

Wrap-up Press Briefing

ISLAMABAD Thursday November 29 – The three-day international conference, “Preparing for Afghanistan’s Reconstruction”, concluded today with a rich basis for a multi-sectoral needs assessment for the war-shattered country.

Delegates were urged throughout to “see Afghanistan through the eyes of Afghans” and when international participants blinked, there were enough Afghan colleagues to open their eyes.

“No one is going to reconstruct Afghanistan for us,” said a young woman speaking for her country. “We need support, but we have to lead.”

The conference was designed to take preparedness for the huge task of reconstruction to a new level. Co-hosts UNDP, the World Bank and ADB have formed a team to distill this knowledge into a preliminary needs assessment in the weeks ahead in readiness for a high-level meeting in Tokyo in January. There is, of course, much more work to be done, but the level of consultation with Afghanistan’s NGO and professional community at the conference has established an important foundation for this urgent work.

“What I have heard, particularly from the Afghan voices in the working groups, gives me great hope that we in the international assistance community have the beginning of a true partnership lead by the Afghan people,” said Mieko Nishimizu, World Bank Vice President for South Asia. “We must honor this, and when a government for Afghanistan emerges, we hope it reflects the wisdom, experience and tolerance of the voices I have heard this week. That will be a leadership that supports the people of Afghanistan in building their own future.”

Mr Yoshihiro Iwasaki, Director Programs West of the ADB, said the conference had been enormously useful in providing inputs for the needs assessment. “Our Afghan colleagues have shown clearly their determination and capacity to take charge of their destiny and the reconstruction of their country. We also appreciate their emphasis on an appropriate policy and institutional framework, alongside the humanitarian effort and to provide a foundation for reconstruction investments.”

Mindful of the scale of the immediate humanitarian task to keep Afghanistan’s people alive through the harsh winter, numerous working groups looked ahead to examine each sector that must be considered on the path to a comprehensive reconstruction strategy.

“Relief and recovery must go hand in hand,” said David Lockwood, UNDP deputy Regional Director for Asia and Pacific. “We have to avoid getting trapped into a relief operation only. Emergency assistance is vital, but we need to work with the Afghans to build a sustainable future that will provide a range of benefits to all.”

A common theme was the need to engage communities and not only build their capacity to analyze and find solutions to their problems but to tap into existing local knowledge and the coping mechanisms that have evolved, particularly among women.

Discussion in the working group on the role of women in Afghanistan's reconstruction was so vital that the presenter struggled to consolidate the many ideas that had been shared. The rights of women were seen as not only a fundamental human and moral right but a practical and economic contribution to the country's future. Most women had not been engaged in conflict but instead had carried the burden of agriculture and finding livelihoods. Their inclusion, boosted by education and confidence building, would be particularly important to a sustainable future.

The group acknowledged that this inclusion would take time and patience but pointed out that women themselves should be the agents of change in Afghanistan. Their goals included changes to the legal system and in the interim, they urged the appointment of a gender advisor to the UN special assistant on Afghanistan, Mr Lakdhar Brahimi and a focus on bringing professional women back to their jobs.

Education was embraced as a human right for all children, girls and boys, and special attention was urged for Afghanistan's many orphans of conflict. Education for men and women of all ages should also be part of a future strategy.

Health and water and sanitation needs would be a special challenge in the immediate and longer term. Only 23 percent of the population has access to safe water and only 12 percent have sanitation while just 35 percent of districts have any mother and child health services to speak of and 4 percent of the population is disabled, many by landmines. Delegates urged a comprehensive health system with strong centralized management and decentralized delivery of services.

Another message was that any funding arrangements and the engagement of the international assistance community be as simple and coordinated as possible so as not to overburden existing capacity.

The conference was not designed to put a price tag on reconstruction. There is consensus that the cost will be great but, to end on a positive note, a voice from the conference told delegates that they already had their most important resources, the Afghan people themselves. "If you support them in ways that they understand and in ways that make sense to them culturally, you will be surprised how quickly they will put this to work."

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