

Why is it Difficult to Deliver Aid in Afghanistan: The Role of Governance and Development Practice

Introduction

Afghanistan has been buffeted by conflict for more than three decades. The country has suffered continuous devastation, displacing millions of Afghan people, causing extreme poverty, and undermining human development. Despite the massive amount of foreign aid, the country is still beset with extreme poverty. The Asian Development Bank's (ADB) recent analysis shows that there has been no improvement in Afghanistan's country performance assessment from 2008 to 2015 (Figure 1), which means that aid's impact has not made a difference over that period. Scholars generally attribute difficult aid delivery to donors' lack of coordination, unsound performance-based models on fund allocation, and the fragile nature of conflict-affected situations. Paul (2015) argues that performance-based aid model or conditionality does not work for recipient countries because the process is misguided and "is grounded in an oversimplified incentive model that does not take account of the real functioning of institutions in recipient countries" (p. 320). Fuchs, Nunnenkamp, and Ohler (2015) posit that the lack of coordination among donors, which is a result of economic and political self-interest, contributes to aid ineffectiveness. Scholars' analyses, however, have been based from a macro-level perspective that is tied to a universal theory. This study aims to narrow down the macro-perspectives offered by the scholars and look at the micro-causes of difficult aid delivery within the local context of a conflict situation in Afghanistan. While it is obvious that conflict and fragility as well as external factors contribute to difficult aid delivery, these are broad categories that need to be unpacked and fleshed out. Metaphorically, these are just symptoms of a disease which should not be the target of treatment, but instead, the root causes should be better understood.

This research project examines the root causes of difficult aid delivery in Afghanistan. Specifically, it looks at the underlying factors within the domains of governance and development practice that result in difficult aid delivery. The study sets a foundational knowledge for international and local policymakers on the key areas they need to prioritize in crafting sound development strategies.

Methodology

The study uses content analysis given the wealth of information that is publicly available at the ADB project website database on Afghanistan. There are 60 completed ADB projects in Afghanistan (the sampling frame) since 2002, the year that ADB reengaged with the country after the hiatus from 1980 to 2001. Systematic random sampling was used to select 30 project documents for analysis. Semi-structured interviews conducted via Skype with two experts in Afghanistan's political economy validate the content analysis. Major themes showing consistent patterns were drawn from the evaluation documents. Implementation challenges and recommendations were extracted from the project documents and each idea was coded as follows: (1) The government is solely accountable to solving the problem; (2) The development agency is solely accountable to solving the problem; (3) Both the government and the development agency are accountable to solving the problem; (4) Challenges are beyond the control of government and development agency; (5) Recommendation for government to solve the problem; and (6) Recommendation for development agency to solve the problem.

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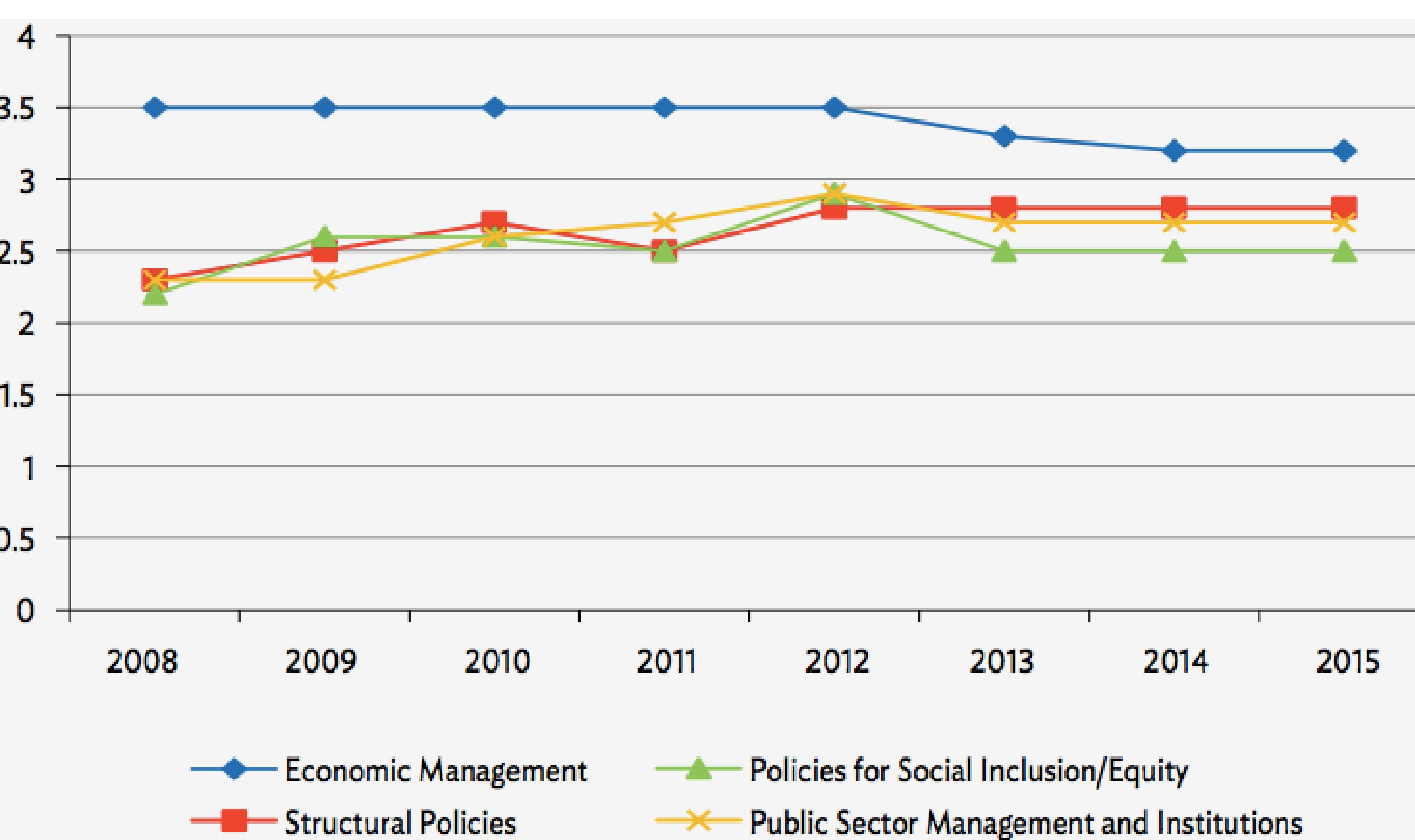


Figure 1: Afghanistan's Country Performance Assessment, 2008- 2015

Findings and Conclusion

The content analysis and interviews yielded the following themes: security, political climate, public financial management, human resource capacity, knowledge of local context, business process, and monitoring and evaluation. Insecurity and political instability, which are beyond the control of both government and development agencies, are the most challenging issues in delivering aid in Afghanistan. Governance factors, for which the Afghan government is accountable, include inefficient public financial management and inadequate human resource capacity. Factors that account for development management include lack of development players' knowledge of local context that lead to ambitious project designs, business-as-usual approaches (lack of conflict sensitivity), and inadequate monitoring and evaluation.

Security issues, related to terrorism and insurgency, results in project implementation delays and difficulty in conducting monitoring and evaluation activities, particularly for infrastructure projects. Friction between political figures (whose commitments are important to drive reforms) has prevented the government from implementing development programs. Public financial management issues include lack of transparency and accountability, weak planning and budget formulation, and lack of coordination across ministries. In terms of limited human resource capacity, Afghanistan lacks professional and skilled workers; though at the top of governance structures, political figures and decision makers are well educated. According to an interviewee, "*The people we deal with in Afghanistan are highly educated but they are director and minister level. But when you go down, to the rank and file, they are really extremely low in capacity.*" The lack of formal education and training for the civil service hampers project implementation by government counterparts. On the part of development actors, lack of knowledge of the local context makes it difficult to design realistic project interventions. International aid workers have been designing and implementing projects without prior understanding of the local dynamics in Afghanistan. As a result, business-as-usual approaches (operating in the same way as with those non-conflict situations) is adopted. There is a lack of conflict sensitivity, which should take into account the risks involved in any development intervention given the fragile context. Program monitoring and evaluation has been difficult in Afghanistan due to remoteness of and security issues in areas where most infrastructure projects are implemented; thus it is challenging to know whether development aid has achieved or not the desired outcomes.

While security issues and unstable political climate are beyond the control of both government and development institutions, both should engage in long-term development programs that will contribute to capacity development of public institutions, including massive education and training for the civil service sector. Development actors, on the other hand, should adopt conflict-sensitive approaches, which should include consultation with local leaders and affected communities, conflict and fragility assessments, and flexible business processes. A subsequent area for further research is replicating this study in other fragile and conflict-affected countries that receive huge amounts of aid and identifying the priority areas—which of these root causes are controllable and uncontrollable; and in what order the controllable factors should be prioritized.

Source of Figure 1: Safran, P. & San Gabriel, C. (2016). *Mapping fragile and conflict-affected situations in Asia and the Pacific: The ADB experience*. Manila: Asian Development Bank.

Source of Photos: Asian Development Bank. (Other references are available upon request)