



# BALANCING BETWEEN AMBITION AND WISFUL THINKING

*Learning from 20 years of Dutch involvement in Afghanistan*  
Peter Heintze and Jorrit Kamminga

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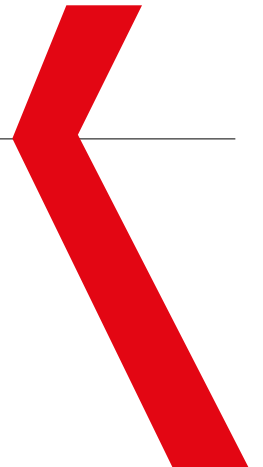
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## GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>3D</b>	Integration of <i>Defence, Diplomacy</i> and <i>Development</i>	
<b>ACBAR</b>	Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development	
<b>CIMIC</b>	Civil-Military Cooperation	
<b>DCU</b>	Dutch Consortium Uruzgan, alliance of Dutch and Afghan NGOs	
<b>DRA</b>	Dutch Relief Alliance, alliance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and 14 Dutch aid organisations	
<b>ENNA</b>	European Network of NGOs in Afghanistan	
<b>EUPOL</b>	Afghanistan - European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan (2007–2016)	
<b>FRU</b>	Family Response Unit	
<b>G20</b>	Forum of the 19 largest national economies and the European Union	
<b>IOB</b>	International Research and Policy Evaluation Directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs	5
<b>ISAF</b>	International Security Assistance Force (2001–2014)	
<b>KUNO</b>	Platform for Humanitarian Knowledge Exchange	
<b>MIVD</b>	Military Intelligence and Security Service	
<b>NADOE</b>	Network of Afghan Diaspora Organisations in Europe	
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation	
<b>NTM-A</b>	NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan	
<b>OEF</b>	Operation Enduring Freedom (2001–2014)	
<b>PRT</b>	Provincial Reconstruction Team	
<b>RSM</b>	Resolute Support Missions (2015–2021)	
<b>SIGAR</b>	Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction	
<b>SMART</b>	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-related	
<b>SMO</b>	Missions and Operations Steering Group	

## Foreword

### A responsibility of its own - a lens of its own

There are several ongoing evaluations regarding the long-term Dutch involvement in Afghanistan (2001–2021), including those from the International Research and Policy Evaluation Directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IOB) and the Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD). KUNO has no ambition to surpass these evaluations with the limited resources available. So why provide its own retrospective? KUNO considers it important to look back from our own specific lens and responsibility - that of humanitarian aid and development cooperation. KUNO has done this within its own circle, but also emphatically with other stakeholders, eliciting feedback on how the Dutch humanitarian sector functions. This led to a series of in-depth discussions that included candid retrospectives.

- 6 These interviews not only looked back at the functioning of Dutch humanitarian and development organisations. In all interviews, participants also naturally reflected on their own operations: the police, defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the diaspora, politicians and the Dutch media. KUNO appreciated this openness, which led to a much broader contribution than expected. KUNO shares those contributions in this report and hopes the following discussion will help the relevant parties learn from each other. This report is presented in a spirit of mutual learning, not as a lecture on how things should be done.

#### Identifying lessons

It is important to identify lessons learned, especially in areas under the most difficult, conflicted-affected and fragile circumstances where the Netherlands aims to make a positive contribution. That ambition is laudable but comes with the duty to operate as carefully as possible and to learn from experience. The situation in Afghanistan was complex. Moreover, new ways of working were tested, such as the 3D approach in which defence, diplomacy and development came together. Finally, Western involvement in Afghanistan ended very differently from how many had hoped. These are all reasons to look back on our role and identify the lessons we have learned.

KUNO is doing this mainly with a view to the future. In the years to come, the Netherlands will more often want to make a positive contribution in complex situations, under difficult circumstances. Are there good practices that can be adopted and used within a different context? Should certain things be done differently next time - perhaps in Afghanistan, the Sahel, Yemen or Ukraine? That was the purpose of KUNO's quest: how can we in the humanitarian sector, and other stakeholders, do our work better and more efficiently while maintaining our guiding principles?

The outcome of Western involvement in Afghanistan is dramatic given the chaotic withdrawal in August 2021. This was not the result the Netherlands had been pushing for. It is tempting to conclude that all efforts were in vain, yet some results have been achieved. For instance, the average life expectancy in 2001 was 56 years and rose to 65 years by 2021<sup>1</sup>. Adult literacy (over 15 years of age) increased from 18 per cent in 1979 to 37 per cent in 2021<sup>2</sup>. The number of children attending primary school grew from one million in 2001 to 6.8 million in 2019<sup>3</sup>, with female participation almost tripling (the Gender Parity Index in education grew from 0.24 to 0.64)<sup>4</sup>. Access to electricity grew from 4 to 97 per cent from 2001 to 2020<sup>5</sup>. In Afghanistan, a whole generation has grown up realising that the future can look different. This is cold comfort, yet it is the reality.

#### Thanks

KUNO owes many thanks to a number of partners, without whom this exploration would not have been possible. To begin with, Niloufar Rahim, former Chairman of Keihan Foundation. Keihan is an Afghan-Dutch foundation, founded in 2005 by a group of Afghan students seeking to build a bridge between the Netherlands and Afghanistan. Niloufar Rahim and Keihan Foundation provided us with solid Afghan input for our retrospectives. Many thanks are also due to Paul van den Berg of Cordaid, the pioneer of the

<sup>1</sup>) <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/AFG/afghanistan/life-expectancy>

<sup>2</sup>) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=AF>

<sup>3</sup>) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.ENRL?locations=AF>

<sup>4</sup>) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ENR.PRSC.FM.ZS?locations=AF>

<sup>5</sup>) <https://www.bit.ly/3yftJH6>

informal Afghanistan platform in the Netherlands. Without Paul van den Berg's network and expertise, KUNO would never have been able to consult such a broad group of intensively involved organisations and stakeholders in such a short time. This applies equally to Jorrit Kamminga, affiliated with Clingendael and author of the book *You are Thanked, Bin Laden* (2021). Jorrit Kamminga also provided substantive support to KUNO in preparing the interviews, guiding the meetings and elaborating on the findings. During our search, his knowledge was an important benchmark. Finally, KUNO naturally owes many thanks to the participants in all talks and meetings - especially for all their openness.

The interviews revealed a high level of Dutch commitment to Afghanistan, even today. It became clear that many are very concerned with the current developments in Afghanistan and worried about the Afghans who are victims of these developments. All stakeholders we spoke with wish Afghanistan and the Afghans well and would still like to contribute. In 2001, there was hardly any connection between the Netherlands and Afghanistan. That too has changed intensely in the past 20 years.

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Suying Lai, chair KUNO



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## Introduction

### Context to this learning pathway

This summary report is based on a series of in-depth learning sessions regarding 20 years of Dutch involvement in Afghanistan, conducted by the Platform for Humanitarian Knowledge Exchange in the Netherlands (KUNO). The sessions reviewed the period from 2001 through 2021 from seven Dutch perspectives, aiming primarily to contribute in a modest but thorough way to other ongoing evaluations and learning trajectories. Due to the nature of its network, KUNO paid particular attention to the perspective of humanitarian aid and development cooperation.

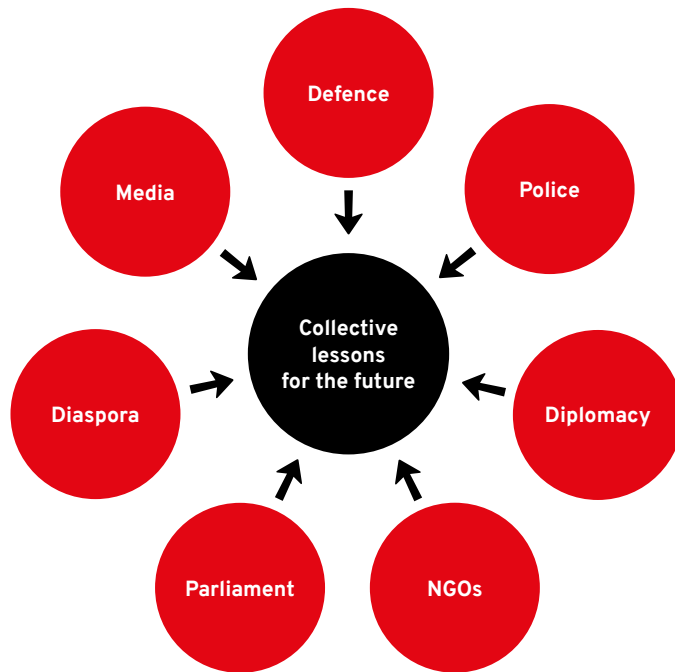


Figure 1: The seven perspectives

## The seven perspectives

The first phase of this learning journey consisted of a series of in-depth discussions with various groups. These learning sessions took place under Chatham House Rule and served as key inputs for this interim report:

- Learning session 1: Development cooperation and humanitarian aid/NGOs: 24 February 2022 (online)
- Learning session 2: Defence: 10 May 2022 (The Hague)
- Learning session 3: Police: 11 May 2022 (Doorn)
- Learning session 4: Afghan diaspora: 17 May 2022 (online)
- Learning session 5: Former politicians: 25 August 2022 (online), 27 and 30 September 2022 (The Hague)
- Learning session 6: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 19 September 19 2022 (The Hague)
- Learning session 7: Media: 28 September 2022 (online)

This phase of the research project ran from October 2021 to October 2022.

The second phase of this learning process involved bringing the stakeholder groups together at an Afghanistan-related meeting on 24 November 2022 to jointly review the findings from the in-depth interviews.

The findings of the entire learning process are reflected in this final report.

Looking back on 20 years of Dutch involvement in Afghanistan is no mean feat. There has been no constant 'mission', but rather contributions to varied military and civilian missions and projects. Moreover, Dutch involvement could never be separated from international and coalition efforts. Learning-session participants looked back with different lenses, from very different backgrounds and experiences and referring to different situations and time periods.

The lessons collected in this paper are therefore quite general. Nonetheless, they do show where a degree of consensus or overlap exists. They are the common conclusions of an otherwise highly diverse range of personal views, experiences and insights. This report does not intend to primarily emphasise the negative. Getting bogged down in everything that has gone wrong is only of

limited use. Looking to the future, it is more valuable to evaluate what went right. In this retrospective, we have left out the evacuation process from Afghanistan in August 2021. The evacuation certainly deserves a critical retrospective, but that topic was too involved to include in this phase of discussions.

The analysis in this report is the responsibility of KUNO and in no way represents the official position of the Dutch government, relevant ministries, other participating organisations and individuals or KUNO's member organisations.

This report is a summary of the main findings. For more information, or with questions about the internal partial reports of the different sessions, please contact Peter Heintze, KUNO Coordinator: [peter.heintze@kuno-platform.nl](mailto:peter.heintze@kuno-platform.nl).

## Executive team

The team that made this research possible:

- Peter Heintze, Coordinator KUNO
- Jorrit Kamminga, Associate Fellow, Clingendael Institute
- Paul van den Berg, Political Advisor, Cordaid
- Niloufar Rahim, former Chair, Keihan Foundation

This team was supported by Communications Consultant at KUNO Marianne Sijtsma and (former) interns Laurie Bolling, Maaïke van Dierendonck, Tara Favier and Renée Schinck.

## Structure of the report

The first chapter consolidates the main lessons of all findings.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 offer a schematic overview of findings from the in-depth interviews, divided thematically:

- Chapter 2: Specific bottlenecks and areas for improvement (Table 1)
- Chapter 3: Specific good practices (Table 2)
- Chapter 4: Common conclusions and general lessons (Table 3)

This report ends with a brief final reflection.

We would like to share one important observation upfront: in all KUNO's

discussions during this process, which included a critical review of the Dutch role in Afghanistan, great appreciation was expressed for the Dutch involvement. Participants widely endorsed that the Netherlands made a positive contribution to Afghanistan in the years 2001–2021. In addition, there was great appreciation for the boundless personal commitment shown by those involved.

## Chapter 1

# Key lessons from 20 years of Dutch involvement in Afghanistan

### Realism versus wishful thinking

The Dutch level of ambition in Afghanistan was too high. Several people involved indicated that they saw or sensed this from the beginning. They blame themselves for not raising the alarm or pushing back more forcefully.

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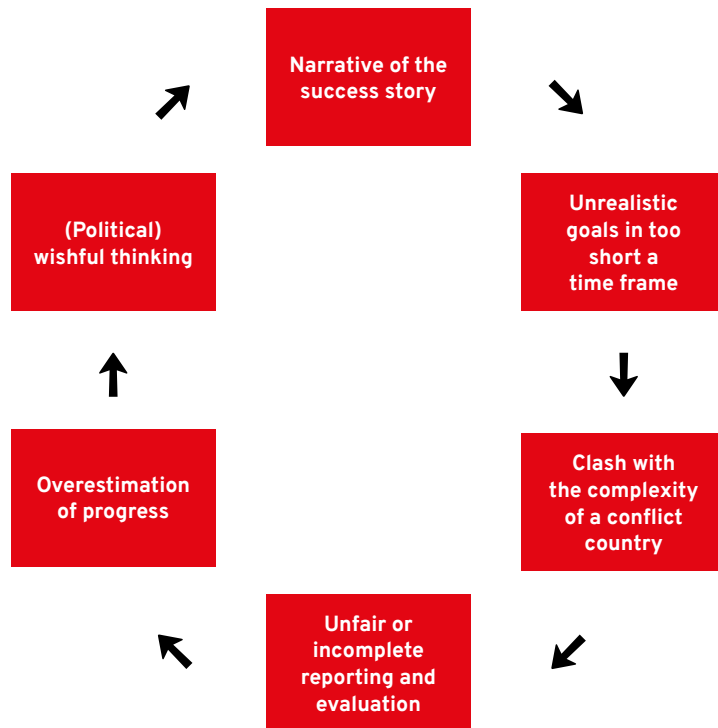


Figure 2: Political wishful thinking translates into high ambitions and an accompanying story of success or confident optimism: 'The Netherlands can do this, and we will do it'. It leads to a vicious cycle perpetuated by unfair or incomplete reporting and overestimating progress.

Politics took a strong lead in defining Dutch ambitions, as it should be. The complicating factor was that a high level of ambition was politically necessary to gain sufficient political support: the Netherlands would not only bring stability and security, it would also help build Afghan society. However, given the context, the Dutch contributions (deployment and duration) were not sufficient. One politician stated, 'The goals were not realistically formulated by the government'. Another politician commented, 'We did not give that build-up a fair chance - we left too soon. Our goals could never be realised in a period of two or four years with the commitment the Netherlands could provide'. Both politicians have a point.

Especially from the Baghlan mission contribution (2004–2006) onwards, political ambition was pushed to the limit. Because the purpose of mission contributions was highly politicised, almost all stakeholders, within ministries and outside, felt the urge or even pressure to report positively on the results they were seeing - often too positively. The mission was not allowed to fail - that could have major consequences, political or otherwise. Even in the face of setbacks, the success narrative remained intact: 'Despite challenges, progress is made'.

At the same time, a key element for achieving peace - engaging in dialogue with the Taliban - was deemed politically taboo in the Netherlands. As a result, the Dutch discussion and perception became increasingly distant from the reality in Afghanistan. As one parliamentarian summed it up afterwards:

*'Looking back now - one year after the fall of Kabul - one of the questions should be: how is it possible that we were taken in all those years by the idea that "we may be a bit behind schedule, but things are moving in the right direction"? And then suddenly it turned out that the Taliban could capture Kabul in a few days and we were all astonished. Something did go wrong there. We need to notice that we have lived in a semi-good-news show a little too long'.*

Several stakeholders raised the important question of how much international circumstances determined the Dutch position and perhaps also Dutch ambition. For instance, after the terrorist attacks in the United States (September 2001), it was virtually impossible for the Netherlands not to

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participate in an international military mission in Afghanistan, partly because of allied obligations (NATO Article 5). Moreover, a leading power (the United States) strongly set the tone, with the unambiguous goal of tracking down the 9/11 terror-attack perpetrators. This tone defined the overarching international strategy - a clearly stated *military* strategy. Within this international context, other goals, such as working on reconstruction or democratisation, were secondary. A final example concerns the desirability of dialogue with the Taliban, already touched upon above, which several observers felt was necessary to allow sustainable steps towards reconstruction. This was not only unmentionable in Dutch politics, but for a long time could not be discussed within the Afghan political leadership.

Lessons identified in relation to wishful thinking include:

- Within ministries: if necessary, push back even harder - especially if the political leadership needs to face an inconvenient truth.
- Diaspora: make yourself heard! And everyone else: take the knowledge and expertise of diaspora and local actors seriously.
- 16 • Parliament: if you commit, you must deliver. Securing and reconstructing a province in two or four years with limited commitment is not achievable - it requires a longer and broader investment. Such a task must be backed by sufficient commitment, either independently or in cooperation with partners.
- Politics (government and Parliament): ask yourself to what extent it is realistic for the Netherlands to formulate an objective that differs from the objective defined by your international partners for the mission in question.
- Government: dare to face the difficult conversation in Parliament (some ministers had this conversation with Parliament, but others seemed to shy away from it). Be clear about risks and limitations. For instance, explain that you can only make peace with an enemy, or that a dialogue with the Taliban is a necessary part of the reconstruction.
- NGOs: be aware of political limitations regarding long-term interests. Long-term interests can only be presented in Parliament if they can be linked to short-term interests. NGOs can help politicians formulate short-term goals in such a way that they can contribute to long-term development.

- NGOs/policymakers: dare to be honest, even if you have backtracked earlier promises or intentions.
- For everyone: conduct mid-term evaluations, and take findings seriously. Dare to adjust programmes and targets. No one ultimately benefits from a lack of sustainable results.
- Media: invest in quality and in-depth reporting. In a conflict zone as important for the Netherlands as Afghanistan, even the major media outlets should have stationed experienced journalists (correspondents) and not relied to a very significant extent on their travelling reporters or freelancers (who often did very good work but tend to lack the necessary experience, and/or who struggled with limited time and means).
- Finally (for everyone): take dissenting analyses and visions seriously, rather than automatically giving more weight to reports that support pre-existing views or to well-known institutions or individuals.

In addition to these lessons, the US watchdog SIGAR was mentioned as an example of good practice. The US Congress established SIGAR in 2008 to provide an independent and objective overview of reconstruction achievements in Afghanistan. Its reporting often contrasted sharply with the US government's overly optimistic progress reports. 17

Certain elements of the approach to the Dutch input in Uruzgan (2006–2010) were also identified as good practice: the Task Force Uruzgan developed a master plan, indicators were identified (co-developed by TNO) and local expertise was used for context analyses, monitoring and in-depth studies (including through The Liaison Office, an Afghan research agency). In Uruzgan, moreover, there was broad cooperation between different actors, including Afghan NGOs.

***‘One cause of the pervasive wishful thinking was the lack of a solid long-term strategy for Afghanistan. Everyone was basically just doing whatever, with no agreement on the intended end state of the Western presence’.***

(Quote from meeting on 24 November 2022)<sup>6</sup>

The Dutch strategy for Afghanistan was mentioned in almost all interviews, albeit in different ways. Unfortunately, participants did not discuss this strategy positively, and it may be hard to even call it a 'strategy'. Participants mentioned that this 'strategy':

- was not clear;
- changed repeatedly;
- was not realistic within the Afghan context;
- did not fit within the international coalition;
- was not supported by adequate resources;
- was based on wishful thinking;
- was formulated by politicians who were not knowledgeable enough about the context;
- was perpetuated by many stakeholders, who indicate in retrospect that the targets were not realistic, but who were unable or unwilling to pull the emergency brake during the ride.

***'Individuals and institutions should consciously step out of the wishful-thinking system (including positive reporting) and bear the consequences. Otherwise, nothing will change'.***

*(Quote from meeting on 24 November 2022)*

### **Learning to understand each other**

Various parties from the Netherlands were active in Afghanistan. These included the 3Ds (incorporating perspectives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs; Defence, Justice and Security; and to a lesser extent Economic Affairs), humanitarian organisations, diaspora organisations, police, business, media and others. Collaboration took very different forms - sometimes ad hoc, sometimes intensive and planned. Mutual understanding is extremely important for good cooperation. The interviews in this study reveal that mutual coordination largely depended on coincidences, especially in the initial phase.

<sup>6)</sup> On 24 November 2022, the preliminary findings from the series of interviews were presented to stakeholders and discussed with them at a meeting in The Hague. This meeting was under Chatham House Rule.

It also became evident that there was considerable lack of clarity between the different groups involved, concerning mandate, assignment, way of working and the people behind different missions.

When positive mutual exchanges between the groups occurred, closer camaraderie did not come naturally, but the exchanges were generally appreciated. Personal relationships often led to more cooperation than did institutional ties. Given the importance of the integrated approach to future missions, cooperation and the establishment of mutual understanding should be encouraged in a less ad hoc manner and more structurally and institutionally.

Just as the various Dutch partners need to invest in learning for mutual understanding amongst themselves, they equally need to seek mutual understanding from Afghan partners and the local Afghan population. Afghans' knowledge of foreign parties suddenly operating in their country, and of the differences between those actors, is anything but self-evident.

Lessons and good practices that involved getting to know and understand each other included:

- Informal get-togethers: 'drinking tea' or the regular informal meetings (reunions, get-togethers), for example at the Dutch embassy in Kabul and at the Ministry of Defence, proved invaluable to those involved.
- Provide overviews to other types of stakeholders (e.g. NGO representatives could introduce their work at military sessions).
- A step further would be training and learning together (opening training courses to each other). For example, this could be in preparation for a deployment, as in the so-called opwerktrajecten (e.g. the Hostile Environment Awareness Training [HEAT]).
- Exchange information and jointly generate added value (e.g. as happened within the Dutch Consortium Uruzgan or at security briefings), even when there is no mission (e.g. within the Afghanistan Platform).
- Joint analysis: working together in a mission preparatory process, or even jointly conducting a context analysis (e.g. the civilian assessment, where prior to the mission in Uruzgan, Dutch actors from the three D's - diplomacy, defence and development - performed a context analysis).

- Formal cooperation, such as that within CIMIC (Civil-Military Cooperation).
- Creating co-determination: a way to enforce cooperation. An example is the civilian Red Card Holder (also called Civilian Representative): a civilian within the military chain of command, at the same level as the commander, with the power to call off military operations.

Importantly, getting to know and understand each other does not happen automatically and can take a long time. It is also important to think carefully about the purpose and forms of cooperation (see the next section).

***‘Learning to understand each other, that is what it is all about! And it is terribly difficult. But not just between the different foreign groups and constructors, especially also with Afghans (and there are lots of different Afghans!). Communicating is a skill in itself’. (Quote from meeting on 24 November 2022)***

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### **Keeping roles separate**

The call for greater cooperation and integration also has limits. Several humanitarian organisations learned the incredibly hard way that they can only have limited influence on how a population - or certain population groups - perceives humanitarian organisations. Humanitarian principles such as neutrality and impartiality<sup>7</sup> were not recognised or endorsed by all Afghan parties. Misjudging these perceptions can mean the difference between life and death for the staff. Getting to know and understand each other, perhaps even wanting to work together (which presupposes visiting each other ‘on the floor’), adds value, yet it is crucial to maintain non-discriminatory action and neutrality. Tension exists between these two values. This concern applies to development organisations (albeit perhaps to a lesser extent) and journalists as well as to humanitarian organisations.

<sup>7</sup>) The principle of neutrality states that humanitarian actors should not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. The principle of impartiality states that humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinction on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.

Lessons and good practices for distinguishing between different roles include:

- For everyone: it is important to be constantly aware of the vulnerability of humanitarian workers and journalists. They work in areas where fighting may be at its fiercest. If the local population or militant groups mistakenly believe these humanitarian staff or journalists are part of the enemy alliance, they will be at particular risk.
- Within this context, the small projects carried out by the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) under the banner of civil-military cooperation (the hearts-and-minds projects) also deserve attention. These projects were widely viewed and presented as development assistance within the framework of the reconstruction, but they were actually an extension of the stabilisation mission. There was therefore confusion about these different roles.
- Humanitarian organisations should be aware that outsiders do not regularly make clear distinctions between humanitarian aid and development cooperation (which entails much more political involvement). Those involved in policy, civil society, business, media and politics do not always seem aware that strict humanitarian neutrality may be necessary to operate in conflict situations.
- Dealing well with role purity presupposes a good understanding of each other’s roles (see ‘learning to understand each other’ above) and consciously determining one’s own role. Incidentally, Dutch Ministry of Defence employees distinguished more sharply between roles and mandates than Ministry of Foreign Affairs employees.
- In Afghanistan, where the military component strongly led during the missions, it was not surprising that the local population did not keenly perceive the independence or neutrality of foreign (Western) humanitarian organisations.
- Humanitarian neutrality and the humanitarian non-discrimination principle require constant scrutiny: what do these principles mean in the specific context? Obviously, from their specific mandates, history and position, humanitarian organisations can make different choices in this regard.

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### Understanding the Afghan context and culture

So far, the main lessons have focused on the Dutch political context and mutual cooperation within Dutch involvement. Another frequently mentioned lesson is the structural lack of knowledge about the Afghan context and culture. Courses were drafted with almost no attention to the country's population, culture, religion and history. The Dutch lack of knowledge about the Afghan context could have paved the way for a high degree of Afghan ownership and leadership, but participants often saw just the opposite. Projects, trainings and other initiatives were rigged using Western resources, blueprints, reasoning and expectations, without matching the needs or customs of the local context. For example, the lengthy decision-making processes typical in Afghan culture were at odds with the high pressure to show short-term results towards construction and democratisation. As a result, programmes were not properly tailored to the local situation, or local partners did not have a proportionate influence on the projects - even with development agencies that worked mainly through local partners.

In future mission contributions, the local context and population should play a more significant role. Cultural awareness is not sufficient; those involved must also be able to translate that awareness into activities and initiatives (also called 'cultural competence'). Those involved must give Afghans adequate space, instead of politically hiding behind empty terms like 'Afghan ownership and leadership'. In a general sense, cooperation between Afghan governments and civil society organisations, on the one hand, and international institutions and NGOs, on the other, could be much better.

Additional comments addressed the nuances and particularities of learning about and getting input from Afghan society - without intending to downplay the need for Afghan input. For instance, Afghan stakeholders' knowledge can be biased: Afghans may take their own political interests into account. Moreover, Afghans in the diaspora may lack up-to-date knowledge. Participants also observed that to understand another culture, you need insight into your own society and culture. It is helpful to ask, 'What kind of culture/society do I come from, and how do I interpret what I hear from, for example, an Afghan?'

Good practices that have contributed to a better understanding of Afghan culture include:

- The civilian assessment conducted for Uruzgan.
- Naming cultural advisers and mapping the historical and socio-cultural context of Uruzgan.

***'A constant factor was surely the Dutch arrogance. An idealistic attitude founded in the Dutch belief in a makeable society and a mentality of "we can do it"- without immersing yourself in the country you are going to'.***

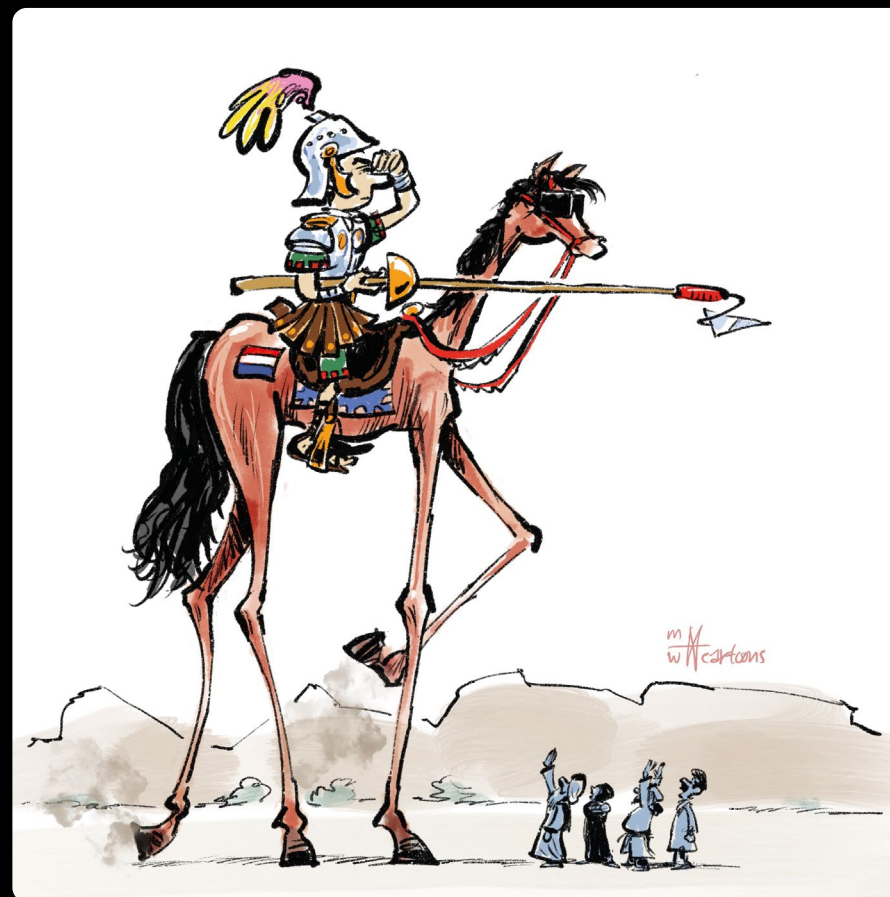
*(Quote from meeting on 24 November 2022)*

The following chapters provide a comprehensive overview of findings from all interviews conducted during this study, which form the basis for the above conclusions.

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One finding which is not reflected in these conclusions but was shared by some humanitarian professionals (KUNO's constituency) touches on the difference 'we' from the Netherlands wanted to make in Afghanistan: the impact of aid, including emergency aid, is ultimately limited. This realisation forces us to be modest, without having to abandon the humanitarian principle of humanity.

The last observation we want to share is that 20 years ago there was no particularly strong Dutch-Afghan connection. That is different in 2023: there is a large and active Afghan community in the Netherlands, and a large group of Dutch people who have put their hearts and souls into Afghanistan. We now have a shared history. The side note is that Afghanistan has lost political importance in the Netherlands, and many stakeholders and organisations are now no longer working in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, KUNO's interviews over the past year show that there is a great sense of commitment to Afghanistan in the Netherlands and - given recent developments - great concern. Perhaps there will once again be room to exploit those strengths and work towards a common future.



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REALISM VERSUS WISHFUL THINKING

## Chapter 2

### Bottlenecks and areas for improvement

This section presents a broad overview of lessons, good practices and comments made during the in-depth interviews with various stakeholder groups. Specific bottlenecks and areas for improvement appear first (see Table 1). These are discussed per theme in the table, with recommendations when possible. The recommendations were sometimes mentioned directly in the learning sessions but sometimes derived from the discussions with the project team. The recommendations are quite general and are mainly intended to stimulate future discussions in which they could be further elaborated. Findings and comments are not always consistent, as they reflect various discussions with different stakeholder groups.

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Perhaps needless to say, the findings named under various headings relate to the specific topic (e.g. politics, development cooperation, defence) and are not necessarily from interview participants in those respective sectors.

**TABLE 1** Specific bottlenecks and areas for improvement

#### Politics

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Political ambition	<p>The political ambition in Afghanistan was too high. The Netherlands has a constitutional ambition to contribute to security, rule of law and promotion of human rights in the world. That ambition also consistently translated into parliamentary support for mission contributions.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Political ambition is fine, but it must translate into realistic goals and expectations. It should also include appropriate investment in the armed forces (such as meeting NATO's two per cent gross domestic product standard).</p>
Broader political interests	<p>Afghanistan was just one of many issues amongst wider political-party or coalition interests. There is no political vacuum in which one can only look at Dutch involvement in Afghanistan to the exclusion of other issues.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> In politics, be honest about these broader interests. This will prevent excessive expectations about Dutch interests and investments in Afghanistan.</p>
Short-term political thinking	<p>By definition, politics has no eye for the long term. Even with broad parliamentary support, results need to be visible quickly.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Translate long-term development goals into short-term objectives that are at least structural steps in the right direction.</p>

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Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Political framing	<p>Political framing (e.g. 'build-up mission', 'combat mission', 'community policing', 'Betuwe plan') is an inevitable part of the political game between supporters and opponents of a mission contribution. This political image-making can affect the political playing field and have negative consequences for NGOs and other parties working in the area. For example, this framing created the false perception that military personnel (with CIMIC projects) were providing development assistance.</p>
Political interference in operational details	<p>Political support seemed inversely proportional to political interference in operational details of the mission contributions (e.g. micro-management). The less support that exists (see, for example, Kunduz), the more political discussion about operational content and limitations of the mission contribution.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Ensure a proper balance in the House of Representatives' role (defined in the Assessment Framework) to test not only political desirability but also feasibility.</p>
Assessment Framework	<p>The value of the Assessment Framework was not always clear. Should it also have prevented certain mission contributions? For instance, in the case of Uruzgan, the Assessment Framework did not outweigh high political ambitions and political wishful thinking, regardless of negative Military Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD) reports and other reports and expert opinions.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> For research institutions: as part of ongoing and future studies, examine the Assessment Framework's functioning in the decision-making process related to Dutch involvement in Afghanistan. How is it possible that unrealistic reconstruction and stability objectives still 'passed' the Assessment Framework?</p>

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Allied obligations	<p>The Netherlands had some freedom over how to shape its contributions to missions, but it was difficult to say 'no' considering alliance obligations (invoking Article 5). This was partly due to the wider interests at play, such as top international positions or a seat at the G20.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> In the political realm, be honest and clear about the Netherlands' wider interests, especially if they are more important than participation in a particular mission itself.</p>
Terrorist threat	<p>The international context, including many terrorist attacks in the West, helped shape decision making leading up to the various mission contributions - and perhaps also to the tone of reporting on those missions. The 2001 attacks on New York were followed by attacks in Madrid (2004), London (2005), Boston (2013), Paris (2015), Brussels (2016) and Manchester (2017), among others - the threat of Islamist terrorism was real. Yet the link to Afghanistan was often limited or less clear.</p>
International pressure	<p>The tone of the international missions in Afghanistan (mission, objectives, approach) was to a very large extent set by a leading power, the United States, which had the unified objective of tracking down the 9/11 terror attack perpetrators.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> In the political realm: even if international pressure or allied obligations make participation essential, the Netherlands must continue to critically examine: 1) which contribution is realistic and useful and 2) whether that contribution can also perform well within the broader military context and framing.</p>

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Political objectives and progress indicators	<p>No clear objectives and result indicators have been established for any mission contribution.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Establish clearly defined goals. Regardless of the complexity on the ground, it is possible to be clearer about what the objectives comprise and what is not included. Setting realistic goals, with associated risks and realistic expectations, is paramount.</p>
Overarching strategy	<p>Besides the lack of concrete targets and outcome indicators, neither the Netherlands nor the international community had an overarching strategy for what we wanted to achieve in Afghanistan. An overarching strategy is especially necessary when using an integrated approach, and its absence strongly encouraged wishful thinking. In particular, questions about reconciliation with the Taliban, or about the future design of the political system, remained inadequately addressed due to a lack of political strategy.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Especially in an integrated or 3D approach, operating without a clear overarching strategy is almost pointless. Establish such a strategy if one is lacking, or start a discussion with allies before embarking on a mission contribution.</p>

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Reporting to the House of Representatives	<p>Ministries were often too optimistic in their reports to the House of Representatives. However, with too many negative reports, it is logical that the House of Representatives will not support further efforts. On the other hand, more honest reporting - in addition to creating realistic expectations - makes it easier to account for later results or a lack thereof.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Reporting to the House of Representatives should be based on a realistic longer-term strategy and an adequate account of the results achieved, even if those results are for whatever reason disappointing.</p>
The knowledge of Members of Parliament (MPs) about Afghanistan	<p>One of the main reasons for political wishful thinking was MPs' moderate knowledge of the situation on the ground. Parliamentarians did visit Afghanistan, yet during those visits they mainly met with dignitaries in Kabul or at the military bases, keeping the 'real Afghanistan' far away.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> MPs should also engage with representatives of local organisations during their working visits to mission areas.</p>
The 'left-wing' relationship with military missions	<p>Although no party made rushed decisions in supporting mission contributions, left-wing parties seemed to have more fundamental difficulty with military missions. This in turn could translate into political framing or euphemisms such as 'reconstruction mission' to secure political support.</p>



**Theme Explanations and recommendations**

<p>The political solution</p>	<p>Improvements in stability, security and development are not sustainable without a political solution. The Taliban's role in this solution (and the practicalities of that role) were almost never debated in the House of Representatives. In fact, 'talking to the Taliban' remained unmentionable for 20 years.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> A political solution is accompanied by a political strategy. Be prepared to contribute to this strategy. Portraying non-state actors as 'terrorists' does not bring a political solution any closer.</p>
<p>The political solution (2)</p>	<p>Engaging in a dialogue with the Taliban was off limits not only in Dutch politics, but also amongst allies in the Afghan political leadership.</p>

**Development cooperation and humanitarian aid**

**Theme Explanations and recommendations**

<p>Short- versus long-term objectives</p>	<p>There was a discrepancy between development organisations' long-term goals and donors' short-term vision. In particular, donors such as ministries or the European Union will always be bound by other interests and objectives with a different time frame. This remains difficult for development organisations, which stand for long-term qualitative programming independent of political whims.</p>
<p>Micro and macro level</p>	<p>There was a discrepancy between the different levels of intervention in Afghanistan. Donors focused a good deal on the macro level (e.g. state building, good governance), while NGOs often focused on local projects. It remains challenging to close that gap. Although both levels are crucial, they frequently interact insufficiently. For instance, local projects do not translate into broader development, and government projects in Kabul do not lead to developments in the rest of the country.</p>
<p>Duration of development projects</p>	<p>The duration of development projects remained short (between one and five years). It is usually hard to achieve much in complex conflict zones in such a short time. That alone should force organisations to set fair, realistic goals, but two other factors come into play: 1) donor expectations and 2) competition with other development organisations.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Provide a policy and funding framework that allows for longer-term projects and encourages a degree of fairness and flexibility appropriate to programming in complex and fragile conflict zones.</p>

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Objectives	<p>Development project objectives were often unrealistic. Moreover, due to insecurity and instability, large parts of Afghanistan were not ready for development or reconstruction activities. This led to unrealistic objectives and excessive expectations, especially in relation to the complexity and fragility on the ground.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Formulate realistic targets. Even though Dutch ambition will remain relatively high, it should be possible to create more realistic objectives for development projects (and mission contributions). In this respect, outputs will be important and outcomes will have to be formulated more realistically. The 'A' in SMART ('achievable') is ultimately the most important. The motto 'less pretension, more realism' coined by the IOB is useful as a general guideline.</p>
Reporting on development projects	<p>NGOs sometimes felt that honest reporting on the achievement or non-achievement of targets was not possible, mainly due to the urgent need for a positive victory story in which the Netherlands contributed to development, security and stability.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Make clear agreements with donors on realistic and flexible frameworks within which results must be achieved, considering the complexity of conflict countries. In the end, unrealistic programming serves no purpose for the donor either.</p> <p><b>Recommendation 2:</b> Conduct mid-term evaluations - and take the findings seriously. Adjust programmes and targets as reality demands.</p>

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Reconstruction	<p>Despite the improvements in such areas as health care, Afghanistan's reconstruction has had very limited success, particularly in light of the investments made and the political results of 20 years of intervention. One questions whether it is the responsibility of international NGOs to build a society. Should Western NGOs have restricted themselves to certain policy areas like health care and left other activities out of the equation? Even though it may seem harsh, given the very limited social engineering of Afghan society, this strategy is more realistic.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Engage in a structural discussion internally (within organisations) and externally (together with other stakeholders) on the effectiveness and sustainability of specific activities, initiatives and investments.</p>
Cooperation between Dutch NGOs	<p>Cooperation between Dutch NGOs remained low, partly because of competition. As project funding has grown more vital for the survival of Dutch NGOs, there will always be competition. The lack of cooperation led to the fragmentation of development projects.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> The government should encourage cooperation and coordination, within the rules of the funding systems, on thematic or geographical reference leads. This can, among other things, counteract fragmentation. Furthermore, donors should focus mainly on the project proposals' content and not only on the price tag.</p>

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Neutrality of humanitarian NGOs	<p>The intensive cooperation between development organisations on the one hand and military and diplomats on the other (within the 3D approach) sometimes reflected negatively on humanitarian organisations. For the local Afghan population, the neutral role of humanitarian organisations was not always well defined. Staff of Western humanitarian organisations were killed because they were perceived as part of a Western (military) alliance.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Be aware that cooperation - or even a call for cooperation - and the branding of the 3D approach can also have negative effects on organisations and their staff. For more information on the side effects of the 3D approach, see the section below titled 'Cooperation within Dutch mission contributions'.</p>
Instrumentalisation of NGOs	<p>The impression that Dutch NGOs were in some way an extension of the political or military mission was fostered through collaboration between NGOs and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Defence.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> NGOs that cooperate with MFA and defence should evaluate the collaboration and explicitly ask whether there has been sufficient resistance to instrumentalisation or to the perception of instrumentalisation.</p>
Afghan perception of Western aid workers	<p>Since the military component took a strong lead in the Afghanistan missions, it is not surprising that locals were unaware of foreign (Western) humanitarian organisations' independence or neutrality.</p>

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Localisation of aid	<p>Large NGOs were often viewed as more reliable partners than diaspora organisations or local partners. This is one of the reasons aid was not localised in Afghanistan. The sector has been calling for localised aid for years, but it is structured in such a way that actually working with and through local partners in Afghanistan has not yet really taken off.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> As a sector, discover practical ideas and recommendations that can actually promote localisation. Be sure to consider the bureaucracy, financial regulations and high legal and political accountability requirements that will remain a structural part of the sector. The way international and Afghan NGOs in Uruzgan joined forces under the banner of the Dutch Consortium Uruzgan (DCU) was an interesting model of meaningful cooperation in a challenging environment.</p>
The relationship between political attention and funds	<p>With Dutch mission contributions, the political attention and available funds increased. Fewer funds will be available for humanitarian and development projects if there are no (or smaller) missions in a conflict country or if there is less political attention to those missions.</p>

## Defence

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Results of military deployment	In retrospect, one must conclude that despite the professionalism, good intentions and boundless commitment of foreign military personnel, the military deployment in Afghanistan has failed. The training of security forces, in addition to military operations and support, did not produce sustainable results. It is exceedingly uncertain that over the longer term anything positive might remain, even indirectly, from all these military efforts and investments.
Military strategy and exit plans	<p>Especially in the early years, there was no clear overarching Dutch military strategy connecting Dutch goals to international goals. Military participation sometimes seemed more important than the question of exactly what the military deployment was supposed to achieve. '3D' or the integrated approach was appealing, yet often remained unclear in practice. It also lacked formulated objectives (SMART) and a clear exit strategy. On the other hand, in complex conflict zones, how much can actually be planned well in practice?</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Ensure (as with the Resolute Support mission) clear 'condition-based' objectives that are in principle not tied to a specific time frame.</p>
Mandates and rules of engagement	<p>The mandate and rules of engagement were often indistinct in Afghanistan. This confusion was intensified by the coexistence of different missions (e.g. ISAF and OEF, and EUPOL and the NATO-led training mission NTM-A).</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Ensure clear mandates and rules of engagement. Accordingly, grant military personnel in the field more decision-making power and a certain degree of flexibility, especially to avoid risk-averse behaviour.</p>

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Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Is an <i>Alleingang</i> real?	The question is to what extent it is realistic for the Netherlands to set an objective that differs from the one defined by its allies and partners for the mission.
Building on expertise	<p>The design of the Kunduz mission was a blatant example of political wishful thinking. Politicians should leave mission design to experts and not attach too many caveats to missions.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Ensure a clear division of tasks between the political consideration (the Assessment Framework) and the substantive interpretation and implementation to be carried out by specialists. This is especially important in the political realm regarding specific mission contributions, such as police training missions.</p>
Combat mission 'versus' reconstruction mission	<p>It need not be a contradiction that a construction mission also involves combat. Reality may dictate that construction can only begin once combat has created security.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> As politicians, do not create or maintain artificial contradictions that do not exist in practice and that distract from the actual debates that should be held.</p>
Accountability regarding use of force	The mandatory reporting (and associated administrative burden) on arms deployment varied in intensity during different periods and mission contributions but was sometimes quite demanding. Nevertheless, this duty is unavoidable. The Netherlands has no legal framework for peacetime military operations. Civilian legal practice therefore continues to apply, including for arms deployment by military personnel in operations.

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Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Risk-averse behaviour of military personnel	High accountability and diminished political support for a 'combat mission' led to risk-averse behaviour from military personnel. For example, they might avoid certain combat operations or weapon deployments. This avoidance hindered the agility that is so important in an unpredictable situation.
Little appreciation for the Dutch military from coalition soldiers	In general, international military cooperation was not particularly good. For example, it was relatively clear on the ground that Dutch military deployment was not well appreciated (such as by Australian military personnel). There was a perception that Dutch military did not know how to fight.
Distinction between reconstruction mission and combat mission	<p>The distinction between reconstruction mission and combat mission, fuelled by politicians in The Hague and by the media, is not realistic in a country like Afghanistan. To reconstruct, conditions had to be safe enough. If security or stability were not already in place, combat was occasionally necessary to achieve stability. Yet combat did not result in long-term stability, and battles continued to be waged in the same areas.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Translate prevailing instability and insecurity into honest reporting and realistic expectations about the progress and results of reconstruction and development activities. Be as honest as possible about the risks and the need to use force. Politicians should also ensure long-term political commitment if reconstruction and development are indeed among the objectives.</p>
The relationship between ISAF and OEF	There was much confusion about coherence and differences between the ISAF and OEF missions. While the two missions could sometimes be clearly separated operationally, this was much more difficult in political and public terms. Lack of clarity on rules of engagement, and national caveats, caused significant political debate and could create unsafe situations on the ground.

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Coherence of CIMIC projects with development aid	<p>Small-scale projects carried out by the PRTs under the banner of civil-military cooperation (or hearts-and-minds projects) were generally confused with development assistance, while they were instead an extension of the stabilisation mission. Despite political honesty about this (e.g. former minister Van Ardenne's explanation in the Chamber), confusion persisted.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> The House of Representatives and the media should make sharper distinctions between and interpretations of different mission-contribution components. The debate should centre on the facts rather than contribute to confusion or perpetuate artificial contradictions.</p>
Deployment periods	<p>Dutch commanders were deployed for a relatively short time (six months) in comparison with other stakeholders, and they could have had their own agenda and priorities. This was detrimental to continuity.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Opt for longer deployment periods. The longer the deployment period, the more stability and continuity it will produce. Also ensure a proper transfer during rotations. Learning-session participants often reported that there was no transfer at all or only a very inadequate transfer, allowing important knowledge and networks to be lost.</p>

## Police

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Political framing of police mission	<p>After Uruzgan, the term 'police (training) mission' became mostly synonymous with 'no-combat mission'. To some extent, this hid the military nature of the mission, because a large military presence was still required to protect against violence. Using this term also gave an incomplete picture of the mission.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Politicians should choose a specific mission contribution for its usefulness and the value the Netherlands can add to the mission, not because of a political compromise.</p>
The political voice of the police	<p>The police were not always directly represented in discussions on the design and progress of 'police missions'. Although the Minister of Interior Relations, for example, participated in the Missions and Operations Steering Group (SMO), there is a perception that police officers were not always directly represented in discussions about mission contributions where policing was paramount.</p>
Policing by non-police officers	<p>Non-police officers made most of the decisions and performed the operational tasks during the Kunduz police training mission. This is not to say that policemen are needed everywhere, but it was peculiar that precisely during the NTM-A police training mission in Kunduz, no (or hardly any) policemen were involved or consulted. European diplomats also sometimes interfered in the EUPOL mission.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Police work, like defence or development cooperation, is a specialisation. Ensure that specialists - in this case Dutch police officers - play at least an important advisory role.</p>

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Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Reporting lines	<p>Reporting lines were often complicated. Police officers were part of EUPOL, with a direct reporting line to Brussels, but they were simultaneously serving the Netherlands, with a reporting line to the Ministry of Justice and Security.</p>
Community policing	<p>Community policing was both a political prerequisite for the Kunduz mission and an overly ambitious objective in the Afghan context, where many police were deployed to counter-insurgency tasks and roadblocks and checkpoints defined the streetscape. The police cannot be the 'friendly bobby' if they are mainly engaged in checks and searches.</p>
Police and deployment	<p>Unlike the Ministry of Defence, the police force is not at its core a deployment organisation. This translates to an ongoing difference in how deployed police officers are viewed and how they are assessed afterwards. This difference also affects police cooperation with the deployed staff from other ministries.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> The Ministry of Justice and Security and police leadership should work towards an institutional culture within the police where deployments are more highly valued and do not adversely affect the careers of deployed personnel.</p>

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## Diaspora

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Knowledge of diaspora	Diaspora knowledge was structurally undervalued or ignored. Despite knowledge of the language, culture, customs and practices, the diaspora was almost never invited to talks or debates in the Netherlands.
Input from the diaspora	<p>The absence of input from the diaspora has contributed to the unrealistic nature of policies and projects in Afghanistan. This was a missed opportunity for NGOs and the government.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> The diaspora should do more collectively to make itself heard and to claim a seat at the table. This is especially important at times when unrealistic policies are made or expectations are set too high.</p>
Biased knowledge of diaspora	Afghan stakeholders' knowledge may be biased. For example, Afghans may take their own interests and political concerns into account. People in the diaspora may also not have up-to-date knowledge.
Requirements of funding frameworks	Diaspora organisations usually do not meet the high requirements established by such agencies as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for financing development projects. As a result, they remain dependent on private resources and cannot benefit from the extra funds that become available during Dutch mission contributions.
Relationship between Afghanistan and the Netherlands	The Netherlands had and still has no natural (e.g. historical) connection with Afghanistan. It is therefore difficult to establish and maintain relationships. The diaspora can serve as a link, but it is challenging to enforce a long-term commitment in the absence of more substantial financial and political interests.

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Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Fragmentation	<p>The diaspora consists of a patchwork of numerous, primarily small, organisations with diverse agendas that generally do not cooperate much. This makes it harder for the government and other NGOs to seek cooperation, although it should not be a justification for lack of cooperation.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Diasporas, for example at the European level, should attempt to act or coordinate more jointly. Governments or NGOs should actively seek out the diaspora as a discussion or project partner.</p>

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## Media

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Political influence and watchdog function	Although articles and broadcasts often prompted Parliamentary questions, in general the media had relatively little influence on the political debate. There is a perception that the media should have been sharper in calling out politically motivated 'window dressing' of mission contributions, especially in the use of euphemistic terms like 'stabilisation' and 'reconstruction mission'.
Quality of media coverage	<p>The quality of media coverage varied and was sometimes superficial. Regardless of individual journalists' talents, there is a perception that the media invested too little in good coverage of Afghanistan. Most newspapers and broadcasters did not have journalists stationed in Afghanistan for long periods of time (such as a permanent correspondent), which meant that reports were mainly based on short press trips. These reports differed greatly and mostly remained at the surface level.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> The media should invest in quality and in-depth reporting. In a conflict zone as important to the Netherlands as Afghanistan, even the major media outlets should have stationed experienced journalists (correspondents).</p>
Criticism in the media	The media did not frequently report on positive developments. In the margins, there was only occasional space for positive stories. They usually dealt with violence, conflict, corruption and lack of results. Images presented in the media sometimes had a significant impact on political debate or public opinion. These images could make it harder for politicians to make or justify particular decisions.

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Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Discussion on unembedded versus embedded journalism	The discussion on unembedded and embedded journalism seems to have been not only too black and white but also oversimplified. With the right nuance, both forms could have complemented each other. Hybrid forms were also possible, and both unembedded and embedded journalism had advantages and disadvantages. For instance, in embedded journalism there was some control over the reporting, and an embedded journalist got a good impression of the experiences and daily routines of the Dutch military.
Influence of political discussions on development work	The difficult political discussions in The Hague, and the media coverage of these discussions, influenced public opinion and reflected negatively on development organisations' work. The discussion about 'building and fighting' is a particular example.

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## Afghanistan related

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Afghan ownership and leadership	In practice, the concepts of Afghan ownership and leadership have too frequently proven to be hollow or mere political rhetoric within reconstruction programmes and projects. This has had major consequences for the feasibility and sustainability of policies, projects and programmes.
Cultural awareness	<p>There was a structural lack of cultural awareness.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> In the future, spend more time raising the cultural awareness of deployed Dutch nationals. An 'afternoon of Afghanistan lessons' is not enough.</p>



Self-awareness	To understand another culture (Afghan culture), you need insight into your own society and culture (Dutch culture). Ask 'What kind of society and culture do I come from, and how do I interpret what I hear from, for example, an Afghan?'
Bridge the knowledge gap	Be aware that the local population may not know about the cultural background, peculiarities, roles and mission of the intervening parties. Invest in bridging the mutual knowledge gap.
Corruption on the ground	Despite the political rhetoric and programmes, it has not been possible in 20 years to structurally address small- or large-scale corruption. Large monetary expenditures in a relatively poor country have only increased corruption.  <b>Recommendation:</b> Dutch politicians should be honest about their own role in fuelling corruption. So far, the Afghan authorities have primarily been blamed, without a critical look at the role of donor funds in fuelling corruption.
The illicit opium economy	For two decades, it was not a priority to curb the influence of the illicit opium economy, even though it clearly contributed to insecurity and instability. Even though interference in the fight against drugs had undoubtedly created other problems, leaving this revenue source almost totally untouched was not a coherent choice from a military-strategic perspective.



## Cooperation within Dutch mission contributions

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
3D approach	<p>The 3D approach, sometimes synonymous with an integrated or comprehensive approach, is important (and may become even more important given current conflicts around the world). In Afghanistan, that approach was implemented unevenly, with the 'D' of defence frequently predominating over that of diplomacy and development. As a result, the other two Ds sometimes seemed to only function as part of a military approach. This tendency may have been due in part to the fact that there was still little room for reconstruction, and the investment priority had to go towards security.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Evaluate the 3D approach as a guide for missions in other countries. In the future, more integration, cooperation and balance will be needed to strengthen the 3Ds and extricate defense, diplomacy and development from each other. Full integration is neither possible nor desirable, but there is consensus around the need for broader cooperation, especially in the preparatory phase and concerning information sharing. By formulating good objectives, it should be possible for development and diplomacy to prevail - especially since in retrospect it is precisely military engagement that has remained the least sustainable.</p>
The risk of the 3D approach for NGOs	<p>The integrated approach contributed unintentionally to the perception that NGOs could be extensions of the military mission. For example, Dutch politicians viewed NGOs as part of the campaign to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan population. The outside world therefore perceived NGOs as an extension of the military mission, which may have been detrimental to the NGOs' security and reputation.</p>

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Theme	Explanations and recommendations
The CIMIC projects and NGOs	<p>The small-scale projects carried out by PRTs under the banner of CIMIC (civil-military cooperation) also contributed to the perception that NGOs were extensions of a military mission. Outsiders mistook them for development cooperation, leading to an indirect negative perception of humanitarian aid and development cooperation.</p>
Collaborative preparation	<p>The effectiveness of the 3D approach was obstructed by the lack of collaborative preparation in mission preparatory trajectories (<i>opwerktrajecten</i> in Dutch).</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Make collaborative preparation the norm and not the exception. In future missions, a 3D approach should typically involve a collaborative warm-up process with the relevant ministries, NGOs and other stakeholders, including interaction with the diaspora and cultural advisers. This does not necessarily mean making all preparations together, but merely coming together to examine how upcoming tasks and disciplines will intersect.</p>
The relationship between donors and NGOs	<p>To some extent, the work of many Dutch NGOs was inextricably linked to the donor's political and military objectives. This was more problematic for some NGOs than others. Complete independence seemed a difficult task for most NGOs. Each NGO made its own decision about this, occasionally also driven by financial opportunism.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Make good agreements between donors and NGOs regarding the content and limits of substantive cooperation and participation. NGOs should retrospectively evaluate their decisions, for instance to examine whether they may have ultimately become too much an instrument of political or military objectives.</p>

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Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Cooperation between Dutch NGOs and the Ministry of Defence	<p>Cooperation between NGOs and the Ministry of Defence was not obvious and was certainly not structural. There were nevertheless some positive exceptions, such as the experience with the Dutch Consortium Uruzgan. However, cooperation or coordination often depended on personal contacts. For instance, at certain times there was intensive contact between NGOs, police and the Ministry of Defence around the theme of 'women, peace and security'. Similarly, the Ministry of Defence was at times a more active part of the Afghanistan Platform.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Encourage partnerships and relationships that are institutional in nature rather than based on personal contacts and interests.</p>
Cooperation between Dutch NGOs and the police	<p>In general, there was very little contact between NGOs and the police. Cooperation was indeed possible - for example, related to training Afghan policewomen - but it often depended on personal contacts and efforts.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Encourage partnerships and relationships that are institutional in nature rather than based on personal contacts and interests.</p>
Cooperation between the Ministry of Defence and the police	<p>The Ministry of Defence and the police did not generally cooperate. Besides sometimes having different management and reporting (e.g. through EUPOL in Brussels), police officers also had a different culture and way of working. Moreover, the military was always in the vast majority, making it difficult to achieve balanced cooperation. Police officers also felt that soldiers sometimes performed police tasks for which they were not trained or equipped.</p>
Cooperation between the police and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs	<p>Cooperation between the police and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was also small and not structural in nature. In general, there was very little contact. However, in Kabul it depended on who the Dutch ambassador was at the time.</p>

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Continuation of relationships in the Netherlands after missions	<p>The contacts established between the 'pillars' often disappeared soon after the mission contributions ended.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Invest in structural relationships that do not depend on ad hoc missions. Even if there is no mission, it is important to maintain relationships between ministries, and also with NGOs and diaspora. However, this largely depends on personal contacts.</p>
Cooperation with the diaspora	<p>The diaspora was often not directly part of development projects and broader 3D approaches. This was frequently a conscious choice on the part of the diaspora, but sometimes also the result of high demands for cooperation and project funding.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> The government and Dutch NGOs should search outside official programme frameworks for additional ways to make the diaspora's work visible and should support this work indirectly or directly. The diaspora is a freely accessible source of knowledge and connections that often remains unutilised.</p>

## Other

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
<p>A critical watchdog</p>	<p>Unlike the United States, the Netherlands had no organisation like SIGAR that could critically and independently check the progress of development projects - or lack thereof. The US Congress established SIGAR to provide independent and objective oversight of US reconstruction programmes and activities in Afghanistan. Development programmes are assessed by the IOB in the Netherlands, but this is often done only after programme completion and not during the journey.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Explore whether an institutionalised, independent watchdog could add value for the Netherlands in complex missions and reconstruction programmes that involve very different stakeholders.</p>
<p>Learning capability</p>	<p>In politics, ministries and the development sector, there seems to be an absence of learning capacity and no structural link between evaluations and new policies. Even when an attempt was made to learn, the organisations and/or project staff were often already involved in new programmes, missions or policies.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> As a sector, explore how learning and evaluations can be more directly part of follow-up projects and can be linked to these projects' financial incentives. For example, it could be mandatory to substantiate assumptions in project proposals with reference to lessons learned from previous programmes and projects.</p>
<p>Non-selective listening</p>	<p>Seriously study dissenting analyses and views, and do not prioritise corroborating reports or familiar institutions or individuals.</p>

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## LEARNING TO UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER

## Chapter 3

### *Good practices and positive impacts*

This chapter presents good practices shared during in-depth interviews with various stakeholder groups (see Table 2). General recommendations suggest ways to explore how these practices might apply in Afghanistan or elsewhere in the future, and a few specific recommendations are given for particular practices.

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**TABLE 2** Specific good practices and positive impacts

#### Politics

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Political importance of the Netherlands	As a key donor, the Netherlands was relatively important on dossiers such as human rights, transitional justice and rule of law. Joint action within the 'Nordic-Plus' and the EU was also effective on a regular basis.
Role of the Dutch embassy	Despite its limited staff size, the Dutch embassy in Kabul was generally very productive and proactive, including in its relations to Dutch NGO development projects financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
The relationship with Kabul	The relationship with Kabul and the Afghan authorities was generally positive and fruitful.
Long-term involvement in the same area	A long-term presence of the same political representative has considerable added value. For example, learning-session participants mentioned the German presence in northern Afghanistan and the fact that Canada had a civilian representative in the same place for a long time, coordinating all civilian activities.
Civil assessment	<p>The civil assessment arose as a recommendation from the final Baghlan mission evaluation and was then applied to the Uruzgan mission. It recommended working with NGOs and other relevant civil-society actors prior to a mission to ascertain the local situation (e.g. local power relations) and what was needed (identifying opportunities for development or reconstruction projects). Subsequently, civilian assessment should guide civilian as well as military efforts.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Make civilian assessment a regular and mandatory part of the preliminary process of mission contributions. Also use it to strengthen ties between the various participating Dutch parties.</p>

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## Development cooperation and humanitarian aid

Thema	Explanations and recommendations
Cooperation with Afghan partners	<p>Most Dutch NGO development projects were implemented by local partners. It is worth mentioning that these partners were not always on equal footing (for example, local partners were rarely included in project consortia).</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Cooperation with local partners pays off. Politicians and the NGO sector should encourage a more equitable position with local partners. The effectiveness and sustainability of development projects requires, at the very least, that local partners have more co-decision-making power.</p>
Long-term involvement of NGOs	A number of NGOs, such as Oxfam Novib, had been present in Afghanistan for decades. This offered longer-term knowledge, experience and commitment that could also be used in preparing the contribution to a mission.

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## Defence/Ministry of Defence

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Military leadership	As a relatively small player, the Netherlands was able to effectively execute command over international coalition forces during different periods. In general, Dutch non-commissioned officers showed special qualities in Afghanistan.
Professionalisation	The mission contributions have brought professionalisation, greater understanding between different divisions of the armed forces and a more efficient way of working. Moreover, the Dutch military has gained important experience in cooperating within a multinational coalition and with new resources and weapons systems.
Multinationality within missions	<p>Multinationality within missions went very well and added value, especially when partnerships were formed with like-minded nations such as Germany or Australia. The effective years-long cooperation in Afghanistan, in very broad international military coalitions, is seen as a groundbreaking achievement.</p> <p>Incidentally, this finding is at odds with the lesson that coalition military personnel under-appreciated the Dutch military personnel (see above).</p>
Cooperation with foreign development organisations	There were regular consultations and joint briefings between the Dutch PRT and USAID and AUSAID.

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## Police

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Knowledge and experience of community policing	Internationally, the Dutch police brought considerable knowledge and experience with community policing. It should be noted that community policing itself still appeared to be a bridge too far for the Afghan context.
Engagement on the issue of Afghan policewomen	<p>Despite the cultural sensitivities and associated risks, the Netherlands' commitment to the meaningful integration of women in the Afghan police was commendable. Given the major cultural and institutional challenges, such a structural approach is pivotal.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Either as part of ongoing evaluations or separately, map the lessons learned from these and other gender-specific investments within the broader framework of 'women, peace and security' (NAP 1325). Similarly, the Dutch will remain highly motivated towards this type of investment in future missions and development programmes.</p>
Family Response Units (FRUs)	Family Response Units were police units focused on domestic violence and other cases involving women and children. In general, these units achieved good results.
The evolution of police training	The police trainings gradually improved, adapting more to the Afghan context. As a result, sensitive topics (such as torture) became easier to discuss.
Agent tracking system	The registration and tracking system of recruits worked reasonably well, despite negative reports about it. Where the recruits ended up working was not seen as part of the (EUPOL) mission. That was up to Afghan politics, but it was also politically magnified in the Dutch House of Representatives.

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## Diaspora

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Afghan-Dutch Conference	<p>The Afghan-Dutch Conferences organised by the diaspora in 2019 and online in 2020 were a good example of events where all stakeholders could meet, strengthen ties and exchange information. This helped somewhat in keeping Afghanistan on the political map and strengthening personal contacts.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> NGOs, diaspora and ministries should look for opportunities to continue organising (jointly) Afghanistan-related events in the Netherlands. The relations that are maintained in this way could be extremely important in future missions and other collaborations.</p>
Network of Afghan Diaspora Organisations in Europe (NADOE)	Additionally, there are initiatives at the European level to increase cooperation between different diaspora organisations. NADOE is one example.

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## Media

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Continued focus on Afghanistan	During 20 years of Dutch involvement in Afghanistan, a handful of journalists continued to monitor Afghanistan very closely, following the developments on an almost daily basis and developing a high level of expertise.

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Balanced reporting and reporting	<p>Some media, such as the Volkskrant, deployed multiple journalists to follow various sides: the military, the political perspective from The Hague and the Afghan context from Kabul. This also provided a solution to the narrower view of embedded journalism.</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Major Dutch media (daily newspapers, broadcasters) should invest more heavily in a conflict like Afghanistan that is important to the Netherlands. The stationing of experienced journalists, such as correspondents in Kabul, is of added value.</p>
Media influence	Despite the media's relatively limited influence on the bigger political and mission-contribution picture, the media did manage to spark important discussions (e.g. the fate of veterans in the Netherlands) and resolve issues (e.g. deployed soldiers' poor equipment).
Freelance journalists and photographers in Kabul	In general, reporting owed much to freelance journalists and photographers who settled in Kabul, sometimes for years, and had invested heavily to report from Afghanistan.

### Afghanistan related

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief & Development (ACBAR)	ACBAR provided good, large-scale coordination of all local and international aid organisations present in Afghanistan. One side note is that this organisation's effectiveness depended on the board being proactive and on available financial resources. Moreover, there were often discussions about ACBAR's legitimacy and its apparent competition with other platforms, such as ENNA (see below).

### Cooperation within Dutch mission contributions

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA)	NGOs consider the Joint Responses successful. In contrast to development aid, emergency aid entails ad hoc and temporary intervention, with less of an inherent conflict of interest between NGOs.
Dutch Consortium Afghanistan (DCU)/ Uruzgan	Overall, four years in Uruzgan brought closer cooperation between the Ministry of Defence, diplomats and NGOs, leading to greater mutual understanding and trust. Cooperation between the government and NGOs within the DCU was seen as particularly positive. This cooperation led to more information sharing and greater mutual understanding. The sharing of an office and coordinator, and the joint purchasing of certain goods or services, were also viewed positively. However, future sustainability will depend on the Netherlands' willingness to be in the same region for longer periods of time.
Joint reprocessing and cooperation	Especially in the build-up to Kunduz (around 2010), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Defence worked well together in a joint build-up process.
Afghanistan Platform	The platform was useful during the Uruzgan period and remains an informal platform for exchanging ideas and information between NGOs and the government. One shortcoming is that government input comes mainly from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Occasionally, the Police and Defence have also actively participated in the platform.
European Network of NGOs in Afghanistan (ENNA)	Dutch NGOs generally have good experiences with the ENNA network, which has often led to joint lobbying processes over the years. The network still exists. A side note is that ENNA was sometimes viewed as a competitor to other networks, such as ACBAR. It also became increasingly difficult over the years to find NGOs that could actively and financially contribute to the network.



**Theme**                      **Explanations and recommendations**

Learning to understand each other

A good understanding of the specific roles and activities of other stakeholders is valued. At the same time, interviewees noted that this does not come naturally and does not happen by itself. In most cases, this means that investment and proactivity are needed to establish mutual understanding.

**Recommendation:** Invest in getting to know each other. This can be done informally (coffee-drinking, informal get-togethers and networking meetings) or more formally (giving external presentations, sharing knowledge, developing knowledge together, training or carrying out analyses).

Separating roles

Dealing well with role purity presupposes a good understanding of each other's roles (see 'learning to understand each other' above) and consciously delineating one's own role. Incidentally, one observation was that employees of the Dutch Ministry of Defence distinguished more sharply between roles and mandates than employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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**Other**

**Theme**                      **Explanations and recommendations**

The US watchdog SIGAR

SIGAR independently audited the spending and results of US government-funded development projects. SIGAR's meticulous audit work created a great deal of extra work for implementing agencies, such as USAID and the State Department.



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**KEEPING ROLES SEPARATE**

## Chapter 4

# Common conclusions and general lessons

This fourth chapter describes some of the more general lessons learned from 20 years of Dutch involvement in Afghanistan (see Table 3).

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**TABLE 3** Common conclusions and general lessons

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Political wishful thinking	The interplay between all kinds of background factors (e.g. political ambition, alliance solidarity, broader political interests, a 'can-do' attitude) ultimately created political wishful thinking that lost sight of realistic goals and expectations.
Realistic level of targets	Objectives were often unrealistic. Political wishful thinking was in many cases translated into programmes, projects or activities that were therefore also unrealistic, either because of short duration, inflated expectations or unrealistic assumptions. Everyone recognises the importance of clear and realistic objectives and expectations.
Feasibility and fit for purpose	<p>The aim should be achievable and fit for purpose. However, that is easier said than done. What do you do, for example, if what is feasible does not fit the values of Western society?</p> <p><b>Recommendation:</b> Feasibility research should ideally be the first stage of a political decision, posing the question 'What do we think we can realistically achieve now?'. Subsequently, at a second stage, this question should be translated into a political policy framework where politicians promise not to go beyond those realistic targets.</p>
Ambition	Ambition is not wrong in principle, but it must have a healthy relationship with what is possible (or doable) in the complex reality of a conflict country.

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Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Complexity	The security and development situation was complex and could vary greatly from one village, district, province or region to another. This meant, for instance, that a grand strategy or undifferentiated approach was difficult to realise. This in turn presented a political challenge, because specific policies could not be developed for each area.
Western blueprints	A more realistic approach also means working less with Western blueprints for stability, democracy and development. Projects and activities were generally conceived and planned in the Netherlands, with little to no involvement of Afghans themselves. Knowledge of the local situation and opportunities should lead the way. By definition, this means that Afghanistan cannot be transformed into a Western-style parliamentary democracy within a few years.
Afghan control and leadership	Despite beautiful words like 'Afghan ownership and leadership', most projects, programmes and policy initiatives were initially conceived in the Netherlands and by Dutch people. Often Afghans were involved only later (such as the local partners of development projects), but usually with little influence over the big picture. Top-down programming can also encourage corruption. In general, cooperation between Afghan NGOs and government agencies and the relevant international parties needs to improve.
Honesty	The call for honesty was strong in all sessions: from honesty beforehand about what can and cannot be achieved, to honesty about the results afterwards. Yet multiple structural factors make honesty difficult, including wider institutional, political and financial interests, as well as political wishful thinking.

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Success story	The main factor working against honesty was the strong need for a success story in Dutch politics. This urge eventually made it more difficult for all involved parties to report honestly. Maintaining this success story creates a constant demand for primarily quantitative progress (rising lines and numbers), which often says little about sustainable or structural progress.
Understanding	Understanding (and especially the absence of it) is a central theme that recurs in all sessions: from mutual understanding between the different actors of the 3D approach to understanding towards the Afghan population.
Cultural awareness	Part of understanding is cultural awareness. A consensus holds that there was far too little understanding and knowledge of local culture, norms and values. Moreover, cultural awareness is only the first step. Cultural awareness must also be used properly in projects and activities (cultural competence).
Rotation	Knowledge, cultural awareness and situational awareness all remained deficient due to the rapid rotation of personnel and lack of coordination with other partners and countries.
Influence	The Netherlands, especially in broader contexts such as the European Union, is a potentially highly influential player in Afghanistan. However, that influence has not been optimal in Afghanistan due to a variety of domestic political factors (e.g. the difficult political debate, or decisions regarding the geographical presence of mission contributions).

Theme	Explanations and recommendations
Political volatility	Politics is whimsical and will remain so in the future. Short-term vision and broader political interests are part of politics. In this sense, foreign policy in a country such as Afghanistan is never a vacuum in which development and security can be implemented without time constraints and other political interests.
Continuity and long-term vision	Sustainable development depends (among other things) on political patience and long-term vision. This is often hampered by the unpredictability of Dutch and international politics.
Flexibility	Within politics, more freedom of action and flexibility should be given to implementing organisations so they can bring about change in highly complex environments such as Afghanistan.
Collaboration	Collaboration (from integration to information sharing) is not a given either between or within the different stakeholder groups included in this learning trajectory. Moreover, cooperation often depends on personal efforts and relationships. It cannot be assumed to already exist.
Civil versus military effects	The civilian effects of a mission contribution (e.g. impact on tribal culture or on informal rulers) should take precedence over military effects.

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UNDERSTANDING THE AFGHAN CONTEXT AND CULTURE

## Final reflection

As coordinator of KUNO and moderator of the learning sessions, we had the honour of being closely involved in this year-long learning process about Dutch involvement in Afghanistan. Several things struck us during that time. We will briefly mention three of them here.

The first thing that stood out was the personal commitment of all the people we spoke to. Even if the participants had not been in Afghanistan for years or no longer did work related to Afghanistan, their intense bond with this country and its people remain clear. The beautiful memories compete with very intense emotions, which are further reinforced by a feeling of powerlessness in the current situation. That fact alone made this learning trajectory valuable. It shows an unprecedented desire to learn from this period. There exists a very strong sense that we need to 'do something' with these two decades of unique foreign policy. This offers hope, though it will always be cold comfort for the Afghan people.

Secondly, it was surprising how honestly and openly participants reflected on the past 20 years, with self-criticism usually prevailing. This gave a refreshing look at a policy area where, politically speaking, the finger was often pointed at the 'other'. This openness and honesty - which incidentally contrast sharply with the lack of transparency and honesty in other processes discussed (e.g. progress reports and the formulation of objectives) - also provides hope for the learning trajectory. If the self-criticism and honesty can translate into better and more realistic mission contributions and development projects after the ongoing evaluations, these learning processes have been beneficial.

Finally, what is most striking is the overarching process within which mission contributions and development projects are created. From the beginning, political wishful thinking emerges. Political wishful thinking, which is cultivated with the best intentions, idealistic motives and a 'can-do' attitude, sets in motion a process characterised by unrealistic goals, over-ambitious expectations, Western blueprints and a lack of cultural awareness and empathy. Once that train starts moving, it will be unstoppable for 20 years - not even by

the critical eye of the media and skilled politicians, diplomats, development workers, veterans and other stakeholders, who are all aware that the policy is not working or at least cannot deliver on the sky-high promises for which we, together, are jointly responsible.

And yet it happened. Will it happen again in the future? Even with this learning trajectory, it is difficult to answer that question. Do we need a different train? A different track? A different route and final destination? Or should we stay home more often? The future will tell.

Peter Heintze and Jorrit Kamminga  
The Hague, 22 March 2023

## Annex 1 Persons consulted

The following 75 people were consulted during this process through participation in conversations, meetings or interviews. The findings as recorded in this report are based on all these interviews, and the conclusions are naturally the authors' responsibility.

**Abdul Ahmad Aumaj**, Heart for Afghanistan (*Hart voor Afghanistan*)  
**Daud Allajar**, IEAF Foundation (*Stichting IEAF*)  
**Maya Aumaj**, Heart for Afghanistan (*Hart voor Afghanistan*)  
**Bert Bakker, D66**, former Member of Parliament  
**Noël van Bemmelen**, de Volkskrant  
**Paul van den Berg**, Cordaid  
**René van den Berg**, Ministry of Defence, Brigadier General  
**Evert van Bodegom**, Kerk in Actie  
**Marten de Boer**, former Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**Daan Boissevain**, Ministry of Defence, Lieutenant Colonel  
**Marloes Borsboom-Turabaz**, The Hague Corporate Affairs  
**Thijs Bouwknegt**, NIOD  
**Maarten Broekhof**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**Menno van Bruggen**, EUBAM Libya, former Netherlands Police  
**Caroline Burger**, Ministry of Defence, Major  
**Arthur ten Cate**, Ministry of Defence, NIMH & Rijksuniversiteit Groningen  
**Hanneke Chin-A-Fo**, NRC Handelsblad  
**Ali Daliry**, SCAN Foundation (*Stichting SCAN*)  
**Piet Deelman**, Netherlands Police  
**Dafna Dempsey**, Ministry of Defence, Lieutenant Colonel  
**Joost Doense**, Ministry of Defence, Colonel  
**Angeliën Eijssink**, PvdA, former Member of Parliament  
**Ab Emmerzaal**, DCA-Livestock  
**Kathleen Ferrier**, CDA, former Member of Parliament  
**Martine Flokstra**, MSF (*Médecins Sans Frontières*), Doctors without Borders  
**Joke Florax**, Netherlands Police  
**Mark Friebel**, Ministry of Defence, Lieutenant Colonel  
**Nico Geerts**, Ministry of Defence, Major General (ret.)

**Jan van Gelder**, Netherlands Police  
**Marjolein Geusebroek**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**Richard Grevink**, Netherlands Police  
**Robert Gooren**, Ministry of Defence  
**Toon van de Graaf**, Ministry of Defence, Major  
**Benoit de Gryse**, Refugee Foundation (*Stichting Vluchteling*), former MSF  
**Denny Heijkoop**, Ministry of Defence, Sergeant Major (Marine Corps)  
**Leen van Hijum**, Ministry of Defence, Colonel  
**Goossen Hoenders**, Heifer Netherlands, former Save the Children  
**Hans van den Hoogen**, former Oxfam Novib & former Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**Anneleen Hulshof**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**Ton Huijzer**, consultant humanitarian aid  
**Olivier Immig**, researcher at Immig & Van Heugten  
**Janna de Jong**, Save the Children  
**Olof van Joolen**, de Telegraaf  
**Donya Kaersenhout**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**Jorrit Kamminga**, associate fellow, Institute Clingendael  
**Martijn Kitzen**, Netherlands Defence Academy  
**Brechtje Klandermans**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**Maggy van Kolck**, Ministry of Defence, Lieutenant Colonel  
**Mart de Kruijf**, Ministry of Defence, Lieutenant General (ret.)  
**Anne Marie Kueter**, Save the Children  
**Nenda Lemmers**, Save the Children  
**Suying Lai**, Oxfam Novib, KUNO  
**Anne Marinussen**, Refugee Foundation (*Stichting Vluchteling*)  
**Mirwais Momand**, MIDO Dairy Production  
**Hans Muller**, former Netherlands Police  
**Bram van Ojik**, GroenLinks, former Member of Parliament  
**Zala Pamir**, Keihan Foundation (*Stichting Keihan*)  
**Willem van de Put**, International Health Policies  
**Niloufar Rahim**, former chair Keihan Foundation (*Stichting Keihan*)  
**Sterre Raterman**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**Willem Reussing**, HealthNet TPO  
**Jeroen Romeijn**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**Zubeer Roshanmal**, MCAN  
**Paula Sastrowijoto**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

**Linda Schouten**, Netherlands Police  
**Khatera Shaghasi**, Azadi Foundation (*Stichting Azadi*)  
**Niels van Swelm**, Ministry of Defence, Commander (Navy)  
**Hanneke Takken**, Ministry of Defence /NIMH  
**Niels Terpstra**, Radboud Universiteit  
**Suzanne Tossings**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**Max Valstar**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**Willem Vogelsang**, former International Institute for Asian Studies  
**Ron de Vos**, former Netherlands Police  
**Rens Willems**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**Theo Zomer**, Netherlands Police

## **KUNO (Kennis Uitwisseling over Noodhulp), Platform for Humanitarian Knowledge Exchange, is a knowledge broker for humanitarian professionals in the Netherlands and connects them to relevant humanitarian expertise worldwide.**

KUNO offers Think Space to discuss the latest humanitarian insights and studies. Knowledge is often developed within silos such as academic institutes, humanitarian organizations or policy institutes. Breaking these silos and sharing and discussing insights, experiences and research findings with practitioners, academics and policy-makers deepens our understanding. KUNO brings relevant actors and thinkers together in a thought-provoking way and creates thinking space to reflect critically on daily humanitarian practice and its challenges. KUNO is at its best when it creates a safe space to discuss in-depth short comings of the humanitarian sector: a moderator of inconvenient, but constructive conversations

### **Why:**

A changing world order, climate change and increased migration force humanitarian actors to adapt their practice. At the same time, after years of debate on localisation, local actors now demand a much larger influence in decision making on humanitarian action. New actors challenge the way the 'traditional' humanitarian system understands its principles and the call for transformation of this system is heard loud and clear.

### **What:**

KUNO supports its membership and constituency in their contribution to systemic change, by raising inconvenient truths, challenging existing beliefs, and allowing for a joint understanding of the need for continuous improvement and shift in mindsets – required for more effective, responsive and just humanitarian action.

### **How:**

KUNO encourages critical self-reflection of its members, questions existing beliefs and promotes debates on complex topics – facilitating reflection, training, knowledge exchange and joint learning, within and across sectors and geographies.

## Members & Partners



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## **A pervasive tone of wishful thinking that everyone saw but few could admit.**

The Netherlands was present in Afghanistan for 20 years, from 2001 to 2021. Many sectors entered an unfamiliar country and a new context. The Netherlands passionately set high ambitions, which it maintained throughout this period. For this publication, 'Balancing between ambition and wishful thinking: Learning from 20 years of Dutch involvement in Afghanistan', KUNO spoke with 75 people directly involved in this mission, including representatives from Dutch politics, the armed forces, the diplomatic corps, aid organisations, the police, the media and the Afghan diaspora. This report shares the four main lessons these discussions revealed, from the humanitarian aid and development perspectives.

It became clear that almost all Dutch groups operating in Afghanistan contributed to a vicious cycle of wishful thinking, unrealistic programmes and objectives and unfair or incomplete reporting. In this way, political wishful thinking led to high ambitions and an accompanying 'success story': 'the Netherlands can and will do this'. The participants went to great lengths to keep this story alive, without considering the Afghan reality or the limited extent to which Afghan society could be shaped to meet Dutch standards.

KUNO's discussions also revealed a need for greater mutual understanding - both amongst Dutch stakeholders and between Dutch stakeholders and the Afghan population.

In addition to outlining the four main lessons learned from 20 years of involvement, this publication shares a broad range of insights and comments - important findings that deserve follow-up. As Dutch stakeholders, we can take the lessons we draw from this report a step further into action, exposing unrealistic wishful thinking and daring to adjust our way of working.

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