

New Joint Project on Afghanistan Highlights Kazakhstan's Effort on International Development Assistance

*The Astana Times Op. Ed.
Originally published on 15th September 2016*

On Jan. 1, 2017, Kazakhstan will take its place on the United Nations Security Council. It is a symbol of how far this country has come since independence and of our status within the international community.

But it is also a big responsibility. The country has been trusted by our international partners with helping make decisions which will have a major impact on the lives of many millions of people and peace and stability in our world.

The challenges are great – whether politically, economically or environmentally. Conflict, for example, has plunged regions into chaos. Prosperity has by-passed too many countries and communities.

Conflict, poverty and despair have also provided fertile ground for violent extremism. In contrast, the evidence shows how it struggles to take root in societies where the economy is growing and opportunities are on the increase.

It is why it is vital that each nation does what it can to help reduce tensions, tackle poverty and provide hope for those who see no prospects for themselves or their families. It is not only morally right to offer a helping hand to the less fortunate but, in an inter-connected world where dangers and threats easily leap borders, is also strongly in our own national interests. There is little to be gained and a great deal to be lost by sitting on the sidelines.

This is the background against which the evolving role of Kazakhstan's international development assistance should be measured. When a national operator for official development assistance (ODA), branded KazAID, is established, it will formally mark the country's transformation from being a recipient of development aid to a donor – the first country in Central Asia to make this step.

Kazakhstan had, of course, quietly been providing financial and food support to meet humanitarian emergencies for years. But through KazAID the country will have a single body to direct and coordinate efforts so they do the most good and build partnerships with its international and national counterparts to maximise impact.

The government in Astana is working, for example, with the United Nations Development Programme to make sure it has the right structures and processes in place to provide effective aid and value for the money. At a national level, a partnership has been forged with Japan's International Cooperation Agency (JICA), announced by the Kazakh Foreign Ministry's press release in August, to strengthen the role of women in Afghanistan's civil service through a series of educational activities involving Kazakh professionals in training capacities.

As a close neighbour and a country with a deeply troubled history and continuing unrest, Afghanistan is rightly a priority for Kazakhstan's aid efforts. If Afghanistan again descends into outright civil war, it will cast a dark shadow over the whole region. It is in all our interests to support its economy and society.

It is why Kazakhstan has already funded around 1,000 Afghan young people to study at our universities so they can return home with the skills and expertise to improve their communities. The new joint programme with Japan focused on expanding the economic independence and rights of Afghan women shows Astana's determination to step up this help.

While Afghanistan and Central Asia have rightly been made the priority for aid projects, KazAID's influence will also be felt wider. Last year, training courses, for example, were run to pass on Kazakh expertise in energy, health and agriculture to professionals from 23 African countries.

Overseas aid is not without its critics. As politicians in Europe and America know from experience, there will always be those who question spending public money on aid efforts abroad. And these complaints get louder when economic conditions are harder as they are across the world.

But provided the money is directed to achieve the right goals and the way it is used is monitored closely, it is money well spent. It is not charity but investment in our security and stability and in our collective economic future as much as of those who directly receive the help. It is this professionalism and transparency which KazAID needs to provide.

Kazakhstan has a solid record of promoting peace and international cooperation. As Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov said, KazAID should turn into an important new instrument to help deliver these goals and build a safer, more prosperous world. It is also another example of the journey the independent nation Kazakhstan has taken in its first 25 years.