

Opinion Ed

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Let us not squander the last Afghan chance

I attended the Tokyo Conference on July 8, the ninth major international conference on Afghanistan since the Bonn conference in 2001, with several other smaller conferences dotting the 11 years. I have concluded from my own reviews of these conferences and their aftermath that most of them repeated discussions and empty promises on issues related to Afghanistan's stabilization, security, rule of law, good governance, democratization agenda, and poverty reduction without ensuring delivery, while donor funds continued flowing, which led to allegations of squandering funds.

Fragile gains to date

Despite the investment of billions of dollars, curbing the insurgency produced negative or inconclusive results. Afghanistan's economy grew but largely dependent on foreign aid and drug trafficking. The social development indicators and human development fare no better. Progress is noted in public finance management and marginal progress in education, health, a participatory rural development process, and the media. The gains made, however, remain fragile. The absence of the Taliban opened educational and work opportunities for women but life-threatening abuse of girls across the country is rampant.

In the absence of rule of law, and with the police and the judiciary remaining two of the least developed institutions in Afghanistan, no respite is expected. While democracy is embedded in the Afghan constitution and elections are held, democratic principles are severely undermined in the election process. Patronage, nepotism, and corruption are endemic.

International commitments for strengthening the capacity of Afghan ministries and institutions have not been addressed. Technical assistance programs have been supply-driven rather than demand-driven. Capacity-development programming riddled with inadequate needs assessment and joint planning and poor quality of expatriate TAs, resulted in leaving the institutions weak after 10 years and billions of dollars of investment.

International community just as guilty

I review above the failure of the deliberations and commitments in eight major international conferences. In my assessment, the international community is as much to be blamed for the dismal state of affairs, in the absence of diligent monitoring. They paid little attention to ensure the implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy—called the Afghanistan National Development Strategy—prepared with over \$9 million of donor funds. The donor community never demanded reports on progress towards Millennium Development Goals. During my term with the Canadian International Development Agency in Kabul, the Afghanistan Compact, which bound the Afghan government and the international community in a mutual accountability framework to deliver on milestones set for concrete progress in development priorities, was formulated and signed but it was never monitored, nor any results delivered.

The Tokyo test

Now, what do the ninth conference in Tokyo (named the “development partnership for self-reliance”) and a substantial multinational pledge of \$16 billion, have in store for ordinary Afghans and the tax-paying public of donor countries? Will Tokyo make a difference?

The Afghan government is rejoicing at the Tokyo pledges, with the Finance Minister announcing that the Afghan Government's requests for \$16 billion over four years are met. The Tokyo joint declaration made mutual commitments in the areas of governance, security, the peace process, economic and social development, narcotics and drug trafficking, food security, poverty reduction, human security, and protection of fundamental human rights, including women's rights. You can decide if these commitments are repeats from previous conferences—commitments never met.

The joint declaration reaffirmed the importance of the implementation of the new National Priority Programs for growth and development. The donor-endorsed Afghanistan National Development Strategy was never implemented. Who ensures implementation of the National Priority Programs, all of which are not even developed yet?

The international community has hinged its pledges on conditions and concrete measures by the Afghan government to direct the country toward transparent and accountable governance. This includes improved financial management, follow-up on the International Monetary Fund-laid conditions, anti-corruption measures, progress on boosting the rule of law, strengthening of democratic principles, and delivery of development results. Topping the list is protection of human rights, especially those of women and children. I found missing the mention of minority rights. All donors, especially the US, the Nordic countries, the European Union, and Canada, emphasized protection of the rights of women as the top priority and condition to which their pledges are tied.

Canada's commitment

To my delight, the Canadian delegation head, Chris Alexander, led the band with the statement that women's rights are not negotiable. In addition to \$300 million for 2011 to 2014, he announced \$227 million for 2014 to 2017, with a targeted focus on girls and women (a large cut from \$235 million in some past years, especially during the years of Kandahar-focused programming). Canadian aid commitments from 2001 to 2011 totaled \$1.9 billion. Canada's overall spending, mostly military, is estimated to have reached \$18.1 billion over the past 10 fiscal years. The Canadian public should be given a transparent analysis of the value for money for this expense, in terms of results produced benefitting the Afghan public. A strong representative group of Afghan civil society, with whom I had long discussions in Tokyo, expressed the same need for accountability for all donors. The donors' fund delivery is to be based on a Mutual Accountability Framework, endorsed by the donors and the Afghan government in Tokyo. The Afghanistan Compact—which mirrored the Mutual Accountability Framework, at least conceptually—failed in the absence of any monitoring efforts.

It is the international community's responsibility to protect the gains, however small they might appear, for the billions invested. I consider it our responsibility to make them durable with further funds judiciously invested, using principles of prudence and probity. My concern is that the country could descend into chaos if international development agencies abandon Afghans at this stage.

Accountability can be assured if a monitoring mechanism is adopted to ensure that funds are used as agreed. Ironically, just as the donors were delivering statements on hinging their funding to protection of women's rights, a woman was being murdered by the Taliban for adultery amidst cheers from the local community! To date, the international community has not shown much appetite to monitor and, in instances, even to condemn such acts, just as it has ignored other undelivered commitments, including its own.

Currently, no appropriate monitoring system is in place to ensure accountability of both donors and the Afghan government.

I disagree with the nuance in Mr. Alexander's statement that the shortcomings in accountability of donor funds do not necessarily apply to Canadian spending. My research findings are that due to inadequate Canadian monitoring, millions of dollars of Canadian assistance failed to produce results. Examples include: the security sector reforms related to reintegration of demobilized ex-combatants and disarmament of illegal armed groups; the police reform through the Law and Order Trust Fund, which is currently under investigation for serious corruption charges; the Anti-Narcotics Trust Fund; and the failure of most of the signature projects in Kandahar, including the much-acclaimed Dahla Dam. None of these funds passed through the Afghan government's budget.

I recommend that before fresh funds begin to flow, donors need to learn from the past un-delivered promises of the decade, and put in place a strong monitoring and evaluation system by strengthening the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework. Other than setting clear results (well sequenced and prioritized) and indicators, an independent body with representatives from the government, donors, opposition groups, civil society, parliament, and women's networks should be formed to do quarterly monitoring. Monitoring is central to success of the Tokyo Declaration. A joint government and donor monitoring committee has proved to be not strong enough to perform independent monitoring functions in the past.

What if results are not attained? Civil society members expressed to me their fears that as in the past, funds will continue to flow from donors who failed to address principles of accountability. The Italian deputy foreign minister, listening to our conversation, said that over the decade, the donors were careless but the current financial crisis will deter funds flow if results are not delivered.

I conclude with an ominous statement made to me by the ex-Afghan minister of interior Haneef Atmar: this is the last chance that Afghanistan has, and so does the international community—let us not squander it.

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