



## Humanitarian Agenda 2015 Afghanistan Country Study

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*Humanitarian Agenda 2015 (HA2015)* is a policy research project aimed at equipping the humanitarian enterprise to more effectively address emerging challenges around four major themes: universality, terrorism and counter terrorism, coherence, and security.

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### Overview

This study is part of a research program undertaken by the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University on “The Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Politics and Perceptions” (HA 2015).<sup>1</sup> The key findings of the research in Afghanistan are presented in the following pages under the four HA 2015 headings: the universality of the humanitarian enterprise; terror and counter-terror and its impact on humanitarian action; coherence of political and humanitarian endeavors; and issues related to security of communities and humanitarian personnel. This is preceded by a brief historical background and by an overview of Afghans’ perceptions of the aid effort. A final section presents key conclusions and (policy) recommendations.

The four themes of the HA 2015 research come together in Afghanistan with clear-cut relevance. The externality of the aid enterprise and the baggage that comes with it—values, lifestyle, attitude, and behavior of aid workers—challenge the purported universality of humanitarian action. The context of terrorism and counter-terrorism is at the heart of the international community’s involvement in Afghanistan: the initial objective of the US-led coalition was to smash Al Qaeda and the Taliban, not to engage in nation-building. The coherence agenda, exemplified both by the integration of humanitarian and human rights



concerns within the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and by the pressures on NGOs to be part of the Coalition’s “combat team,” colors the operating environment of the aid community. And the heavy toll inflicted by insurgents and criminal elements on the security of aid workers, both Afghan and international, cuts across the three other themes and deeply affects staff morale and ability to address critical humanitarian need.



The field research in Afghanistan for the preparation of this case study came at a period of dashed expectations and increasing concerns for Afghans. Compared to early 2005 when fieldwork for the Tufts “Mapping” study<sup>2</sup> was undertaken, the general mood was more disillusioned and more somber. While the process initiated by the Bonn Agreement in December 2001 was formally nearing completion—the parliamentary elections had been held in late 2005 and President Karzai was preparing to submit a new government to the parliament’s approval—the prevailing view among both Afghans and international personnel of the UN, NGOs, and even the Coalition Forces (CF) and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) militaries was that the general security situation was deteriorating. Unlike previous winters, the low-level Taliban insurgency had not let up, and there were signs that the insurgents were preparing for major spring and summer

offensives. Suicide bombings, hitherto unknown, had appeared on the Afghan scene, perhaps indicating connections between the Afghan and Iraqi insurgencies. Large swaths of the east, southeast, and south of the country were practically no-go areas for aid agencies. Those who continued to work there had to resort to militarized convoys (the UN) or go underground (NGOs) eschewing visibility, communications, and international presence.

More importantly, the overwhelming sentiment was that while in the (relatively secure) areas visited the security situation appeared to have stabilized, the socio-economic plight of Afghans had not. There was near unanimity in the focus group meetings and in the interviews held for this study that human security for the population had not improved or was deteriorating. This was attributed to a number of factors, to which we shall return below, including the absence of a visible peace dividend, the perceived ineffectiveness and corruption of the aid system, the perception that the international community has a hidden agenda at odds with Afghanistan's development objectives as well as the crippling effects of international aid on Afghan ownership of the recovery process.

In the words of one acute observer of things Afghan: "For the Afghan people . . . the window is slowly closing; there is an enormous amount of public frustration that five years down the road, after all the promises of the international community, their lives have not really changed that much."<sup>3</sup> This frustration is often expressed by the jokes that Afghans are fond of telling. Two seem to encapsulate their current predicament: "If the Coalition forces left at 10 am tomorrow, large scale fighting would break out by noon." "We wanted Afghans to be in the driver's seat, but we didn't mean it literally. . . . Look at all those senior Afghan professionals who are drivers for the foreign aid agencies." The disconnect between expectations and reality is captured by two emblematic statements. The first, utopian and probably apocryphal, is attributed to President Karzai in a meeting with the former King: "Majesty, ten years from now Afghanistan will be like Dubai." The second by a senior Taliban commander captured by the Coalition points ominously to a very different future: "You Americans have watches. We have time."<sup>4</sup>

In a very real sense Afghans feel "wronged". The rewards they expected have not materialized. A narrative that is often heard goes as follows: we endured twenty-five years of war, we put the final nails into the coffin of the Soviet empire and provoked its demise, we have suffered great abuse and displacement during the civil war years and under the Taliban, we have missed out on education opportunities for our



Tribal elders, Gardez.

Photo: A. Donini

children and on economic development for the longest time. We had great hopes when the Americans chased away the Taliban only to realize that the hated warlords were back in power. The Americans installed Karzai and we voted for him, but he has been a major disappointment. We deserved better from the international community, but the Americans are only interested in Al Qaeda, not in the development of our country. That's why we are only getting small NGO projects that are totally unsustainable. There are no infrastructure projects, so employment is not picking up and our expectations are being dashed. In the meantime security in the country is deteriorating, the drug economy is triumphant and corruption is everywhere. And more in the same vein.

In this context of frustration and disenchantment, the aid agencies are easy targets, rightly or wrongly, as they represent the visible face of the international community's concern for the well being of Afghans.

Criticism of the NGOs is convenient to deflect attention from the failures of government and governance. The CF and ISAF are generally not openly criticized (at least in the areas visited) as they have done something eminently visible (booting out the Taliban), although their behavior is seen as rude and arrogant by some. If anything, the foreign militaries are criticized for not having done enough to bring security to the country. This frustration and disenchantment in turn fuels a typically Afghan feeling of nostalgia for times past when there was a sense that things were going in the right direction: the Zahir Shah and Daoud pre-war halcyon days, the Soviet occupation (because the Soviets supported the state and implemented large projects that generated employment) and, more recently, even for the Taliban, abusive as they may have been, but austere, just, and incorruptible in the views of some.

### Methods

This report is based primarily on the data collected through 15 focus groups (FGs) with local people and communities held in Kabul, Shomali, Paktia, Wardak, and Parwan provinces by Antonio Donini and three FGs organized by Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam with female participants in Kabul. All focus groups were held in February 2006. Participants in FG's ranged from destitute urban widows and unemployed rural youth to university students, teachers, and urban intellectuals. In addition, interviews, to provide context to the analysis herein, were conducted with more than 30 national and international UN, NGO, and Red Cross staff members, as well with a number of senior Afghan officials, parliamentarians, journalists, and intellectuals



**Timeline of the Afghan crisis, in five phases.**

***1. Fragmented state***

**December 1979: Soviet intervention to quell the beginnings of mujahedin uprising**

**1979-1988: 5 million Afghans flee to neighboring countries; millions more are IDPs; insurgent factions control most of countryside. Large scale assistance to refugees in Pakistan and Iran; NGOs start cross-border activities in mujahedin-held areas.**

**April 1988: Geneva peace accords; establishment of special UN humanitarian coordination office (UNOCA)**

**February 1989: Last Soviet troops leave Afghanistan**

***2. Failed state***

**April 1992: Fall of the Najibullah Soviet-backed regime**

**1992-1996: Civil war; triumph of warlordism**

**Autumn 1994: First operations of Taliban in southern**

**Afghanistan (continues on next page. . .)**

(see Annex I).<sup>5</sup> The field research was complemented by desk study of available written materials and discussions with knowledgeable informants in Europe and the USA in late 2005 and early 2006.

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**Context: Unending Crisis**

The Afghan crisis spans a quarter-century—from the Soviet invasion in December 1979 to the emergence, since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, of an embattled and externally-supported regime seeking peace amongst the spoils of war. During this period Afghanistan descended into a spiral of conflict, displacement, massive human rights violations, and collapsed livelihoods. Humanitarian action remained a constant during this period, although its ability to provide assistance and protection to those in need—whose numbers have ranged from 3 million to over 10 million—has ebbed and flowed according to the vagaries of conflict, external intervention, and the international community’s fickle attention span. Humanitarian action in Afghanistan thus has a long history, which has been affected by, and has intersected with, the political, military, human rights and socio-economic dimensions of the crisis. As in other contexts, humanitarian action itself has been more or less principled, politicized, or instrumentalized depending on the interests of superpowers, donors, and local actors as well as the humanitarian agencies’ ability to orchestrate a coherent and coordinated response.<sup>6</sup>

Another factor that has remained constant during the past quarter century, as well as in earlier decades, is the tension between tradition and modernity. Afghanistan was and remains one of the poorest countries in the world, at the bottom of the heap in terms of all social and economic indicators. Major infrastructure development projects

**3. Rogue state**

**September 1996: Taliban enter Kabul; control two-thirds of the country**

**1996–1998: Taliban extend grip on west and north of the country**

**October 2001: Coalition intervention; collapse of Taliban regime**

**4. Recovering state**

**December 2001: Bonn Accords; transitional government and UNAMA integrated mission established**

**June 2002: Emergency Loya Jirga**

**December 2003: Constitutional Loya Jirga**

**December 7, 2004: Hamid Karzai elected President**

**18 September 2005: Parliamentary elections. (The first results were declared on 9 October. Final results were delayed by accusations of fraud, and were finally announced on 12 November.)**

**5. Back to the future?**

**2005: Lack of visible peace dividend; disillusionment and resentment against aid agencies**

**Spring 2006: Resurgent Taliban and widespread insecurity**

**May 2006: Anti US riots target aid agencies**

had been initiated in the late 60s: hydropower, roads, ambitious irrigation schemes. Factories in urban areas provided some employment, and a westernized and educated elite was consolidating itself. However, after the overthrow of the king in 1973, the forced modernization under the communist regime triggered the reaction of the more conservative rural areas which provided the bulk of the mujahedin resistance fighters. This eventually resulted in the collapse of most state structures and the chaotic proliferation of factions and commanders who fought bitterly over power and resources but were united in their more or less fundamentalist Islamic opposition to centralized processes of social transformation. The emergence of the Taliban in the mid 90s and their resurgence in 2006 are yet another permutation of the same urban-rural dynamic, but also of a new ethnic dynamic in which the Taliban were trying to suppress the Hazaras, and to some extent Uzbek and Tajik groups, who had been trying to assert themselves against perceived Pashtun supremacy in the mujahedin internecine war years. Similarly, the post 9/11 Klondike-style externally-driven aid, economic and commercial processes at play today in urban Afghanistan are the latest avatars of modernization.

The current center-periphery dynamic has a new twist, however, as it extends all the way to the globalized centers of western capitalism under the guise of the global war on terror (GWOT). The Taliban may well represent a conservative vision of society rooted in pashtun mores and values, but at the same time, because of their links with Al Qaeda as well as other fundamentalist groups in the region and their reported involvement in narco-trafficking, they are part of much wider, even global, networks. Similarly, aid agencies were once relatively minor bit players in the global scheme of things. Humanitarian agencies derived their acceptance and effectiveness from their perceived marginal capacity to influence the outcome of conflicts. They have now become, willfully or by default, the capillary ends of global political designs that range from world ordering and securitization to the promotion of liberal peace. NGOs and UN agencies were never the paragons of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, though many, particularly during the Taliban period, strived to work in a principled manner. But today, in the “with us or against us” context of GWOT, the task of respecting basic humanitarian principles—and of being seen as such—is much more difficult. In Afghanistan, whether they like it or not, aid agencies are seen as embedded in an externally-driven nation-building process that is being attacked by insurgents and that, as the paragraphs below will show, is deeply flawed and unpopular.

As optimism falters and insecurity for aid staff—and, more importantly, for Afghan citizens and communities—increases, the flaws of the

Coalition intervention and Bonn process are starting to appear in stark relief. The formality of the process has been more or less respected, but the underlying issues remain. Afghanistan was “democratized in a vacuum.” Not only were internal issues whitewashed but the historical conflict with Pakistan—over the artificial Durand line and the Pashtunistan issue—was also ignored. The result is that tension is brewing on the border, Great Game-style. The legitimacy of the government is patchy and contested by armed insurgents. Corruption, linked to drugs and international assistance, is rife. The illicit economy built around the production and trafficking of drugs and the increasing web it weaves at all levels of society carries the very real risk of Afghanistan becoming a narco state. Warlords are perhaps disarmed but still call the shots whether it is at the local level or in parliament where the new dispensation of power has served to legitimize them. Accountability for past human rights violations remains a distant mirage. And perhaps most importantly, there has been little or no visible progress in advancing the human security of the vast majority of the population. “Peace is jobs and electricity,” quipped one of the respondents of our 2005 study. A year later, neither of these goals seems any closer.

### The Perceptions Gap

The key finding of the fieldwork is that there is a deep malaise among all the Afghans interviewed with respect to the overall direction and effectiveness of the international aid effort in Afghanistan. It is symptomatic of significant levels of alienation vis-à-vis the aid community and the overall development process. It revolves around three D’s: disillusionment, disempowerment, disengagement. The Tufts study of 2005<sup>7</sup> identified a major disconnect between how outsiders (aid agencies, peace support operations) and local communities understood the meanings of peace and security. The data collected in 2006 shows that this disconnect is much wider and pertains to the very nature of the activities of the humanitarian enterprise and the larger aid community. These perceptions, while indicative of the mood in Afghanistan today, do not necessarily correspond to reality (nor to the views of the researchers). A more analytical commentary is included at the end of this section.

The key messages coming from the communities are:<sup>8</sup>

- Our great expectations have not been met. There is no visible improvement of our situation; we do not see any evidence of the impact of the assistance (thus, regrets are expressed for halcyon days of the past when progress and large infrastructure developments were visible—“At least the Soviets built Microrayon”<sup>9</sup>

is a frequent refrain—or even for the Taliban, though this is a minority view heard in conservative circles only). Some stress the lack of direction of the process: “The formal Bonn process is now completed, but for the people nothing has really changed” (Afghan female NGO professional). Others stress its superficiality: “There are no fundamental sustainable results. This is just relief. The Russians and the Germans came and left physical traces behind. But what has America done? Just look at the roads—they become like swimming pools in winter” (Afghan female intellectual). A seasoned UN aid worker adds: “The view that the state worked better under the Russians is a valid one.”

- Aid is not in line with our needs. It should go through the government. The priority should be factories, power plants, dams and other big infrastructure projects that give employment to people (not the small NGO rehabilitation projects that “we can do ourselves”). Change and reconstruction tend to be understood in terms of physical infrastructure. To some extent this echoes voices in the government that are calling for the international community to put money in infrastructure projects rather than in the “social” projects of NGOs. It also reflects an attachment of ordinary Afghans to the provision of social services by the state—a highly contentious issue given current pressures from international donors and the World Bank for privatization, even of the education sector. At issue is also the lack of sustainability of what is visible, i.e., small NGO projects that provide services that many people think should be provided by the state. Many NGOs “just put up signs” but do not actually do anything substantive.
- Our trust is rapidly eroding. The government is corrupt and ineffective. The criticism of the government is omnipresent. Everyone assumes that corruption, either fuelled by the narco-economy or by the aid economy, reaches the highest levels. Nepotism and patron-client dealings are seen as ruling the management of external resources. At the same time, most people, including relatively uneducated rural communities, say that the government is being undermined because international aid bypasses it with deleterious consequences for state-building.<sup>10</sup> Cynicism also permeates the general view of institutions of governance. As a national NGO director put it: “We all participated in the Loya Jirga process because we believed things would change<sup>11</sup>; we voted for Karzai, but he disappointed us; by the time the parliamentary elections came we were disillusioned and few people bothered to vote.” Commenting on the low turnout at the parliamentary elections and on the cynicism of Afghans vis-à-vis their institutions, a senior UN staffer added: “The reality of power at



**The chain of intermediaries refrain has deep roots in Afghan society. An elder from Gardez explained, “Once, in Zaher Shah’s time a minister came to Gardez. He met with the Governor and the elders who complained that no assistance was coming from Kabul. The minister listened then got up, went outside and returned with a snowball. He gave the snowball to the Governor who did not know what to do with it so he passed it to the first elder who passed it on to the next one and so on . . . until the last elder who just got a few drops of water. This is how the system works.”**

the district and village level was not at stake. Things do not change: former commanders are now police chiefs or district administrators. Ordinary people feel they have no say in decision-making.”

- Our socio-economic conditions have not improved in the past two years (with variations: Kabul middle class people are more positive than poorer groups and the rural population in general). Whoever provides visible assistance is viewed positively, but most people say that there is discrimination in the distribution of aid. It goes to those who are well-connected with those in power. It also seems to respond to criteria that are arcane to ordinary Afghans (“why is aid going to that group and not to us?”) or that correspond to foreign policy considerations. They feel that aid has bypassed them, in some cases literally: in the Ghorband valley, they see it go up the road to Bamyan. Issues of perceived discrimination in the allocation of aid are not being addressed. Some are concerned that aid will fuel ethnic tensions. There is also a sense that urban areas and elite groups are benefiting disproportionately from the international community’s largesse: “Overall, I would say that poor people and rural people are worse off. That’s why there is so much migration to urban areas. The aid money hasn’t reached its aims. But some people’s lives (in urban areas) have improved because they get much higher salaries now” (young female Afghan NGO professional). An interesting spin on discrimination is that some young men claim that because of the pro-women policies of the donors “women get all the jobs” in aid agencies.
- Our security is deteriorating. In large parts of the country there is widespread insecurity due to a mix of insurgency, drugs, and general lawlessness. While the vast majority of the people interviewed state that their personal security had improved over the past two years, the overall outlook was bleak. Large scale fighting would break out if the CF/ISAF were to leave. Many people feel—particularly in rural areas—that the absence of jobs and a visible peace dividend may push young people to join the insurgents (as well as other criminal groups). All say that the insurgency, whether Al Qaeda, Taliban or others, is fuelled by outsiders (who come from another district, another province or, of course, another country). The insurgency, poppy cultivation and livelihoods are linked to the provision of aid. As a tribal elder in an underserved area (Ghorband) put it: “Aid goes where there is poppy and war.” Another added, in a comment suggesting the counterproductivity of current policy: “No poppy is grown here, but if assistance does not come, next year we will plant it everywhere.” Moreover, many say, for the unemployed youth there are few choices for making a living beyond poppy or the Taliban.

- Even if it is not corrupt, international aid is mismanaged, expensive, expat-heavy . . . and there are far too many intermediaries. At each step in the chain, money gets siphoned off. The rational explanation is that “In Afghanistan, the transaction costs of international assistance are very high. They are in the order of 40%, compared to around 10% in Burkina Faso, for example. The additional costs for staff security are also enormous” (World Bank official). The popular view is that “the foreigners are here to get rich.”
- Aid is ineffective. “Aid agencies turn up unannounced, make an assessment, and then disappear without result” is another frequent refrain. If they do turn up again, aid efforts are often viewed as superficial and unsustainable. Afghan NGOs—because they are poorer—are seen as more susceptible to corruption than international aid agencies. Aid is going to the people who are “connected,” to those who are rich and powerful who are able to occupy key links in the chain of intermediaries, not to the most needy. Many Afghans suspect that there are underhand deals so that the people who are “gatekeepers” benefit from it (gatekeepers in government who mediate transactions with the aid community, but also key Afghan aid agency staff who maintain the contacts with government and local authorities). At the same time there are high levels of denial, particularly among the educated. A UN staffer who taught for a time at Kabul university recalls: “My students often complained that NGOs were ‘all thieves’ and that they received no assistance. They were forgetting that they were all receiving a stipend from an international agency and that they had been on a study trip to Germany.”
- Individual foreign aid workers are generally respected—“as long as they do good work”—but their conspicuous consumption, lifestyles, and sometimes their values, are problematic. While few subscribe to the anti-NGO rhetoric of former minister Bashardost (“NGOs are nearly as bad as warlords”), many wonder about their professional credentials or their motives. Some say: “There are many jobless people in the world; perhaps the foreigners come here because they cannot find work at home.” A minority feel that they come with some kind of hidden agenda (religious, political). The majority of respondents say they come because “it is their work,” their “mission” or they want to “get rich,” the implication being that aid workers have a vested interest in how the present system functions and are keen to perpetuate it rather than working themselves out of a job.
- The ISAF/CF presence is well tolerated (in the areas visited); the private security firms are not. The notion that there is an

“occupation” for ulterior motives (a forward base to attack Iran; to exploit Afghanistan’s natural resources) is there, under the surface.<sup>12</sup> The impression is that educated Afghans talk about it among themselves but not to foreigners. One frequent refrain among the educated is that the foreign military presence is there because of 9/11 and not actually to help to solve the “real” problems (security, narco-corruption, the lack of justice and accountability) and that the enormous funds spent on military presence (“to test new weapons for use elsewhere”) might have been used more productively for reconstruction (dams, factories, infrastructure projects). A few hint at more sinister motives for the Coalition presence: “Our country is a foreign policy arena and we are the losers. The Americans used the same slogans as the Russians. They used religion and ideology to get us to go on jihad. They used our rural people and created rifts between the people of Afghanistan. First they paid for the Taliban to set themselves up, then they got rid of them in record time. Their behavior is inconsistent. They could end terrorism but they don’t want to because who will need them if they do?” (female intellectual, Kabul).

Overall, the above summary of views indicates a significant and growing disconnect between civil society and the national and international institutions of governance. This is manifest in the massive perceptions gap and in the widespread criticism of aid agencies, which is fuelled by politicians and the media but also by a general frustration that “life has not changed.” Many people see the international aid effort as something that is alien and does not concern them because it bypasses them. While these feelings are certainly real and widespread, gauging how accurate they are is a different matter. Aid agencies come in very different hues.<sup>13</sup> Some have been working in Afghanistan for twenty years and have a well-documented track record, including high levels of appreciation from the communities in which they work. At the other extreme, small national NGOs struggling to survive vie for contracts and are really more akin to construction companies. The populist demagoguery of politicians and the media unfairly tars all NGOs with the same brush. Communities tend to be much more discriminating. Nevertheless, the fact that NGOs, as a category of civil society, have fallen from the role of heroes to that of villains in the space of a few years is an indication that something is amiss with the category as a whole either in what it provides (which may no longer correspond to popular expectations) or in how it provides it (which may mean that approaches that were acceptable in the past no longer fit the current situation), or both.

The corollary of this perceptions gap are yawning information, communication, and public relations gaps: agencies, whether NGO or UN, seem to be unable to explain in a credible manner what they are achieving with the funds entrusted to them by the international community. Their credibility is further undermined by the government's call for more international funds to be channeled through



Female community meeting, Kabul  
(Old City), February 2006.

Photo: A. Donini

its ministries. Scapegoating the aid agencies is expedient for the government as it deflects attention from the government's own weak absorption and implementation capacity (in February 2006, 11 months into the fiscal year, only 27% of the government's development budget had been spent). Moreover, and worryingly, it seems that there is no attempt to manage these gaps, neither from the government nor the aid community sides.

One intriguing aspect of the situation is that the criticism of outsiders is focused on the NGOs and not on the UN, donors or private contractors. This may be explained in several ways. Firstly, ordinary Afghans do not have the ability to distinguish between *farenjees* (foreigners) other than between the military and the civilians. Most Afghans have some knowledge of NGOs—because they were the main type of foreign aid presence

during the jihad years and because they are aware of the criticism broadcast by the media and politicians. They tend to lump all and sundry under the convenient 'NGO' label. Secondly, the UN itself is recognized, if at all, as the custodian of the peace process and the organizer of the elections rather than as the provider of assistance. Thirdly, the UN is a less visible assistance player than it was during the Taliban and the drought years when its role was prominent and easily understandable as it focused on life-saving assistance. After the aid/donor/contractor juggernaut descended on Afghanistan post-Bonn, the UN has become a relatively small assistance player in a very crowded and confusing field. Its role is more behind the scenes working with and through line Ministries and is thus much less in the limelight. This is especially true now that the peaks of repatriation and elections have passed. Some agencies, like WFP, have a deliberate policy of keeping a low profile, partly for security reasons and partly in an effort to blend in with the government. The relative absence of the UN from the perceptions of communities may also be a reflection of the diminishing role of the UN in the eyes of Afghans.

Perceptions are not about events; they are about their meaning. And the meaning here is how the Afghans interviewed make sense of what is happening around them. Perceptions do not necessarily reflect



realities. Nonetheless they can have very real consequences, including on the safety and security of aid workers whose vilification is a recurrent leitmotif in Afghanistan. This situation needs to be urgently addressed. Some recommendations appear at the end of this report.

## Universality

### Does It Matter?

One of the objectives of our study was to test the universality of the humanitarian discourse by trying to understand how it was perceived by those affected by crisis. Our assumption was, and is, that while it may claim to be universal in spirit, the humanitarian enterprise is fundamentally northern in values, appearance, and behavior. Generally speaking, the evidence collected in Afghanistan supports this assumption. Humanitarian action, unsurprisingly, is associated with the work of foreign agencies and, with a few exceptions (e.g., BRAC, the Aga Khan network, Mercy Malaysia), these are essentially northern.<sup>14</sup> But does this undermine the universality of humanitarianism in Afghanistan? Does it make for less-than-universal action?

Here the analysis is more complex because the situation in Afghanistan is not a clear-cut humanitarian one, and because the counterfactuals are not there: it is impossible to say whether a different, more or less universalist approach, might have been more effective in saving and protecting lives. It is possible, nevertheless, to make a few general points. The fact that the humanitarian endeavor is seen as northern or western makes it suspect. At a minimum it is seen as alien and pregnant with foreign-ness (rich in resources but often obscure in intent, hence the frequent refrain “we don’t know why they come or what they do,” “they show up, do an assessment and we never see them again”). At a maximum it comes with a hidden agenda ranging from the promotion of “different” or un-Islamic values to religious proselytism or intelligence gathering for political agendas.

Afghans also make the connection between the sudden post 9/11 gold rush atmosphere of Kabul and other urban areas and the geo-strategic interests of the US and its allies. Few Afghans are aware that in the weeks preceding the launch of the military intervention in Afghanistan, Colin Powell called upon NGOs to be the Coalition’s “force multipliers” and “part of our combat team.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the relationship between the aid enterprise and the Coalition intervention is fairly obvious—after all, the massive increase in aid agency presence happened on the heels of the US-led intervention—whether or not aid agencies put themselves directly under the security umbrella of the military or kept them at an arm’s length. The direct connection—that

aid agencies are the tool of the US—is made by the insurgents, of course, and their propaganda percolates and is discussed throughout Afghan society.

Moreover, the personal behavior of expatriate aid workers, while not necessarily a big issue in the areas visited, sets them apart, sometimes literally, as in Kabul where most foreigners live in segregated areas or protected compounds, from Afghan civil society. The otherworldliness of expatriate aid workers increases and so do questions as to why they are there. Could it be that they cannot find jobs at home? The mercenary motives of humanitarian personnel are frequently mentioned. There is often a perception that expats who come to work in Afghanistan are not “professionals,” and that people whom Afghans have trouble identifying with the professions they know and respect are earning large salaries which are not commensurate to their perceived qualifications or effectiveness.<sup>16</sup>

More importantly, perhaps, northern-style humanitarian action sets the stage for others seeking to pursue humanitarian objectives. Firstly, it pushes indigenous NGOs, many of whom are struggling to survive, to mimic the structures and behaviors of their northern counterparts. This undermines the overall universality of humanitarianism as it fosters the copying of exogenous processes and motifs rather than a dialogue between different, but perhaps complementary, approaches to humanitarianism. Thus, the terms of the humanitarian discourse are dictated by the outsiders. This in itself was not a problem in the earlier phases of the Afghan crisis, for example under the Taliban, when the acceptance of outsiders and the aid they provided was very high. Now that acceptance is much lower, both because of attacks by insurgents and widespread criticism from politicians, the media, and communities, the top-down and sometimes arrogant externality of the aid enterprise becomes problematic, a fact made worse by the perceived deep-seated reluctance of donors to provide support for the capacity-building of indigenous organizations.

Secondly, it privileges the roles and functions of the outsiders and thus results not only in a dominant-dominated humanitarian dialectic but also in the obfuscation of both the coping mechanisms of local communities and of the mostly invisible networks of solidarity (tribal, religious) that allow people to survive in times of crisis.

Finally, there is an exploitation-cum-helplessness motif running through the comments on the assistance community and the overall international presence: the geopolitical interests of foreign powers and the exploitation of Afghanistan’s energy resources and assistance are

**“Girls working for foreign organizations always have to be pretty,” says a female intellectual. “Why does ISAF always take good looking young men as translators? People don’t like their young relatives going to work for foreign organizations. They think they will be brainwashed and then foreign agencies can do anything they want in our country,” adds a female aid worker.**

wrapped up together in a feeling that Afghans are powerless: “Foreigners want Afghanistan’s resources. Nothing comes for free” (destitute widow, Kabul), “The whole world is not dirty. There are real humanitarian organizations who want to help but, unfortunately, the oil interests have spoiled everything” (female intellectual).

Most, if not all, foreign aid agencies subscribe to the universalist ideology of humanitarian and human rights principles. Some—the ICRC, human rights groups—specifically articulate these principles in their everyday work. For others, the principles are assumed to be part of the agency’s ethos. The extent to which Afghans recognize themselves in these principles or see them as a western construct varies, but by and large there does not seem to be major friction between local mores, beliefs, and religious precepts and humanitarian or human rights principles in their most generic formulation. The protection of civilians in times of war, the right to receive assistance and protection, and the need for accountability and redress for past human rights violations are all deeply cherished values, as a number of recent surveys have shown.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the universalist ideology of expatriate humanitarians does not seem to be problematic—Afghans are genuinely grateful when they see lives saved and protected and good work done. However, some of the unintended effects are the source of suspicion. This relates in particular to the issue of women’s rights and women’s employment, a historically controversial issue in Afghanistan well before Taliban times.<sup>18</sup> On the positive side, many more educated women are now gaining access to employment. This, unsurprisingly, generates resistance in some of the more conservative quarters. Nevertheless, there are also hints of sexual exploitation among female respondents sometimes combined with an external political agenda. This highlights the historic Afghan paranoia that young people exposed to foreigners and their ways will be culturally influenced and brainwashed to further an outside agenda.<sup>19</sup>

But, cultural issues aside, does it matter to the beneficiaries if the design is northern, if the humanitarians have to share space with the military, if agencies work with or for the government? The data as we interpret it says: probably not much. However, the implications are likely to be deep and wide-ranging should the humanitarian enterprise (further) lower its principled guard. In fact, the issue here is not so much one of impartiality (even the military can deliver relief in a relatively impartial manner) but one of neutrality and independence. If northern-framed humanitarian action is associated with a coercive military design or if it becomes itself coercive, as is happening in

insecure areas of Afghanistan today where humanitarian personnel and commodities travel in militarized convoys, any and all pretense to neutrality and independence would necessarily be abandoned.

It is interesting to record some of the views of the CF/ISAF military on this issue. A senior officer in a PRT explains that he understands the concerns of the NGOs and that in theory it would be good not to blur the lines between military and humanitarian functions but the world has moved on (“NGOs are living in the past”) and the future is bound to bring more integration between military and civilian peace-building functions, not less. He also acknowledges that many Afghans worry that “the government and the parliament are puppets of the US.” That’s why the PRT tries to keep out of the public eye and put the government’s role forward. Another adds that, unlike aid agencies, the PRTs are not driven by recognition: “We are past hearts and minds. We no longer put visible signs on our projects.” After all, “when you are hungry, you do not care which tree the apple falls from.” There may be another explanation for the PRTs’ concerns about visibility: tolerance for the western militarized approach to meeting the needs of the population was undoubtedly high in the first months of the US-led intervention. It is now starting to wane, as the Kabul riots indicate. This begs the question of whether alternatives to leading with a western jack-boot should have been sought in the first place.

It may be true that hungry civilians do not really care if wheat is delivered to them by an NGO, government, or Coalition truck (“We were hungry, we did not really care where it came from” quipped an unemployed youth from Qarabagh). But in the long term, such things are likely to matter more, especially if the insurgency, now limited to large but relatively circumscribed parts of the country, were to expand.<sup>20</sup> There are already indications that in some of the more insecure areas villagers are afraid of being associated with aid agency activities. The insurgents are quick to exploit any blurring of lines to their advantage.

Aid agencies are therefore likely to face an increasing dilemma: either succumb to pragmatism and in insecure areas place themselves resolutely under the security umbrella of the CF/ISAF or insulate themselves as much as possible from the CF/ISAF and find ways of re-engaging with communities, and of talking to the insurgents, in order to re-burnish their tarnished humanitarian credentials. To some extent, the choice between the security umbrella and the humanitarian flag is a judgment call. Both approaches allow for the provision of relief to people affected by conflict and crisis, and in some extreme cases the provision of relief by military contingents may be the necessary last



resort. The point here is that these choices carry consequences for agencies especially if they muddy the waters by trying to be pragmatic and principled at the same time. Becoming the tool of a security or political enterprise carries a series of short-term and long-term risks for aid agencies. In the short term, the obvious risk is increased attacks by insurgents if agencies are perceived as being, by design or by default, the instruments of the Coalition. In the longer-term, the essence of humanitarianism as we know it is at stake. The protection of humanitarian action from overt politicization is not a new issue, but the willing acceptance of parts of the humanitarian system to abdicate universalist values for a particularist agenda—even if this agenda saves and protects lives in the short term—would likely have long term negative implications for the ability of humanitarian agencies to work in contested areas, particularly in Islamic contexts.

It may be impossible to maintain a fictional unity on this issue across the broad spectrum of agencies that consider themselves humanitarian. This argues for more insulation of “purist” members of the humanitarian movement from the vagaries of politics. Some ideas on how this might be done will be suggested in the conclusions section below.

#### How To Define the Situation?

One of the problems confronting aid agencies working in Afghanistan, and researchers trying to make sense of what is going on, relates to the ambiguities with which the overall situation is defined (or not). Is it a humanitarian crisis or a post-conflict, peace-building-cum-development situation?

This is not just an issue of semantics. The way in which the situation is defined impacts directly on the posture that agencies assume vis-à-vis the government and the other forces at play. It also impacts on key issues of principle and thus of universality. The same is true for the assumptions, patent or latent, that are made about how the security situation might evolve.

In Afghanistan today, while the international and de jure legitimacy of the government may be strong, its de facto legitimacy varies around the country. The posture of NGOs varies too. There is a degree of opportunism here: NGOs are happy to fudge the issue. They define themselves as humanitarian or developmental when it suits them.<sup>21</sup> Can the same organization be “developmental” (and work with or for the government) in one part of the country and “humanitarian” (and respect established humanitarian principles) in another? Can an NGO

conduct local situation analyses for a PRT in a contested area and still expect to be seen as impartial or humanitarian?

In a spirit of pragmatism and an ethos of getting things done, (“There is a strong pressure to spend money and deliver,” an INGO Director recognizes), many agencies seem not to be asking themselves these questions. Others do and either accept to become the willful instruments of a political design or take refuge under cover of principle. What is worrying is that these issues do not seem to be discussed openly within the aid community or with its counterparts. Moreover, it is unclear what impact these ambiguities mean for the beneficiaries of aid. Does it matter if assistance comes in a military truck or under the auspices of a principled NGO? It seems not (on the basis of the findings of the 2005 Tufts study and anecdotal evidence collected in 2006). What seems to be important is *what* is provided, not *who* provides it. There are indications however that in the more insecure areas association with western agencies does matter: being partners in an aid project can constitute a security risk for villagers.<sup>22</sup>

The situation in Afghanistan in early 2006 presents a blend of conflict, post-conflict, humanitarian, and development characteristics. In Kabul and in the North where security is not a serious issue and the legitimacy of the government is broadly accepted, agencies are in post-conflict, even development mode. In the most insecure areas of the East and South, agencies are either absent or treading very gingerly. Little thought seems to have been given to how they define their own roles and are perceived in these latter areas. Some argue that the situation in these areas is quite similar to Soviet occupation times: The military control the main towns and some of the district centers during daytime. At night, and in the countryside, the insurgents move relatively freely and deny access to a stable government presence.

The difference, of course, is that unlike the jihad period of the late 1980s, aid agencies have negotiated no “humanitarian consensus” with the insurgents. Even the most principled of humanitarian organizations, the ICRC, is unable to offer or provide the traditional medical services it provided for 20 years to fighters *hors de combat* or to engage with the insurgents on humanitarian issues. The humanitarian relationship, like the war, is asymmetrical. Given the nature of the conflict, real questions arise as to whether agencies who purport to be “humanitarian” can in fact work credibly in accordance with established international humanitarian law (IHL) principles in those areas where insurgents are present. If agencies work directly or indirectly under the security umbrella of the Coalition or ISAF and in direct partnership with the government, what message does this give to

**“The argument for humanitarian space in Afghanistan has been lost. It has been trampled by the political imperative.” (Donor representative, Kabul)**

**“These people [foreign contractors] had come to Afghanistan at America's behest, therefore they should be sentenced to death,” (Statement attributed to Mullah Omar as relayed by Taliban spokesman Qari Mohammad Yousuf, 12 March 2006)**

the insurgents? And to those communities where insurgents are active? What are the implications for staff security? And does it matter to the beneficiaries? Conversely, if an Islamic NGO tried to work neutrally and impartially with the insurgents or in areas where they have a strong presence, would it not be labeled as supporting “terrorism” by the CF?

Views on whether conflict is fuelling a humanitarian crisis in the more insecure areas of the country diverge (“these are remote and poor areas, but no particular needs have shown up as yet”; “it is a self-fulfilling prophecy: insecurity means less assistance which means more insecurity”). There are indications that fighting and insecurity, particularly in Kandahar and Helmand provinces, is resulting in involuntary displacement. Should the insurgency expand or be able to hold on more permanently to bits of territory, the situation would undoubtedly change. Larger population movements might occur and/or communities would find themselves trapped by fighting and *in extremis*. Aid agencies, because they have not nurtured a clear humanitarian profile, are likely to find it increasingly difficult to be accepted by the insurgents in these areas. A social contract of acceptability will be difficult to re-negotiate. The Government and the CF/NATO forces might also find it distasteful if agencies entered into negotiations for access and space with insurgents, who in the global struggle between good and evil have been labeled as “terrorists”. Thus, the profile adopted by aid agencies—pro-western, pro-government—has a direct impact on their ability to respond to humanitarian need. The de facto choice seems to be between working without impartiality and neutrality and not working at all.

In sum, there is a fundamental ambiguity in Afghanistan today arising from the lack of clarity with which the situation is defined. During the civil war years (1992-1995) and the time of the Taliban (1996-October 2001), aid agencies could situate themselves clearly in a humanitarian perspective and limit themselves to life-saving assistance and protection activities which were clearly understood, and appreciated, by the belligerents who, by and large, were not classified in terms of good and evil. In the eyes of aid agencies whose objective was access to and protection of civilians, they all tended to be abusive of civilians. Aid was often instrumentalized for political purposes,<sup>23</sup> and the respect for IHL waxed and waned, but by and large humanitarian action and limited small-scale rehabilitation were the only shows in town.

After the demise of the Taliban, things became much more complicated. The international community and aid agencies were quick to assume that the war was over. The UN set the tone by establishing an integrated mission—UNAMA—in which the humanitarian and human

rights components were subordinated to political decision-making. It immediately became more difficult to raise human rights concerns<sup>24</sup> as the UN mantra became “we are here to support the government.” Humanitarian action retained some initial autonomy during the first months of the Karzai government. Humanitarian actors had to compete for space and resources with the host of new players (development agencies, private contractors, and military contingents with their own “humanitarian” agenda) that descended on Afghanistan. They were slow to understand that a fundamental paradigm shift had taken place: by aligning themselves with the government and UNAMA they were also aligning themselves de facto with the military intervention and its objectives (which were and are of a GWOT nature rather than peace-building). By implication, humanitarian agencies were forsaking neutrality and independence because they had chosen to “engage in the controversies” of a fundamentally political design.<sup>25</sup> The ICRC was quick to understand that in the context of post 9/11 Afghanistan, where in their view there is a “civilizational confrontation” at play,<sup>26</sup> activities such as the promotion of democracy could be “controversial” as they could be seen as part of an external agenda. The ICRC has thus stopped all such “development” activities (i.e., activities promoting agriculture or employment that are not strictly humanitarian) because “especially since the arrival of militaries with so-called humanitarian intentions,”<sup>27</sup> it became essential for it to focus on its clear-cut humanitarian mandate. MSF<sup>28</sup> and a few others adopted a similar position, but the bulk of the aid and donor community did not see, or chose not to see, that fundamental issues of humanitarian principle were at stake.

Contrary to expectations, the Taliban and other insurgents were not completely defeated. In the words of a senior Afghan NGO professional, “they are like crushed glass, you cannot see them but they have retained their capacity to hurt you.” From the perspective of the insurgents it became clear that the aid community had taken sides, and, therefore, attacks against aid workers were fair game. During the previous quarter century of conflict and crisis there had only been a handful of attacks against foreign aid workers. By and large aid workers had been tolerated if not respected by belligerents. Paradoxically, during Taliban times, when the culture clash was greatest, respect and protection for foreign aid workers was strongest. Communities had been generally very supportive as aid agencies were seen as providing essential services. Even the Soviets and the Najibullah government who saw the NGOs as objective allies of the mujahedin refrained from targeting aid workers. Suddenly, after 9/11, as in Iraq after March 2003, the taboo of the inviolability of



humanitarians and their emblems was lifted and a tragic succession of killings ensued.

A senior governmental official (who comes from the NGO world) commented, “In the present context, impartiality works, but not neutrality. There is a tension here: you have to respond to needs, but you have to take a long-term sustainable view, which cannot be done outside State institutions.” A donor who has a long-term memory of Afghanistan counters: “In the mujahedin days, NGOs were not seen as a threat. They provided a service that was understood by all. Now they are seen as a threat because they are part and parcel of the political process orchestrated by the international community.” One of the allegations made by the Taliban to justify their attacks is that NGOs and other aid agencies do intelligence work for their governments (in addition to spreading alien values). Surprisingly, this allegation is repeated by some communities on the ground, intellectuals and even by national NGO Directors who cannot be suspected of having sympathies with the Taliban.

To conclude, is the universality of the humanitarian discourse in jeopardy in Afghanistan today? The data from the field, while not clear-cut, does indicate that both the nature of the activities as well as the *modus operandi* of humanitarian agencies and the types of voluntary or involuntary alignments that they make, or are perceived as making, are problematic. As in Iraq, the credibility and credentials of the humanitarian enterprise are in question. The international community has, it seems, not learned the lesson of the past: in the long run, the instrumentalization of humanitarian action does not pay.

Is it still possible to turn the clock back? Would a more formal bifurcation between card-carrying humanitarian purists who would seek to insulate themselves and be insulated from political processes, on the one side, and pragmatists and “solidarists” who would on the contrary engage with politics, either in support or in critique, on the other, allow for better and more effective humanitarian action? The answer is by no means clear. It could be that in some very specific and fraught situations there is an inherent contradiction between saving lives and taking a long-term principled stance. This would justify, for example, the militarization of relief assistance as a last resort. After all, the principle of humanity trumps all others and the fundamental obligation of humanitarians is to save and protect lives (or to allow others, including the military, to do so). But the costs might be very high for humanitarianism and its purported universality in Afghanistan and beyond. Should the insurgency expand and cause a large scale protection and assistance crisis the humanitarian community would in

all likelihood find itself very ill-placed to address humanitarian need, if not fundamentally compromised. Some practical recommendations, derived from this analysis, appear in the final section of this study.

### Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism

Post 9/11 Afghanistan, like Iraq, is the theatre of evolving world-ordering experiments built around the global war on terror and the imposition of *Pax Americana*.<sup>29</sup> The general implications of GWOT for the future of humanitarian action need not be discussed here as the fundamentals have not changed since the flourishing of writings and debate on the subject in the wake of the US intervention in Iraq.<sup>30</sup> If anything, the level of concern in the humanitarian community has increased in the past couple of years as the implications of the “you are for us or against us” approach have started to sink in. What will be discussed in this section is how the GWOT agenda is seen from the ground up in Afghanistan and how it affects the work of humanitarian agencies.

A reminder is in order here: the US intervention in Afghanistan came squarely under the banner of GWOT. The objective was to crush the Taliban and Al Qaeda by all available means. Regime change was the expected outcome but little thought was given, at least initially, to the shape of the new regime and to the regional implications of its establishment. As a result, the military intervention and the subsequent Bonn Agreement that ushered in the first Karzai government suffered from (at least) three major flaws that impacted directly on the environment in which humanitarian agencies operated.

The first was that “all available means” implied bringing back, arming, and bankrolling the warlords who had been responsible for the chaos and atrocities committed during the civil war period (1992-1996) and who had been defeated by the Taliban in the previous years (and who by all accounts were, and are, universally reviled by ordinary Afghans<sup>31</sup>). In the struggle against evil, the warlords had suddenly—and somewhat miraculously—become “good”.

The second was that the Bonn Agreement was a deal among victors brokered by the UN, not a peace agreement which all parties would feel bound to respect. The result is that, while the Bonn process may be formally completed, the legitimacy of the government is weak, uneven, and contested by armed insurgencies that seem to be spreading at the time of writing. Its writ is beset by parallel or pre-existing power structures, often abusive, that have been to one degree or another legitimized by the recent elections. Governance is weakened by

corruption, primarily narco-related, which permeates society (and, reportedly, even the highest levels of the institutions of governance).

The third, which is a consequence of the first two, is the unwillingness of the US and the international community and of the Afghan government to tackle the issue of accountability for human rights violations of the past. In the words of President Karzai, “justice is a luxury that we cannot afford.”<sup>32</sup> This approach in turn fuels the disconnect between the outsiders and the local population<sup>33</sup> and the feelings of disillusion and disenchantment described in the section on perceptions above.

The US-led intervention had an immediate effect on humanitarian action. As soon as the bombing campaign started on 7 October 2001, Afghanistan’s borders were effectively sealed, trapping asylum seekers who were fleeing the bombing inside. No amount of advocacy by the UN and NGOs on the ground was able to move the US, Pakistan, the other neighboring countries, or the major donors to respect their obligations under the refugee convention. This was the first in a series of violations of international law. It was followed by the Coalition’s “humanitarian” food drops (characteristically, packaged in yellow, the same color of the cluster bombs also being dropped by CF). Soon a major controversy emerged with the aid community over the “dress code” of armed CF Special Forces roaming around in civilian clothes and un-marked vehicles resembling those of NGOs and who on many occasions presented themselves with weapons at humanitarian facilities or coordination meetings. This resulted in an uproar in the aid community, but, initially at least, incomprehension and little change on behalf of the Coalition.

For its part, the UN dropped its humanitarian and human rights guard and found it difficult to go public about the conduct of the war. Senior CF officers established communications channels with the UN on the ground, the UN and WFP deployed liaison officers to the Coalition central command in Tampa, Florida (while, of course, it became immediately impossible to communicate with the Taliban), and UN staff were told informally that it was OK to socialize with CF personnel. Not to be outdone, UNICEF cancelled, for the first time, its call for a cease-fire during the national immunization campaign (November 2001) for fear of antagonizing the coalition.

The operating and security environment for aid agencies in Afghanistan is still defined by GWOT. Aid agencies cannot ignore the CF and ISAF forces. They are part of the landscape. Nor can they ignore the threat of attacks against aid workers or of suicide bombers as well as the

bunkerization of Kabul and the securitization of aid (private security companies, armed escorts for UN missions, increased costs of security protection). In the case of the CF and NATO Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and their hearts and minds and/or assistance activities, aid agencies have no option but to share their space with the militaries, even if many agencies would prefer to keep as much distance as possible between themselves and the PRTs. The environment is not defined solely by the GWOT but by a set of unpalatable variables—warlords, the drug economy, general lawlessness and insecurity, the corruption it engenders, the lack of transparency and accountability of institutions, etc.—that affect aid agency operations. The point here is that the shadow of GWOT and the securitization of aid that accompanies it have become a major defining factor in the operating environment of aid agencies. Securitization, both in the sense of manipulation of aid agencies in the furtherance of security agendas and as concern for the physical security of staff and activities, has reached levels hitherto unseen in the humanitarian community in recent years.

Afghans are well aware of GWOT. They are generally grateful for the booting out of the Taliban, and the “B52 factor” is a frequent topic of semi-serious jokes. At the same time, they take a wider view: “The Americans brought Osama to Afghanistan. He is their creation” or “After Iraq, the US is not taking the problems of Afghanistan seriously. They are preparing to disengage” (parliamentarians). The widespread paranoia about outsiders interfering in Afghan affairs is always close to the surface, however. Practically everybody claims that the insurgency is armed and supported from across the border. “The Taliban would be nothing without the support they get from Pakistan.” And of course, it is always “people from outside” (another country, province or district, never people from here) who are responsible for attacks.

Many people—parliamentarians and rural villagers alike—make a direct link between terrorism and human security. “Unemployment is the mother of all ills” quips a conservative elderly gentleman from Kabul, and the ills he mentions are youth joining kidnapping gangs, the drug mafia, or the Taliban. A rural mullah says: “The lack of jobs makes working for the terrorists attractive. The enemies of Afghanistan take advantage of this.” A (male) parliamentarian complains that his province is underserved by aid agencies “because the international community was convinced that all Pashtuns were Taliban or Al Qaeda, my province gets very little assistance. Underserved areas become more insecure and provide a foothold for terrorists.” In the opinion of another parliamentarian from a relatively insecure area, NGOs sometimes make things worse by attracting insurgent attention through their own

**Afghanistan shows that there seems to be a negative correlation between “international politics,” as in superpower involvement, and the ability of the international system to provide humanitarian assistance in a relatively principled manner. The “highs” in politics in Afghanistan (Cold War proxy war; post 9/11 peace-building) corresponded to “lows” in principles and a subordination of humanitarian action and human rights concerns to political imperatives.**

activities: “Some NGOs do a good job, but the majority work for intelligence agencies (and sometimes churches). For example an NGO I know is really an intelligence service. It only works in Pashtu areas and passes information to the Coalition who then go out and arrest people.”

While the CF and NATO (many people cannot distinguish one from the other) are generally lauded for what they have done in the past, views on their present roles and behaviors are mixed. Some people make a connection between the CF presence and the new forms of terrorism, in particular suicide bombings, that have now appeared in the country, the assumption being that rather than quashing terrorism, western military presence has fomented it. Nonetheless, few direct anti-CF/NATO views are expressed. A senior Afghan NGO staffer explained, “What did you expect, you are a foreigner! We talk about the occupation all the time.” Public commentary is more muted (“Seeing a foreign soldier with a gun in your own country is not very nice,” female intellectual). People are reluctant to talk about “invasion” or “occupation” but they do express a wariness or impatience with indefinite foreign military presence. Complaints about specific acts of improper behavior are more direct. Low-flying helicopters that pass over family compounds, reckless driving in urban areas, arrogant behavior of patrols that burst into houses without first consulting the village elders, cultural insensitivity of the CF and their proclivity to act on “wrong information” provided by their corrupt Afghan advisors are often mentioned.

The private security companies, omnipresent and particularly arrogant and trigger happy, are universally reviled: “We know the difference between mercenaries and regular troops. The former answer to nobody. They are people who have escaped from prison and get paid to kill. We don’t want these people here” (female intellectual). Their driving habits are particularly objectionable. As this writer can attest, they do not hesitate to point their weapons menacingly to anyone who gets in the way.

And what about the future? Afghans and expatriates alike assume that NATO, if not the Coalition, will be part of their landscape for many years to come. They are not too concerned with the actual presence, but the implications of GWOT are what worries them. The alleged desecration of the Koran by US militaries in Guantanamo in 2005 led to huge protests and riots in Afghanistan that allowed the Taliban to give substance to their claim that the intervention in Afghanistan was directed “against Islam”. Similar incidents occurred at the time of the research visit in February 2006 around the Danish cartoons issue. This was followed in May 2006 by the extremely violent and totally



unexpected so-called “road rage” riots in Kabul.<sup>34</sup> Resentment is there under the surface, and it can easily be manipulated. That it can explode unpredictably and violently is a reminder of how fragile the consensus around the coalition presence (and the Karzai administration it upholds) really is.

Most observers would agree that GWOT has had a number of negative impacts on the functioning of the humanitarian enterprise in Afghanistan. Perhaps the most visible consequence has been the deterioration of the security environment for aid workers. Attacks were virtually unknown before 9/11; now in large swaths of the country aid workers, whatever the actual causality or motive of the attacks, are considered legitimate targets by insurgents and assorted criminal elements. The Coalition intervention, through the PRTs and other activities aimed at associating NGOs and the UN to its objectives, has visibly encroached on humanitarian space in terms of blurring of lines and agendas and of the increasing securitization and potential militarization of the aid enterprise. So far GWOT has had more negative consequences for the aid community and its operations than for ordinary Afghans, who, while perhaps resentful, still see benefits to the presence of foreign military contingents. This could rapidly change, however, if the perceptions gap discussed above is not addressed. The absence of a palpable peace dividend combined with a deterioration of security could easily result in a multiplication of the levels of discontent with possibly ominous consequences.

The overall concern and uncertainty was summarized by a western donor representative with long years of experience in Afghanistan: “The more the US violates international humanitarian law in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the more the aid agencies are seen as complicit in what is understood by Afghans to be a strategic design for control of Afghanistan and the entire region.” Herein, therefore, lies the key message on the implications of GWOT in Afghanistan: the manner in which the war is prosecuted carries no guarantee that it will result in a stable and even less in a “democratic” Afghanistan. So far, it would seem that rather than suppressing terrorism, the western military intervention has given it a new lease of life. For aid agencies, the implications are even more worrisome: quite apart from what happens in Afghanistan, aid agencies are now seen as guilty by association, if not by design, by belligerents and many others who are supportive of their cause. It is as if humanitarianism had walked into a minefield... blindfolded. Extricating itself is likely to be a long and complex task.

## Coherence

There has been a long tradition of attempts to generate coherence between international political, humanitarian, development and assistance processes in Afghanistan. A retrospective look at the Afghan cycle of crisis and conflict, which spans twenty five years of international involvement, provides insights into an interesting array of approaches and experimentations by the international community. Afghanistan shows, for example, that there seems to be a negative correlation between “international politics,” as in superpower involvement, and the ability of the international system to provide humanitarian assistance in a relatively principled manner. The “highs” in politics in Afghanistan (Cold War proxy war; post 9/11 peace-building) corresponded to “lows” in principles and a subordination of humanitarian action and human rights concerns to political imperatives. Conversely, superpower dis-attention to the Afghan crisis, as in the civil war and early Taliban periods, allowed more space for issues of principle and for significant innovations in how to do UN business in a crisis country, as well as for more assertive coordination. It is a bit like dependency theory: when superpowers are busy elsewhere, there are more opportunities for local initiatives and creativity to flourish.

Moreover, the definitions of what was “humanitarian” have expanded and contracted to suit particular political contexts. An extremely wide definition was used during the Taliban period<sup>35</sup>; post 9/11 we see a dangerous level of contraction. Respect for humanitarian principles has ebbed and flowed depending on the particular position of Afghanistan on the international community’s radar screen. Similarly “coherence” and “integration” have become loaded terms. Once used to describe the aspiration for a higher level of concern for humanitarian and human rights principles in the context of a multidimensional response to the problems of a country torn by conflict and crisis, they have now become euphemisms for the subordination of principles to political objectives.<sup>36</sup>

The key moments in the evolving coherence saga are as follows:

- June 1988: establishment of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programmes Relating to Afghanistan (UNOCA). The appointment of Saddrudin Aga Khan as the first high-profile Coordinator was a major innovation in that he had a strong mandate to coordinate the UN system’s humanitarian, and potentially, assistance activities, including the allocation of funds. This resulted in a strong push for a unitary approach vis-à-

vis the warring factions even if there remained a separate UN political peace mission.

- December 1990: after Sadruddin's resignation, UNOCA and the UN political mission are put under the same leadership but with little change in the functions performed by either.
- 1992-1996: Civil war period: UNOCA becomes the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) and is humanitarian only. UNDP, in anticipation of progress towards peace and stability is put in charge of coordination of development assistance. De facto, as the country descends into chaos and the UN is frequently forced to evacuate, UNOCHA remains the key player as the only assistance that it is possible to provide is very limited life-saving assistance. The UN political mission has a separate head, but its role is limited to "talks about talks."
- 1996-October 2001: Taliban period. UNOCHA and UNDP are joined at the head under a "UN Coordinator" with a strong unitary mandate in recognition of the need for the system to speak with one voice to the Taliban. The Strategic Framework (SF) is developed and becomes the instrument for ensuring coherence between the UN's political, assistance and human rights objectives in the country; UNSMA, the UN political mission, remains separate but subscribes to the common objectives of the three pillars of the SF. NGOs are brought into the unitary coordination mechanism for assistance through Principled Common Programming mechanisms. Elements of donor coordination are promoted through the establishment of the Afghanistan Support Group in which the UN and the NGOs are also represented.
- Oct 2001-present: The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is established as the most "integrated" mission to date. UNOCHA is folded into UNAMA. The humanitarian and human rights pillars lose their agency. The coordination and common programming mechanisms of the SF are disbanded or fall into disrepair. NGOs feel excluded from or deliberately shun the new UNAMA coordination structures. The multiplication of actors (CF and NATO, PRTs, bilateral donors, World Bank, private companies, hundreds of new NGOs and of course the fledgling government) weaken UNAMA's coordination role. Emergence of alternative coordination centers such as PRTs, provincial coordination councils which sometimes overlap or conflict with UNAMA and NGO bodies.

Two specific coherence initiatives—the Strategic Framework and the establishment of UNAMA—and their respective impacts on humanitarian action are worth highlighting and contrasting here. The

coherence agendas of the SF and of UNAMA were fundamentally different. The first was centered around the objective of creating a more unitary and principled approach to international assistance—essentially, under the Taliban that meant humanitarian assistance—through the collective agreement of the aid community on a set of principles and human rights objectives. Thus coherence of assistance and human rights activities was achieved, to a point, through an array of thematic and sectoral common-programming bodies which were the main coordination and policy formulation fora for UN and NGO assistance and human rights actors. The coherence between the assistance and human rights pillars on one side and the UN political pillar on the other was always tenuous. UN political staff had little sympathy or understanding for the perspectives of their humanitarian and human rights colleagues. As humanitarian assistance was the main show in town and there was little traction on the peace-making front, coherence was mainly an objective of the humanitarian and human rights actors. An assumption was made that principled assistance would promote the “logic of peace.” In the views of some, the SF became an “aid-led approach to conflict resolution”<sup>37</sup> even though the SF’s primary ambition was to address the consequences of conflict rather than its root causes.

Some “purist” humanitarian organizations—MSF in particular—were critical of the SF approach which they saw as an attempt to politicize humanitarian action. While in theory the MSF view had some merit, the situation on the ground in Afghanistan during the Taliban years was such that the humanitarians were at the front lines of the international community’s involvement while the UN political mission was crippled by the lack of any traction in the search for a peace agreement. It therefore made sense to promote coherence on the assistance and human rights side as this was the prerequisite for effective programming of the very scarce resources that the international community made available to address a deepening crisis. While the UN Coordinator’s role was on occasion muscular, it was also collaborative and ensured levels of buy-in by UN agencies and the NGO community never before seen in Afghanistan, and rarely elsewhere.

UNAMA represented a 180-degree turn. While the SF was predicated on the idea that humanitarian and human rights concerns should be given “equal billing” in the framing of a coherent UN response to the crisis, integration under the UNAMA model was and still is predicated on the primacy of politics and the subordination of humanitarian and human rights concerns to what SRSB Brahimi used to call “the art of the possible.” UNAMA’s operating system revolved around the twin

mantras of “support the government” and “don’t do anything that might derail the fragile peace process.”

As a result, three things happened: firstly, the situation was somewhat arbitrarily defined as “post-conflict,” thus enabling the government to occupy the driver’s seat, at least formally. This made it more difficult for humanitarian players (UN and NGO) to argue that there was still a need to operate under established humanitarian principles; at which point some of the key NGOs, such as MSF, started to distance themselves and even insulate themselves from UNAMA. Moreover, the humanitarian and human rights components of the mission were constrained in their advocacy and protection functions: for example, numerous incidents of abuse or retaliation against civilians committed by warlords in northern Afghanistan in early 2002 were not reported to UN HQ or publicized for fear of affecting the political process.<sup>38</sup>

Secondly, because of delays in the establishment of the assistance pillar of the mission and the appointment of the DSRSG for assistance, the humanitarian community was left rudderless after the forced departure of the UN Coordinator. With the arrival of many new players (NGOs unfamiliar with Afghanistan, bilateral donors) and the sudden availability of seemingly unlimited funding, the UN lost its edge in terms of humanitarian coordination. UN agencies and NGOs broke ranks and undermined the SF sectoral and geographical coordination mechanisms, arguing, with some reason, that they were no longer in line with the new dispensation. Coordination by the government soon proved to be ineffective and in many cases bilateral agencies and NGOs simply ignored it. Thus, at least initially, integration resulted in a significant loss of effectiveness and engagement in terms of addressing humanitarian need.

And, thirdly, as has since become increasingly obvious, the aid community in Afghanistan started to be perceived by the insurgents and their supporters as having taken sides with the Kabul government whose writ and legitimacy remain contested in large parts of the country and its international military backers. It could be argued (without any possibility of providing the counterfactuals) that a clearer separation between the political and humanitarian functions might have provided for better protection of UN, and by association, NGO staff. As noted above, the traditional protection provided by humanitarian emblems has been lost and it is difficult to see how a new social contract between humanitarian agencies and insurgents might be re-established. While it is unclear whether aid workers are being attacked because of their alien values or their purported



participation in a “western conspiracy,” it is quite clear that they are being targeted because they are seen as a prop to the government.

In the words of a senior government official, “aid agencies are being targeted because they deliver services for the government. NGOs increase the legitimacy of the government. The insurgents are not attacking the NGOs, they are attacking the government.”

It was difficult to obtain views on the UN’s role from some of the focus group respondents, especially those who were less informed (or interested). Apart from mentioning the elections, most people are at a loss when asked about the UN. Returnees sometimes mention assistance received from UNHCR. Most respondents do not realize that food, school materials and other services are provided by UN agencies. This is perhaps symptomatic of the UN’s diminished overall role now that the Bonn process is more or less complete. Among the educated, two types of comments stick out: UNAMA’s credibility is falling because of its perceived association with “corrupt government” and its mismanagement of the parliamentary elections (widely seen as manipulated by the UN-supported Joint Electoral Monitoring Board); the second set of comments relate to human rights and the absence of progress on issues of impunity: “The UN is not pushing on human rights. It is not playing a positive role. ‘Impunity? Time to turn the page’, they say” (female NGO Director). An intellectual and human rights activist adds: “UNAMA is not promoting the transitional justice agenda. This allows Karzai to say things like ‘justice is a luxury.’ He knows that he can get away with it.”

Predictably, there was little criticism of integration to be found among UNAMA staff. They are quick to point to the strengths of having everybody under one management. Integrated field offices where UNAMA political and assistance staff work together are also seen as an asset because they facilitate substantive communication with local authorities and the PRTs. Often other UN agencies and IOM are co-located behind UNAMA’s fortified walls, but this is more for security than programmatic reasons.

UNAMA was the first and only attempt so far at total UN integration in a post-conflict environment. Unlike Sierra Leone and the DRC, the UN humanitarian component was folded into the UN mission from Day One. OCHA disappeared as a coordination entity for humanitarian affairs and what residual humanitarian activities (now limited basically to natural disasters) are required are undertaken under the UNAMA flag. In this the set-up is similar to Liberia. The human rights component was also subsumed under UNAMA. This happened in the

very early days of the mission and the place of the humanitarian and human rights components in the Afghan setup is no longer an issue. The momentum for relatively independent UN humanitarian action was lost early on. Senior UN humanitarian officials on the ground and at HQ now recognize the downside of “total integration” but have to accept that integration with some safeguards for humanitarian action is perhaps the best that can be obtained in the current situation.<sup>39</sup> From the UN political perspective, having all the UN components under a single chain of command was an advantage in political and managerial terms as the independent humanitarian and HR voices were perceived as irritants by the very politically-minded SRSG. From the humanitarian perspective, it is debatable if there were any pluses to be derived from integration. The humanitarian voice was stifled. In addition to losing its autonomous capacity to raise and address humanitarian issues, the UN humanitarian coordination function very rapidly lost its attraction for the NGOs, i.e., they felt excluded from and/or saw no real advantage in being associated with a coordination structure that was functional to UNAMA’s political objectives. In a sense, humanitarian action disappeared: in early 2002 UNAMA decided that there was no longer a humanitarian crisis nor a need for a Consolidated Appeal.

The paradox of the Afghanistan experience is that integration has not strengthened the overall role and effectiveness of the UN. The balance sheet is more negative than positive. Separation or even insulation of the humanitarian and human rights components from the political wheeling and dealing of the UN would have better served the interests of citizens and communities on the ground. A measure of distance from the SRSG, for example, would have allowed the articulation of an agenda for more independently addressing the issue of impunity and accountability for past human rights violations without this being necessarily seen as a hindrance to the peace process. Similarly, a degree of independence in addressing humanitarian needs might have helped in maintaining a clearer humanitarian profile, a more inclusive coordination approach and one that would have been less prone to manipulation.

The reality today is that there is an array of coordination mechanisms on the ground and that UNAMA is only one of them. The locus of coordination varies from sector to sector and issue to issue. Bilateral donors hold the purse strings for key sectors (UK, poppy eradication; Italy, justice sector; US, police and security sectors; World Bank and government, development strategy, etc). At the provincial level, UNAMA, the Government and the PRTs sometimes duplicate each other’s coordination structures. UNAMA complains that PRTs don’t provide

advance notice of the projects they are going to undertake; PRTs have a “we get things done” ethos and criticize the UN bureaucracy. As noted in the 2005 Mapping study, the tension between the PRTs and the aid agencies has eased. They are a *fait accompli* and NGOs and the UN have had to learn to live with them. In the words of a senior UN official: “People on both sides are less doctrinaire. Aid agencies have accepted the PRTs as part of the scenery. And the generals are starting to understand that development is not about winning hearts and minds through QIPs.”

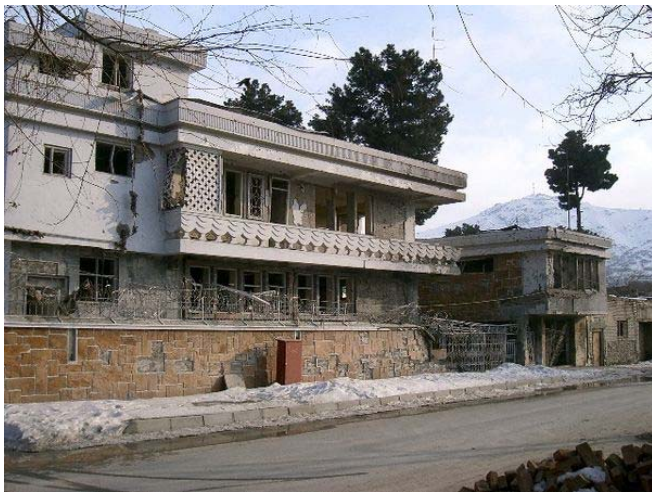
But what is the future of the PRTs? Are they a flash in the Afghan pan or a permanent fixture of world ordering? This question elicited some interesting clues as to what the future of peace-building might hold. Both CF and NATO officers said that the concept was still in flux. On the one hand, some military officers felt that the PRTs should be progressively “demilitarized,” i.e., they should become civilian facilities for CF or NATO-country bilateral aid agencies with just a few CF/NATO military personnel to provide security or even just local security guards. The PRTs would progressively transition to local government support functions and reduce their direct project implementation activities. On the other hand, some envision an institutionalized international role for PRT militaries in the longer term future. Another CF officer stressed that the PRTs had demonstrated the cost-effectiveness of the provision of assistance by the military: “Once we are here, our basic costs are covered whether we provide assistance or not. Every dollar we get for projects goes directly to the beneficiaries. Basically we can provide it for free.”

A convergence of interests seems to be building between the PRTs and the UN. The latter relies on the PRTs in the more insecure provinces such as Zabul “where the PRTs are the only people around.” They allow the UN to move around (presumably with its own armed escorts). The fact that the UN integrated compound is close to the PRT is an additional element of security. A senior military PRT officer adds: “We appreciate the role of the UN and we think they should be in the lead in post-conflict situations. Integrated missions are the way to go, they are an experimental model that needs to be translated into doctrine.” The implication, clearly, is that the military and the UN can work together. As for the development agencies and the NGOs, they do not get high marks in terms of approach and effectiveness: “They are living in the past. They need to ask themselves some tough questions and rethink what they do. Ten years from now will they still be able to justify their roles?”

As noted above, the pluses of integration are greatly outpaced by the minuses. Humanitarian action has been hostage to political fortunes in Afghanistan, especially since the establishment of UNAMA. From a purist humanitarian perspective, this is evidence of a deeply troubling compromise on issues of principle. But even from a pragmatist perspective, the approach may well turn out to be flawed: the close association with the government and the coalition make UNAMA ill-suited to confront a major humanitarian crisis that might well result from the growing levels of insecurity in large swaths of the country. The Taliban redux and other insurgent or destabilizing anti-government elements are likely to take a dim view of the UN's neutrality and impartiality. The same applies to NGOs, although, arguably, those who have nurtured deeper relationships with communities may be in a better position to win over the acceptance of whatever militant groups may be active in the specific areas where the NGO works.

### Security

The general consensus in early 2006 was that security was deteriorating. It was deteriorating rapidly and unexpectedly in the northeast, parts of the southeast, and the southwest of the country, but Kabul, Herat, Mazar and even the northern province of Badakshan had witnessed a flare-up in violence.<sup>40</sup> At the time of the visit, the



**Dyncorps Office, Kabul, after bomb attack.**

**February 2005.**

**Photo: A. Donini**

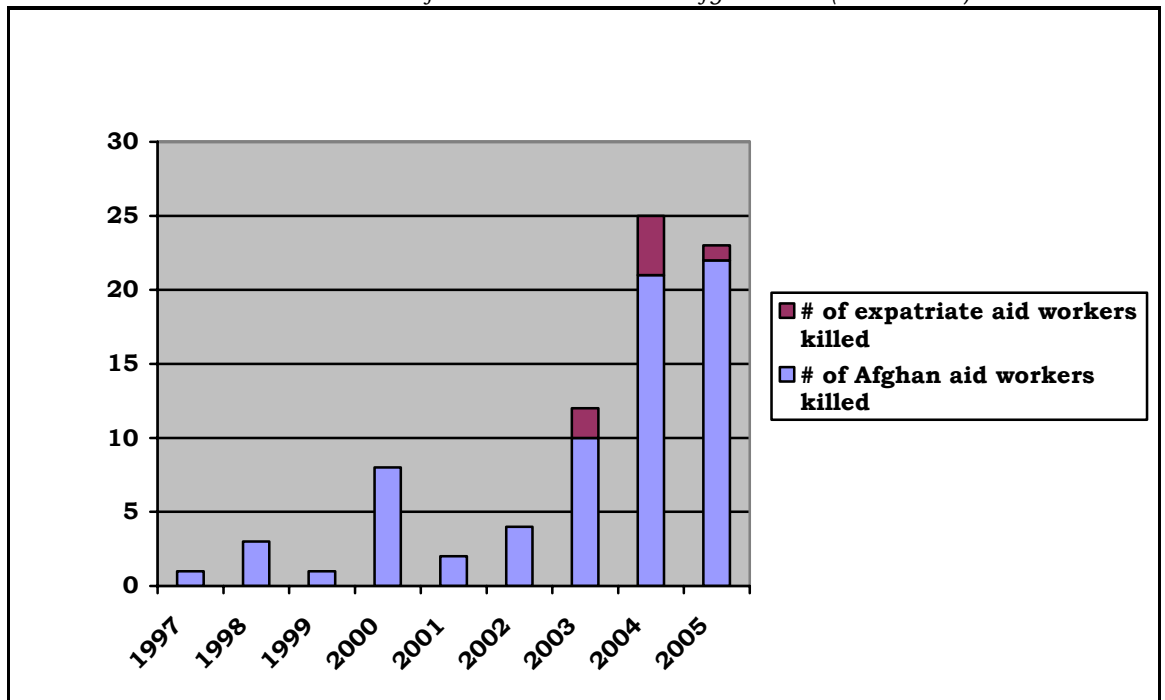
traditional winter lull had not happened. Suicide attacks, a new development in the history of Afghan violence, were regularly targeting Coalition and NATO forces, and insurgents were mounting larger and more sophisticated operations against the Coalition and the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) as well as the police. Everyone expected the spring and summer to be “hot” and, in fact, the Taliban themselves had announced that they would step up attacks against the newly deployed UK, Canadian, and Dutch troops in the south and southwest. “We will intensify suicide attacks to the extent that we will make the land beneath their feet like a flaming oven,” Taliban leader Mullah Omar is reported to have said.<sup>41</sup>

Another shift seems to be taking place: in addition to high profile attacks against the CF/NATO and the Afghan army and police, the insurgents seem to be stepping up low-level attacks against the government and its symbols. Schools are being burned down because they represent Government presence, as are administrative buildings. There are increasing targeted attacks against district administrators and local police chiefs as well as gruesome killings of people accused of being spies for the CF/NATO or the government or the Coalition.

*Shabnama* (night letters) are posted, including in areas where the insurgency is not active militarily, warning the population not to work for the government. One, seen in Syedabad (Wardak), threatened to kill anyone working for the government and the foreign occupation adding that “Mullahs should not say prayers on their graves.” A senior Taliban commander is quoted by Al Jazeera (19 April 2006) as saying: “We warn all those who work with the porous government, in the national army, with the occupation forces or in the administrative system, to refrain from doing so.”

Attacks against aid workers in early 2006 seemed to be slightly lower than in the past couple of years. This is for two reasons: aid agencies are avoiding the most insecure areas (rural Kandahar province, Zabul, large parts of Helmand province) where assistance activities have been shut down or continue with the most minimal supervision; the Taliban seem to be re-thinking their strategy vis-à-vis aid workers. Information received through proxies by both the UN and NGOs seems to indicate that they no longer object to aid workers who genuinely “come to help” Afghans and that their targets are more “political,” that is, the government and its presence.

*Number of aid workers killed in Afghanistan (1997-2005)<sup>42</sup>*



These messages should however be taken with a grain of salt. The insurgency seems to be amorphous and multifaceted with the respective roles of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Hekmatyar’s Hezbi-Islami,



and other groups difficult to unscramble. Moreover tribal conflicts, drug mafia-related violence, petty criminality, and activities of disgruntled warlords or aggrieved local officials add to the general climate of lawlessness. A connection seems also to be emerging between the insurgency and the drug economy, with calls from the Taliban to farmers to resist poppy eradication and offers to defend communities from the eradicators. This seems to be a strategic decision of the Taliban who understand that poppy eradication, in the absence of any viable sustainable alternative, “can damage (or even break) the nascent relationship between the citizen and the State” and who purposely aim to exploit this “disaffection”.<sup>43</sup>

According to experienced Afghan aid workers, it is a mistake to attribute the targeting of aid workers only to the Taliban. Others—drug barons, warlords, police chiefs, and administrators keen to get more resources—have interest in exploiting insecurity. “Aid agency presence acts as a deterrent against abusive behaviour by commanders,” but at the same time this aid worker expresses the concern that “aid agencies have to tread very carefully. Many people feel that aid agencies are ‘spying’ because they are collecting information at the community level.” This argues for being “rooted” in communities, and many national and international aid workers agree that in the areas where they have a good relationship with the communities, NGOs are still highly appreciated. “It’s not working there, it’s getting there that can be the problem.”

But the Taliban are not the only ones to blame. A parliamentarian and former experienced aid worker explains: “Security is deteriorating day by day. It is not the Taliban but the weakness of the Government that fuels insecurity. The root causes are corruption, nepotism, and drugs. This has implications for aid agencies as the security-insecurity conundrum reinforces the biases in aid distribution.” Many respondents in the aid community stressed this vicious circle of insecurity/reduced access/increased humanitarian need/more insecurity. Another variable in this circle is that “insecurity increases the distance between the government and the people” even in areas where the Taliban are not active “commanders still rule even if they have handed over their guns” (female national NGO worker).

The UN (as well as most bilateral donors) have hardened their armor—bunkerized compounds, armored vehicles and armed escorts in all insecure areas.<sup>44</sup> This makes contact with communities even in areas that are not significantly insecure more difficult (witness this researcher’s visit to villages in Wardak with a UN team where at every stop the armed police guards would fan out, Kalashnikovs at the

ready). The costs of security are also onerous. One UN official estimated them at 20-30% of project costs. Another explained that to send an international staff member on an overnight road missions outside Kabul, there was an additional security cost of about \$ 500 per person per night to cover local arrangements and payments for armed police guards.

The NGOs, on the other hand, have adopted a much more low key approach using unmarked vehicles or even taxis, no visible communications equipment and generally trying to blend in. Some are also experimenting with direct implementation with communities using either the tribal structures or the national solidarity programme community development committees (CDCs) as counterparts to reduce agency staff presence on the ground.

What remains unclear is the overall impact of the security posture adopted on actual program delivery. Obviously, as mentioned above, the costs of security are high. There may be a point where they become prohibitive, and it will be more difficult to secure funding for project activities, where, say, 40% of funds are swallowed by security and overheads. An additional, and more important substantive area of concern, mentioned by a number of NGO respondents, is that the security procedures adopted by the HQs of international agencies and NGOs make the travel of international staff to monitor projects in insecure areas that much more difficult and the security risk is thus passed on primarily to the national staff. Such “localization” might have benefits in terms of capacity-building and local ownership, but as it is practiced now, it simply results in the disproportionate displacement of the security risk to national staff.<sup>45</sup>

Looking back on long involvement of aid agencies in the Afghan conflict, it appears that an important qualitative change in the parameters of staff security occurred after 9/11. Historically, there had been only a handful of attacks on international aid workers during the first twenty years of the Afghan conflict. Only a handful of expatriate aid workers—UN, Red Cross Movement, NGOs—lost their life in targeted attacks. Clearly, something happened after 9/11 (more than 60 national and internationals have been killed between 2002 and 2006<sup>46</sup>). Whether because aid workers are seen as allies of the western imperial conspiracy or for reasons that have more to do with societal breakdown or the manner in which aid agencies are perceived, or improper personal behavior or contractual or commercial grievances, the humanitarian protection of emblems no longer holds in many areas. Until early 2002, aid workers were generally tolerated if not well-received throughout Afghanistan. The Taliban, abusive and anti-

**“The view taken by the coalition in Kabul so far—as by the Americans in Baghdad—is that the only thing these people understand is force.” Yet massive force has been deployed to bring Afghanistan to heel—costing \$18 billion a year—and all that has been achieved is thousands of deaths. Afghanistan is now less safe than at any time since the Taliban ruled and as open as ever to the practice of terror.”**

**Simon Jenkins, *The Sunday Times*. June 18, 2006**

western as they were, criticized aid agencies, harassed national staff but by and large took it upon themselves to protect foreign aid workers. There was a taboo about attacking aid workers that was not violated. Now it is, routinely.

The task is therefore to unpack the reasons for this qualitative change and to develop measures that would allow the reestablishment of a minimal humanitarian consensus around the role and functions of aid workers. In a sense, the implications of the “taking sides” causality in attacks against aid workers is easier to conceptualize. Ideally, if humanitarian agencies could do the necessary to reestablish their principled credentials, perhaps a contract of acceptability could be renegotiated with the insurgents and the emblems would again allow for protection. Yet, while the perceived alignment of aid workers with the Coalition and/or the Government may figure in some attacks, it does not explain them all nor why the life of humanitarians (and electoral workers and private contractors, etc.) is seen nowadays to be more expendable. It may be that attacks have a lot to do with the general climate of disillusionment vis-à-vis the overall aid effort which no longer provides services that are deemed to be essential by communities. Groups seeking to exploit the situation for their own political or opportunistic ends thus find a fertile terrain. The general breakdown of law and order as well as the mushrooming of the criminalized economy are additional likely factors, as well as the insensitive behavior of individual aid workers or contractors.

Finally, the security of aid workers cannot be de-linked from the general security of the population. In assessing the perceptions of focus group participants, a distinction needs to be made between their own security and their view of the general country-wide security situation. Some 75% of the respondents said personal security had improved in their area in the past two years, 15% that it had remained the same, and a bit more than 10% that it had deteriorated. The most frequently mentioned security concern was the police (corrupt, untrained, abusive), robberies (including those committed by young drug addicts, a new phenomenon). Taxi drivers were mentioned as being a particular at-risk category. It should be noted however that the relatively benign security assessment of the respondents was limited to their immediate surroundings, i.e., the neighborhoods or villages where they lived. Beyond, in the country as a whole, insecurity looms large. When asked what their prognosis was for the country as a whole, the vast majority of respondents (over 90%) expressed serious concern (resurgent Taliban, infiltration and destabilization from neighboring countries, combination of drugs and terror, etc.) an assessment which is no

**There seems to be a culture of anti-empiricism in the aid community. The basic data for an assessment of the impact of humanitarian and rehabilitation assistance is lacking and/or improperly used. This is an area where investment would be worthwhile.**

different from that of the Kabul-based aid community (see annex III for details).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Afghanistan seems to be sliding back into a deep crisis. The crisis may well result in large scale humanitarian needs—either because of escalating conflict and, possibly, displacement, or because certain areas of the country become inaccessible for security reasons. Aid agencies are perceived by significant segments of the population as compromised by association with the Coalition and its support to a weak and ineffective government. Aid agencies are ill-poised to confront the challenges ahead.

It appears that what is needed are 3R's: reflection, reform and reengagement.

### Perceptions

1. The perceptions gap must be addressed. It has two major components that are sometimes conflated: (a) disillusionment and disengagement vis-à-vis the government and (b) criticism of aid agencies. The former is a problem that the government needs to address. As for the latter, the aid community, and the NGOs in particular, face a dangerous credibility crisis which needs to be addressed urgently in a culturally appropriate manner that is in tune with the way Afghans receive and process information (i.e., not a “northern advocacy campaign”).
2. Criticism of the aid community by politicians and the media is largely based on rumor. The pervasiveness of the criticism, however, is such that it cannot be ignored. Afghans are angry with aid agencies but they are also angry with facts. Moreover, there seems to be a culture of anti-empiricism in the aid community. The basic data for an assessment of the impact of humanitarian and rehabilitation assistance is lacking and/or improperly used. This is an area where investment would be worthwhile. The best approach is to put the facts on the table and document what the aid community is good at, where it is cost-effective and where it isn't. For example, independent evaluations could be commissioned on the relative effectiveness of government, UN agencies and NGOs in the provision of services (e.g., health and education).<sup>47</sup> The results would probably go a long way in restoring credibility (where it is deserved). They would also help to document the issues of overall strategy (or lack thereof) and the consequences of donor “cherry picking.” The findings should be presented and disseminated in a culturally resonant way to different audiences (parliamentarians,

government officials, local authorities, civil society groups, the media, religious leaders) with which a dialogue needs to be engaged.

3. Effective re-engagement requires a communication strategy aimed at the government and the general public. NGOs and the UN need to explain the achievable as distinct from unrealistic goals. For example, there is a widespread expectation that “factories and electricity” are key to solving the population’s current problems. Large infrastructure projects may well have a beneficial effect on employment and growth but such projects will take years if not decades to implement. If the government, the donors, the UN or the media are not saying that it will take a generation before significant changes occur in the human security of the average Afghan, perhaps the NGOs should.

#### Role and Functions of Aid Agencies

4. NGOs in particular, and the wider aid community including donors, need to confront the issue of the role and functions of NGOs in the Afghan context. Some NGOs are living in the past, ducking and weaving around the government, while others have a-critically jumped onto the government bandwagon. There is an impression that collectively NGOs are living on borrowed credit accumulated during the jihad years when they were the only players around and when their role was widely appreciated. Some may have outlived their welcome (or their shelf life).
5. One striking feature of the aid community in early 2006 is the absence of a substantive and open development debate. NGOs should take the initiative of engaging substantively with government, UN development agencies and donors in a debate on the overall direction of the aid effort in Afghanistan, including on the role of NGOs therein. NGOs should not shy away from thorny issues such as corruption in the aid system and government, the implications of the rapidly-expanding illicit economy and the role and functions played by aid in a narco-state scenario, the tension between the promotion of internationally-accepted human rights norms and the need to be “culturally sensitive”.
6. Given the confusion surrounding roles and functions of NGOs, the time has come for a more determined effort aimed at identifying and certifying humanitarian actors. There is a case for a clearer identification of “Dunantist” agencies that would work according to established humanitarian principles. They should be clearly distinguishable from “pragmatist” or “solidarist” agencies that more freely engage in advocacy and political or rights-based agendas that go beyond the narrow humanitarian objective of caring for people in



extremis and who have no qualms about engaging with governmental, Coalition, or PRT agendas. NGOs (or the UN coordination body) might devise a system where agencies would have to choose the label defining their activities in the country (“humanitarian,” means we work independently of government, CF or PRTs; “reconstruction,” means we are partners in government programs or in line with government policies). The issue of NGO certification is not specific to Afghanistan but is particularly relevant here given the ambiguities surrounding the functions performed by NGOs. Certification is unlikely to happen without donor support or pressure. Perhaps a group of like-minded donors could take the initiative of exploring how this could be done.

7. Moreover, it might be wise to consider if the NGOs themselves (or the UN humanitarian coordination body) should not put in place a moratorium on certain types of NGO activities that could be construed as being particularly divisive (e.g., the collection of information on behalf of belligerents, or direct implementation of projects on behalf of PRTs). Again, donors, in the spirit of the good donorship initiative, have a role to play here.

#### Universality

8. Conflict between core humanitarian values embraced by the international community and local mores is not generally a problem in Afghanistan. “Good work” is well accepted as is the presence of foreign aid workers when they are in sync with communities. The cultural baggage that comes with the aid workers is more problematic as are the power relations inherent in the dominant discourse of the aid system and its management and programming style. Cultural insensitivity and lifestyle issues can complicate the relationships on the ground where the foreigners are often perceived as arrogant and vectors of alien or strange, if not hidden, agendas. With the right approach—involving the communities and listening to them—many of these issues can be addressed. The promotion of information sharing with and accountability to beneficiaries are promising avenues for nurturing a sense that universal values are not something imposed from outside but the result of a shared understanding of human dignity and the importance of compassion as well as analysis of problems and solutions.
9. Nevertheless, the externality of humanitarian action often impedes a fruitful dialogue between “northern humanitarianism” and local humanitarian traditions. Work needs to be urgently undertaken, for example through further studies on local perceptions and/or the deployment of social anthropologists that can provide a better

understanding of local change processes. This would help to minimize barriers, including linguistic barriers, between outsiders and insiders.

- 10.** Moreover, the acceptability of the humanitarian discourse—and of the presence of humanitarian staff—in parts of the country is undermined by the blurring of lines between humanitarian, development and political/military action. This argues for a better identification of the specificities of different actors in the humanitarian arena (as recommended in 6 above) but also for an urgent clarification on the application of humanitarian principles by aid agencies. The decision on whether or not international humanitarian law should apply, and in which parts of the country, poses a particular challenge because, depending on the geographical and philosophical viewpoint, the nature of the relationship with the government, the coalition forces and the insurgents could be quite different. In particular, the pretence that the entire country is in a post-conflict situation needs to be abandoned and the relevant dispositions of IHL applied by humanitarian agencies in those areas where this is warranted.

#### Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism

- 11.** GWOT is the defining environment of the current situation in Afghanistan. Influencing the prosecution of this war in the direction of ensuring basic respect for humanitarian principles is obviously a tall order. Nevertheless, what happens in Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib directly impacts on the ability of humanitarian actors to provide life-saving assistance and protection to people in need. This is the case both in terms of the popular perceptions of the actors and of their security. Humanitarian actors at HQ and on the ground must continue to advocate for a greater respect of humanitarian values, interests and agencies by all military actors including the western military forces who are prosecuting the war and their Afghan counterparts. The scapegoating of assistance and human rights NGOs by the Afghan government should also cease. Aid agencies need to continue to drive home the point that the government of Afghanistan has a responsibility to ensure that IHL is applied where appropriate.
- 12.** Working in an environment defined by GWOT places humanitarian agencies in uncharted and troubled territory. Choices made in Afghanistan (or Iraq) today are likely to have deep consequences for the humanitarian enterprise's ability to address life saving needs well into the future. The humanitarian enterprise must maintain and increase its level of professionalism in order to be a credible and influential interlocutor with the forces of GWOT as well as an

advocate for the rights of beneficiaries it assists and protects. Humanitarian principles are far too often poorly understood by aid workers or considered “for reference” only. This argues for more systematic training and awareness of IHL as well as knowledge and application of the accountability principles embodied in the SPHERE and Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) standards as well as other accountability initiatives.

### Coherence

13. The integration of humanitarian and human rights functions into UNAMA is a *fait accompli*. The same is true for the presence of the PRTs and their encroachment on humanitarian space. The battle for principled humanitarian action may have been temporarily lost in Afghanistan, but it is not too late to learn some key lessons that would allow for better respect of humanitarian values in Afghanistan and elsewhere. In Afghanistan the balance of priorities in the post 9/11 period was heavily skewed in favor of the political process. The reality that in UN peace missions politics trumps humanitarian action has had negative consequences for the coherence of the overall approach to peace-building by the international community. The issue of integration needs to be revisited. The issue is of course wider than Afghanistan and recommendations on reviewing the current UN approach to integrated missions are included in the HA 2015 consolidated report.<sup>48</sup>
14. The instrumentalization of humanitarian action and its perceived alignment with the Coalition and the government will hamper the ability of aid agencies to address urgent needs, should the Afghan situation deteriorate in areas that are insecure or where insurgents are present. This lends urgency to reconsider the issue of humanitarian presence and coordination, perhaps through the re-engagement of OCHA and other humanitarian actors in order to ensure that the system is best equipped to respond to humanitarian needs as they arise.

### Security

15. Attacks against aid workers have multiple causes ranging from the arbitrary to the very specific. Insufficient analysis of causalities and context impedes effective risk management. Lifestyle and behavior of international staff have added to the risk of politically motivated attacks. As a result of increased insecurity, the UN has hardened its armor and most NGOs have tried to “blend in” and gone more local with the unfortunate consequence that security risks have been passed on to national staff, disproportionately. Among aid

agencies and communities interviewed, the overwhelming sentiment was that security will continue to deteriorate. While they were sometimes caught in the crossfire or the object of attacks based on faulty intelligence, hitherto communities were not the object of directly targeted attacks by either of the sets of belligerents. As the conflict heats up, this may be changing. In some insecure areas, association with foreign aid agencies endangers communities. Local village leaders have been threatened if they are seen to be working with outsiders, be they Government officials or aid workers. In Afghanistan, the social contract of acceptability is broken: urgent steps are required to mend it.

16. The extent to which it would be possible to re-engage with the Taliban and/or other belligerents on the basis of a re-commitment to humanitarian principles is difficult to gauge. The negotiation of a minimum of acceptance should remain a mid to long term objective, especially for purist humanitarian agencies. This argues for a clearer demarcation of humanitarian agencies from other providers of services as well as for a more broadly contextual approach to conflict and security incident analysis. This could be achieved through strengthening the analytical capabilities of the Afghanistan NGO Security Office (ANSO). In addition, it might be useful to conduct a study on the pros and cons of the security postures adopted by the UN, ICRC, and key international NGOs.

#### Looking Ahead

17. Finally, aid agencies would be wise to initiate a discussion on Afghan ownership and on the nature of the processes of social transformation they are contributing to and on possible alternatives to their current *modus operandi*. Processes of social transformation are delicate and must be “illuminated from within,” yet much of what is done today in Afghanistan is promoted from without. A frank debate on alternatives to top down, expat-driven processes and on the values and types of behavior such processes transmit is overdue. NGOs and the aid community in general should be wary of promoting the perception that they are an essential ingredient in the complex processes of social transformation currently at play. Societies have recovered from violent conflict for centuries before NGOs and the UN appeared on the scene. Accepting as the default position that “we are essential” to Afghanistan’s recovery is an unhelpful, patronizing and potentially dangerous proposition. Instead the focus should be on alternatives more grounded in local realities, more sustainable, more empowering, and more in line with the needs of ordinary people.<sup>49</sup>

## Annex I: Methodological Issues

The bulk of the data for this study was collected during a three-week visit to Afghanistan by Antonio Donini in February 2006. Eighteen focus group meetings were held in Kabul, Shomali, Paktia, Wardak, and Parwan with close to 200 participants drawn from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds (see Annex II for details). The vast majority of participants were male, but three FGs for women were organized by Sippi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam. These three groups also had the advantage of not requiring translation as Sippi is a native Farsi speaker. Additional context interviews were held with some 30 UN, NGO and Red Cross movement staff, 10 senior government officials, 4 parliamentarians, 6 intellectuals/academics, 4 donors, and a few others.

The focus groups provided rich qualitative data. They constitute a useful tool that allows the canvassing of a much wider range of people than one-to-one interviews. Focus groups are not without problems, however. Participants are sometimes wary of expressing their views in public or defer to older or senior people present. They sometimes aim to please the foreigner and/or expect that he/she is linked to an assistance program (even if the opposite is clearly stated). The interviewees' desire for mimetism and to tell the foreigners what they want to hear should not be underestimated. Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to pierce the overlapping layers of Afghan society (gender, generational deference, ethnicity) and to access the most underprivileged: all interviews took place in semi-public places during the day, not at night in a darkened, remote village accessible only on foot where the conversation might have been quite different, etc. Language and the vagaries of translation are additional filters that complicate the task of the researcher. Nevertheless, despite these constraints, the focus groups yielded a wealth of data and interesting insights into the views of individuals and communities.

Survey tools had been prepared for the study. In practice, they served as a guide for interviews. Not all questions were covered, however, as some of the more generic questions (e.g., on the relevance of universalist humanitarian principles) clearly did not make sense to the majority of respondents. An attempt to analyze some of the quantitative data collected appears in Annex III.

It is important to note that the study is about perceptions—including the perceptions of the researcher—not about realities. Perceptions are



important in their own right as they influence behavior and are symptomatic of a particular time or situation. Perceptions can even become realities, sometimes with potentially dangerous consequences (e.g., criticisms of NGOs can make them more vulnerable to attack). Understanding the perceptions gap is thus a critical factor in understanding communities that, in turn, is a key precondition for effective assistance programs.

## Annex II: Focus Group Meetings

Participants	Number/Gender	Location	Venue
1. Mullahs	8 M	Qarabagh (Kabul prov)	Local house in village
2. Unemployed youth	12 M	Qarabagh	Local house in village
3. High School teachers	11 M	Qarabagh	INGO site office
4. Tribal elders	6 M	Gardez (Paktia)	National NGO site office
5. Unemployed youth	5 M	Gardez	National NGO site office
6. Civil society reps	3 M/2 F	Kabul	Private house
7. Disadvantaged women	12 F	Kabul (old city)	INGO site office
8. Elderly men	17 M	Kabul (old city)	INGO site office
9. University students	7 M	Kabul	Faculty of pharmacy
10. High school teachers	6M/3 F	Kabul	INGO office
11. Primary school teachers	14 M	Sayedabad (Wardak)	Education office
12. Villagers and elders	17 M	Sayedabad district	Local house in village
13. Primary/middle teachers	30M/1F	Chardeh (Parwan prov)	School courtyard
14. Elders	16 M	Chardeh	School courtyard
15. Senior afghan officials	5 M	Kabul	Ministry of RRD
16. Female intellectuals	6 F	Kabul	NGO office
17. Destitute Widows	9 F	Kabul	NGO site office
18. Professional women	6 F	Kabul	Private house
<b>Total male: 168 female: 27</b>			
<b>Grand total: 195</b>			

## Annex III: Some Quantitative Information Analysis

The data collected in Afghanistan lends itself primarily to a qualitative exploitation. As is obvious from the methodological discussion above, the focus groups were composed of people who volunteered to participate rather than on any rigorous sampling. An effort was made to balance urban/rural respondents and to include FGs with women participants. As a result of these limitations no attempt was made to do quantitative analysis of the data. Nevertheless, some of the questions that were asked in all the FGs (except those done by Sippi) yielded responses that would appear to have statistical relevance, at least in terms of orders of magnitude.

1. As in the 2005 Mapping study, when asked what was the main problem they faced, respondents overwhelmingly cited employment, or lack thereof, as their most serious concern (more than 2/3 of respondents). The prevalence was the same in Kabul, in rural secure and in rural more insecure areas. The second cluster of concerns relates to water and irrigation (a bit more than 1/3) especially in the rural areas, some of which are still affected by drought or its consequences) and physical security (a bit less than 1/3, but with a higher prevalence in Kabul than in the rural areas). Health, transport, and education issues are also mentioned.
2. When asked if their socio-economic situation had improved or worsened in the past two years, nearly 2/3 of the respondents said it had worsened. Less than 1/4 thought that it had improved. In Kabul, people were slightly more optimistic than in rural areas.
3. Respondents were split 60%/40% as to whether the assistance provided by the international community was having a positive or negative impact on their lives. Many qualifiers were introduced: it depends on the project and the motivations of the individuals; international aid workers have a better rating than national who are more susceptible to corruption; INGOs often show up, do a survey and are never heard of again; aid workers are often not technically qualified or do things Afghans could be doing, etc. The issue of corruption was very often mentioned: "Aid workers do a good job... but the system is corrupt."
4. When asked what the motivations were for foreign aid workers to come and work in Afghanistan, most respondents showed a high degree of cynicism. More than 1/3 said they had come to "become

rich” or because they could not find work in their home countries. Another 1/3 felt they came because “they wanted to help” or because “it’s their job”. About 20% mentioned that they came to spread alien values or religion. It is interesting to note that this factor was strongly mentioned primarily in the Shomali plain (a very secure and allegedly over-served area North of Kabul where the communities are accustomed to seeing many aid agencies) as well as one group in Kabul city (elderly men, the same who also expressed nostalgia for Taliban times). In the more insecure (Paktia, Wardak) or in the under-served areas (Parwan) this did not seem to register as a problem.

5. As for perceptions of physical security, some 3/4 of respondents said it had improved in their area in the past two years, 15% that it had remained the same and a bit more than 10% that it had deteriorated. The most frequently mentioned security concern was the police (corrupt, untrained, abusive), robberies (including those committed by young drug addicts, a new phenomenon). Taxi drivers were mentioned as being a particular at risk category. It should be noted however that the relatively benign security assessment of the respondents was limited to their immediate surroundings, i.e., the neighborhoods or villages where they lived. Beyond, insecurity looms large. When asked what their prognosis was for the country as a whole, the vast majority of respondents (over 90%) expressed serious concern (resurgent Taliban, infiltration and destabilization from neighboring countries, combination of drugs and terror, etc.)
6. When asked if the presence of the Coalition and other military forces (ISAF) had made their life more secure, practically all the respondents (except a couple in Paktia where the CF has a more robust anti insurgency role) said that they were grateful for the work done by the CF/ISAF. A minority expressed concerns about the behavior of the foreign militaries; the most frequently mentioned incidents, as in the tufts 2005 study, were: culturally insensitive attitudes, breaking into houses without prior notice/consultation with elders; helicopters flying too low over compounds; reckless driving. A handful of respondents (mainly educated teachers or intellectuals as well as a couple of mullahs) expressed concern that the presence of the CF amounted to an occupation with a hidden agenda (variously, a stepping stone to attack Iran or controlling Afghanistan’s natural resources).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Details on the research program as well as related case studies and reports are available at: [fic.tufts.edu](http://fic.tufts.edu).

<sup>2</sup> A. Donini, L. Minear, I. Smillie, T. van Baarda, A.C. Welch, *Mapping the Security Environment. Understanding the Perceptions of Local Communities, Peace Support Operations, and Assistance Agencies*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, June 2005, available online at [fic.tufts.edu](http://fic.tufts.edu).

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Znet/South Asia*, 6 April 2006: [www.zmag.org/southasia/southasia1.cfm](http://www.zmag.org/southasia/southasia1.cfm)

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Lt. Gen. Karl W. Eikenberry, commanding general, Combined Forces Command, Afghanistan, at a lecture at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, 5 May 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Donini is the principal author of this report although he benefited considerably from written inputs, comments and insights provided by Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam.

<sup>6</sup> For extensive background on the humanitarian and nation-building dimensions of the Afghan crisis, see A. Donini, N. Niland and K. Wermester, eds, *Nation-building Unraveled? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan*, Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, December 2003. On the politicization of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, see also Helga Baitenmann, "NGOs and the Afghan War: The Politicization of Humanitarian Aid," *Third World Quarterly*, January 1990; Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002. Works by Barnett Rubin, Ahmed Rashid and William Maley provide in depth accounts of the political dimensions of the crisis.

<sup>7</sup> Donini, A., et al. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the messages in these bullet points are constructed on the basis of perceptions collected in the FGs and interviews conducted by the researchers. As such they are symptomatic rather than representative. An attempt to quantify some of the data appears in Annex III.

<sup>9</sup> A large soviet-style housing development in Kabul mainly occupied by middle class families.

<sup>10</sup> According to the World Bank country director 75% of international assistance by-passes the government completely.

<sup>11</sup> The Loya Jirga process is frequently dismissed by Afghans as the "loya jagra" ("big fight")

<sup>12</sup> In late May 2006 popular resentment against the American presence exploded in public view during a day of harrowing rioting in Kabul that left some 20 people dead. Aid agency offices, including Care International who facilitated this writer's research, were attacked and looted. The violence was sudden and fierce, an indication perhaps that the "consensus" around the presence of the CF is essentially weak and hostage to manipulations that can easily degenerate.

<sup>13</sup> "Not all NGOs are the same. One should really do an anatomy of the aid community. Some NGOs have been around for years and years. Some turned up last year. Some deal with leprosy and some deal with hairdressing. Some exist in one person's briefcase, some have established offices in many parts of Afghanistan. Some are like wadis and exist in good seasons when there's funding, some have been going for years and have a great reputation. Some are at the forefront of humanitarian debates and some don't know anything about any debate..." (Expatriate researcher, Kabul).

<sup>14</sup> There are of course a number of reputable Afghan NGOs and hundreds of others struggling to survive. The point here is that the stage is set by the foreign players.

<sup>15</sup> Remarks at the National Foreign Policy Conference for leaders of NGOs, US State Department, 26 October 2001, available online.



<sup>16</sup> Middle class Kabulis however heap considerably more scorn on the so-called “dog-washers,” i.e. Afghans who fled to the West and held menial jobs there and are now back as senior experts in the Ministries where they earn expat-level salaries.

<sup>17</sup> See for example, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), *A Call for Justice. A National Consultation on Human Rights Violations in Afghanistan*, Kabul, February 2005, available online; Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium (HRRAC), *Speaking Out: Afghan Opinions on Rights and Responsibilities*, Kabul, November 2004, available online.

<sup>18</sup> S. Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, “Afghan Women on the Margins of the Twenty-first century,” in *Nation-building Unraveled?*, cit.

<sup>19</sup> An experienced observer notes: “Even today one hears stories about how communities in places like Paktia tried everything to stop boys from going to school in the 1950s because they thought they would lose their culture by becoming “literate”. You come across this notion a great deal in Afghanistan.” (Sippi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, personal communication)

<sup>20</sup> The past may serve as prologue here: the compromises on issues of principle, such as those of the late 80s and early 90s when many NGOs sided with the mujahedin, have a habit of coming back to haunt. See Antonio Donini, *The Policies of Mercy. UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique and Rwanda*, Occasional paper #22, Humanitarianism and War Project, Providence, RI, 1996, (available online at [famine.tufts.edu](http://famine.tufts.edu)), pages 21 and ff.

<sup>21</sup> This is less true for the UN who is seen, and mainly sees itself in a support-to-government mode, a reality perhaps made easier since UNAMA proper has no humanitarian functions beyond responding to natural disasters and the other UN humanitarian players, UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP who now stress their government support role rather than their humanitarian responsibilities

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Chayes, “Afghanistan: The night fairies” (March/April 2006 pp. 17-19 (vol. 62, no. 02) Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, [http://www.thebulletin.org/print.php?art\\_ofn=ma06chayes](http://www.thebulletin.org/print.php?art_ofn=ma06chayes)

<sup>23</sup> See A. Donini, *The Policies of Mercy*, cit.

<sup>24</sup> See Norah Niland, “Justice Postponed. The Marginalization of Human Rights in Afghanistan” in A Donini, N Niland and K Wermester (eds), *Nation-building Unraveled?* Cit.

<sup>25</sup> A point first made by Nick Stockton in “The Failure of International Humanitarian Action in Afghanistan,” *Global Governance*, July 2002.

<sup>26</sup> ICRC participant at donor/NGO meeting, Kabul, February 2006

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> MSF has since left Afghanistan after the attack on its staff in Faryab (June 2004) when 3 expatriate and 2 national staff were killed.

<sup>29</sup> On Pax Americana, see N. Stockton, “Afghanistan, War, Aid and International Order” in *Nation-building Unraveled?*, cit. p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> See A. Donini, L. Minear, and P. Walker, “The Future of Humanitarian Action: Mapping the Implications of Iraq and Other Recent Crises”. *Disasters*, Vol. 26, 190-204, 2004 and “Report of an International Mapping Exercise: The Future of Humanitarian Action, Implications of Iraq and Recent Crises,” Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, January 2004, available online at [fic.tufts.edu](http://fic.tufts.edu).

<sup>31</sup> See HRRAC report, *Take the Guns Away. Afghan Voices on Security and Elections*, Kabul, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> BBC World interview with Lyse Doucet, 4 February 2006. Karzai had made similar statements on BBC and elsewhere as far back as October 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Numerous studies have shown that an overwhelming proportion of ordinary Afghans are anxious to see a process of accountability taking place. See note 31 above.

<sup>34</sup> On 29 May a US military truck accidentally ploughed into a traffic jam killing several civilians and sparking violent riots in the center of Kabul during which international NGO offices and other symbols of foreign presence were looted and/or torched.

<sup>35</sup> Donors had agreed not to provide any assistance that could be construed as “development” or capacity building of the presumptive Taliban authorities. Aid agencies therefore resorted to labeling as “humanitarian” many small scale rehabilitation projects that would have been considered developmental elsewhere. This led to surrealistic situations as when a key donor refused to provide funds for improved drought-resistant wheat seed (that would have protected the lives and livelihoods of thousands of drought-stricken families) because that was “development”.

<sup>36</sup> There is considerable written material on the issue of coherence in Afghanistan. See in particular A. Donini and N. Niland chapters in *Nation-Building Unraveled? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan* on the humanitarian and human rights challenges in Taliban times; on the Strategic Framework, see Mark Duffield, Patricia Gossman, and Nicholas Leader, “Review of the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan,” Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Islamabad, 2001: available at [www.areu.org/af/publications/strategic%20framework/strategic\\_framework.pdf](http://www.areu.org/af/publications/strategic%20framework/strategic_framework.pdf), Nicholas Stockton *Strategic Coordination in Afghanistan*, Afghanistan Evaluation and Research Unit, August 2002, as well as Donini, A., “An Elusive Quest: Integration in the Response to the Afghan Crisis.” *Ethics and International Affairs* (2004), Vol. 18, N.2. The broader issues of integration vs. insulation are discussed by in Minear, L. “Informing the Integration Debate with Recent Experience.” *Ethics and International Affairs* (2004). Vol. 18, N.2. and in Minear, L. *The Humanitarian Enterprise: Dilemma and Discoveries* (Bloomfield, CT.: Kumarian Press, 2002).; recent discussions on integrated missions are expounded upon in Eide, Espen Barth; Anja Therese Kaspersen, Randolph Kent & Karen von Hippel, 2005, *Report on Integrated Missions: Practical Perspectives and Recommendations*, Independent Study for the Expanded UN ECHA Core Group. New York: United Nations/ECHA.

<sup>37</sup> Joanna Macrae, “Understanding Integration from Rwanda to Iraq.” *Ethics & International Affairs*, Volume 18, No. 2 (Fall 2004), p. 33

<sup>38</sup> It was only after the rape of an international NGO staff member that the SRSR agreed to confront the warlords and go public about this string of incidents. In Taliban times, such incidents would have been immediately reported to HQ and the UN would have gone public if there was no risk of compromising the sources of the information. See N. Niland, “Rights, Rhetoric and Reality: A Snapshot from Afghanistan” in N.D. White and D. Klaasen (eds.), *The UN, Human Rights, and Post-conflict Situations*, Manchester University Press, Manchester (UK), 2005, p 340.

<sup>39</sup> See Eide et al: 2005. *Report on Integrated Missions*, cit.

<sup>40</sup> The Afghanistan NGO Security Office (ANSO) compiles detailed raw data on security incidents, and in particular security incidents affecting aid agencies. There is little analysis of trends and context, however.

<sup>41</sup> Drake Bennett, “The Other Insurgency,” *The Boston Globe*, 16 April 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Table adapted from Farahnaz Karim, “Humanitarian Action in the New Security Environment: Policy and Operational Implications. Afghanistan Background Paper,” Center for International Cooperation (CIC), NYU, May 2006, available online. It should be noted that the high figure of 2000 was caused by a single ambush which caused the death of 7 national staff from Omar, a partner de-mining agency of the UN.

<sup>43</sup> David Mansfield, “Exploring the ‘Shades of Grey’: An Assessment of the Factors Influencing Decisions to Cultivate Opium Poppy in 2005/05,” a report of the Afghan Drugs Inter Department Unit of the UK Government, London 2006, available online.

<sup>44</sup> A notable exception is Switzerland (SDC): “We will never employ armed guards. We would prefer to shut down our programmes.”

<sup>45</sup> See CIC Background paper quoted above.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>47</sup> A number of such studies have been undertaken (e.g the Johns Hopkins University 2006 study on the comparative effectiveness of government and aid agencies – national and international – in health services) but their results have not been disseminated in a manner that informs public perceptions.

<sup>48</sup> A. Donini, et al. *Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power, and Perceptions*. Feinstein International Center. Medford, MA. September 2006. Available at fic.tufts.edu.

<sup>49</sup> In an essay on “How to Rebuild Africa” (*Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2005), Stephen Ellis makes a comment on indigenous structures and institutions that is equally relevant to Afghanistan. “One of the few hopeful developments to come out of Africa’s many dysfunctional states is the way power vacuums have been spontaneously filled by new structures with deep roots in African history. These institutions, such as Somalia’s subclans or West Africa’s initiation societies, do not figure in textbooks on government and sometimes play a negative role. In other cases, however – as in the self-governing Somaliland – they have made a positive contribution. At present UN administrators tend to ignore such networks and often spend an entire tour of duty rebuilding formal new governments without noticing the alternate structures already in existence right under their noses.”