

Policy Brief from Solidarity Committee's International Conference 2025¹

Supporting Change from Within: Rethinking International Engagement with Afghanistan

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Main Take-Aways

1. A principled pragmatism approach is necessary to contribute to concrete change in the lives of the Afghan population without legitimising repression. Meaningful change is rarely linear and often emerges gradually. It requires actors to remain patient and move beyond rigid conditionalities and prioritise the well-being of the most disadvantaged over the optics of politically symbolic debates. The priority should be to stay present, grounded, and guided by principles while navigating a landscape where change is unpredictable and often emerges in modest ways.
2. Recognising that the Taliban is not a monolith is key to identifying opportunities for engagement, which are often small-scale and not openly discussed. Overly simplistic analyses can lead to a gloomy assessment that obscures existing opportunities. Isolation by the international community has rarely dismantled authoritarian regimes; rather, it often consolidates their internal control while the rest of society is disproportionately affected.
3. There is a need to identify potential door openers for engagement. Climate is one such area, as it is relatively depoliticised and links humanitarian basic needs with adaptation and livelihoods, while also offering opportunities to support women's economic empowerment.
4. The lack of data and knowledge from within Afghanistan is a cross-cutting challenge. Whether on girls' education or climate, reliable evidence is scarce and often contested, which results in policy by assumption. Greater emphasis should be placed on local knowledge, for example by turning operational work into iterative evidence generation.

Introduction

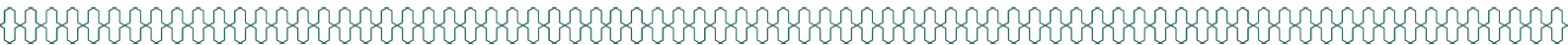
On 5-6 November 2025, the Solidarity Committee for Afghanistan hosted an international conference to discuss topics of relevance to development in Afghanistan today. The conference was convened to move beyond binary debates about (non)recognition and to consider what forms of Afghan-led, people-

centred change remain feasible under current circumstances.

The Afghan context is characterised by the Taliban consolidating power and control. Women's and girls' right to secondary and higher education,

¹ This policy brief differs from the rest in the Solidarity Committee series, being a reflection from a conference. All issues in the series can be found here: <https://solidaritycommittee.org/tag/policy-brief-series-2025/>

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employment, and public participation continues to be severely challenged. The large number of returnees from Pakistan and Iran in the past year constitutes yet another development challenge. Poverty levels are rising amid a deepening humanitarian crisis, leaving millions in acute need. Civic space is severely curtailed, with restrictions on civil society organisations and independent voices, limiting pathways for participation and accountability. In addition, minorities and other marginalised groups face exclusion, while the government is dominated by a part of one ethnic group. International development cooperation has been sharply reduced in 2025, and international sanctions further weaken the conditions for economic development.

The conference, convened under the same headline as this policy brief, brought together academia, civil society, public agencies and politicians for a series of thematic roundtable discussions. The themes for the roundtables were Taliban governance, education, women's economic empowerment, civil society, climate change and access to climate finance, and migration. The closing session was an open debate on ways forward and recommendations for Solidarity Committee as well as for other actors who wish to contribute to Afghan-led development. This policy brief summarises some of the reflections cutting across the different themes. It does not claim to summarise the content of the conference as a whole, but rather to bring to the fore several thoughts, and to highlight some of the main recommendations. The conference was held under Chatham House Rules and thus, no arguments or thoughts presented in this brief are assigned to any specific conference participant.

Reflections Across the Themes

The supreme leader of Afghanistan continues to strengthen his centralised and full authority over the country. His rule prioritises order, control, moral and virtue over service delivery, including provision of

basic services such as health and education. At the same time as the Taliban is consolidating its power, there is a divide between Kandahar and Kabul. The former group stands for an extremely conservative interpretation of Islam, and an equally extreme control over policy enforcement. The latter group has a less conservative interpretation of Islam, and several ministries in Kabul have more or less openly expressed their discontent with, for example, the ban on girls' education.

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The Taliban is hence not a homogeneous group, but consist of a significant variation of convictions and priorities. Rather than seeking opportunities at national level, actors that aim to engage could identify sub-national openings. To do so, it is necessary to include Afghan actors with deep knowledge and necessary horizontal and vertical legitimacy in the lead. Recognising that the Taliban is not a monolith is key to identify opportunities that can be found in the cracks and exceptions, often small-scale and not openly articulated. Simplistic portrayals of the Taliban as a uniform actor can lead to an overly gloomy picture and cause existing opportunities to be missed.

The lack of access to basic services places the population in a dire situation. A key question that was discussed during the conference was whether the international community can effectively address basic human needs and rights of the population without contributing to increased capacity of the public authorities. The conference participants underscored that addressing basic human needs and rights without inadvertently reinforcing authoritarian

capacity is a delicate balancing act. Some participants argued that strengthening delivery systems will inevitably risk legitimisation of the regime, while others stressed that without strengthening service provision and accountability mechanisms, humanitarian and development efforts will remain fragmented and unsustainable. There was a consensus that ordinary Afghans, especially women, minorities, and returnees, bear the heaviest burden of weak capacity, decreasing aid and exclusion.

Possible door openers need to be identified, and climate stands out as one of the areas of potential. Climate impacts cut across livelihoods, water, health and displacement, yet carry lower political salience than women's public roles or formal recognition. At the same time, Afghanistan is excluded from most global climate finance. Authorities (e.g. the National Environment Protection Agency) show willingness to endorsing implementation by NGOs, which can legitimise practical collaboration without channelling funds through central structures. Positioning climate as "humanitarian-plus"—to protect basic needs while building adaptation—can restore dialogue and unlock private co-financing in areas like water systems and storage. Other openings share similar traits; they are not politically symbolic, relevant to the everyday life of the Afghan population, and anchored in basic needs or social legitimacy:

- ◇ Education via hybrid models and madrasas can advance literacy, numeracy and languages if paired with curriculum influence and teacher mentoring.
- ◇ Health services, especially in maternal and child health, are often tolerated and can maintain access through community health workers and gender-segregated clinics.
- ◇ Local governance and dispute resolution structures (shuras, jirgas, maliks) retain legitimacy that can be mobilised to re-open civic space incrementally.
- ◇ Selected private sector niches (agriculture, food

processing, textiles) are culturally acceptable for women's participation if segregation is respected and can be scaled into market-linked livelihoods.

Like climate, these door openers enable transactional engagement: resources and technical support in exchange for verifiable openings, such as curriculum flexibility, women's workspaces and monitoring access.

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Identifying door openers as well as cracks and exceptions, as discussed above, is crucial to continue to firmly contribute to the advancement of rights and opportunities for women and girls, including through investments in private sector and agriculture production in certain value chains. However, the work (not just in agriculture and private sector development) is challenged by donor-funded interventions that are in short project cycles, suffer from compliance-heavy design and keep most initiatives micro-scale and fragile. Aggregating demand, introducing quality standards, and securing predictable off-take can convert micro-projects into market-linked employment opportunities. It is important to take back the very idea of long-term, as it has been distorted (largely by development cooperation) into meaning everything that exceeds three years, while any real social change obviously takes much longer. However, given the complex, repressive and unpredictable situation, a high level of flexibility is needed, and not all actions might be long-term. We need, nevertheless, to avoid quick and simplified fixes for structural problems that risk causing more harm than good.

Economic empowerment cannot be siloed from education and participation, and girls' learning, via

hybrid madrasa models or informal community schools, is foundational to future agency. Similarly, women's ability to earn an income is inseparable from their capacity to move, speak and influence decisions. But at the same time as we need to allow ourselves to think about women's economic empowerment large-scale, we need to recognise the power of the many small actions that may not speak loudly but still make all the difference. Two such examples are older women and men providing education to their children, boys and girls, at home, and the imams stretching the limits for what is taught in a madrasa. In those actions, the importance of the involvement of, and support from, men and religious and traditional leaders is crucial. Participants also raised concerns about madrasas, particularly the lack of clarity around what is taught and the broader vision that drives the Taliban's "madrasafication" of girls' education. It was noted that this area remains under-researched, which makes it difficult to assess if these institutions are used to institutionalise ideological agendas that limit future pathways for girls and if they undermine efforts for inclusive and rights-based education.

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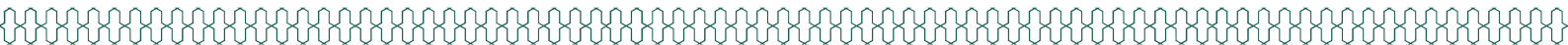
Data and knowledge scarcity is a cross-cutting challenge in Afghanistan. Whether discussing girls' learning, climate losses, or reintegration outcomes, reliable evidence is thin and often contested. The result is policy by assumption. Organisations like the Solidarity Committee possibly have an added value to support Afghan-led, mixed-methods learning, embed simple outcome tracking in programmes, and share findings broadly, including with authorities where relevant, with a potentially positive outcome for the population. This can turn operational work

into iterative evidence rather than waiting for perfect baselines.

Participants converged on the lesson that past support projectised civil society and inadvertently displaced traditional, locally legitimate structures (shuras, jirgas, religious leaders, women's informal networks). Under current restrictions, the viable and just approach is to support Afghan civil society in its own right, especially informal, traditional and faith-anchored initiatives, while intentionally—but in a contextually appropriate manner—addressing gender and youth participation from within communities. This implies accepting risk, practicing patience and discretion, and resisting the reflex to rebuild centralised compliance ecosystems that exclude local actors. A real transfer of power over decisions to local actors is needed, including on funds, ways of operating, what to do, where to do it and with whom – beyond ticking the box of exercising localisation.

The Afghan diaspora is a distinctive part of the Afghan civil society but the relationships between Afghan actors inside and outside of Afghanistan respectively are often characterised by conflict, contestation and mistrust. The conference showed some relevance to this regard, providing a safe space for a wide variety of opinions and positions. It was concluded that there is a need for such spaces, that focuses on leverage for the Afghan population.

The limited availability of funding, and the current positions and approaches of many actors within the donor community, constitute major obstacles to the materialisation of the principled pragmatism approach. Contrary to the current trends that are dominated by donors, the approach demands flexibility and patience, as well as acceptance that change is non linear but rather unpredictable and, when coming from within, slow. Furthermore, supporting the cracks and exceptions challenges the demand for visibility and, even more so, some



donor countries' interest to loudly showcase their work as well as protest, especially to a home country audience.

Towards Principled Pragmatism for People-Centred Change

The closing discussion underscored the fact that the state, also under Taliban rule, remains the primary vehicle of development and coercion, and it cannot simply be “thought away.” Recognition debates, like the ones currently taking place in many Western countries, risk to obscure the more practical question: how can state structures be worked with for the good of the population without legitimising repression.

Comparative insights from Iran shed some light on the question. Revolutionary regimes – from Tehran to Kabul – institutionalise over time. The charisma fades but structures endure. Isolation by the international community has rarely dismantled authoritarian resilience, rather, it often consolidates internal control while starving a society. Furthermore, any country depends on international relations for trade and cooperation and with Western doors closing, Afghanistan is forced to turn to other directions. Sanctions, isolation, rhetorical condemnation and complete disengagement carry limited leverage in the current configuration,

while pragmatic although principled engagement, anchored in rights and reciprocity, offers more leverage. However, with engagement comes the risk of de facto legitimisation. This can be mitigated by being clear on principles with authorities, to protect the legitimacy and integrity of Afghan implementing organisations and ensuring independent monitoring.

To operationalise principled pragmatism requires treatment of engagement as transactional: skills, resources or convening power in exchange for verifiable openings; non-discrimination baselines, space for women to work and learn, operational transparency, and freedom to monitor. Turning principles into red lines may seem like a reasonable method, but at the same time it is associated with challenges and risks. If a red line is breached, we are forced to react even though it might not, in that specific situation and context, appear to be the most constructive thing to do. Otherwise, the red line loses its value. Red lines risk becoming more for show than to make a real impact – just as many other statements by international community in Afghanistan. It is a continuous challenge to balance the principles and the pragmatism, considering that human rights cannot remain performative. To matter, they must shape operational choices, including what we fund, where we stay, and when we pause to reflect upon and negotiate principles.