

THE AFGHAN DIASPORA: PARTNERS IN THE CRISIS RESPONSE

Mapping of Afghan diaspora organizations in Italy and the prospects for their involvement in the humanitarian response in Afghanistan



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**THE AFGHAN
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Preface

Diasporas have long been recognized as actors of socioeconomic development in both their countries of origin and their host countries. They can make an important contribution to peace consolidation processes and to supporting the humanitarian response, conducting relevant activities also during the reconstruction stage. Thanks to their proximity to crisis-affected populations and their flexibility, diaspora actors can mobilize resources quickly and carry out targeted actions by providing assistance in the form of financial contributions, remittances, in-kind donations and skills transfers. IOM recognizes the fundamental role of diasporas in responding to humanitarian crises, during their various phases. At the same time, it promotes their engagement along the humanitarian –peace –development nexus, as well as their inclusion in a broader humanitarian ecosystem. The response provided by the formal humanitarian actors and by diaspora organizations often run in parallel and with limited coordination. On the contrary, the IOM policy on the triple nexus advocates a joint and simultaneous approach, combining humanitarian assistance with reconstruction and development initiatives that address structural challenges and support resilience.

Through an analysis of the Afghan context and the activities conducted by the Afghan diaspora in Italy in response to the ongoing humanitarian crisis, this publication aims to contribute to the broader debate on the involvement of diaspora actors in the formal humanitarian system.

The study provides a detailed picture of the priorities of Afghan organizations as to interventions in their country of origin and in Italy. It also presents recommendations on how to support their contribution to the response to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and to the reception and integration of Afghan nationals in Italy.

I hope that this report can encourage reflection on potential synergies and areas of collaboration between traditional humanitarian actors, development actors and diaspora organizations, during all stages of a humanitarian crisis, from the response to the development for peace.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized initials 'LH' followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Laurence Hart
Director
*Coordination Office for the Mediterranean
Head of Mission in Italy and Malta
Representative to the Holy See*

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Executive summary

On 15 August 2021, the capital of Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban, who announced an interim Government and the restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on 7 September. The speed of the Islamic Republic's collapse had catastrophic effects on institutions, politics, society, the economy and international relations. It has also reinforced the tendency towards emigration, which has been crucial to survival and to the distribution of risks and opportunities among the population in the country's recent history.

The recent emigration from Afghanistan is changing the landscape of Afghan diasporas in the world. In fact, they are experiencing a transitional phase that will be shaped by four main factors: internal dynamics; relationships with their country of origin; the decisions made by the de facto authorities in Afghanistan; and the decisions made by institutions in host countries. The outcome of the transition will have an impact on both their country of origin and their host countries. For many years, academic literature, civil society and institutional actors have indeed recognized diaspora communities as “change agents”. The impact of these communities on the social and economic development in their home countries has also been acknowledged, in terms of skills and knowledge transfer, support for health care and education initiatives, direct investment and humanitarian assistance. At the same time, the diasporas' contribution to the production system in the host countries has also been recognized.

Given the context, this study stems from the need to understand the changes in the Afghan diaspora in Italy following the Taliban's return to power. The main objectives are as follows:

- To provide a general map of Afghan diaspora groups and organizations in Italy, while assessing their potential and their limitations;
- To identify the main activities conducted and the priority interventions, both in the host country and in Afghanistan in response to the humanitarian crisis;
- To provide recommendations for enhancing the contribution of the diaspora, both to integration processes and to the crisis response in Afghanistan.

This publication contributes to the academic and institutional debate on the inclusion of diaspora actors in the humanitarian ecosystem, through an improved understanding of the organizational structures, the modus operandi and the composition of the Afghan diaspora in Italy, and through the identification of potential areas of collaboration with traditional humanitarian and institutional actors.

The research is based on three main methods:

- Review of academic literature;
- Fieldwork;
- Direct participation in Afghan organizations' activities in Italy.

The fieldwork mainly consisted of semi-structured interviews with representatives and/or members of diaspora organizations, selected on the basis of their representativeness and the relevance of their activities. A total of 51 qualitative semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with members of the Afghan diaspora; 10 remote interviews with members of the Afghan diaspora; 5 interviews with

Italian experts. Twelve of such interviews were followed up with meetings or phone calls. The fieldwork was conducted in Rome, Turin, Florence, Perugia, Bologna, Trieste and Bari between mid-December 2021 and mid-February 2022, while telephone interviews were held with diaspora members in Venice and Milan. The locations above were chosen on the basis of the demographic weight of individual Afghan communities in Italy.

> MAIN RESULTS

The study showed that the regime change in Afghanistan caused a noticeable transformation in the demographic significance of the Afghan diaspora in Italy. In fact, through “evacuation” flights following the Taliban’s return to power, Italy received around five thousand new Afghan nationals, equal to 40 per cent of those already residing in the country as of January 2021, according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2021).

The arrival of thousands of people, often with a higher social status and a qualified professional background, and the radical changes in Afghanistan caused not only a quantitative demographic transformation, but also new dynamics within the diaspora, changing its social composition, modes of intervention, and relations with the Italian society.

The events occurred in August 2021 led diaspora actors to become more aware of their own roles and responsibilities, both in their host country and in their country of origin, prompting them to take on a more leading role.

Diaspora actors led protests, solidarity rallies and awareness-raising campaigns, held public meetings, fundraised and transferred resources to Afghanistan. They also contributed to evacuating civilians at risk from Afghanistan and receiving them in their host countries. These initiatives have marked an important transition for diaspora activism,

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which has shifted its focus from within the community to the public sphere.

In parallel to this growing activism, diaspora actors have also sought greater recognition from society and institutions. This represents a significant new development as well as a resource to further engage the Afghan diaspora in Italy, both in inclusion policies and in the humanitarian response. The self-mobilization started in summer 2021, which in many cases continued over the following months, strengthened the relations between existing diaspora groups, broadening the participation base and increasing the share of the population involved. Combined with the arrival of members of the “new diaspora”, this trend also provided a spur for the creation of new organizations or for the formalization of existing ones. It therefore led to the amplification of the organizations’ engagement.

The transformations in the country of origin have also had negative consequences, exacerbating ethnic divisions within the community. This trend has emerged in all Afghan diasporas in Europe. Because of these divisions, reinforced by the return to power of the Taliban, an Islamist group of Pashtun origin, the creation of a single national umbrella organization in Italy is also considered unlikely.

However, there is a widespread consensus among diaspora organizations on the creation of a coordination network or a common platform between local organizations. According to some interviewees, community differences in the diaspora account for the lack of communication with relevant institutions. At the same time, such differences reportedly allow for a more direct and participated representation of local communities.

In Italy, diaspora activism pursues mainly three different approaches. The first is the integration of the “new diaspora” into Italian society, often by replacing and/or complementing the institutional reception system, perceived as weak. Most respondents reported having conducted (or being able to conduct) relevant activities in the areas of integration,

legal assistance, education, material and psychological support for new members of the Afghan community.

The second approach consists in self-representation and a more explicit public accountability; the third approach consists of communication activities with and about Afghanistan. Such activities aim to overcome the lack of information, making the voice of the Afghan diaspora heard in Italy, and encourage coordination between local organizations and with their country of origin.

The most recurring requests made to Italian authorities include: the allocation of more resources for the implementation of social and cultural activities led by the diaspora; legislative changes aimed at reducing waiting times for asylum and family reunification applications; participation in the definition of Italy's strategic objectives concerning reception policies and aid strategies for Afghanistan.

More generally, according to respondents a substantial change is perceived in the history of relations between Italy and the Afghan diaspora. If supported by adequate institutional policies, the demographic and social change affecting the diaspora could lead diaspora actors to shift their perception of Italy from a transit country to their country of destination. In turn, this shift could foster increased participation of the Afghan diaspora in Italian society.

The implementation of institutional programmes aimed at coordinating and strengthening diaspora organizations in Italy would meet the needs of the diaspora as well as the priority objectives of government policies, including activities to conduct in Afghanistan.

Many respondents believe that, due to the changed political and social conditions in Afghanistan, the diaspora will play an even bigger role than in the past, and that it would be crucial that channels of communication and collaboration between those working within the country and those who have left be maintained or built.

Most respondents stated being able to identify the needs of the Afghan population and intervention priorities thanks to their knowledge of

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THAN IN THE
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the local context, which is more in-depth than the one of traditional humanitarian actors. They added that the priority areas of intervention are those where the material needs of the population are most urgent and evident: humanitarian assistance, poverty alleviation and access to health care.

The intervention priorities in Afghanistan mentioned by respondents include the transfer of social and intangible resources. For the Afghan diaspora in Italy, it is vital to avoid any further isolation of Afghanistan and any deterioration of its social and intellectual capital. To this end, communication channels with the outside world should be kept open, while access to qualified education should be ensured for as many people as possible. Special emphasis was placed on access to education for girls and women, in light of the discriminatory policies that have been adopted by the country's de facto authorities.

With regard to the possibility of organizing effective activities in Afghanistan, many respondents suggested using caution in situations where such activities may harm the targeted communities, because they are considered hostile by the de facto authorities. However, some diaspora actors are working to facilitate the launch of educational and entrepreneurial activities that would link their host country with their country of origin.

Moreover, the survey shows a widespread willingness to cooperate with Afghan organizations and traditional humanitarian actors, while there is little interest in strengthening State institutions, because they are governed by authorities that are perceived as hostile and poorly representative of all the country's political and ethnic components. Two instruments for responding to the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan were identified as particularly useful: fundraising and remittances; and collaboration with Afghan organizations. Cooperation with traditional humanitarian actors was also identified as an additional possible instrument.

Although the links between diaspora members in Italy and organizations in their country of origin are limited compared to those of other

Afghan diasporas in Europe with a different migration history, they hold useful potential for the implementation of new humanitarian projects. In fact, Afghan diaspora actors in Italy can clearly identify intervention priorities and the specific needs of their country of origin.

> RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations build on the first-hand accounts gathered as part of a set of interviews with members of the Afghan diaspora in Italy and experts. They are also based on the analysis of the relevant contexts (in Afghanistan and in Italy).

For IOM:

- Enhance the **skills**, organizational resources, initiatives and project development capacities of Afghan diaspora actors in Italy through training and capacity-building courses (for example, project design, administration and so forth).
- Support the consolidation of **diaspora organizations** in Italy and their networks:
 - Encourage the creation of collaboration platforms, which may not necessarily be formal but ensure regular activities. These can provide venues for exchange with the aim of identifying common priorities and potential activities, for example through the establishment of a national or thematic coordination network.
 - Enhance cultural and community activities implemented or planned by diaspora organizations, including through special funds and ad hoc initiatives.

- Facilitate the creation of communication channels between Afghan diaspora organizations in Italy and international organizations, particularly within the European Union.
 - Facilitate the creation of communication channels between diaspora organizations and institutions, public bodies, universities, private foundations, the media and the entrepreneurial sector.
-
- Facilitate meetings and dialogue between diaspora actors and recently arrived Afghan nationals, by encouraging their interaction.
 - Create opportunities for public discussion whereby diaspora actors can identify and assess the prospects and limitations of their involvement in activities both in the country of origin and in the host country, as well as the intervention priorities.
 - Continue the nationwide **mapping** of the Afghan diaspora in Italy, notably through the creation of a regular and continuous monitoring mechanism.
 - Promote **information** on Afghanistan in national and international media.

For Italian civil society:

- Encourage discussion between traditional humanitarian actors and diaspora actors.
- Encourage cooperation between diaspora organizations and Italian universities, including training activities for students living in Afghanistan.
- Support e-learning initiatives and projects by the Afghan diaspora aimed at beneficiaries in their country of origin.

For policymakers and donors:

- Involve diaspora actors in the definition of the strategic objectives of humanitarian aid and development cooperation.
- Involve diaspora actors in the monitoring of the effectiveness of humanitarian and development cooperation activities conducted in the country of origin.
- Encourage institutions to design a coherent policy on the role of diasporas in integration, humanitarian assistance and development.
- Facilitate access to financial resources, so as to enable the launch or continuation of activities by diaspora organizations, notably increasing flexibility in the allocation of funds.
- Foster, encourage and promote the contribution of the Afghan diaspora to humanitarian, recovery, peace and development activities in Afghanistan, including through the allocation of a special fund.
- Foster, encourage and promote the contribution of the Afghan diaspora to reception and integration activities aimed at members of the “new diaspora” in Italy, notably through the allocation of a special fund.

CHAPTER I



Introduction

1 OBJECTIVES

This study has five main objectives: (i) to provide a general mapping of groups, organizations or individuals active within the Afghan diaspora in Italy; (ii) to identify the main activities conducted by diaspora groups, organizations or individuals in Italy and in response to the crisis in Afghanistan, namely with regard to the needs expressed by local communities, and to the operational capacities of groups or organizations in both countries; (iii) to identify intervention priorities in Italy and in Afghanistan, according to diaspora groups, organizations or individuals; and (iv) to assess the potential and limitations of the Afghan diaspora in Italy in the activities conducted in both countries; (v) to provide recommendations on tools to strengthen the Afghan diaspora's contribution in integration pathways as well as in response to the humanitarian emergency in Afghanistan.

The research also contributes to the academic and institutional debate on the inclusion of diaspora actors in the humanitarian ecosystem, through an improved understanding of the Afghan diaspora's organizational structures, modus operandi and composition in Italy, and through the identification of potential areas of collaboration with traditional humanitarian and institutional actors.

2 METHODOLOGY

This report is based on three main methods: review of academic literature; fieldwork; and direct participation in Afghan organizations' activities in Italy.

The review of academic literature focused on the concept of diaspora, the role of the diaspora in humanitarian activities and development cooperation, the history of migration in Afghanistan since the late 1970s, and the demographic and social characteristics of the Afghan diaspora in European countries. Additional data were collected from journals, newspaper reports and institutional websites.

The chapter on the Afghanistan's current events is based on a review of academic literature, institutional reports and analyses performed by relevant think tanks. Moreover, the chapter builds on the author's long first-hand experience in Afghanistan, a country he last visited with no IOM mandate between the end of October and the end of November 2021. The review of academic literature was followed by a preliminary mapping of Afghan diaspora groups in Italy, and then by the fieldwork. Further details on the inclusion criteria for the mapping can be found in the section on the definition of diaspora. Diaspora groups, organizations and individuals were selected in several stages, starting with an online, social network and journal search, and by consulting Italian and Afghan organization members, and experts in the field through the author's network. The fieldwork was conducted after the mapping, and it allowed for the progressive expansion of the network of references, contacts and interviewees. Fieldwork areas in Italy were selected on the basis of 4 criteria: their representativeness in terms of diaspora population; the representativeness and relevance of the activities performed by the Afghan diaspora, or the presence of particularly representative members of the diaspora; the intention to include both members of the "first-generation" diaspora (those who have been resident in Italy for years) and members of the "new diaspora" (those who arrived in Italy after mid-August 2021); and the author's network.

The fieldwork mainly consisted of semi-structured interviews with representatives and/or members of diaspora organizations, which were complemented with more in-depth interviews with some national experts. Moreover, focus groups were conducted with members of diaspora organizations. In addition to the qualitative semi-structured interviews based on a questionnaire, and the focus groups, the author adopted the direct observation method with regard to certain activities conducted by Afghan organizations in Italy, alongside members of the “first generation” and members of the “new diaspora”. A total of 51 qualitative semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with members of the Afghan diaspora; 10 remote interviews with members of the Afghan diaspora; 5 interviews with Italian experts. Twelve of such interviews were followed up with meetings or phone calls.¹

The fieldwork was conducted in Rome, Turin, Florence, Perugia, Bologna, Trieste and Bari (and Gioia del Colle) between mid-December 2021 and mid-February 2022. Telephone interviews were conducted with members of the diaspora in Venice and Milan. Interviews with first-generation members of the diaspora were conducted in Italian, while those with members of the new diaspora were conducted in English. Where necessary, the latter were facilitated by an interpreter speaking Dari or Pashtu, the two most widely spoken languages in Afghanistan.

THE FIELDWORK
MAINLY
CONSISTED OF
INTERVIEWS

3 LIMITATIONS

The research had some limitations. Firstly, only a limited number of geographical areas were included, due to time constraints and to the urgent need to provide prompt recommendations for the

1 Organizations of the Afghan diaspora whose members were interviewed for this research or that were mentioned by our interviewees include: the socio-cultural organization Nawroz (Rome); the Afghan Community in Italy (Rome); the Cultural Organization of Afghan Nationals in Italy (ACAFI) Rome, not active; the Afghan Community in Turin; the Global Afghan Forum (GAF) Turin; and the solidarity organization Women for Women (Rome-Venice).

diaspora's involvement in the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan: conclusions were inferred from the analysis of participants' opinions. Interviewees do not represent the Afghan diaspora in its entirety, but a small share, albeit significant. The observed trends are therefore not entirely exhaustive, despite their representing a significant sample. A further, long-term study involving the whole country should therefore be conducted.

Another limitation was the absence of primary or secondary literature on the Afghan diaspora in Italy. Consequently, no comparative assessment and no analysis of the diaspora's historical evolution and of the activities performed in the country of origin and the host country could be conducted. Due to this limitation, it was decided to provide contextual elements of the Afghan diaspora in Europe, and to place a greater focus on the interviews and the collection of opinions during the fieldwork; a selection of such interviews and opinions is provided in the third chapter. Given the lack of studies on the subject, this research is novel in the academic and institutional literature on the role of the Afghan diaspora in Italy. Therefore, it is expected to encourage further in-depth studies.

4 DEFINITION OF DIASPORA

There is no single definition of “diaspora”², nor a unique legal recognition of the term. In fact, its meaning varies depending on the context, the intention of those using it and the historical period. This report employs the definition provided by the IOM Glossary on Migration: “Migrants or descendants of migrants whose identity and sense of belonging, either real or symbolic, have been shaped by their migration experience and background. They maintain links with their homelands,

2 IOM, Engaging Diasporas for Development, IOM Policy-Oriented Research. Available at www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/main/site/policy_and_research/policy_documents/iom_research.pdf.

and to each other, based on a shared sense of history, identity, or mutual experiences in the destination country.”³

At the same time, we support the emphasis on the transnational character of diasporas as expressed in the definition provided by the IOM’s Work on and with the Diaspora: “We also define diasporas as transnational communities, because in a world of unprecedented global mobility, they comprise people who are connected to more than one country [...]. The transnational nature of diaspora implies that these people are crucial when it comes to connecting countries and communities because they can call on multiple networks, relate to different identities and share a sense of belonging to more than one community.”⁴

The definition used in this report is therefore based on the idea that, although diaspora groups have different compositions and forms of organization, and although they adopt different instruments, not only do they share the origin, but also the desire to maintain a collective identity linked to their country of origin, as well as the ability to implement transnational practices involving Afghanistan.⁵ From this point of view, the transnational and socially organized nature of the diaspora, both at the local and the global level, enables it to mobilize, to take collective action and to act constructively both in the country of origin and in the country of destination.⁶

When adopting these definitions, which are widely used in academic literature and in institutional practices, it should also be considered that

3 IOM, *Glossary on Migration*, 2019. Available at www.iom.int/glossary-migration-2019.

4 IOM, IOM’s Work on and with the Diaspora. Available at www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/2019-01/SCPF_97_4.pdf. See also Nicholas Van Hear, *New Diasporas: the Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*, Routledge, 1998.

5 See Giulia Sinatti and Cindy Horst, Migrants as agents of development: Diaspora engagement discourse and practice in Europe, in *Ethnicities*. International Migration Law No. 34. 2015, Vol. 15(1):134–152.

6 See Fiona Adamson, Constructing the Diaspora: Diaspora Identity Politics and Transnational Social Movements, in Terrence Lyons and Peter Mandaville (eds.), *Politics from Afar: Transnational Diasporas and Networks* (pp. 25–42), New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

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there are differences within each diaspora, even when its members come from the same country. Just as there is no single, universally accepted definition of diaspora, there is no single, homogeneous form of diaspora, diaspora organizations and diaspora actors. The diaspora may also use different forms of participation. Diaspora mobilization, collective engagement and activities can take place at the formal as well as the informal level. Therefore, as pointed out by other authors⁷ in this report, the term “diaspora organizations” is used to refer to a wide range of organizations, from officially registered organizations to informal yet active groups, including cultural centres, volunteer networks and umbrella organizations. The terms “association”, “group” and “organization” are used interchangeably.

Associations, groups and organizations are considered to belong to the diaspora if they include a significant number of members who identify as sharing the same origin outside their host country and for whom their origin plays a prominent role in the perception of their group, in the activities they perform or plan, and in their ultimate objectives, regardless of any mandate or *modus operandi*. Similarly, following a well-established trend in academic literature,⁸ self-perception, namely whether interviewees perceive themselves as members of the Afghan diaspora in Italy, is considered relevant in this research.

The diverse forms of the diaspora’s organization and expression reflect the heterogeneous composition of the different groups that represent it. However, they also raise important questions about the nature of the relationship that relevant stakeholders can establish with these groups in order for such relationship to be fruitful. In the report, this aspect is addressed indirectly in the section on the action priorities identified by interviewees and in the section on recommendations.

7 For example, Matilde Skov Danstrøm, Nauja Kleist, Ninna Nyberg Sørensen, Somali and Afghan diaspora organizations in development and relief cooperation, DIIS Report, No. 2015:13. Available at www.econstore.eu/bitstream/10419/144728/1/848327802.pdf.

8 See Nauja Kleist, In the name of diaspora: between struggles for recognition and political aspirations, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34(7):1127–1143, 2008.

CHAPTER II



The Afghan Context and the Role of the Diaspora

1 FROM THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC TO THE EMIRATE

On 15 August 2021, the President of the Islamic Republic, Ashraf Ghani, left Kabul, and Afghanistan's capital fell into the Taliban's hands. On 7 September, the Taliban announced an interim Government and the restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the political and institutional structure already established in 1996 and overthrown in a US-led military intervention in 2001. The Taliban returned to power after 20 years of jihad against foreign troops. Following a careful regional and domestic diplomatic strategy, in a few weeks, they conquered most of the territory formerly under government control through a military offensive. They then occupied provincial capitals, and finally the capital and the Arg, the presidential palace in Kabul, where the Emirate flag was hoisted on 11 September 2021.

The interim Government has not been recognized by the international community. It almost exclusively includes members of the Taliban movement and the Pashtun ethnic group, which have represented the majority and the politically leading community for three centuries. It comprises also individuals included in the terrorist lists of the Government of the United States and the United Nations. Moreover, the United States Government blames the de facto Afghan authorities for non-compliance with the so-called "Doha

Agreement”.⁹ The agreement was signed in Qatar’s capital on 29 February 2020, and it provided for the withdrawal of US troops in exchange for the Taliban’s engagement in counter-terrorism and the initiation of a peace process with the political leaders of the Islamic Republic, with a view to a possible ceasefire. Intra-Afghan negotiations were soon broken off, and before the withdrawal of foreign troops, which was completed at the end of August 2021, the Taliban launched an offensive against Afghan Government forces, thus excluding the possibility of a gradual transfer of power, as had been informally promised to regional partners and as provided for, although ambiguously, in the “Doha Agreement”.

Since their seizure of power, the de facto Afghan authorities have been blamed for internal repression, particularly against minorities and former members of the Government and the Republic’s security forces; the denial of human rights; gender discrimination; and the lack of inclusiveness in the Government. Moreover, the Government has progressively taken control of the media and significantly reduced the freedom of expression and opinion.

2 ORGANIZATIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

With the Taliban’s return to power, the civil society network, which had been developed since 2001, lost its cohesion. In recent years, although with many limitations, civil society has played an important role in promoting public participation, monitoring human rights, denouncing injustice and corruption, spreading a culture of peace and demanding a more active role for women, men and youth. Many

9 Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America; the text of the agreement is available at www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf.

local organizations have also been involved in the humanitarian field, particularly in education, training and health care.

Among civil society activists, members of Afghan organizations and operators of local organizations, there is a widespread perception that they may suffer reprisals from the Taliban, who have been blamed by the United Nations for a series of targeted killings.¹⁰ In recent years, the Taliban have perceived civil society as a sort of humanitarian arm of the international community and Kabul's Government, which they have not recognized, as well as an instrument/vehicle for importing practices and ideas contrary to "a true Islamic system". Their attitude, however, has not prevented some civil society organizations, especially those active in the humanitarian field, from operating also in districts and areas under Taliban control. The local negotiation processes have been crucial to maintain the activities of such organizations.¹¹

In addition to the aforementioned widespread fear among activists, following the Taliban's seizure of power, two aspects have weakened the network of organizations and civil society: the fact that the evacuations organized by foreign governments in mid-August 2021 and in the following weeks often involved the leading members of Afghan organizations and those who had close relations with non-governmental organizations or foreign governments; and the interruption of funding from abroad. The first aspect has been changing the composition of the Afghan diaspora in many European countries, including Italy, and is addressed in Chapter II; the second aspect is connected with the ongoing economic crisis in the country.

IN RECENT YEARS,
ALTHOUGH
WITH MANY
LIMITATIONS,
CIVIL SOCIETY
HAS PLAYED AN
IMPORTANT ROLE
IN PROMOTING
PUBLIC
PARTICIPATION

10 United Nations, General Assembly Security Council, The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security – Report of the Secretary-General (A/76/667-S/2022/64 of 28 January 2022). Available at <https://unama.unmissions.org/secretary-general-reports>.

11 Ashley Jackson, *Negotiating Survival. Civilian–Insurgent Relations in Afghanistan*, Hurst Publisher, London, 2021.

3 THE ECONOMIC AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

The speed of the Islamic Republic's collapse, which was surprising even for the Taliban, has had catastrophic effects on institutions, politics, society and in particular on the economic and financial sectors. In fact, by choosing military action over negotiations, the Taliban severed the link between the Afghan State and the countries that had ensured its fiscal and economic survival since 2001.¹² Before the Taliban's seizure of power, foreign donor aid accounted for 40 per cent of gross domestic product and 75 per cent of public spending.¹³ Afghanistan is therefore a State depending on external resources. Fundamental services, above all education and health care, depend on international donors, who have met the State's needs by providing an average of USD 8.5 billion in aid per year since 2001. However, from mid-August 2021 donors stopped transferring money. The United States Government reacted to the events of August 2021 by freezing the Afghan Central Bank's assets held at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, namely about USD 7 billion out of a total of USD 9.5 billion. The sanctions already in force against individual members of the Taliban movement and the Haqqani network were de facto extended to the Government of the so-called Emirate. Any transfers from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were discontinued, except for the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), which was later partially resumed. The ARTF is the largest civil reconstruction fund. It is managed by the World Bank, which announced the resumption of the relevant money transfers at the beginning of March 2022.¹⁴ However, transfers were stopped

12 Kate Clark, *Killing the goose that laid the golden egg: Afghanistan's economic distress post-15 August*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, November 2011. Available at www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/killing-the-goose-that-laid-the-golden-egg-afghanistans-economic-distress-post-15-august/.

13 Security Council Report, January 2022 Monthly Forecast. Available at www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2022-01/afghanistan-15.php.

14 World Bank, 2022, World Bank Announces Expanded Approach to Supporting the People of Afghanistan, Press Release. Available at www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/01/world-bank-announces-expanded-approach-to-supporting-the-people-of-afghanistan.

again at the end of the same month, following the decision of the de facto authorities to postpone the opening of girls' high schools.¹⁵ The freezing of the Afghan Central Bank's assets, the interruption of money transfers from abroad and the sanctions led to a paralysis of the Afghan financial and banking system, which is now suffering from a severe liquidity crisis. They also caused a contraction of the Gross Domestic Product by between 30 per cent and 40 per cent in a few months,¹⁶ the interruption of the payment of salaries to civil servants, an increase in unemployment, a rise in inflation and in the price of primary goods and a worsening of the humanitarian crisis.

Before the Taliban's seizure of power and the collapse of the Islamic Republic in August 2021, the country was already facing a severe humanitarian crisis. The World Bank and the Asia Development Bank predicted that, due to the intensity of the conflict, the pandemic, a prolonged drought, structural problems and the reduction in humanitarian aid at the same time as the withdrawal of foreign troops, the percentage of the population below the poverty line would rise to 72 per cent in 2020.¹⁷ According to the Human Development Index for 2019 released in 2020, Afghanistan was among the most vulnerable countries, ranking 169th out of 189.¹⁸

The country's multiple crises worsened following the Taliban's return to power and the reaction of the international community. According to the rapid appraisal "Economic Instability and Uncertainty in Afghanistan

15 Afghanistan: World Bank freezes projects over girls' school ban. BBC, 30 March 2022. Available at www.bbc.com/news/business-60923196.

16 United Nations, General Assembly Security Council, The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security (see footnote 10).

17 Hartwig Schafer, End Poverty Day: A critical time to support Afghanistan's poorest, World Bank Blogs, 19 October 2020. Available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/end-poverty-day-critical-time-support-afghanistans-poorest>.

18 UNDP, Human Development Reports 2021. Available at <https://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking>.

after August 15” carried out by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in September 2021,¹⁹ if the ongoing political and economic crisis is not adequately addressed, by mid-2022 the country could plunge into universal poverty and the share of population below the poverty line could increase to 97 per cent.

The United Nations repeatedly urged the international community to raise more funds for Afghanistan. On 13 September 2021, the United Nations Secretary-General organized a high-level ministerial meeting in Geneva on the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan,²⁰ during which the international community pledged USD 1.2 billion.²¹ On 11 January 2022, the United Nations launched the largest ever appeal for a single country,²² requesting USD 4.4 billion for the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan,²³ the crisis management plan. A further USD 623 million was requested for the Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan,²⁴ to support refugees and host communities in the countries in the region (the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan).

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19 UNDP, *Economic Instability and Uncertainty in Afghanistan after August 15*, September 2021. Available at www.undp.org/publications/economic-instability-and-uncertainty-afghanistan-after-august-15.

20 The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *High-level Ministerial Meeting on the Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan*. Available at www.unocha.org/high-level-ministerial-meeting-humanitarian-situation-afghanistan.

21 \$1 billion pledge a ‘quantum leap’ in commitment to Afghanistan: UN chief, UN News, 13 September 2021. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1099782>.

22 Afghanistan: UN launches largest single country aid appeal ever; UN News, 11 January 2022. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1109492>.

23 OCHA, *Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2022*, January 2021. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-response-plan-2022-january-2022>.

24 UNHCR, *Afghanistan Situation Regional Response Plan (RRP) January - December 2022*. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/afghanistan-situation-regional-response-plan-rrp-january-december-2022#:~:text=The%202022%20RRP%20will%20focus,communities%2C%20and%20potential%20new%20arrivals>.

For IOM Director General António Vitorino, “Afghanistan stands at a critical juncture. Decades of conflict, natural disasters, the added shock of the political upheaval and the impacts of international sanctions have pushed millions of Afghan women, men, boys and girls to breaking point.”²⁵ According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), this is the “most rapidly growing humanitarian crisis”.²⁶ To address this crisis with the aim of providing critical assistance to 24.4 million people out of Afghanistan’s total population of approximately 38 million, the High-level Pledging Event on Supporting the Humanitarian Response in Afghanistan 2022 was held on 31 March 2022.²⁷ The conference was co-organized by the United Nations and the Governments of Germany, Qatar and the United Kingdom, and USD 2.4 billion was raised during the event.²⁸

United Nations representatives emphasized that, in addition to humanitarian assistance, a functioning economy is essential.²⁹ In order to prevent the Afghan economy from collapsing, it is also crucial that the

25 António Vitorino, International Organization for Migration (IOM), The People of Afghanistan Must Not be Forgotten: IOM Director General Antonio Vitorino, 1 April 2022. Available at <https://unofficeny.iom.int/news/people-afghanistan-must-not-be-forgotten-iom-director-general-antonio-vitorino>.

26 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UN and partners launch plans to help 28M people in acute need in Afghanistan and the region, 11 January 2022. Available at www.unocha.org/story/un-and-partners-launch-plans-help-28m-people-acute-need-afghanistan-and-region.

27 OCHA, Afghanistan Conference 2022, High-level Pledging Event on Supporting the Humanitarian Response in Afghanistan, 31 March 2022. Available at www.unocha.org/afghanistan2022#:~:text=The%20High-level%20Pledging%20Event,to%209%3A30%20p.m.%20Kabul.

28 Ibid.

29 OCHA, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths’ opening remarks at the High-level Pledging Event for Afghanistan, 31 March 2022. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-7>.

Central Bank should be allowed to operate effectively,³⁰ making at least part of its foreign currency reserves available to the Government on a conditional basis. In recent months, donor countries have been asked to exempt financial transactions and other activities in the humanitarian sector from the sanctions regime. The United States Department of the Treasury has issued several “licenses” allowing an exception to the sanctions regime,³¹ so as to enable the transfer of resources to the humanitarian sector. On 22 December 2021, the United Nations Security Council also adopted a resolution³² allowing humanitarian exceptions to the sanctions regime. However, these exemptions were not sufficient to reassure economic and financial operators and to remove obstacles to the transfer of resources to the country. According to the Department of the Treasury, no sanctions have been enforced on the Afghan Central Bank, but the uncertainty has led international financial institutions not to conduct any transactions, thus worsening the country’s economic isolation and the paralysis of its banking system. On 11 February 2022, US President Joe Biden announced an executive order³³ to use half of the Afghan Central Bank’s USD 7 billion frozen by the United States for humanitarian activities in the country, provided that no funds are transferred through institutions governed by the de facto authorities. On 25 February 2021, the US Department of the Treasury also formalized a “General

30 ‘We cannot abandon the people of Afghanistan’ Guterres tells Security Council, UN News, 26 January 2022. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1110622>.

31 U.S. Department of the Treasury, Afghanistan-Related Sanctions. Available at <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/afghanistan-related-sanctions>.

32 United Nations, UN News story, Security Council paves way for aid to reach desperate Afghans, 22 December 2021. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/12/1108642>.

33 The White House, Executive Order on Protecting Certain Property of Da Afghanistan Bank for the Benefit of the People of Afghanistan, 11 February 2022. Available at www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/02/11/executive-order-on-protecting-certain-property-of-da-afghanistan-bank-for-the-benefit-of-the-people-of-afghanistan/.

License”³⁴ (sanction exemption) allowing commercial transactions for import and export to and from Afghanistan, including financial transfers to government institutions, such as the Afghan Central Bank (Da Afghanistan Bank). Although the licence is expected to facilitate trade, especially at regional level,³⁵ it is not expected to solve the country’s liquidity problems in the short to medium term, which also adversely affect humanitarian activities. The gravity of the situation has also urged humanitarian actors and donor countries to examine the most effective means of tackling the current crisis, including with the involvement of the Afghan diaspora, which is the result of decades of migration.

4 THE TRANSITION AND MIGRATION TRENDS

The country is facing a delicate transition, perhaps the most complicated one since the long period of political instability and conflict caused by the so-called “Saur Revolution”, the coup d’état of 27 April 1978 by which the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overthrew Mohammed Daud’s presidential republic. Following the coup d’état, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 and withdrew only 10 years later, in 1989. This first phase of the conflict was followed, from 1992 to 1996, by the war between the Mujahideen groups that emerged victorious against the occupying troops but were divided. After that, the Taliban seized power and, in 1996, they established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, a Government recognized only

34 U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, 25 February 2022, U.S. Treasury Issues General License to Facilitate Economic Activity in Afghanistan. Available at <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0609>.

35 Adam Weinstein, New sanctions relief for Afghanistan is a ‘game changer’, Responsible Statecraft, 25 February 2022. Available at <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/02/25/new-sanctions-relief-for-afghanistan-is-a-game-changer/>.

by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Emirate was overthrown in the winter of 2001, after the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon by the terrorist organization al-Qaeda, which had bases in Afghanistan. In the last phase of the conflict, Taliban armed opposition groups fought against the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which was supported by the United States of America, the international community and NATO Member States. This phase ended in August 2021 with the collapse of the institutional structure established after 2001, the withdrawal of foreign troops and the restoration of the Emirate.

In the history of Afghanistan, in particular since the coup d'état in April 1978 and the Soviet occupation in 1979, internal and transnational mobility was crucial to the survival of the Afghan population,³⁶ distributing risks and opportunities.³⁷ Each phase of conflict and the relative stability that followed was characterized by its own particular migration flows to and from Afghanistan.³⁸ The Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, two neighbouring countries, received the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers.³⁹ Despite the return migration trends, with about 5.2 million Afghan nationals having returned home since 2002 (the year after the first Islamic Emirate was overthrown), as reported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),⁴⁰ there are still almost 1.5 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and 780,000 in the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, these are partial figures. According to

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THE AFGHAN
POPULATION

36 IOM, *Transition, Crisis and Mobility in Afghanistan: Rhetoric and Reality*, January 2014. Available at www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/documents/Transition-Crisis-and-Mobility-in-Afghanistan-2014.pdf.

37 See Alessandro Monsutti, *Homo Itinerans. Towards a Global Ethnography of Afghanistan*, Berghahn, New York, 2020.

38 IOM, *Transition, Crisis and Mobility in Afghanistan: Rhetoric and Reality*.

39 Leila Jazayeri, The migration–development nexus: Afghanistan Case Study, December 2002, in *International Migration* 40(5):231–254.

40 UNHCR, *Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan 2022*. Available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90521>.

official estimates made by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran included in the aforementioned UNHCR report, there are a total of 3.5 million Afghan nationals in the country, most of which (2.1 million) are undocumented. About 3 million Afghan nationals are estimated to reside in Pakistan, 775,000 of which are undocumented. Prolonged conflict, political instability and humanitarian crises made Afghanistan one of the countries with the highest number of asylum seekers globally. According to Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2020,⁴¹ in 2020, Afghanistan ranked third in the world in terms of international displacement under the UNCHR mandate, after the Syrian Arab Republic and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. A similar trend has been observed in Europe. In both 2019 and 2020, Afghan nationals were among the top nationalities of asylum seekers in the European Union in 2020,⁴² Afghan applications accounted for 10.6 per cent of the total, second only to Syrians (15.2 per cent).

According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), in 2019, “the stock” of Afghan migrants from the different stages of migration included 5.12 million people: 4.43 million in Asia, mainly in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran; 135,162 in North America; and 488,944 in Europe, of which more than half⁴³ in Germany (263,000), the others in the United Kingdom, Sweden, the Netherlands and Austria. According to the estimates of the international migrant stock provided by the United Nations (Population Division), there are 5.8 million Afghan migrants. As reported by IOM, in 2021, the conflict caused 700,000 new internally displaced persons, increasing their total number in the country to 5.3 million.⁴⁴

41 UNHCR, Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2020. Available at www.unhcr.org/60b638e37/unhcr-global-trends-2020.

42 Eurostat, Annual asylum statistics. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Annual_asylum_statistics&oldid=559263.

43 Cordaid, Diaspora Engagement in Afghanistan, April 2021. Available at <https://www.cordaid.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2022/11/210330-Policy-Brief-Diaspora-Sustainable-Development-Afghanistan.pdf>.

44 Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) Afghanistan. Available at https://dtm.iom.int/afghanistan?f%5B0%5D=country_report_published_date%3A2022.

5 THE AFGHAN DIASPORA IN EUROPE

The complexity of the Afghan migration history is reflected in the composition of the diaspora, as most studies on the subject, including the most recent ones, have revealed.⁴⁵ The migration of Afghan nationals to Europe is not a new phenomenon: “decades of migration (for example, for asylum, family reunification or education) have resulted in a diverse and large diaspora population”.⁴⁶ There are a significant number of Afghan diaspora organizations in Europe, especially in Austria, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Sweden. However, there is no relation between the number of registered organizations in a given country and the demographic size of its diaspora. Although the Afghan diaspora population in Germany, the largest in Europe, is about five times larger than that in Sweden, there are fewer organizations in Germany than in Sweden,⁴⁷ namely 129 compared to 133.

In Europe, diaspora organizations “proliferated in the 2013 to 2015 period – particularly in Europe – in response to the increasing level of Afghan emigration due to the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan hastened by the withdrawal of NATO in 2014”.⁴⁸ Several comparative studies have dealt with the countries where diaspora organizations are most widespread and well established. However, due to the different criteria adopted in individual countries when defining immigrant and diaspora population, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of members and organizations of the Afghan diaspora in Europe. Studies have been conducted on the role

45 Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination Initiative (DEMAC), Diaspora engagement efforts in Afghanistan Real-Time Review, December 2021. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/diaspora-engagement-efforts-afghanistan-real-time-review>.

46 Meshkovska, B., N. Sayed, K., Koch, I., Rajabzadeh, C., Wenger and M. Siegel, *Afghan diaspora in Europe: mapping engagement in Denmark, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom*, UNU-MERIT, Maastricht, the Netherlands, 2019. Available at www.merit.unu.edu/publications/uploads/1576769428.pdf.

47 Ibid.

48 DEMAC, Diaspora engagement efforts in Afghanistan Real-Time Review.

of Afghan diaspora organizations in integration processes in host countries, as well as on some development projects promoted by such organizations in five European countries (Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) and implemented in Afghanistan since 2001.⁴⁹

All studies have emphasized that the Afghan diaspora in Europe is not a homogeneous group. The differences prevail even at country level: the most evident lies in the socioeconomic starting conditions and the migration background of members of the first-generation diaspora and members of the new diaspora. An individual's perception of Afghanistan changes depending on when they left their country of origin and where they were born (some Afghan refugees were born in refugee camps in neighbouring countries). Differences in gender, social class, religion, political orientation or affiliation and ethnicity are reflected in the way individuals relate to Afghanistan and consider their own role within the diaspora in each European State.

As described below, also many of those interviewed in this research mentioned the differences in the ethnicity and the political views of the diaspora in Italy. Similarly to other European contexts, the diaspora in Italy perceives itself as a heterogeneous community that shares the same origin or a bond with Afghanistan, but that is divided by ethnicity and political orientation. Such fragmentation is evident throughout Europe, where diasporas have experienced difficulties in establishing national representative organizations. One of the few exceptions is the Netherlands, where the Union of Afghan Associations in the Netherlands (UvAViN) was established, bringing together more than 30 organizations. At European level, the following are worth mentioning: the Federation of Afghan Refugee Organizations in Europe (FAROE), which brings together more than 53 organizations from

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49 Ali Ahmad, A Guide to Afghan Diaspora Engagement in Europe, VIDC 2020. Available at www.vidc.org/en/detail/a-guide-to-afghan-diaspora-engagement-in-europe.

different European countries, the majority of them being Dutch⁵⁰ and the Afghan Refugees Experts Network in Europe (ARENE).

6 THE DIASPORA AS A CHANGE AGENT

For some years, diaspora refugees and migrants have been recognized as change agents,⁵¹ both in their host countries and in their countries of origin, where they can play an important role in development cooperation, inclusive growth, and humanitarian aid. Migrants, “members of the diasporas or new generations of Italians with a migration background, can actually play a bridging role and become change agents in the different societies they belong to”.⁵²

Academic literature, civil society, the media and institutional actors have recognized the impact of diaspora communities on the social and economic development of their countries of origin through the transfer of knowledge and skills,⁵³ support for health care and education initiatives, direct investment, humanitarian assistance. At the same time, their contribution to the production system in their host countries has also been recognized and encouraged. Recent studies have therefore

50 Cordaid, *Diaspora Engagement in Afghanistan*, April 2021. Available at <https://www.cordaid.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2022/11/210330-Policy-Brief-Diaspora-Sustainable-Development-Afghanistan.pdf>.

51 European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), *Working together with refugee diasporas in development*, January 2015. Available at https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/DomAid_DiasporaPaper.pdf.

52 IOM, *Project Development Manual for Migrants' Associations: Global Development Agents*, by Valeria Saggiorno, 2019. Available at <https://publications.iom.int/books/project-development-manual-migrants-associations-global-development-agents>.

53 Katie Kuschminder, *The role of the diaspora in knowledge transfer and capacity building in post-conflict settings: the temporary return of qualified nationals to Afghanistan*, IS Academy Migration Policy Report N° 1, December 2011. Available at www.files.ethz.ch/isn/151138/PR01.pdf.

revealed that “refugees are not only to be seen as recipients of aid but also as “change agents” whose transnational affiliations potentially serve as an advantage in development cooperation under the right circumstances”.⁵⁴ Diasporas have been recognized as change agents also by institutions: “support to migrant and diaspora development activities is mentioned in several European development cooperation portfolios”, as well as in so-called co-development policies.⁵⁵

In the 1990s, development aid agencies offered various forms of support to diaspora organizations. First, “through general NGO funding schemes and supplemented with special diaspora initiatives from the middle of the 2000s”.⁵⁶ Then, by emphasizing the establishment of networks and recognizing the link between successful integration in host countries and activism in countries of origin. In fact, according to many studies, there is a mutually reinforcing link between integration activities conducted in the country of residence and a contribution to development in the country of origin.⁵⁷ From this perspective, “integration and transnational activities should thus not be seen as opposed efforts but rather as complementing efforts that could feed productively into each other”.⁵⁸

In addition to the link between migration and development, which has been discussed at least since the early 2000s, academic literature

54 Danstrøm et al., Somali and Afghan diaspora associations in development and relief cooperation (see footnote 7).

55 Ibid. See OM and Migration Policy Institute (MPI), *Developing a Road Map for Engaging Diasporas in Development – A Handbook for Policymakers and Practitioners in Home and Host Countries*, Geneva and Washington D.C.. Available at https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/diaspora_handbook_en_for_web_28may2013.pdf.

56 Ibid.

57 United Nations, Introduction: Opportunities and challenges for mobilizing the potential of developing country diasporas, in *Realizing the Development Potential of Diasporas*, United Nations University, 2013. Available at www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789210563369c003.

58 Danstrøm et al., 2013. Somali and Afghan diaspora associations in development and relief cooperation (see footnote 7).

now also recognizes the role of diasporas in addressing humanitarian crises in their countries of origin. This report is thus part of a broad international research trend aimed at understanding: (i) how to include “non-traditional” or “newly recognized” actors in the humanitarian ecosystem;⁵⁹ (ii) what role diaspora groups can play in strengthening humanitarian responses to crises; and (iii) what relationships should be established between diaspora groups and traditional actors in the field. The activities of diaspora organizations and those of formal humanitarian relief workers often run in parallel due to a lack of communication and collaboration: interaction occurs on a discontinuous and intermittent basis, if at all.⁶⁰

The role of diasporas in the humanitarian field was openly recognized during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, but since then, there have been relatively few opportunities for and projects aimed at connecting diaspora actions and roles with the formal humanitarian system through capacity-building activities for diaspora organizations, or for the promotion of coordination mechanisms or new partnerships. Notable initiatives include, the Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination initiative and the global initiative for “a deeper understanding of diasporas as humanitarian actors”.⁶¹ It promotes better coordination between diaspora organizations and the humanitarian system. Several projects promoted by IOM, including Connecting Diaspora for Development (CD4D1), COVID-19 Preparedness and Response and IOM Italy’s initiative A.MI.CO Emergency COVID-19 are also worth mentioning.⁶²

Studies conducted so far have revealed that diaspora organizations are “fast responding actors who work transnationally, including in

59 See James Shaw-Hamilton, Newly recognised humanitarian actors, in *Forced Migration Review*, June 2012. Available at www.fmreview.org/north-africa/shaw-hamilton.

60 *Creating Opportunities To Work With Diasporas In Humanitarian Settings*, DEMAC, May 2018. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/creating-opportunities-work-diasporas-humanitarian-settings>.

61 www.demac.org/about-us.

62 <https://italy.iom.int/it/amico-emergenza-covid-19>.

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countries facing humanitarian crises. Having a connection with and understanding of their country of origin or heritage plays a vital role in humanitarian assistance where diaspora organizations often are part of the first response in the aftermath of a disaster. Diasporas are also key actors when it comes to raising the alarm in times of crisis”.⁶³ In many cases, thanks to their transnational networks, diaspora organizations are also able to take action in areas and countries where there are few international actors.⁶⁴

As it has been observed in other studies,⁶⁵ the political and economic significance of diasporas therefore goes far beyond their numbers. The dynamic nature of diasporas, their ability to access qualified education and connect with transnational networks, as well as to send financial and social remittances⁶⁶ to their countries of origin, have stimulated the interest of stakeholders. They are aware that diasporas involvement can lead to new forms of contribution and longer-lasting solutions.

7 REMITTANCES AND THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Remittances from Afghan diasporas have supported families and communities, development projects and humanitarian activities for decades. In 2020, formal remittances to Afghanistan amounted to USD 788 million, about four per cent of the gross domestic product. With the paralysis of the financial system following the Taliban’s seizure of

63 DEMAC, *Diaspora engagement efforts in Afghanistan Real-Time Review*.

64 See Alan Gamlen, *Diaspora Institutions and Diaspora Governance*, *International Migration Review* 48(1):180–217, 2014.

65 IOM, *Transition, Crisis and Mobility in Afghanistan: Rhetoric and Reality*.

66 Meshkovska, B., N. Sayed, K. Koch, I. Rajabzadeh, C. Wenger, and M. Siegel, *Afghan diaspora in Europe* (see footnote 46).

power, remittances from Afghans living abroad – 5.8 million⁶⁷ out of a population of 38 million – have become more important.⁶⁸

As with other countries, in the case of Afghanistan, not only formal remittances – namely money transfers made through official banking channels – but also informal remittances, namely those going through unofficial channels, should be considered. One of such unofficial channels is the Hawala system, which has only partially been registered. Hawala is a mostly, but not exclusively, informal money-transfer system that does not involve any physical transfer of money. It is based on trust and balance between different brokers: the first broker receives a sum of money from the customer who intends to transfer it across national borders. The second broker advances the sum to the intended foreign recipient, minus a commission. The few studies that have been conducted have revealed that about a third of Afghan households receive remittances from abroad through informal channels, such as the Hawala system, or through private companies like Money Gram and Western Union.⁶⁹ The ease of collection and rapid distribution of money makes informal systems crucial in crisis situations. Access to the service provided by private companies, such as Money Gram and Western Union, has been limited by the contraction of the banking system and the fact that there are few branches in the country, with most of them being in Kabul. Hawala, on the contrary, is an integral part of the country's financial system and ensures a high degree of accessibility.

According to a futures study, “as banking operations shrink across Afghanistan, including within the city centers, humanitarian actors may need to increasingly rely on hawala transfers by exchangers to move

67 www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock.

68 Stefanie Barratt, Nicholas Ross, Remittances to Afghanistan are lifelines: they are needed more than ever in a time of crisis, in Migration Data Portal, 6 September 2021. Available at www.migrationdataportal.org/blog/remittances-afghanistan-lifelines.

69 DEMAC, Diaspora engagement efforts in Afghanistan Real-Time Review.

money across the country”⁷⁰ and receive it from abroad, so that they can pay local expenses and transfer resources to project beneficiaries. Collaboration between humanitarian actors and operators of the Hawala system is not a new phenomenon: in some cases, relations have been maintained since the time of the first Emirate in the late 1990s. With the Hawala system, money can be transferred in a matter of minutes or within a couple of days, including to the most remote locations. This is possible thanks to the widespread network of operators (called Sarafis or Hawaladars) throughout the country. A few thousand brokers have registered with the Central Bank, which has tried to regulate and monitor the system since 2018, although most of them act informally. Sarafis “will likely fill a void created by a retreating banking sector”,⁷¹ which in the short term may have to face the closure of local bank branches and staff reduction. The network also reaches those who are excluded from the formal banking system: according to some studies, less than one in six Afghans have a bank account and only 3.6 per cent of women, namely one in 25; according to other data, only 7 per cent of women have access to formal finance, while Afghans who have a bank account amount to 15 per cent of the population.⁷²

As many studies point out, remittances also represent an essential contribution to the macroeconomic stability of the receiving country. They also facilitate the creation and enhancement of human capital through better access to health care and education,⁷³ especially in countries with structural problems, where they are an important

70 Fayez Sahak and Nafay Choudhury, *Afghanistan: Banking Sector Assessment*, International Rescue Committee, December 2021 (published in February 2022). Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-banking-sector-assessment-december-2021>.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Dorelyn Rannveig Agunias and Kathleen Newland, *Developing a Road Map for Engaging Diasporas in Development*.

resource for development. The Taliban's return to power could affect the systemic effects of remittances. In fact, for capital flows from abroad to be truly productive and to translate into improved human development index, a reduction in extreme poverty and equitable and inclusive development, they need to reach countries that have adequate institutional systems for receiving such inflows, adequate distribution mechanisms, as well as democratic institutions.⁷⁴ The institutional context of the receiving country, which changed in the transition from Republic to Emirate, is therefore also relevant.

In July 2017, the President of the Islamic Republic, Ashraf Ghani, recognized the importance of the diaspora for the country's development and self-reliance. In 2018, the Afghan Government started designing the Afghan National Diaspora Engagement Policy (ANDEP), the institutional plan for diaspora engagement, in collaboration with IOM.⁷⁵ According to media reports, the country's current de facto authorities have not yet adopted any official position on the ANDEP. The Afghan authorities do not hide the fact that they are suspicious of any activities organized or supported in Afghanistan from abroad,⁷⁶ which they intend to control to the extent possible.⁷⁷ However, they have often urged qualified personnel now living abroad to return to Afghanistan.

The paramount economic needs, the vast needs in the humanitarian field and the lack of expertise could lead the de facto authorities to take a more accommodating position. This has been partly shown,

74 Giuliano, P. and M. Ruiz-Arranz, Remittances, financial development, and economic growth, *Journal of Development Economics*, vol. 90(1):144–152, 2009.

75 IOM, Afghanistan looks to diaspora to promote development, 17 July 2018. Available at www.iom.int/news/afghanistan-looks-diaspora-promote-development.

76 Irwin Loy, In Afghanistan, aid groups wrestle with the new reality of Taliban control, TNH, 16 August 2021. Available at www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/8/16/what-does-taliban-control-mean-for-aid-in-afghanistan.

77 Sune Engel Rasmussen and Margherita Stancati, Taliban want to control aid funds, a red line for donors, *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 March 2022. Available at www.wsj.com/articles/the-taliban-want-to-control-aid-funds-a-red-line-for-donors-11648735574.

although on a different level, by the fact that they have authorized some foreign NGOs, including Italian ones, to resume some of their activities. Transfers through the Hawala system, however, remain largely immune to any attempts at monitoring on the part of the country's de facto authorities.

CHAPTER III



The Diaspora in Italy

1 THE TALIBAN'S RETURN TO POWER AND THE AFGHAN DIASPORA IN ITALY

The regime change in Afghanistan has had a significant impact on the Afghan diaspora in Italy, leading diaspora actors to become more aware of their own roles and responsibilities, both in Italy and in their country of origin. Motivation for taking action in both countries is a structural feature of all diasporas, including Afghan diasporas in European countries with a longer migration history and a considerable demographic size. This feature has been strongly influenced by historical events and the relevance of such events.

In Italy, the Taliban's return to power has produced a noticeable change in the demographic significance of the diaspora. In fact, according to ISTAT, through "evacuation" flights our country received approximately 4,890 new Afghan nationals,⁷⁸ equal to 40 per cent of those already residing in Italy on 1 January 2021, who amounted to 12,198.⁷⁹ According to most interviewees, due to the arrival

78 According to data from the Ministry of the Interior reported in Luca Misculin's article, *Che fine hanno fatto gli afghani arrivati in Italia* (What happened to the Afghans who arrived in Italy), *Il Post*, 14 February 2022. Available at www.ilpost.it/2022/02/14/afghani-italia/.

79 The revised ISTAT data are available at www.tuttitalia.it/statistiche/cittadini-stranieri/afghanistan/.

of thousands of people with a higher social status and a qualified professional background, not only the demographic size, but also the social composition of the diaspora has changed. This aspect is dealt with in detail in the following chapters.

Afghan diasporas in the world are therefore experiencing a transitional phase that will be shaped by four main factors: (i) decisions and dynamics within the various groups and organizations; (ii) the relationship between each group and the country of origin; (iii) the decisions made by the de facto authorities in Afghanistan; and (iv) the decisions made by institutions in the host countries.

Part of the Afghan diasporas' transition was analysed in *Diaspora Engagement Efforts in Afghanistan Real-Time Review*, a report published in November 2021.⁸⁰ Since the Taliban's seizure of power, all diaspora organizations analysed in the report⁸¹ have changed their area of intervention or approach: "For the already active and well-established organizations, the main changes included new focus areas or an escalation of efforts in their activities. Organizations that were largely inactive before the recent events in Afghanistan quickly began to mobilize their resources for making meaningful contributions to their cause."⁸² Diaspora organizations (DOs), in particular those registered, "have shown rapid self-mobilization in response to the current crisis in Afghanistan. For the majority of Afghan DOs, self-mobilization and re-evaluation of focus areas had already taken place in a few weeks leading up to the fall of Kabul",⁸³ with more emphasis on supporting internal displaced persons and/or on advocacy and communication campaigns about the risks of the Taliban returning to power.

80 DEMAC, *Diaspora Engagement Efforts in Afghanistan*.

81 The research monitored the online activities of 60 Afghan diaspora organizations in Europe, 21 in the United States of America, 9 in Afghanistan's neighbouring countries and 5 in Australia.

82 *Ibid.*: 9.

83 *Ibid.*: 65.

MANY LONG-STANDING MEMBERS OF THE DIASPORA HAVE TAKEN ON A MORE ACTIVE ROLE, NOT ONLY WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITY, BUT ALSO WITHIN THEIR HOST SOCIETY

This research has revealed a similar capacity for self-mobilization of the Afghan community also in Italy, where the landscape of diaspora organizations is more fragile and activities are more discontinuous than in other countries. Many long-standing members of the diaspora have taken on a more active role, not only within their community, but also within their host society. They have therefore connected more explicitly – and in some cases for the first time – the three spheres where diaspora engagement generally occurs: the private sphere (extended family), the community sphere and the public sphere.

Indeed, the organization of protests, solidarity rallies, awareness-raising campaigns, public meetings, fundraising and the transfer of resources to Afghanistan signal that diaspora activism has shifted its focus from within the community to the public sphere. This shift is unprecedented, and it represents a resource that can be drawn on to encourage an increased involvement of the Afghan diaspora in inclusion policies in Italy, as well as in the response to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, as has been revealed by several studies.⁸⁴

Since mid-August 2021, new relations have been established with Italian civil society organizations, journalists, media workers, non-governmental organizations operating in Afghanistan in the humanitarian sector or in Italy in the reception sector, universities, research centres, companies and entrepreneurs. Many of such relations have been maintained until now.

The events of August 2021 have therefore stirred the Afghan diaspora in Italy. The regime change in Afghanistan is now reshaping not only the landscape of Afghan diaspora organizations, but also its relations with Italian society. The activities started in summer 2021 strengthened the relations between existing groups, broadening the participation base and expanding what could be called the “reference community”.

84 See, for instance, Nicholas Van Hear, Refugees, Diasporas and Transnationalism, in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, 2014, by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, Nando Sigon.

Recent political events have also sparked new discussions on the usefulness and necessity of establishing representative organizations. These are considered more effective in interacting with Italian society and institutions, and in conducting any activities aimed at addressing the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. In all locations analysed in this report, interviewees were interested in having more regular activities (so far only run intermittently) organized by local organizations. Interviewees also repeatedly stated their explicit intention to establish new organizations, so as to respond to the leading role recently taken on by actors of the old diaspora, and to the enlargement of the Afghan community due to the arrival of members of the new diaspora.

“ **First-hand accounts⁸⁵ a: RALLIES**

Farhad: *Before August, everyone was asleep. Then we woke up. We thought we had to do something, especially for the newcomers.*

Gulbuddin: *We started taking action in August. We lobbied the public, the media, politicians. We started with a single case, we requested to have one of our relatives evacuated to Italy. Then we received a list from Kabul: 62 journalists and lecturers. We managed to help 48. Our work is not finished yet.*

Abbas: *We took action by helping with evacuations, lobbying, networking and making new contacts, then by giving support, advice and hospitality to newcomers. A family of Afghans who have recently arrived are staying at my house. We are ready to collaborate with all organizations in the area.*

Aziza: *In my experience, this is the first time that the Afghan diaspora, both global and Italian, has been so involved in the country's changes. This is a sign that something new is on its way.*

Amin: *The important thing is that Italian public opinion has also shown itself to be much more sensitive and aware than in the past. There has been widespread solidarity, a lot of supportive initiatives, especially for women and minorities.*

85 The names of the interviewees, in this and the other sections, have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Barialay: On 23 August, in Piazza Nettuno, in the centre of Bologna, there was perhaps the most well-attended rally in Italy. Two main demands were made: to open humanitarian corridors and not to recognize the Taliban government.

Fariuddin: The rally organized last summer, after Kabul's events in August, taught us that if we want to, if we work together, we can achieve our goals. A new sense of community is emerging. Perhaps it is inevitable. Before, we were all just young women and men, living on our own. Then our families came. Now a new phase is beginning with the newcomers.

Timur: The rally in Turin started with us. There were 100/200 of us. We need to network to succeed. We had two demands: to help those who wanted to leave the country; to support the Afghan people.

Wasima: We demonstrated because Europe must not forget Afghan women. Humanitarian corridors must be opened, family reunification must be facilitated. The people must be helped.

Elahe: Demonstrating was important, especially for us women. It has been long since we had the opportunity to make our voices heard and demand freedom for our sisters in Afghanistan.



First-hand accounts by ORGANIZATIONS

Timur: We have been trying to establish an organization for 6/7 years. So far, we have not been successful. But now we will. We are preparing the documents. We have had doubts about the name for a long time. The truth is that it is difficult to reach an agreement even among ourselves.

Imran: After the events in the summer, we met and thought it was time to create an organization, so we could be more active. But then we faced difficulties: choosing how to organize ourselves, finding money, a venue and so forth. But we are ready and willing to do everything necessary.

Gulbuddin: Now there is a new organization here in Venice. It has a hybrid form between the association and an entrepreneurial project. The aim is to match the demands from local companies with the skills of newly arrived Afghans or those who stay in Afghanistan.

Mansour: We organized three rallies, also with support from Italian organizations. To show solidarity, to challenge the Taliban and to demand the opening of humanitarian corridors. We also demanded and continue to demand that the borders with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan be opened.

Abbas: *In Italy, there is no truly inclusive organization. There are several, they are not very active and are little known. We do not know much about them either, in some cases. After 15 August, I was contacted by some young Afghans who wanted to revive an old organization. We got lost in discussion for a long time. I would like it to be common good for all Afghans. To be inclusive.*

Latif: *Our idea, which came to us after the events of August, is to set up an organization here in Trieste and have it create links across Europe. Given our geographical location, it is natural to also consider Europe. We can draw the attention of the public and institutions to Afghanistan. Organize cultural activities, exhibitions, events.*

Hamida: *In other European countries, there are many Afghan organizations; here in Italy, there are hardly any. Why? It is time to get organized and take action. The events of August urge us to act.*

Zahir: *We had the idea of creating an organization after the regime change in Afghanistan. It is our responsibility towards our country of origin. We felt the need to start working again and be more ambitious. Previously, Afghan communities were all about weddings and funerals.*

Rauf: *We have talked a lot about the crisis in Afghanistan. We have decided to create a new organization: the articles of association are ready, the directors have voted, the positions have been filled, all we need to do is register the organization with the tax authorities, and we have already created a page on Facebook.*

2 A MAP OF THE AFGHAN DIASPORA

The best-known organizations within the Afghan diaspora operate in central and northern Italy. Most of the best-known or most active organizations have been registered in Rome, Milan, Venice, Turin, Trieste and Bologna. Their geographical distribution significantly reflects the demographic size of individual Afghan communities in the country. According to data from ISTAT for the beginning of 2021, the top six regions in terms of number of Afghan residents were Lazio, with 16.8 per cent (2,048, of which 223 women); Lombardy, with 10 per cent (1,220, of which 173 women) Apulia, with 8.8 per cent (1,077, of which 60 women); Friuli-Venezia Giulia, with 8.7 per cent (1,065, of which 77 women); Emilia-Romagna, with 7.3 per cent (892, of which 121 women); and Piedmont, with 7.3 per cent (888, of which 136 women).

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Considering the relationship between the geographical distribution of Afghan residents and that of diaspora organizations, it should be noted that there are no stable groups or organizations in Apulia, although it is the third region in terms of number of Afghan residents. On the other hand, diaspora groups are very active in Veneto, although it is only the tenth region in terms of number of Afghan residents (5.2 per cent of the total, namely 638 Afghan nationals, 69 of which women). It is worth mentioning that there are no exhaustive data on the geographical distribution of members of the new diaspora, although their numbers could significantly change the demographic size of the Afghan communities in the various Italian regions.⁸⁶ Therefore, research should be conducted throughout the country, so as to identify the final destination of members of the new diaspora. This would allow to map Afghan organizations in Italy more in detail.

The number of members in current organizations is limited: membership varies from 20 to 100, although many interviewees claimed that organizations have broader representation. Indeed, as happens with other forms of organization, within each diaspora group there is a narrow circle of activists who promote initiatives and activities, and a larger group of collaborators and volunteers, whose degree of involvement is conditioned by personal inclinations, as well as by the composition of the board of directors and current events.

Until now, diaspora organizations have adopted mainly informal structures of internal organization. According to interviewees, sometimes organizations choose not to register any articles of association, while in other cases they cannot do so due to a lack of resources, the perceived non-transparency of Italian bureaucracy, or a lack of information as to the persons and institutions from whom to seek advice and practical support. Due to their informal nature, organizations often lack stability, and, in some cases, they

86 For partial data on the distribution of members of the new diaspora in the Reception and Integration System SAI ("Sistema Accoglienza Integrazione"), see the above-mentioned article: *Che fine hanno fatto gli afghani arrivati in Italia* (What happened to the Afghans who arrived in Italy). Available at www.ilpost.it/2022/02/14/afghani-italia/.

are not able to design or implement any projects. However, at the same time, their informal nature reflects a bottom-up activism and trust-based participation, ties and personal interests. This ensures greater organizational flexibility than is the case with organizations that have tighter bureaucratic and administrative constraints. It is also a potentially advantageous feature when establishing new partnerships with traditional development cooperation and humanitarian intervention actors.

As mentioned above, after the regime change in Afghanistan, diaspora members tended to formalize existing organizations and to be engaged in the creation of new organizations. In some cases, Afghan communities held extended discussions about which option should be preferred between reviving previously active organizations or creating new ones, which would signal the unprecedented situation and the evolution and maturity of the community. From this point of view, it is significant that the tendency to formalize and “institutionalize” new organizations, by drafting a written statute and officially registering them, was particularly displayed by members of the old diaspora. In fact, they considered the official creation of a new organization also as a public assumption of responsibility and as a testimony to their successful integration in the host country.⁸⁷

The engagement of the diaspora therefore represents not only a reaction to the events of August 2021, but also a demand for both individual and collective recognition. It represents an attempt to claim an active role in the host society and at the same time to state the ability to work for the welfare of the country of origin.

In short, the recent tendency towards activism displayed by the Afghan diaspora in Italy seems to depend on two aspects that enhance each other, the first being linked to current events, and the second to history: the regime change in Afghanistan and the evolution of the migration trend of Afghan nationals to Italy.

87 On the leading role of the old diaspora's actors, see Nauja Kleist, *In the Name of Diaspora*, footnote 8.



First-hand accounts a: SELF-PERCEPTION

Amin: I am very active, I often travel around Italy for work, to take part in meetings and discussions, but I only know two Afghan organizations. One is that in Rome, a Pashtun organization. The other is in Turin, organized by the Hazaras. Then there are other informal groups, like that in Novara, created by Pashtuns from Jalalabad-Wardak. They work together with the Hazaras to some extent. And then there is a new organization that is being created in Rome.

Mohammed: Our organization was established in 2016, formally registered. I am one of the founders. There are between 15 and 20 members, all men. Most of us live in Rome, but there are also some members in Milan and Naples. We help with paperwork and organize sporting and some cultural events.

Farhad: We created the community here, year after year. I arrived 21 years ago. I still don't have citizenship, but I know everyone. In 2018, we created an informal group. We are now about to register a new organization.

Jamila: There are few Afghan organizations in Italy. There is a not very extensive network in Trieste, one in Turin, and in Bologna there is an informal group. Obviously, in Rome there is the Pashtun organization and the informal group with many Hazaras, who are thinking of creating a new organization. Then a whole series of activists scattered around Italy.

Amin: We want to be more active also because we have realized that we will not be able to return to Afghanistan in the short term. That is why we are getting more organized in Italy. Here in Milan, there are two informal groups, and I have heard that a new organization may be created. There is a group of activists spread between Varese, Cinesello and Sesto San Giovanni.

Hafez: We are mainly active in training. We are convinced that education is the basis for everything. We have helped to build schools in Afghanistan. Here, we are active in raising awareness in Italian schools. I myself go to meetings all the time. Good education is crucial against fundamentalism. Without it, things will never change.

Lal: I would like to set up a non-profit foundation. It takes strategy and money. I would like to support women's employment in Afghanistan, through distance working, working from home online. And of course, to help the poorest.

Rauf: I know there is an organization in Turin and more than one informal group in Milan. An organization should also be set up in Varese, but it seems they are waiting for us to officially register our organization here in Rome. They will do the same in Pordenone. Something new also seems to be going on in Bologna and even in Sicily, where there is a small Hazara community.

Elaha: We women have been little active in these years. After all, there are few of us in Italy. I know there are groups in Milan, Turin and maybe Bologna. But there are still too few women. But maybe things are changing.



First-hand accounts b: THE EVOLUTION OF AFGHAN ORGANIZATIONS

Farhad: We are the bridging generation, we have responsibilities.

Yasin: I see the organization as a way to return the assistance Turin has given us. And to take action. I am convinced that a city is alive if those who live in it make it alive, if they get busy. The problem is that you also need money to get busy.

Mir Ahmad: The community has changed over time. Many more women and families have been arriving since 2012/2013. And there is also a growing need and desire to have a form of representation, a place where we can get together other than our homes.

Idrees: How many are there of us? Nobody knows! I think there are just under 20,000 of us throughout Italy. Three thousand, maybe more, here in Rome. And many in Turin, Bologna, Venice, Milan and Trieste. The community changed: at first, there were almost only men, then with time came families, women and children.

Abu Malek: Historically, the Afghan diaspora has never been well organized or strong, unlike other communities in Italy. It lacks stability, the institutional capacity to integrate, to recognize skills, to create processes for newcomers to become autonomous. The problem is not only due to the Afghan community, but also to the reception system.

Paola: We are members of an Italian organization that we created to give support and advice to migrants in transit in Rome. Then things changed: since 2015/2016, more and more women have arrived for family reunification, and far fewer are "in transit". Since then, we have focused on orientation workshops and individual support, but also on storytelling workshops against isolation and to make our voices heard.

Imran: Here in Italy, there are not many organizations because there are few Afghans and those who are here do not want to stay. I have been here for nine years. Almost everyone else who was here in Trieste nine years ago has left. The question is: why?

Fatima: We women who have been here for more time have to take care of our families, but we also hold people together, act as bridges, a bond between men, who quarrel with each other too often. Fortunately, there are more women today than in the past.

Esmat *Now there are very few of us in Bari. Some of us live alone, some with their families, but there is no networking. There are few contacts. Living in Apulia is difficult, there are few job opportunities. Many of those who lived here moved away: some to Rome, many others to Germany or Norway, where things work better.*

Paola *Last August's events were a shock to me and the whole community. It takes time to get over it. Personal relationships also changed. And we feel more motivated to get organized. Old residents want to help newcomers, they feel responsible and at the same time able to transfer their knowledge. We are witnessing an evolution of the community.*

Javed *In Europe, the Afghan diaspora is characterized by a certain weakness compared to other national groups, which have more stable organizational structures connected with a different migration history. Except for the Hazara community, which has adopted some more solid organizational forms, the Afghan diaspora is weak, fragmented, "in transit": Italy is seen as a transit country, not a real destination.*

3 AFGHAN POLITICS AND THE DIASPORA: DIVISIONS AND UNITY

As mentioned above, the regime change in Afghanistan stimulated the Afghan diaspora in Italy, contributing to the establishment of new organizations or the revival of existing ones. However, it also had a negative consequence: the exacerbation of ethnic divisions. According to most respondents, the political changes in Afghanistan have already fostered and/or will foster divisions within the Afghan community. There are division mainly between the Pashtun and Hazara communities and the country's other minorities, including the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Turkmens. Within the Hazara diaspora, there is a prevailing mistrust of the Pashtun community, which is considered supportive of, or sympathetic or accommodating to the Taliban, a movement whose origins can be traced back to the Pashtun areas in southern Afghanistan. Some Hazaras do not consider themselves as Afghans, as they believe that the modern Afghan State was established with the use of force by the Pashtuns, seizing absolute power.

Current feelings have ancient roots. Ethnic divisions were exploited by Afghan military leaders during the “civil war” between 1992 and 1996, which was followed by the establishment of the first Islamic Emirate. During the first Islamic Emirate, the Hazaras, a Shia minority in a Sunni-majority country, and other minorities were discriminated against and persecuted by the Taliban, who are now the country’s de facto authority. Respondents expressed different opinions as to how long the new Government and the new Emirate will last. Some believe it will soon be overthrown, others predict it will last longer. However, most respondents are convinced that the Taliban’s return to power is creating further divisions within the diaspora.

So far, the tendency of diaspora organizations to reflect the ethnic differences existing in Afghanistan has prevented the creation and development of a national representative organization or a coordinating body in Italy. This trend can be found in almost all European countries.

In Italy, the renewed activism following the Taliban’s seizure of power is characterized more by an increased collaboration between Afghan diaspora groups and Italian organizations, than between individual diaspora groups, which are divided due to their different ethnic and community background. There is no formal coordination mechanism between the various organizations. However, informal networking activities are conducted, including between organizations in different places that share the same ethnic and community background.

Respondents were mostly sceptical about the possibility of creating a national Afghan organization. Some interviewees hope that such organization will be created, as they believe it would be more effective in interacting with Italian institutions and in supporting their country of origin. However, they are pessimistic about it. Others believe that any attempt at creating a national organization will inevitably fail, while others argue that, despite the difficulties, it is important to work towards the creation of a single national organization.

In some cities and within some diaspora groups, a significant generational difference can be observed: for the younger generations, ethnic divisions can be overcome with a view to a common national identity, more

THERE IS NOW WIDESPREAD CONSENSUS AMONG DIASPORA ORGANIZATIONS ON THE CREATION OF A COORDINATION NETWORK OR A COMMON WORKING PLATFORM

effective interventions and stronger representation. For members of the old diaspora, divisions appear more relevant or more difficult to overcome. In addition to generational differences, the interviews revealed a common feature: communities blame each other for being unwilling to overcome divisions.

Most respondents therefore recognize that, ideally, establishing a single representative organization would be useful, although they consider it unlikely. However, there is now widespread consensus among the diaspora organizations on the creation of a coordination network or a common working platform between local organizations. Such a network would allow common activities to be conducted, while overcoming some of the divisions. It would also give a sufficient emphasis to the demands and priorities expressed by local communities in different geographical locations. Most respondents believe that each organization should maintain strong links with its local communities.

In contrast, connections with other diaspora organizations in Europe appear to be less relevant. Presently, such links appear to be weak, because they are based on individual contacts rather than on long-standing relationships, partnerships or collaboration between organizations.



First-hand accounts a: THE DIASPORA AFTER AUGUST 2021

Elaha: *Before, we were more united, although it was never easy. With the Taliban in power, divisions have increased.*

Aziza: *It is difficult for a single organization to be created in a short time. We are still trying to understand what happened in Afghanistan, how the Taliban managed to return to power so quickly.*

Hamidullah: *We are in a new phase, where we must not think in terms of ethnicity. Divisive talk should be abandoned, once and for all. Fellow nationals abroad hope that we can unite, now that Afghanistan is no longer a real country. But with the Taliban in power, everything is more difficult, divisions are increasing.*

Latif: *We all have a common problem: the Taliban. The Afghan tragedy has only one positive aspect: corrupt leaders fled, they left Afghanistan. Only the people*

remained, and they are one, united. This is an important lesson about unity. Will we be able to learn it?

Arif: The politics in Afghanistan also affect us outside the country, including here in Italy, of course. Especially now. I am against the Taliban, we Hazaras are against the Taliban. But the Pashtuns? I am not racist, but I would really like to know what they think about them.



First-hand accounts b: ETHNIC DIVISIONS

Burhan: Unfortunately, there is no unity between the Hazaras, the Uzbeks, the Tajiks and the Pashtuns. This is a problem. We tried to unite, but we failed.

Hafez: There is no national organization in the world that represents all Afghans because we are not a people. Ethnic groups have been against each other for more than 40 years. It is like an Afghan virus inside politics, inside society. It is also within communities abroad, including here in Italy. We are against each other.

Farhad: Conflict and division are in our DNA. Luckily, there are younger people with a different mindset, free from certain ideas, from certain conditioning.

Faruddin: We all dream of being united, but then we wake up and realize that there are divisions even within the Hazara community. After all, the Pashtuns believe they are the majority group in the country, and they act like they were, but they are not.

Mir Ahmad: The truth is that we Afghans never agree. We have a wrong, ethnicity-based mindset. There can be no single organization for all, holding together Hazaras and Pashtuns.

Wasima: Not all Pashtuns are bad or are against us. I do not think they should be blamed for the country's situation. But many treated us badly.

Mohammed: It bothers me that the Afghan people are divided into ethnic groups. It is like dividing a body into pieces. Ethnicity does not matter under a dictatorship. We are all the same. But I recognize that it is very complicated to be united.

Latif: Look, around this table we are all from different backgrounds and ethnicities. I am Pashtun, they are Hazara, he is Tajik. We are all Afghans and the problems here and in Afghanistan are the same for everyone.

Aisha: Ethnic divisions are so deep, they affect our everyday lives regardless of where we live. Whether in Kabul, Venice or Rome. They also affect us outside Afghanistan.

Siamuddin: *I keep a certain distance from the other Hazaras because I think they spend too much time together and little with the others. I wish we Afghans were more united and cohesive.*

Aisha: *No, there can be no organization holding together all the different groups. There is still hatred between them, especially towards the Shia.*

Arif: *I do not consider or see myself as an Afghan, because the Afghan identity has been imposed on us by the Pashtuns for centuries. I am for the decentralization of power.*

Javed: *One of the Afghan diaspora's problems is its internal division. The question about the future is: will Afghans be able to overcome their divisions?*



First-hand accounts c: A COORDINATION NETWORK

Barialay: *There is no organization representing all Afghans. There are small ones scattered here and there. We need to network to be effective.*

Abu Malek: *One of the reasons for conflict is the division between ethnic groups. I try to keep out of it and work towards unity. I am more and more for cosmopolitanism. Having had to cross so many borders, I hate nationalism.*

Sahraa: *Having a national organization could be useful, but local ones are very important, as they connect with local communities. One thing is living in Rome, another in a small city. A coordination network would be more useful than a single organization.*

Saleha: *It is only right that there should be an organization in each region, perhaps not every region, because they help understand local problems. But then there should be coordination between them.*

Wasima: *It is important that there should be a single organization that represents everyone and is stronger than all the organizations in the various areas.*

Abdul: *Given the divisions, it is right that each group should organize on its own, as long as this does not create even further divisions. At the same time, having a national umbrella organization would increase our representation and allow us to be more influential.*

Syed: *There are and always have been differences. I do not care about them. We share the same culture, and we should focus on this aspect that unites us, rather than on those that divide us.*

Jamila: *We need to be united, because discriminating or non-inclusive Government policies affect us all, regardless of the community we belong to.*

Ibrahim: *There are differences, but they can be overcome as long as the organization has clear rules, and they are followed. We need to cooperate, otherwise we will get nowhere.*

Ehsan: *I do not care about ethnicity, language or origin. We are all human beings. But this is difficult to understand for us Afghans.*

Alidad: *There are demographic differences between the various areas, so it is important to take into account the demands put forward by one or the other party through local organizations and groups. However, there should be a coordination network.*

4 THE AFGHAN DIASPORA AND PRIORITIES IN ITALY

The regime change in Afghanistan resulted in increased activism on the part of the Afghan diaspora in Italy. As mentioned above, it also changed the way diaspora actors perceive themselves, by raising their awareness of their roles and responsibilities both in their host country and in their country of origin.

Finally, it also led to a change in the intervention forms and priorities of Afghan organizations in Italy. Diaspora organizations played an important role in the evacuation of people at risk from Afghanistan between the Taliban's capture of Kabul on 15 August 2021 and the complete withdrawal of US military forces from the country at the end of the same month. They exerted pressure on Italian institutions, while opening or enhancing communication channels with their contacts in Afghanistan or with Italian authorities, mobilizing public opinion and the media, launching appeals and financing and fundraising operations, and creating new mobilization networks, including beyond the sphere of influence of the more traditional Afghan communities.

Since then, communication and advocacy campaigns, as well as pressure on Italian authorities aimed at facilitating the evacuation of people at risk or family reunification have never stopped. In some cases, such campaigns have been successful, leading to the inclusion of individuals deemed vulnerable in evacuation programmes, or to a shift in public opinion towards more active solidarity. Old diaspora activism pursues mainly three different strategies: the integration of the new diaspora

into Italian society, often by replacing and/or complementing the institutional reception system; self-representation and the assumption of public responsibility in a more explicit and “political” manner than in the past; communication activities with and about Afghanistan.

Most of the respondents stated that they conducted or are able to conduct relevant activities in the areas of integration, legal assistance, education, and material and psychological support for new members of the diaspora. The three main objectives are as follows: informal reception, to help newcomers recover from the shock due to their sudden, often traumatic emigration; practical advice, to overcome the lack of information perceived by newcomers; and inclusion in organizations, to provide a solid point of reference for newcomers, while strengthening group cohesion and the sense of community.

Respondents recognize the importance of the unprecedented arrival of about 4,900 Afghan nationals in Italy. Many associate the arrival of the new diaspora with an influx of skills and productive resources. The establishment of new relations spurs activism in the entire Afghan community, which is in the process not only of a demographic, but mainly of a social and cultural change. This structural change raises new questions about the identity, responsibilities and priorities of the diaspora within the host country while considering the changing relationship with the country of origin.

Most members of the diaspora interviewed believe that a major change is occurring, which has led to a greater public prominence and to a demand for self-representation: to be recognized as effective members of Italian society, and to define their own identity and make it known. They consider the combination and merging of the old and the new diaspora, and therefore of experience and expertise, to be productive. Over the past few months, many initiatives have involved members of the new diaspora, despite their precarious conditions.

Maintaining communication channels with the country of origin and drawing media attention on Afghanistan in the host country have become a priority request from both the old and the new diaspora.

The search for greater social and communicative interaction between the two contexts has translated into the need for an information body with three objectives: to overcome the lack of information on Afghanistan caused by the restrictions on information in the country of origin, and the perceived lack of attention in the host country; to make the voice of the Afghan diaspora heard in Italy; and to encourage coordination between diaspora organizations.

Cultural activism represents another widespread priority. Diaspora actors believe it has three purposes: to promote openness to the host society, so that it can learn about and share Afghan cultural practices; to facilitate identity cohesion between the old and the new diaspora; and to maintain the culture of the country of origin, while adapting it to the local context.

Both cultural and “political” demands have been made: an increased resource allocation for the implementation of social and cultural activities on the part of the diaspora; legislative changes aimed at reducing the time necessary for assessing asylum and family reunification applications; inclusion in the processes for defining the strategic objectives of reception policies in Italy and support policies for Afghanistan.

According to most interviewees, the outcome of the ongoing changes in the Afghan diaspora in Italy depends on the internal dynamics of the Afghan community, but also on the decisions made by Italian institutions. The interviewees stated that they are ready for a more active role, both in integration policies for newcomers and in the response to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. However, they demand adequate symbolic recognition and resources. The members of the new diaspora interviewed also stated that they are ready to make their resources available to the Italian community. However, they anticipated that they will require more time for gradual involvement, as they need to achieve stability first.

More generally, the current phase represents a substantial change in the history of relations between the host country and the Afghan diaspora. If supported by adequate institutional policies,

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the demographic and social change in the Afghan diaspora could lead diaspora actors to shift their perception of Italy from a transit country to their country of destination of choice.

The launch of institutional programmes to coordinate and strengthen diaspora organizations in Italy and to involve them in humanitarian activities in Afghanistan would meet the needs of the diaspora and the priority objectives of institutional policies aimed at the Central Asian country.



First-hand accounts a: THE NEW DIASPORA

Paola: *Among the newcomers there are women gynaecologists, students and activists; they are more politically aware than those who were already here. We are trying to create a bridge between the old and the new diaspora.*

Farhad: *Many new Afghans have arrived. Educated people, as opposed to us who could not study much. We belong to the “one works, ten eat” generation. Today, however, people have different priorities. Education is considered more valuable.*

Najiba: *Among the 64 people who arrived with me and live in the same apartment complex, at least 20/25 were very active. But they are still getting over the trauma of leaving so quickly.*

Latif: *Many of them are qualified and educated, and they held important positions in Afghanistan; and they know the country better than we do. Lecturers, intellectuals, lawyers, engineers, both men and women. They will play an important role in providing a new narrative of refugees.*

Esmat: *Several families arrived by plane. Most of them worked with the old Afghan Government or in embassies. They risk finding themselves in a very different social and economic situation. What awaits them is different from what they expect.*

Siamuddin: *Many are educated, they belong in the middle class. They are teachers, journalists, parliamentarians and judges. My experience was very different, as was that of the others who arrived like me in 2006/2007. I watched the evacuation flights open-mouthed. For us, it took years.*

Hafez: *There are many different people among the newcomers. There are the corrupt, the manipulators, the enriched, and there are those who have been deluded into expecting freedom and are now still in shock. The truth is that the*

evacuation did not work: it was not those most in need who came, but those who were most able to find a way.

Ahmed: In Afghanistan, I dealt with justice issues for local organizations, and with human rights for international and Italian organizations. I am an activist. We arrived with eight other families from Afghanistan in August, and I hope there is a way we can help from here as well.

Mir: Among the newcomers, there are people with a strong personality and political awareness. This will lead to a multiplication of divides and divisions within the diaspora.

Najiba: The new diaspora can help Afghanistan, but it takes time. We suffered a trauma: we cannot forget those days at the airport in Kabul. I thought I was strong. But I often find myself thinking about those moments. And half my family stayed there. It is difficult.

Bashira: We cannot do much in the short term. We need stability. Then, in the medium and long term, we can help better.



First-hand accounts b: RELATIONS BETWEEN THE NEW AND THE OLD DIASPORA

Abu Malek: The old diaspora is and must be a point of reference for the new one, so it can give accurate, correct information, to help them integrate better, to be stronger together.

Esmat It is very important that there should be a community that keeps old and new together. It helps not to get isolated from each other, to give those who have just arrived the information they need. In many cases, organizations and institutions do not actually do what they should do. Together, we can better show our value. Here, they often treat us like fools.

Asefa: Among the newcomers there are journalists, lecturers, researchers and doctors. Many people with knowledge and skills. Italy also needs them. But we need mechanisms, structures and resources.

Idrees: For now, there is not much communication between the old and the new diaspora. An organization would help precisely to make communication easier.

Soraya: On 26 August, I had to leave Kabul, where I was studying civil engineering. Now, I am studying to be admitted to the Turin Polytechnic. I would like to become the first foreign woman military pilot in Italy. A lot can also be done outside one's own country.

**First-hand accounts c: SUPPORT FOR NEWCOMERS**

Hamida: We Afghans who have been living here for a long time can guide and advise newcomers about the world of work, bureaucratic paperwork and language matters.

Idrees: Training activities for evacuated women, for children, so they can continue to speak their mother tongue; then, providing information to the public; Italian language courses for newcomers; psychological assistance, support networks; and providing basic information, also on rights and obligations. Our organization can and must do so much.

Khaled: The most important things are education and training. We are lucky, our children go to school, but for other families who arrived with us it is different.

Najiba: When we arrived, we found no organization of Afghans. We could have used one. Afghans could help us more. They could explain better how reception works, what happens next. We do not really know what will happen.

Mansour: I lived in Mazar-e-Sharif, in the north of the country. Then we had to leave. The Afghans I met here were very helpful to my family. If there was an organization, many more useful things could be done.

Mahmoud: We still do not know if our educational qualifications are valid. Many of us are looking for opportunities to study: we need an organization to act as a link between us and universities.

Ahmed: I have recently arrived in Italy. I still do not know what to expect, they have not given me any clear information. An organization run by Afghans could give legal advice, help with bureaucratic procedures and health care, and provide assistance; it could also teach us the language, give us vocational training and help us find a job. We are skilled, but if nobody helps us put our skills into practice, we cannot display them.

Zahir: We organized several initiatives, mainly cultural ones. We hosted an exhibition of photos by Afghan artists. They can no longer exhibit there, so we do it here. This was the first major Afghan self-organized cultural initiative. Now we want to set up a Herat School of Art in exile to provide support and raise awareness of Afghan culture.

First-hand accounts d: SELF-REPRESENTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Amin: *The priority is to provide a new narrative of Afghans and refugees, who are labelled as drug dealers, helpless people or “poor fellows”. We want to make our own voices heard. But as soon as we say we know how to do something, they tell us: “You should be grateful we have taken you in.” Then they ask us about our journey to Italy. We are working for a more active role.*

Abu Malek: *There is a widespread paternalistic mindset. The narrative of refugees is toxic. It is up to us to help change it. Refugees are seen as passive people, only as beneficiaries of services. This view is an obstacle to our empowerment. We need a voice, we need self-representation.*

Hafiz: *We must make our voices heard, we can meet students, citizens, hold courses and meetings in schools, share our history and cultural identity.*

Latif: *We need more opportunities for young Afghans, so they can come here to Italy from abroad; we need scholarships, resources, international agreements. And we need more resources for those who are here: there are many intelligent people, but they end up as riders. We are a resource, so let them use us!*

Abdul: *A news bulletin or a website would be useful. We could tell our stories and give information about Afghanistan. Create a new narrative under our own direction.*

Barialay: *It is important that information should continue to arrive from Afghanistan. And that this information also reaches the Italian public. Maybe a website, a news bulletin or a press review in several languages would be useful.*

Latif: *A website would serve as an information portal but also as a link between Afghan groups in Italy and between groups in Italy and Afghanistan.*

First-hand accounts e: THE ITALIAN SYSTEM, FROM TRANSIT TO FINAL DESTINATION COUNTRY

Aziza: *It is very important that Italian institutions and society understand that before becoming refugees these people had a life, often full of interests. Too often, dignity is denied in reception processes, but it must be respected.*

Wasima: *Newcomers will make an important contribution. They are educated, they have clear ideas, they are “fresh”, even if they have been traumatized by the evacuation. They want to be active. The problem is that Italy is not a country to stay in.*

Laura: All the people who have arrived in our area tell us they want to be involved, they want to participate, they ask us what they can do. There is enormous potential, it needs to be developed. It must also be recognized by institutions.

Barialay: Something new is on its way. Relations are slowly being established between old and new Afghans. Newcomers are hungry for work, for study. We need the Italian system to recognize them as resources, to recognize their potential.

Timur: Everyone knows that Italy is not a country for foreigners.

Gulbuddin: I am convinced that in the long run 80 per cent, 90 per cent of the newcomers will leave Italy. Some say that 40 per cent have already left. This is a country of transit. It does not appeal to qualified foreigners. An important role is played by universities: the more opportunities they provide, the more Afghans will want to stay and contribute here.

Syed: It is not noticeable that there is an Afghan community here in Rome. We are divided, scattered across different neighbourhoods. An organization would be useful. But the fact remains that Italy is not a point of arrival for many Afghans; it is a country of transit.

Chiara: Intellectual and scientific exile is a kind of treasure chest that can be used to protect and leverage knowledge that would otherwise be at risk of being lost. It plays an important role. But much depends on the reception capacity of the host country. Whether students in exile can return and contribute to Afghan universities in the future depends on the means made available to them abroad.

Rauf: Institutions should set up public funds for diasporas, they should network with private foundations: often people are willing and skilled, but there are no resources. Not only money, but also training opportunities should be provided: sometimes a little help can turn an idea into a concrete action, like a small push in the right direction.

5 THE AFGHAN DIASPORA AND PRIORITIES IN AFGHANISTAN

Many respondents asserted that, due to the changed political and social conditions in Afghanistan, the diaspora will play an even bigger role than in the past, and that it would be crucial that channels of communication and collaboration between those working within the country and those who have left be maintained or built.

Most respondents affirmed being able to identify the needs of the Afghan population and intervention priorities in their country thanks to their knowledge of the local context, which is more in-depth than that of traditional humanitarian actors. Their knowledge would be useful both when identifying the needs to be met and when monitoring the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions, the consistency between objectives and results achieved, or whether aid is being distributed in an equitable manner. Their potential has been similarly highlighted in other sectoral analyses and studies.

Moreover, many respondents consider it possible and useful to establish collaborative relationships with traditional actors in the humanitarian system, with a view to tailor-made projects or long-term partnerships, provided that they share the same objectives, which should not be dictated by any third parties.

Interviewees stated that the priority areas of intervention in Afghanistan are those where the material needs of the Afghan population are most urgent and evident: humanitarian assistance the fight against poverty and access to health care. According to some studies, diaspora organizations in some European countries were most active precisely in these areas before August 2021.

Respondents suggested using a certain degree of caution as to the possibility of organizing effective activities in their country of origin. In fact, they fear that such activities may harm the target communities, because they are considered hostile by the de facto authorities. However, some diaspora actors are working to facilitate the launch of entrepreneurial activities connecting Italian companies with workers in Afghanistan.

Among Afghan organizations in Italy, there is also a widespread willingness to cooperate with Afghan organizations and traditional humanitarian actors, while there is little interest in strengthening State institutions, because they are governed by authorities that are perceived as hostile and poorly representative of all the country's political and ethnic components. It is worth mentioning that many members of the new diaspora left Afghanistan precisely because of

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the Taliban's return to power, while most members of the old diaspora interviewed harbour deep resentment and strong suspicion against the de facto authorities. Not only institutional and structural constraints, which are dealt with further below, but also the above-mentioned attitude of the diaspora could be an obstacle to the implementation of activities that do not have solely humanitarian purposes but aim at developing and strengthening institutions. The intervention priorities in Afghanistan mentioned by interviewees include not only the fulfilment of primary material needs, but also the transfer of social and intangible resources. For the Afghan diaspora in Italy, it is imperative to avoid any further isolation of Afghanistan and any deterioration of its social and intellectual capital. To this end, communication channels with the outside world should be kept open, while access to qualified education should be ensured for as many people as possible. Special emphasis was placed on access to education for girls and women, in the light of the discriminatory policies adopted by the country's de facto authorities. According to interviewees, the emigration of a part of the middle class, which is educated and skilled, the contraction of the economy and the reduction of professional expectations risk reducing the country's capacity to meet the educational needs of the younger generations. This risk can be at least partly avoided through informal networking, Internet courses and distance education provided by diaspora actors in cooperation with other institutional and humanitarian actors. This intervention strategy assumes particular significance in light of the country's deep economic contraction, which has led and will continue to lead many Afghan families to forgo education for their children. According to some respondents, the adoption of adequate monetary aid mechanisms, such as the payment of tuition fees from abroad, could redress the balance between boys and girls in access to education. Indeed, inequalities have affected access to education in past years, and they have been reinforced by the attitude of the de facto authorities towards female education.

**First-hand accounts a: TANGIBLE ASPECTS**

Amin: The priority is to fight hunger and poverty. I am afraid large international agencies do not distribute aid fairly among all communities. The Hazaras are often disadvantaged, for example in the remote and isolated province of Daykundi. The important thing is to prevent the money from getting into the Taliban's hands and give it to those who actually need it.

Imran: A lot can be done from here. For example, through campaigns to prevent families from having to sell their daughters, in the most difficult cases. We have already raised funds. Funds can also be raised for humanitarian action. It is a matter of contacts and money.

Najiba: We Afghans know Afghanistan well. We know what people there need most. We could run distance courses, like technical courses or training courses. But the priority now is food. It is more important than education.

Mohammed: Taking action in Afghanistan is difficult. We rely a lot on personal connections and contacts. We mainly deal with donations, especially in the provinces we know best, Kunar and Nangarhar. We work with some solidarity organizations.

Idrees: Now many of us are sending money to families, to relatives. The priority is poverty.

Barialay: Communities outside the country can do a lot if they are well organized. I am thinking of the Afghan diaspora in Australia, in the United Kingdom and in Finland. Schools, hospitals and solar panels have been built in remote villages. But here in Italy, we are not as well organized. But things may change.

Fatima: The priority is poverty, a huge problem that, from here, we can only address through fundraising; then there is the denial of rights, which we address from here through demonstrations, but also online courses and other activities.

Syed: Food is the priority. They are all out of work, without money, without food. Then comes education. But they need to work, so families can rely on their own resources, without having to depend on others for too long.

Saleha: For me, the priority now is to get those in danger to safety, especially women like me. And then humanitarian aid must be distributed as fairly as possible. The Taliban are evil. They have an evil attitude towards women in particular.

Abdul: The priority is to overcome the economic crisis. Now they are all staying home in Afghanistan. There is no work, there is nothing.

**First-hand accounts b: INTANGIBLE ASPECTS**

Mansour: From here, we are trying to help other musicians to leave, but it is not easy. Afghanistan has become a big jail.

Gulbuddin: Everyone says bread, but it is not enough. Our goal is to maintain skills, to continue to make people feel useful, to keep them active. We must prevent Afghanistan from becoming a poor and sad country.

Aisha: Female students must be our target: to help them through this difficult phase. Let them know that there is someone who supports them. Organize courses, online meetings, voice their concerns.

Elaha: Everything has collapsed in Afghanistan. Things have become much worse for women in particular. They are isolated at home. It is important to support and encourage them. Remote courses could be run, but the Internet costs are a problem for many families.

Bibi: Now the priority is food, not books. An entire generation has lost hope. They see no future for themselves. This is why everyone is trying to leave. They are leaving the country because they no longer have any opportunity to grow, to improve, to use their qualities and skills. We must do something.

Gulbuddin: We are trying to set up an online university for students in Afghanistan. The Taliban promised that they would reopen universities, but even if they did, the quality would be lower. We must act carefully; in Italy, we have already created a network with some teachers and a university to start courses.

Barialay: The entire Afghan population cannot move to Italy or Europe. We need scholarships, especially for female students, and humanitarian aid, and procedures must be simplified: there is no longer an Italian embassy in Afghanistan, but certain documents are still required to be recognized and stamped by the Italian embassy. Is this not absurd?

Hamida: School, education, training: without them, what will happen to Afghan female students? We can do a lot from here.

Najiba: Once the problem of food shortage and extreme poverty has been tackled, we need to deal with education and gender equality. This is what I did in Afghanistan. The day the Taliban arrived in Kabul, we were about to start a new course for women: vocational training.

Amin: We help with remittances, we send money to Afghanistan. We can help support training and education for female students, creating a bridge between

here and there; we can organize distance courses, or cover school fees for boys and girls.

Gulbuddin: *Here in Italy, we are working on an entrepreneurial project. The idea is to connect some local textile and haute-couture companies with women workers and embroiderers in Afghanistan. We could create jobs in Afghanistan, then sell the products abroad, starting a profitable business to help the Afghan economy.*

Rauf: *There is a connection between what needs to be done in Italy and in Afghanistan. But before we can be effectively active in Afghanistan, we need to improve here, acquire more skills, achieve more stability. For now, we are continuing with fundraising to help families in need. And we are going to start a project with an organization from Milan to support a group of women in the province of Bamiyan.*

Hamida: *Studying is important. Our sisters in Afghanistan must be allowed to continue to study.*

Latif: *We asked ourselves if, what and how much we could do. We know that some things could be dangerous for our families there. We must be cautious, but also courageous.*

5A INSTRUMENTS FOR INTERVENTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

Most of the diaspora members interviewed stated that they have a strong connection to both their country of origin and country of residence. They therefore play both an internal and an external role, or a dual internal role, based on personal relationships, trust-based networks and family or community ties. According to many studies, this dual role of diaspora actors increases their credibility, trust, knowledge and their ability to make diaspora voices heard.

Interviewees identified two instruments for responding to the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan: (i) fundraising and remittances; and (ii) collaboration with Afghan organizations. A further, potential instrument was also identified: the cooperation with traditional humanitarian actors.

As happens with other countries, also in Italy there are too few statistical data available to quantify remittances sent to Afghanistan by the Afghan diaspora. However, this research confirms the tendency to consider remittances to the country of origin as common and ordinary practice, as has already been noted in other contexts.⁸⁸ According to interviewees, direct financial support, donations and fundraising have already provided households with financial support in the past, as well as promoted access to health care for some local communities and contributed to the construction of schools and clinics. Many respondents believe that remittances will continue to provide significant financial resources to households in Afghanistan.

The Afghan diaspora in Italy has a prevailing tendency to use remittances for individual, tailor-made support for families, small communities or particular cases. On the other hand, remittances are not generally used to initiate long-term development or humanitarian support projects, as is the case in other European countries.

According to interviewees, concrete support is also provided through connections with Afghan humanitarian or community organizations. However, little information is available on ongoing projects or organizations active in Afghanistan. This lack of knowledge is only partly due to the changed political conditions in Afghanistan, which have led to the closure of many local organizations. In fact, there is equally little information available on organizations that were active in the country before the Taliban seized power.

It is significant that most diaspora actors, including the most active members, find it difficult to clearly identify Afghan organizations, groups or non-governmental organizations with which to establish operational

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88 *COVID-19 in Afghanistan: Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices, and Implications*, Samuel Hall, July 2020. Available at www.samuelhall.org/publications/covid-19-in-afghanistan-knowledge-attitudes-practices-amp-impact.

relationships or plan activities in the country. This difficulty reveals that diaspora actors generally have a less detailed knowledge of their country than they assert, and that their knowledge is limited to their area of birth or the area where their extended family live.

This lack of knowledge is due to the lower “circular mobility” between the country of origin and the host country on the part of members of the Afghan diaspora in Italy compared to that of members of other diasporas in Europe. In fact, the latter have had easier and more frequent access to their country of origin in recent years, due to different institutional policies and a different migration history. As a consequence, they have an increased capacity to identify local needs, to be updated on projects and support activities and to create mixed organizations supported by the diaspora in the host countries but run by Afghans in the home country.

The difference revealed between the actors of the new and the old diaspora is significant: actors of the new diaspora have a more direct and accurate knowledge; such knowledge, however, is limited to non-governmental groups and organizations that, since the regime change in Afghanistan, have no longer been operational in the country or have been threatened by the de facto authorities. On the other hand, actors of the old diaspora have a more general, less circumstantial knowledge, which often depends on advice received from other members of the diaspora in Europe after the events of August 2021.

Although the links between diaspora members and organizations in the country of origin are limited compared to those of other Afghan diasporas in Europe, they demonstrate useful potential for the implementation of new humanitarian support or development projects in Afghanistan. In fact, Afghan diaspora actors in Italy can clearly identify the intervention priorities and the specific needs of their place of origin.



First-hand accounts a: REMITTANCES

Imran: We created a personal fund, collected money and sent it to Afghanistan. Then we collected more, to cover an Italian activists' expenses who went to Islamabad to help our family members get a visa from the Italian embassy.

Ibrahim: In most cases, we send remittances to support our extended families. Then those in greatest need. I have only been in Italy for a short time, and I have realized that we mainly use family channels here. In other countries, where Afghans have been living longer and set up organizations, you go to one of such organizations and they give you education and health-care services.

Wasima: We use a system that is mainly based on trust; it is called Hawala. You give the money to a person, who then gets it to Afghanistan via another person in a short time. You give a secret code to the person the money is for. Before that, we also used Money Gram or Western Union.

Barialay: Sending money is difficult. There is Western Union and Money Gram, or rather there was. Now it is difficult to use them. There is another system that is easier to use, Hawala. I do not know if it is legit, maybe not here in Italy. It is very effective, though.

Bashira: There is no money in the country, there is no liquidity. Banks only let you withdraw small sums. Sending money through the banking system is impossible. We rely on Sarafis.



First-hand accounts b: THE AFGHAN ASSOCIATIONS

Abul Malek: There are some organizations like the Aga Khan or Bashardost, or the one founded by Sima Samar that are active in Afghanistan and are doing a good job. But it is difficult to really help from here.

Abbas: They need everything in Afghanistan. The situation is tragic. We are willing to work with anyone, we are ready to help. We know people from the Etilatrooz newspaper in Afghanistan.

Najiba: The Italian NGO I worked with in Kabul is still active. As far as I know, it has been authorized to provide online training courses. Then I think it also provides aid.

Aziza: Newspapers like Etilatrooz or Nimrokh, or other media are very active, with editorial staff inside and outside the country. Then, there is a new push towards informal organizations. This is the first time that action has been taken "from below"

in Afghanistan, by ordinary women, so to speak. They have already organized many demonstrations, all on their own, to demand bread, rights and freedom. They are simple women and female teenagers. But helping them is not easy.

Fatima: For some time now, I have been interested in the activities carried out by Integrity Watch, which does social monitoring, mobilizing citizens so they can see how money is spent in Afghanistan.

Lal: I know that Mediothek Afghanistan has changed its activities from journalism and culture of peace to humanitarian aid, giving out food, especially in the northern province of Balkh. But I have not heard anything about it for a few weeks now.

Imran: I have already been ripped off several times by people who said they wanted to raise money. I no longer trust them. And if there is no reliable organization in Afghanistan, sending money is impossible. Finding such organizations is not easy, especially for those who like us have lived abroad for so many years.

Asefa: They ask us for help from Afghanistan, they ask us how they can leave the country. Many women risk being killed, mistreated and not being able to study any more. There were some organizations I knew of, but I am not sure if they are still active. Perhaps they are operating secretly, and this is why it is more difficult to find out about them. The main problem now is poverty. Then comes education.

Soraya: The organizations I knew of in Afghanistan were all closed down. They were forced to. Because they had no money, or because of the Taliban.

Arif: In Afghanistan, I created a foundation in memory of the woman I was going to marry, who was killed in an attack. I managed to create it with help from the diaspora. The Taliban destroyed our headquarters in the Daykundi province. We are for critical thinking and equality between men and women, but what about the Taliban? The other problem is money; it is difficult to resume activities without money and with the economy in free fall.

Bashira: I would like to help Afghanistan, women in particular, especially in education. But the situation is complicated. I know the Social Organization of Afghan Justice Seekers and Hawca, the Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan. Hawca is still carrying out activities. It cares for those most in need.

Amin: As far as I know, most aid is provided on an individual basis rather than in an organized way, but I think there are still some active Afghan organizations. Some are operating secretly, others openly. I asked for advice, and they suggested the Naji Development Welfare Organization and the Khedmat Development and Learning Organization. Both are in the Hazara areas.

Abul Malek: *A corridor could be opened to bring aid to the country, but it is not easy with the Taliban in power. We need dialogue, so we can find the right way to present the activities. I knew an organization, AMASO, that worked with migrants, but I am not sure if it is still active, the director had to flee the country.*

Khaled: *In Afghanistan, Hawca is still active, the Afghan Women Network has resumed some activities.*

Sahraa: *I worked with the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers and another similar organization, but I think they have been disbanded. In fact, I am sure they will never be able to operate again. It is very difficult to maintain relations with Afghanistan, even via the Internet.*

CHAPTER IV



Conclusions

> MAIN RESULTS

The study showed that the regime change in Afghanistan caused a noticeable transformation in the demographic significance of the Afghan diaspora in Italy. In fact, through evacuation flights following the Taliban's return to power, Italy received around 5,000 new Afghan nationals, equal to 40 per cent of those already residing in the country as of January 2021, according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2021).

The arrival of thousands of people, often with a higher social status and a qualified professional background, and the radical changes in Afghanistan caused not only a quantitative demographic transformation, but also new dynamics within the diaspora, changing its social composition, modes of intervention and relations with the Italian society.

The events occurred in August 2021 led diaspora actors to become more aware of their own roles and responsibilities, both in their host country and in their country of origin, prompting them to take on a more leading role.

Diaspora actors led protests, solidarity rallies and awareness-raising campaigns, held public meetings, fundraised and transferred resources to Afghanistan. They also contributed to evacuating civilians at risk from Afghanistan and receiving them in their host countries. These initiatives have marked an important transition for diaspora activism, which has shifted its focus from within the community to the public sphere.

In parallel to this growing activism, diaspora actors have also sought greater recognition from society and institutions. This represents a new significant development as well as a resource to further engage the Afghan diaspora in Italy, both in inclusion policies and in the humanitarian response.

The self-mobilization started in summer 2021, self-mobilization, which in many cases, continued over the following months, strengthened the relations between existing diaspora groups, broadening the participation base and increasing the share of the population involved. Combined with the arrival of members of the new diaspora, this trend also provided a spur for the creation of new organizations or for the formalization of existing ones. It therefore led to the amplification of the organizations' engagement.

The transformations in the country of origin have also had negative consequences, exacerbating ethnic divisions within the community. This trend has emerged in all Afghan diasporas in Europe. Because of these divisions, reinforced by the return to power of the Taliban, an Islamist group of Pashtun origin, the creation of a single national umbrella organization in Italy is also considered unlikely.

However, there is a widespread consensus among diaspora organizations on the creation of a coordination network or a common platform between local organizations. According to some interviewees, community differences in the diaspora account for the lack of communication with relevant institutions. At the same time, such differences reportedly allow for a more direct and participated representation of local communities.

In Italy, diaspora activism pursues mainly three different approaches. The first is the integration of the new diaspora into Italian society, often by replacing and/or complementing the institutional reception system, perceived as weak. Most respondents reported having conducted (or being able to conduct) relevant activities in the areas of integration, legal assistance, education, material and psychological support for new members of the Afghan community.

The second approach consists in self-representation and a more explicit public accountability; the third approach consists of communication activities with and about Afghanistan. Such activities aim to overcome the lack of information, making the voice of the Afghan diaspora heard in Italy, and encourage coordination between local organizations and with their country of origin.

The most recurring requests made to Italian authorities include: the allocation of more resources for the implementation of social and cultural activities led by the diaspora; legislative changes aimed at reducing waiting times for asylum and family reunification applications; participation in the definition of Italy's strategic objectives concerning reception policies and aid strategies for Afghanistan.

More generally, according to respondents a substantial change is perceived in the history of relations between Italy and the Afghan diaspora. If supported by adequate institutional policies, the demographic and social change affecting the diaspora could lead diaspora actors to shift their perception of Italy from a transit country to their country of destination. In turn, this shift could foster increased participation of the Afghan diaspora in Italian society.

The implementation of institutional programmes aimed at coordinating and strengthening diaspora organizations in Italy would meet the needs of the diaspora as well as the priority objectives of Government policies, including activities to conduct in Afghanistan.

Many respondents believe that, due to the changed political and social conditions in Afghanistan, the diaspora will play an even bigger role than in the past, and that it would be crucial that channels of communication and collaboration between those working within the country and those who have left be maintained or built.

Most respondents stated being able to identify the needs of the Afghan population and intervention priorities thanks to their knowledge of the local context, which is more in-depth than the one of traditional humanitarian actors. They added that the priority areas of intervention are those where the material needs of the population are most urgent

and evident: humanitarian assistance, poverty alleviation and access to health care.

The intervention priorities in Afghanistan mentioned by the respondents include the transfer of social and intangible resources. For the Afghan diaspora in Italy, it is vital to avoid any further isolation of Afghanistan and any deterioration of its social and intellectual capital. To this end, communication channels with the outside world should be kept open, while access to qualified education should be ensured for as many people as possible. Special emphasis was placed on access to education for girls and women, in light of the discriminatory policies that have been adopted by the country's de facto authorities.

With regard to the possibility of organizing effective activities in Afghanistan, many respondents suggested using caution in situations where such activities may harm the targeted communities, because they are considered hostile by the de facto authorities. However, some diaspora actors are working to facilitate the launch of educational and entrepreneurial activities that would link their host country with their country of origin. Moreover, the survey shows a widespread willingness to cooperate with Afghan organizations and traditional humanitarian actors, while there is little interest in strengthening State institutions, because they are governed by authorities that are perceived as hostile and poorly representative of all the country's political and ethnic components.

Two instruments for responding to the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan were identified as particularly useful: (i) fundraising and remittances; and (ii) collaboration with Afghan organizations. Cooperation with traditional humanitarian actors was also identified as an additional possible instrument.

Although the links between diaspora members in Italy and organizations in their country of origin are limited compared to those of other Afghan diasporas in Europe with a different migration history, they hold useful potential for the implementation of new humanitarian projects. In fact, Afghan diaspora actors in Italy can clearly identify intervention priorities and the specific needs of their country of origin.

> RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations build on the first-hand accounts gathered as part of a set of interviews with members of the Afghan diaspora in Italy and experts. They are also based on the analysis of the relevant contexts (in Afghanistan and in Italy).

For IOM

- Enhance the **skills**, organizational resources, initiatives and project development capacities of Afghan diaspora actors in Italy through training and capacity-building courses (for example, project design, administration and so forth).
- Support the consolidation of diaspora **organizations** in Italy and their networks:
 - Encourage the creation of collaboration platforms, which may not necessarily be formal but ensure regular activities. These can provide venues for exchange with the aim of identifying common priorities and potential activities, for example through the establishment of a national or thematic coordination network.
 - Enhance cultural and community activities implemented or planned by diaspora organizations, including through special funds and ad hoc initiatives.
 - Facilitate the creation of communication channels between Afghan diaspora organizations in Italy and international organizations, particularly within the European Union.
 - Facilitate the creation of communication channels between diaspora organizations and institutions, public bodies, universities, private foundations, the media and the entrepreneurial sector.

- Facilitate meetings and dialogue between diaspora actors and recently arrived Afghan nationals, by encouraging their interaction.
- Create opportunities for public discussion whereby diaspora actors can identify and assess the prospects and limitations of their involvement in activities both in the country of origin and in the host country, as well as the intervention priorities.
- Continue the nationwide **mapping** of the Afghan diaspora in Italy, notably through the creation of a regular and continuous monitoring mechanism.
- Promote **information** on Afghanistan in national and international media.

For Italian civil society:

- Encourage discussion between traditional humanitarian actors and diaspora actors.
- Encourage cooperation between diaspora organizations and Italian universities, including training activities for students living in Afghanistan.
- Support e-learning initiatives and projects by the Afghan diaspora aimed at beneficiaries in their country of origin.

For policymakers and donors:

- Involve diaspora actors in the definition of the strategic objectives of humanitarian aid and development cooperation.
- Involve diaspora actors in the monitoring of the effectiveness of humanitarian and development cooperation activities conducted in the country of origin.
- Encourage institutions to design a coherent policy on the role of diasporas in integration, humanitarian assistance and development.

- Facilitate access to financial resources, so as to enable the launch or continuation of activities by diaspora organizations, notably increasing flexibility in the allocation of funds.
- Foster, encourage and promote the contribution of the Afghan diaspora to humanitarian, recovery, peace and development activities in Afghanistan, including through the allocation of a special fund.
- Foster, encourage and promote the contribution of the Afghan diaspora to reception and integration activities aimed at members of the new diaspora in Italy, notably through the allocation of a special fund.

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Notes

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