students, to the establishment of a parliamentary library, resource centre and budget office.

One area of programming that deserves particular attention is the international effort to encourage bloc or caucus-building within parliament. Although party affiliation is now allowed on the ballot paper, it is not required and most candidates choose to register as independents.[44] Even those parliamentarians with a stated party allegiance do not have a platform base on which to stand, but instead usually represent the party as a result of historical allegiance to its military faction, patronage ties, geographical influence in their home province or ethnic affiliations. A key objective of international assistance programming has thus been the attempt to build solid, issues-based blocs in order to better organise parliament. Assistance efforts aim to encourage more structured discussion between groups over issues, moving away from the current debates between the 200-plus individual MPs.

In spite of the varying approaches taken by different agencies, this attempt has largely failed. From 2005–2007, IRI conducted a programme on caucus-building, working with independent MPs and helping to build groups around issues determined as pertinent by IRI staff. Through this programme, three caucuses were initiated focusing on business, youth and anti-corruption respectively. With a detailed plan aimed to link these caucuses in parliament to the social movements it was supporting outside, in theory the programme met both short-term and more sustainable long-term democracy objectives. One of the main difficulties, however, was ensuring that a core group of MPs continued to attend caucus meetings regularly. This was arguably made more difficult by the fact the groups had not formed organically but had been initiated by international actors. As donor interest waned, less attention was paid to the upkeep of these groups and they gradually dissolved. According to current IRI staff, support to these groups will be revisited with the inauguration of the new parliament.

If this idea is revisited, then it would be pertinent to consider the factors contributing to its problems and pitfalls in the first session of parliament. It is clear that the 'issues' chosen need to bind participants strongly to a particular cause. While business, youth and anti-corruption are issues with which MPs empathise and have been reasonably vocal about, they do not command the fervour needed to overcome ethnic, political and other social divisions that currently inhibit MPs from forming united, issues-based blocs.[45] It is difficult to suggest feasible alternatives, other than those relating to ethnicity and, often correspondingly, property rights (as in the Kuchi/Hazara dispute over land ownership, for example). In the present environment of increasing

[43] A. Wordsworth, 'A Matter of Interests: Gender and the politics of presence in Afghanistan's Wolesi Jirga'. Kabul: AREU, 2007, p.33.

[44] In 2005, party affiliation was not allowed on the ballot paper. This is a recent development that was implemented in the 2009 and 2010 elections.

[45] This is not to say that these divisions have always existed to the same extent as they do now. Indeed, in recent years ethnic divisions have been emphasised far more than in the time of Zahir Shah, or under the PDPA.

instability, these are the kinds of issues to which MPs are likely to commit time and energy. However, they are obviously not suitable subjects for international assistance, as they are highly political, partisan and have the potential to drive conflict. As they emphasise potentially dangerous political rifts between groups, they cannot be supported by international donors.

There are also numerous contextual factors preventing the development of more general blocs in parliament which are unrelated to particular international programmes. It should be stated that when IRI and other organisations were beginning to focus on bloc-building, the Parliamentary Rules of Procedure were completed, requiring that 'parliamentary groups' be formed as the bases for political party development.[46] These groups were to be formed according to certain regulations, however, which forbade groups forming on the basis of factors such as ethnicity, region, language, gender – thus rendering impotent any groups that might be based on issues that actually concerned MPs. Attempts were made to form groups that had *de facto* quotas for different ethnicities and had nothing to bind them together other than the personalities of their leaders. After considerable bargaining and changing, groups soon disintegrated, splitting due to leadership disputes and bribes offered to coax MPs from one group to another. One MP interviewed by the author at the time spoke of having a group of 42 which split into two groups of 21 so that both he and another MP could both be group leaders.[47] This problem was unrelated to international assistance: it is an institutional difficulty which still persists today.

There is no real incentive for MPs to form solid blocs in parliament, as the blocs in question cannot offer any significant perks in return for membership. In the current environment, it is more advantageous to remain unaligned; benefits can be gained by maintaining a middle ground between groups and bargaining for competing advantages.[48] If an MP has not made their political allegiance public, they are able to promise support to more than one interest group and in doing so reap the multiple rewards of these promises, such as patronage, financial assistance, business connections and social capital. When nobody plays by the rules of the game, it is expedient to keep alliances ambiguous and fluid. This poses a serious problem, however, for those technical programmers aiming to assist bloc formation in parliament. One example of this problem lies in the way in which political parties often claim to have MPs representing them in parliament, and yet cannot name their representatives.[49] MPs themselves will also often deny party membership, or admit to being connected to more than one party.

This problem was noted by NDI when it was developing its programme for political party support. From a list of over 100 registered parties, those with at least some organisational framework and/or membership had to be selected as participants (many parties are little more than registered names without offices or formal members). In order to participate, parties had to prove that they were represented in parliament. This was more difficult that it sounds: due to the way in which MPs tend to keep their allegiances ambiguous, it was and remains challenging for parties to demonstrate the extent of their representation in the *Wolesi Jirga*.

Twenty-six parties were identified for support and a comprehensive programme designed to improve the technical and organisational capacity of these parties. This included a three-month education programme for party trainers, who were selected by party leaders and used the information they learned to train other party members. The programme also included a series of training sessions for party leaders themselves, identifying objectives, platforms, strategies and target constituencies for election campaigning. This endeavour received positive feedback from the recipient parties themselves: in interviews for this study, they were very keen to talk about the benefits they received from this programme's training. There remains the question of how this micro-level assistance will affect the general dynamic in parliament, especially in the light of increasing executive control and interference, but it is certainly an example of technical democracy assistance provided by donors which is well-received and considered useful by recipients.

[46] Government of Afghanistan, 'Rules of Procedure of the *Wolesi Jirga*', Rule 13.

[47] Wordsworth, 'A Matter of Interests', op. cit., p. 17.

[48] Larson, 'The *Wolesi Jirga* in Flux: Elections and Instability I', op. cit.

[49] A. Larson, 'Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organise Democratisation?', Kabul: AREU, 2009.

Women legislators were also targeted by donors during the early years of the new parliament. A considerable focus was placed on building their capacity to compete with their male counterparts. UNIFEM established a women parliamentarian's resource centre near to the parliament, and NDI (informally coordinating with Global Rights) attempted to establish a women's caucus. This programme encountered similar problems to those described above – an initial enthusiasm fading to a lack of participation, personality clashes and general disinterest among women MPs. In interviews with these women at the time, it was clear that the assumed unity of cause derived from their sex was relatively weak. Unsurprisingly, women parliamentarians – like their male counterparts – prioritised ties to other interests, such as local geographical representation, political affiliation or ethnicity, above and beyond their collective gender interests.[50] Referring to the women's caucus programme, one representative of an international recipient agency working in parliament talked of the way specific contextual analysis was not always conducted before a programme was implemented:

> 'There are some programmes which take a sort of cookie-cutter approach where staff say, how did we run a programme elsewhere? Let's try that in Afghanistan – and don't necessarily look at the situation here and see what's needed, or say how will this work in this context. This is the case with the parliamentary caucuses. They keep flogging a dead horse with no analysis as to why it didn't work or how it should be rethought'.

Evidently, with a renewed focus on assistance to parliament in the aftermath of Wolesi Jirga elections held in September 2010, a considerable emphasis will need to be placed on assessing the current political context of the Lower House, along with the needs of parliamentarians in the new session.

Timing and consistency of support are also vital when it comes to assistance in this area. As many of the implementing agencies working in parliament are very much dependent on bilateral donor support, their programmes are designed to incorporate key donor priorities. This is problematic when funding is taken away from a given project in order to meet greater priorities elsewhere. This is nowhere more evident than with support to parliament, which was in vogue in 2006 and 2007 (after the inauguration of the first post-Taliban parliament in late 2005), but which tailed off significantly afterwards. An innovative parliamentary internship programme was unfortunately ended, along with other parliamentary support, just when its effects were beginning to be seen. As the new, second post-Taliban parliament is about to be inaugurated, plans are afoot for another round of 18-month support to the legislature, which will involve a renewed commitment from UNDP SEAL (perhaps with a different name) and a renewed focus on the capacity building of parliamentarians from IRI, NDI and IFES, according to representatives from these organisations. These efforts will no doubt be required to boost the legislative functions of a new parliament. However, there is still the problem that just when programmes are beginning to establish themselves and develop effective means of delivering key services, funding will once again be dropped and a new priority in the field of governance identified. This links back to the problem of implementing agencies' agendas being defined almost exclusively by donor interests, which are distinct from those of Afghan recipients of democracy assistance.

Conclusion

Over the past nine years, democracy assistance in Afghanistan has not followed a linear trajectory. Situated in a context which has moved rapidly from 'post-war' to 'conflict' categorisation, promotion of democratic governance has become less and less of a priority for donors in their attempts to achieve stability. This brings into question the entire practice of promoting democratisation quickly in post-conflict contexts, especially when donor interests lie primarily with their own highly political and media-saturated foreign policy concerns, as in Afghanistan. Attempting a whole-of-government approach has benefits in terms of streamlining objectives, but it can also impact democratic development negatively when security and stabilisation overshadow governance and democratisation goals. In Afghanistan, it appears that the security situation is so severe that

[50] Wordsworth, 'A Matter of Interests', op. cit. p. 14–15.

democracy-building is now paid little more than lip-service through the funding of elections and programmes to prop up fragile institutions. In fact, very little thought is being given to the long-term institution building so vitally necessary if democracy is to prevail. Essentially, as the recent fraudulent elections have shown, there is very little point in conducting such exercises if they are not strongly complemented with a substantive commitment to improving the accountability of the Afghan government.

This appears a particularly negative conclusion to a report which began by summarising the seemingly vast undertakings of donors promoting democracy assistance. Indeed, it was not the intent of this paper to indiscriminately administer unconstructive criticism: findings from the research indicate that there are windows of opportunity for improvement. Furthermore, this report has specifically not referred to democracy-building initiatives in terms of their 'success' or lack thereof in the Afghan context. This is due to the subjective nature of 'success', depending on who is defining it at which point in time. The data presented above takes the form of opinions, and thus an objective measure of progress cannot be made from it. We do not have a picture of the democracy assistance effort as a whole. Nevertheless, the opinions gathered offer important perspectives on this effort and suggest ways in which more effective programming could be developed. These include:

- The reduction of funds to civil society organisations – along with the corresponding re-organisation of grants to core funding rather than project-based models. Funding that decreases over time, encouraging the identification of locally-based sources of financial support, delivered in combination with institutional development to help plan for independent funding, could be one way of promoting sustainability.

- Greater coordination and collaboration between donors and CSOs, along with a willingness from donors to allow CSOs greater input in programme agendas.

- A structured and coordinated vision among donors (developed with the input of civil society) for a more accountable government in Afghanistan, complete with short-, mid- and long-term goals to guide individual actors' activities. This could take as a starting point the governance cluster of the National Priority Programmes identified for the Kabul Conference – although this had not been agreed upon by all parties at the time of writing.

Fundamentally, however, any improvements that are made in this regard will not affect democracy-building at the macro-level in Afghanistan unless they are situated within a secure context. Insecurity undermines the very core of democracy assistance because it necessarily demands that people prioritise the safety of their families before the democratic fate of the nation. This is particularly true in Afghanistan where the concept of a national identity is still in its infancy. Finally, in the context of a potential political settlement with insurgent groups, it is critical that international support to strengthen fragile democratic institutions over the long-term increases, so that these institutions are able to withstand the potential threat from fundamentalists who would seek to disregard democracy altogether.

Appendix: Country Report Methodology

Scope and aims of this report
This report assesses external democracy assistance in one country according to the views of local democracy stakeholders.

The report does not aspire to provide an exhaustive record of external democracy assistance to the country in question. Neither does it aspire to be a representative survey among local civil society at large. The scope of this project allows reports to provide only a rough sketch of external democracy assistance to the country assessed, and of the tendencies of local civil society activists' views on the latter.

Sample of interviews
The report's findings are based on a set of personal interviews that were carried out by the author between spring and autumn 2009.

For each country report, between 40 and 60 in-country interviews were carried out. The mix of interviewees aimed to include, on the one hand, the most important international donors (governmental and non-governmental, from a wide range of geographic origins), and on the other hand, a broad sample of local democracy stakeholders that included human rights defenders, democracy activists, journalists, lawyers, political party representatives, women's rights activists, union leaders and other stakeholders substantially engaged in the promotion of democratic values and practices in their country. Wherever possible, the sample of interviewees included representatives from both urban and rural communities and a selection of stakeholders from a broad range of sectors. While governmental stakeholders were included in many of the samples, the focus was on non-governmental actors. Both actual and potential recipients of external democracy support were interviewed.

Donors
The term 'donor' is here understood as including governmental and non-governmental external actors providing financial and/or technical assistance in the fields of democracy, human rights, governance and related fields. Among all the donors active in the country, authors approached those governmental and non-governmental donors with the strongest presence in this sector, or which were referred to by recipients as particularly relevant actors in this regard. An exhaustive audit of all the donors active in this field/country is not aspired to as this exceeds the scope of this study. While many donors were very open and collaborative in granting interviews and providing and confirming information, others did not reply to our request or were not available for an interview within the timeframe of this study. While we sought to reconfirm all major factual affirmations on donor activities with the donors in question, not all donors responded to our request.

We do not work to a narrow or rigid definition of 'democracy support', but rather reflect donors', foundations' and recipients' own views of what counts and does not count as democracy assistance. The fact that this is contentious is part of the issues discussed in each report.

Anonymity
External democracy assistance to local activists is a delicate matter in all the countries assessed under this project. It is part of the nature of external democracy assistance that local non-governmental recipients, especially when openly opposed to the ruling establishment, fear for their reputation and safety when providing information on external assistance received to any outlet that will make these remarks public. In a similar vein, many donor representatives critical of their own or other donors' programmes will fear personal consequences when these critical attitudes are made public on a personal basis. In the interest of gathering a maximum of useful information from our interviewees and safeguarding their privacy and, indeed, security, we have ensured that all interviewees who requested to remain anonymous on a personal and/or institutional basis have done so.

Interview methodology

In order to carry out field work, authors were provided with a detailed research template that specified 7 areas of focus:

1. A brief historical background and the state of democracy in the country;
2. A short overview of donor activities;
3. A general overview of local views on impact of democracy aid projects on the micro, meso and macro levels (including best practices and variations of the local and international understandings of the concept of 'democracy');
4. Local views on specific factors that have weakened the impact of democracy aid;
5. Local views on diplomatic back-up to aid programmes (including conditionality; diplomatic engagement; donor coordination; relevance, quality, quantity and implementation of programmes, etc);
6. An illustration of the above dynamics in one or two key sectors of support;
7. A conclusion outlining the main tendencies of local views on external democracy assistance.

Along these lines, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were carried out by the authors in the country between spring and autumn of 2009.

Key sectors of support

Transitions to democracy are highly complex political, economic and social processes. No study of this scope could aspire to fully justice to them, or to external assistance to these processes. Aware of the limitations of our approach, we have encouraged authors to let their general assessment of local views on external democracy support be followed by a closer, slightly more detailed assessment of the dynamics in one or two key sectors of support. These were chosen by the respective authors according to their estimated relevance (positively or negatively) in the current democracy assistance panorama. In none of the cases does the choice of the illustrative key sectors suggest that there may not be other sectors that are equally important.