

NGO Policy Dialogue XI
Afghanistan Revisited
April 30, 2002

Overview

The discussion was the eleventh in a series by the Humanitarianism and War (H&W) Project of Tufts University, the last several co-sponsored with the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the City University of New York (CUNY). The sessions seek 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. The Issues Note is available at the Project's web site, hwproject.tufts.edu

Held at the CUNY Graduate Center, the April 30 session drew together 18 staff from 11 relief and rights NGOs and five observers in a productive, off-the-record exchange of views. As in other sessions, representatives from donor governments and UN organizations were not present in the interest of encouraging a more candid exchange.

Picking up the threads of the November 15 meeting on Humanitarian Action and the Afghanistan Crisis, participants took an inventory of present operations, raised questions about the most difficult aspects of their work, and sought to identify and anticipate future challenges. The sessions were organized around four themes: stocktaking of recent developments, security, Afghanistan, and future challenges.

Stocktaking

Coordination. The topic was introduced with the observation that, given the checkered history of "coordination" (which to many NGOs means "the abdication of responsibility and control to someone else"), the desideratum for Afghanistan should be the more modest one of "cooperation." Expressing frustration with the term "coordination," many preferred to be more specific about what it means functionally, how it works, what is being coordinated, and by and among whom. Some held that "cooperation" is the best one can hope for, others that in such highly politicized and insecure circumstances, more assertive lines of authority are essential.

In the course of the discussion, distinctions were drawn between cooperation on the ground within the country itself, where information is now quite widely shared, and between agencies at the headquarters level. In the field there are multiple coordination bodies, yet no single one includes all humanitarian actors: international and local, general and specialized, Muslim, Christian, and secular. ACBAR, a 60-member organization founded in 1988 and the subject of a recent report by ICVA, InterAction, and SCHR, seemed to be the preferred vehicle, yet by all accounts it has yet to hit its stride.¹ However, some considered ACBAR too dominated by larger agencies, which are now seconding staff to strengthen its capacity.

The status of coordination, or even cooperation, among NGOs in Afghanistan has been uneven. One participant suggested that it was better in Herat, Kandahar, and Jalalabad than in Kabul. Another thought that NGO attention focused too much on the capital. A third emphasized that there are too many NGOs and not enough coherence, jeopardizing the overall effort and reputation of NGOs in Afghanistan. In the post-September 11th world, coordination is seen as even more problematic because donors are apprehensive about whom to give money to and whom to work with in Afghanistan. There may also be greater suspicion within and among NGOs.

The NGO universe is bewildering in its size and complexity. At present, some 380 NGOs (international and local) are now registered with the Afghan Ministry of Planning, rendering the situation thoroughly “dysfunctional,” in one person’s view. Another commented that NGOs are conducting “business as usual,” with the exception of the fact that donors are now more willing to underwrite coordination activities. Few NGOs, however, had taken advantage of available funding for this purpose.²

The current extent of working together is, by most accounts, limited. Rather than a full integration of operations or specified division of labor, coordination takes the form of relatively cost-free assistance such as the sharing of information. One NGO noted that in addition to the authoritarian approach taken by Ashraf Ghani of the Afghan Assistance Coordination Authority (which the NGO welcomed), the government might soon give the Aga Khan Foundation the responsibility of accrediting individual NGOs.

The current state of coordination is a mixed bag for several reasons. First, competition for funds and the desire for visibility undermine coordination. Second, the focus of NGOs on sensitive security issues rather than programming hinders their willingness to work with other NGOs. (Variations in the perceived threshold of tolerable security conditions may severely complicate joint activities.) The third factor revolves around the personalities involved. Some individuals are more willing than others to work together. Clearly, what has developed in Afghanistan, as in other such settings, is less a “system” than a series of ad-hoc arrangements. As is often the case, creative people at the field level find ways of working together despite well-known problems of a headquarters and operational nature.

Aid administration. The discussion segued into the issue of whether NGOs or governments should be ultimately responsible for the administration of aid. In the case of Afghanistan, the problem stems from an unusual dynamic. On the one hand, the central government lacks the capacity to administer aid flows effectively. Yet on the other hand, NGOs (particularly international ones) are viewed by the authorities with some suspicion. US policy compounds the problem, seeking to strengthen the central government even as its aid moves largely through private agencies rather than the public sector. Furthermore, given the difference from province to province in terms of human needs and political factors, it is hard to visualize a genuinely countrywide humanitarian approach at all.

Credibility. On the broader question of attitudes toward NGOs, the views expressed were more negative than positive. A planning document by UNDP for a national development framework in Afghanistan mentioned NGOs only in passing. In a broader sense,

someone commented, “UN people have given up on NGOs.” Another added that NGOs are being used as scapegoats by donors and the Afghan authorities for the absence of visible changes on the ground. The Schenkenberg report noted that “There are repeated rumours of hostility, or at least resentment, from [Afghan] government representatives towards NGOs. These feelings may have been fed by the fact that for more than a decade, NGOs have been able to operate in Afghanistan in a vacuum, bypassing the central government, and sometimes even working against [it].”

Others observed, on a more positive note, that NGOs were essential not just to short-term relief but also to rehabilitation and development. Current “NGO bashing,” they anticipated, would right itself over time.³ NGOs, particularly their local staffs, deserve great credit for the successful avoidance of the mass famine that many had predicted. Even now they are playing a more important role in emergency assistance than their reputations would suggest.

Relief vs. development. The composition and sequencing of aid has always been a difficult issue for NGOs and other practitioners, even with the concept of a relief-rehabilitation-development continuum no longer in vogue. The emphasis on reconstructing Afghanistan is strong in some aid circles and in the media despite the reality that the relief phase of the emergency may continue in many areas for the foreseeable future.

The continuation of active hostilities or rear-guard military actions, the persistence of a lengthy and grave drought, and the recent return of more than a half-million refugees lends urgency to expanded emergency activities, including support of livelihoods, rather than shifting overnight to development. Beyond delaying the laborious task of rebuilding, the emphasis on relief may affect the political structures and capacities of domestic actors. Whereas development funds tend to go through the central government, emergency relief aid is usually distributed through locals, favoring local over national capacity building.⁴

Local aid staff. The importance (and vulnerability) of local relief and rights personnel, and the issues related by faith-based western organizations working with predominantly Muslim populations and local agencies, did not come in for as much discussion as at the November session. Reference was made, however, to a recent article that examines the proselytizing agenda in Afghanistan of some international religious groups. “Christian aid organizations,” the piece concludes, quoting Catholic Relief Services Church World Service and CARE, “say that missionaries who masquerade as humanitarian workers make it harder for their groups to relieve poverty, malnutrition, and disease.”⁵

Security

The second session focused on the interface between NGOs and the military and the overall security situation in Afghanistan. An NGO introduced the discussion with comments about how Afghanistan was in some ways a “different war.” The U.S. wants to be ferocious and magnanimous at the same time, its troops cast in both roles. To date,

the military has launched some 50 civic action projects, including repairing schools and clinics near Kabul and the base at Bagram. The issue of weapons-bearing troops, both civil affairs and Special Forces, working on aid projects in plainclothes has proved a major target for NGO advocacy work.

The NGO/Military Interface. In crisis after crisis, the relationship between NGOs and militaries has proved fraught, given the different imperatives between the two sets of institutions. In other crises, however, it was felt that constructive working relationships had eventually been established. In Afghanistan, previous cooperation is viewed as having taken a step backwards.

First, the overall strategy of utilizing the military to support humanitarian operations sends confusing messages. Most NGOs see a contradiction in the military's pursuit of a combined carrot and stick strategy. U.S. forces have conducted bombing and other military maneuvers as a belligerent in the conflict along with airdrops of humanitarian daily rations (HDRs) and civic action activities.

Second, the humanitarian work pursued by the military is intensely political in nature, even beyond the objective of intelligence-gathering. Those activities have set up a tension with the more principled approach that emphasizes the neutrality of humanitarian operations. Participants confirmed that U.S. troops have undertaken civic action projects at their own initiative and with Defense Department funds, while simultaneously soliciting funding and contacts from NGOs. One NGO responded to a written overture by urging that troops concentrate on providing security, their most essential contribution to the humanitarian undertaking, rather than engaging in competitive aid activities.

Third, NGOs view the issue of the lack of military attire by soldiers engaged in humanitarian operations as one that increases the vulnerability of authentic humanitarian workers. This concern has become the focus of recent lobbying efforts, in part on the assumption that the ability of NGOs to influence policy on the other two issues is marginal. Not only InterAction but also AID have sought to clarify and reverse U.S. policy in this regard.

The Pentagon now agrees that U.S. military personnel must wear "some part" of their uniforms during humanitarian operations, although whether this really identifies a person as a soldier or meets other requirements of international law is doubtful. Moreover, this concession applies only to soldiers serving in civil affairs capacities and not to U.S. Special Forces. One participant had found it useful to point out in his advocacy the contradiction between denying captured Taliban and Al Qaeda forces P.O.W. status in part because they were not a uniformed fighting force, and yet seeking to enhance the safety of U.S. soldiers by taking them out of uniform.

Viewpoints varied on the appropriateness of collaboration with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which includes troops contributed by Muslim nations and also conducts civic action work. One agency would have no qualms about doing so, since the uniform issue and other stumbling blocks do not apply. After all, NGOs in other contexts

have accepted and even solicited help from the military without a perceived violation of humanitarian principles. Another cautioned, however, that collaboration with any military forces, even multilateral in character, could become a liability if and when the political-military situation on the ground shifts. NGOs and other agencies committed to remaining for the long haul should be particularly wary.

Participants also discussed the presence of private military companies in humanitarian operations. It is not clear what role they may be playing in Afghanistan, but there does appear to be interest by such companies in being contracted to provide security, train those who provide security, and/or give logistical support and advice to NGO humanitarian operations. It is too early to say whether private military companies will become a significant player, but NGOs may find it useful to clarify their views regarding the use of such companies.⁶

Continuing insecurity. Despite media reports that the war in Afghanistan is winding down, pervasive insecurity persists in major parts of the country. Echoing the sentiments of military commanders in the field, participants agreed that the ISAF should be expanded if it is to make a substantial contribution in establishing security for the Afghan population and for humanitarian operations. While the Afghan interim administration had initially expressed reservations, more recently the Kabul authorities have requested additional troops in the run-up to the establishment of the *loya jirga*.

Participants blamed the Bush administration (more precisely, the President himself, since many of his advisors are sympathetic to authorizing an expansion of forces) for the absence of adequate numbers of ISAF troops to ensure security. Some also implicated the reluctance of European governments to commit more troops forces to fulfill ISAF's mandate. Several speculated that it will take a highly visible and dramatic deterioration of security to expand ISAF assets. The possibility of stepping up NGO lobbying efforts, concentrating instead on European governments, was also mentioned.

Afghanization

The third session explored what is meant by the concept of Afghanization and examined recent and largely ineffectual efforts in this area.

What is it? The term has several interrelated meanings. One is to encourage and empower Afghans to assert ownership over international aid efforts and to make key decisions for themselves. A second involves the actual implementation of international NGO policies and programs by Afghans themselves. Third, Afghanization involves a strategy that seeks to minimize the negative impacts of international aid activities and personnel upon the local economy.

Often the issue comes down to the relative power of expatriate staff and institutions versus that of host government officials and local agencies. Participants concurred that the participation of local civil society in the priority-setting process to date had been relatively minor and should be broadened considerably. Ironically, it seems that if

Afghan ownership is firmly asserted over aid efforts, it will be more reflective of the role played by Ashraf Ghani rather of any concerted steps taken by aid agencies themselves.

Structural distortions. Often the presence of international NGOs, the UN and other external aid actors skews the local economy because these agencies can afford more in rent and salaries than local institutions, whether governmental or private. Unfortunately, participants confirmed, much of the talent essential to the long-term rebuilding of Afghanistan is being siphoned off by the aid community. Consequently, NGOs may actually worsen the long-term prospects for reconstruction by consuming resources critical to promoting Afghan self-sufficiency. The problem is not only in purchasing power but also in the substance of aid. While food distribution is essential in times of crisis, for local food producers to be economically viable food aid must not undercut the price of food or instill a cycle of dependency.

Aid practices have helped create a tight market for commodities such as translation services, but have also fed resentment among many Afghans. Illustrations of this distortion are evident everywhere. A driver for an aid agency in Kabul earns \$900 a month, substantially more than a university professor or senior government official. An overnight ten-fold increase in rent had forced one project to relocate its offices. An increase in pay of 80 percent for UN local staff, already higher than pay scales of other agencies, had recently upped the ante. Interim President Hamid Kharzai, who is known to have concerns about NGOs rooted in his experience in the 1980s, is reported to have said that if expatriate salaries are higher than local ones, foreigners should be productive by at least the same multiple.

The bidding war affects those immediately within the orbit of NGOs but is also drawing talented Afghans from rural areas that themselves lack capacity for addressing humanitarian concerns, propelling urbanization and a rural to urban brain-drain. In addition to NGOs, other international institutions, embassies, and the press, with deep pockets and a willingness to pay whatever it costs to get a good story, also contribute to the economic disequilibrium.⁷

Offsetting the artificial aid economy. Several proposals were made. First, limit NGO local salaries, either by capping the amounts or by pay cuts. While this would reduce the appeal of these jobs to Afghans, it might also draw less-talented individuals to the profession. Second, make financial contributions to local NGOs so that they can offer competitive salaries competitive. Third, have the government certify which agency may work where doing what. Although a regulatory system would help ensure oversight of NGOs and moderate their impacts on local economies, it raises a host of questions including the politics of issuing such visas and human rights concerns. Fourth, develop a code of conduct to govern NGO interactions with locals.

Where from here?

While participants are intensively engaged in humanitarian work in Afghanistan on a day-to-day basis, major questions of the overall policy framework and specific program

strategies and activities remain to be addressed. As of April, the imperatives of triage – responding to selected immediate needs – continue to take precedence over long-term planning.

The bad news is that more than six months into the organized humanitarian response, basic issues of positioning aid in relation to the UN political framework and coordinating and organizing countrywide aid efforts are still unresolved. The good news is that there is still a window of opportunity to salvage the situation. Is it possible to identify elements of strategic planning for the future in areas such as local participation, security and interface with international military actors, and relief vs. development aid, or is the die already cast in these areas?

Recurrent challenges and changing contexts. Many of the challenges confronted by aid operatives in Afghanistan are generic ones faced in other complex emergencies. These include humanitarian access, the assessment of needs for protection and assistance in unstable areas, positioning aid efforts in relation to the prevailing political-military context, and finding responsible and accountable national and local interlocutors.

At the same time, the “war against terrorism” which has provided the political backdrop for much of the international presence in Afghanistan injects some new elements into the perennial mix. As anti-terrorist efforts evolve, both within Afghanistan and throughout the world, the implications for the evolution for humanitarian operations may be rather striking.⁸ Even at the November session, some NGOs that were mounting programs within the anti-terrorist rubric in Afghanistan were questioning whether they would do so should the “war” move to other geographical areas. By April, NGOs were raising serious questions about U.S. policies and their implications for aid agencies, should U.S.-led anti-terrorism efforts be extended to places such as Iraq, the Philippines, or Somalia.

A focal point of dissatisfaction was the unwillingness of the United States to provide troops for an expanded International Security Assistance Force – and its reluctance to have other countries to do so. Many around the table, some of whom had lobbied intensively on this issue, felt that laudable humanitarian, economic, and political goals for Afghanistan would surely fail in the absence of enhanced security throughout the country. One person had established to his own satisfaction that the central point of resistance to a more effective ISAF was President Bush himself rather than most of his key advisors.

Another area of potential change involves the uncertainty that large-scale resources, on which effective relief and reconstruction efforts are predicated, would continue to be provided. OCHA reports that only 48 percent of the \$1.8 billion in emergency aid pledged for Afghanistan has been delivered. UNHCR, IOM, and WFP have announced cutbacks in their activities. Having just succeeding in averting catastrophic food shortages, says a WFP spokesperson in the field, “We do not want to go back to famine.” Some analysts have projected continued food shortages, reflecting ongoing drought and lack of agricultural infrastructure. But given how precious and limited humanitarian aid is, should one Afghans be repatriated to a place that can not sustain them?

Comment: A number of participants were struck by the bleakness and even despondency of the discussion. The optimism that characterized last November's meeting – at that time the opportunity to “do things right this time” beckoned – had given way to seemingly inevitable obstacles. The disarray on the ground represented a step back: back to problems in Former Yugoslavia and Kosovo in dealing with international military forces, back to Goma in the jockeying for position among agencies on the ground, back to the Caucasus in terms of lack of respect for humanitarian actors and to Somalia in terms of the rough edges between the UN's political agenda and humanitarian activities.

Complicating the operational challenges faced on the ground, NGOs now seem to have the worst of all worlds. Not only is the mounting and maintenance of activities, with which they are associated first and foremost, difficult. The slowness of changes on the ground, despite an aid apparatus very visible in the cities, is already drawing critical comment from Afghan officials, academics, the media, and the local population.

The agency disarray among NGOs and other humanitarian actors is mirrored by a welter of evaluations and policies reviews on the research side. It is encouraging to have real-time evaluations in progress such as those carried out by UNHCR, and the openness among practitioners to improve the quality of the sector's performance has been refreshing. Yet the lessons from previous crisis responses (e.g., those identified by ALNAP for the DAC) remain largely unimplemented.⁹ At the time of the April 2002 ALNAP biennial meeting, a score of reviews under way, each requiring resources and the precious time of practitioners and headquarters officials. Yet research groups saw little chance at this point in the process of coordinating their efforts.

But is the current disarray inevitable? The following questions need to be addressed, with an eye to the next crisis inasmuch as the options in Afghanistan grow more limited with each passing week.

1. Positive aspects in coordination to date are generally more the result of actions taken by the Afghan authorities than self-imposed discipline by NGOs. What steps can be initiated by the NGO community, to the extent that it is a community, to assert greater control and rigor over its own activities? What might donor governments do to encourage or reinforce such an approach?
2. Could preference be given to NGOs that have a previous track record in the region or country involved? One agency participating in the session, which is currently not operationally involved in the crisis, was “listening deeply to the discussion” with an eye to reaching a decision about the shape of its eventual involvement. “There may be no place for us here,” they said, reflecting on the discussion.
3. Could NGO coordination bodies at the international level (ICVA, InterAction, SCHR) or within crisis countries become more assertive? Or is the live-and-let-live ethos of the sector likely to continue to prevail, despite donor, public, and even NGO dissatisfaction?
4. Could wage scales for various categories of aid workers, based on pre-existing

standards, be agreed to in advance to hold in check the artificial and inflationary aid economy? An attempt late last year to develop a code of conduct for staff employment was unsuccessful.

5. In the start-up phase of an emergency, could a moratorium for a stated period (e.g., 3 months) on visits by agency heads, whether NGOs, UN organizations, or donor agencies? Once again in Afghanistan, these visits seem to have advanced the cause of individual agency profiling rather than of coordination.
6. Given the proclivity of international military forces to engage in civil action activities, could firmer strictures, perhaps modeled on the NATO post-Kosovo guidelines, be put into place and monitored to delimit such activities. That would place the initiative more firmly with humanitarian professionals to request assistance.
7. In the light of the difficulties experienced by relief and rights groups, should all civilian humanitarian personnel keep their distance for an initial period during which such activities would be entrusted solely to the military?
8. In the area of advocacy, should there be an increased commitment by the humanitarian sector to more concerted international efforts on critical policy concerns: in this instance, the mandate and strength of the ISAF and the importance of the protection agenda?
9. Should not higher priority to lessons learning during a given operation be essential? The Schenkenberg report observes that “there is no debate at this moment in time among NGOs in Kabul on issues relating to the quality of and accountability of humanitarian action.”¹⁰

Next session. Policy Dialogue XII will discuss the research being launched by the Project on the political economy of the humanitarian enterprise, with particular emphasis on operational constraints and experiences. Please circle Wednesday Dec. 11 from 10:00 – 3:00 at CUNY in New York City. We will confirm the date as soon as possible and provide more details on the information to be discussed.

Please note that following a decision taken at the November meeting, the Project has now posted the Issues Notes and Reports from the policy-dialogue series, sanitized to the extent necessary to protect the identity of the participants, on our web site. This provides a rich resource not only for practitioners but for academics and other students of the NGO sector.

This report was written by Peter Hoffman and Larry Minear.

May 13, 2002

¹ Circulated in the packets for the meeting was Ed Schenkenberg’s report, “NGO Coordination and Some Other Relevant Issues in the Context of Afghanistan from an NGO Perspective” (April 9, 2002). (See www.interaction.org)

² The Schenkenberg report is somewhat less alarmed than was the group: “The actual number of [NGO] newcomers is not as high as one might expect given the amount of

funds pledged by donor governments and institutions.”

³ One UN official is quoted in the Schenkenberg report as saying that “There are great needs out there and the government will not have the capacity to implement, so we need the NGOs here.”

⁴ The Schenkenberg report points out that “A major problem built into the UN relief-development pillar of the UNAMA structure is the integration of relief and development programmes and the same approach that is taken toward coordinating both.”

⁵ Barry Yeoman, “False Prophets: Inside the Evangelical Christian Movement that Aims to Eliminate Islam,” *Mother Jones*, May+June 2002, 42-49.

⁶ For a report of a recent conference on the subject at Tufts co-sponsored with the International Alert, see www.famine.tufts.edu

⁷ See, for example, “NGOs slam higher UN salaries,” IRIN May 13, 2002. Reporting on a press conference by ACBAR, the news item notes that “Many international and Afghan NGOs are losing their trained employees, who are joining larger international organizations such as the UN, international financial institutions, donors and embassies for higher wages.” At the same time, the head of an Afghan coordination body (ANCB) notes that “the international NGOs now complaining about the issue had been doing the same to Afghan NGOs for the past decade.”

⁸ For an elaboration of these issues, see a paper by Larry Minear, “Humanitarian Action in an Age of Terrorism,” prepared for an International Expert Consultation at Arden House, May 24-25 sponsored by Columbia University. The text, which was distributed to participants at the April 30 meeting, is available in electronic form at hwproject.tufts.edu under New Developments.

⁹ See Development Co-operation Directorate, “Aid Responses to Afghanistan: Lessons from Previous Evaluations,” a paper prepared by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) and circulated in advance of the April 30 meeting with the Issues Note. (DCD/DIR (2001) 31). (See www.alnap.odl.org.uk)

¹⁰ Schenkenberg quotes a senior NGO official as saying, “ ‘When it comes to learning the lessons from experiences in previous humanitarian crisis, . . . these lessons and the policy implications they bring with them are certainly not discussed by NGOs together.’”