

# Sweden in Afghanistan 2001–2021

Experiences and Lessons Learned

*Summary of the Report of the All-Party Committee of  
Inquiry on Sweden's Engagement in Afghanistan 2001–2021*

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# Summary of the Report of the All-Party Committee of Inquiry on Sweden's Engagement in Afghanistan 2001–2021 (SOU 2024:92)

## Introduction

### The Committee's remit and work

On 9 June 2022, the Swedish Government decided to appoint an all-party committee of inquiry (hereinafter 'the Committee') to evaluate Sweden's overall engagement in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. The Committee's remit has been to detail, evaluate and clarify what lessons can be learned from Sweden's engagement. In addition, the Committee has specifically investigated the impact of these activities on the situation of women and girls. The remit also included reporting on and analysing Sweden's evacuation operation, which began in August 2021. The Committee has been assisted by advisers, experts and the secretariat.

The work has been broad in nature. The Committee meetings have lain at the heart of this work, and have led to a number of lessons being learned. Representatives from government agencies and organisations, Swedish as well as foreign, and political decision-makers were invited to share their knowledge and experience of Sweden's engagement in Afghanistan. The secretariat arranged a roundtable discussion on the enjoyment of human rights by women and girls in Afghanistan. The Committee organised a meeting in Stockholm with representatives from civil society, the research community and Afghan organisations. Extensive written material from the relevant government agencies and archives was reviewed. The secretariat met some hundred people in addition to the approxi-

mately fifty who participated in Committee meetings. One consultant reviewed a large number of evaluations of Swedish development assistance to Afghanistan, and another consultant investigated how Sweden's engagement has contributed to promoting the role of women and girls in Afghan society. The same consultants reviewed this report: one from a gender equality perspective, and the other from an evaluation perspective.

### **Context of Sweden's engagement and lessons learned in brief**

Sweden has had a long and broad engagement in Afghanistan, initially through civil society organisations such as the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) and through providing humanitarian support via the UN system. The efforts in Afghanistan have been the object of great political and societal interest over the twenty-year period, both internationally and in Sweden. Sweden's engagement in Afghanistan was one of the most long-lasting and extensive international efforts that Sweden has contributed to. The engagement was discussed regularly in the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament) Committees on Foreign Affairs and Defence and in joint committees. Thousands of Swedes worked in the country, very often in dangerous and challenging situations. Six Swedes were killed in Afghanistan while in the service of Swedish or international organisations, along with two locally employed Afghan interpreters. With many other countries, Sweden contributed to supporting Afghanistan and its institutions and to improving people's living conditions. In Afghanistan, Sweden has acted bilaterally, as a Member State of the EU and the UN, as a troop-contributing country, and as a partner country to NATO. In these different roles, Sweden's scope for action has varied.

The Committee's remit concerns the period from 2001 to 2021; from the year when the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 shook the world to a few months after the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021 and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan.

The current situation in Afghanistan shows few hopeful signs. For women and girls in the country, the situation is particularly dire. Afghanistan is no longer the object of as extensive inter-

national interest as it once was. Other international crises and conflicts are now in the foreground.

In its joint work, the Committee has listened to, read, discussed and learned lessons, which are briefly presented below in Table 1 and in more detail later in the summary and in the report.

**Table 1 Overview of the lessons learned by the Committee in six areas**

<b>Area and lessons</b>	
<b>1. Context and environment of the international and Swedish engagement.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Context and environment – a reality that was often overlooked in Afghanistan.</li> <li>• The regional perspective – a dimension that had long been lost.</li> <li>• “Knowledge of” is not enough – initial decisions not grounded in the local context had consequences for legitimacy and the reconciliation process.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Participating in a wider international context.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sweden’s engagement in a wider international context – dealing with limited scope for action.</li> <li>• Effective agency in international contexts – consistent action in concert with others yields results.</li> </ul>
<b>3. Objectives, governance and cooperation.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear and realistic goals that are adapted over time – the cornerstone of all activities.</li> <li>• Strategies and other policy documents – greater clarity and a common picture of their function would have been needed in order to take the objectives one step further.</li> <li>• A concerted effort across policy areas – a clear direction and strategy is even more important.</li> <li>• Decision-making and cooperation within the Swedish public administration model – close communication and consultation are needed.</li> </ul>
<b>4. Conditions necessary for long-term results and effects.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Afghan ownership – necessary for sustainable results.</li> <li>• Change and development take time – something that was underestimated.</li> <li>• The role, representation and rights of women and girls in Afghanistan – excluding half the society is costly.</li> <li>• Sustainable and viable activities – realistic time frames, effective national ownership and domestic resource mobilisation are essential.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Implementation of the activities on the ground in Afghanistan.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective implementation requires presence, resources, training and continuity – areas with room for improvement.</li> </ul>
<b>6. From reporting, follow-up and evaluation to changed approach.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reporting, follow-up and evaluation of Sweden’s activities in Afghanistan provided information regularly – but adaptations lagged behind.</li> </ul>

## Context and detailing

### Background on Afghanistan and the international context

Many decades of conflict had left their mark in Afghanistan even before 2001. The Afghan society that Sweden and other participating countries encountered was based on complex social structures shaped by many cultural and religious influences throughout history – in particular different interpretations of Islam. It was a heterogeneous and patriarchal society with a population scarred by prolonged conflict and oppression, poverty and profound humanitarian and development needs. By tradition, women were denied many rights, protection and participation in decision-making and social life. There was no social contract between the population and the central government, and the rural areas had largely had to fend for themselves.

Following al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, an American-led military offensive against the Taliban in Afghanistan began. This rapid offensive was carried out in cooperation with various Afghan warlords. At an international conference in Bonn in 2001 following the fall of the Taliban regime, the foundations were laid for a new Islamic Republic to emerge with international support. The UN Security Council subsequently adopted resolutions to establish the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The new republic, supported by the international community, was built on unstable ground. Warlords and 'commanders' who had previously oppressed and exploited the population were given important posts through political decisions, this too with the support of the international community. This paved the way for growing corruption in the country which, together with the deteriorating security situation, contributed to many Afghans losing the optimism that they had felt at the inception of the republic. Opium cultivation and drug trafficking fed the informal economy and further increased corruption. Developments in Afghanistan were and remain closely tied to the interests of regional actors. Pakistan is key in this context and it both enabled and opposed the international engagement. Among other things, the Taliban were generally allowed to operate unhindered in the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region, which added

fuel to the armed conflict between the internationally supported Afghan National Defence and Security forces and the Taliban.

During the twenty-year period, the Taliban gradually took control of larger and larger areas. Civilian casualties from the conflict grew, and efforts for an Afghan peace process remained ineffective. In February 2020, the Doha Accord between the United States and the Taliban was signed, without the participation of the Afghan government. The Accord meant an end date for the international military presence in Afghanistan, which the United States postponed in April 2021 until 11 September 2021. In the spring and summer of 2021, the international troops were withdrawn while intense fighting was occurring between the Afghan parties. The Afghan security forces gradually lost control of districts all around the country and subsequently also the provincial capitals and eventually collapsed. On 15 August 2021, the President of Afghanistan fled the country and the Taliban took control of Kabul and once again proclaimed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

## Foreign and security policy activities

Sweden's diplomatic relations with Afghanistan go back more than 80 years. After having first been managed from Moscow and then Tehran, diplomatic relations remained dormant from the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 until Afghanistan started being covered through accreditation from Islamabad in 2002. The Embassy of Sweden in Kabul opened in 2008. Between 2010 and 2014, there was a Section Office in Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan. The embassy was moved to Stockholm in August 2021 and closed in August 2024. The Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs' costs for a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan have amounted to just over SEK 482 million.

In 2009, the United States appointed a Special Representative for Afghanistan-Pakistan. Sweden and other countries soon followed suit. The Special Representatives established an international network, the Af-Pak group, which provided a forum for political dialogue and consultation on primarily regional matters.

Sweden participated in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2001–2014 and thereafter the Resolute Support

Mission (RSM), an international training and advisory effort, in the period 2015–2021. These efforts were guided by government bills submitted to the Riksdag for decision. Participation in the ISAF and RSM was based on international law through UN Security Council Resolutions and at the invitation of the Afghan Government. More than 9 500 members of the Swedish Armed Forces served in Afghanistan during this period. The international engagement involved at most about 140 000 servicemen and servicewomen from some 50 countries. Initially, international efforts focused primarily on combating terrorism, and subsequently focused on building up the Afghan security forces and their capabilities. These measures aimed to hand over responsibility for security in the country to the Afghan authorities by the end of 2014. Between 2006 and 2012, Sweden was the lead nation responsible for the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan. This included being responsible for security in a large geographical area covering four quite different provinces. Multiple attempts were made over the years to bring about a more coordinated Swedish effort in Afghanistan that would include both military and civilian components. In 2010, Sweden established a civilian function in the PRT in Mazar-e Sharif called a Senior Civilian Representative (SCR) who was to lead the overall Swedish effort in northern Afghanistan from 2012. Between 2012 and 2014, the PRT became a Transition Support Team (TST) which was intended to facilitate the transfer of responsibility for security to the Afghan authorities. Sweden terminated its participation in the RSM in May 2021.

The reported cost of Sweden's contribution to the international military operation in Afghanistan amounted to at least SEK 11.3 billion. But there is considerable uncertainty about this sum, and it is likely to be higher. It has not been possible for the Swedish Armed Forces to report separately all indirect costs for international efforts, such as equipment acquired for combat units in Sweden and used in Afghanistan.

## Development assistance

Sweden has been a donor to Afghanistan for a long time. Sweden's development assistance to Afghanistan in the period 2001–2021 included humanitarian support, guided by humanitarian principles; and development cooperation, which is largely guided by bilateral strategies adopted by the Government. In accordance with these strategies, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) prioritised education, health, democracy, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), support for human rights defenders, infrastructure, rural development and the promotion of local ownership. Other agencies with development assistance activities in Afghanistan included the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), and the Swedish Police Authority.

Sweden's development assistance was also governed by multi-donor frameworks and multilateral organisations' governance mechanisms. A number of international donor conferences were held and frameworks were established for the governance, implementation and follow-up of the support provided to Afghanistan. In 2002, the World Bank's Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) was created, which played a central role in Sweden's and other donors' assistance to Afghanistan and in the dialogue with Afghan authorities. A significant framework was the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF) from the Tokyo Conference in 2012 where Sweden gave the most extensive and longest-lasting commitment to continued support of all among the donor countries. Under these frameworks, 50% of the development assistance was to eventually go "on budget", meaning to programmes and projects taken up in the Afghan national budget. Due to corruption and poor capacity within the Afghan government, to a large extent multilateral channels with established follow-up mechanisms became the viable pathway for donors. About 60% of Sweden's aid to Afghanistan went through multilateral actors such as the World Bank and UN organisations.

Individual civil society organisations also played a prominent role. A quarter of Swedish development assistance to Afghanistan went to SCA, which has been operating in the country since 1982. SCA implemented locally supported initiatives in health,

education, rural development and support for individuals with disabilities. Other actors included Rädda Barnen (Swedish Save the Children), Svenska Röda Korset (the Swedish Red Cross), the International Committee of the Red Cross and Marie Stopes International Afghanistan.

Sweden's bilateral humanitarian assistance and development co-operation with Afghanistan amounted to a total of SEK 14.7 billion during the period 2001–2021. Of the total development assistance, 98% went through Sida. During the twenty-year period, on average Sweden was the seventh largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan within the OECD, corresponding to 2.8% of the total official development assistance provided.

A number of different mechanisms, forums and committees for coordinating the development assistance were created. Afghanistan and Swedish development assistance to the country were part of the dialogue with and governance of international organisations. The Embassy of Sweden in Kabul participated in coordination meetings locally with other bilateral donors, multilateral organisations and Afghan authorities. Along with primarily the other Nordic countries, Sweden pursued joint priorities such as human rights, gender equality, anti-corruption and poverty reduction. Swedish civil society organisations acted within local coordination networks.

## Monitoring and evaluation

In its work, in addition the information it has gathered itself, the Committee has taken into account previous Swedish and international evaluations and follow-ups. In the report Sweden in Afghanistan 2002–2014 (SOU 2017:16), the inquiry chair Tone Tingsgård came to the conclusion that overall, the achievement of the objectives for Sweden's engagement in Afghanistan for the period 2002–2014 was very poor. However, there were differences in the extent to which the objectives identified by the inquiry chair were achieved.

The military operations were primarily followed up through the Swedish Armed Forces' analyses of their experiences, and by the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). In these, it was noted

that participation in these operations had had a profound impact on the Swedish Armed Forces. A recurring theme in the Swedish Armed Forces' annual reports during the period was that Sweden's participation had developed the Armed Forces' combat capabilities and cooperation with other countries. At the same time, the experience gained had been transferred more on a person-to-person basis than in a structured way. The fact that this participation contributed to strengthening the Afghan security forces' capabilities was mentioned in the recurring ISAF and RSM government bills. Various reports, for example from FOI, have questioned the ability of the Afghan security forces to act independently and tenably over the twenty-year period.

Sweden's development assistance to Afghanistan in 2001–2021 was extensively followed up. According to Sida's strategy reports, the implemented efforts and programmes were relevant and had largely achieved their immediate objectives. Progress was mainly apparent at the activity level. In most of the objective areas, long-term improvements were absent. The systematic review of development assistance evaluations commissioned by the Committee shows the same trend. The high number of donors led to a substantial need for coordination. The World Bank fund ARTF was a necessary and much appreciated tool for joint efforts and coordination. However, coordination overall was poor. UNAMA never got the enhanced coordination role that Sweden and other donors wanted to see. Many evaluations pointed out that interventions which had been successful were well anchored in Afghan local communities. Such efforts included the ARTF's National Solidarity Program (NSP) and Citizens' Charter projects, and SCA's efforts for access to schooling and healthcare, for example through training midwives.

Corruption in Afghanistan has been described in Swedish and international reports as an existential threat to Afghan society. The interviews conducted as part of the Committee's work paint a similar picture. Of the Swedish government agencies surveyed, only Sida was able to establish that there had been corruption or financial irregularities in Swedish-funded activities in Afghanistan. Between 2007 and 2021, Sida investigated 104 cases of suspected corruption, of which 65 were confirmed. In connection with these cases, Sida or its contracting partners requested repayment,

terminated staff and cancelled agreements with implementing partners. Anti-corruption efforts evolved over time.

The Committee has noted common features in evaluations carried out by other countries and organisations that are in line with its own observations and conclusions. These concern changing and unclear objectives and a lack of contextual awareness. The USA's dominance functioned as a guarantee for the engagement while also being a complicating circumstance in the absence of a coherent American strategy. The Afghan security forces were not professionalised, and Afghan ownership never materialised. Many evaluations highlighted the positive results of the international engagement, particularly in the areas of education and health, but also how it fed corruption and dependence on development assistance in the Islamic Republic. The lack of coordination nationally and internationally, and the complex landscape involving many actors was another recurring theme. While there was follow-up, it was too little and made more difficult by the gradually deteriorating security situation.

## Objectives and their achievement

The Committee has found that an overarching, guiding vision for Sweden's engagement in Afghanistan was lacking during the period 2001–2021. To a large extent, the overall objectives as presented in government bills, strategies and other policy documents have been broad, vague and not always concordant with each other. The objectives varied over time and were relevant at a general level. They were characterised more by wishful thinking than a realistic assessment of the actual circumstances in the country.

The following is an interpretation of the objectives – some of which remained constant and some of which changed – that the Committee identified for activities during the period 2001–2021, and whether or not they were achieved.

Contribute to security and stability in a broad sense, initially and primarily by means of combating terrorism, and subsequently by other means, including strengthening the capabilities of the Afghan security forces.

After initial progress on security in Afghanistan after 2001, the security situation gradually deteriorated until the Taliban assumed power again in summer 2021. Sweden's presence in northern Afghanistan initially helped to maintain stability in this vast area. After the transition of responsibility for security and stability to the Afghan state, the Afghan security forces were unable to provide security in the country on their own. The common international aim – that the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan should take over security in the country in a way that was sustainable – was not achieved. This also meant that the Swedish military engagement did not lead to lasting improvements in security and stability in Afghanistan.

Contribute to building and capacity development of the Afghan state.

State-building became a key aspect of the international engagement in Afghanistan due to the lack of a functioning state apparatus in the country, which is fundamental. During the twenty-year period, various institutions and structures were built up with assistance from Swedish and other international efforts but in a way that proved to be not sustainable. The population's confidence in the Afghan authorities remained low throughout the period. Corruption worsened and the Afghan Government neither prioritised nor implemented the agreed reforms in this area to a sufficient degree. The objective of contributing to the building and capacity development of the Afghan state was not achieved, despite some progress being made during the period of the international engagement.

Contribute to strengthening the conditions for reducing poverty.

Combating poverty was an area of high consensus in the donor community. Despite this consensus and major efforts, the proportion of the population living below the poverty line grew overall. On the other hand, in large parts of the country access to basic social services such as healthcare and education, as well as life expectancy, did improve up until 2021. However, an overall assess-

ment is that the conditions for reducing poverty in Afghanistan were not strengthened.

Contribute to strengthening the conditions for economic and social development.

Health and education are key components of economic and social development. Certain efforts in these areas did show better results compared to other areas, and a clearer link was evident between these results and Sweden's engagement. These interventions were often implemented through non-government actors, in particular SCA. The World Bank fund ARTF was central to efforts for economic and social development. The activities of UN organisations such as UNICEF were also significant. The objective to contribute to strengthening the conditions for economic and social development was met to some extent.

Contribute to strengthening the conditions for a democratic and inclusive society.

Up until 2021, support from the international community, including from Sweden, contributed to strengthening the conditions for a democratic society in some areas, such as support for an independent media landscape and civil society. Like the Islamic Republic in general, Afghanistan's emerging civil society was very much dependent on international support. The implementation of projects in this area also highlighted challenges in communicating and garnering support for democracy and human rights throughout Afghan society. It is still too early to say whether the progress made at the time will have an effect in the future. Given the situation in Afghanistan after 2021, it cannot be said at present that the overall objective of strengthening the conditions for a democratic society was achieved.

Contribute to strengthening the position of women and girls.

The situation of women and girls was consistently a priority of Sweden's engagement. Support from the international community made a difference in women's role, participation, representation, rights and security in Afghanistan, as well as their access to education and their health. The proportion of women in the workplace and in leadership positions increased during the period. Legislation against gender-based violence was introduced, but compliance was largely absent. Progress in this area was limited in scope in Afghanistan's patriarchal society, and differed geographically and socio-economically. The enjoyment of human rights by women and girls has been severely restricted since August 2021. Thus, this objective could not be achieved in a lasting way.

Strengthen the transatlantic link and cooperation with NATO.

Sweden's engagement in Afghanistan deepened cooperation between Sweden and NATO. Sweden was afforded expanded opportunities to gain insight into, influence and be more included in talks in the NATO structures and with other troop-contributing countries. Many have stated that the opportunity to attain this position was perhaps the main reason for Sweden's considerable military engagement in Afghanistan. Although it was not a stated objective in itself, this affected Sweden's engagement. Swedish participation in Afghanistan strengthened the transatlantic link and cooperation with NATO.

Improve Sweden's credibility and capabilities as a participant in international operations.

Sweden's participation in ISAF – including lead nation responsibility for the Provincial Reconstruction Team Mazar-e-Sharif (PRT-MeS) – and the RSM, has helped to develop the credibility and capabilities of Sweden as a participant in multinational military operations. Sweden's participation also contributed to developing its national combat capabilities, for example in its combat units and staff units. These objectives were achieved during the period covered by the Committee's work.

Conduct a concerted Swedish effort in the work with other objectives.

The link between peace, security and development was a benchmark for the international community's engagement, as it was for Sweden's engagement. Finding ways to translate this into practice was a challenge. Civil-military cooperation ended up having only a limited impact in the operational realities of Afghanistan. The lack of a clear analysis of the conditions, no common understanding of what this concept entailed, and no overarching strategy meant that stated ambitions could not be translated into action systematically on the ground. The ambition to carry out a concerted Swedish effort in Afghanistan across policy areas could not be implemented in practice, as the conditions for this had not been identified in concrete terms. The concept of 'civil-military cooperation' was also largely seen as an end in itself and not a means.

### **An overall assessment of objective achievement for the engagement**

In the analysis of objectives and objective achievement, the Committee has taken into account that Sweden's engagement was a contribution to a broader international effort. Sweden had limited opportunities to influence the overall direction and implementation of the international engagement. This was particularly true of the military missions.

That the Taliban are again in power since August 2021, resulting in repression, severe restrictions on the enjoyment of human rights and increased humanitarian needs, must be considered a failure. The international engagement's endeavour to support the development of a sustainable and democratic Afghan state was not achieved. The lack of more lasting progress was due to shortcomings on the Afghan side as well as within the international presence. Key factors that hampered positive results were the lack of understanding of the Afghan context and history, the number of actors – each with their own national priorities and proposed solutions – the widespread corruption, the lack of national ownership, and the gradually deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan.

At the same time, it is important to note that there was variation in the achievement of the objectives in different areas of the engagement. Some limited areas and efforts did show relatively good results within the twenty-year period. Both the successes and challenges that Sweden's engagement faced in a complex environment need to be noted.

At the time that the Committee's report is being presented, just over three years after the Taliban returned to power, it is difficult to see what lasting results Sweden's engagement and the rest of the international engagement has had. Neither does it seem possible to provide an overall assessment of what the effect of Sweden's participation in these efforts has been, nor to answer the question of how Afghanistan would have developed if Sweden and other countries had not been engaged there during the twenty-year period.

Some results failed to materialise over the twenty-year period, such as the building of a functioning Afghan state with a resilient security structure. But concrete progress could be seen, for example in education and health. It is still too early to draw any far-reaching conclusions concerning other, more long-term results, such as changes in norms and values. The Committee notes with concern that currently the scope for such changes is very limited, and will be shaped by future developments in Afghanistan. In light of this and in line with its terms of reference, the Committee found it more useful to focus on the lessons learned from the engagement.

### **The impact of Swedish efforts on the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan**

The Committee specifically investigated the impact of Swedish efforts on the situation of women and girls with regard to such factors as their rights, representation, security, and access to education.

Sweden's prioritisation of the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan strengthened over the period, in particular as a consequence of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. In dialogue with Afghan representatives and international partners, Sweden was one of the countries that pursued the inclusion of gender-equality aspects in the international engagement in Afghanistan. This had an impact in the Swedish Armed Forces at a strategic level but was not as visible at the operational

level in Afghanistan. Across all development assistance strategies, gender equality was prioritised in both integrated and targeted efforts. About 90% of Swedish development assistance efforts in Afghanistan had gender equality as a significant objective or the principal objective.

Clear objectives for activities are fundamental to achieving results, even if long-term effects have been more difficult to identify. In the area of development assistance in particular, there is documented evidence that it was meaningful for those affected. But these socially important achievements were also limited in scope and permanence. Traditional and patriarchal structures continued to prevail. International efforts in Afghanistan generally took too little account of the perspectives of women in different parts of the country, from different social classes, and from different ethnic and religious groups.

Sweden's efforts to support girls and women are particularly interesting in a discussion about viability. Gender equality is one of the areas where the most tangible change occurred during the twenty-year period, but has also shown the greatest decline during and after 2021. Women's and girls' access to education has been severely curtailed, but the knowledge acquired by those who had already gained an education for themselves remains. Is this enough as a seed for long-term change?

## **The evacuation in 2021**

When the Taliban took control of Kabul on 15 August, a very extensive international evacuation operation began, centred around Kabul airport. In the last two weeks of August, until the USA handed over the airport to the Taliban on 31 August 2021, more than 120 000 people were evacuated by some thirty countries. During this 'phase one' in August 2021, Sweden evacuated more than 1 100 people. During the subsequent second phase, which ended in December 2021, more than 800 people were evacuated or transferred to Sweden. In total, almost 2 000 people were evacuated or transferred from Afghanistan to Sweden during phases one and two.

This work was done with the help of a number of Swedish government agencies on the ground in Kabul, in the region and in Sweden, and in cooperation with other countries. The people evacuated were Swedish citizens, other individuals covered by consular regulations, and locally employed staff and other individuals in need of international protection. These individuals were covered by a variety of regulatory frameworks: The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, the consular protection rules and the re-settlement mechanism. The latter required decisions by the Swedish Government to be applicable in this case. During the evacuation, the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing, which affected forms of work, travel options, etc.

The Committee gathered experience from the participating government agencies, actors, and other countries on the evacuation, and took into account the previous review by the parliamentary Committee on the Constitution. The overall impression is that Sweden's evacuation operation got started later than comparable countries, which was demanding for both the evacuees and those who were working with the evacuation. However, it can also be noted that the Swedish government agencies, in cooperation with each other and with other countries, carried out an extensive and very demanding evacuation operation with a result that can be deemed successful given the difficult circumstances.

The Committee has identified six main lessons that can be learned from the Swedish evacuation operation from Afghanistan in 2021:

- The evacuation from Afghanistan was a unique challenge.
- Where the legislation does not fully cover the situation, clarity and quick decision-making by the political leadership is required.
- A changing mission and a somewhat unclear division of responsibilities placed particularly high demands on those whose task it was to carry out the evacuation.
- Insufficient resources and technical constraints.
- Hesitancy in the process regarding people who worked for Sweden in Afghanistan.
- The importance of prevention and joint exercises.

## **The Committee's reasoning on lessons learned from Sweden's engagement in Afghanistan**

The Committee identified some key issues and perspectives for its conclusions and the lessons learned from Sweden's engagement in Afghanistan in the period 2001–2021. Among other things, lessons learned need to be based on actual circumstances, seen in the light of a larger context, and conclusions need to be drawn from sustainable and long-term effects in addition to more short-term, quantitative results.

The main lessons learned according to the Committee are set out below in six areas.

### **Area 1: Context and environment of the international and Swedish engagement**

Insufficient knowledge and understanding of Afghan society and its social structures made it more difficult to plan, implement and adapt the international engagement to the realities on the ground. It was necessary to understand the context and take it into account. To a large extent, the international community did not succeed in this in the twenty-year period. Sweden's knowledge of Afghanistan could not be applied in full.

The significance of the region for developments in Afghanistan was underestimated for a long time. This was especially true concerning the influence of Pakistan and other neighbouring countries. When the significance of the region was given greater prominence in discussions in various forums, Sweden played an active role.

There was rarely a readiness or possibility to act on the basis of the knowledge and information about the local context that did exist. Different models and solutions for Afghanistan were presented based on external priorities and the beliefs of the different nations involved that these solutions would lead to the fastest results. Decisions in the initial phase of the engagement, for example at the Bonn Conference in 2001, had far-reaching consequences for both the international engagement and the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. This undermined the conditions that would have been needed to achieve an inclusive reconciliation process.

## **Area 2: Participating in a wider international context**

The international military operation in Afghanistan was one of the most long-lasting and extensive operations that Sweden has participated in. Afghanistan became the largest recipient country for Swedish bilateral aid in 2013. Despite this, Sweden's contribution was only a small part of the whole engagement. In an international engagement of this magnitude, it falls upon a relatively small partner like Sweden to realistically assess its scope for action and seek added value from its efforts. In Afghanistan, Sweden's scope for action was limited, but was utilised relatively effectively. A decision to participate in such an endeavour also needs to include resourcing, not least for security measures, that is commensurate with the ambitions.

Where Sweden acted with consistency in Afghanistan, these actions did have an impact, for example in Sweden's work to support the situation of women and girls. This impact was augmented through cooperation with other, like-minded actors. Nordic cooperation was particularly close. Emphasising an expanded role for the EU and the UN was a consistent priority for Sweden. Sweden played an active role in the international governance and coordination of the efforts in Afghanistan: through the Embassy in Kabul on multilateral boards and steering groups, in collaboration with other like-minded parties, and through secondments in strategic positions. However, the international coordination in Afghanistan proved to be inadequate.

## **Area 3: Objectives, governance and cooperation**

Clear and feasible objectives were largely lacking for both Sweden's engagement and the international engagement in Afghanistan. Efforts were made during the second half of the engagement to express the objectives in more concrete terms, making them easier to follow up. Besides the fact that the objectives should be characterised by concreteness, relevance and realism, continuous follow-up and adaptation over time are needed.

Strategies and other policy documents are important instruments for clarifying how to achieve adopted objectives. Greater clarity would have been needed in Afghanistan regarding the

content and function of these policy documents. The level of detail in policy documents needs to be weighed against the need for flexibility in the execution.

Decisions on a long-term, concerted Swedish effort require meticulous and thorough analysis based on a clear direction. An overarching governing strategy should be elaborated as early as possible concerning what Sweden's actors can be expected to achieve. Decisions made quickly in autumn 2001 did not allow time for this. Nevertheless, it took until 2010 until an overarching strategy for Sweden's engagement in Afghanistan was adopted. Clarity should be aimed for at the central level in order to avoid questions being left to the implementation level to sort out. This was a challenge for Swedish actors in Afghanistan. Civil-military cooperation needs to be based on the actual needs, and be a means and not an end in itself.

Effective action within the Swedish public administration model requires knowledge of each other's responsibilities and spheres of activity, regular and frequent sharing of information, and consultation between the relevant actors in order to create a common picture of the situation as the basis for decisions as far as possible. Quick decisions are based on previously established contact channels.

#### **Area 4: Conditions necessary for long-term results and effects**

Many years of experience – in developing countries in general, and in difficult environments in particular – have clearly shown that national ownership is a prerequisite for long-term and sustainable societal development. Afghanistan is no exception here. Despite national plans and strategies, there was insufficient Afghan ownership of reforms and interventions.

Evaluations of their support to Afghanistan carried out by Sweden and other countries show that awareness of the importance of a realistic time frame was underestimated. To a large degree, state-building in Afghanistan meant building the state apparatus from scratch, rather than reconstructing it.

Swedish efforts – especially in development assistance – consistently prioritised strengthening the role of women and girls. International efforts did make a difference for their role, representation

and rights in Afghanistan, but lasting change has not been achieved. In Afghanistan after August 2021, half the population once again enjoys fewer rights than anywhere else in the world. This has devastating consequences for individuals and for the Afghan society as a whole.

Realistic time frames, functional national ownership and domestic resource mobilisation are essential for sustainable and long-term change, but these were lacking in Afghanistan during the period of the international engagement. Sweden contributed to concrete results being achieved in areas such as education, health, gender equality, and free and independent media. It remains to be seen whether the progress made in these areas can provide basis for changes in norms in the long term. Change that is requested and driven by the Afghan population is a prerequisite for long-term development.

### **Area 5: Implementation of the activities on the ground in Afghanistan**

Effective action by Sweden in international efforts of various kinds requires an awareness of the needs and the required actions along the entire chain. An early and increased presence in Afghanistan, a greater focus on preparatory training, longer service periods – at least for people in leadership roles – and sufficient resources to manage the activities would have been valuable.

### **Area 6: From reporting, follow-up and evaluation to changed approach**

Despite the worrying developments in Afghanistan for many years, the Committee notes that there was little change in policy, direction and implementation, and what change there was, was not timely. Institutional know-how and learning are key elements for following up and adapting the engagement.

## **The Committee's final comment on lessons learned**

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 were sudden and had far-reaching consequences globally. The rapid response by the USA to these attacks in the form of a military offensive in Afghanistan, the international community's declaration of solidarity with the USA, and the Bonn Process came to have a significant impact on the development of Afghanistan from that point. In the vacuum created after the fall of the Taliban regime, an unstable foundation was laid for a new Republic. The Afghan context, history and the needs of the population themselves were overshadowed in favour of quick fixes and external priorities. These initial decisions complicated the building of a legitimate Afghan state and arriving at a necessary and inclusive political solution to the internal conflict. Despite extensive international support, the Afghan government ultimately did not succeed in taking responsibility for security, reducing corruption or laying the foundations for sustainable economic development. At the same time, Sweden and other countries contributed to improving the living conditions of millions of Afghans, many of whom initially welcomed the international engagement. Access to health-care and to education, especially for women and girls, stand out as successful interventions during this period. The question of whether the seeds of changes in norms have been sown, and what the long-term effects of these interventions will be, is not yet possible to answer. The situation in Afghanistan appears dark and dire, marked by repression, rising humanitarian needs and a sharp decline in human rights.

Sweden's participation in the larger international engagement in Afghanistan placed high demands on the formulation of the objectives and strategy for the engagement, and its coordination, implementation and follow-up – areas in which a clearer focus and more rapid adaptation would have been needed. It is the Committee's hope and conviction that these lessons learned, which have emerged during the course of its work, can be useful in future efforts and support.

## Annex: Members of the All-Party Committee of Inquiry

<b>All-Party Committee Members</b>	Lennarth Hjelmåker, Committee Chair
	Kerstin Lundgren, Centre Party
	Mikael Oscarsson, Christian Democrats
	Lotta Hedström, Green Party
	Anders Fänge, Left Party
	Nina Larsson, Liberal Party
	Stefan Olsson, Moderate Party
	Katarina Tolgfors, Moderate Party
	Johan Andersson, Social Democratic Party
	ClasGöran Carlsson, Social Democratic Party
	Alexandra Völker, Social Democratic Party
	Björn Söder, Sweden Democrats
	Lars Wistedt, Sweden Democrats
<b>Advisers</b>	Anja Glavinic Jones, Ministry of Defence
	Kerstin Lindblad, Ministry of Justice
	Peter Tejler, Ministry for Foreign Affairs
<b>Experts</b>	Olof Granander, Swedish Armed Forces
	Cecilia Hull Wiklund, Folke Bernadotte Academy
	Karin Kronlid, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
	Louise Weber, Swedish Migration Agency
<b>Secretariat</b>	Helena Pilsas, Principal Secretary
	Isak Myrestam, Assistant Secretary
	Evis Bergenlöv, Assistant Secretary