

# Principled Humanitarian Action in Afghanistan

Briefing Note

May 2023

## Introduction

Afghanistan is one of the most challenging environments for aid operations today. Aid workers face numerous hurdles, including increasing bureaucratic restrictions, various national and international political pressures, and other obstacles which are exacerbating needs and challenging principled action. Despite the difficulties, the world cannot ignore the deepening crisis, and much can still be done to support principled humanitarian programming.

In light of the challenges facing the humanitarian community in Afghanistan, this study investigates how humanitarian principles and other values factor into operational decision-making and coordinated action. It also looks at the impact of decisions, particularly concerning how they affect operational space and principled programming. The objective of this research is to help aid organizations and donors reflect on the challenges and what might be done differently. This note concludes by outlining concrete measures that can improve principled humanitarian action in Afghanistan.

This briefing note is based on a broader study that investigates the dilemmas facing humanitarian actors in Afghanistan and the role of humanitarian principles in dealing with these challenges. The research included qualitative interviews with over 170 aid actors, donors, beneficiaries, and authorities in Kabul and four provinces (Daikundi, Herat, Kunar, and Kunduz).

This study focused on a snapshot in time, from November 2022 through March 2023. This includes the ban on Afghan women working for NGOs but predates the ban on Afghan women working for the UN. That said, its findings remain relevant to evolving dynamics.

### Research locations



### Terminology:

- **Authorities** is used here when referring to the current government or individuals within it.
- **Taliban** refers to the group that assumed control of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021.
- **Insurgency** refers to the Taliban after 2001 and before August 15, 2021.
- **Republic** refers to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the government established in late 2001 and which collapsed on in August 2021.

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# The humanitarian principles

The study looks at several dimensions of the core humanitarian principles (humanity, independence, impartiality, and neutrality). Specifically, it seeks to understand what principles and other values guide decision-making on the ground, and how humanitarian actors and others perceive the core humanitarian principles.

## The role of humanitarian principles and other values

Beyond their legal significance, humanitarian principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence) are a guide to navigating the challenges of providing humanitarian assistance. In the current environment in Afghanistan, there are often no right answers to dilemmas facing aid workers, and few good options. Principles come into conflict, and compromises are often required. For these reasons, we did not look at actions as being “principled” or “unprincipled.” We instead focused on what principles and values were at play in a range of different dilemmas, and how that differed across organizations.

A wide range of actors implement humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. While humanitarian principles are important, they are one subset in a broader spectrum of values guiding humanitarian work in the country. Part of the reason is that before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan was primarily a development funding context. With development funds dramatically reduced after August 2021, humanitarian aid has been used for broader objectives. Consequently, many actors providing humanitarian aid do not see themselves as solely humanitarian. They have, in the past or continue to do, other kinds of work, such as development, resilience, and peacebuilding, and are guided by various other values, such as solidarity, do no harm, sustainability, human rights, and others.

Given the diversity of actors providing humanitarian assistance, it is crucial to recognize that different principles

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and values influence positions, decision-making, and approaches. The push for common positions and red lines exists in tension with this reality. Coordinated approaches to addressing the most urgent challenges have often been hampered by a lack of recognition for this diversity of principles, coupled with competition for funding and mistrust among aid actors.

The highly politicized nature of the operating environment has undermined understanding of and respect for the principles. Humanitarian needs are partly driven by political failures and the absence of a political process. Humanitarian action can alleviate some of the impacts of the current crisis, but it cannot substitute for the lack of a political solution. Moreover, the politically-driven conditions that donor governments and Afghan authorities have placed on aid have undermined respect for humanitarian principles and generally made it more difficult to provide aid in accordance with them. To be sure, humanitarian action in Afghanistan has long been subject to varying degrees of political instrumentalization. But with the Taliban takeover, these dynamics have been transformed by geopolitical interests and alignments.

## Understanding and perceptions of the humanitarian principles

Many frontline aid actors were not fully aware of the core humanitarian principles. Part of the reason may be the rapid scale-up of the response and an exodus of skilled aid workers. This has meant that some frontline aid workers are new to the sector and not fully aware of the principles or how to negotiate principled programming. Still, other more experienced frontline aid workers, who were aware of the principles, felt under pressure to compromise them or did not always consider them the most relevant framework for making decisions.

Part of the reason is that they felt they could not push back on specific demands from communities and authorities. When facing a dilemma between principled action and program delivery, most felt compelled to prioritize program delivery. When people expressed this in terms of principles, they talked about the principle of humanity as “fallback” principle when other principles were compromised. These aid actors wanted to act according to their principles, but they often felt that, as one aid worker said, “the challenges are so much that it leaves very little room for the principles.” A key takeaway is that frontline aid workers want to work according to the principles but need more support and flexibility.

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This was especially true of national NGOs. They often implement programs as subcontractors or partners for UN agencies and international NGOs, which typically have far more flexibility and control over program design than their national NGO implementers. This funding setup has created pressure to act in potentially harmful ways. Without direct donor funding or the global or core funds that many international organizations have, national NGO survival depends on project funding. National NGOs have been particularly hard hit by the banking collapse and dramatic reduction in development funding after the Taliban takeover. Getting project funding requires them to deliver, and many fear that non-delivery will result in their contracts being cut, making them less likely to stop implementation, and more likely to compromise their principles, and more vulnerable to political pressures. Many felt they simply had to “implement the project by whatever means possible.” Additionally, national NGO staff have comparatively less staff time for external coordination or less access to the kind of organizational support, training, and mentoring that would support more principled decision-making.

The study also explores how communities and authorities perceived and understood the principles. Among communities, the overwhelming consensus was that aid should be delivered according to these principles - but it was often not. This was down to a range of factors and not necessarily new, given the level of aid corruption during the Republic era, nor unique to Afghanistan. A more worrying dynamic was when community members talked about the harmful impacts of aid actors compromising their principles (i.e., allowing elders or authorities to influence beneficiary selection and interference in aid worker recruitment). Communities are often unaware of what to do in these instances, where to complain, or how to seek protection from harmful practices. Finally, they felt aid workers should be doing more to advocate for or educate the Taliban on humanitarian principles, which they feel will create space for more principled action over the long term.

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Local authorities were generally not aware of the humanitarian principles. When we explained the principles, they did not believe that they were the basis upon which aid was allocated or delivered. Specific to neutrality, there was a sense that aid actors were aligned with foreign interests and, therefore, untrustworthy. “For 20 years, we have had a negative image of NGOs as puppets and spies of foreigners,” said one local authority. “It will take a lot of time to change that image and perception.” That much humanitarian work is funded by governments who fought the Taliban insurgency for twenty years has not been forgotten. Like communities, local authorities expressed concerns about aid corruption and a lack of transparency. They denied “interfering” in aid but justified any interventions as wanting to ensure aid was delivered to the neediest. Given their suspicion and distrust of aid agencies, the authorities see themselves playing an essential oversight function. The more that aid actors tried to avoid engagement with them, the more suspicious authorities became.

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# Key dilemmas, decisions and impacts

This report examines five broad, interconnected operational challenges, the dilemmas that arise from them, and aid actors' decisions, collectively and individually, in response.

## Dilemma 1: Programmatic and operational interference

Since taking power, the authorities have monitored and sought to influence humanitarian action at the central and local levels. These attempts include but are not limited to growing regulations on aid, bureaucratic access impediments, and efforts to influence beneficiary selection, program design, and recruitment. Some of this is part of a more coordinated or national effort, as with the Procedure for Control and Regulation of the activities of domestic and international organizations, introduced by the national authorities in February 2022 to govern aid projects. Other interventions are more informal, ad hoc, and local, based on various authorities' personal views and individual interpretations of directives.

Interference presented several dilemmas and challenges to core principles and values. Most of these dilemmas focused on compromising impartiality and operational independence to operate safely and reach those in need. Facing pressure from donors, authorities and communities, frontline aid workers often concealed the extent of the compromises (which often centered around impartiality and independence). But frontline aid workers weren't the only ones, as senior aid workers such as country directors grappled with how to address growing pressures.

This dynamic is an outcome of many factors. That authorities are deeply suspicious of aid actors, with a poor understanding of how the humanitarian system works and limited capacity. This leads to confusion on both sides. The lack of dialogue with the authorities has exacerbated their suspicion of aid actors. On the other hand, harmful donor positions, unrealistic expectations, and top-down subcontracting have also perpetuated a “don't ask, don't tell” dynamic amongst aid workers. Non-recognition of the government, in particular, has created new dilemmas with regard to the perception of “legitimizing” or “recognizing” the government, which has put aid agencies in a difficult position. In short, aid actors are held to higher standards and more intense pressures from both donors and national authorities than they were under the Republic.

That said, interference itself is not new. For example, aid workers faced pressure from both Republic officials and

insurgents to hire “their” candidates. The February 2022 Procedure is similar to a draft NGO law introduced under the Republic. During the Republic, some agencies suspended operations or took similar measures to preserve what they saw as a principled approach. Just as they did under the Republic, many actors have been able to push back on interference under the current authorities. This is more common among actors with relatively reliable funding, direct donor relationships, a long-standing presence in Afghanistan, and a history of holding fast to principled positions.

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### Key takeaways:

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- Interference is not new, but the character and drivers of it have changed. A lack of productive dialogue between authorities and aid actors at both the national and subnational levels has exacerbated Taliban suspicion of aid.
  - Sharing experiences and coordination can help aid workers better navigate these dilemmas, but few are willing to do this. They are reluctant to share information or tactics despite dealing with similar challenges. They also tend to conceal their concessions and compromises, which is irresponsible and counterproductive.
  - Funding concerns often influenced responses to interference. Donor flexibility and being the direct recipient of funding better allowed some to better deal with interference. Indirect funding, or subcontracting, disincentivized principled decision-making.
  - Stronger capacity and knowledge of humanitarian principles and negotiation helped some actors uphold their principles. Strategic dialogue with the authorities at all levels, negotiation training and mentoring, and stronger local accountability could help better support principled responses.
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## Dilemma 2: Gender-related restrictions

Gender restrictions have gradually worsened since the Taliban takeover, culminating in several bans on female education and on female Afghan aid workers. While this research was conducted before the authorities banned Afghan women from working at the UN on April 5, 2023, it traces and analyzes the events that led up to it, including the ban on Afghan women working for NGOs issued



**Above:** A medical screener weighs an acutely malnourished infant in the screening room of Action Against Hunger's therapeutic feeding unit in Kabul's Ahmad Shah Baba Mina area on April 13, 2023 (Photo by Elise Blanchard)

on December 24, 2022. The bans on female aid workers present a fundamental dilemma between humanitarian imperative, on the one hand, and commitments and values to uphold women's rights (as well as impartiality), on the other.

In Afghanistan's conservative cultural context, implementing many activities for women and girls is difficult, if not impossible, without female aid workers. Conservative norms and other restrictions on women have long limited aid access to and for women differently across the country. A key difference now is that the authorities enforce conservative rural norms that limit both women's access to aid and protection, and the wider aid community's ability to deliver aid impartiality.

In response to these restrictions, the humanitarian community has been divided. Agreement on a collective course of action was not possible for many reasons, not least due to competing interests and different views among aid actors. As a result, actors have largely pursued bilateral local solutions. While many wanted a collective position, there was no "one size fits all" approach on the ground, as aid actors

encountered a patchwork of local attitudes and conditions. Much female participation in humanitarian response now rests on fragile local solutions, time-consuming negotiations, and limited sectoral exemptions.

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that it is still possible to work with women and to reach women in need. It is easier in some sectors and areas of the country than others, and some actors are better positioned than others (i.e., NGOs with a long-term presence and a track record of strategic dialogue with the authorities have had better success in many cases). Much more can and should be done to invest in creative ways to reach women and continue dialogue with local and national authorities. This, however, will take significant time, patience and flexibility.

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### Key takeaways:

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- Each new gender restriction seems to have surprised the humanitarian community, despite clear signals and historical precedent. Aid actors and donors must be realistic about barriers to working with and for women and invest more in areas with opportunities. Much can still be done, but it requires more creativity, agility and strategic thinking.
  - The humanitarian community has been divided and unable to reach a common position on gender-based restrictions. Responses have been largely unilateral and iterative. Local adaptations provide the ability to continue work, but these arrangements are fragile and require continual engagement and negotiation.
  - In general, stable funding, donor reassurance, funding flexibility, strong staff capacity on humanitarian principles and negotiation, and long-term organizational presence in Afghanistan helped aid actors to navigate this incredibly difficult situation.
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### Dilemma 3: Donor restrictions and policies

Donor restrictions (real or perceived) pose numerous challenges to principled decision-making. After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, western countries cut aid and froze Afghan assets abroad. While the economy went into freefall, this set the tone for Western donor engagement in Afghanistan. Donors were initially reluctant to go beyond life-saving aid, and any activities perceived to support state systems – even for basic services – are generally off-limits. Donors who had invested billions in state-building under the Republic were, once the Taliban took over, initially unwilling to fund the state health system they helped build to prevent its collapse. That has slightly changed with more funding for essential needs, but the general dynamic remains. Unfortunately, there is currently no political pathway out of this situation.

The trouble is that humanitarian aid alone is simply not sufficient or appropriate to address Afghanistan's post-August 2021 crisis. Indeed, many donor demands and political positions have often run counter to the very kinds of principled action they claim to support. Donor concerns about aid falling into the hands of the Taliban or otherwise "legitimizing" their government have led to constraining, counterproductive policies and created obstacles to principled programming. While not true of all donors, several of the most significant donor governments imposed politically motivated conditionalities,

(unintentionally) reinforced aid dependence, and manipulated the principles to suit political objectives.

Yet donors often find themselves between a rock and a hard place, constrained by their own governments' hostility to the Taliban. While they argue internally that the Afghan people should not suffer the consequences of the Taliban takeover, political leaders and elected officials are less sympathetic and have pushed to cut aid. Aid will very likely decline in the near or medium term. A significant drop in aid will have disastrous macroeconomic, political, and regional consequences – and the humanitarian crisis will once again worsen.

Many aid actors found themselves torn between maintaining a principled approach, versus adhering to donor requirements (again, either explicit or inferred). With the female aid worker bans, they feel they are under new scrutiny and pressure to prove they can deliver in line with donor objectives. To be sure, aid actors have often self-censored or taken a highly conservative interpretation of what donors are willing to tolerate. Still, many aid implementers felt that, at the very least, funding flexibility, more direct funding to implementers, and donor technical engagement with the authorities would be helpful. Additionally, seeking advice on navigating sanctions and legal restrictions has given some actors options and more space to make principled decisions.

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### Key takeaways:

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- Donor concerns about "legitimizing" the government have created challenges to principled programming. The sharp shift from a largely development funding context to short-term humanitarian aid limited the appropriateness and principled nature of the aid response.
  - Aid actors must navigate unclear political sensitivities, which has a chilling effect on principled approaches. Politics around funding in many cases trumps principled action, which has led many to conceal the extent of challenges from donors.
  - Aid actors must more uniformly invest in educating their managers and senior staff on key issues like sanctions, humanitarian negotiations, and humanitarian ethics.
  - The solution to the humanitarian crisis is political. Aid actors should take a stronger stand on the need for principled engagement and clearly communicate to audiences in donor countries that political decisions on all sides are driving the crisis.
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**Above:** A policeman at work in the main station of Police District 13 of Kabul, on August 4, 2022 (Photo by Elise Blanchard)

#### **Dilemma 4: Engagement with the authorities**

The lack of strategic engagement with the authorities at the national and local levels undermines principled programming. There was a strong sense that a window of opportunity was missed after the Taliban takeover to build a better basis for enabling access, and that window had all but closed. Even so, there was a lingering sense of hesitancy to engage with the authorities. This reluctance is driven by various factors (i.e., personal distastes, fear of falling afoul of donor restrictions or sensitives, staff turnover and lack of expatriate new staff familiarity with Afghanistan). Moreover, many aid actors felt current efforts at advocacy and dialogue were insufficient, ad hoc, reactive and transactional.

Misperceptions abound on both sides. Even now, many aid workers, particularly expatriates, do not feel they have the tools or information required to understand the Taliban. Again, few actors share experiences with one another or compare approaches. Additionally, because aid actors

have been caught off guard by multiple events (i.e., the Taliban takeover, the ban on female education and aid workers, and the Procedure), they are constantly reacting rather than planning or proactively engaging.

Meanwhile, authorities at local and national levels have little experience or understanding of humanitarian aid. A sense that aid actors could not be trusted fueled and justified efforts to regulate them. Local authorities interviewed said they did not feel appropriately recognized or consulted. Even seemingly small things, like failing to invite line ministry officials to meetings or gatherings, deepened suspicion and resentment.

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While these challenges might sound insurmountable, many thought more engagement – specifically, much more dedicated outreach and genuine consultation with the authorities on humanitarian work – could have a positive impact. This, however, will require long-term investment and not yield results overnight. This means staying engaged and continuing to talk – and listen – even as the political and operational environment becomes more difficult.

#### Key takeaways:

- Aid actors lack the necessary information, analysis, strategy, and structures for effective engagement. But other factors – such as donor restrictions (real or perceived), staff turnover, and misperceptions on both sides – hampered effective dialogue. Most dialogue was undertaken bilaterally and discreetly, and few actors seemed to share experiences or information with one another.
- Local authorities feel excluded and not appropriately consulted. This increases their suspicion and hostility towards aid actors. While not a panacea, more engagement and consultation with authorities could have an enabling effect on principled decision-making.
- Much can be done to fill the analytical and tactical gaps. This includes supporting stronger political economy analysis, creating safe spaces and platforms to share experiences and tactics, and training and mentoring staff more extensively on humanitarian dialogue and negotiation.

### Dilemma 5: Insecurity

Finally, there was also a perceived lack of appropriate evidence and analysis in dealing with insecurity. While levels of attacks affecting aid workers are markedly lower than during the insurgency, armed opposition groups, specifically Islamic State Khorasan Province, still threaten humanitarian safety – but views on the severity of this threat were dramatically different. The core dilemma focuses on the application of restrictive security measures in the face of these real or perceived threats, while still reaching people in need in a principled way. The use of armed escorts undermined independence and impartiality, while more bunkerized approaches restricted the ability to respond to humanitarian needs.

Much of this centered on the threat from ISKP, but it is important to differentiate between those actors who perceived ISKP as a severe and imminent threat (and thus

took a more bunkerized approach) from those who did not. Still, those who did not perceive ISKP as an imminent threat, or see security as presenting major dilemmas, were still fairly “bunkerized”.

Part of the reason is that many aid actor security postures comprise a confusing patchwork of residual Republic-era rules, some more recent flexibility, and reactive measures. There is the perception of a herd mentality, where organizations felt pressure to reduce staff presence in the country or undertake other measures when they heard other organizations were doing so. Specific measures negatively impact humanitarian access and protection (such as armed escorts), but there was little appetite to review these approaches.

#### Key takeaways:

- While some aid actors perceive security as a significant constraint on principled action (impeding independence and humanity), others do not. Yet most maintain a bunkerized security posture anyway, inhibiting their situational awareness, connectedness to communities, and, in some instances, their delivery modes.
- The lack of reliable security analysis and no coherent, shared narrative on the nature and severity of security threats contributed to a herd mentality. This has made it challenging to adhere to a principled approach, especially with regard to navigating emerging threats.
- Risks have dramatically changed since August 2021, but humanitarians have not adequately adjusted their understanding or approach. Current views of the security situation require a critical rethink, with a more robust analysis of how various security measures impact principled access and what alternatives exist.

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# The way forward

Aid actors have few good options in Afghanistan, and things will likely worsen before they get any better. But that, to some degree, is the nature of humanitarian work, and the dilemmas discussed above are not unique to Afghanistan. Aid actors cannot control much, and little will likely change donor or Taliban attitudes in the near term. But aid actors can vastly improve how they deal with these challenges, individually and collectively.

The question now is what a more principled way of operating within these constraints looks like and what is needed to achieve that (especially given the magnitude of humanitarian need). There is much that can and should be done, and the remainder of this section focuses on addressing five clear gaps identified through the research. Building on this analysis and looking ahead, this report outlines five key areas for investment:

## **Recommendation 1: Strengthen understanding of and respect for the principles**

Donors and aid agency senior managers should prioritize training, capacity building and mentoring on humanitarian principles and dialogue, particularly for frontline aid workers. Much has already been done, but much more can and should be done to reinforce and expand awareness of the principles and principled engagement (especially among frontline aid workers and national NGOs).

However, training on principles alone is not enough. Donors, the UN and aid agencies must also invest in educating their teams on key issues such as sanctions, humanitarian negotiations, and humanitarian ethics. Moreover, the structural barriers to sharing challenges must also be addressed. Mechanisms for assisting aid workers grappling with dilemmas and encouraging openness about the challenges should be supported and expanded.

## **Recommendation 2: Improve analysis**

There is a clear need to strengthen the analysis systems and operational resources with regard to both security analysis as well as that regarding political context and engagement. Donors and operational actors should seek to strengthen independent humanitarian analysis. But research papers or mapping exercises alone won't substantially change the situation unless this evidence is used to spur dialogue, debate, and changes in practice. That means insights may have to be packaged and

repackaged in various ways to create dialogue and wider understanding.

Moreover, humanitarians can benefit from comparing analysis and engaging in critical debate with actors in other sectors (i.e., political, diplomatic, research). Comparing notes with those who have a different point of view and objective does not undermine humanitarian independence. On the contrary, it can ultimately help humanitarians better understand the situation – and ensure other actors understand humanitarian positions and perspectives.

## **Recommendation 3: Strengthen strategic and operational engagement**

The humanitarian leadership (the UN and coordination bodies such as ACBAR), supported by donors, must urgently create, resource, and implement a proactive humanitarian engagement strategy and action plan to improve relations with the authorities at the national and local levels. There is more flexibility at the subnational level than at the national level, but long-term engagement at the national level is nevertheless essential. That is because changes at the national level, though difficult to secure, can bring concrete improvements at a broader scale. Meanwhile, progress through local negotiation, although easier to obtain, tends to be fragile and temporary. Local, bilateral negotiations however, are not sufficient on their own in the long term.

Humanitarian needs, rather than donor constraints or political considerations, must guide engagement with the authorities. More support is required for bilateral, frontline engagement (i.e., negotiation training, mentoring, support; additional staff resources; more flexible funding modalities). This effort should be staffed with experts with deep knowledge of humanitarian negotiations and Afghanistan and appropriately resourced by donors.

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## “Aid actors must be accountable to the Afghan people, but donors must ensure they operate that way and in line with core principles and values.”

Donor agencies and donor governments must also engage with the authorities to enhance humanitarian space and support country-level efforts. Donors should engage with the authorities frequently and strategically. Some are already there and do regular field monitoring visits. But establishing more donor presence in Kabul, either stationary or through visits, should be a priority. And the donors who are in Kabul, or visit regularly, should establish regular technical dialogue with relevant authorities. Technical engagement directly between donors and ministries would create a kind of pressure-relief valve: it will enable donors to better understand the authorities through interacting with them, and allow aid actors to elevate technical disputes to donors, which might increase their leverage vis-à-vis the authorities.

### **Recommendation 4: Address harmful practices and protect vulnerable people**

Improving accountability – specifically accountability to Afghans – is an urgent priority. This has been elaborated as part of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) monitoring framework, but all aid actors must redouble their efforts given the level of interference and lack of community knowledge of complaints mechanisms found in this study. Strengthening awareness and mechanisms to prevent sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment must be a priority. Important work has already been done, while much remains in progress or planned. All international and national aid workers and national stakeholders should be urgently trained on norms, obligations, and systems to address violations as a requirement of donor funding.

This research strongly suggests that expecting humanitarian actors to monitor and hold themselves accountable is unrealistic. Aid actors must be accountable to the Afghan people, but donors must ensure they operate that way and in line with core principles and values. Donors should also implement independent accountability mechanisms for the most severe issues. The UN and ACBAR, supported by donors, should create an ombudsman

function to serve the humanitarian community and ensure frontline workers have somewhere to turn with the immense challenges and ethical concerns they face (both about their organizations and the response in general).

### **Recommendation 5: Shape the narrative**

A joint effort to reshape the global narrative on Afghanistan can create more space for principled engagement. This would entail a proactive external communications strategy that creates a clearer, evidence-based public narrative on the drivers of the crisis in Afghanistan and the role of political engagement in addressing the drivers. Few people in donor countries understand the roots of the Afghan crisis or why aid should continue so long as the Taliban remains in control. Making the case to domestic audiences in donor countries would indirectly support an expansion of the space to operate and create greater political leverage with donors.

Aid actors are well aware, for example, that sanctions punish the Afghan people and not the Taliban and that current sanctions and other economically punitive measures reinforce both aid dependency and fragility. Much of the rest of the world does not. The narrative on Afghanistan outside the country is also unhelpfully polemicized, with diaspora voices tending to dominate the discourse to the neglect of perspectives from inside Afghanistan.

Moreover, aid actors are also well aware of the opportunities and spaces that still exist to help Afghans and are best placed to tell that story. With few foreign journalists left in Afghanistan, aid workers are also uniquely positioned to tell the outside world what things are really like. This work should also extend to Afghan audiences, re-telling the story of the humanitarian principles, communicating critical information about complaint mechanisms, and improving the image of aid among Afghans.