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Realising the Opportunities in Afghanistan's Transition: Using Communications and Technology to Empower Afghan Citizens
by Katherine Lawson Bornet and Ashley Hartz

Key Points

- *The transition in Afghanistan opens avenues of both opportunity and risk, and at this point, no one is in a position to say which will prove the most meaningful for 2014 and beyond.*

- *In this transition, the real concerns of civilians—survival, livelihoods, and services— are often forgotten by the international community which is more concerned variously with security, political and economic transitions. In contrast this policy paper attempts to take a more civilian-centered and holistic approach, and focuses on opportunities rather than challenges.*

- *Despite the rush to troop withdrawal and dwindling financial support, utilizing existing models of practical interventions can help harness some of these opportunities, with potentially high returns on small-scale investment.*

- *These initiatives include international actors communicating clear, unambiguous information to citizens about future international involvement and commitment, and leveraging Afghanistan's increasing array of cellular networks and connectivity of its people to create a two-way communication platform for the government and citizens to be partners in growth.*

The new Afghan government will be confronted with an international community tapering off its financial, security, and governmental assistance. It will have to manage the ISAF pullout and ongoing negotiations over the bilateral security agreement. Domestically, it will be tasked with controlling territory that is currently in contention, fostering a virtually non-existent private sector, and delivering services to isolated citizens whose needs are already going unmet. It is easy from outside the country to prognosticate the grimmest. This Policy Paper takes a different perspective, one that understands that there are opportunities to be found here, and that there are small-scale interventions that can meaningfully impact the concerns of the group most talked about, yet most overlooked in policies concerning Afghanistan, namely Afghan civilians themselves.

Finding Opportunity in Transition

While apocalyptical prognoses grab headlines and airtime, even on Afghan television, research and conversations with Afghans themselves reveal grounded hope for a different outcome during and after 2014. With a median age of 18, it is a youthful country, in which dual-SIM phones are in-demand status symbols and more young people are being educated and becoming embedded in international networks than in generations past. They are savvy and aware of the international discussions surrounding them; though they remain uncertain as to how much of this talk about their country and its future is credible. They are also determined not to relive the disorder and disillusion of the 2009 election, which triggered meaningful electoral innovations and reforms that have been in place for the 2014 vote.

On the security front, the most prominent threats have been neutralised to the extent that, even in the Hezareh region of Bamiyan, one interviewee declared, "We see Taliban, we shoot them. No problem." Security remains a prominent concern, of course, but a major insurgency is not on the immediate horizon. Credit can also go to an increasingly well-trained and effective Afghan National Security Force paired with local security forces that are still finding workable models to protect and serve local populations.

It should by no means be assumed that the work of the international community in Afghanistan will disappear overnight, too. The roads paved by UNOPS will not revert immediately to gravel. The former insurgent fighters turned labourers through the work of development programmes like the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program are not eagerly waiting to take up arms after ISAF shuts the door behind them. There is a will amongst the Afghan population and the neighbouring countries to create a state able to weather the transition and stand on its own. Pakistan and Iran both are aware of the destabilising impact that throngs of refugees would have on their countries and, while the former is often credited with sponsoring attacks on international targets in the country, both recognise the importance of an Afghanistan that can support its people.

Another neglected but important asset to the country is its diaspora. Afghans with seed capital are waiting with ideas of how to make their home country a better place. Every Diaspora Afghan interviewed mentioned at least one project that someone in their circles had in mind—from cold storage to grain processing facilities. The new government would do well to enable this population to make a positive difference as well and seek to repeat the construction bubble their funds created in the past.

Seeing 2014 Differently

To understand this paper's contribution, a clear line should be drawn between the way that various experts focus on different aspects of the transition—security, political, and economic—and how these aspects are seen on the ground. Indeed, for Afghan civilians, the transition does not easily sort itself into issue areas. Citizens will not, for instance, parse potential successes of the political versus the failure of the security, because they are so tightly intertwined. A secure environment is one in which elections and economic activity can take place, and success in these areas can create more secure environments, which will in turn lead to more economic activity, and so on. For Afghans, 2014 represents a unified experience, a struggle for survival and prosperity, in which they have their own stakes and not ones that conveniently overlap with the interests of international organisations.

This kind of strategic communications platform would be especially powerful when paired with increased international assurances. Receiving information from the government directly reduces the credibility issues they must tackle when going through traditional media, and it can serve to take government out of Kabul and put it in far-flung Provinces, the places where it is seen the least, and local power holders (sometimes with alternative loyalties) are trusted to fulfill the roles of a government.

This is the perspective we tried to key into during our research in Afghanistan. Although it would be misguided to claim to speak on behalf of Afghan civilians, we tried to understand their unique situation and concerns by listening to them and their advocates. Of course there is no single, unified Afghan perspective—indeed the country is defined by its diversity—but some priorities proved common across regions and demographics, priorities which are not always prominent in the discourse of western policy makers. Yet understanding the specific needs of the public is exactly what will make the difference in the new Afghanistan between a success story and a failed state. A satisfied population can buttress its government against any number of internal and external shocks without the need for large-scale interventions from the international community.

To better understand their concerns and hopes, we consulted with 27 individuals in and outside of Afghanistan, ranging from Afghan drivers and members of the diaspora through UNAMA employees to academics. Chief among their concerns were uncertainty regarding future commitments, employment, security, and governmental legitimacy. Although some such concerns are more difficult to address than others, experience in Afghanistan and elsewhere has shown creative ways to speak to communities, to encourage the growth of businesses employing locals, and even to make public service delivery more effective. If these are the priorities, the international community is already armed with the tools it needs to address them with a high degree of efficacy. We also found guarded optimism amongst Afghans, which contrasts with the pessimism often reflected in media or political coverage.

The main concerns identified by interviewees stemmed from two distinct phenomena: the proliferation of confusion and misinformation amongst the public, and a lack of service delivery from the government. In terms of communication, numerous channels for disseminating information exist in the country, but neither the media nor the government itself seem able to instill in their public the degree of confidence needed to encourage the undertaking of job-creating economic projects, faith in government for public security, or to envision a genuinely Afghan future for the Afghans.

The lack of service delivery compounds this malaise. Only a fraction of the billions of dollars in aid have reached their intended targets, critical infrastructure projects are rarely completed on schedule, and, on a local level, a recent UNODC report revealed that some 59 percent of Afghans report paying bribes daily, and they have become disillusioned not only with their government, but with the state-building mission itself. In an environment in which the government is not seen as legitimate—or capable of delivering services—Afghans are forced to seek out self-help mechanisms or simply go

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without, as incompetence and a lack of civic spirit has diverted needed resources. Though these phenomena seem obtuse, the eight months remaining in 2014 are a chance for the international community to make real progress. They just have to make those months count.

Policy Recommendations for the Afghan Government and International Community

In order to realise the potential of the transition, and address the real concerns of Afghans, the first thing that needs to be done is to take a clear-eyed look at the remaining time and capacity. The goals of the Afghan state building mission began and remain both lofty and unmet, and it would require a massive commitment of time and resources to bring this mission back on track. Furthermore, the international forces and institutions remaining in Afghanistan lack the commitment to do so. As such, and realising that a call to rid the country of corruption, increase security multifold, and even create a national budget would add nothing new to the conversation on transition, innovative solutions to approachable challenges need to be found. In their own localities, internationals and Afghans themselves have innovated numerous solutions, like the Dehqan mobile-based platform, helping to educate otherwise isolated farmers and developed by Afghan programmers, which are simply waiting to be identified and applied in a larger context.

Communicate international commitments to the public clearly

Afghans, like those international institutions within the country, have been taking a breath and avoiding the sort of projects crucial to future stability and economic gain. Though every interviewee was aware of the rhetoric of international commitment, they remained unsure that the rosy future once promised will be delivered.

The solution starts with international organisations involved in the country articulating their projected future engagement. This becomes problematic when future engagement runs counter to their past commitments of support, but at this point, the harms of broken commitments take a back seat to the benefits of honest, concrete admissions. The most useful form that this would take are provincial reports, in coordination with the office of the governors, which detail financial pledges, staffing needs, troop commitments, and contracts issued for that Province. Including support that comes with conditions is something that should also be avoided, as meeting those conditions is largely out of the hands of the people wanting that information, civilians. It is crucial that Afghans are informed to as high a degree of certainty as possible, and it is very possible to meet this need. Such a solution need not come at an unreasonable cost to the organisations in question, and it can be carried out with existing staffers.

Encourage the establishment of a talking points-

based communications strategy

If western media is any indication, one area in which politicians excel is creating a narrative and not deviating from it. No matter how ridiculous or alarmist the message is, the same phrases can be heard on every political talk show and in every press conference. This is thanks to sophisticated political party apparatuses, whose communications strategies focus on crafting a message and discourage its members from deviations from the party line. Frequently, our interviewees recounted watching their politicians and coming away with a sense of confusion and, at times, the suspicion that even their members of Parliament shared their befuddlement.

This is where the political classes of the West genuinely have something to offer Afghanistan, and it would come in the form of consultations with Afghan political parties to improve intra-party communications and encourage the circulation of messaging tools to help keep party members on message when in the public eye. Programmes for information-sharing have been active since the state-building process began, and this could, in fact, be carried out more easily than—say—agricultural exchange programmes that necessitate extensive travel. Creating a message can also help these parties take a longer view of their role and not one in which they are moving from crisis to crisis. Not only does this improve the immediate optics and reassure the public, but it also empowers Afghan political parties and the whole political system, to form a narrative in which they are active participants.

Work to build trust from that public through appropriate fora

Communicating such information is only one-third message—equally important is who is issuing the statement and from where that statement is issued. To disseminate the message, the staff related to communications and public relations within the major operators in Afghanistan have to be engaged domestically and not toward an external donor audience. The messages need to be crafted as articulately as possible; as one of our interviewees pointed out, giving the Afghan and international media room to speculate is what has created the current media environment, in which worst case scenarios are repeatedly forecasted, if only for the sake of gaining an audience. Along these lines, the channels selected for communication need to be as trusted by the public as possible. Putting faith in popular Afghan TV talk shows to reassure the public may backfire. Finding an appropriate channel for trusted information will be difficult, but the integrity of the assurances is key.

Create and disseminate a cellular-based strategic communications platform

One resource available and often neglected is the technological savvy of the Afghan people, with 85 percent of the population currently within reach

of a telecom provider, according to the BBC. This is the same population consuming the speculation and 'controversial discussions' popular on their televisions and radios, removed from their government, even if they find themselves in Kabul. Anti-government elements within the country have found ways to harness SMS technology to communicate information with locals and gather information, and the government needs to catch up.

Establishing a programme to share or gather information would first involve a choice of target audience: smart-phone users would narrow the field of participants, but it would still generally include members of an educated class, an important population to have involved and invested in the government. A solely SMS-based option would work with a wider swathe of the population, but it limits, to some extent, the amount and type of information that can be gathered and disseminated. At this point, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology should prioritise certain forms of outreach. Informing the public of local governmental contacts for various resources, ongoing security operations, and even the location of their polling places can make governance and its operations real to a large and often neglected segment of the population. If it is intended as a two-way platform, citizens may be able to contact their representatives, make requests, and report crimes or malfeasance to authorities outside their own villages, bringing added value.

Once the mission statements have been outlined, technical experts need to come in to negotiate with the five major telecom providers and craft the platform itself. Should this programme involve two-way communications, the formation of a cell phone application does not need to be particularly time consuming. If specifications for it are detailed enough, programmers and coders have proven the ability to craft a prototype in as little as two days.

This kind of strategic communications platform would be especially powerful when paired with increased international assurances. Receiving information from the government directly reduces the credibility issues they must tackle when going through traditional media, and it can serve to take government out of Kabul and put it in far-flung Provinces, the places where it is seen the least, and local power holders (sometimes with alternative loyalties) are trusted to fulfill the roles of a government. Investing citizens in their government, through feedback or even a one-way connection, can inspire them to participate in the democratic process, the civic-mindedness discussed above, and it can facilitate more opportunities for an Afghan conversation on the future of the country.

Conclusions

The essential quality that these solutions seek to harness is the optimism and resourcefulness of the Afghan people. In the chaos of 2014, as so many institutions prepare to leave the country behind, against a backdrop of increasingly grim outlooks, it is both the Afghan optimism and the Afghans themselves who are being forgotten. The current election process represents not only a changeover of governments but also what should be a chance for citizens to have their voices heard. In the words of one UNOPS Programme Manager: "This, right now, is their best chance to take advantage of the world's attention in a positive way…This opportunity will not come again. If the people have a long view, they will rise to the occasion." And if we have a long view, we will do what we can to help Afghans claim their country through 2014 and beyond.

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