Impact of Aid in Highly Fragile States

A synthesis of three systematic reviews of aid to Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan, 2008 – 2021

Next

Preface

A key function of IOB, the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is to inform policy-makers and practitioners about "what works" and under which circumstances. Evidence-based policy-making and implementation can be improved by making knowledge about proven results more accessible to decision-makers. This is especially important for interventions in fragile and conflict-affected settings: achieving Sustainable Development Goals remains most difficult in these contexts.

A systematic review uses explicit and reproducible methods to systematically search, critically appraise, and synthesize the literature on a specific issue. The majority of systematic reviews or meta-reviews focus on specific themes and include studies from various countries. As a result, key findings and conclusions may not be applicable for individual countries, let alone for fragile or conflict-affected contexts. A positive exception is the review of all available evaluation reports concerning development cooperation and facilitation of security in Afghanistan that was commissioned by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2020. This review concluded that the international community repeatedly overestimated its own capacity and that of Afghan partners to bring about rapid transformational change.

To complement and broaden the evidence base of the impact of international interventions in fragile settings, in 2021 IOB commissioned Christoph Zürcher from the University of Ottawa, the author of the review of Afghanistan referred to above, to perform a similar exercise for two other conflict-affected countries: Mali and South Sudan. *The Impacts of Aid in Highly Fragile States* presents a synthesis of the main findings drawn from the individual systematic country reviews: Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan. Ultimately, this synthesis serves as a building block for a broader IOB evaluation of the Netherlands' contribution to stability in fragile contexts, which aims to arrive at lessons for future policy formulation and implementation in fragile settings. That evaluation will be published early 2023.

The picture that emerges from *The Impacts of Aid in Highly Fragile States* is rather bleak: a lot of well-intended efforts by the international community have, at best, had a very limited impact on security and development in these countries. Nevertheless, the reviews did identify pockets of success within specific sectors. Another remarkable finding that emerges is that evaluation reports almost never discuss the potential of interventions doing harm, even though they are being implemented in some of the most vulnerable settings in the world.

To the best of our knowledge, this exercise is innovative as, for the first time, it includes three extensive systematic reviews of security facilitation and development cooperation at country level. These reviews draw on 322 individual studies. IOB commends Christoph Zürcher and his team for their thorough approach. We feel that the results from this study should serve as the starting point for a constructive discussion between policy-makers, politicians and evaluators. Finally, we encourage researchers and scholars to further expand the evidence base presented in this study.

Peter van der Knaap
Director IOB

This synthesis report has been commissioned by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) at the Ministry of Foreig Affairs of the Netherlands. It was written by Christoph Zürcher (lead author). The research was supported by Patrick Labelle (research librarian) and Luan Borges, Kolby Hoare, Mir Ahmed Javid, Kathryn Kavanagh, Sabrina Sarna and Emily Woolner (research associates).

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1. Introduction

Fragile and conflict-affected states cause great harm to their own populations. They require and deserve help. Afghanistan, Mali, and South Sudan are among the most fragile and underdeveloped countries in the world. In 2021, they ranked 16, 9, and 3, respectively, on the Fragile States Index, and 169, 184 and 185 (out of 189), respectively, on the Human Development Index (HDI).[1] Between 2008 and 2020, the international community provided Official Development Aid (ODA) to these three countries totaling USD 70.75 billion. This report is concerned with the effectiveness of aid in this context. To what extent can aid be effective in highly fragile situations? Are there differences among aid sectors? What prevents aid from being effective, and where are pockets of success likely to occur?

To provide evidence-based answers to these questions, three systematic reviews of evaluations of aid to Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan, respectively, were conducted. Systematic reviews are exercises in learning. Their objective is to identify and summarise all existing evidence on a given topic. To minimise bias, systematic reviews rely on a predefined protocol that comprises the search strategy used to identify relevant documentation and a set of criteria as to which documentation will be included in the synthesis (see below, Methods). To our best knowledge, this is the first time the instrument of a systematic review has been used to assess the effectiveness of aid in fragile states. The results should be interesting for donors and policy-makers engaged in fragile states.

The systematic review of aid to Afghanistan was commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and was released in 2020. The systematic reviews for Mali and South Sudan were commissioned by the Policy and Operations Evaluation

1 Fragile States Index is accessible at https://fragilestatesindex.org/data/. Higher ranking means greater fragility. The HDI is accessible at https://hdr.undp.org/en/data. Lower ranking means a lower level of development.

Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (IOB) and were released in 2022. The present report is a synthesis of the main findings from these three systematic reviews.

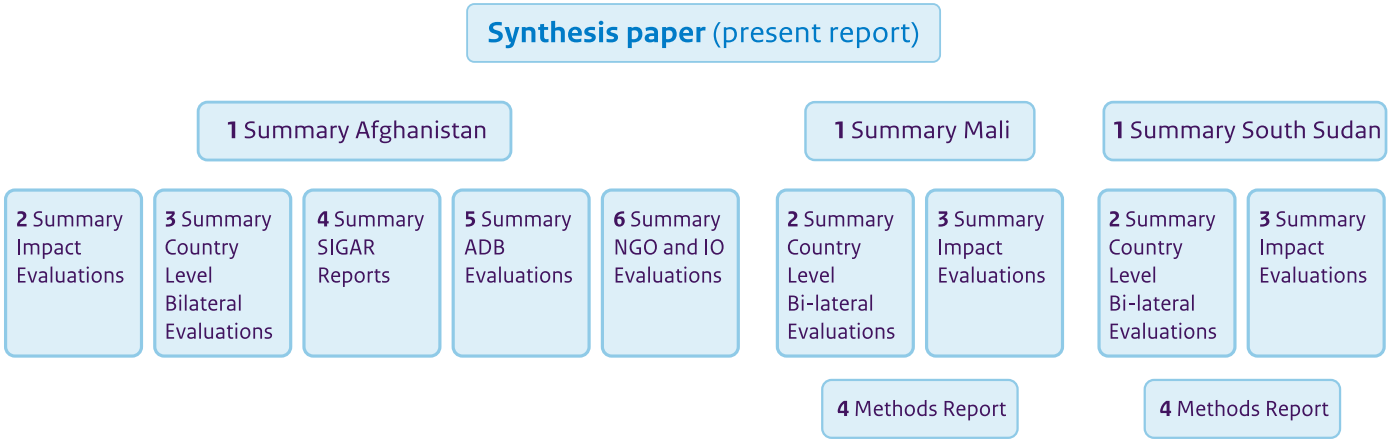
Altogether, there are three hierarchical levels of reporting (see Figure 1) on the impact of aid to Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan:

1. The first is this synthesis paper, which transcends the country level by combining and synthesising the findings from the systematic reviews of aid to each country.
2. The second comprises the individual country-level summaries of systematic reviews of aid to each country (part I). These reports synthesise all identified and selected evaluation reports for the individual countries.
3. The third comprises the comprehensive reports that summarise all the original data sources: country-level evaluations (part II) and the individual program and project evaluation reports (part III). These reports provide detailed descriptions of all evaluated interventions, including details on donors, implementers and budgets. The summaries also discuss implementation, sustainability and the evaluation method used.

Readers are invited to consult reports from levels 2 and 3 for more detailed information, including full references to the 322 original studies on which this current synthesis is based.

Underlying reports

Figure 1. *Overview of the three levels of systematic reviews for the evaluation of aid to Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan*



Afghanistan

The findings on Afghanistan are presented in six standalone reports.

- Zürcher, Christoph (2020). 'Meta-Review of Evaluations of Development Assistance to Afghanistan, 2008 – 2018. Chapeau Paper / Summary'. German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Berlin and Bonn.
- Zürcher, Christoph, Maryam Musharaf Shah and Ella Sylvester (2020). 'Summary Report of Eleven Bilateral Country-Level Evaluations'. German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Berlin and Bonn.
- Zürcher, Christoph, with Andrew Coon, Marissa de la Torre Ugarte, Patrick Labelle, Binxi Li, Razan Masad, Hassina Popal, Reem Saraya, Maryam Shah, Michael Swenson, Ella Sylvester, Anna Vanderkooy, and Mengrou Wang (2020). 'Systematic Review of Impact Evaluations of Development Aid in Afghanistan, 2008 – 2018'. German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Berlin and Bonn.
- Popal, Hassina, and Christoph Zürcher (2020). 'Summary Report of Selected SIGAR Reports, Afghanistan, 2008 – 2018'. German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Berlin and Bonn.
- Saraya, Reem, and Christoph Zürcher (2020). 'Summary Report of Evaluation Reports by the Asian Development Bank, 2008 – 2018'. German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Berlin and Bonn.
- Saraya, Reem, and Zürcher, Christoph (2020). 'Summary Report of Selected Evaluation Reports by Multilateral Organizations and NGO, 2008 – 2018'. German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Berlin and Bonn.

Mali

The findings on Mali are presented in four standalone reports.

- Zürcher, Christoph, with Patrick Labelle, Luan Borges, Kolby Hoare, Mir Ahmed Javid, Kathryn Kavanagh, Sabrina Sarna and Emily Woolner (2022). 'Impacts of Development Aid to Mali 2008 - 2021, Part 1: Summary Paper'.
- Zürcher, Christoph, with Patrick Labelle, Luan Borges, Kolby Hoare, Mir Ahmed Javid, Kathryn Kavanagh, Sabrina Sarna and Emily Woolner (2022). 'Impacts of Development Aid to Mali 2008 - 2021. Part II: A Synthesis of Country-level Bi-and Multilateral Evaluation Reports'.
- Zürcher, Christoph, with Patrick Labelle, Luan Borges, Kolby Hoare, Mir Ahmed Javid, Kathryn Kavanagh, Sabrina Sarna and Emily Woolner (2022). 'Impacts of Development Aid to Mali 2008 - 2021. Part III: A Synthesis of 86 Program and Project Evaluations'.
- Zürcher, Christoph and Patrick Labelle (2022). 'Impacts of Development Aid to Mali 2008 - 2021. Methods'.

South Sudan

The findings on South Sudan are presented in four standalone reports.

- Zürcher, Christoph, with Patrick Labelle, Luan Borges, Kolby Hoare, Mir Ahmed Javid, Kathryn Kavanagh, Sabrina Sarna and Emily Woolner (2022). 'Impacts of Development Aid to South Sudan 2008 - 2021, Part 1: Summary Paper'.
- Zürcher, Christoph,with Patrick Labelle, Luan Borges, Kolby Hoare, Mir Ahmed Javid, Kathryn Kavanagh, Sabrina Sarna and Emily Woolner (2022). 'Impacts of Development Aid to South Sudan 2008 - 2021. Part II: A Synthesis of Country-level Bi-and Multilateral Evaluation Reports'.
- Zürcher, Christoph, with Patrick Labelle, Luan Borges, Kolby Hoare, Mir Ahmed Javid, Kathryn Kavanagh, Sabrina Sarna and Emily Woolner (2022). 'Impacts of Development Aid to South Sudan 2008 - 2021. Part III: A Synthesis of 58 Program and Project Evaluations'.
- Zürcher, Christoph and Patrick Labelle (2022). 'Impacts of Development Aid to South Sudan 2008 - 2021. Methods'.

2. Methodology

Description of methodology

The objective of systematic reviews is to provide a robust body of evidence. In this section, a brief description is given of the methodological approach.[2] (For a further discussion on the robustness of the provided evidence see Appendix 1 in this report. For more details on methods, see the Methods report.

Searches were conducted in relevant databases, using a specifically developed search string. Also searched were the websites of important bilateral and multilateral donors, non-governmental organisations and repositories of evaluations in international development cooperation. Finally, the evaluation departments of multilateral and bilateral donors and major NGOs were contacted with a request to provide the evaluation reports. Search strings, data sources and further details are provided in the Methods report.

The searches were conducted between June and September 2021 for Mali and South Sudan, and between October and December 2018 for Afghanistan. Title and abstract screening were conducted with the screening software *Covidence*. Two researchers had to independently agree or disagree on whether an evaluation report met all criteria required for inclusion in the relevant review. Conflicting cases were resolved by the principal investigator.

This systematic review uses a convergent mixed-methods approach, which includes both statistical / experimental and qualitative evaluations in the final synthesis.[3]

While well-executed statistical /experimental evaluations are often thought to produce more robust results than qualitative evaluations, solid qualitative evaluations can also provide valuable insights. Most of the available evaluations are indeed qualitative. By not taking into account solid qualitative evaluations, a lot of valuable information would be lost. Also, restricting

2 The approach used for the reviews on Mali and South Sudan builds on the earlier Afghanistan review, but was further developed.

3 For more details on convergent mixed-methods reviews, see Noyes J, Booth A, Cargo M, Flemming K, Harden A, Harris J, Garside R, Hannes K, Pantoja T, & Thomas J. Chapter 21: Qualitative evidence. In: Higgins JPT, Thomas J, Chandler J, Cumpston M, Li T, Page MJ, & Welch VA (editors). Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions version 6.3 (updated February 2022). Cochrane, 2022. Available from www.training.cochrane.org/handbook.

the study to statistical /experimental studies only could introduce bias since this type of study tend to be much more prevalent in sectors such as health and nutrition, and less so in other sectors. For these reasons, it was decided to include also solid qualitative evaluation reports.

Although the present report synthesises all evidence, in the underlying reports evidence from statistical evaluations was kept separate from the evidence from qualitative studies. This allows readers to see how evidence from quantitative and from qualitative studies "speak to one another" and mutually reinforce findings.

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

1. Published in English between 2008 and 2021 (2018 for Afghanistan) and published in French (only for Mali) between 2008 and 2021.
2. Provide an assessment of the outcomes and impacts of projects, programmes, multi-sectoral programmes, and country-level assistance. Studies that only reported outputs were not included.
3. Studies were included if they met one of two thresholds for methodological quality:

a. Studies were included if they were considered "rigorous impact evaluations", with a logically or statistically measured value for the counterfactual. Typically, rigorous impact evaluations use one of the following research designs:

- randomised controlled trials (RCTs)
- regression discontinuity designs
- natural experiments
- non-randomised studies with pre-intervention and post-intervention outcome data in treatment and comparisons groups
- difference-in-difference designs
- interrupted time series
- non-randomised studies with control for observable confounding, including various matching designs
- regression designs, including repeated cross-sectional regressions.

b. Studies were included if they were mostly qualitative but could still meet a certain quality threshold. This type of study was classified as a "good enough" evaluation.[4] While rigorous evaluations are *likely* to capture the impacts

4 This criterion was consistently applied to studies for Mali and South Sudan. For Afghanistan, a slightly less formalised approach was used insofar as only the principal investigator decided whether a study met the threshold for classification as "good enough".

of an intervention, it is *possible* that "good enough" evaluations can also capture impacts. The following four necessary criteria for "good enough" evaluations were:[5]

The study must explicitly intend to assess outcomes and/or impacts of one or several specific interventions.

The study must contain adequate primary data (typically quantified measures of outcomes, and/or data from interviews).

The study must demonstrate that it is plausible that the data are suitable for attributing observed outcomes to the interventions.

For interventions with a complex causal chain, the logic behind the assumed theory of change/causal mechanisms/interventions must be mentioned.

These criteria were all "necessary": only studies that met all four criteria were included. Like all existing tools for appraising non-experimental studies, the results are open to interpretation. To minimise the effects of individual bias when assessing the quality of a study, the research team repeatedly applied these four criteria to random subsamples of studies. Once all researchers had reached their assessments, the reasoning behind each assessment was discussed. By repeating this process, a shared understanding of how to apply the criteria was developed, resulting in more consistency when the criteria were applied by members of the research team. For the actual screening process, two researchers had to independently arrive at the same decision. In cases of disagreement, the principal investigator decided.

5 These criteria were developed by the research team and discussed with IOB. The objective was to develop threshold criteria for differentiating between "good enough" evaluations and evaluations that are unlikely to produce reliable results. The aim was to define a threshold that is theoretically plausible and feasible (i.e. relatively easy to apply to a large number of studies). There is no shortage of appraisal tools for qualitative studies. A very useful overview that was consulted is Majid, Umair, & Meredith Vanstone. 2018. "Appraising Qualitative Research for Evidence Syntheses: A Compendium of Quality Appraisal Tools." Qualitative Health Research 28 (13): 2115–31. A synthesis of the criteria most often used for assessing quality (based on 58 appraisal tools across various disciplines) is provided in Santiago-Delefosse, M., A. Gavin, C. Bruchez, P. Roux, & S.L. Stephen. 2016. "Quality of Qualitative Research in the Health Sciences: Analysis of the Common Criteria Present in 58 Assessment Guidelines by Expert Users." Social Science & Medicine 148 (January): 142–51. Another useful tool is CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Program), CASP was developed and widely used in health sciences (see https://casp-uk.net/. The criteria used for the inclusion of studies for this report were based on a streamlined combination of CASP criteria and the most commonly used criteria for social science appraisals tools as described in Santiago-Delfosse et al. (2014).

4. **Country-level evaluations of bilateral or multilateral donors were also included by default** and did not have to meet a threshold of methodological quality. Such evaluations typically comprise lengthy and highly condensed syntheses of many programme and project evaluations, thus making development of a valid quality threshold problematic. Nevertheless, these studies contain a wealth of aggregated information, which was considered valuable for the analysis.

Data extraction from evaluations was based on a predefined template. Extracted data included population, intervention(s), comparator, outcome, methods, and moderators. In addition, data were also extracted concerning sustainability, efficiency and barriers (factors that were said to hinder better implementation). The extracted data served as the basis for the level III reports (see Figure 1, above).

To provide an additional in-depth analysis of capacity building (earmarked as a priority by the IOB), software (ATLAS.ti) for qualitative data analysis was used to identify and extract relevant information.

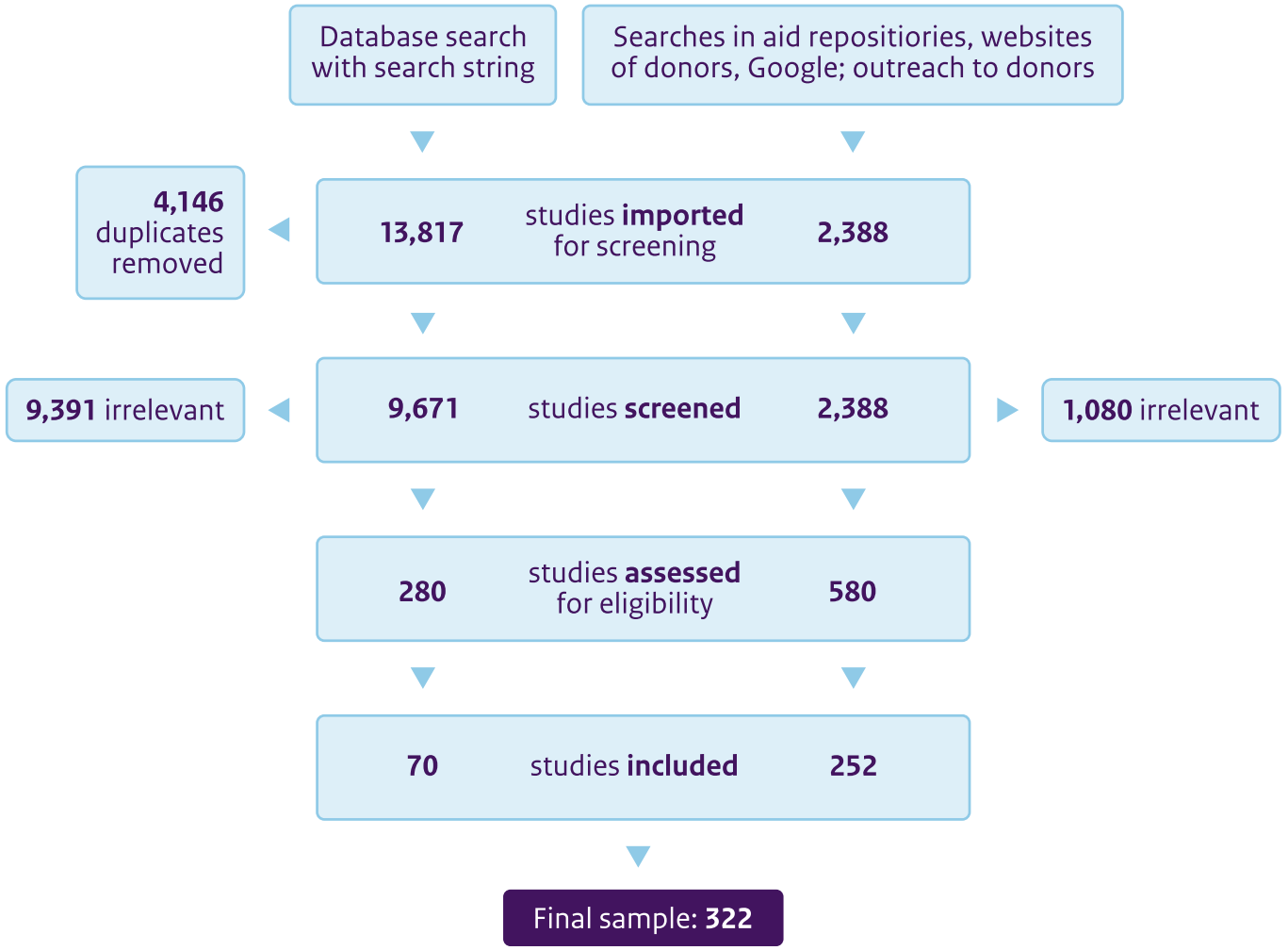
All studies to be included were then distributed among 10 predefined aid sectors: women's rights; health; rural development and climate change; rule of law; stabilisation; education; sustainable economic development; nutrition; humanitarian assistance and good governance. These sectors were defined based on discussions with the commissioning agency, the IOB.[6] When distributing studies among sectors, typically the designation given by the studies themselves was followed. This explains why some types of interventions can be found in more than one sector. For example, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions can be found in humanitarian aid, but also in health, and support for village savings associations can be found in rural development, humanitarian aid, and stabilisation.

The study selection process is shown in Figure 2. For a breakdown of the final sample by country and sector, see Evidence Base.

6 In the case of Afghanistan, a slightly different sectoral classification was used. For this present report, some studies were reclassified to ensure consistency.

PRISMA diagram

Figure 2. *PRISMA flow diagram of search strategy for relevant studies for Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan*



Overview of evidence Base

	Afghanistan (2008 - 2018)		Mali (2008 - 2021)		South Sudan (2008 - 2021)		Total	
	TOTAL	RIGOROUS	TOTAL	RIGOROUS	TOTAL	RIGOROUS	PER SECTOR	RIGOROUS
Country-level programme evaluations	15	-	18	-	12	-	45	-
Women's Rights	14	2	9	4	4	-	27	6
Health and Nutrition	21	9	35	27	13	7	69	43
Rural development, Climate	5	-	26	8	7	2	38	10
Rule of Law	2	-	-	-	1	-	3	-
Stabilisation	12	11	4	-	12	1	28	12
Education	14	3	5	3	3	-	22	6
Sustainable economic development	29	2	-	-	3	1	32	3
Humanitarian assistance, refugees, migration (a)	-	-	3	1	7	2	10	3
Good Governance	18	-	4	-	8	-	30	-
Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (b)	11	-	-	-	-	-	11	-
Other	7	-	-	-	-	-	7	-
Totals (per country)	**148**	**27**	**104**	**43**	**70**	**13**	**322**	**83**

3. Country contexts

A state is fragile when its central government does not exert effective control over its own territory, when its legitimacy is weak, when it lacks the capacity to – or is unwilling to – provide basic services for its population, such as protection from violence and access to food, shelter, health, education and economic opportunities. In addition, most fragile states are plagued by endemic violence.[7]

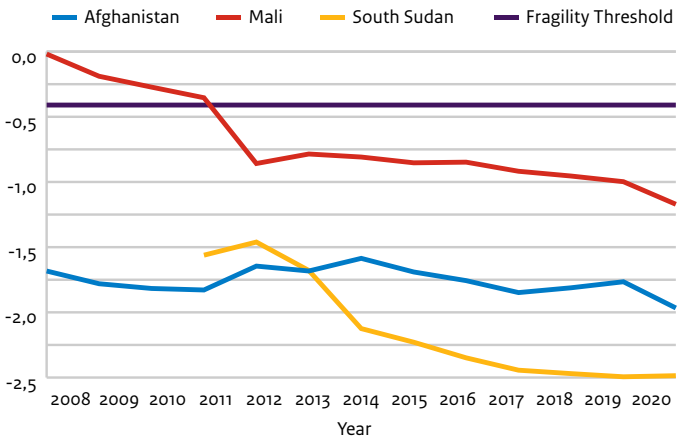
Afghanistan, Mali, and South Sudan are among the most fragile countries in the world, suffering from the typical symptoms of fragility, such as low growth and few economic opportunities, widespread poverty, low life expectancy, high population growth especially in rural areas, low levels of education, internal migration, and so on. In addition, all three counties suffer from widespread violence, which exacerbates development problems. Afghanistan has suffered four decades of war. Following the victory of the Taliban in August 2021, the level of violence has ebbed, but the country is far from achieving a stable peace. Mali is caught up in intertwined conflicts, with secessionist Tuareg and Islamist rebellions in the north and inter-ethnic violence in the center of the country. South Sudan was plunged into an inter-ethnic civil war only three years after it had gained its independence. By 2018, the most intense fighting had subsided, but violence remains endemic.

As all highly fragile states, real political power in these three countries does not reside with formal political institutions, but rather in networks of patronage, which transcends the formal political institutions. This creates a political economy in which elites have little incentive to strengthen formal state institutions. Instead, elites nurture their networks of patronage, which are the base for their authority and their political, and often physical, survival. Rent-seeking, widespread institutionalised corruption and intense competition between rival networks are typical symptoms of the political economy of fragile statehood. One important implication of such a political economy is that elites are not interested in political reforms that would endanger this mode of governance. Donors therefore often find that their partners show no political will to implement policies that might lead to greater accountability, more robust formal institutions or democratic processes.

7 This definition is based USAID's 2005 'Fragile States Strategy', United States Agency for International Development, Washington DC. Most other definitions of state fragility refer to similar concepts.

Despite massive civilian and military engagement by foreign actors, all three countries became even more fragile in the period 2008 to 2020. Figure 3 depicts trends in fragility in Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan. Measures of fragility are derived from a statistical summary of all six indicators of the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicator, which measures various aspects of governance, such as voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption.[8] The figure's black line depicts the 30th percentile. Countries below that threshold are understood to be highly fragile. To contextualise this threshold: countries such as Honduras, Kenya, Mozambique or Togo all are situated just above the threshold. By contrast, Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan are well below the threshold and are all on a downward trajectory, becoming more fragile over time. Mali plunged into fragility in 2011 after the collapse of the democratic order and the onset of civil war; it has been on a downward trajectory ever since. Afghanistan is hovering near the bottom, with a slight downward trend. South Sudan was born into fragility in 2011 and thereafter rapidly sank towards the very bottom, making it the most fragile of the three countries in this review. By 2020, all three were far below the line that separates extremely fragile countries from "normal" developing countries.

Figure 3. *Trends in fragility index for Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan, 2008 – 2020*



Despite many commonalities, stemming from the fact that all three countries belong to the group of extremely fragile states, there are some differences in how these states became fragile and how the international community reacted.

8 The measure is based on the first component of a principal component analysis of the World Governance indicators. This approach is preferred above simple averaging, since the latter attributes equal weights to each fragility dimension, and in every period, whereas these weights should ideally reflect changes in the underlying fragility profile of countries, both, across dimensions and across time. Indeed, if such changes do exist in the data, then an ex-ante assumption of equal weight is likely to lead to inaccurate assessments.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan, more than any other country, exemplifies the shattered dreams of externally led state-building. After nearly two decades of massive international engagement, Afghanistan today remains one of the poorest countries in the world and is again ruled by the Taliban.

The most recent engagement of the international community in Afghanistan began in 2001, when, backed by the US, the so-called Northern Alliance defeated the Taliban and the international community installed Hamid Karzai as interim president of Afghanistan. In 2004, a new constitution was adopted that was meant to pave the way towards a democratic and self-sustainable Afghan state. Once the formal trappings of statehood were in place, the international community began to bankroll Afghanistan's attempts at state-building. During the first decade of their engagement (2002 - 2012) alone, international donors allocated a staggering USD 47.2 billion of development assistance; see Figure 4. This vast amount of ODA reflected both the dire need of the country and the ambitious vision of the donor community.

Civilian reconstruction went hand in hand with military support. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established under a UN mandate. At its height, the force was more than 130,000 strong, with troops from 51 NATO and partner nations. In addition, there was a sizable US force operating outside ISAF, named Operation Enduring Freedom.

In the early days of donor engagement, optimism was high. The Afghan population welcomed the international involvement and its promise of stability and development. The Taliban appeared to have been defeated and there were some quick gains enabled by the ousting of the Taliban and improvements in everyday security. Starting from a very low level, access to basic health services and basic education improved, roads and other transport infrastructure was rehabilitated, some development aid started to reach rural regions, and the nascent government in Kabul received generous support. In 2014, Ashraf Ghani was elected president, replacing Hami Karzai. The fairness of the election was widely disputed, but the international community nevertheless saw the regime change as a sign of gradual progress in Afghanistan's transition.

At the same time, there were clear signs that donor visions of a stable, democratic and self-sustainable Afghanistan might be out of reach. The constant stream of external funding had built a burgeoning rentier state with high levels of corruption, entrenched patronage networks and little capacity or will for reforms. Despite massive investments in government capacities, the Afghan state remained weak.

Just as troublesome was that the Afghan government was unable to earn legitimacy among its population. The new government, despite the massive support from donors, could not forge a social contract with its citizens. Instead, the Afghan population increasingly saw the government as ineffective and corrupt. Along with this, the reputation of international donors suffered. Without tangible progress in the alleviation of poverty and improvements in security, the Afghan government and its foreign backers were losing the battle for hearts and minds of the Afghan people.

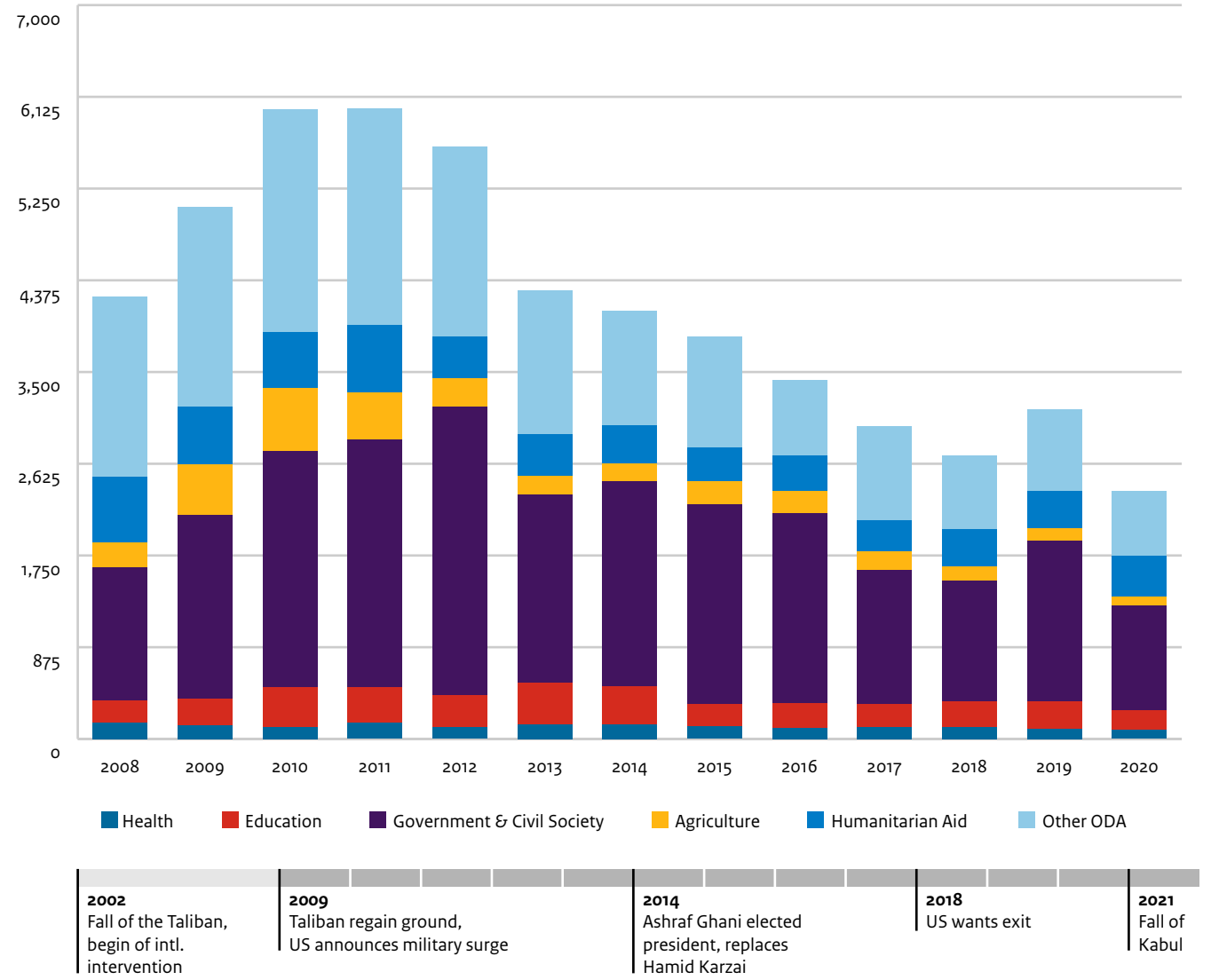
Donors continued their financial support. Although ODA peaked in 2011, amounting to nearly USD 6 billion, it nevertheless averaged USD 3.68 billion annually for the years 2012 – 2018.[9] The vision of a self-sustainable and democratic Afghanistan was reiterated in a series of large pledging conferences.

Over the years, there were few adjustments to the overall aid portfolio; see Figure 5. Notably, the share of aid for "government and civil society" averaged an annual 49 percent of total ODA between 2008 and 2020, and its share was still 49 percent in 2019. At the same time, funding of humanitarian aid and rural development remained low at a 6.1 percent and 10.2 percent, respectively, of total ODA for the period 2008 – 2020. These numbers suggest that donors continued to treat Afghanistan as a "normal" developing country, (unlike South Sudan, where spending for "government and society" shrunk to 6 percent; see below), despite the lack of progress in sectors such as state capacity and good governance.

By 2018, it became evident that the US wanted rapidly withdraw its forces. Talks between the US and the Taliban led to the Doha Agreement in February 29, 2020. This agreement was negotiated between the US and the Taliban only, making the Afghan government, as well as the wider international community, bystanders. Following the signing of the agreement, the US announced the withdrawal of their remaining troops by September 2021.The Taliban, seizing the opportunity, increased their military pressure on Afghan security forces, and after capturing many major cities – often without a fight – the Taliban gained control of Kabul in August 2021.

9 ODA amounts here and in the following sections are Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Creditor Reporting System (CRS) figures, at https://stats.oecd.org/Index.

Figure 4. *ODA provided to Afghanistan, in USD million and timeline of significant events affecting conditions for development cooperation, 2008 – 2021*



Source: OECD/DAC, CRS

Mali

The landlocked country of Mali faces a multitude of development challenges, including high population growth rates and an undiversified economy dependent on subsistence agriculture. Mali is also frequently exposed to natural hazards such as droughts, irregular rains and flooding. In addition, it suffers under endemic violence and insecurity in its northern and central regions. Northern Mali is also a hub for the trafficking of cocaine from Latin America to Europe. The competition for lucrative smuggling routes fuels political instability and further complicates the search for peace.

Mali has been on a sharp downward trajectory since 2012. Prior to 2012, Mali was a "donor darling", with foreign governments keen to provide support for the democratic transitions that began in the 1990s. A toxic brew of drought, insurgencies and a military coup ended its positive course as well as the optimistic outlook of donors. By 2012, Tuareg and Islamist secessionist rebellions in the north had destabilised the country. The Tuareg rebellion crystalised around heavily armed Tuaregs who had fought in the Libyan Civil War and returned to Mali after NATO's intervention in Libya.

In reaction to the ineffective response of the government to these new threats, the military overthrew the democratically elected President Touré. Unable to restore its authority in the rebel-held areas, the Mali government requested international support. French forces intervened to stabilise the northern regions, followed by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), established in 2013 with a broad mandate to support security and stabilisation.

Unrest not only gripped the north. In 2013, violence also erupted in central Mali. The conflict was mainly fought between agricultural and pastoral communities, fueled by competition for land and water and exacerbated by climate change.

In June 2015, a peace agreement between the government and an alliance of various rebel groups was brokered. However, that peace deal did not include the Islamist insurgency, and insecurity in the north remained high. Important elements of the peace deal were the promise of decentralisation, a devolution of authority to the regions, integration of former rebel militias into a national army, a boosting of the economy in the north, and the commencement of national reconciliation through dialogue and attention to justice.

This agreement proved to be extremely difficult to implement. Constitutional reforms that were promised under the peace agreement remained on hold, and the peace process lacked popular support.

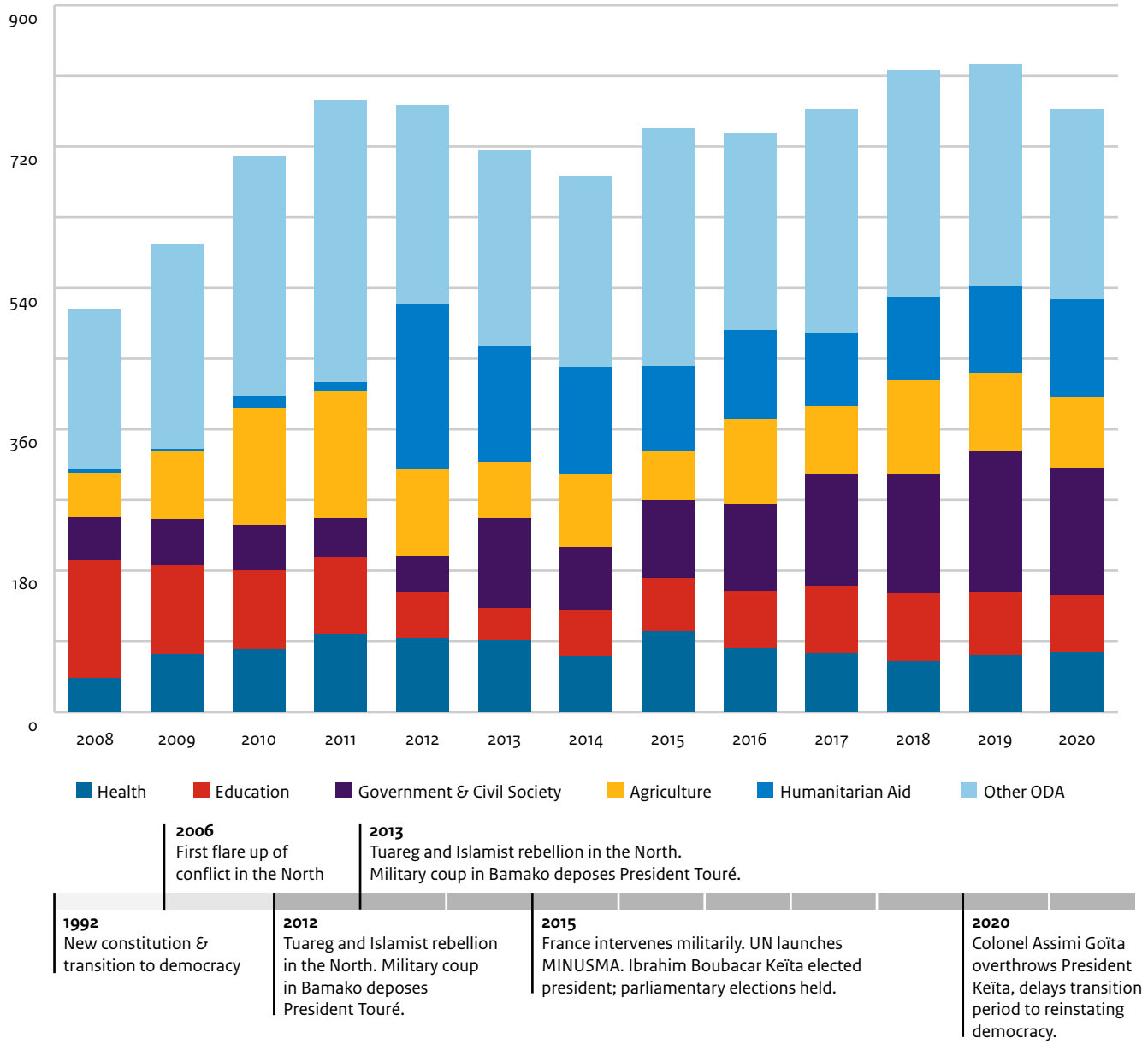
In August 2020, and then again in May 2021, another two military coups d'état took place. The international community condemned the coups and tension between the government of Mali and Western countries rose to new heights.

In hindsight, the escalation of the conflict in northern Mali and the breakdown of democratic order in 2012 was a watershed for the country and for its relations with donors. During the decade prior to 2012, Mali was treated by the donor community as a positive example of democratic governance. From 2002 to 2011, annual ODA steadily increased from USD 610.35 million to USD 1.14 billion; see Figure 5. A substantial part of this aid was channeled through the government in the form of budget support. Budget support was credited with an overall positive effect on overall public finances in Mali, and specifically with positive impacts on education and health, but also as having significantly contributed to achieving goals within the national poverty and growth strategy, macroeconomic management and public investment in the social sectors.

Donor engagement in Mali changed in reaction to the rupture in democracy that occurred in 2012. While ODA still consistently grew, budget support was drastically reduced – less aid went to the public sector – and a larger share of aid was channeled through multilateral organisations and NGOs. Humanitarian assistance, with food security as the most important expenditure, dramatically increased.

In their reaction to the breakdown of the democratic order in Mali, donors invested notably more aid into sectors such as good governance and elections, probably because they assumed that increasing aid for these sectors would facilitate a return to democracy. Despite an overall investment of USD 5.245 billion in ODA since 2013, today Mali is less secure, less democratic, and more fragile than it ever was before the breakdown of the democratic order in 2012.

Figure 5. *ODA provided to Mali, in USD million and timeline of significant events affecting conditions for development cooperation, 2008 – 2020*



Source: OECD/DAC, CRS

South Sudan

South Sudan, officially the Republic of South Sudan, came into existence in 2011, when it gained independence from the Republic of Sudan. It was at birth already an extremely fragile state and has remained so ever since. Between 2011 and 2020, South Sudan received USD 11.43 billion in ODA.

South Sudan has been fighting for autonomy from the Republic of Sudan in the north since 1983. The violent struggle for independence went hand in hand with violence between political fractions and ethnic groups within the South. In 2005, South Sudan signed a peace agreement with the government of the Republic of Sudan in Khartoum. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) reached called for a power-sharing agreement between the North and the South and for the establishment of a semi-autonomous government in the South. It was also agreed that there would be a transition period of six years, after which the final status of South Sudan would be determined by a popular referendum. Donors rushed to provide support for the CPA, as well as the new institutions of the South Sudanese government. It was assumed that such support would help to make the fragile peace permanent and to prevent South Sudan from pushing for independence. However, in January 2011, in a referendum 99 percent of the South Sudanese population voted for independence, and South Sudan became an independent country. Donors continued to provide financial and political support for the newborn country.

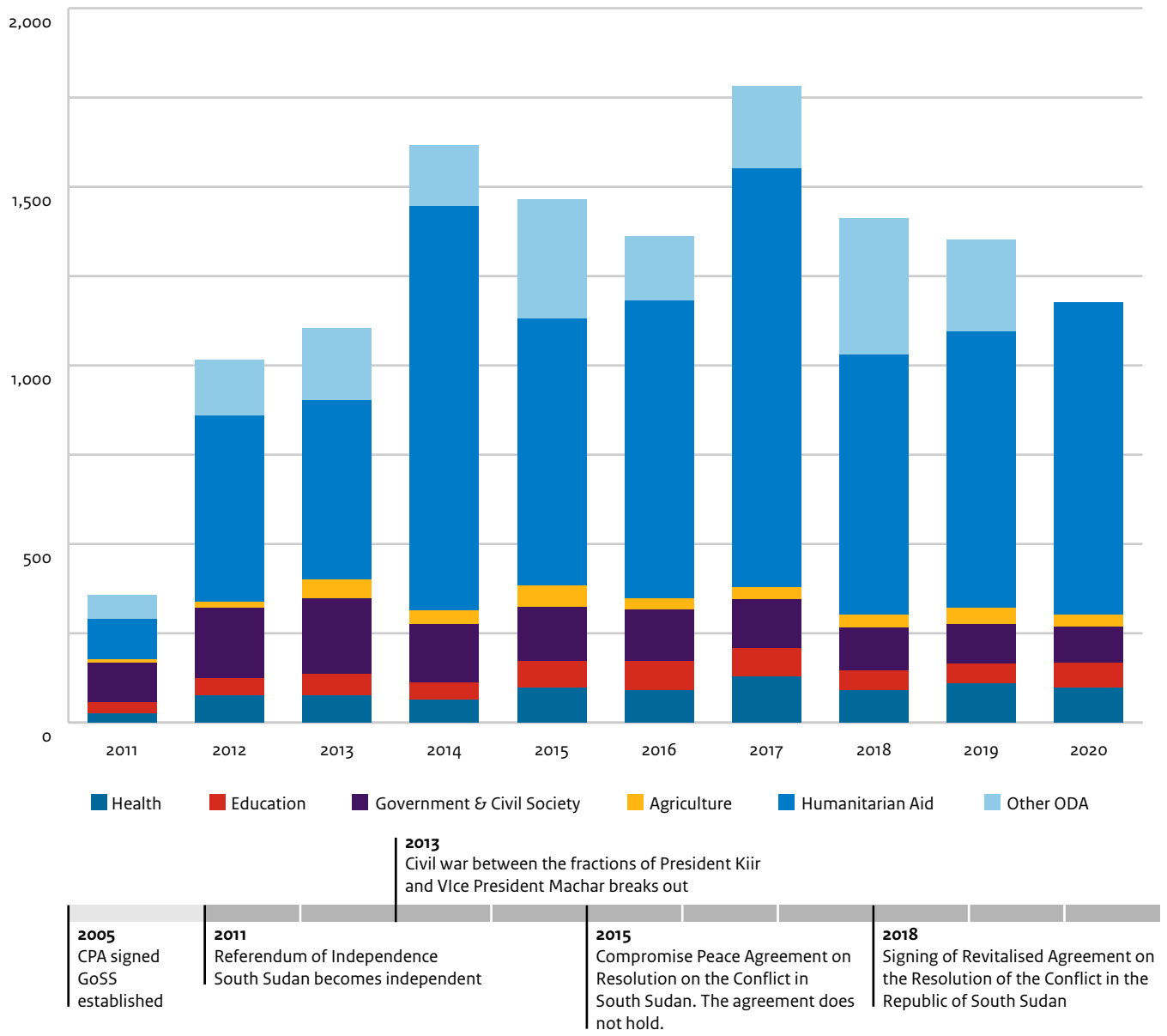
Despite high hopes and great efforts, the peace did not hold. In 2013, internal conflicts within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement led to a political crisis that soon turned into a fully-fledged civil war fought along ethnic lines. After five years of devastating violence, the two warring parties agreed on a cease fire and reached a peace agreement that proposed a power-sharing structure. Between 2013 and 2018, the civil war had displaced four million South Sudanese (of a population of 11 million). An estimated 400,000 people had been killed, the economy had collapsed and food shortage was widespread. South Sudan had become a major humanitarian disaster.

Between independence in 2011 and the resurgence of war in 2013, donors provided massive aid for state-building. ODA almost tripled between 2011 and 2013, from USD 351 million per annum to USD1083 million three years later. However, donors grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of political will displayed by the South Sudanese government to engage in state-building efforts.

The outbreak of the civil war in 2013 marked the beginning of a new phase in donor engagement in South Sudan. Donors became predominantly engaged

in emergency assistance, food security and local-level peace-building, hoping to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and facilitate stability and, eventually, peace; support for government institutions was scaled down. ODA continued to climb, rising from USD 1083 million in 2013 to USD 1751 million in 2017, the year when ODA peaked; see Figure 6. Aid for state-building shrank while humanitarian aid dramatically increased: in 2011 humanitarian aid amounted to USD 110m, rising by 2017 to USD 1154m. In other words, relative to overall ODA the share of humanitarian aid rose from 31 percent in 2011 to 66 percent in 2017.

Figure 6. *ODA provided to South Sudan, in USD million and timeline of significant events affecting conditions for development cooperation, 2011 – 2020*



Source: OECD/DAC, CRS

4. Main findings

4.1 Core state functions

How effective can aid be in highly fragile and conflict-rife countries, and does its effectiveness vary among aid sectors? The findings from the systematic reviews of all three countries provide comprehensive, evidence-based answers to these questions.

The effectiveness of aid in addressing the core deficiencies of fragile and conflict-affected states is first discussed: lack of security, state capacities, and institutions and procedures that would enable good governance.

Stabilisation

Stabilisation is a key objective of donors in fragile and conflict-affected states, and aid is assumed to play an important role in achieving this. Unfortunately, stabilisation is a vague concept, and donors include an extremely wide variety of activities under the term, as the examples from our sample of studies demonstrate.

Interventions labelled by donors as "stabilisation" can be classed as one of five types. A first type of stabilisation projects and programmes focuses on quickly restoring basic services to the population, in the hope that this will encourage people to work with the government and to loosen their ties with insurgents. Such stabilisation initiatives rely on what can be called a peace-dividend approach: by re-establishing services such as education, water supply, sanitation, transportation and health services, which are usually interrupted during periods of war, donors hope to win the good-will of the population. This in turn could be expected to lead to more good-will for the government and its foreign backers and thus eventually help to build a more legitimate and capable government. In a nutshell, peace dividends are expected to help win people's hearts and minds.

A second type of project sets out to improve economic opportunities for communities, for example by providing training, by investing in job creation or by providing access to credits. Such economic opportunities are assumed to provide a peace dividend, as well as making it more expensive for insurgents to recruit and pay fighters. When labour is cheap and economic opportunities scarce, insurgents find it easy to recruit fighters. By providing sources of legitimate income, the costs to insurgents rise. In theory, altogether this should lead to more stability.

A third type of stabilisation intervention aims at directly strengthening the capacity for mediation and conflict resolution of communities and political actors. Donors have supported conflict-management and peace-building processes at the local level, offering training in dispute resolution, facilitating peace meetings, strengthening local-level justice support, and creating and supporting peace clubs, where local communities could meet and learn mediation skills. Donors have also created arenas for opposing parties to hold discussions and provided support for political communication via mass media channels to promote peace, democratic participation and reconciliation.

Another, fourth type of intervention supports political institutions and processes that are seen as contributing to stability. For example, donors provided support for rebel organisations to transform themselves into political parties, support for the process of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) by building cantonments for former rebel forces, and support for the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (CVJR) in Mali, as well as support to the legislatures of all three countries. In Afghanistan and Mali, donors also pushed for political and fiscal decentralisation to defuse regional competition.

The fifth and final type seen as a possibility for contributing to stabilisation entails support for actors in civil society. Since unresponsive and often corrupt governments are seen as a source of instability, it is assumed that more capable actors in civil society would be more able to hold their governments accountable, thereby helping to rebuild social contracts between governments and their societies.

The findings from the three systematic reviews strongly suggest that aid to improve stability in fragile states is not effective. Note, however, that three considerations must be kept in mind before discussing this conclusion further.

First, donors often label, and even re-label, "regular" development interventions as "stabilisation interventions". In reality, stabilisation interventions are often similar to ordinary development interventions, particularly in sectors such as emergency aid, livelihood, rural development and access to justice.[10] In the context of stabilisation, it is then assumed that developmental outcomes might also contribute to more stability, often without specifying (or measuring) the complete causal chain.

10 Note that evaluations of stabilisation interventions were included where there was an explicit objective to reduce violence, and/or where the study was identified by donors themselves as a stabilisation intervention .

Second, not all evaluations of stabilisation interventions use a valid measure for determining the success of stabilisation efforts. Some rigorous studies measure success as a reduction in violence, greater legitimacy for the government, or a renewed social contract between society and the government.[11] For this current study, such an approach was considered an appropriate way of measuring stabilisation. However, other evaluations (mainly from qualitative studies) measure success more upstream. For example, these may discuss whether stabilisation interventions led to more jobs, whether peace clubs remained operational, or whether beneficiaries thought that their mediation capabilities had increased. Immediate outcomes such as these are often portrayed as a success of the stabilisation intervention. This is a false claim, however. Such immediate outcomes may be an important first step towards stabilisation, but without measuring the subsequent steps (for example, a reduction of violence) these studies cannot prove that interventions indeed led to greater stabilisation. It is advised that evaluations of stability interventions always use a valid outcome measure, such as reduction of violence or improved legitimacy of the government.[12]

Third, and finally, immediate stabilisation outcomes (e.g. employment opportunities, peace clubs or mediation training) are typically implemented at the community level. Donors hope that such local-level stabilisation will trickle up to create greater stability at higher levels. The evaluations reviewed show that immediate local effects were rarely achieved, hence there could be no question of trickling up taking place.

Afghanistan provides the largest evidence base for the findings, with 12 project-level evaluations, extensive reports by the Special Inspector General for the Reconstruction of Afghanistan, and assessments of the stabilisation programmes of the UK, US, Denmark, and Canada. **In sum, there is no evidence that these initiatives had a positive effect on stability.**

The US ran by far the largest stabilisation programme in Afghanistan. The evaluations available suggest that its programme not only did not dampen violence, but even exacerbated inter-group tensions and stimulated violence. Project-level evaluations came to similar conclusions. For example, the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) neither led

11 A reduction of violence is indeed an appropriate measure for stabilisation initiatives, but it is also noted that it is often not easy to obtain appropriate data, especially not at the subnational level. Studies that use such violence data often obtain these from declassified military data (available mainly for Afghanistan and Iraq) or collect their own data.

12 Studies that measure only immediate outcomes can still contribute to our evidence base. If the immediate outcome (the first element in the causal chain) was not achieved, then we know that the stability outcome was also not achieved. This is indeed the case for most studies included in the stabilisation sample.

to a reduction in violence nor did it win the hearts and minds of the local population. CERP was the premier stabilisation programme of the US Army in Afghanistan, running small- to medium-scale projects to communities to provide humanitarian relief and reconstruction. Other evaluations relate to the effects of various community-driven development programmes and of projects to increase youth employment by offering technical education. None of these interventions reduced violence, decreased the propensity for joining the insurgency or increased the legitimacy of the government.

The evidence from Mali and South Sudan corroborates the findings from Afghanistan. **In South Sudan, interventions in stabilisation were not effective** and could not prevent a resurgence in violence. After independence (2011) and up to 2014, donors operated under the assumption that lack of development was a major cause of conflict, hence they focused on delivering "peace dividends" under the assumption that peace and development would reinforce each other. They also supported DDR measures and provided incentives for military organisations to transform themselves into political parties. These endeavors failed because of a lack of political will on the part of the South Sudanese government.

After the outbreak of the civil war, donors helped to create arenas for dialogue in society and supported the various peace negotiations held between the warring parties, but without any discernable reduction of violence. Donors also supported conflict-management and peace-building processes at the local level, including dispute resolution, peace meetings, livelihood programmes, and local-level support of justice. There is no evidence that these interventions achieved the desired immediate outcomes, and the evaluation reports reviewed question whether such local-level interventions had any long-term effect on stability. Furthermore, most interventions were implemented at the community level and were therefore not designed to support conflict-management processes at inter-communal or inter-ethnic levels. The interventions would, therefore, have had little effect on the major drivers of conflict. These findings strongly suggest that small-scale local stabilisation efforts do not have a trickle-up effect on stabilisation.

Findings from Mali are similar. There are evaluations of a variety of interventions to promote stabilisation. At the national level, donors provided support to the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (CVJR), for political communication via mass media channels in support of peace, for political and fiscal decentralisation, and for the provision of cantonments within the framework of DDR processes. At the local level, donors supported income-generating activities in the private sector, capacity building in

conflict resolution, and restoration of access to basic services. The evidence available does not suggest that interventions in any of these areas brought greater stability. Many of the evaluations included cannot demonstrate that immediate outcomes were achieved, and none provides evidence that the interventions contributed to the overarching objective of improving stability in terms of violence reduction or improved legitimacy for the government.

In sum, there is no evidence that aid has contributed to greater stability in Afghanistan, Mali or South Sudan. Most evaluation reports do not discuss why this might be the case. However, a reading of recent academic literature on the topic suggests that aid only has a stabilising effect under rare circumstances, which are unlikely to be present in regions that are still subject to conflict. To have a stabilising effect, aid must be implemented in reasonably secure, government-controlled regions where insurgents lack the capacity to sabotage, loot or tax aid projects. Furthermore, aid should be implemented in a participatory fashion, preferably through accepted local authorities; aid should be transparent and not benefit local power-brokers through corruption or nepotism. If such rare conditions do not exist, aid is unlikely to improve stability, rather it has the potential to exacerbate corruption and inter-group conflicts, as documented in Afghanistan.[13]

The existing evidence strongly suggests that aid is not a good tool for improving stability in highly unstable regions. Aid alone will not chase off insurgents. Nevertheless, aid may still have a stabilising effect on regions where some modest levels of security and governance are present and where insurgents cannot move freely. One implication of this is that stabilisation efforts should not focus on areas of highest risk, rather they should seek to bolster and make more durable existing pockets of stability – and build out from there.

Government capacity building

A lack of government capacity is at the core of fragile states, and many development actors have sought to build state capacity across all levels of government, along with enhancing the capacity of civil society.

For Afghanistan, the evidence clearly suggests that measures for building state capacity were mostly not successful. In the few instances where progress was made, it remained confined to small pockets that did not translate into improved overall state capacity, and

13 See, for example, Sexton, R. (2016). Aid as a tool against insurgency: Evidence from contested and controlled territory in Afghanistan. American Political Science Review 110 (4), 731–749. For a systematic review of the effects of aid on violence, see Zürcher, C. (2020). The impact of development aid on organised violence. 3IE working paper, no. 37.

where it did it was mainly borrowed from the "second civil service", consisting of well-paid Afghan returnees or international consultants. There is no clear case of a successful capacity-building programme in the Afghanistan sample, but quite a few examples of rather ineffective capacity-building programmes. For example, donors agreed that the massive Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) had no impact on improving governance, nor did it contribute to improving the state capacity of the Afghan government. Likewise, three programmes for decentralisation and capacity building for the subnational administration were not successful at building more capacity for the local administration or providing incentives for a meaningful decentralisation process. Also, two reviewed capacity-building programmes for civil servants proved mostly ineffective.

The reasons for these disappointing results vary but are mostly linked to the difficult context: there was little demand from the government for such programmes. The permanent competition for power among various ethnic and political networks hampered cooperation within and among institutions, and frequent changes of key personnel made institutional learning difficult. Most importantly, capacity building was not effective when there was no political will for capacity to be built, which was often the case in politicised areas such as, for example, decentralisation, which the central government opposed.

In Mali, results are similarly disappointing. There is no evidence that capacity building at the level of central governance was effective. For example, in 2015, three years after the breakdown of the democratic order, the World Bank noted that objectives in governance reform, management of public resources, and fiscal decentralisation were not achieved. The same report noted that the World Bank had overestimated the capacity and the political will of the government of Mali for institutional reform.

While capacity building for the central government was usually not effective, there were some pockets of success, mainly in the health sector and in highly technical, apolitical areas at the subnational level, e.g. education, rural development and health. Several evaluations noted that capacities in the health sector had improved: broader vaccination coverage; better maternal and child health; midwives, nurses and community health workers, who were trained to perform necessary treatments and to address the shortage of doctors in the community; and enhanced capacity of Ministry of Health personnel.

In the case of South Sudan there is broad consensus in the evaluation reports that capacity-building measures for the government were rarely effective. Donors overestimated both existing state capacity and the government's political will for reform. As a result, programming for capacity building was overambitious,

unsustainable and ineffective. Donors' hopes that the government would become a partner in the delivery of services never materialised.

Least effective were capacity-building measures in "politicised" areas, which offer opportunities for lucrative corruption, and which are therefore vital for maintaining the rentier and patronage state. For example, Norway's support to the natural resource sector did not lead to more accountability and transparency, since there was no political will for it. As well, support for the legislature and for the judiciary appears to have had little effect since there is no sign of improvement in these areas. While it was possible to provide skills to individuals, this did not translate into more effective and more accepted political institutions.

To compensate for the lack of government capacities, donors created parallel systems for service delivery, which helped to produce some results, but these results were not sustainable and did not address the underlying issues of failing state capacity.

In South Sudan, as in Mali, some positive results were achieved in the health sector, where donor support did help to increase individual and institutional capacity, leading to better treatment of malaria, diarrhea and pneumonia, as well as better healthcare provision to mothers and children.

In sum, the available evidence clearly suggests that capacity building for governments in highly fragile states is ineffective, especially when it is applied to areas that can affect political processes in general and the patronage and rent-seeking economy in particular. Obstacles are smaller in strictly technical areas that are not overly politicised, where there is less opportunity for rent-seeking, and where the subnational level rather than the national level is targeted.

Good Governance

Good governance is a very broad sector and includes, among other things, public-sector and regulatory policy reform, facilitation of democracy, election support, anti-corruption programmes and the rule of law. It is, together with stabilisation and capacity building for the government, at the core of what donors are trying to achieve in fragile states. Promoting good governance is not only seen as a normatively desirable goal, but also as a prerequisite for stable, self-sustainable and violence-free statehood. Donors rarely give up their vision of bringing good governance to fragile and conflict-affected states. One of the few exceptions is South Sudan after 2014, when donors admitted that the South Sudanese government was unwilling to work towards better governance. As a result, donors largely gave up on working with the government to improve governance and instead increased humanitarian and emergency aid, which bypasses government channels.

By contrast, in Afghanistan donors continued to sponsor projects to facilitate good governance, despite mounting evidence of widespread systemic corruption and flawed democratic institutions.

In Afghanistan, there is no evidence that interventions aimed at improving "good governance" were effective. It has already been mentioned above that capacity-building measures for the central and subnational governments were not successful. Similarly, nor were initiatives to reform public administration and to create better regulatory frameworks for private-sector development and the agriculture sector.

Evaluations of improvements in the rule of law suggest that interventions were not successful because they were overly ambitious, were not based on political-economic realities on the ground and were ideologically framed by an unrealistic theory of change.

Finally, regarding the facilitation of democracy, the evidence available suggests that development assistance could provide the technical capacities needed for conducting elections; projects aimed at fostering democratic awareness or democratic participation had little effect, however.

In Mali, the evaluations selected cover a variety of interventions in various areas, such as management of public resources, fiscal decentralisation, political decentralisation, rehabilitation of governmental infrastructure, capacity building for government officials and civil society, strengthening the relationship between citizens and public authorities, and establishing arenas for public debate. **There is no example of an effective intervention in any of these areas in our evaluations sample.**

Prior to 2012, many donors noted some positive trends in the governance sector in Mali. However, after the breakdown of the democratic order in 2012, evaluations increasingly suggest that governance in the country was in a poor state, with ineffective institutions, weak capacities, lack of accountability, endemic corruption and entrenched patronage. According to a World Bank evaluation of 2015, most objectives in governance reform, management of public resources, and fiscal decentralisation were not achieved. The same report noted that the World Bank had overestimated the capacity and the political will of the government for institutional reform.

Also not effective were interventions to facilitate decentralisation. After the 2015 peace agreement, administrative decentralisation was seen as one way to promote stability and improve governance. As a result, many donors supported the process of decentralisation. However, little was achieved, mainly because there was no political buy-in by the

central government: decentralisation was seen as strengthening the political position of the North.

One area in which donors saw some success was election support. UNDP's support for elections in 2013 and 2016 was seen as being mainly effective in the sense that the technical help provided enabled the government to conduct elections. Nevertheless, it should be noted that conducting elections did not result in greater democracy, as Mali's democracy has been in steady decline since 2008.

Not surprisingly, initiatives in South Sudan to support good governance were also not effective. After South Sudan gained independence, donors invested in good governance projects by supporting institutions such as the National Legislative Assembly, the Anti-Corruption Commission, the National Audit Chambers (NAC) and the National Elections Commission (NEC). Support also included reforms in public financial management and budgetary strengthening. Still other interventions provided support for the rule of law, community policing, free media and organisations in support of civil society.

However, donors generally overestimated the government of South Sudan's state-building capacity and its political will to improve governance, which led to overambitious, ineffective donor programmes. By 2014, a consensus among donors emerged that governance projects had not been effective, that ownership by the government for such projects remained low, that little capacity was built, and that the new government of South Sudan not only lacked capacity, but also the political will to become a committed partner in state-building.

In sum, interventions to facilitate good governance were not effective in Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan. Factors that hampered good-governance programmes in these countries were: entrenched patronage-based practices within government; a lack of buy-in by the governments; a prevalence of donor-driven, top-down project designs that had little regard for the core institutional requirements and demands of partner institutions; and a lack of political will on the part of these governments.

4.2 Basic services

Health

For Afghanistan, available studies point to a tangible increase in access to basic healthcare and to a massive improvement in many health indicators, especially child and maternal mortality. The reports reviewed suggest that successful interventions took place in training of midwives, visits to provide antenatal care, child deliveries attended by health workers, conditional cash transfers for women and community health workers, and improved family planning. Access to healthcare was improved with the implementation of a Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS), which provided primary care, enhanced access to in-patient care and elimination of national user fees. Due to limited government capacity to provide health services, all publicly-funded health services were provided either through contracting the services out to NGOs, or through service provision and programming carried out directly by the Ministry of Public Health.

For Mali, the evaluation reports agree that there were some positive outcomes, especially regarding maternal, newborn, and child health, access to healthcare for women, and in mobilising resources to fight HIV/AIDS. Budgetary support, which was widely used up until 2012, is credited with improving the capacity of the healthcare system and making healthcare more accessible. After 2012, budgetary support was reduced. Instead, donors increasingly used multi-donor trust funds, which are credited with strengthening the healthcare system and reducing maternal and infant morbidity and mortality. Effective interventions were also reported for malaria management, WASH and child mortality. One evaluation mentioned that training of health workers in telemedicine and teleconsulting was effective improving the health of mothers and children.

For South Sudan, the available evaluations also report some positive outcomes, especially in maternal, newborn and child healthcare. Notably, the massive Health Pooled Fund (HPF) was credited with significant results in improving health services. One evaluation suggested that the HPF was a success story and that this form of aid should be implemented in other fragile contexts. The evaluations also note that more improvements in health services were hindered by a lack of skilled staff, difficult logistics, and endemic violence.

Also noteworthy is the finding that many women refused to use specific health services because the service providers were men. In many communities, unfavorable gender roles and societal norms continued to be a barrier to access, particularly in areas with poor literacy and high poverty rates. The "rigid roles" of men and women were highlighted as one of the biggest barriers to women getting healthcare in South Sudan.

In sum, interventions in the health sector were mostly effective in all three countries. That said, the sustainability of many of the effective health practices relies on continued funding by donors. Improvements are, therefore, often not sustainable without external support.

Education

For Afghanistan, the available evaluation reports agree that substantial progress has been made regarding better access to primary education for both boys and girls. Much of the progress was enabled by the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the increasing security that followed. In addition, education was an early priority for the Afghan government, and many donors also made it a priority in their aid portfolios. Despite massive investments, a large demand for educational infrastructure remained, the quality of education continued to be problematic, and evaluation reports warned that many gains might not be sustainable given the enduring problems with providing security and the lack of the financial and administrative capacities of the Afghan government. Furthermore, by 2015 donors were also warning that the impressive enrolment figures and numbers of schools built included many "ghost" pupils and schools: in reality they did not exist.

In Mali, some gains were made in education, leading to improved enrolment and retention figures. Before the collapse of democratic order in 2012, donors supplied a substantial part of their aid through direct budgetary support. This support was credited with improvements in the educational sector, especially rising rates of enrolment in basic education. Even after the end of widespread budgetary support, donors continued to provide aid to the educational sector. The widely used school feeding programmes had a positive impact on both nutrition and student retention rates. Also noteworthy is that donors recorded the strong commitment of the Government of Mali to the educational sector, even after 2012. Similarly, there was a high degree of buy-in for the educational sector by local administrations and their communities. Nevertheless, although access to education increased, the quality of learning did not improve.

In South Sudan, the impact of educational projects was relatively low. Evaluations suggest that donor aid did contribute to some improvement of infrastructure for education and student retention rates, but not necessarily to improvements in the quality of learning. Support for the provision of education, especially basic education, became slightly more prominent after 2014 as donors moved away from state-building and shifted some of their aid to basic services. A very thorough and comprehensive evaluation of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) found that GPE programmes

in South Sudan achieved their targets of improving school supervision and increasing total enrolments. However, according to this GPE evaluation, the interventions did not improve learning outcomes, improve school leadership, or reduce school dropout rates. Many evaluations also note that improvements in the education sector were hindered by a high level of insecurity in the country, making it very difficult to provide basic services outside the relatively safe urban region. Cash transfers for the enrolment of girls and school feeding appear to have been effective in supporting girls' attendance and retention rates.

In sum, interventions in education appear to be somewhat effective even under very adverse circumstances. In all three countries, evaluations show that it is possible to improve educational infrastructure and increase enrolment and retention rates – more so in Mali and least so in South Sudan. School feeding and targeted cash transfers can be effective add-ons. It is noteworthy that the governments of Mali and Afghanistan both saw education as a priority, and that buy-in for this sector was relatively high. However, in all cases, improving the quality of education has been much more challenging than increasing enrolment rates.

4.3 Livelihoods and economic opportunities

The strengthening of livelihoods and the creation of economic opportunities is an important objective for donors in fragile contexts, and they use a wide variety of interventions in this sector. At the macro-level, donor projects may support macroeconomic policies and financial management, opportunities for the private sector, or investments in sectors such as telecommunications, transportation, and energy. On the more local level, there are interventions in rural development and resilience, including small infrastructure for irrigation, roads, energy, access to credits and savings, and a wide array of community-driven development approaches.

Interestingly, the bulk of the available evidence from all three countries refers to more localised interventions in rural development. Information on macro-level economic interventions, on the other hand, is rather scarce in all three cases.

In Afghanistan, programmes supporting economic development, macroeconomic policies and financial-management capacities made some progress in the early stages of reconstruction after 2004. For example, there was initial growth in telecommunications, transport, and construction, but these results were not sustainable, nor was it realistic to expect sustainable economic growth, given the insecure environment and shrinking aid flows after the end of the ISAF mission in 2014. Interventions aimed at promoting the private sector were rarely effective with evaluations citing weak institutional infrastructures and procedures, widespread corruption within the Afghan government, political instability, and lack of security as the main reasons. Interventions aimed at regulatory policies for fiscal management and public administration reform were also rarely effective because the capacity of the country's institutions to absorb these developments was limited. In general, donors agree that interventions aimed at reducing poverty and creating jobs and income for people throughout the country were on the whole not effective.

In the case of rural development, the evidence suggests that interventions, often implemented through newly created community-level organisations, helped to build large amounts of small-scale infrastructure such as roads, irrigation and access to energy. This contributed to improved livelihoods and strengthened coping mechanisms, but it did not lead to sustainable economic growth that translated into jobs or income opportunities.

In sum, interventions for sustainable economic development in Afghanistan, despite some progress, were not able to reduce poverty rates or promote sustainable economic growth.

For Mali and South Sudan, there is only evidence available for interventions in rural development.

In Mali, rural development was an important item in donors' aid portfolios. Before the onset of violence in 2012, donors were optimistic about long-term opportunities seen in Mali's agricultural sector. That changed after the collapse of democratic order, and interventions in the rural sector increasingly focused on food security, coping mechanisms and resilience. Results appeared to have been satisfactory, and interventions such as provision of rural credits, cash and in-kind transfers, establishment of saving associations, and the introduction of new crops, and irrigation projects were all to some extent effective. Also noteworthy is that the cooperation between donors and the government of Mali in the sector of rural development was satisfactory, and that capacity building and training of government officials at the subnational level in technical disciplines related to rural development was effective. This contrasts with most other areas, where cooperation and capacity building were rarely effective. Nevertheless, the available evaluations also agree that interventions in rural development aimed at increasing productivity beyond subsistence farming were rarely successful. For example, support for agricultural value chains or for small agro-businesses were not effective.

In South Sudan, projects for rural development and climate adaptation, including those related to food security, livelihoods, water and sanitation, and small-scale infrastructure, proved to be reasonably effective in improving coping strategies and resilience. However, there is no evidence in the available evaluations that interventions successfully improved productivity beyond subsistence levels for the beneficiaries.

In sum, macro-level interventions (for which only evidence from Afghanistan is available) were not effective in promoting sustainable economic growth. At local and rural levels, interventions in all three countries were reasonably effective in increasing resilience and coping strategies of beneficiaries, but not enough to improve their productivity beyond subsistence levels.

4.4 Women's empowerment

This section summarises the main findings from evaluations that were categorised by the donors themselves as mainly focusing on gender relations and women's empowerment. The scopes of these interventions differed considerably. At one end of the spectrum there were interventions designed to improve the economic situation of women (and often men) and their access to services, while at the other there were interventions aimed at transforming gender relations, leading to a more gender-equal society. The evidence suggests that the first type of interventions were often effective in achieving their stated objectives, whereas there is no evidence that the second type had a transformative effect.

The dimension of gender was especially prominent in development cooperation in Afghanistan. In the political narrative of many donors, helping Afghan women and girls was often portrayed as both an important objective and a legitimising factor for international engagement. The end of Taliban rule in 2002 and the rehabilitation of the infrastructure for healthcare and education meant that access to healthcare and education markedly improved for men and women. Such improvement does not, however, mean that interventions targeting gender equality were effective.

The effectiveness of gender programmes was low in Afghanistan. For example, despite sustained support, donors reported that the capacities of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) remained weak. Donors also noted that both the capacity and the political will of the Afghan government and political elites for gender-equality programmes remained limited; prevailing cultural norms made progress difficult.

There were, however, pockets of modest success. Examples include greater literacy of rural women, increased access to healthcare and education, and improved livelihoods in female-specific activities within agriculture, such as mushroom farming and kitchen gardening. In sum, modest, small-scale projects embedded in traditional structures helped to increase women's access to healthcare and education, and modestly improved their livelihoods. By contrast, larger, more ambitious projects aimed directly at changing gender norms and relations had no discernible impact.

Results are similar for Mali and South Sudan. **In Mali, the political and cultural context made it difficult to make tangible progress on women's rights and gender equality.** Some positive results were achieved regarding legislative changes. Donors pushed for new laws on gender quotas in parliament, better protection of victims of gender-based violence (GBV), and greater representation of women in formal and informal institutions dealing with peace issues. It

remains unclear, however, whether such legal changes contributed to greater gender equality, through actual implementation. The support of the Mali government and its willingness to implement new laws and norms appear to be rather low.

At the local level, projects aimed at tangible benefits for women were often effective. For example, village savings and loans associations helped improve women's economic status. Interventions aimed at better educational outcomes for girls led to concrete results. Finally, reports noted that removing healthcare user fees increased access to healthcare for women.

In South Sudan, interventions to improve women's rights and gender equality were not effective. Although policies for gender equality were revised or newly introduced, they were rarely implemented. Moreover, women's participation in the many unsuccessful peace negotiations rarely yielded results. Project evaluations suggest that interventions at reducing GBV were not effective.

Some small pockets of success can be found in projects in the education sector: targeted interventions helped increase female enrolment and retention rates. Also worth mentioning is that some positive results regarding women's economic empowerment were reached in aid sectors such as rural development or emergency aid. While community-level projects aimed at enhancing women's social or political empowerment produced few tangible outcomes, projects with an economic component, specifically targeting women's economic situation, fared better since they had broader acceptance and reach.

In sum, interventions to improve gender equality were not effective. Donors were sometimes successful by pushing for institutional reforms, leading, for example, to gender quotas in the parliaments of Afghanistan and Mali, the formation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Afghanistan, the formal inclusion of more women in political processes, and new legislation for the protection of women's rights. Nevertheless, such institutional changes often did not translate into action: the necessary laws were not passed, nor did ministries have the capacity to implement policy. As a result, little real change in gender relations was achieved.

Smaller, local interventions were more effective in providing tangible benefits for women, for example in aspects such as literacy for rural women, increased access to healthcare and education, support for livelihood projects for women-specific activities within agriculture, greater access to microcredits and saving associations for women, and higher retention rates for girls in basic education.

Finally, a few evaluation reports also point out that in contexts such as those of Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan gender projects have a large potential to do harm, by creating backlashes against women who participate in projects that are seen by large segments of society as not compatible with traditional values.

4.5 Humanitarian aid

Humanitarian aid is vital in fragile and conflict-affected states, and nowhere more so than in South Sudan, where on average around 64 percent of total ODA in the period 2011 – 2020 was directed towards the humanitarian sector. In Mali and Afghanistan, the proportions are considerably lower, with 12 percent of ODA in Afghanistan and 10 percent in Mali.

The systematic review of Afghanistan did not include an evaluation of humanitarian aid, so only reported findings for Mali and South Sudan can be considered. Given the importance of the sector, the evidence base is relatively small, with only three dedicated project evaluations for Mali and seven for South Sudan.

In Mali, after the collapse of democratic order and the onset of war in 2012, most donors increased their humanitarian aid, much of which was channeled through multilateral organisations. Humanitarian assistance, with food and in-kind aid, as well as income-generating activities in rural areas, grew in importance and contributed to the rudimentary social-safety net. Humanitarian interventions helped to prevent malnutrition in areas of conflict in the north. In addition, school feeding programmes had positive effects on enrolment and attendance figures, and the increased use of cash-based transfers (for example, for school feeding and nutrition support) increased aid efficiency. Programmes that combined food aid (such as cash, food vouchers or food transfers) with providing assets such as irrigation channels, flood protection or home gardens were especially promising.

In South Sudan, humanitarian assistance became the dominant form of aid by 2014. Humanitarian interventions were reasonably **effective in preventing things from going bad to worse.** A substantial part of humanitarian aid was channeled through pooled multilateral funds such as the UN-managed Common Humanitarian Fund for South Sudan. The fund was commended for its capacity to absorb large grants and use contributions in a strategic, yet flexible fashion. Measures implemented through the fund included general food assistance, cash-based transfers, school feeding, and large-scale distribution of livelihood kits. The reports note that cash-based transfers were often more cost-efficient and timelier than in-kind transfers, but that aid in this form could not be rolled out in all regions due to their lack of security. Other reasonably effective interventions were nutrition projects, clean-water delivery projects, WASH projects, setting up of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA), and small cash transfers for livestock or inputs such as seed, tools or fishing kits. Despite these achievements, many evaluations of humanitarian programmes noted that their long-term effect on resilience was probably small.

While the evidence base is relatively small, **the evidence available suggests that humanitarian aid was reasonably effective.** It remains, however, unclear whether interventions also contributed to greater resilience and thus produced more sustainable results, or whether humanitarian assistance was no more than a band-aid.

One more observation is noteworthy: **The available evaluation reports of humanitarian assistance almost never discuss the potential of humanitarian aid for doing harm.** Given that there is a substantial body of literature on the topic, and that examples of the destabilising impact of misused aid are well documented for many fragile and conflict-affected contexts, not least South Sudan, this seems a glaring omission. Clearly, evaluations of interventions in fragile states should pay more attention to unintended negative consequences. Its absence in relation to humanitarian aid interventions – but also in all other sectors included in this report – is surprising.

5. Conclusions

Main findings

The evidence suggests that there are differences in effectiveness across aid sectors in highly fragile states.

Interventions in education and health appear to be reasonably effective, although it is unclear how sustainable results are. Rural development programmes were also reasonably effective, contributing to improved livelihoods and strengthened coping mechanisms. Rural women also benefited from the livelihood programmes. Nevertheless, rural development programmes did not lead to sustainable economic growth that translated into jobs or income opportunities.

Programmes supporting macroeconomic development, macroeconomic policies, financial management and support for the private sector were mostly not effective and generally did not contribute to sustainable economic growth. Similarly, interventions aimed at transforming gender relations had little impact.

Likewise, interventions to facilitate good governance, capacity building for the central government and greater stability were not effective.

Why is this so? The reasons are manifold, but four intertwined factors stand out in the evaluation reports: first, the distinct, problematic political economy of fragile states; second, a lack of capacity of the government; third, endemic violence; and fourth, overambitious interventions.

As has already been mentioned, political power in highly fragile states does not reside with formal political institutions, but rather in networks of patronage that transcend formal political institutions. Rent-seeking, widespread institutionalised corruption, and intense competition between rival networks are typical symptoms of the political economy of fragile statehood. One important implication is that elites in such a system are not interested in political reform, which would endanger a mode of governance that is the sole source of their authority. Consequently, there is a distinct lack of political will to truly embrace reforms that could lead to greater accountability, more robust formal institutions and democratic procedures. Consequently, the effectiveness of aid programmes is especially low areas such as good governance, decentralisation, anti-corruption, and the like.

This situation is without doubt exacerbated by a lack of state capacity. Many evaluation reports stress that governmental structures lacked the capacity to deal with aid flows in a productive way. Unfortunately, many donors consistently overestimated state capacity, especially in Afghanistan, designing programmes based on largely imagined absorptive and administrative capacity. Unfortunately, as evaluations demonstrate, building capacity rarely works in such contexts, leading to a vicious circle that few fragile countries can escape. In addition, elites in such contexts are typically highly fragmented, with intense and often violent competition among various networks. Foreign donors can, therefore, rarely build reliable partnerships because there is a high turnover of government officials, and government officials are often preoccupied with internal power struggles.

The third factor explaining a lack of effectiveness is insecurity and violence. A constant theme in the evaluation reports is that the lack of basic security is a pervasive problem, affecting every aspect of development cooperation. Reports often highlight how difficult it is to implement and monitor development projects when sites are not accessible, or when development workers are at risk of being targeted by insurgents. Many reports describe how a lack of security caused delays and cost overruns. Lack of security also forced aid organisations to employ security measures, which increased implementation costs.

Finally, a recurring theme in the evaluation reports is that donors often designed overly ambitious projects that were not based on political and economic reality on the ground, but rather on overly optimistic assumptions and ideologically charged theories on the process of change.

Taken together, the distinct political economy of fragile states, a lack of capacity on the part of governments, endemic violence, and overambitious planning go a long way in explaining why aid is rarely effective beyond sectors such as education, health and livelihoods.

Paradoxically, the orthodox aid approach with fragile states is to use aid as a tool to overcome these obstacles. Unfortunately, available evidence suggests that development aid is not an effective instrument for this. **Donors need to come to terms with the fact that while traditional development aid can help to improve basic livelihoods and provide services – albeit to a limited, non-sustainable extent – it's political transformative capacity in fragile states is low.**

Pockets of success

There are some pockets of success in highly fragile states: aid is somewhat effective in the health, education and rural development sectors. For example, the evaluations suggest that basic health indicators improved (especially for mothers' and children's

health), that some capacities were built in the health sector, leading to better healthcare practices, and that enrolment and retention rates of boys and girls in basic education increased.

In the livelihood sector, improvements to small infrastructure improved food security. Interventions improved farming skills or income-generating activities, leading to greater resilience. These gains were mainly achieved "in the heads" of people in the form of skills, knowledge and practices; institutional gains, however, were rare. At a community level, factors that were identified as being helpful for achieving sustainable results were project buy-in and project ownership by communities and their leaders, as well as connectedness and collaboration with NGOs and with the government, since they have to ensure the project continues after external support has ceased. Occasionally, interventions also led to an increase in the technical capacities of subnational government structures in relation to agriculture practices.

While interventions aimed at gender equality were not effective, some improvements in the situation of rural women were achieved. Examples include rural literacy, increased access to healthcare and education, and better livelihoods in female-specific activities in agriculture, such as mushroom farming and kitchen gardening. The establishment of village savings and loans associations also helped to improve women's economic status and interventions aimed at better educational outcomes for girls were often effective. In general, gender projects with an economic component, specifically targeting women's economic situations, fared better than norm-changing, awareness-raising interventions, since they enjoyed broader acceptance among both women and men and they provided tangible, immediate benefits.

While capacity building for the central governments was usually not effective, there were some pockets of success, almost exclusively in very technical, apolitical activities at the subnational level, e.g. education, rural development and health.

Generalising the lessons from these pockets of success, it can be concluded that smaller, localised projects performed better than larger, more complex projects. Also, projects with tangible results, such as the building of small-scale infrastructure, providing services such as access to water and electricity, or training in new skills in farming, hygiene or finance, were often effective. Results have been less strong when programmes were transformative in nature, either for capacity building or to change cultural and social norms.

Are the gains made in these pockets of success sustainable? There is only limited evidence available on which to base an answer to this question, since many evaluation reports do not address issues of

sustainability and ex-post evaluations are rare.[14] As far as one can tell, prospects for sustainability are highest for projects that focus on people's skills (e.g. better farming practices, better healthcare practices), involve relatively simple infrastructure (e.g. simple irrigation, water wells), rely on relatively simple organisational structures that function without external partners (e.g. VLSA). Projects that were assessed to be sustainable focus on, for example, small-scale infrastructure for food security, VSLA, farming and gardening skills, better irrigation, or healthcare training and practices.

Prospects for sustainability were lower for projects that required continuous external funding, strong partner capacities, or involved complex infrastructure. Examples of such projects are large-scale irrigation schemes, funding of the health sector, large income-generating programmes and cash transfer programmes.

These findings are not overly surprising. In difficult contexts like these, one of the few hooks for sustainability is "in the heads" of people, in the form of skills, knowledge and practices. Institutional transformation is much harder to achieve.

Absence of the notion 'do no harm'

A final observation concerns absence of attention for the issue of "do no harm". With few exceptions, the evaluations assessed make no mention of this issue. This seems a striking omission, given that the risk of doing harm in fragile and conflict-affected situations is high. A substantial body of "do no harm" literature points out that aid is often stolen or "taxed", with the profits being reinvested in the organisation of violence. Furthermore, competition for aid can fuel conflict between groups, leading to more conflict. Another problem is that insurgents often have the power to either grant or deny access to aid workers, thus using aid as a means to reward friends and penalise foes, thereby exacerbating humanitarian needs and conflict. Finally, insurgents often portray themselves as enablers of aid, thereby increasing their legitimacy among the population. In short, there are numerous ways by which aid can do harm. Donors should make greater efforts to identify and mitigate the ways aid can be misused by parties in conflict, and evaluators should make "do no harm" assessments mandatory in their evaluations of such contexts.

14 The sustainability assessments for all sectors are reported in more detail in: Christoph Zürcher et al. 2022. "Impacts of Development Aid to Mali 2008 - 2021. A Systematic Review of Evaluation Reports. Part III: A Synthesis of Evaluation Reports", and Christoph Zürcher et al. 2022. "Impacts of Development Aid to South Sudan 2008 - 2021. A Systematic Review of Evaluation Reports. Part III: Synthesis of 104 Program and Project Evaluations".

Appendix 1: How robust is the evidence?

This section addresses possible concerns about the robustness of the findings.

A systematic review is a summary of existing evaluations. The robustness of the review depends on the quality of these underlying evaluations. What if the quality of these evaluations is poor?

In order to counter this threat, only evaluations that met a predefined quality threshold were included (see Methods, above, and the Methods report).[15] Two researchers independently assessed whether an evaluation met the threshold and could be counted as evidence.

This systematic review includes evaluations based on statistical methods, as well as evaluations based on qualitative methods. Doesn't this weaken the results?

A quality threshold for qualitative evaluation reports was applied (see Methods, above, and the Methods report) to ensure that only evaluations of solid quality were included. Furthermore, in the underlying reports, evidence from statistical evaluations was kept separate from evidence from qualitative studies, before finally integrating the finding in a synthesis. This allows readers to see for themselves that the evidence from these different sources is mutually reinforcing.

Maybe this systematic review relies on too few studies?

A systematic review strives to find *all* evidence and considerable efforts were made to identify all existing studies. That said, there will always be limitations. In this case, the search was limited to studies published in English and French after 2008. A longer time frame and more languages may have identified more studies. It is not clear, however,

15 Christoph Zürcher & Patrick Labelle. 2022 "Systematic Review of Evaluation Reports. Effects of Development Aid to South Sudan and Mali, 2008 – 2021. Methods". March 2022.

whether such studies would lead to a change in findings, although it is unlikely since the selected sample of 322 studies is already large.

Maybe there are not enough studies per sector?

The number of studies varies per sector. For example, there are 68 studies for health and nutrition, but only nine for humanitarian aid (see Evidence Base, above). There is no rule for how many studies are needed to ensure robust evidence, but being transparent about the numbers of included studies enables readers to form their own opinion by asking themselves "*Given what I have learned from the available studies, and taking into account the context, is it probable that more studies would lead to different results?*"

This systematic review finds that interventions in sectors such as health and education were more effective than interventions in sectors such as stabilisation, good governance and gender. Maybe this simply reflects that it is easier to measure impacts in the former sectors and rather difficult in the latter?

It is true that impacts in the health and education sectors are more straightforward to measure than impacts in sectors such as good governance, gender or stabilisation. Nevertheless, with adequate methods, it is possible to measure impacts in good governance, gender or stabilisation, as some of the included studies demonstrate. Furthermore, even if a study cannot measure impacts, it often measures whether outcomes or outputs were achieved or not. If even outputs or outcomes were not realised, then by inference these interventions were not effective. This is important information that also needs to be reported.

Some changes take a long time to occur. Perhaps the time frame of the assessed evaluations is too short to assess impacts?

Indeed, evaluations often have a time frame of a few years only. Often an evaluation is made in the last year of the implementation cycle; ex-post evaluations are rare. However, if there is no evidence of a positive impact within the evaluation time frame, and/or the evaluation demonstrates that outcomes or outputs were not realised, then it is in most cases unreasonable to assume that more positive changes will manifest themselves later, or that "more of the same" would lead, in time, to better results.

This synthesis report is a condensed summary based on 322 studies. Isn't It possible that information has been lost and researcher's bias has crept in during the summarising process?

This synthesis report is based on a reasonable number of underlying reports (see Figures 1 & 2). Separate country-level reports summarising the main findings for each country are provided, as well as reports containing detailed summaries of every evaluation included. Furthermore, all underlying reports are fully referenced so that readers can consult the original sources if they wish. These underlying reports were written by a team of independent scholars following predefined inclusion criteria and a template defining which information to extract from the original sources.

Are there other considerations that support the main findings of this systematic review?

One of the main findings is that interventions in the sectors of capacity building for the government, stabilisation and good governance were not effective. Country-level data show that the trends in these sectors are negative for all three countries (see Country context). This suggests that the interventions were not effective enough to counter these negative trends. Furthermore, many evaluations point out that context factors were difficult and made it unlikely that interventions in these sectors could have worked. Finally, many evaluations note that theories of change underlying interventions were often not realistic. Factors such as these lend additional support to our findings regarding lack of effectiveness in many sectors.

Appendix 2: Data sources

Databases

- Academic Search Complete
- AfricaBib.org*
- Cairn*
- EconLit
- Érudit*
- GenderWatch*
- Global Health*
- International Political Science Abstracts
- MEDLINE*
- PAIS Index
- Pascal (up to 2015)*
- RePEc / IDEAS*
- Web of Science
- Worldwide Political Science Abstracts

Bilateral donors

- US / USAID (Development Experience Clearinghouse)
- UK (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, formerly DfID)
- Canada (GAC)
- Australia (DFAT)
- New Zealand (MFAT)
- Germany (KfW, GIZ and BMZ)
- France (Agence française de développement AFD)
- Italy (Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS))
- Sweden (SIDA)
- Norway (NORAD)
- Denmark (Danida)
- Finland (Finnida)
- Belgium (Enabel)
- Netherlands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
- Switzerland (DEZA)
- Japan (JICA)
- China (China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA))*

* Not searched for Afghanistan
** Searched only for Afghanistan

Multilateral & International Organizations

- African Development Bank (AfDB)*
- African Union*
- European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)
- European Investment Bank*
- European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)
- European Investment Bank
- European Union
- International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD; part of the World Bank Group)
- International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)
- International Monetary Fund (IMF)
- International Organization for Migration (IOM)
- UNMAS, United Nations Mine Action Service
- United Nations (UN)
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Evaluation Resource Center
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
- United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)
- World Bank Group (esp. World Bank e-library, CAS Completion Report Review, Country Performance Portfolio Review, IEG Evaluations, Impact Evaluation
- World Food Programme (WFP), Evaluation Library*
- World Health Organization (WHO)*
- UN Women, GATE System
- OECD DEReC
- Asian Development Bank**

* Not searched for Afghanistan
** Searched only for Afghanistan

Repositiories of Impact evaluations in int'l development*

- 3ie RIDIE (Registry for International Development Impact Evaluations)
- 3ie Development Evidence Portal
- AgEcon
- AGRIS
- BREAD
- CGIAR: Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research
- DEval
- GEF (Global Environmental Facility)
- GEF (Global Environmental Facility)
- Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery:
- ICNL Research Centre
- IFPRI
- Independent Development Evaluation, AfDB
- J-Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)
- Millennium Challenge Cooperation
- RePEC IDEAS

Major developmental NGOs

- ACTED*
- ActionAid*
- Aga Khan Development Network
- CARE International
- Catholic Relief Services
- Danish Refugee Council*
- IRC
- Médecins Sans Frontières
- Mercy Corps
- Oxfam International
- Plan International*
- Samuel Hall*
- Save the Children*
- Welthungerhilfe
- World Vision
- HALO Trust*
- Oxfam Novib*

* Not searched for Afghanistan
** Searched only for Afghanistan

Appendix 3: Included Evaluations

Afghanistan

Country-level bilateral and multilateral evaluations

Australia. (2017, September). Aid program performance report 2016–2017: Afghanistan. Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. https://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/afghanistan-appr-2016-17.pdf

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Stabilisation

Rigorous

Child, T. (2014). Hearts and minds cannot be bought: Ineffective reconstruction in Afghanistan. The Economics of Peace and Security Journal, 9(2), 43–49.

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Good enough —

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Rigorous

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Good enough —

Rural Development

Rigorous —

Good enough

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Good enough

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Colophon

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