HOUSE OF COMMONS

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Afghanistan, HC 919

Tuesday 7 December 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Mr Richard Bacon; Theo Clarke; Mrs Pauline Latham; Chris Law; Navendu Mishra; Kate Osamor; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 1 - 45

Witnesses

I: Alain Délétroz, Director-General, Geneva Call; James Cowan, Chief Executive Officer, The HALO Trust; Elizabeth Winter; Executive Director, British & Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG).

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Alain Délétroz, James Cowan and Elizabeth Winter.

Q1 **Chair:** I would like to start this evidence session where we look at Afghanistan, specifically the impact of the withdrawal of troops on the humanitarian workers who were based out there at the time. We are very lucky to have three witnesses before us: James Cowan is the chief executive officer of the HALO Trust; Alain Délétroz is the director based in Geneva of Geneva Call; and Elizabeth Winter is the executive director of the British & Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group; we will call it BAAG for short, if that is okay. Elizabeth, I am very grateful that you are here in person.

I will ask you to introduce yourselves and your organisations a little more, but it is particularly profound that we are meeting today for two reasons: it is 101 days since the last flight out of Kabul, but also today the British press is lit up with the whistleblower Raphael Marshall, who has been giving evidence of what it was like to be a junior desk officer on the ground when all of this was happening. As MPs, we were responding at the opposite end, with constituents who were stuck out there or concerned for family members, so if you will indulge us we will probably have a few questions around that as well. I would ask each of you to introduce yourselves and your organisations a little more.

Elizabeth Winter: The British & Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group has been going for more than 30 years, has more than 30 members, and deals with policy and advocacy in relation to Afghanistan. We work closely with Afghan civil society as well as with our own members in the wider group. We are called on to give advice to a variety of stakeholders, whether it is places like this, academics or Foreign Office officials. We were also involved in facilitating the civil society voice into the Geneva Conference last time, and four or five times before that. That is the interministerial conference that takes place every two years with donors and with the Afghan Government. It is a pledging conference first, and next time it is just a discussion on progress. We have been involved since way back. In 2001 we co-chaired, with Afghans, the first civil society conference in Afghanistan.

James Cowan: I am James Cowan, chief executive of the HALO Trust. The HALO Trust is the world's oldest and largest mine clearance charity, although mine clearance explains only part of what we do. Essentially, we save lives and restore livelihoods by removing explosive munitions, whether they be landmines or improvised explosive devices, or by removing direct fire weapon systems. We are in 28 countries. We have about 10,000 staff worldwide, 3,000 of whom are in Afghanistan, which was our first programme in 1988 and remains our largest programme today. It also makes us, by measurement of direct employees, the largest British NGO in Afghanistan.

Alain Délétroz: Geneva Call's mission is easy to express and less so to implement. Our mission is to go out into conflict zones, get in touch with armed and state actors, and bring them to respect the basic principles of international humanitarian law. We are now in 16 conflict zones in the world. In Afghanistan, something happened to us for the first time in the history of the organisation, when one armed actor that we had been engaging with for years took over the whole territory of a fully fledged member of the United Nations. We are active and continue working there, and I am happy to be giving my evidence today to your Committee.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you, all of you, for the work that you and your organisations do. We are really indebted to you. I wonder, Elizabeth, if I could start with you, turning specifically to Raphael Marshall's evidence. Did it resonate with you?

Elizabeth Winter: It resonated with me in the sense that it was an appalling time for everybody involved. We were all, whoever we were—Afghan or non-Afghan—utterly distraught by what was happening. It was worse, in a sense, than you will have heard about from the reports. For example, walking out through the sewage canal, I learned from one of the people I knew who got out that it was full of razor wire, so her legs were in ribbons, as were her clothes—apart from the stench, etc.

I was somewhat surprised by the evidence he gave in relation to civil servants. My experience was that civil servants were working around the clock; certainly in Afghanistan they were. People I spoke to had two or three hours' sleep a night, if that, and it was difficult to sleep because of the noise and anxiety.

The experience that I had with civil servants in London was that they were also extremely concerned but did not quite know—as nobody did, really—how to tackle the situation, with the number of staff they had and the crises as they occurred one after the other, but my impression was that they were doing their level best.

Q3 **Chair:** I do not doubt at all that FCDO staff were doing their level best, but we have heard that they did not have translators there, or that they had one computer for eight people. As a constituency MP, I was just trying and trying. All of my staff came in off their holidays to try to get through. Everything that I heard this morning made a lot of sense of the chaos that I felt as a constituency MP, and MPs around the table are nodding.

Elizabeth Winter: If I can add to that, as somebody who had to deal with people who were stuck and in fear of their lives, I experienced it as well. Trying to get through to people; trying to get your people out because you knew very well that they were at major risk—whether they were people who had worked with the Government, or whether they were well-known civil society activists or journalists—and in real fear of their lives; trying to get them on a list; and then trying to get them to the airport was a major issue.

It remains a major issue. There are still people there who need to get out now, and we have provided chapter and verse more than once. If there is anything the IDC can do about that, it should be extending the ARAP programme, making sure that people who are eligible for that do not get added to the list of 5,000, that the 5,000 people should also be allowed to bring their families, and that the ACRS should be clarified and should start.

I am aware that there are probably people still being helped out now, clandestinely, and I appreciate that, but for the majority of people who are still stuck, who I and my colleagues are dealing with, it is not happening and it is extremely stressful. Some of my colleagues have been given counselling as a result. There have been times—I am sure it was the same for your staff—when you had sleepless nights, because you did not know, if you could not get hold of somebody, whether they were still alive or not.

Q4 **Chair:** It has been horrendous for all who have been touched by this, and let me say again thank you to all of you for all that you are doing. Trying to give some comfort to the people who are out there must be very challenging. I wonder if I could start digging down into some of the details that you have raised and alluded to, and then hand over to the rest of the Committee.

Specifically looking at the withdrawal of UK and NATO troops, and the takeover by the Taliban, how has it affected aid and development work there now and the people delivering it?

Elizabeth Winter: It has affected us a great deal. There are enormous challenges, one of which is the banking situation, which has meant that it is extremely difficult to get money in. It has meant that poverty has increased enormously. The figures are stark and almost unbelievable. If you listen to WFP or UNDP figures, 19 out of 20 people are food-insecure; 97% of the population will be below the poverty line in 2022. It is horrific. You know that people are dying. You see the reports.

We have a lack of clarity around the banking situation and whether or not we can use the hawala system. Some say we can and some say we cannot. We need more clarity on that. We need the international community to combine in order to deal with the situation, because the humanitarian situation is dire, as I have already mentioned. You will have seen all the reports, so I do not need to detail those.

James Cowan: The situation in Afghanistan has some extremely grave aspects to it, in the main because of the economic situation, which has largely been inflicted by the freeze on liquidity and the fact that the Afghan banking system has, in effect, collapsed. I do not believe that that is a necessary crisis. Our response, which wants to be humanitarian, will simply address symptoms and not causes. Unless we address the underlying economic problem here, which is about liquidity, we will be simply applying sticking-plasters.

There is quite a lot to be positive about. For the first time in my professional life, Afghanistan is under one single authority. It is remarkably peaceful at the moment. I have a senior British team in-country at the moment. They are currently in Kandahar and have just been to Arghandab. They have been able to travel around everywhere, without any problem whatsoever. They are experiencing extraordinarily high numbers of casualties born of improvised explosive devices, largely to children and to other innocent civilians, and there is currently no support whatsoever for that. There is a remarkable opportunity right now to do something to help Afghanistan.

In addition to the economic crisis, the fundamental tension within Afghanistan is what it has always been, which is that it is a highly militarised, highly weaponised society with a propensity to return to warlord-ism and Islamic extremism. I do not believe that the international community is in any way willing to address that reality, or at least to think hard about how it removes weapons from Afghan society or begins to think about disarming Afghanistan and helping the literally hundreds of thousands of young men who have fought on either side to find work. At the moment, thousands of them are forming up every morning outside our offices, looking for work. They are desperate. What is now an economic crisis will quite soon revert to a military disaster.

Q5 **Chair:** James, you made the distinction between humanitarian work and development work, so are you seeing a different impact on those two sectors?

James Cowan: The capacity of western aid agencies to conduct their humanitarian work is, as Elizabeth says, about how much money you can get into country at the moment. The failure of the banking system means that we are having to use hawala. It is working and viable, but for how much longer? Essentially, it is a promissory note system that relies on cash under a bed in Jalalabad or somewhere. For how much longer will there be enough dollars under the bed for that to survive? We have to find a better and longer-term solution. That is the first issue.

Secondly, the United Kingdom is being particularly slow about apportioning the £286 million that it has promised. It has applied the first £50 million, but I do not know when the rest is being applied, and none of it has come to the HALO Trust. The HALO Trust is the UK's largest NGO in Afghanistan and does not receive a penny of British overseas aid.

Q6 **Chair:** I am shocked and disappointed by that particular stat, because I know just how much benefit your project brings. Alain, what are your thoughts? Has it become more difficult since the troop withdrawal for development and humanitarian work to be carried out in Afghanistan?

Alain Délétroz: I would follow the line that James and Elizabeth have already opened. For us, on the one hand, if I want to insist on the positive side of things, movements across the country and access have become easier, because the level of fighting in the country has gone

down since 16 August. In August, we witnessed the end of the war. Maybe, as James alluded to, we are already seeing another war starting between factions that do not trust the effective Government, and between people who are estranged. The money is not coming in. Humanitarian aid is impeded because all the pledged money has not been disbursed. You have a deep sense of being ostracised by most of the factions that we meet in our work in Afghanistan.

If I may give you a suggestion, in conflict zones sanctions should always be designed in such a way that they do not impede humanitarian aid and access. The international community needs to balance the security concerns and humanitarian needs of Afghans, without pushing them into despair, particularly now, as winter sets in. This is necessary to envisage regional stabilisation and to help diminish the flow of refugees.

If I take concrete examples of the people we are meeting on a daily basis there, teachers, nurses and medical doctors, both male and female, have not been paid since July. Having these people in such a dire situation is a very improper way to help prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and a massive exodus from Afghanistan. Teachers and medical doctors have not become extremists overnight, yet they feel that they are treated as such. If there is an appeal that I would like to make to your Committee, it is to ensure that aid is being unblocked now, so that, as winter sets in, humanitarian workers and aid can be delivered to the Afghans.

Chair: Thank you. We hear that loud and clear. We are aware that we cannot change the past but we can learn from it, which is the intention of this session, and then try to put some better preventive measures in place going forward.

Q7 **Theo Clarke:** My question is regarding the extent of the UK Government's duty of care to people working in the aid sector. Elizabeth and James, prior to the UK's withdrawal from Afghanistan, I would be interested to know what assumptions you had of the obligations that the Government had to ensure the safety of organisations in receipt of UK aid, particularly those people working within those organisations.

Elizabeth Winter: We were given to understand that we would not necessarily be taken care of if something awful happened. There used to be a system where you could register with the British embassy and they would know where you were, who you were, what you were doing, etc. Although that continued informally, it did not continue formally.

We were contacted several times by the Government and told, "Things are looking tricky. We advise people not to go to Afghanistan. Can you tell us who the British people are who you are aware of, so that we can keep them informed about what information we get and perhaps assist them, if we are able to?" That happened several times. Again, I felt that the staff of our embassy would do what they could to assist, although they did not appear to have any formal obligation to do so, because we had been told not to go there.

James Cowan: The duty of care was even less pronounced for us, because we are not funded by the British Government. There is a slight misapprehension here, in that the vast majority of my 3,000 staff have not asked to leave Afghanistan. They have bank accounts that are frozen. If they walked away, they would lose that money. They have houses, families and extended families, not all of whom they could get out. They would be ending up living in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany or somewhere, essentially in social housing and having given up everything they had built their lives for. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority wanted to stay and never felt threatened by the Taliban, because our work was in no way opposed by the Taliban, so there is a slight misapprehension here.

I also worry that the British obsession with duty of care had, in effect, limited the embassy's ability to know what was going on. Nobody in the embassy ever set foot outside of it, certainly not outside of Kabul. By August, their horizon had dropped to something very closed in indeed. The United Kingdom's awareness of Afghanistan and its problems had simply passed them by.

Once an embassy returns to Kabul, we must, in a way, relax our obsession with the health and safety of Foreign Office staff and begin to re-meet the Afghans, relearn about Afghanistan and rediscover the amazing country that it is. Right now, there is an obsessive and very negative belief in health and safety, which is not helping British foreign policy.

Q8 **Theo Clarke:** Since the UK's withdrawal from Afghanistan, how adequately have the UK Government responded to organisations like yours and staff?

James Cowan: I do not want to join a pile-in about the news this morning. There are some fantastically hardworking, honourable and decent people who work for the Foreign Office. The problems of August largely originated from the top, and there is a stark contrast between the decision of the Ministry of Defence for its Ministers and senior officers to return to work, and what happened in the Foreign Office.

What I witnessed was the Germans and the Americans being just so much better organised—emails answered quickly, very businesslike and responsive, and just a sense of efficiency and organisation that was singularly lacking within the chaotic surroundings of the British Foreign Office in August.

Elizabeth Winter: I cannot comment on the other countries and whether they were better organised. I can only say that it was chaotic and longwinded, and then suddenly cut off. It was like falling off a cliff for people and left them feeling utterly abandoned by the international community generally, but especially for those who had worked directly with the British Government. The interpreters situation has been one of the biggest scandals. There is a lot to say that is extremely upsetting,

and I would argue now that it needs to be put right. Those people who deserve to come out under the ARAP scheme should be assisted now. Those people who are in third countries should be allowed to come here, and the sooner the better.

Q9 **Chair:** James put the onus of the chaos on the Ministers rather than the FCDO staff. Is that a fair assessment?

Elizabeth Winter: I do not think that that is anything that I know enough about to comment on.

Chair: That is a very good answer; maybe go into politics.

Q10 **Theo Clarke:** James, you said that HALO is not funded by the British taxpayer. Did the response vary according to whether people were employed by the UK Government directly, through contracts or subcontracts, or by charities like yours that do not receive taxpayer funding? Was there a different type of response, depending on the organisation or whether you were employed directly by the British Government?

James Cowan: I do not believe so, no. FCDO staff would have done their best for anyone. The reality is that the emails just went unanswered. Nothing happened. The speed of it really needed very timely responses. Of course, we just timed out, because suddenly the whole operation was over. It did not have that timeliness that was needed, but I do not believe that that was a prejudice against non-British funded staff.

Theo Clarke: Elizabeth, do you have anything to add on that?

Elizabeth Winter: He is right.

Q11 **Theo Clarke:** Finally, what evidence is there that the UK Government's handling of their withdrawal from Afghanistan and their response to those organisations and staff put any of those staff in jeopardy?

Elizabeth Winter: The question of leaving information behind to be found, so that people could be identified, was an appalling breach. It was terrifying for those who were on those lists and those emails, so that needs to be looked into.

James Cowan: We are a slightly different organisation. As I have mentioned, we are not in any way at odds with the Taliban. They like our work. They want the IEDs gone and the landmines cleared, and so our staff have never been threatened. I can see no reason why any information held that might have been found in the embassy would have put my people at risk in any way.

Elizabeth Winter: We deal with people who are quite severely at risk because of their work with civil society—human rights defenders, journalists, people involved in a whole variety of ways. We are frightened about what is going to happen to them. Our members are continuing to work in Afghanistan, so they are able to run programmes. If they had the

money flowing properly, they could do even more. As has already been mentioned, access to some areas is easier. That has allowed one of our members to travel in most Afghan provinces, and she has been able to return with stories of how dire the humanitarian situation is—the poverty, the starvation, with winter coming and so on. This is not intended as a Taliban issue. There was poverty in the country beforehand. The previous Government did not attend to things in the way that one would have hoped it would, and this has just exacerbated everything.

Q12 **Chair:** From March, we know that the embassy was putting warning signs up that the country could fall. From May, we know that that was being exacerbated. Elizabeth, you said in your opening remarks that there were a couple of occasions when FCDO contacted you to warn you of the risks. Was it a surprise, when August came, that there was not a more thought-through strategy for getting people out, and that it very much felt that it was being done on the hoof? Did you feel that there were contingency plans in case this was likely to happen?

Elizabeth Winter: There should have been contingency plans, yes.

Chair: Do you believe that there were contingency plans?

Elizabeth Winter: Again, it is not something I am privy to.

Chair: I am asking you what you believe, not what you know.

Elizabeth Winter: I do not believe that they were adequate if they existed.

Chair: James, do you think that there were plans in place, should this happen?

James Cowan: I am sure there would have been plans in place, but, like Elizabeth, I cannot say that for sure, because I am not privy to them. Whatever plans there were, they were completely overwhelmed by the speed and scale of what took place.

Q13 **Mr Sharma:** Elizabeth, what advice did the organisations that you represent receive from the UK Government on the security situation before and after 8 July, when the Prime Minister announced the withdrawal of troops?

Elizabeth Winter: We were advised to look at Government websites. There will have been private meetings between Government officials and NGOs to brief each other on what was happening. They will have been told, as I said earlier, that it was not terribly safe to be there and that they should probably not bring in more people. There is an issue about whether expatriates should stay or go, and whether they are more at risk. In fact, it is Afghans who are more at risk. If we are under stress, just think what Afghans were feeling. Expatriates can now go relatively safely to Afghanistan. They are not under attack—so far, in any case—although some threats have been made by other groups than the Taliban.

The warnings were issued in the way that I have said, but because they did not have a responsibility beyond a human one, as it were, I do not think that there was anything more formal than that.

James Cowan: We suffered the most severe attack that the HALO Trust has ever had in its 30-plus years of history on 8 June, when ISIS in Afghanistan attacked us and murdered 12 of my staff in a remote camp in Baghlan province. We therefore became very focused on the threat from ISIS. It was an extremely brutal attack and we have taken measures to protect our people from further attacks by them.

It is interesting to note that the Taliban condemned the attack and went after ISIS, and have since claimed to have arrested some of the perpetrators. The Taliban have never shown any malice at all towards us. As the events of August rolled in, so our various bases were taken over, and their promises to us that they would respect our people and property were all honoured. At no point were any of my staff threatened or any of my property damaged by the Taliban.

As far as the British Government were concerned, we received the same warnings that Elizabeth has mentioned. We followed them and my international staff were extracted before the main crisis at Kabul airport got under way. I am glad I was able to get them out in time. Our temporary withdrawal was very orderly, and then we restarted operations four days after the end of the evacuation operation with just our Afghans, because it is a highly localised operation and we have some very competent Afghan leaders who can work very well without us.

Q14 **Mr Sharma:** What advice did you receive on exit routes for staff of aid organisations?

Elizabeth Winter: Quite a bit of advice. I know that some aid agencies were given assistance by the British Government and told where to go, when and how. There was one particular staff member of one of our members who was unable to get out. I think he went to the airport about three times, but was eventually taken out on a plane, as, indeed, were all the expat staff who wanted to leave.

James Cowan: As I keep mentioning, my staff, in the main, did not feel threatened. I had a couple of members of staff who toyed with the idea of leaving. My advice to them was to not put their families and children in peril by going to the airport and waiting in that appalling location. In time, they agreed with me and chose not to go there. My staff sat it out and were perfectly safe. In hindsight, that was the right thing to do.

Q15 **Mr Sharma:** You both briefly touched on this, but did you have to ask for information or was it provided proactively? Was that advice helpful?

Elizabeth Winter: Some was provided proactively. People on the ground will have had their own relationship with British Government officials and, I am quite sure, discussed the situation and informed each other what was happening. I imagine it was as useful as it could be.

James Cowan: I felt for them in the embassy. I felt they were completely overwhelmed by the circumstances and I do not believe that they were in a position to give me particularly helpful advice. In the end, we just took stock of our own counsel, and that was fine, as far as we were concerned.

Q16 **Mr Sharma:** Did the UK Government guidance on the security situation accord with what you were hearing on the ground from the people and communities you were working with?

Elizabeth Winter: No, the situation was more serious than the Government either thought or were making public, but it may well be that they understood it better and did not want to alarm people by talking about it publicly or to damage any negotiations that they were involved in.

James Cowan: I think they had a pretty good idea of how serious it was. I did not feel misled on that account. There was such a dearth of information coming from them. They were not in a position to be briefing me, nor did I really feel that I was a priority. There were many other NGOs and organisations that had staff who felt they were more at risk. I did not feel that my staff were at risk, and therefore did not want to burden the British Government unduly.

Q17 **Chair:** James, I was struck by something you said in your earlier answer. You said that the British embassy staff had reduced down, so that they had specialist knowledge only of Kabul. Could you speak a little more about that? Do you think that they should have had a better understanding of the whole country?

James Cowan: Yes, I do. I took Ruth Davidson, who will be known to you as a fellow parliamentarian, to Kabul in December 2018. The Foreign Office's initial reaction was, "She is a Scottish Opposition politician. She has no official status. She can stay in your HALO house. She will not have any protection," which was fine by me, because we would have had the freedom to do what we needed to do. A few days before the visit, they changed their minds and insisted that she be a guest of the embassy. That meant that she never left the embassy, so her whole visit became a series of meetings within offices. She might as well have stayed in London, frankly. It was indicative of the risk aversion within the Foreign Office and its inability to get out, always viewing everything as a problem and never seeing anything as an opportunity. Therefore, I think their horizons had closed in. From as early as then, and perhaps several years earlier, they were not leaving Kabul or travelling around the country. They were very timid about the threat, and as a result they could not really understand the threat or see how quickly things were moving when the Taliban reached Lashkar Gah, Kandahar and Herat. They were in their ivory tower.

This is a significant cultural problem that needs to be overcome if we are to have any foreign policy that is understanding of local activities,

customs and attitudes, or we are just going to be trapped, looking at ourselves within an office in a different country.

Q18 **Chair:** You work in 20 countries. Is this phenomenon of the ivory tower unique to Afghanistan, in your experience?

James Cowan: It is particularly acute in the context of Afghanistan, but you might say the same thing about Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Somalia and Libya—any of these countries, which are real problem countries. If you cannot get out there and see the problem, you are never really going to understand it.

Q19 **Mr Sharma:** Are you aware of occasions when organisations raised concerns about the safety of staff directly with the UK Government as the situation in Afghanistan escalated?

Elizabeth Winter: No, but I can ask our members if that happened.

James Cowan: I agree with Elizabeth. I am not aware of that.

Chair: If you could write to us on that, that would be most helpful.

Q20 **Mrs Latham:** Are there safety-specific concerns for women working for aid projects in Afghanistan and for women and girls who were recipients of the aid?

Alain Délétroz: Of course we are very concerned particularly about women working for aid institutions. In the health sector, close to 80% of medical personnel in Afghanistan are women, and this is a concern. Geneva Call's country director in Kabul is a woman. She has been received regularly by the Taliban leadership. We are in a very similar situation as HALO Trust, as James described, in that the activities of Geneva Call in Afghanistan have never been seen as something negative by the Taliban, so we have not felt threatened. We are carrying out training across the country, particularly in provinces like Nangarhar, where the level of conflict remains pretty high.

Donors and the international community have to demand that women can continue working freely. The international community has to be willing to engage and to ensure that teachers and medical workers are being paid by the effective Government, and that the effective Government sees women as a chance for the state of Afghanistan to progress.

James Cowan: I would agree with that. There is no point in insisting on women working if there are no means to pay them. A lot of women are working for no money whatsoever, but many are not.

The picture is perhaps more variegated than one might think, and maybe that is not unusual for any other country. I have just come back from the United States, where different governors require different Covid restrictions, in just the same way as some governors in Afghanistan are allowing women to work. I know for a fact that the Governor of Kandahar

has allowed our mixed-gender teams to go back to work, and similarly the Governor of Herat.

There is some uncertainty as to whether our staff who are employed in Kabul are defined as civil servants, even though they are working for an NGO; so they are all, of their own choice, working from home. I am trying to encourage them to come to work, because I cannot find anything saying that they cannot work.

There is some clarification to be got from the Taliban, but we should also expect some fairly conservative measures. They will insist upon women being segregated, on dress, and on them being escorted, but that was true before anyway. My mixed-gender teams are survey teams who drive around Kandahar province, looking for minefields. It is very detailed and courageous work, because it requires quite high skills of mapreading and survey. They would have to be perhaps a husband and wife team, a brother and sister team, or a father and daughter team. This is fairly traditional and preceded the return of the Taliban. We just need to dig into this more, but my sense is that many women are now working.

I was talking to the Aga Khan Foundation the other day, which is very adept at working with traditional Islamic societies. Practically every single one of its women is back at work, so it is a more complex picture than you might think.

Elizabeth Winter: It is a mixed picture. It is easier for international NGOs to have their women going back and working than it is for smaller Afghan NGOs. We do hear horror stories. There was a beheading yesterday that we heard about of a female doctor in a clinic. She was beheaded in the clinic. That is not the first time we have heard these things. It is a question of how adept you are, as James was saying, at dealing with traditional Islamic societies. One of the ways of dealing with it is not to ask permission for things, and to wait and see if you are told that you cannot do it.

Other ways are that long-term NGOs in Afghanistan are well known, their work is well known, and they are respected. Once you start straying into small organisations dealing with human rights and women's rights, and calling themselves civil society organisations, they are probably more at threat. Their offices have been raided and their computers have been taken. Sometimes staff have been beaten. Then there are enforced disappearances and executions. You can read about those in the Human Rights Watch report that has just come out.

Q21 **Mrs Latham:** Elizabeth, what could the UK Government have done differently to better respond to those organisations and staff in the lead-up to and during the UK's withdrawal from Afghanistan?

Elizabeth Winter: It goes back to the contingency plans that we were talking about. There could probably have been better plans. I am more inclined to say that they need to do something now about the banking

situation and liquidity, which we have already brought up. People were very unsure what was going to happen when the Taliban took over, hence expatriates fleeing. Some of them are now making their way back. They were unsure whether anybody would be allowed to work, particularly women, and it is now becoming clearer that the Taliban are saying that women can work in health and education professions, given the strictures that we have heard about separation, etc.

It is more important that they do things now. I would rather look forward than try to find blame, because my experience is that although people write a lot of lessons learned, it sits on the shelf and they don't implement them.

James Cowan: I couldn't agree more. There is only one answer to the question, "What should we have done differently?", and that is not to have left. President Biden ought not to have done what he did. That is the simple answer, but it is such a simplistic answer and does not really help anyone. I agree with Elizabeth that we should be looking forward, and right now I believe that the Taliban are the Government of Afghanistan. I believe that they are probably no more conservative than other conservative Islamic allies such as Saudi Arabia.

We should be trying to get them into a moderate position, where they are not in any way offering hospitality to Islamic extremists, from either ISIS or al-Qaeda, and in which they are behaving pragmatically towards women, allowing them to work, and towards girls, allowing them to go to secondary school. On that basis, we can come up with a workable, pragmatic relationship with the Taliban, and the sooner we get on with it, the better.

Q22 **Mrs Latham:** How could the UK Government in the future better support the safety of people who are working or have worked for the organisations in receipt of UK aid in Afghanistan, and the safe passage of those people to the UK in cases where they are at risk because of the UK's withdrawal from Afghanistan? Should a special case for safe exit be made for people who have worked for or benefited from UK aid-funded projects or those delivered by UK NGOs?

James Cowan: This is a major moral conundrum. For very good reasons, we have facilitated the extraction of over 100,000 of Afghanistan's best brains, and thereby significantly damaged Afghanistan's ability to succeed in the future. We need to strike a balance. We certainly need to facilitate the extraction of people at severe risk in the manner that Elizabeth described. That appalling story of that lady having her head cut off is just unconscionable. There are many more Afghans who are able to work in Afghanistan, some of whom are now wanting to go back. I believe that we should be getting an embassy back there, working with the Taliban, recognising them as the de facto Government of Afghanistan, not appeasing them, but channelling our aid through NGOs and helping avert a very severe humanitarian crisis, which is partly of our making.

Elizabeth Winter: I agree with every word of that. There has been a moral dilemma when people are approaching us all the time—and they still do—saying, "Please help me get out. This is my story. This is why I need to get out." We are having to make decisions as well about those who we feel are under threat and we want to assist, and who we go to. MPs are helpful. The moral dilemma is, as we have heard, a brain drain and encouraging it. We have people sitting here in limbo, who were told that they were going to be allowed to work and have all the privileges of British citizens, and who are still in hotels and thoroughly depressed. More needs to be done on that as well.

Q23 **Mrs Latham:** UK lawyers are considering legal action against the UK Government on behalf of members of the Afghan judiciary and legal profession, and their families, who want to come to the UK. Might the Government face similar legal challenges from others in Afghanistan?

Elizabeth Winter: We were told that we might be put in touch with lawyers who would work for us pro bono to bring people in who were at severe risk—maybe Hazaras, who, as you know, are one of the groups who are very badly bullied, harassed and killed, who have their land taken, etc. So far, they have not turned up. I am not aware of any other legal action. I am aware of organisations, such as Safe Passage, Crisis Action and others that we work with, that are trying to support people who have arrived here or who have not left yet, but I am not aware of any other class action.

James Cowan: I do not think I am qualified to comment on that. I have nothing more to add.

Alain Délétroz: I am not qualified to react to that either.

Q24 **Navendu Mishra:** Thank you to all the panellists for joining us. Human Rights Watch has reported that more than 100 former Afghan police and intelligence officers in just four provinces have been summarily executed or forcibly disappeared since the Taliban took over the nation. Are you aware of any aid workers, humanitarian actors or activists coming to the same conclusion?

Elizabeth Winter: Yes. A doctor I knew very well, who worked around the clock, not in Kabul but in another city, dealing with patients almost all hours of the day, was forcibly taken and disappeared. The family were asked for a ransom and paid handsomely with everything that they could get hold of and sell. His body was then discovered, showing clear signs of torture. Yes, these things are happening.

Q25 **Navendu Mishra:** Are you aware of many cases like this or just this?

Elizabeth Winter: I am aware of other cases, because I am involved in Afghan advocacy groups. I am aware of the information that they get, which is difficult to verify when the media, by and large, are silenced, so hats off to Human Rights Watch, which is a BAAG member, for having verified these accounts. For most people in the provinces, it is very

difficult to do. They are terrified of saying anything anyway, because they fear more repercussions if they do.

James Cowan: We need to maintain some perspective on this. Kidnap and ransom have been an endemic aspect of Afghan society for many decades. It has happened to my staff. I have had people kidnapped and held for ransom long before August. It is a criminal activity in the main, and the fact that it is continuing now should not be a surprise to us. What I find surprising is that it has not got worse, because we have taken out the entire rule of law sector, and therefore one might anticipate that, as poverty levels increase, the desperation associated with taking people ransom in order to secure some money will rise. We just need to keep a slight sense of perspective on this.

Q26 **Navendu Mishra:** I take the point about kidnapping and ransom, but my question was more about aid workers, humanitarian actors, activists and civil society groups being murdered or disappeared. Would you like to comment on that?

James Cowan: I do not have any first-hand evidence of anybody I know of—certainly not with the HALO Trust—who has been murdered for political reasons. My point is that the danger of it happening will rise significantly as this economic crisis takes hold and as we return to the traditional Afghan fighting season in the spring.

Q27 **Navendu Mishra:** Please feel free to not answer this, but I noticed you mentioned earlier that there was that attitude in the British mission not to have an understanding or step outside of Kabul. Would British diplomats or officers have a good understanding of what is going on with aid workers, humanitarian workers or civil society activists outside or even within the capital?

James Cowan: Do you mean now or back before August?

Navendu Mishra: Now.

James Cowan: They are reliant entirely upon what they hear from us. Their entire eyes and ears system has collapsed.

Navendu Mishra: They are dependent on third-party organisations, not first-hand information.

James Cowan: There is no other way.

Q28 **Chris Law:** Thank you for all the evidence you have given so far. It is very harrowing to listen to, and we have not yet even really talked about the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. Elizabeth, you mentioned that 95% of people in Afghanistan are food-insecure and 97% are in poverty. I want to ask each of you for an overview of the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. What further examples can you give to this Committee?

Elizabeth Winter: It has been very difficult already, even before the collapse of the Government, to deal with the poverty in the country.

There has been a major pandemic. There have not been enough vaccinations. People have had to work, because unless they work a large number will not be able to eat or to feed their families. Winter is approaching and it is already very cold in some parts. People are starving. We have heard reports of people selling their children, which have been verified by people we know who have travelled in the country and seen it first-hand. The hospitals have run out of medicine and many of the staff are not being paid.

It is extremely difficult for the vast majority of the population at the moment. Even those with money in the bank have not been able to access enough of it. People have lost their jobs, so they do not have any pay any more. The day labourers have almost no work left. They were just about able to feed their families before. Even if humanitarian assistance does get into the country, it will not replace the amount of aid that was being given to Afghanistan, so it is very difficult to see how the situation can be improved enough. That is something that economists and Governments need to get together on. They need to get together, first of all, to get humanitarian assistance in and to deal with the banking crisis, but then they need to get together to work out how other funding can go in for development programmes as well. Unless we continue those, hunger will only increase.

Many of the crops have already gone because of drought, and people have sold almost everything they can, so the future is bleak at the moment, unless the international community does something. That is what the Afghan population are asking for. They are saying, "Have they really abandoned us to this? They are strangling the country. Money is not coming in. What are they going to do about it? Are we just to assume that we are being left to die?"

James Cowan: To add some further information to what Elizabeth has just said, hospitals are increasingly full of children with acute malnutrition. They are running short of medicines, and the main hospital in Kabul has just cut down 300 trees to burn for heating and cooking. You have to remember that 70% of the state budget previously came from bilateral aid, and that has disappeared overnight. There are no salaries. Nobody—doctors, nurses, teachers or municipal workers—has been paid since July. Even if you had some money, you could not get it out, because it takes hours to queue for it at a bank, with the $400 withdrawal limit, which has just dropped to $200. They are being turned away by the banks. It is a really appalling situation. People do not have any heating in their homes. It is now freezing at night.

I just feel that this crisis was inflicted entirely by the West in order to punish the Afghan Government, but it is punishing the Afghan people, and we really must do something about it.

Alain Délétroz: I can only start where James finished. We see the Afghan people being afflicted by an incredibly severe humanitarian crisis.

The situation on the ground is going down the drain so quickly. Before, you were speaking about criminalisation. We see our colleagues experiencing today, for the first time, the first attack on one of Geneva Call's staff, which has much more to do with the criminalisation of people with guns and who have no money. Engaging now is what all of us should do. Like James has said about HALO Trust, Geneva Call has increased its programme in the country since August.

If the international community does not act or engage now, it is also putting itself outside the game in Afghanistan and into a situation in which it will have zero impact on the future of the situation there. I think there is still room for engagement now; there is still room for influence now, but if we decide to leave this room to others, or just to be out of this, we will have only our own eyes to cry with and only ourselves to blame in the future.

Q29 **Chris Law:** Just to dig deeper into this, can you tell me to what extent the current humanitarian situation is attributable to sanctions that have been put in place? What should donors' priorities be, going forward? How are the challenges in delivering humanitarian assistance to be overcome?

Alain Délétroz: What should be done immediately is that the pledged money should be delivered, so that the humanitarian agencies can start delivering. Governments like the UK Government should then allow organisations like HALO Trust and Geneva Call to work. What Geneva Call does is train people. If the people who are in charge and who will receive the humanitarian aid money cannot deal with it, we will, again, be in a situation in which the aid will not be delivered to the Afghan population.

There should be two priorities now. First, make sure that the organisations on the ground that are already working and have the contacts that they need in order to be in and continue working in all the provinces of Afghanistan get the level of support that they need. Geneva Call, HALO Trust and other organisations on the ground did not foresee in our budgetary exercise that, during the second half of this year, we should have to increase our operations here by so much.

Secondly, the big aid agencies should get the money pledged to them, and ensure that they get access and can deliver on the ground.

Elizabeth Winter: Some aid agencies are owed money, so it is not just a question of getting the money that is pledged. They are already requiring the money that they have already laid out, and they need to be paid that. It is sanctions that have made life almost intolerable. The Americans have issued some licences, we understand, which have helped some of their aid agencies. We have just had a reply from the Government saying that, because of a technical reason, the British are not able to provide licences. We have been advocating for some time now with a variety of people, whether it is the UK Government, the EU, the UN or others, explaining the situation and just pleading for the international community to get together and sort it out. It should not be impossible. Humanitarian

assistance should not be sanctioned. People should not be in this situation.

Q30 **Chris Law:** Elizabeth, just on that point, if you do not mind me stopping you, can you tell me a little bit more about this technical problem in terms of saving lives? That is what we are talking about here.

Elizabeth Winter: I saw the letter just before I left. It is something to do with the British Government not having the derogation that the US Government do. Again, I can send you the letter, so that you can see what it says, but it does not give us any comfort. I really think that it is the international community, the politicians and the diplomats who need to find a solution. They have been able to do it for other countries. It has not worked fantastically well anywhere, but at least it has allowed people to have international aid and assistance, and it is essential that they do now in Afghanistan.

James Cowan: I find myself baffled by this. We are the largest British NGO in Afghanistan and are funded by the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, Norway and Ireland, but not our own country. We employ 3,000 people. We could employ twice that number. We save lives. We restore livelihoods. There are about 30,000 dependants who rely on us in Afghanistan. There are tens of thousands of young men of fighting age who we could soak up and prevent going back to the conflict. There are roads that are blocked by IEDs, where other aid agencies cannot deliver because of the threat of the IED.

What is wrong with them? Why not get behind us, and get on and support our work? You are not routing the money through the Taliban; you are routing it through a reliable aid agency that has zero tolerance for corruption and is highly efficient. Get behind us. Get on and support it. I cannot see what the problem is.

Chris Law: I do not think that any of us on this Committee can either, for that matter.

Q31 **Chair:** James, the HALO Trust was getting money for Afghanistan before, was it not? What changed?

James Cowan: Yes, it was. Essentially, it comes back to a decision taken at the end of 2019 that they wanted to stop funding us. I sense that it was just too burdensome for them to run a bilateral programme. The reason now being given is that they do not have the staff to run a bilateral programme. They do not need to have many staff to run this. We work for the British in other countries in a very lean and efficient way. I simply do not think that that is a good enough reason not to be funding us.

They should be reinvesting in Foreign Office staff looking at Afghanistan and really working out how to run efficient, well-run programmes that can help Afghan people. Imagine if the United Kingdom was the principal player behind removing the threat of IEDs, landmines and other weapons

from Afghanistan. What an amazing achievement that would be. It would be a very concrete set of achievements for the United Kingdom, but they do not want it.

Q32 **Chris Law:** Am I right in saying that the cut was 75% of your budget from the UK? Is that correct?

James Cowan: That is the proposed global cut, which will reduce funding, not for the HALO Trust but for all of mine action, from £100 million over three years to £25 million. That was set out in—what is the lingo?—an early market engagement. We are going to hear from Ministers, we think, in the next few weeks—probably after Christmas, I imagine. That is when the new Foreign Secretary will have the chance to make her own mind up. Of course, she is new and she may come to a very different decision, and I rather hope she does.

Q33 **Chris Law:** Lastly on the humanitarian situation, would it be fair to say that the current crisis is worse for women and girls because of restrictions placed on them by the Taliban?

Elizabeth Winter: Yes, it would, particularly people who are in women-headed households with no men or young boys who can act as a mahram. For them to leave the house, if they are people at risk, is enormously difficult. The strictures on them, with no work or education and so on, is leading to depression and a whole load of other things. Yes, it is worse for women. Having said that, men are very upset about what is happening to their wives and their children.

It is extremely upsetting for everybody, but the Afghan women who I know feel strongly that, again, the international community, which took them out of Afghanistan and brought them to places like this, and trained them—as if they needed training, very often, but that is another story—to speak about how their lives were, taught them about their rights and about human rights, are asking, "Where has all that gone? You have abandoned us. What were these 20 years of promise all about?" We try to say to them, "You are very powerful. You do have a voice. We will try to make sure that part of BAAG's mandate is that you are heard."

There should be civil society people involved in the peace process, particularly women, because all the international research shows that if they are, it is much more sustainable and durable. They should be involved in the future of their country and discussions about it.

Q34 **Chris Law:** You have neatly dovetailed into my next question about provision of UK aid to Afghanistan. James, what lessons have organisations operating in Afghanistan learned from when they first started operating in Afghanistan in the early 2000s?

James Cowan: I would just like to say how eloquently Elizabeth put that about women, and I completely agree that they are the people who have suffered disproportionately.

The lesson that I would like to say is this: that the HALO Trust, like the two other organisations represented here today, are not quitters. We do not believe in exit strategies. We have been in Afghanistan since 1988 and we will stay the course. That is what the people of Afghanistan want. My principal lesson is for people to try to show patience, to endure, to stick at it, and not to betray the people of Afghanistan.

Alain Délétroz: One of the lessons that have been learned on our side is that the worst thing that can happen to committed people who are working for us—who were working back then or are still working for either British or international organisations, for schools or for the healthcare system—is the feeling of being abandoned. This feeling is very strongly there right now in Afghanistan. It is stronger, I believe, among our women colleagues.

None of Geneva Call's staff, as with HALO Trust, asked to leave in August, but two colleagues left without asking. They are brilliant young women who clearly, when they were out and we talked with them, said, "We don't see our future in this country." I will repeat what has been my mantra since the beginning of this evidence: engagement now is key. By engaging now, we can all help everybody there to look at the future in a way that is open for everybody in that country.

Q35 **Chris Law:** What have aid organisations learned from other conflict areas in which they have operated? How are those organisations doing things differently in Afghanistan now?

Elizabeth Winter: Some of our agencies are working only in Afghanistan, but they will very often have been trained in international development and learned in that sense. Others are large international organisations with programmes elsewhere and have, in the past, taken people from Afghanistan, for example to Nepal or India, to see how things are done there, and for workshops and training sessions. It is fair to say that, when possible, they have managed to learn from other countries. When we have had conferences, we have tried to bring in people from other countries to talk about their experiences as well, and it has been very rich and rewarding.

James Cowan: My principal point is that we tend to come at this from whatever category of organisation we are—humanitarian, development, etc. The HALO Trust is at the intersection of stabilisation, humanitarian and development needs. The problem of Afghanistan is not simply a humanitarian one. The humanitarian problem is a symptom of the economic crisis. There is also a military aspect to this, which is that it is a highly militarised society with a tendency towards warlord-ism, and we really need to watch that come the spring, when fighting resumes.

The object of our exercise should not be purely humanitarian. It needs to have an economic aspect to it. It needs to think about how we stabilise and de-weaponise Afghanistan, and how we deal with the hundreds of thousands of ex-fighters on both sides who are likely to go back to

conflict if pushed by these dire economic circumstances. Right now, all I am seeing is a humanitarian response and not nearly enough of an economic and stabilisation response.

Q36 **Mr Bacon:** I would like to start with James and then come to Elizabeth and Alain on the question of working with the Taliban. The Prime Minister said in August that it might be necessary to work with the Taliban. More recently, he said to a parliamentary Committee in the middle of November that, even though it is controversial, there is no option but to work with the Taliban.

James, what does working with the Taliban mean, particularly in an environment where there are sanctions and where it is very difficult for ordinary life to continue? Is working with the Taliban possible in any meaningful sense without doing some of the things that Governments do, including having embassies and engaging? What does it mean?

James Cowan: This is a really profound question. We need to think about where Afghanistan is going to be in 10 years' time. Do we really think that a liberal, Ashraf Ghani-style Government is going to be back, or do we think the Taliban are still going to be in power? I believe that the Taliban will still be in power. The particular nature of the coalition may change. It is a complex coalition, with the Haqqanis, the Quetta Shura, those who were in Doha, the people from Kandahar, etc. Nevertheless, it is likely that they will be in power.

Therefore, if we think ahead, we need to think about what sort of relationship we want with that country and how we want it to play its part on the world stage. Yes, we do need to open an embassy and to persuade, cajole and educate them to behave responsibly in a security context and with respect to human rights. We need to get on with it sooner rather than later, because nature abhors a vacuum, and others such as the Chinese and Russians will step in. I heard last week that the EU is thinking about reopening an embassy, and I think the British should be doing the same as soon as possible.

Q37 **Mr Bacon:** When you have made these points to British diplomats, what sort of response have you had?

James Cowan: I would like to be able to say that I am getting to talk to British diplomats every day of the week. I have just come back from the United States, where a more profound and sophisticated discussion about this is going on. I cannot claim to have spoken to senior British diplomats recently, but if I had that chance, that is what I would say to them.

Q38 **Mr Bacon:** There is a view that the Taliban have changed. The Prime Minister made the point that the Taliban of now are different from the Taliban of 20 years ago. I would love your view on the extent to which that is true. It must surely be true in one sense, in that the country with which the Taliban must deal has changed after 20 years of much more education for women and girls than was the case, and that, as a result, there is now a whole cohort in a way and at a scale that previously did

not exist, which makes the conditions with which the Taliban must deal different. Can you just unpack that a bit for us?

James Cowan: We should not be naive about the Taliban. They are different but I am not going to try and apologise for them or claim that in some way they are saints. This is clearly not the case. We should treat them as interests, not friends, in the typical, realist way of dealing with foreign policy. Since we will have mutual interests with them, that is the basis upon which to proceed.

I do think things have changed, and the Taliban know it. First of all, most of the population was not born when the Taliban were last in power. It is an incredibly young and growing population. It is highly urbanised. It has tasted western freedoms. There are different ways of doing things now in Afghanistan and it would be very hard for the Taliban to revert to the way they were done before. They know that, and the more enlightened amongst them know that better than others.

It is complicated, though. People tend to think that the Haqqanis are the bad ones, but some of the Haqqanis are tending more towards allowing women to work than perhaps some of the, what you might have thought of as more moderate, Kandaharis, who are, in fact, quite traditional. It is quite a complex picture and we would do well to try to understand it better than we currently do.

Mr Bacon: Presumably, we would do better if we had an embassy with people on the ground.

James Cowan: Exactly.

Elizabeth Winter: NGOs have always engaged with local powerholders; they have had to. It is equally true of Afghanistan. In some areas, the Taliban have been influencing and, in others, they have been in control, so NGOs have certainly had to relate to them. They are neutral and they look after the needs of the population. In order to do that, you need to have discussions, to ensure that you have safety of passage, etc. That has been perfectly possible in many areas. Unless you engage, you do not build any kind of understanding between you. Understanding can lead to more trust and, therefore, perhaps to influencing their behaviour.

In terms of whether they have changed, most of the Afghans I speak to will say, "No, don't trust them." They vary. The ones who negotiated the American withdrawal agreement in Doha will have seen a different side of the world, will have seen different things, and will often have sat for hours in rooms with women, talking to them. That will have had an effect. Those who are rural, who have come to Kabul expecting riches, who do not have anything to eat, and who have been brought up in a madrassa to feel that they have no relations with women, and never should, despite being borne by them, are different.

It is going to take some time before we know how it will pan out, but to withdraw, to ostracise, is not the way forward. We have to communicate

and engage. I was very pleased to see that Sir Simon Gass was sent out to talk to the Taliban, and I hope that that is not the first time.

Alain Délétroz: What Elizabeth has just underlined is essential. If you look at the effective Government of the Taliban right now in Afghanistan, you often see contradictory messages coming out of them. This is why talking to them now, with the different compositions of this Government, is also a way to ensure that those who are moving the country, and have the will to move the country, towards something quite in line with international conventions, which, as the de facto Government of Afghanistan, they have to take on board now, will have a chance to take the upper hand in the coming months and years.

If they are increasingly ostracised, what we could fear is a country that is suffering and looking inwards, and where those at the top who are preaching about looking inwards, and not accepting the full complexity of the obligations that a state member of the United Nations should take upon itself, might win the day. I do not think that this is what we want in the room where you are and in a larger way today.

Q39 **Mr Bacon:** What lessons should the UK Government learn from their experience in Afghanistan in order to improve their humanitarian response in other countries at risk of destabilisation?

James Cowan: That is the biggest question ever. The humanitarian response needs to be dovetailed within a broader UK strategy. What I witness too often is that the humanitarian, security, development and diplomatic are all done entirely separately, and that there is no sense of cohesion. My concern is that we recently had the integrated review, which was supposed to integrate these things, but I see no real move towards genuine integration of the different arms of British foreign policy to serve the global Britain interest. I have been trying to push for this myself.

In the context of taking action on conflict, we need to find a new way that is not the heavy-handed interventionism of the 2000s, nor the isolationism of today. We need a new way of doing this and I would really love to see the United Kingdom take a lead on that front.

Elizabeth Winter: Don't throw money at it when you don't know where it is going, and don't allow corruption to continue. Corruption has been extremely destabilising in Afghanistan and has led people down paths that Afghans would normally never go down. Most of the older Afghans I know were brought up to be extremely honest; Islam teaches you to be honest. They lost faith in their Government some time ago. They lost faith in people who were asking them for money for the simplest things. That has been extremely damaging. If you read the SIGAR reports, they are quite frightening as well.

I have been involved in Afghanistan since travelling there for the first time in 1977 and for the second in 1978, and I continued to go there.

What I found was that no heed was given to the internal expertise of Afghans. There were many examples of that. There used to be a really good anti-locust scheme run by the Ministry of Agriculture, for example. It was set up in the local agriculture departments, so people had warning. When the international community came in, things like that just disappeared, because they brought in so-called experts from outside, who really did not know a great deal about Afghanistan, to advise them, to get large salaries and to be thoroughly resented, if they were not even polite, as some of them were not.

That is not to say that there have not been good aid programmes that have supported the Afghan Government and Ministers, and have done really good work. The UK is included in that, but real mistakes were also made. Having young women with no status or experience whatsoever being told they were gender focal points was another major mistake. There are lots of things like that, but, as I said earlier, I am not optimistic that people learn these lessons.

Q40 **Mr Bacon:** The thing that interests me particularly about this is that after 9/11 Afghanistan became, over a period of many years afterwards, the biggest focus for the Department for International Development. It had the biggest DFID office in the world. There was no lack of effort, money or people. As we have seen in many places in Africa, there was what you might call "four-wheel drive-ism", with a lot of people flying in, with big salaries, big contracts, consultants and four-wheel drives. They do their two or three-year tour and then move on somewhere else. Are you saying that that happened in Afghanistan and it ended up being part of the problem, notwithstanding what you have said about the good work that did happen?

Elizabeth Winter: It was part of the problem but I would not lay it necessarily at DFID's door. There were obvious examples when consultants were paid and did not do a good job; that is certainly true. But DFID used to be able to fund civil society organisations, NGOs and community development, and it should revert to that. It was the same as we heard earlier: that it was thought to be too expensive to fund HALO Trust. We were told the same thing: "We cannot deal with lots of different NGOs. We cannot have the extra costs that that entails. We prefer to give the money to the trust funds."

Now, if they were able to fund civil society, particularly small Afghan organisations, they could do a lot of good work. They would understand much better how to use the funding to get to the people who need it at the moment.

Q41 **Mr Bacon:** At the moment, they operate mainly at a large scale, with budgets through intermediaries, to which they let contracts.

Elizabeth Winter: I don't know how they are operating at the moment. They are still discussing how to—

Mr Bacon: Sorry, I mean over the last 20 years.

Elizabeth Winter: It varied enormously, but it was decided about 10 years ago that the extra costs of dealing with more than a few organisations was too much and, as I said, they preferred to put money in trust funds and so on. They still have no civil society fund, so it is not possible to approach FCDO at the moment and ask it to fund things like this, although I do understand that it is considering the possibility of doing this now. It should be encouraged to think of any way it can of getting assistance in and given out by the people who know what they are doing.

Alain Délétroz: It is difficult to ask a Swiss what the British Government did wrong or right in Afghanistan, but there is now some soul-searching in all the countries that took part in the military coalition. Military interventions of that large scale, after what happened in Afghanistan, have certainly come to be questioned by all of us. I am listening to the debate today in your Committee. I was recently invited to a similar debate in another big European country that also took part in this operation, with the same soul-searching. One thing that has to be questioned is the added value of such heavy military interventions in countries that we know so little about, and particularly interventions that last for so long.

Q42 **Chair:** In a private evidence session to this Committee, we were told that the development money that the UK gave to Afghanistan over the last 20 years, which should have been spent on alleviating poverty, had a focus on security rather than stability. I wonder whether that resonates with any of the witnesses and whether that was the right way to be investing British taxpayers' money.

Elizabeth Winter: It was very difficult to find out where the money went. That is the problem. There are transparency organisations that have been pushing for there to be more transparency by DFID and now FCDO, and they did improve. None the less, there are ways of hiding what you are really supporting. Given that we are talking about funding now, you will not be surprised to know that I think the 0.7% should be reinstated. A really good look should be taken at paying back those people who are already owed money and at ways in which money can be got in now and spent sensibly.

Q43 **Chair:** This Committee shares those views. Devtracker, where the Government put where their money is going, has only just been updated to 10 projects that are going to Afghanistan, but nine of those are pre-2021. The Government have said a lot about bringing in additional money. After they took away, they are bringing in slightly less than they took out of the pot for Afghanistan. Are any of you aware of new projects or funding streams that are coming forward to Afghanistan?

James Cowan: No. My concern is that the decision to fund the multilaterals and the voluntary trust fund, etc., has meant that the cut

from 0.7% to 0.5% has fallen disproportionately on British NGOs. That is why we have taken a 75% cut, or look like we might be doing so, and yet we are incredibly Afghan-ised. Of my 3,000 staff, only five in August were not Afghans. We are incredibly lean, highly affordable and highly localised, and yet punished because, in some way, it was inconvenient for the British to run bilateral programmes with British NGOs.

Yet they love shovelling money out of the door at multilaterals, with hugely expensive salaries and UN budgets, without really having any means of knowing how that money was being spent. Whether it was really going out of the door in the UK's national interest, I don't know. I am highly sceptical of it.

Elizabeth Winter: They have had their staff cut, and so to work out how they could operate by funding NGOs might be more difficult now than it was. This needs to be looked at and, as somebody has already said, if you don't really understand a country, you can blunder about and make a huge mess.

Chair: Alain, does that ring true with you—investment going on security rather than stability in the last 20 years?

Alain Délétroz: Yes, but what I am waiting for—and I feel a little unqualified to answer this question—is for historians to step in, maybe in 20 years, and tell us why that happened so quickly, how come the Taliban took over the country without bloodshed, and how come, in spite of all this heavy investment and all the military power that the national army of Afghanistan had, nobody decided to defend that system or the Republic of Afghanistan. This is a huge question to all westerners—to Governments and to us. With the kind of fieldwork and groundwork that we do, this is a huge question.

Of course, I feel very much in sympathy with what James said, because we are in the same situation. In Afghanistan, our only expatriate staff is the country director. Everyone else is Afghan. We can say that all the money invested in organisations like HALO Trust or Geneva Call is money well invested, with a direct impact on the ground and discretion. I have somehow developed a personal allergy to huge white Land Cruisers in countries like Afghanistan or Libya. I cannot understand that there is still so much money for this kind of operation and why it is so difficult to find £300,000 or £400,000 for a discrete programme that will have concrete impacts on conflict regions.

Chair: Alain, I think your allergy is catching. All of us have the symptoms. While I share your desire to want to know why this happened, we are slightly keener to get it more quickly than in 20 years' time. This inquiry is trying to learn the lessons now, so that we can prevent it happening in any other country around the world.

Q44 **Theo Clarke:** James, I was horrified to hear about the terrible deaths of some of your HALO staff. Did you have enough support from the UK

Government during that terrible tragedy?

James Cowan: It was a pretty searing moment. It would have been nice to have heard from the Foreign Secretary. We handled it well and we dealt with the circumstances, but I did feel that we were on our own.

Q45 **Navendu Mishra:** Did you have any support at all from the Government?

James Cowan: I got a nice letter from Lord Ahmad some weeks later.

Chair: Thank you, witnesses. I would be really grateful if you could express our deep gratitude to all your staff. The work that they do is phenomenal. I am ashamed that we are not giving you the support and the clarity that you need right now or that you needed in the preceding months, but please keep doing what you are doing. The world needs Afghanistan to remain stable and, as a Committee, we will be pushing as hard as we can to make sure that the resources follow to enable that. Thank you, witnesses and Committee members.