



Select Committee on International Relations and Defence

Corrected oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan

Wednesday 23 September 2020

11 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Alton of Liverpool; Baroness Fall; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Lord Mendelsohn; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Baroness Rawlings; Lord Reid of Cardowan.

Evidence Session No. 4

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 30 - 36

Witnesses

I: Dr Orzala Nemat, Director, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit; Charles Davy, Managing Director, Afghanaid; Mark Bowden, Senior Research Associate, Overseas Development Institute.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Dr Orzala Nemat, Charles Davy and Mark Bowden.

Q30 **The Chair:** Welcome to the second session today of our inquiry into the UK and Afghanistan. Our witnesses for this session are Dr Orzala Nemat, Director of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit; Charles Davy, Managing Director of Afghanaid; and Mark Bowden, Senior Research Associate at the Overseas Development Institute.

Thank you for being here to share your expertise so that we can be better informed in the preparation of our report. As ever, I do the procedural part where I remind members and witnesses that the session is on the record. It is broadcast and transcribed. I also remind members to declare any interests they may have when they ask their question. I shall ask the first question, which is usually very general in nature, and I will then turn to my colleagues, who will ask more detailed questions.

Turning to the first question, what would you identify as the biggest development and humanitarian challenges facing Afghanistan?

Dr Orzala Nemat: It is my pleasure to be here in the witness panel. Afghanistan is going through a war, so there are humanitarian and development needs linked to the ongoing violence, mostly to do with migration issues. There need to be specific programmes and strategies to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. There are issues with returnees, another form of refugee migration. Due to the war and to the restrictions and further pressures from neighbouring countries, Afghan refugees are returning, even though the violence has still not ended.

In addition to the violence, there are natural disasters. Like many other parts of the world, Afghanistan is going through a lot of issues due to natural disasters. We recently had floods that were extremely destructive to some areas, such as Parwan province, and several other provinces have been affected. In an extremely volatile political situation, as a war is going on, specific strategies are required to respond to these major challenges. I have quickly highlighted these, and the other distinguished panellists would probably like to add further.

Charles Davy: Good morning, everybody. I agree with Orzala that the conflict is perhaps the major challenge, and I would add perhaps corruption and the weak systems for law and order and justice. Of course, the narco-economy also contributes to the challenges. If these issues could be addressed somewhat, if they were mitigated against and reduced, we would start to create the environment in which we can focus on natural resource management and water management, which will allow for economic growth.

I point to natural resource management and water management in particular as fuelling economic growth, because that is what the majority of the population is dependent on. They are engaged in agricultural activities and it just holds them back. Of course, with better natural resource management, you would have a reduction in risk from natural

disasters, including flooding and drought, and potentially avalanches, which set back communities for years when they are struck.

If the economic engine was able to really kick off at the grass roots, you would start to get more kids in school, particularly girls. People would be able to afford better medical care. You would get an altogether healthier and more vibrant society.

Mark Bowden: Perhaps I can take a slightly different tack on this, because I certainly agree that conflict is a major challenge to development. Looking at where Afghanistan needs to go in the future on development, a new Afghan national peace and development plan is being proposed for the Geneva conference, which puts three pillars on the development side. One of them is market building, the second is state building and the third is peacebuilding. That underlines the need for diversification of the economy, which is hindered by the conflict.

The second issue that people need to be concerned about in development terms is the levels of unemployment. We need an economy that focuses more on employment generation than it does at the moment. There is an increasing problem of youth unemployment, which adds to political instability. Another area where we have gone wrong in the past in our development focus has been too much emphasis on expecting rapid growth from the exploitation of Afghanistan's natural resources. It is important that, as we go through the peace process, we also have a more realistic view of what we need to do in development.

Turning to the humanitarian side, internal displacement is a massive issue that will have long-standing repercussions for the ability to bring peace and stability. Over 3 million people are internally displaced. There is a large external refugee population outside the country. None of them has real access to land, title or livelihoods, and they add to the increasing levels of poverty. One of the real challenges, whether or not you have peace, is how to deal with this increasing and increasingly vulnerable displaced population.

The Chair: Thank you very much for setting the scene and for approaching the question from different angles. That was very helpful indeed.

Q31 **Baroness Fall:** Thank you for your time this morning. I wondered what you all thought of how the Afghan talks with the Taliban were going, what you considered to be a success for those talks, and how you considered the prospects for failure.

Dr Orzala Nemat: As we all know, at the moment we are in the process of kick-starter negotiations; the actual negotiations have not yet begun. The latest update indicates that there are two contact groups, from the Taliban and Afghan negotiation teams, and they are planning to discuss it. If I may picture a successful outcome, it would be one that results in an immediate end to violence, or a comprehensive plan for a ceasefire with a clear strategy for reconciliation and the reintegration of armed

forces from both sides, and one that ensures that everyone is included and nobody is left behind.

At the moment, the concerns are quite serious. Women in particular are more concerned, as well as minority ethnic groups and different religious groups, because of comments by members of the negotiating team that give specific indications of what form of Islamic order both sides are foreseeing for the future, particularly on the Taliban side.

Failure could be defined in two ways. One is the continuation of the status quo. We have violence every day. As I speak, a war is going on in different parts of the country, and civilians as well as factions are losing a lot of people. It would be a failure if we continued with the status quo.

Better scenarios are those where there is an immediate ceasefire and a lasting peace. Something in between would probably risk women, which is a major concern. Women from Afghanistan, within civil society, the government and elsewhere, are trying very hard to address this and highlight their concerns in order to ensure that there is no compromise that turns a blind eye to the political, economic and social future of half the population.

Charles Davy: In preparation for this question, I polled different cross-sections of my staff last week and was struck by their apparent distrust of the peace process. They are concerned that there is pressure, particularly from the Americans, for a quick peace, and that things will be agreed to before the November elections. They are really concerned that Ashraf Ghani's government will be pushed to accept things that they should not accept. They believe that the peace process should probably take 18 months or two years, and they seem open and comfortable with that in the hope that it can be done right.

With the prospect of a quite drawn-out process, they are hopeful that there could be scope for much greater inclusion of women and minorities than there is currently. I am talking not so much about Uzbeks and Hazaras, who may even be considered majorities at certain reference points, but particularly about Nuristanis and Balochis, and much smaller minorities such as Hindus and Sikhs. They would hope to see mechanisms for including and recognising these populations, such as through observer status, participation in problem-solving workshops, et cetera.

In terms of what success would look like, everybody says that it would be an Islamic republic. Nobody is talking about wanting an Islamic emirate. They really do want a democratic system. A very recent survey found that, across the country, something like 82% of the population favour an Islamic republic and only 7% an Islamic emirate.

Many people are concerned about the role of women. Educated women here are very fearful that they will lose opportunities for work and careers, and that their children will lose opportunities, if too much

pressure is put on accepting a deal that does not involve their participation and very present input into the whole process.

Mark Bowden: We need to agree that there will be no rapid solution. High expectations of quick breakthroughs need to be managed far better. We also need to make sure that the dialogue is truly national. Afghanistan has a very strong rural/urban divide, and this is potentially a peace process between urban elites and the Taliban representing the rural countryside. There needs to be better, more truly national engagement as part of this process, extending to the engagement of civil society, to ensure that we have stronger regional and local representation of civil society and women's groups in the process, as well as the current team.

The Chair: I turn now to Baroness Helic for her question, which very much develops some of the themes you have just been referring to.

Q32 **Baroness Helic:** Good morning, everyone. Good morning, Orzala. I have not seen you for quite some time, so I hope you are well and safe.

I have quite a lot of questions to ask, but I will try to put them into two short sentences. First, I would like to express my massive admiration for all the work that the women of Afghanistan do, Orzala in particular. They live under constant threat. Some of them have been regularly attacked, yet they keep on pushing and fighting for their rights. As women who live in safe countries, we have an extra responsibility to always be there and offer to support them in the best way we can. I know that whatever we do is very small, but here it is.

I have come to a conclusion, observing these talks. I find it staggering that, 20 years ago, the Taliban was our biggest enemy and it is now our friend, as is Saudi Arabia. It shows that we have really gone off track here. Women and girls have taken the brunt of conflict in Afghanistan. It appears to me that peace and women's rights have been framed as an ugly but necessary trade-off. Am I being too naive or too pessimistic in thinking this way? I would love to hear what you think about it.

What is the best way that we can help you not only sustain what you have achieved over the last 20 years but develop and build on it?

The Chair: Dr Nemat, over to you. You have been very much at the forefront of the issues that Baroness Helic has referred to.

Dr Orzala Nemat: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Baroness Helic, for the question. It is excellent to see you virtually as well after a long time.

I am grateful to the American people and the American Congress that, yesterday, when Ambassador Khalilzad was delivering witness accounts, he was questioned on women's issues and the future of women in the US-Taliban agreement; I will not call it a US-Taliban peace deal. This question was completely ignored. Ambassador Khalilzad has his defence in saying, "This is the beginning and we are controlling the process". This is contradictory, because, on the one hand, it is an intra-Afghan dialogue,

with Afghans deciding among themselves, and, on the other hand, the United States is saying that it is in control.

Our hope is that this control, whatever it means, results in something tangible. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has been widely dependent on foreign aid for everything, including development programmes on women's employment. The Taliban is not a grass-roots, rural movement. Let us be very frank here. I do not think that the new 4x4s, the weaponry or the explosive material that it uses are products of the Afghan villages. They all come through outside support. This dependency has to be addressed.

I am happy to say that, just yesterday, my organisation launched a report focusing on women's role in the peace process. We have deliberately focused on the provinces and women leaders within rural communities at the provincial, district and even village levels. Charles is here as a witness from Afghanaid, which has implemented massive programmes in rural Afghanistan. This shows that women in rural and urban areas all want their rights to be guaranteed.

What you say is partly correct, Baroness Helic. Some people are trying to pit women's rights and peace against each other. In reality, it is hugely problematic, because women are now actively participating in politics and society. At the same time, it will be impossible for the Taliban to move on while ignoring women. In fact, to the Taliban's credit, out of genuine honesty it did not have women delegations in the peace negotiations. This is clearly its current stance; it does not believe in women's rights.

My expectation and hope are that our four female delegates at the negotiating table, as well as our excellent female journalists and filmmakers in Doha—and more women are trying to go there to talk—will convince the Taliban that its thinking is outdated and it can no longer count on ignoring half the population. I strongly believe that the Taliban of today will not be able to convince its own wives and daughters that they should be kept locked in their homes and denied their basic rights, such as education, economy and politics.

Charles Davy: Baroness Helic, you are not being naive in this. There is perhaps a readiness to sacrifice some of the gains. There are two schools of thought on this. People say, "Let's just get the peace and then we'll solve the interethnic or gender issues later", but there is a real fear. The Taliban is saying, "We've changed. We're different from what we were 19 years ago". That is honestly not what I see on a daily basis in the field. Where we are running women's programmes, we are always questioned about the work that is being done.

While they may be included among the elite population, for example the more sophisticated women in Kabul, women and girls in the provinces, smaller towns, villages and provincial capitals are really fearful that they are going to lose a lot of what has been gained. We owe it to them to stand behind them. As Orzala says, they are half the population here. It cannot just be a negotiation with the other half.

There is a real desire among women and girls who, over the past 19 years, have begun to hope for careers and more diverse lives. We really need to make sure that they are involved in this process. Whether it is involvement through the peace negotiations or at the table in Doha, participation in consultative assemblies and commissions, or inclusion in high-level problem-solving workshops, if there are avenues in which women can be engaged it would be extremely beneficial in ensuring that they are heard and that whatever comes out of this peace process recognises their rights and preserves opportunities for them. As you say, it is important to preserve what has been gained over the past 19 years, but even now it is still a very difficult place for a woman to live. It is imperative that the gains continue year on year. We cannot just accept the status quo as being enough.

Mark Bowden: I very much agree. It will be very difficult for the Taliban to turn the clock back on what has been achieved in women's issues. In particular, there is strong and increasing local demand for girls to stay in education. In my previous job, I used to have regular discussions with the Taliban over humanitarian issues. Among the negotiating team and the political commission, there is a shift towards recognising the different environment that they are operating in, but in the Taliban that applies only to the political commission and does not necessarily go through to grass-roots attitudes. It is a matter of building on women's representation in the talks and other meetings, and promoting their overall engagement better nationally. We have to focus on that.

Q33 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** Thank you to our guests for their invaluable advice and expertise in these areas. Over the past couple of decades, when we have been looking at development and aid work we have tended, perhaps not unnaturally, to discuss this in the framework of aid and development assistance to the Kabul government, either directly or through international organisations.

I am interested in the reality of development and aid work in Taliban-controlled areas. There has just been reference to some of these discussions. How different is this to areas controlled by the Afghan government? Have there been any changes to that situation since the US-Taliban deal in February, a short time though that is? Finally, how might the reality of development work in Taliban-controlled areas change after a possible intra-Afghan peace agreement?

Charles Davy: I will begin by describing what it is like working in a largely government-controlled area. If we were planning to address needs in a particular district or particular communities in a government-controlled area, we would begin with a needs assessment, which would result in a proposal to donors and the awarding of funding. That needs assessment would have been done in close co-operation with the communities and local government, and we would get very good and well-informed input in that process, typically.

Once we had started a project, we would begin with an inception workshop, where we would call all stakeholders together. We would

explain the programme to them and how we planned to implement it. We would talk about mutual responsibility in programme implementation from the community side, from the local government side and from our side. We would then need to register the programme with the government, either at the central level in Kabul or at the provincial level, with the provincial governor or the designated departments, depending on what the programme was engaged in.

At that point, we might come across stumbling blocks. They might try to change the design. They might put forward people we should hire or direct us towards communities of particular interest to them that are outside the original needs assessment. There would be pressure there. We would work with it, negotiate with it, and eventually generally come to a solid agreement that we could work with.

Throughout the life of the project, we would regularly report to local government, which would undertake field visits from its departments and give input on how we could improve things and collaborate better. Altogether, it would generally be a very collaborative process.

As for Taliban-controlled areas, there are different levels of control across different areas. Typically, in a Taliban-controlled area, there is a shadow government, in effect. There will be a shadow governor and, particularly pertinent to us, a Taliban commissioner for NGOs and companies to whom we have to relate. To begin with, they would not be involved in design. We would not have the time or opportunity to work through the complexities of involving them in a design process. We would have to build that on what we know of their attitudes and how they operate already, as it is an area we have been in.

Once the project was funded, they would not attend the induction workshop but we would try to reach out to the commissioner for NGOs and companies, and to the shadow governor, and inform them of what we were planning to do. At this point, we would typically be asked for a 10% tax on everything that we do. We would push back. They might ask us to employ certain individuals or to contract certain businesses to do some of the work, and we would push back again. Like most other NGOs, we have a set of red lines that we will not cross in these negotiations.

We would involve the local community in that negotiation so that the project could get started. The community leaders would meet with Taliban leaders, and they would negotiate on our behalf to get the programme off the ground and get it okayed by the Taliban. We know that there are occasions when the Taliban will simply pass the 10% tax to the community members receiving the assistance, and have some way of being paid, but it is really difficult, once the threat of violence is there, to keep that completely at bay.

The programme would go on. We would be reporting to the government on one side and to the Taliban on the other, keeping them as informed as we can. Depending on the type of programme that we are doing, for the communities as well as for the government and the Taliban, we need to

be very conscious of culture and Islamic values, and to implement programmes according to those standards and have our staff behave according to those norms.

If the government found a problem in a programme, they would tell us about it and we would try to resolve it together. If the Taliban found a problem, they would likely stop us working and then insist that we stop the project for a time. That could go on for a few days, weeks or months until the issues are resolved. When you are in that negotiation, there is a very overt threat of violence. They will come out and say, "If you do this, your staff might not survive".

That is the main thing. We try to work with it. It is a very difficult context to work in. We have to be very conscious of security and to continually map the stakeholders. Local Taliban government structures change on a fairly regularly basis and are rotated around, so you have to build new relationships every year or two years to ensure that you comply with the wishes of those particular leaders.

The Chair: Thank you for such a careful description of life on the ground for those trying to deliver aid.

Q34 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** This question is quite a change of field. It is about Covid-19. Could you say what impact the Covid-19 pandemic has been having in Afghanistan? What are the most serious aspects of the pandemic beyond the immediate health impact on the population? We do not need to go too much into the numbers, because I doubt whether they are very credible anyway, but I want to hear from you about the impact on Afghans generally, not just on their health.

Dr Orzala Nemat: This is a very important and timely question. The response at the very beginning was hugely problematic, because at the time the government were supposed to focus on preventing Covid-19 cases, but they started to turn this into a PR activity and have lots of politicians visit the dedicated sites for building hospitals. There were serious issues with restricting non-government organisations' work in importing or bringing in ventilators. The health capacity to respond to emergency or complicated cases was also a major concern.

One overall impact of Covid-19, which is probably the same in many other countries like Afghanistan, and we will see what the research tells us, is the further deepening of poverty. During the lockdown period, the poorest of the poor were not dramatically affected by Covid because they were deprived of everything anyway, but the middle and lower middle-class professionals, such as painters, masons and carpenters, who relied mostly on small businesses, were badly affected.

I was in the UK last week. Arriving back in Kabul this week, I realised that people are starting to pretend that it is over. Everyone is back on the street. Unfortunately, the government are not helping to raise awareness and alert people that Covid is still a global pandemic and a risk. There is a need to highlight that this is an ongoing challenge. The impact is

probably not highly significant, because the lockdown lasted for quite a short time in Afghanistan compared to elsewhere. In that short period, it expanded the level of poverty to the lower middle class.

Mark Bowden: The economic impact of Covid-19 is the main area of concern. First, it has had a major impact in the way aid is seen. I am very worried at the moment that the decline in Western economies has affected aid budgets. Already, cuts have started to be made on aid going into Afghanistan as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is the wrong time to be making those cuts to organisations. It is having an effect on aid budgets, not just in the UK.

The other unfortunate consequence in Afghanistan was that it opened up an unhealthy dialogue between government and civil society, where NGOs and others were seen as competitors with government for aid resources. We have seen a deterioration in civil society's and NGOs' relationships with the government, at a time when there is a need to better utilise and make use of NGO contributions to Afghanistan.

Charles Davy: The lockdown lasted for a month or six weeks, starting in early April. By Eid, at the end of May, it was over. It was never going to be sustainable in a country where so many people are dependent on a daily wage. Since that time, things have been fairly normal in terms of human activity, although some efforts are being made on social distancing, mask wearing, et cetera. It has gone through the population, to a large degree. As Lord Hannay said, the numbers are not particularly reliable, but anecdotally among our staff, for example, 75 out of 400 believe they have had the infection, which is quite a high ratio. A lot of lives were lost. Graveyards were digging graves 24/7 to try to keep up.

Alongside Mark's comments on the economic impacts, there was a significant increase in the price of goods. Everything went up, at a time when people were not earning income. That was a particularly hard time for them. There has been significant unemployment and greater poverty as a result. In 2019, GDP was 2.9%; projected GDP for this year is minus 5.5%. There has been a significant increase in criminality and the narcotics trade. That is very observable in Kabul too.

The hospitals could not cope. They were stretched to breaking point. We reached a peak and came down, and there has been very little infection among my own staff, with no new infections for six weeks, but it seems as if, this past week, we are entering a second phase. Pretty much every day for the past week to 10 days there has been a doubling of the number of tested cases put out by the Ministry of Health and the WHO.

Q35 **Lord Grocott:** Many thanks to our witnesses for all they have said so far. This is only our second public examination of witnesses today, but what is already coming through very clearly indeed, at least to me, if it is not too obvious to state, is the colossal importance of the involvement of the international community in the peace process and the future development of Afghanistan on a happier path.

In that context, what are your hopes for the meeting in Geneva in November? Would you like to give me an overview of what has been happening over the last few years, and maybe project a bit into the future on the numbers of countries that, diplomatically or through aid, are involved in Afghanistan and its future? Is that number, either absolutely or in amounts of aid and support, on a downward or upward trajectory?

Dr Orzala Nemat: The best person to give more on the numbers is Mr Bowden, with his direct experience, but I would like to emphasise the importance of donor commitment. The international community has a responsibility to Afghanistan, because it has been at the forefront of conflicts since the Cold War and since 1978, when Afghanistan was invaded by the Soviets following a coup d'état. I will not take up your time going through the history. This has been a very long period and we are not yet out of violent conflict. In this conflict, a lot of outside countries are involved and there is a strong internal aspect to it, too.

The donor commitment conference being tied to the negotiations with an insurgent group is hugely worrying and concerning, because any delay in the commitment of development and humanitarian funding will not affect the people sitting in the palace or enjoying luxury hotels in Doha; they will have their salaries, their money and their resources. It will be the majority of the population and the poorest of the poor who are affected.

If there is still an argument to be made on humanitarian grounds, as Afghans we want the Geneva conference to happen. We want aid and humanitarian development to continue, at least for a period, but mostly learning the lessons of the past. There are examples of programmes, projects and interventions that have really helped sustainability. I hope that those continue, especially because we are hearing concerns at the moment that the Geneva conference might be delayed if the peace talks do not have a result. My desire is to see them separated and the humanitarian and development assistance continue while we discuss a future political settlement.

Mark Bowden: I should perhaps explain that I used to be the UN Humanitarian Co-ordinator and Resident Co-ordinator, and in that role I used to be the co-ordinator of the donor community.

In overall terms, there is no doubt that aid is on, and will continue on, a downward trajectory. How far down it goes is really the issue. The donor configuration is called the five plus three: five major donors represented in discussions, and three minor ones. Of the five major donors, the US was the most significant. Due to difficult relationships, its aid has been reducing. It might save lives. Japan is another major donor, but for economic reasons it will not be able to maintain the same levels of aid. Germany, the EU and the UK are the other members. Germany is likely to stay very much the same. The EU is also involved in long-term commitments, so that will be quite stable. I hope that the UK will also maintain its commitment.

We should not hold out any hope for a peace dividend from the current aid configuration. To clarify, my understanding of the Geneva conference at the moment is that it will go ahead, but there is a discussion about whether the commitments should be made only on a one-year basis, to see how the peace process goes, or on a longer-term basis. I agree with Orzala that it is critical, just in the effect on the marketplace and the economy, that longer-term commitments are made. Holding up aid commitments on the basis of the peace process could be very destructive.

Charles Davy: I would echo what Orzala and Mark have said. It is really important that the conference goes ahead and that funding levels remain close to where they are. If there is a peace to be had, I would hope that there is not simply a withdrawal of security funding, and that some of that funding could transition to development funding and support other areas, rather than being tied to the current situation. With the funding that is provided, there is a need for greater efficiency, as well as greater accountability and governance, of the funds that are flowing through, to make sure that it is targeted to the needs and implemented in the way it should be. That close monitoring should be a condition of the funding.

Q36 **Lord Mendelsohn:** Thank you very much for joining us today. It has been very helpful. Further to the comments that you made in answer to Lord Grocott's question, I want to probe these issues further.

I appreciate that I might be pushing you into the territory of speculation, but I would like to get a sense of the consequences of what you have been discussing. The trajectory in aid is down. At the end of last year, the World Bank said that it was likely that military and civilian aid would need to increase, but it must be kept at the same level for those things to sustain themselves. We have had the Covid consequences and a lot of this is contingent on peace.

It would be very useful to get some sense from you about this decline in aid. If it were to be prolonged, what would the consequences be? What are the risks? What are the things that are most likely to be affected in short order and over the long term?

Looking at people's hope that the economy will grow in order to create self-sufficiency and be able to deal with these drops in aid, there has been a huge impact because of Covid, as there has around the world. What prospects are there for the economy to generate significant developments in diversification and other things in order to counterbalance aid drops? Are there particular areas of economic support that are required and which we need to consider?

Dr Orzala Nemat: As I said in response to the earlier question, the consequences of cuts in foreign aid will be on the majority of the population. The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, for example, is one of the channels or mechanisms through which DfID, formerly—the FCDO now—paid a significant contribution. The result of a further limitation to aid will be no further assistance to most of the rural

population across the country in particular, as well as in urban settings, where the majority of people benefit from it.

There is also a gender aspect to cuts in foreign aid, because there is the possibility that women will be further denied access to some support programmes on women's economic empowerment and so forth. Knowing the current challenges that we are facing with the existing system, with further limitations on gender and no stronger commitment to including women, there is a chance that these cuts in foreign aid will have a greater effect on programmes focusing on girls' and women's education, income generation or economic activity.

We may need less funding in the security sector for a period if there is a comprehensive ceasefire and peace agreement with the Taliban, but even then the violence will continue, so there will still be some need. Significant financial cuts in the security sector are of major concern, because, to be frank, even in the very best scenario that we can predict there are active criminal networks and there will unfortunately be a period of further violence.

Charles Davy: I agree with Orzala. Significant cuts in aid now will be quite catastrophic. Statistics from 2017—and it has increased since then—showed that 54% of people were living below the poverty line. That number will go up further. Two million children lacked sufficient nutrition, and the number will increase. The 34% of the population who are food insecure will increase. It will be a very difficult time for a great many people across the country, especially those who are already in vulnerable situations, such as those in female-headed households, the disabled, the elderly and the frail.

I really believe that it is important to have a very clear plan for the reduction of aid, and not simply to think that we can make carte blanche cuts because we have a peace dividend. I firmly believe that we are looking at perhaps a 10 or 15-year plan to reduce in a measured way, at the same time as we are building capacity, mirroring those reductions through economic growth and supporting the capacity of government to implement the services that are needed by society.

Mark Bowden: I acknowledge that Afghanistan has the highest levels of aid dependency globally, and it will be a real challenge to sustain that. At the same time, to answer the question directly, the capacity for the government to pick up on the revenue base is very low. Although public financial management is quite good, the revenue base is low and likely to get lower, so we will be challenged with an increasing aid gap. That also requires looking at efficiencies within the system. The ARTF needs to be looked at. There is a dependence in the country on the NGO sector for the development and delivery of services. It needs to be protected in the aid cuts to ensure the provision of services across the country.

The Chair: It simply remains for me to thank our three witnesses for contributing your expertise in a way that will enrich our ability to draft and then publish a report early next year. Thank you very much indeed.