



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 16 October 2017
(OR. en)

13098/17

COASI 163
ASIE 43
CFSP/PESC 861
RELEX 841
DEVGEN 226
CIVCOM 187
COHOM 113
COHAFA 76
MIGR 198
COPS 308
AGRI 539
TRANS 405
ENER 400
CODRO 5
COTER 100

OUTCOME OF PROCEEDINGS

From: General Secretariat of the Council
On: 16 October 2017
To: Delegations

No. prev. doc.: 12912/17

Subject: Afghanistan
- Council conclusions (16 October 2017)

Delegations will find in the annex the Council conclusions on Afghanistan, as adopted by the Council at its 3566th meeting held on 16 October 2017.

Council conclusions on Afghanistan

1. The Council welcomes the Joint Communication by the High Representative and the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on Elements for an EU Strategy on Afghanistan¹. The Joint Communication lays out a path for a coherent, ambitious and forward-looking strategy for EU engagement and cooperation with Afghanistan in order to overcome its substantial challenges. In line with the Global Strategy on the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy and its integrated approach to conflicts and crises, the strategy reconfirms the EU's and Member States' long-term commitment to promoting peace, stability and prosperity in Afghanistan and to support its sustainable development.

2. The Joint Communication focuses on four priority areas critical to achieving progress in Afghanistan: a) promoting peace, stability and regional security; b) reinforcing democracy, the rule of law and human rights and promoting good governance and women's empowerment; c) supporting economic and human development; d) addressing challenges related to migration. The EU supports those objectives, recognising that the security interests of EU Member States require significant engagement in Afghanistan, and which are in line with the Council conclusions of 18 July 2016. The EU will pursue these objectives in close partnership with relevant international stakeholders.

¹ JOINT (2017) 31 final of 24 July 2017

- A) Promoting peace, stability and regional security
3. The EU encourages coordinated efforts to support an inclusive Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process, which is the only viable path towards a sustainable resolution of the conflict. The EU reaffirms that such a process must lead to the renunciation of violence and the breaking of all ties to international terrorism and the respect for the Afghan Constitution including its human rights provisions, notably the rights of women and children. The EU welcomes Afghan initiatives for peace such as the Kabul Process on Peace and Security Cooperation. The EU will actively reach out to support international initiatives contributing to peace, security and stability in Afghanistan, building on its strong engagement in peace and development since 2002. The appointment of a new EU Special Envoy to Afghanistan ensures the EU's continued engagement in international and regional processes aiming at peace in Afghanistan.
 4. The EU underlines that security and sustainable development are interconnected challenges in a state-building process that needs to be underpinned by genuine political support from the region. A secure, stable, and prosperous Afghanistan is vital to peace and stability of the region as a whole. The EU urges all regional stakeholders to cooperate constructively in order to promote a genuine and results-oriented negotiation process without preconditions aimed at creating a lasting settlement between the parties to the conflict. Such a settlement will provide the foundation for peace, security and prosperity in Afghanistan and the wider region.

5. The EU is committed to working with Afghanistan to combat terrorism, the financing of terrorism and terrorist threats in all their forms and to step up dialogue and cooperation to prevent and counter violent extremism, radicalization and recruitment and to address their root causes. The EU expects regional stakeholders to contribute to creating an environment that is conducive to peace and reconciliation, including efforts to ensure that their territory is not used as safe-havens and for the preparation of terrorist activities.
 6. The EU welcomes the Afghan Government's four year sector reform plan and commends the efforts made in support of sufficient and increasingly sustainable Afghan National Defence and Security Forces as endorsed by Afghanistan and contributing countries of the Resolute Support Mission at the NATO Warsaw Summit on July 2016.
 7. The EU recalls the importance of a more effective, responsive and transparent civilian police force. This will require institutional reform and capacity building. Experience drawn from the EUPOL mission which ended in 2016 shall be taken into account.
- B) Reinforcing democracy, the rule of law and human rights and promoting good governance and women's empowerment
8. The EU remains committed to supporting Afghanistan in implementing its agreed reform agenda. The EU emphasises that, to this end, further efforts and tangible progress are needed by the Afghan side, notably in the areas of democracy, rule of law, human rights and women's empowerment, as well as anti-corruption measures, fight against drug production and trafficking.

9. The new EU Strategy takes account of established international frameworks and in particular the reform plans, presented at the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan on 5 October 2016. This includes the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF), National Priority Programs (NPP) as well as the renewed and updated 'Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework (SMAF)' which contains commitments for specific reform deliverables on women, anti-corruption, governance, rule of law and human rights, poverty reduction as well as fiscal sustainability and public finance management. The EU welcomes the progress made on the ANPDF, SMAF and NPPs. Furthermore, the effective implementation of the Afghanistan National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security is of key importance. The EU emphasises the importance of regular reporting on progress of those frameworks and programmes and will closely follow their developments.
10. Parliamentary and district council elections are announced for 7 July 2018. These will be followed by presidential elections in 2019. The EU calls on the Independent Election Commission, the government, political stakeholders and civil society to continue working closely together towards an inclusive, transparent and credible election process. The EU reaffirms its willingness to support the Government's efforts in that regard.

C) Supporting economic and human development

11. Economic and human development make an important contribution towards a self-reliant Afghanistan by reducing dependence on external aid and giving economic perspectives to the population, particularly for young people. Strengthening the private sector is key to developing the economy, including the agricultural sector. Afghanistan also has potential for developing extractive industries, which would create jobs and generate greater revenue for the state.

12. Enhanced regional and international economic and trade cooperation should be encouraged to stimulate the Afghan economy and to promote stability. Initiatives that improve regional connectivity and enable increased trade throughout the region, by promoting transit, transport and energy corridors are therefore vital namely in the frameworks of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA), the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process (HoA) and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
13. The Council expresses its concerns with regard to the continually deteriorating humanitarian situation. The Council notes the high number of civilian casualties, and condemns all attacks targeting civilians or civilian facilities, which must be protected. The Council recalls the responsibility of all parties to protect civilians in accordance with their obligations pursuant to International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law.

D) Addressing challenges related to migration

14. The EU underlines the importance of deepening the existing dialogue and cooperation on migration, including returns and readmission and the fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. The EU welcomes the on-going implementation of the EU-Afghanistan Joint Way Forward and of the Member States' bilateral arrangements on migration, and underlines the importance of pursuing and enhancing these efforts for their effective implementation, in line with the EU Law and especially in accordance with fundamental rights and the general principles of international law. The EU will continue to focus on addressing the root causes of migration and to support the Afghan Government's efforts to ensure in the context of the regional dimension the safe, orderly and dignified returns and the sustainable reintegration of returned Afghan nationals within the country.

15. The EU underlines the great importance it attaches to the role of both national and international civil society organisations and NGOs. In order for these organisations to fulfil their essential role in creating awareness and promoting fundamental rights, they need to carry out their activities in an unhindered way according to the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and the right to assembly.
 16. The EU welcomes the ratification of the Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development (CAPD) by Afghanistan and looks forward to its swift provisional application, so that the first dialogue under the CAPD framework may take place in early 2018.
 17. The Council recalls its Conclusions of 12 May 2016 confirming the value of joint programming for the EU and Member States to better align their actions, for increased strategic analysis, coordination and joint implementation.
 18. The Council endorses the third and final annual implementation report of the "European Union Afghanistan Strategy: 2014-16" (cf. annex).
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ANNEX 2

Third review of the EU Strategy for Afghanistan 2014-2016

May 2017

Introduction

Since the last review of the EU Strategy for Afghanistan in June 2016, the EU and its Member States have continued to coordinate their activities closely, thus ensuring their presence and active involvement in all areas related to achieving the Strategy's objectives.

Over the course of this reporting period of January-December 2016, joint EU and Member State activities, in pursuit of common strategic objectives have in large parts centred on the preparations of the October 2016 Brussels Conference on Afghanistan (BCA) and its follow up. The joint strategic objective on migration has seen increased EU and Member State coordination and cooperation.

During the June 2016 review of the strategy, it was proposed that the strategy should be updated, in light of the outcome of the BCA, building on the mutual commitments agreed at Brussels and on a finalized Afghan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF), as well as future priorities for reform. An updated EU Strategy for Afghanistan, currently under development, will cover the period from 2017 onwards.

The pursuit of European strategic objectives was strengthened by the successful outcome of the BCA, where Afghanistan's international partners renewed their financial commitments to the tune of US \$15.2 billion in support of Afghanistan's ongoing state-building efforts through 2020 as well as by the successful July 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, where Afghanistan secured continued international support for the security sector and the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF).

These contributions will allow for an additional four years of sustained support to stabilize Afghanistan and move the country closer to peace. Such support is paramount to prevent a reversal of the achievements to date, considering a deteriorating security situation, political uncertainties over government unity and electoral reforms; economic difficulties coupled with population growth and unprecedented numbers of conflict-induced internally displaced persons (IDPs) and regional returns from Pakistan and Iran. These factors have affected Afghanistan's progress towards peace and development, increasing the country's fragility.

Context

Two years into the Transformation Decade (2015-24), Afghanistan's National Unity Government (NUG) has demonstrated perseverance despite significant security, economic and political challenges. State fragility has continued to be exacerbated by corruption, weak rule of law, illicit economic activities, and ongoing armed conflict. Implementing the government's reform agenda has progressed slowly, and delays in key appointments have damaged government legitimacy.

The Government and political elites have continued to manage their political differences, frequent tensions notwithstanding. At the end of 2016, the government also advanced electoral reform by adopting a new Election Law and appointing new members in the Electoral Management Bodies.

Afghanistan's overall security situation has deteriorated. While the ANDSF have proven their resilience during what was long foreseen as a difficult transition, 2016 has turned out to be a difficult fighting season. The Taliban have established a presence in many rural areas and continue to challenge a range of district centres and some Provincial capitals. As a result, up to a third of the territory and 25% of the population remain cut off from government services. Similarly, the ISIL (Daesh)/Khorasan is a growing concern as they have managed to plot and carry horrific and unprecedented attacks in Kabul and other provinces in North and East of Afghanistan.

The humanitarian situation has deteriorated as a result of intensified conflict: in 2016, 600,000 people were displaced, bringing the overall number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to 1.5 million. UNAMA's 2016 Annual Report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, has documented the highest number of casualties since 2009, with 11,418 civilian casualties. This represents a 3 percent increase, compared to 2015.

The Afghan government's efforts concerning peace and reconciliation have seen mixed results. The Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) came to a standstill in mid-2016 and there has been no sustained, formal negotiation process with the Taliban. Progress was made, on the other hand, in negotiations between the government and Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG). The implementation of the peace agreement signed in October 2016 is progressing, with the hope of the agreement to serve as a blueprint for future agreements with the Taliban.

An increase in revenue collection in line with IMF targets counts as a positive development, although economic growth is projected at 1.8% in 2017 (WB estimates), a steep decline from an average rate of 9.4% in 2003-12. Unemployment remains at 34.3% (ALCS 2016-2017). As a result of economic and political uncertainties, the optimism felt by the Afghan public has declined significantly: in 2016, only 29.3% of Afghans said the country is moving into the right direction – the lowest level recorded since 2004.²

These developments have had an effect on migration: in 2016, Afghans remained the second-largest group of migrants to the EU. While Afghan nationals no longer arrive in Europe at the same rates as they did in 2015, the return of over 1 million Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran over the course of 2016 has severely stretched government capacities and represents a serious challenge. This challenge is expected to be exacerbated in 2017, as projections indicate that similar numbers can be expected. A coordinated answer is needed.

² Asia Foundation (2016), "A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2016".

Objectives

(a) Promoting peace, security and regional stability

Objective: Promoting peace, security and regional stability, by advocating for an inclusive peace process; mitigating threats from drugs, trafficking and organised crime; tackling illegal migration; and supporting the development of a professional and accountable civilian police service

While no formal peace process is underway with the Taliban, some peace-focused initiatives have taken place. A formal agreement with HIG was signed in October 2016 and its implementation is underway. Going forward, there is a need to encourage the government to remain focused on peace despite what stands to be a tough 2017 fighting season. The High Peace Council, with President Ghani's significant input, is currently formulating a new and more cohesive peace strategy, which counts as a positive sign.

Poppy cultivation and trade, as part of the broader illicit economy, continued to negatively impact state-building efforts. The potential production of opium has increased significantly by 43% from 3,300 tons in 2015 to 4,800 in 2016.

Migration remains a significant issue with sizeable Afghan refugee populations from Pakistan and Iran returning to Afghanistan. Migrants asserting to be Afghan nationals remained the second largest group of arrivals to Europe in 2016, although their number reduced compared to 2015.³

Assistance to civilian policing remains a need, particularly in light of the present focus on counter-insurgency on the part of the Afghan National Police (ANP). Challenges are present in the areas of development of leadership, training and education at all levels, as well as fostering greater accountability, in particular through anti-corruption measures.

³ 267,485 illegal entries in 2015, number reduced to around 50,000 in 2016.

The EU and Member States have continued **to support an inclusive Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process leading to a political settlement in which all parties eschew violence, disavow any link with terrorism, and respect human rights – in particular women’s human rights.** The EU and Member States continued to support a peace process and to encourage adequate and active female participation in all its aspects. Specifically, the EU and Member States have advocated the inclusion of a female negotiator in any future Afghanistan-Taliban talks, and have engaged in training activities for negotiators, peace-builders and female police.

While **enhancing political and economic cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours and supporting mutually reinforcing cooperation initiatives with neighbouring countries and international organisations,** the EU and Member States continued to support initiatives and processes such as the Heart of Asia – Istanbul process and its confidence building measures, as well as trade related technical assistance. In recognition of the importance of regional solutions to peace, the EU and Member States also supported regional peace initiatives, through diplomatic outreach and engagement, recognizing that any initiative should be driven by Afghanistan and include the EU.

In 2016, the EU and Member States continued their high level policy dialogue and technical support towards **strengthening Afghan and regional efforts to fight organised crime and reduce drug production, trafficking and demand.** The EU and Member States aimed to address counter-narcotics and the illicit economy through a comprehensive approach focusing support to capacity building and regional and international cooperation for law enforcement and the judiciary, on legal matters; border management and trade facilitation; prevention and treatment of drug dependence amongst vulnerable groups and research and analysis on illicit drug consumption's trends; and alternative livelihoods, aimed at reducing the dependency of subsistence farmers on narcotic crops. Through the UNODC Regional Program on Afghanistan and Neighbouring Countries, the EU supported counter-narcotics initiatives partnership and trust building between the countries in the region.

In the field of migration, **the EU and the Afghan government agreed in October 2016 on the “Joint Way Forward (JWF) on migration issues”**, which represents a **comprehensive cooperation framework** going beyond return and readmission and addressing several issue of joint concern and interest such as the fight against smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings, medium to long term reintegration of returnees and awareness raising. Several Member States simultaneously also negotiated and concluded bilateral Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), to deepen the cooperation on migration and facilitate returns. The first meeting of the Joint Working Group on the implementation of the Joint Way Forward was held in November 2016. In the last quarter of 2016, the EU also decided to finance a programme in support of the host communities across Afghanistan, for a total of Euro 79 million.

At the regional level, the EU supported the “Solution Strategy on Afghan Refugees” for the reintegration of Afghan refugees based on principles of voluntary repatriation and sustainability. Actions are benefiting a significant number of the total Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan and around 200,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan. The EU financially supports the provision of public services in health, education, legal protection and legal assistance, sanitation and hygiene as well as livelihood opportunities. The EU has increased its efforts toward reaching a sustainable solution for the Afghan refugees in the region, through several dialogues with relevant partners and also through supporting sustainable reintegration of returnees.

The EU (including its police mission EUPOL) and certain Member States bilaterally continued to provide strategic advice to the Ministry of Interior (MoI) leadership, in pursuit of the development of a professional and accountable civilian police force. With the end of the EUPOL mission on 31 December 2016, EU support for MoI reform and the professionalization of the Afghan police service will continue through a new EU Police Assistance Team as well as nd political engagement.

The EU and Member States continued engagement in strengthening Afghan-led efforts to increase the quality and sustainability of civilian policing, as an integral part of the wider rule of law reform efforts. The EU, EUPOL and Member States continued political and technical dialogues with the aim of developing the Afghan National Police (ANP) gradually into a professional civilian police service. The EU and Member States also engaged with the government to improve Afghan leadership and strengthen ownership in the MoI's anti-corruption and fiscal sustainability reforms.

Coordination between the EU and Member States, government and other donors was done through the Oversight and Coordination Body (OCB) as well as the International Police Coordination Board (IPCB), while technical aspects have been regularly addressed in the increasingly efficient MoI Support Team (MST). The EU and Member States supported the restructuring of the UNDP-administered Law and Order Trust Fund (LOTFA) to provide more focused and programmatic support for MoI reform, police professionalization and civilianisation as well as increasing oversight over the payroll management.

EUPOL and LOTFA, supported by the EU and Member States, developed and assisted the implementation of the MoI Female Police Strategy and supported Police Women' Councils to increase coverage and gender mainstreaming throughout the system. Moreover, in August 2016 EUPOL organised a joint two-day conference with the MoI on the future of civilian policing in Afghanistan focused on leadership and equality in the ANP.

(b) Reinforcing Democracy

Objective: Reinforcing democracy: functioning democracy needs to be embedded through democratic oversight at national, provincial and district levels, inclusive and transparent elections, and capacity-building in key institutions of governance;

Stalled electoral reform progressed with the adoption of the new Election Law on 1 September 2016 and the appointments of the new commissioners in Independent Elections Commission (IEC) and Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) on 23 November 2016. The Government is expected to hold delayed parliamentary and district elections at the earliest possible date. Meanwhile, the implementation of meaningful electoral reforms still faces many challenges, including weak electoral administration that does not enjoy the confidence of the Afghan electorate; interference of the government in technical electoral issues; unresolved corruption cases; security; and budget. The upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, which should be free, fair, transparent and credible, are seen crucial to the consolidation of an Afghan democracy.

Political momentum on sub-national governance has decreased over the past year. The President has requested a further review of the country's sub-national governance policy in order to broaden its spectrum beyond administrative to thematic issues, including mining. However, the activities of the Independent Directorate on Local Governance (IDLG) continue to be hampered by lack of leadership owing to vacancies at the very top level. Inter-ministerial coordination in sub-national governance remained an unaddressed challenge throughout the period and continues to require further strengthening.

The Afghan government has stepped up anti-corruption measures and commitments. The refreshed Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework (SMAF) presented at the BCA in 2016 updated the deliverables for the drafting of anti-corruption plans of the five key revenue-generating ministries, by requiring these ministries to report publicly on implementation progress of their anti-corruption plans in 2017. The SMAF also called for the drafting and endorsement of an anti-corruption strategy for the whole government in the first half of 2017.

The EU and Member States continued to support the electoral reform process based on the broadest possible political consensus among Afghan stakeholders. The EU and Member States actively participated in the discussions with the Government, emphasising a realistic electoral timeline for the upcoming elections; strong leadership, impartiality and independence of the Electoral Management Bodies and the need to resolve financial and administrative fraud. Pending clarity on the electoral timeline for the upcoming elections, **the EU has supported politically the UNDP Project Implementation Plan (PIP)** providing a minimum technical advisory assistance to electoral reform and management bodies. **Given that the legitimacy of the electoral process will ultimately rest both on an actual and perceived integrity of the elections,** the EU advocated for the inclusion of an Electoral Integrity Assessment under the PIP, and started negotiating the project to strengthen electoral integrity and justice in Afghanistan, both to be implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).

Within the Afghan Parliament's present constitutional and legal mandate, **the EU continued to provide support to the two Houses of the National Assembly and their respective secretariats, with a view to improving legitimacy, transparency and more inclusive governance at all levels as well as strengthening oversight and accountability mechanisms.** This support was provided within the framework of the “Institutional and Capacity Support to the Parliament of Afghanistan”, with expected completion in December 2017.

Building the capacity of Sub-National Governance in Afghanistan continued to be a key priority for EU and Member States in 2016. **Focusing on reducing corruption and increasing accountability in order to improve service delivery and budget administration,** the EU and Member States continued to engage actively in the policy dialogue with the central and sub-national government on reform efforts and contributed to strengthen Provincial Governor Offices' and Provincial Councils' capacities on revenue generation at municipal level.

In addition, the EU and Member States assisted municipalities to undertake strategic urban planning and promote local economic development, stimulate investment and expand inclusive service delivery.

Capacity-building of key institutions also extended to anti-corruption initiatives with the EU and its Member States actively supported government efforts in this regard. On 8 May 2016, the EU organised its third Anti-Corruption campaign and conference, which focused on prevention and the role of investigative journalism in disclosing cases of corruption. Together with the UK, the EU continues to host regular ambassadorial events to reach agreement on key messaging and alignment of action among the international community. The EU also attends the High Council of Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption, chaired by the President and has contributed guidance to the legislative reforms against corruption.

(c) Encouraging economic and human development

Objective: Encouraging economic and human development including creating a transparent economic framework to encourage investment, raise revenue, allocate finances, strengthen resilience and improve access to health and education, including for the most vulnerable segments of the population;

In 2016, economic growth picked up at 1.6 percent after a significant downturn at 1.3 percent and 0.8 percent respectively in 2014 and 2015.⁴ With the pace of economic growth lagging population growth by 3 percent, poverty and unemployment has been on the increase⁵.

New company registrations in 2016 (a proxy indicator for new investments and business confidence) pointed towards limited new investments and weak economic activity, with the reduction occurring across all sectors. Business confidence remained critical, with potential new investments not at the same levels in 2016 as recorded three years prior. This suggests that potential investors were delaying their investment decisions as a result of the overall political uncertainty and market conditions.

⁴ World Bank, Afghanistan Development Update, October 2016 [update]

⁵ Latest Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey of 2013/14.

*Afghanistan's accession to the World Trade Organization in July 2016 - and the opening of the Chahbahar port in Iran as an alternative trade route - were important developments in 2016. The Government announced reforms including the promotion of **regional integration** and an enabling partnership for **private sector development**.*

Despite important reforms undertaken in 2016, such as approval of an open access policy in the telecommunication sector and the establishment of a one-stop shop for business licensing, regulatory challenges to doing business in Afghanistan and corruption in business service delivery continued to hinder economic development and deter foreign investment. Improving the investment climate, putting in place enabling business environment policies and pursuing the implementation of WTO obligations will promote diversification and integration of Afghan businesses in regional networks.

A number of newly introduced measures, in line with recommendations from the IMF Staff Monitored Programme (SMP 2015) and the successor Extended Credit Facility (2016-2019), resulted in a 18% year-on-year increase of domestic revenues in 2016. Notwithstanding, sustainable growth will require further private sector engagement and strengthening of the revenue base.

The **State Building Contract for Afghanistan (2016-2018; EUR 200 million)** signed at the BCA, represents a new strategic platform for the EU and Member States to follow-up, engage and influence the Government's reform agenda. The EU and Member States engaged in regular political and technical policy dialogue on medium and long-term fiscal sustainability, aiming at **stronger financial self-sustainability of the Afghan state through increased revenue generation**, particularly with the aim of reducing the 2017 budget's 61% reliance upon international grants and loans.

The EU and Member States contributed to the Public Financial Management Roadmap (PFMR II) and the resulting Five-Year Fiscal Performance Improvement Plan (FPIP) covering the period 2016-2020 and were closely involved in policy and technical dialogue with the Ministry of Finance and other involved parties. Implementation of the FPIP began in January 2016, and support by the EU and Member States through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund is set to progress a number of objectives, including improvement in the execution rate of the development part of the budget.

The EU-funded Trade Assistance project (2016-2019) further assisted the Government of Afghanistan in improving the conditions for the use of trade as a lever for enhanced regional cooperation, economic and human development and poverty reduction, aiming at strengthening human and institutional capacity on trade policy and strategy formulation and implementation with active engagement of the private sector.

The EU and Member States support **human development, including for the most vulnerable segments of the population, by continuously advocating with the government for improvements on service delivery** and through support for agriculture and rural development, water and energy supply, health, education, governance and rule of law. The EU and Member States' investments in education have contributed to higher literacy rates for women. Still, a considerable gap persists between boys' and girls' school enrolment and quality of education remains of concern. Despite enormous security and political challenges, the EU and Member States' support to service delivery contributed to sustaining past gains, such as a significant decline in maternal and child mortality.

The EU and Member States support the Citizen Charter – one of five National Priority Programmes and a key BCA deliverable – which was launched in September 2016 with the objective of improving the delivery of core infrastructure and social services to all communities in Afghanistan. An estimated 40,000 rural communities and all urban communities are expected to receive this support, over the next ten years, through Community Development Councils (CDCs).

EU interventions on **improving the rural economy, to generate jobs and reduce dependence on the poppy** focused on consistent support to community infrastructure development, animal health, access to good quality varieties of seeds/plants, water management and food security. The bulk of the EU and Member State contributions in agriculture have focused on making the rural economy more resilient and on fostering an environment conducive for farmers to invest in agriculture.

(d) Fostering the rule of law and human rights

Objective: Fostering the rule of law and respect for human rights by advocating respect for human rights (including in particular the full implementation of statutory protections for the rights of women and girls), supporting greater equality before the law of all citizens and assisting with the development of a comprehensive framework to strengthen and reform the justice sector.

In 2016, the human rights situation - in particular for women and children - left room for improvement. Cases of inhumane punishment had been recorded and there were reports of torture being carried out in detention facilities and by prominent government officials. The lack of prosecution of such human rights violations reflects a culture of impunity. War crimes committed during the last decades have not been investigated. The government continued to implement the death penalty. Six prisoners were executed in response to a large Taliban attack in Kabul on 19 April 2016. Freedom of expression and a diverse media landscape in Afghanistan both counted as positives, especially when compared to other countries in the region. Nevertheless, 2016 was the bloodiest year ever for the media in Afghanistan, with 13 journalists killed, the highest figure ever.

The government has been committed to advancing human rights especially for women and children. The Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law remained in force. However, there were serious concerns about its implementation, with mixed results reported across the country. A Law prohibiting the recruitment of children to the ANDSF had been passed and a draft Child Act was drafted. The Government began implementing the National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325). However, its implementation was weak and lacks financial resources.

The Government approved a Justice Sector Reform Plan at the end of 2016. Public distrust in the statutory legal system remains prevalent. The formal justice system is not accessible countrywide, and many Afghans continue to rely on informal justice mechanisms.

The EU and Member States closely coordinated efforts and continued to **advocate advancing human rights, in particular for women and children, as well as women's empowerment**. These efforts included addressing cases of major human rights violations, notably as regards civilian casualties; the death penalty; women's rights and children's rights; advocacy and public statements and demarches. Of particular note were joint efforts towards the implementation of the EVAW Law and the NAP 1325.

Human Rights were addressed at the October 2016 BCA; a side event on gender took place in the margins of the BCA ("*Empowered Women, prosperous Afghanistan*") which allowed for an inclusive discussion on where Afghanistan stood on protecting human rights, especially for women and ensuring gender equality, and the way ahead.

The second EU-Afghanistan local Human Rights Dialogue took place on 1 June 2016 with a follow-up meeting on 30 November 2016. The EU continued to follow up with the government on the implementation of the NAP 1325, including the need to implement the plan fully. The Local Human Rights Dialogue also included topics such as the signature and ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) and the issuance of internal instructions to all security authorities for the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) and the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Interior and the National Directorate of Security on the Ombudsman Section in the AIHRC.

The EU and Member States have continued to **advocate for an end to the culture of impunity for serious war crimes and human rights violations and abuses**. The EU and Member States raised the issue of transitional justice and the International Criminal Court (ICC) with the Afghan government and have encouraged the government to cooperate with and extend an official invitation to the ICC. The EU and Member States also held meetings with the Transitional Justice Coordination Group and continue to follow-up on specific human rights cases with the Afghan government, centrally and in the provinces. The EU and Member States advocated that the reservations to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment should be removed.

The EU and Member States continued to liaise with government counterparts to create an environment conducive to progress and reforms, as well as engaging with other donors to streamline these efforts and donor support. The EU and Member States continued to support Afghanistan in its **maintenance of the right to freedom of assembly and strengthen the right to freedom of expression, including by supporting journalists and human rights defenders**.

The EU and Member States cooperated closely with civil society and the media as well as the Afghanistan Journalist Safety Committee and regularly met with journalists and human rights defenders on security and related matters. **The EU and Member States produced an EU+ Local Strategy for Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan, which outlined envisioned protective actions including political dialogue, awareness raising, trial monitoring, as well as internal and external relocation of those at risk**. The EU and Member States cooperated closely with Human Rights Defenders and established a mechanism to ensure swift cooperation and burden sharing for the protection of Human Rights Defenders as well as an Afghan-led Human Rights Defenders Committee.