

Restoring Social Services: Identifying Priorities

Dr. Sima Samar

Thank you for the opportunity today to talk about restoring services in education, health, and other social service sectors in Afghanistan and especially the role of local NGOs.

Because of 23 years of war and poverty, we have to rebuild our country from almost nothing. Education and health care systems in Afghanistan have been devastated. Moreover, the job ahead in Afghanistan is not only reconstruction of things destroyed during the war, it is construction. Virtually no development took place since war began, and earlier development never reached large parts of the country.

Our country has made some improvements since December when an interim government was put in place, but there is still a very long way to go, especially for women and especially in the health and education sectors.

The combined, coordinated, and cooperative efforts of the Afghan government, local NGOs, international NGOs, UN agencies, and donor nations are necessary to take the next steps in rebuilding the country, providing services to the people, and advancing women's rights and human rights.

Most importantly, Afghanistan needs funding in order to restore social services. The country needs financial resources to demonstrate that peace creates changes in the conditions of people's lives. Almost ten months have gone by and because little reconstruction money has reached Afghanistan. Virtually no rebuilding, outside of some small NGO projects, has begun in any sector. The world cannot expect Afghanistan to be rebuilt or stability to be sustained in this region of the world without more help.

The other issue is where funding should go and who should lead reconstruction projects. For the most part, most donor nations have refused to provide direct funding to either the Afghan government or to local NGOs and most funding has gone to international NGOs and UN agencies instead. In most discussions about reconstruction in Afghanistan, almost every speaker talks

about the need for Afghan-led reconstruction. But the on the ground reality has not been as much Afghan-led as it should be.

The unwillingness of donors to fund the Afghan government is having bad consequences for reconstruction and for the future of NGO work in the country. This funding situation is causing the government to resent NGOs. The large disparity between expatriate salaries and Afghan government salaries is adding to this tension. A major challenge is how to create a good balance between NGOs and government activities to prevent a backlash.

As the head of an Afghan NGO for the past 13 years, I believe that local and international NGOs have an absolutely crucial role to play in reconstruction, in the delivery of humanitarian services, and in holding the government accountable for progress on women's rights and human rights. But, now there is a government, and it should have responsibility and resources for some social service functions. Addressing the lack of resources overall and providing more support for the Afghan government and for Afghan-led and women-led NGOs are important strategies.

Women-led Afghan NGOs have a particularly important role to play in providing services to women and children and in increasing women's leadership in reconstruction. Some of these NGOs have been providing education and health services in Afghanistan and in refugee areas in Pakistan for years. When UN agencies, international NGOs, and donor nations have come and gone from Afghanistan over the past 23 years of war, it is the local NGOs who have stayed behind to provide services that those in power in the country have either been unable or unwilling to provide. These organizations know what the local needs are, but need they need direct funds to meet these needs.

International NGOs also must begin to listen to local NGOs rather than imposing their own notions of Afghan culture and traditions. In recent years, I have heard international NGO leaders proclaim that Afghans are not interested in education for their girls and that it goes against our culture because of low school enrollment of girls even before the Taliban. In fact, in most areas of Afghanistan, there have not been schools for the girls to attend. I have seen for years, and now the world is seeing, that when schools are open to girls that they flock to them with the full support of their

families. In Afghanistan, we have to develop unique strategies to get around the obstacles faced by women and girls, but culture and Islam have not been what has stood in the way of girls' education. It has been the lack of schools.

In addition to improving education and health care directly, there are additional needs the rebuilding of the social service sector should address. The lack of job opportunities is one of the biggest difficulties. Social services can at the same time provide services and create jobs. For example, the building of schools requires furniture for desks and chairs. It is better for skills training, immediate income, and long-term economic development to stimulate furniture manufacture within Afghanistan rather than importing furniture from Pakistan and other countries. The construction of schools, clinics, hospitals and homes should also be seen for their potential in the demobilization of former male war combatants.

Income generation projects also must be a priority to enable families, particularly those led by widows, to survive and to gain economic self-sufficiency. The need for both immediate relief and opportunities for earning a living is great. In many areas of the country, families that have been displaced literally have nothing. Many of these families lost husbands and other male members and their homes in the war. For example, in Bamyan, where the Taliban murdered ethnic Hazaras and burned villages, families have been forced to seek shelter in mountain caves and have no source of income. The social sector also must improve the housing situation in Afghanistan, both in rural and urban areas.

Some kinds of social services need special attention after years of neglect that was followed by Taliban restrictions. One of these areas is reproductive health. The Taliban banned birth control and severely restricted access to health care for women. Reproductive health care also has been largely ignored in refugee areas. As a result, women have gone without gynecological care and access to family planning. Health care facilities in Afghanistan – especially maternity hospitals – are in horrible shape. The construction, repair, and upgrading of health care facilities, recruitment and training of medical staff, and provision of reproductive health care services must be undertaken immediately.

I also want to make the point that the rebuilding of social services in Afghanistan requires security. In Afghanistan, the situation right now is better than it has been in the past two decades of war. But the exercise of women's rights and human rights, reconstruction, humanitarian aid delivery, and establishment of peace and democracy are in great jeopardy because there is still not enough security. I personally, the Afghan government, the United Nations, and humanitarian aid and women's rights and human rights organizations have urged the expansion of peace troops beyond Kabul since the beginning of the year, but the world community has not responded and the need remains greater than ever.

I hope that someday Afghanistan will not have to depend on assistance from other countries, and that someday we can be a country that helps other people in need. But, the reality is that without assistance from the international community right now, we will never reach this point. At the same time, this assistance must be provided in such a way that strengthens the social service sector and the country for the long-term. Support for local NGOs, especially women-led NGOs, and for the Afghan ministries that provide these services is important to achieve this outcome.