**Position Paper for United Nations General Assembly:**

**Special Session on Indigenous Affairs**

Long recognized by the UN as one of the least developed countries in the world, the decimation of the nation’s infrastructure after years of war, the road to recovery and self-sustainability will be a long one. As said by Kofe Annan at the International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance in Afghanistan in 2002, “Our challenge is to help the Afghans help themselves.” As still a relatively new government, Afghanistan greatly appreciates the efforts of many United Nations (UN) agencies and programs in supporting the establishment of a stable governance structure, provision of emergency and humanitarian relief, and working diligently towards achieving our goals as outlined in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS).

As one of the countries who voted in support of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007, the government of Afghanistan welcomes the opportunity to participate in discussions at this Special Session on Indigenous Affairs to address many of the issues relating to the mistreatment and marginalization of indigenous persons. Afghanistan has led a tumultuous existence, marked by war and civil unrest. As an extremely culturally diverse nation with 14 distinct ethnic groups, efforts to improve the overall outlook are marred with challenges from many perspectives: the forced nomadic existence of many indigenous populations, ongoing tribal and guerilla fighting, discrimination, geographic disposition, and cultural or ethnic practices, to name a few.

Topic 1: Indigenous Peoples, Healthcare, Mental Health, and Wellness

After decades of war and civil unrest, the plight of the people of Afghanistan is bleak, to say the least. Access to appropriate healthcare has been limited, particularly for women and children and for the many tribal people living in rural areas. Beyond the lack of infrastructure, ranging from roadways to facilitate travel to appropriate diagnostic and recordkeeping tools, challenges for improving healthcare services include poor nutrition and sanitation brought about by extreme poverty, a shortage of skilled healthcare providers – particularly women, and ethnic and cultural norms.

Despite the UN’s efforts in the late 1990s to combat the cumulative damages of civil war and a series of natural disasters, 25% of Afghan children were dying of preventable diseases before the age of 5. Millions of children each year were being vaccinated against diseases like polio and measles, yet in the early 2000s, typhoid, cholera, pneumonia and malaria were rampant. The Minority Rights Group International has reported that 9 out of 10 Afghan women are illiterate; on average, they give birth to 7 children and live for only 42 years.

A collaborative effort between The Global Fund, the Afghan Ministry of Public Health and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is aimed at improving the provision of basic healthcare services to those in rural areas of Afghanistan.

In 2014 the UNDP Afghanistan was awarded four Global Fund Grants for continued work on tuberculosis (TB), malaria, HIV and health system strengthening. Afghanistan is one in 22 countries with a high incidence of TB. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that there are 53,000 new cases of TB in Afghanistan each year, and 11,000 deaths per year. As a result of this funding the UNDP is working with the Ministry of Public Health, the National Tuberculosis Programme and NGOs to build and strengthen the healthcare system. Training and community awareness programs also aim at reducing discrimination against TB patients. In addition efforts are focused on improving prevention, screening and diagnostic services.

These grants have also enabled the purchase and distribution of over 1 million mosquito nets to areas with high malaria transmission rates. With respect to strengthening the fundamental healthcare system, grants are providing training for female nurses who can then care for women and children who for cultural reasons would not be able to seek care from a male doctor; improving access to community-based healthcare services, particularly in remote areas; and improving the ability to record and access a national database of healthcare information.

Overall, these cumulative efforts to bring preventative and diagnostic medicine to the many ethnic and cultural groups within the Afghan population can help, over time, to reduce the mortality rates.

Topic 2: Indigenous Land Rights, Climate Change impacts and Environmental Protection of Resources

Geographically the many groups/tribes of Afghanistan are naturally divided, although, they have been hit by many natural disasters over the years of recovery (2 earthquakes and major flood in 1998, then their longest drought in living memory since then); this made it very hard to set up and maintain the infrastructure for a primarily agricultural economy. Land rights vary across the nation and environmental protection measures have been lax due to decades of war and civil unrest.

Since the 1990s the UN has led consolidated appeals for aid for Afghanistan, which saw emergency aid provided, as well as funding allocated to rehabilitation projects focusing on reducing poverty in rural communities. Activities included distribution of seed for crops, irrigation and rehabilitation of thousands of hectares of land for orchards and crops. Subsequent campaigns have not been as fruitful and the rise of the Taliban further destabilized programs like these.

Regrettably, one area of agricultural development has been the marked increase in the production of opium, with Afghanistan being the source of approximately 80% of the world’s opium contributing to the region and becoming a haven for drug traffickers and terrorists. Despite the Taliban officially banning production of opium in 2000 the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics indicates that opium production in 2016 increased by 43% over 2015, and the area used for poppy cultivation has also increased by 10%.

In addition, the vast presence of landmines in many regions is further hampering efforts. It is estimated that there are 10 million landmines in Afghanistan, with approximately 150 km2 being identified as priority one zone, meaning they are in direct impact with people’s lives – where they live or work, farmland, waterways and the lake. Efforts to repatriate immigrants as well as rebuild infrastructure and agricultural lands are tedious, and costly, due to required clearing. A report from 1995 estimated almost 15,000,000 sqm of roadways still needed to be cleared of landmines at a cost of $0.80/sqm.

The potential for developing new land resources exists, however, presents its own challenges. The Afghan Geological Survey has documented land rich in mineral deposits, including a vast amount of iron, copper, gold, cobalt, rare earth metals, and lithium. Unfortunately the mining sector is unregulated, and without sufficient regulation and infrastructure it has been a revenue stream for criminal enterprise.

Topic 3: Indigenous Peoples, Poverty, and Development

Much progress has been made since the Afghan Interim Authority was established in 2001 under the Bonn Agreement. A broad-based, inclusive government was established and the new Constitution incorporates measures to promote recognition of persons from each of the 34 provinces. The constitution recognizes all citizens of Afghanistan having “equal rights and duties before the law.” Despite broad statements like these, other laws have been passed that can negate personal rights and freedoms for some ethnic groups, like the Shi’a Personal Status Law (2009) which strips basic human rights afforded under the constitution from Shi’a women.

Combined with other efforts around non-discriminatory education programming and establishing employment and economically viable businesses we can see a self-sufficient Afghanistan arise. Much progress has been made under this new Afghanistan government since the Afghan Interim Authority was established, but having fundamentally started from ‘ground zero’ there is much more to be done to realize all the goals of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS).

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