

Day 2 - Conference Briefing

ISLAMABAD Wednesday November 28 2001 – The UNDP, World Bank, ADB hosted conference, "Preparing for Afghanistan's Reconstruction", moved into business rapidly as work-group discussions became the first round of broad consultations on a needs assessment for Afghanistan.

High-level meetings in Washington earlier this month and scheduled for Tokyo in January, have requested the three hosting organizations to produce a preliminary needs assessment for Afghanistan. This week's conference, planned several months ago, has now become a vital round of consultations between experienced and knowledgeable Afghans from the NGO and professional community and their international assistance partners.

"The most important thing is that donors are hearing us directly," said Mr Sayed Fazlullah Wahidi, Chairman of the Afghan NGOs Coordination Bureau. "We are sharing our information from the ground about the reality of the need."

Mr Wahidi's umbrella organization includes about 140 Afghan NGOs. Also attending the conference are two other important NGO umbrella organizations, Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Refugees and Islamic Coordinating Council. In addition about 60 NGOs active on the ground in Afghanistan are directly represented in discussions.

"This conference is serving as a thorough consultation with Afghans on the reconstruction needs of their country and is a very good start towards the needs assessment. We are gathering as much good and current information as possible from NGOs and professionals working in service delivery," said William Byrd, World Bank Acting Country Manager for Afghanistan.

The UNDP and World Bank have been gathering social and economic data on Afghanistan for several years under the Watching Brief program funded by the Bank's Post-Conflict Fund. This week's timely conference takes this work to a new level of depth by facilitating direct contact with so many experts experienced across the complex variety of sectors which all need attention in Afghanistan.

A theme which has cut across much of the discussion so far has been the need for capacity building and involving communities in decision-making from the very start, especially as many of these communities are already richly experienced in service delivery and organizing to meet basic needs.

The group discussing private sector development in a post-conflict country identified the "freedom to do business" as their overarching goal. They saw opportunities for the Afghan private sector in the work of reconstruction itself and in the longer term, the key principle emerged as building "a sustainable economic environment based on private enterprise and thus limiting and minimizing the extent and duration of external aid". Free trade with the world was essential to this sustainability.

A group discussing the mobilization of community leadership envisaged links from the grass roots-level right up to central government level and that organizational structures should ensure that the voices of women were heard and that existing capacities in the form of village elders, village organizations and women's shuras be tapped.

Agriculture was identified as a sector which could bounce back in the short term with key inputs of seed, implements and fertilizer. On a three to five year time horizon, participants envisaged the development of support including microfinance, irrigation and social safety nets. Over time, policy-making and regulatory capacity should take shape along with credit institutions and watershed management and conservation.

Discussions on the rebuilding of the public sector urged that assistance should not reinforce "artificial divisions" in Afghanistan. Also, decentralization should be driven by capacity, resources and accountability rather than the designs and desires of donors. The group recognized the entrepreneurial traditions of Afghans and that the state was needed to strengthen the security, law and order and regulatory environment in which this spirit could grow and thrive.

Group discussions continue today and the conference will hear the outcome of these deliberations in plenary session tomorrow.