

**NGO Policy Dialogue X**  
**Humanitarian Action and the Afghanistan Crisis**  
**November 15, 2001**

Overview: The discussion was the tenth in a series of biannual workshops sponsored by the Humanitarianism and War (H&W) Project of Tufts University, designed to encourage reflection among NGOs on issues of humanitarian policy and programming. The discussion used as a launching pad the Issues Note prepared for the meeting but then focused on issues of particular concern to the group itself.

Held at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, this session engaged 21 staff from 15 relief and rights NGOs, plus four observers and three participants from the H&W Project in a productive, off-the-record exchange of views. Comments received from persons who were not able to be present for the discussion were also shared. As in other sessions in the series, representatives from donor governments and UN organizations were not present.

Against the backdrop of a rapidly changing political-military situation on the ground in Afghanistan – during the span of just a few days in the week of the meeting, Northern Alliance control had shifted from about 10% of the country to well over 50% – the complex interactions of international and local politics and humanitarian operations had produced a confused situation for all: displaced populations and governments as well as NGOs and other relief and rights agencies. Plans that had seemed sensible a week earlier now appeared to be overtaken by events.

At this early stage in the “war” against terrorism, with no clear template for humanitarian action established, the group sought to take advantage of learning from earlier experience in Afghanistan and elsewhere to lay the groundwork for “doing it right” this time around. The meeting sought to identify the elements of a common humanitarian strategy to address the Afghanistan crisis (see the Conclusion section at the end of this report). In an informal “mapping” exercise, participants filled out a questionnaire on their current and contemplated activities, the results of which are attached.

Details: The discussion began by reviewing *the political context* provided by the anti-terrorism initiative within which humanitarian action is set. A number of factors that pertained to the Afghanistan crisis were cited as new to the post-Cold War humanitarian landscape. Terrorism as an acknowledged global security threat is one. A united community of states, reflecting a shared sense of a common threat and of the need to respond to the September 11 events, provides a new level of international political will. The resulting agreement among the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council is unusual. The fact that a number of US NGOs have soft-pedaled or deferred appeals for

Afghanistan so as not to compete with fundraising for domestic needs may also be a new element.

Other participants stressed commonalities with earlier ones that outweigh such acknowledged differences. As in Somalia and the Balkans, humanitarian crises had preceded the dispatch of external military forces. As in Kosovo, prominent major donors – the U.S. is contributing 80% of the resources for Afghan aid – were themselves belligerents in the conflict and dispensers through their troops of assistance to civilians. As in Kosovo, the post-conflict political structure may be dictated by victorious militants, with the former victims perhaps becoming perpetrators of the next round of violence.

As in other settings with predominantly Muslim populations, a large and cumbersome western aid apparatus has had difficulty making the necessary connections with local institutions and values. As in other settings where military and economic coercion has targeted regimes and stigmatized leaders – Iraq is one – the resulting atmosphere may work against humanitarian and peace-building activities. Massive investments in responding to this high-profile crisis are in danger of preempting resources needed elsewhere in the world. Some NGOs are receiving “hate mail” for the first time; others which have assisted people in countries with pariah regimes in the past are already familiar with the phenomenon.

The politicization of humanitarian activities itself was viewed as both an old and a new element. In every complex humanitarian emergency, relief and rights work functions on highly political terrain. The review of humanitarian activities in the 1980s and 1990s in Afghanistan itself confirmed as much.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the new overlay of the war against terrorism was seen as having a potentially deeper and more dramatic impact on the humanitarian enterprise than garden-variety post-Cold War politics. It has not only complicated the socio-political landscape but may embed humanitarian activities more firmly within it. With the political stakes higher, humanitarian space may be more constricted.

One recurrent concern was the evolving nature of the response to anti-terrorism. Not only was the political-military framework changing as regards Afghanistan, with the international objective broadening from capturing bin Laden and dismantling Al Qaeda to the expulsion of the Taliban regime itself. Beyond Afghanistan, the global war against terrorism may at some point in the future move to other locations such as Iraq, North Korea, Chechnya, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, or Colombia.

In this broader perspective, some agencies that were prepared to collaborate with the U.S. on humanitarian issues in the current conflict expressed wariness about what the future holds. According to one NGO, its association with the U.S. effort in Afghanistan may have value from an operational and constituency viewpoint, but there could be a number of downsides as the anti-terrorism campaign progresses. Could reconciliation and peacebuilding work in the Philippines, the agency asked, be negatively affected by the

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<sup>1</sup> See the materials by Antonio Donini in the Attachments to the Issues Note.

presence of U.S. Special Forces assisting the Philippines Army in hunting down terrorists on Mindinao?

Another concern involved the high-profile nature of U.S. government involvement in the humanitarian sector. Agencies expressed dismay at the preemption and/or undercutting of their humanitarian work by the military. Examples cited included the perceived damage to the integrity of humanitarian action by the U.S. military's airdrops of "humanitarian" daily rations (HDRs). The accountability on which donors (and NGOs themselves) insist was not being applied to the activities of the military. The high-profile HDR effort makes NGO work appear to be an extension of U.S. political-military policy. A number of agencies also expressed concern about the White House's request for private donations to its own Afghan Children's Fund. It is clear that, for better or worse, the humanitarian arena is not the sole purview of card-carrying humanitarian organizations.

A third concern involved the regional nature of the challenge. The type of political crisis that preceded the humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan may be playing out in Uzbekistan (which has a sizeable Islamic insurgent movement), China (which is fighting a civil war against Uighers in Xinjiang), Russia (which has severe problems in Chechnya), India (which has recently passed its own anti-terrorism law and perceives a Muslim threat in Kashmir), and Pakistan (a significant proportion of whose Pashtun population is sympathetic to the Taliban). The regional dimensions of the Afghan crisis have implications for effective humanitarian as well as political action.

The anti-terrorism framework was seen as making it incumbent upon US NGOs to apply greater attention to the political terrain and the political impacts of their own activities. One participant associated with major Afghan relief work in the Eighties said that at that time, "We thought we were doing humanitarian assistance [but were] unaware of the political framework. Now we have an opportunity to do things differently." The ways and means available for protecting humanitarian space, however, are anything but clear or readily available.

Within the existing political context, two major sets of *operational challenges* were examined: those among NGOs and those between NGOs and local populations. Problems identified among NGOs included coordination, protection, and reconstruction.

*Coordination* is, of course, a generic problem in major humanitarian emergencies, and Afghanistan is no exception. The UN Information Center, launched by OCHA about 10 days earlier in Islamabad, reported 135 humanitarian organizations already on the scene and was seeking to step up information flow among them. One participant recently back from the region, however, expressed the view that OCHA seemed overwhelmed and ineffective at managing coordination among UN agencies, let alone at relating to NGOs.

There was some difference of opinion about what kind of coordination by OCHA would make the most sense. Analyses by the Humanitarianism and War Project suggested that in some circumstances – of which this may be one – coordination by command rather

than by consensus or default is needed. One NGO countered that coordination structures may become “instruments for regimentation and control” and expressed the view that “flexibility must be preserved at all costs.” Another noted his agency’s experience that the UN is not the logical coordination vehicle since it is “not impartial in many of these settings,” including the present one where it is viewed by many as a handmaid of the anti-terrorism coalition.

A third expressed the even more radical view that the “humanitarian community is terribly out of date” and urged a reduction in the plethora of NGOs through concerted efforts by the agencies to work in coalitions rather than singly. One such coalition is the Agency Coordination Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR). Formed in the late 1980s and based in Peshawar with a suboffice in Islamabad, ACBAR might be encouraged to expand its small suboffice in Kabul and play a more active role in coordinating NGO operations. As in other crises, lead agencies might be identified over time to spearhead NGO work in specific sectors. NGOs expressed their sense of urgency that embarrassments such as Baidoa in 1992 and Goma in 1994 be avoided.

Coordination problems among NGOs are complicated by the different perspectives by headquarters and field staffs. Whereas a headquarters vantage point may be more reflective of the larger picture, field offices operate more in accordance with local dynamics. Headquarters personnel are more attuned to the political agendas of donors, while in-country personnel seek to find practical ways to put humanitarian principles into practice. In the words of one participant, “NGOS need to do what donors don’t want to do.” Tensions within individual agencies may thus produce disconnects in priorities, policies, and practices within and among agencies.

In sum, while the group saw the need for major changes in the business-as-usual (that is, atomistic) approach to NGO action in emergencies, it also acknowledged that getting each NGO with its own identity and institutional needs onto the same page of the humanitarian playbook will prove difficult.

A second major issue is that of *protection*. On a positive note, a number of agencies cited new institutional arrangements (e.g., collaboration between a relief and a rights NGO on the training of aid personnel) that give higher priority to protection. One international lawyer had just completed a month’s tour of duty, advising a major US NGO on legal and protection issues in the crisis. Aid agency personnel as a whole seem more attuned to protection needs than in earlier crises.

Many participants expressed concern, however, over the vulnerability of civilians in Afghanistan and the present level of insecurity in humanitarian operations. In several previous crises, Memoranda of Understanding negotiated with the authorities had facilitated the protection of civilians populations and humanitarian work. The fluidity of the situation in Afghanistan as of mid-November, however, made identification of interlocutors and insistence upon implementation of agreements difficult.

Reflecting the acknowledged tendency of relief agencies to emphasize assistance rather than protection, there was consensus that an NGO focal point for protection should be established in-country as soon as possible. Such a person would, as had been the case in Kosovo, seek to sensitize NGOs to the protection potential of their aid activities and also encourage geographical coordination among NGO protection efforts. Several agencies expressed interest in exploring the possibility of seconding such a staff person to the region.

Concern was also expressed for the safety and welfare of Afghan staff members of international organizations and for indigenous Afghan agencies and their personnel.

A third concern involved the need for NGOs to be prepared to move as quickly as possible from relief to *reconstruction* activities. Several problems in doing so were identified. The first was that the UN has yet to agree upon a “strategic framework,” first attempted in 1997, within which relief, reconstruction, and development policies and activities are to be situated. Such a framework would address the issue of the extent to which conditions should be attached to reconstruction aid. Concern was expressed lest life-saving assistance itself be made conditional and that, in the absence of such a framework, NGOs might be faulted for the eventual failure of reconstruction efforts.<sup>2</sup>

A second problem is that funding available from donors is often more plentiful for emergency relief, and also more available for the short-term (3-6 months) than for medium- to longer-term periods. Little flexibility is evident in allowing emergency aid to be applied to reconstruction needs. It was suggested that NGOs press OFDA to provide longer term funding, which would also link their activities to AID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI).<sup>3</sup> While the Bush administration has committed itself to fund reconstruction activities, experience suggests that resource levels may fall off more quickly than durable economic and social change can be achieved. Successful reconstruction and development represent key elements in the sustainable resolution of conflict and thus, in a broad sense, in the effectiveness of emergency response.

Concern was also expressed regarding sustained attention to the rights and needs of Afghan women. If past is prologue, donors may initially provide large amounts of funding for short-term support of women’s groups, only to leave them high and dry before they have established themselves. The involvement of Afghan women in relief as well as reconstruction, as planners and administrators as well as beneficiaries, was flagged as a major objective of any international undertaking in the region. The fact that many Afghan NGOs are male-headed and or male-dominated needs also to be taken into account.

Shifting the focus from relations among US NGOs to their *interactions with local populations*, a number of challenges were noted. First was the identification of U.S.

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<sup>2</sup> For an elaboration, see “Review of the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan,” listed among the Attachments.

<sup>3</sup> See Ian Smillie’s *Relief and Development: The Struggle for Synergy*, H&W Occasional Paper 33.

NGOs with the felt needs of the Afghan people. Was the faith-based nature of some US agencies, it was asked, an obstacle to working in predominantly Muslim settings such as Afghanistan? The religious organizations represented, none of which is involved in proselytization, did not feel that it was.

One noted that considerable common ground exists in the area of joint programming, which does not raise religious issues. A second agency had been invited to provide volunteers to work with the Iranian Red Crescent Society. A third had been reminded by Muslim counterparts that both Christian and Muslim agencies share a common ancestor in Abraham. A fourth had found its religious basis, and religion itself, to be a “connector” rather than a “divider.”

The issue of religion soon merged with the broader question of whether U.S. NGOs, faith-based or otherwise, share the vision of Afghans themselves for their country. While NGOs often assume that they share a vision with local populations, it was pointed out that there are multiple and conflicting visions of and for Afghanistan, some them quite politicized, personalized, and particularistic. An instructive, if negative, parallel was suggested to the work of UNRWA, which for decades, it was said, reflected not the views of Palestinians but the interests of powerful states in the resettlement of Palestinians outside of Palestine, with projects funded accordingly.

Is there a role for NGOs in the process of helping Afghans to clarify their vision for their country? One participant noted an initiative by his agency to bring Afghans to the United States so that they could function as their own advocates with U.S. policy makers. Another recalled the work of the Mennonites in the early 1990s in encouraging Somalis in the diaspora to hammer out a common vision while civil war was rending their nation asunder.

Concern was also expressed about the distorting impacts of applying political lenses to the work of Muslim civil society organizations. As mentioned in the Issues Note, pressure is being brought to bear by donor governments on UN humanitarian organizations to delimit their collaboration with certain Muslim groups. The eventual implications for local capacity building and for a needs-based approach to programming could be quite negative. Political strictures on collaboration might impede the necessary reconstruction process as well.

The group affirmed the importance of exhibiting greater sensitivity in relating to Afghan society than has been demonstrated in other major crises.<sup>4</sup> At issue are not only cultural but also social, economic, and political sensitivities. In this respect, the performance of the NGO community in the current crisis represents something of a test case not only in having learned the lessons from recent experience in places such as the Bosnia and Kosovo but also in preparing for future challenges in a world where an estimated 80% of refugees are Muslim.

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<sup>4</sup> The need for greater contextual awareness has been discussed at several earlier sessions in the dialogue series.

As in other crises, a large, western-staffed relief and reconstruction operation can have profoundly destabilizing and counterproductive impacts. The use of expatriate relief and rights personnel may displace local talent. Conversely, the “bidding war” among international agencies for local staff can undermine wage scales and government efforts to staff up the necessary infrastructure. Once again, “doing it right” this time means proceeding with both savvy and caution.

Less time was spent by the group on relations with other actors than on relations among NGOs and with local populations. Improvements were noted in communication between humanitarian organizations and the U.S. military, as witnessed by the presence of an InterAction staff person (as well as UN agency representatives) at the U.S. Central Command Headquarters in Tampa. Some European NGOs, however, are critical of their US counterparts for too-close collaboration with the U.S. military.

One participant cautioned that while some US NGOs might prefer to work with UN peacekeeping forces rather than US armed forces, UN forces were neither very imminent in terms of deployment to the region nor, based on past experience, very professional or effective. In other words, NGOs predisposed to multilateral solutions may face an unsatisfactory choice.

Also mentioned in passing was the need for the exercise of greater responsibility by the media and for NGO cultivation of a more probing approach by journalists. One participant expressed the view that news and analysis in the print media had been more substantial than in TV. Another noted a difference in the perspective and detail afforded by the BBC and other international news sources.

Conclusion: Out of the discussion, which was rich in the experiences shared and the issues raised, emerged the outlines of a common humanitarian strategy to address the Afghanistan crisis. No particular consensus emerged about how closely NGOs should associate their humanitarian activities with the anti-terrorism initiative. However, a number of specific suggestions were offered for moving forward, including:

- *increased strategizing among NGOs to establish basic principles and ground rules for involvement in Afghanistan.* The decision of one NGO not to deliver services within UNHCR camps as currently sited along the Pakistan border was viewed as a step in the direction of greater circumspection and an action that merited support from other traditional UNHCR partners. The situation on the ground was viewed as similar to that of the camps for Hutu refugees in Goma, where NGOs failed to insist from the outset on adequate security and accountability arrangements.
- *NGOs should engage the U.S. government* on a number of specific policies and procedures governing grants and contracts. These might include less stringent ground rules on the use of emergency funds and more ample funding for reconstruction and development. AID and BPRM could also be encouraged to give preferential funding to NGOs that have had involvement in Afghanistan predating September 2001 and that work in NGO coalitions rather than on their own.

- *The creation of a “focal point for protection” among NGOs* to seek to prevent assistance activities from being carried out without reference to, or in disproportion with, protection activities. The position that Save the Children had created for Kosovo in 1999, following up on a similar suggestion at an earlier NGO policy dialogue, was cited as a useful precedent. IRC and the Women’s Commission offered to work with Save to follow up on this recommendation.
- *Monitoring the human rights policies of coalition partners.* Since the war against terrorism is being approached as a long-term battle to be waged in many countries, anti-terrorism will increasingly be used to justify policies that infringe on the human rights of ethnic and political minorities. Thus, for example, new anti-terrorism laws in India and Colombia warrant monitoring, as do Russian policies in Chechnya and Egypt’s treatment of dissident Muslim groups.
- *Advocacy efforts* to challenge UN organizations such as UNHCR and governments to be faithful to their legal mandates. One rights organization expressed concern about the erosion of international law, evidenced in the absence of effective political pressure on states in the region (and on the United States government itself) to open borders to refugees. Concern was also expressed about the recasting of refugee law through the use of the euphemism, “externally displaced people.” A parallel was suggested with U.S. unwillingness to apply the term “genocide” to events in Rwanda in 1994, which would have triggered specified legal obligations.
- NGOs should work to place *codes of conduct* center stage during the crisis, both for quality control purposes of their own work and as a benchmark for holding accountable the aid efforts of military forces.
- In *development education and fund-raising* efforts, NGOs should make connections between the humanitarian crisis being experienced by Americans and the insecurity that affects many people caught in conflicts around the world. A strong case can be made for addressing the underlying causes of insecurity which provide a breeding ground for terrorism.
- *A more detailed effort to bring recent experience to bear on the challenges of Afghanistan.* While a number of agencies are drawing on their experience to shape their strategies for involvement, there is a role for policy analysts, including the H&W project, in identifying relevant lessons for programming in the coming months. It was also suggested that there might be value in discussing some of the issues from the November 15 meeting at the field level, perhaps in Islamabad or Kabul, in the near future.

Next session: There was consensus that, given the evolving nature of the issues, the next policy dialogue should take stock of developments during the coming months in Afghanistan rather than tackling a different topic such as advocacy. A date for the next session, probably in mid-May, 2002, will be confirmed shortly. The group agreed to have

the notes from the November session and from earlier discussions posted on the Project's web site [[hwproject.tufts.edu](http://hwproject.tufts.edu)] to facilitate wider circulation.

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Nov. 26, 2001

Attachments: Mapping Exercise Result  
An Internet Inventory prepared by Greg Hansen

Three earlier sets of materials prepared for the Policy Dialogue will be posted on Project web site, [hwproject.tufts.edu](http://hwproject.tufts.edu)

- Issues Note (November 1)
- Set of 13 Attachments (November 1)
- Addendum of More Recent Documents and Developments. (Nov. 15)