

The risks of working in conflict

A fact sheet by Swedish Committee for Afghanistan

Throughout its 40 years of development assistance to Afghanistan, Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) has learned that acceptance is key for access. Therefore, we work closely with local communities to build ownership and mutual trust. Working in a conflict affected setting is associated with risks. In recent years, SCA has experienced increased pressure from warring parties. In order to ensure continued acceptance, we maintain dialogue with all parties to the conflict. This fact sheet outlines Swedish Committee for Afghanistan's principled approach to the risks of working in conflict.

The conflict in Afghanistan and its impact on civilians

Afghanistan has experienced extended periods of armed conflict and civil war for 40 years, leading to immense human, social and economic costs. It has left Afghanistan with poor governance, weak institutions and widespread poverty.

Since 2001, when the US and allies invaded Afghanistan, the main parties to the conflict have been armed opposition groups, mainly the Taliban, the Afghan government and NATO and US forces. Moreover, in recent years the Islamic State has established a presence in eastern parts of the country.

In 2019, the number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan exceeded 10,000 for the sixth consecutive year. Since 2009, when the UN started its systematic documentation, there has been more than 100,000 civilian casualties in Afghanistan. The main cause of civilian casualties is improvised explosive devices followed by ground engagement. In recent years, civilian casualties caused by airstrikes and search operations have increased significantly. According to the UN's mission to Afghanistan, UNAMA, armed opposition groups were responsible for the most civilian casualties overall (47% by the Taliban and 12% by the Islamic State), but all parties to the conflict cause civilian harm (Afghan National Security Forces 16%, International forces 8%).¹

The conflict also has severe impact on access to health care and education. During 2019, UNAMA documented 70 incidents impacting access to education. Four education personnel were killed and 52 were abducted. Nine students were killed and 29 injured. Similarly, UNAMA verified 75 incidents impacting health care during 2019. Forced closures and destruction of clinics led to a loss of 24,000 hours of health care delivery. 13 health personnel were killed, 34 injured and 35 abducted.

¹ UNAMA Protection of civilians in armed conflict 2019
https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_annual_report_2019_-_22_february.pdf

Swedish Committee for Afghanistan

Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) started its work in rural Afghanistan in 1982 and continued working regardless of Soviet occupation, civil war, Taliban rule and today's conflict. The vision of SCA is an Afghanistan free from poverty, violence and discrimination, where human rights are respected and all live in dignity, enjoy equal opportunity and social justice. The mission of SCA is to empower individuals, communities and local organizations, primarily in rural areas and with particular focus on women, girls, boys and vulnerable group such as people with disabilities, so that they may participate fully in society and influence their own development.

Today, Swedish Committee has about 6 000 members of staff, out of which more than 99 per cent are Afghans. SCA is present in 14 out of 34 provinces, covering large parts of the northern and eastern Afghanistan. Its programs include service delivery, capacity building and advocacy within the areas of health, education, disability and rural development.

Risks of working in conflict

Working in conflict affected areas is always associated with risks. This cannot be avoided, but risks can be reduced, and their consequences mitigated. The level of insecurity in Afghanistan varies between different parts of the country and may even differ between neighbouring districts on local level. The situation is often unpredictable and can change quickly. Swedish Committee for Afghanistan therefore closely monitors security development at provincial and district level on a regular basis. Risks make security, logistics, recruitment and monitoring more difficult and more expensive.

Non-Governmental Organisations in Afghanistan were affected by 256 security related incidents during 2019.² SCA itself recorded 68 incidents the same year.³ Every incident has impact on staff and operations, in one way or another, but also on the people who SCA serves. Three examples of incidents during 2019:

- 9 January, Ghazni: The Taliban threatened a staff member at SCA's regional office, demanding that SCA hires a person chosen by the Taliban. Local village councils mediated on behalf of SCA, explaining the recruitment processes of the organisation.
- 18 April, Ghazni: On his way home from work, SCA's education field supervisor was detained for unknown reasons by Afghan security forces. He was released after more than two months in detention.
- 19 May, Wardak: A member of SCA's staff was injured from crossfire between Afghan security forces and armed opposition groups close to one of SCA's clinics.

² International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) Report 2019

³ Incidents recorded by SCA are internally registered incidents, and does not relate to the official INSO statistics (i.e. SCA were not affected by 68 out of the 256 incidents reported by INSO)



Swedish Committee for Afghanistan's approach

Swedish Committee for Afghanistan's strategy to reduce risk is founded on acceptance among communities, local leaders, religious scholars and parties to the conflict. This includes applying a long-term and predictable approach to build trust and gain access. The strategy has served both communities and SCA well since the early days of operations. It was instrumental in navigating the turmoil and civil war following the Soviet withdrawal in the early 90's, as it was during the years of Taliban government up until 2001.

SCA works together with local community councils on village level, where all projects and programmes are planned in response to legitimate rights and needs of the community, carefully ensuring local participation and ownership. If schools or hospitals are being subjected to pressure and threats by armed groups, local community leaders in the affected area are better positioned to negotiate continued access and safeguarding of operations. In this approach, SCA relies on mutual trust and the goodwill of the population for its security in operational areas. SCA staff spends considerable time communicating and interacting with local communities, raising awareness of SCA's work and core values among local leaders, residents and authorities. Key messages are that Swedish Committee for Afghanistan has a long-term commitment to the people of Afghanistan, works together with communities to promote the fulfilment of their rights, and that all its work is based on and guided by the following core values:

- **Responsiveness:** SCA works in respectful cooperation with target groups to address their needs and legitimate demands with an emphasis on local ownership.
- **Impartiality:** While upholding the duty to be inclusive and non-discriminatory in our approach, SCA doesn't take sides in conflict or support specific factions or parties representing various interests in society.
- **Equality:** SCA promotes equal opportunities and facilitates equal access to resources for all citizens, including women, girls, boys and people with disabilities.
- **Social Justice:** SCA strives to be fair to all with whom it works. While working to affirm the rights of all individuals, it recognises that differences in gender, individual capabilities and identities give rise to varied needs and interests.
- **Integrity:** SCA maintains honesty and transparency in all of what it does and say, upholding a spirit of openness and sharing with stakeholders, while always prepared to be held to account for our actions.

Dialogue with parties to the conflict

Swedish Committee for Afghanistan maintains dialogue with all parties to the conflict to ensure transparency and awareness of its vision, mission, core values and principles. This promotes the access required to carry out projects in areas that are

conflict affected. Most often, this dialogue is carried out locally through community councils, local leaders and religious scholars. When issues cannot be resolved locally, SCA supplements this by also engaging in dialogue with decision makers at higher levels. This was the case in the 90's, during the Taliban rule, and it remains necessary today. The Taliban are de facto stakeholders and 'gatekeepers' in many areas where SCA works. In some instances, they control the local administration, and in recent years their power has become more consolidated. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is a key stakeholder in facilitating dialogue.

When things go wrong

The measures above allow Swedish Committee for Afghanistan to work in areas where few others could. However, risks cannot be fully avoided in a complex conflict. Active armed conflict or direct threats against SCA's staff or operations can result in a risk too high for SCA to continue its work. It can also be subjected to threats against its values of impartiality, equality and social justice, for instance if there is a ban on girls' education.

The main deterrent measure available to Swedish Committee where security cannot be guaranteed is the threat to close down activities. SCA stands ready to suspend activities if discussions with warring parties are not fruitful. In the worst cases, SCA has to evacuate from the affected area.

Swedish Committee will not compromise on its principled approach. Suspending activities is however always a difficult decision to make. Schools are closed at the expense of students' right to education, and closure of health facilities limits peoples' right to healthcare. For women and girls, who often have few possibilities to seek assistance elsewhere, the consequences may be particularly difficult. SCA always strives to find ways to reopen and resume closed operations as soon as possible.

Joining others

During 2019, many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) including SCA, experienced increasing pressure and scepticism from armed opposition groups. Some humanitarian organisations were pressured to pay illegitimate fees or taxes, or to reveal confidential information. Such demands are never acceptable to Swedish Committee.

In light of the increased pressure, the need for a common response from NGOs has become more evident. During 2019, the UN took the lead in formulating a set of Joint Operating Principles (JOPs) for humanitarian actors, a common approach for interaction with parties to the conflict and other stakeholders, reflecting humanitarian policies and established practices. The principles are derived from International Humanitarian Laws and Human Rights Laws and include humanity, neutrality, impartiality and operational independence.

Through endorsing the Joint Operating Principles, NGOs also agree to act in accordance with the principles of "Do No Harm", with dignity, transparency and accountability, cultural sensitivity and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. The JOPs calls for engagement with all relevant parties to the conflict and stresses

that this engagement should never be considered as recognition or support to that actor. The joint principles further stresses that NGOs will never accede to requests to pay illegitimate taxes or payments or abide to programming demands. They will not allow influence over selection of staff, partners or vendors or provide confidential information about these.

CASE: The attack on a clinic in Wardak

During the night between 8-9 July 2019, Afghan special forces by force entered a health clinic run by Swedish Committee in Tangi, Wardak. On their way in, a guard was killed. Inside, all staff and patients were held and interrogated for hours. The intruders took three people outside, out of which two were clinic staff employed by SCA. Two were killed on spot, while the head of clinic was detained for two weeks.

This incident was triggered by Afghan Special Forces believing that Swedish Committee employed clinic staff with affiliations to the Taliban. This in turn led to a loss of confidence in SCA among the local Taliban, who accused SCA of failing to ensure security of its health facilities. Consequently, 42 out of 77 clinics in the province were closed by Taliban, affecting over 5.700 patients every day.

In order to reopen the clinics, SCA engaged in community mobilisation and contact with local Taliban through the community elders. The approach was successful, and the clinics could reopen. The consequences of the night raid were however more long-term, counted both in human lives and suffering, a damaged trust in the Afghan government among local communities and for SCA as service provider. Previous experience shows that the number of women seeking antenatal and postnatal health care can reduce by up to 90 percent after an attack on a clinic.

Violations of International Humanitarian Law, such as the operation in the Wardak clinic, are serious threats to the possibility for organisations such as SCA to access and operate in conflict affected areas. It also illustrates the importance for SCA to maintain the principled approach and building acceptance among the parties to the conflict. A rumour that Swedish Committee is not impartial may quickly turn into a security risk.

Lessons learned

- 1) In the context of war, dialogue and transparency are necessary for acceptance, and acceptance is key for access and safety.
- 2) Incidents that impair acceptance have long term consequences for Swedish Committee, its staff and the people it aims to support.
- 3) Abiding by the value of impartiality and principles of Do No Harm help mitigate risks.
- 4) Swedish Committee for Afghanistan has remained committed to the Afghan people for generations and recognizes that working closely with, and relying on, local communities has built bonds, mutual trust and commitment that are invaluable – for development and for safety.

Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, July 2020