Briefing Paper

Strengthening the humanity and dignity of people in crisis through knowledge and practice

Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power, and Perceptions
Afghanistan: Humanitarianism under Threat

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Darulaman palace, Kabul, January 2009. Photo by A. Donini.

Introduction

Since our case study on local perceptions of humanitarian action in Afghanistan was issued in June 2006,[2] the situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated considerably, both for ordinary Afghans and for aid agencies attempting to bring assistance and protection to those affected by crisis and conflict.

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[2] Antonio Donini, "Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power, and Perceptions. Afghanistan Case Study," Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, available at **http://wikis.uit.tufts.edu/confluence/display/FIC/Humanitarian+Agenda+2015 --Afghanistan+Country+Study.**

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This briefing paper provides an update on the humanitarian challenges and opportunities in Afghanistan. It is based on some 60 interviews with Afghan and international aid workers, as well as with senior Afghan government officials, bilateral donors, and observers and analysts unrelated to the aid enterprise. These interviews were conducted in Kabul in August 2008 and January 2009. In order to gain a wider perspective on perceptions of the evolving situation, five focus groups were also held in the Shomali plain (north of Kabul) and in Jalalabad with a selection of local beneficiaries of assistance projects, returnees, and conflict-affected displaced persons. The purpose of this paper is to highlight, working from the data collected on the ground, critical issues affecting the provision of humanitarian action and to suggest how they could, partially at least, be redressed.

Humanitarianism is under deep threat in Afghanistan. Humanitarian actors and the principles they profess are under attack. The ability of humanitarian agencies to address urgent need is compromised by internal and external factors, i.e., both by the organization and modus operandi of aid agencies on the ground, and by an extremely volatile and dangerous operating environment.

The UN is, and is seen as, aligned with the US-led coalition intervention. Its humanitarian capacity is weak and further diminished by its incorporation, until very recently, into an essentially political, integrated mission. The separate OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) office that had existed since 1988 was disbanded when the integrated mission was launched in 2002. A humanitarian unit was only re-established within the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in 2007.[3] This arrangement was seen as unsatisfactory, especially by international NGOs who, as the crisis deepened, advocated repeatedly for the creation of a separate OCHA office,[4] a move that the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) and the UN headquarters political departments opposed, but that OCHA headquarters and the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) supported. While it has recently been decided (December 2008) to separate the humanitarian coordination function out of the mission through the establishment of a separate OCHA office, the problem of perception of alignment and inadequate UN humanitarian capacity remains. The lack of humanitarian capacity and resources is broader than just OCHA's coordination functions: there is no common information collection and analysis system, nor an adequate humanitarian logistics capacity, common services for customs and tax agreements, joint convoys, coordinated air services, and the like.

The majority of NGOs do not fare much better. Many work as implementing partners for government programs or, even if they do not, are seen as part of the international enterprise that supports the government. Unlike other conflict situations, there are few NGOs in Afghanistan with humanitarian track records or specifically humanitarian mandates. Most, if not all, NGOs are multi-mandate organizations focused principally on reconstruction, development, and advocacy or solidarity issues. Some engage in humanitarian activities as part of their varied portfolios. A few of these have dedicated humanitarian staff that ably engage on issues of principle or humanitarian advocacy. Nevertheless, the absence of a critical mass of principled "Dunantist" humanitarian players affects the quality of the debate around humanitarian issues and the ability to address these issues on the ground. The defense and promotion of humanitarian principles is left to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the only international organization able to work neutrally, impartially, and independently on both sides of the conflict, although its ability to interact and negotiate access with the Taliban and other insurgent groups is impaired by the volatility of the situation and uncertainties about the representativeness of local interlocutors on the ground.

Donors, all of whom are also belligerents, with the exception of Switzerland, are either unwilling or unable to recognize the need for a humanitarian response and to mobilize the necessary resources. ECHO (the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Department) and Norway stand out as donors supportive of principled humanitarian approaches. The programs of most other donors are driven by political and security agendas and based, in the main, on the increasingly erroneous assumption that Afghanistan is a post-conflict country. The pressure from donors on "their" NGOs to work with and around their country's Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) is particularly troubling. The pursuit of "joined-up" or "comprehensive" approaches, in which assistance, including humanitarian assistance, is functionally linked to political and military agendas, is seen by many observers as a dangerous blurring of lines, in addition to clashing with the Good Humanitarian Donorship principles to which donors have subscribed.

There is no humanitarian consensus in Afghanistan and very little humanitarian space. Both have been trampled by political expediency and by the disregard by all parties to the conflict for the plight of civilians. Civilians are dying because of conflict and insecurity. According to UNAMA, there has been a 40% increase of civilian casualties in 2008. The human security of ordinary Afghans is rapidly deteriorating because of the combination of conflict, appalling levels of poverty, food shortages, difficulties of access, and the accumulated consequences of three decades of war. Conflict-related displacement is a seriously under-addressed issue. Estimates of the numbers of displaced vary, but there is agreement among aid workers that they are on the rise and that the international community is not doing enough, even in places like Kabul, where access is possible.

Aid agency staff are being increasingly targeted by the Taliban and other insurgents for their perceived instrumentalization by, and support of, alien political agendas. Access and operational space are almost nonexistent in the south, south-east, and parts of the west of the country. Large swathes of the country are no-

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[3] Thanks to a contribution from Norway, one of the few donors to recognize the need for a humanitarian capacity within UNAMA.

[4] Through a formal letter to the DRSG/RC/HC in March 2008 and subsequently in various demarches, both at UN HQ and in the field.

go areas to the extent that it is now impossible even to have a clear picture of the humanitarian situation on the ground. The combined effects of conflict, drought, increased food prices, and a long history of recurring disasters are thought to be severe in parts of the country, but the actual depth and breadth of the crisis are as yet unknown.

Thus, the aid community in Afghanistan faces severe challenges that need to be urgently addressed so that civilians in need can be protected and assisted and the credibility of the humanitarian enterprise restored. Failure to do so will have dire consequences for Afghans and for the future of humanitarianism worldwide.

These challenges arise from a complex mix of causes relating to the nature of the war, the set-up of the international community and its objectives in Afghanistan, the failure of the externally-directed state-building project, and the conditions of structural underdevelopment pertaining in Afghanistan, which has been made worse by thirty years of unending war and foreign occupation and manipulation.

The environment in which aid actors operate is largely the result of decisions taken by the international community in the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent collapse of the Taliban regime. Among the factors that contributed to the re-emergence of the Taliban and other insurgent groups, three stand out, in the view of many local and international observers:

• The fact that the Bonn agreement was not a peace accord but an agreement among victors;

• The return of rapacious and despised warlords as instruments of the US-led intervention;

• The failure to address the issues of impunity and accountability for the massive human rights violations of the past.

From a humanitarian perspective, perhaps the single most serious "sin" is to be found in the way in which donors and the aid community defined the Afghan situation in the aftermath of 9/11. All players willingly accepted the notion that Afghanistan was in a post-conflict situation, and that therefore the role of external actors, including NGOs, was to support the government. As a result, the existing capacity for addressing humanitarian need that had been built up since the late 1980s and had successfully weathered the Taliban years (1996-2001), when it represented the only visible form of the international community's engagement in Afghanistan, was dismantled under the fallacious assumption that it was no longer needed.

While much denial still prevails in the fortified compounds of Kabul's "green zone," where donor and UN bureaucracies live in a kind of virtual Afghanistan, the seriousness of the situation is plain to see for anyone who ventures outside the wire or the blast walls and interacts with ordinary Afghans. Hopelessness and disenchantment, if not rising anger, are everywhere. The government and its police, in particular, are universally seen

as corrupt; both are increasingly reviled. The tide is turning against the foreign militaries, largely because of poorly targeted bombing raids and heavy-handed searches of civilian houses that violate custom and culture, as well as for their support for power holders with infamous human rights track records. There is a sense that the regime itself is becoming more authoritarian, with frequent crackdowns on the independent media and civil society organizations. Abuse of power is seen to be rife. The judiciary is in shambles. The death penalty is being used as a tool to appease public opinion and more conservative elements in society. Criminality is on the rise and sometimes linked to organs of the state. Middle-class Afghans, and their children, seem to be particularly at risk of kidnappings for ransom. As a result, many businesses are shutting down and those who can are moving to Dubai.

"I have to lock my children inside the house when I leave. It is too dangerous for them to go out to play."
- Senior Afghan NGO professional

The remit of the insurgency has rapidly expanded in 2008, with forms of Taliban counter-power emerging in areas where they hold sway. They provide rudimentary justice and police services. There are reports that criminality has all but disappeared in some of the areas controlled by the insurgents. This does not mean that the Taliban are welcome—few Afghans are keen to see the return of their brutish regime. Rather, it is an indictment of the externally-supported state-building project which has failed to provide physical and human security on the ground.

The current situation in many ways resembles that of the Soviet occupation. The government and its allies control the main towns and parts of the north and center of the country, but are unable to maintain a stable presence in much of the rest. The strategically crucial Kabul to Herat ring road is unsafe. Kabul itself has a nervous and edgy feel: it has come under rocket attack and anti-government elements are only a few miles away and have shown that they can strike with deadly suicide bombings within the city itself. The differences, of course, are that, unlike Soviet times, aid agencies—with the partial exception of the ICRC—are unable to work on both sides of the conflict and that donors are supporting the outside military intervention, rather than the insurgents, as was the case when the mujahedin were the West's "freedom fighters." Moreover, the levels of corruption, ineffectiveness of the state machinery, and perceived lack of legitimacy of the government around the country seem to be higher than in Soviet times.

Despite successes in some sectors since 2001—education, health and the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) are most often mentioned though even these appear now to be in jeopardy[5]—the disproportion between the international

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[5] Millions of girls have gone/returned to school since 2002 and health indicators have improved dramatically; however, since 2006,

community's largesse in military expenditure and the paucity of actual visible development for ordinary Afghans, combined with the growing gap between the very rich and the destitute multitude, feeds a sense of nostalgia for the Soviet period.

> *"At least the Soviets built factories," says one experienced female Afghan aid worker. "Over a thousand women worked in the Bagrami cotton plant. And we were all poor; there was no corruption." A local NGO employee adds: "The state functioned. We were poor but we got coupons for sugar and subsidized bread."*

It is useful to remember that in the late 1980s, the UN had negotiated a formal "humanitarian consensus"[6] with all parties to the conflict, as well as with Afghanistan's neighbors. This agreement allowed UN agencies, and by extension the NGOs, to address humanitarian need by working cross-border from Pakistan, Iran, and the then Soviet Union, as well as cross-line from government-held towns to mujahedin areas and vice versa. There is no such "consensus" today, partly because of the changed nature of the conflict—asymmetrical warfare where one set of belligerents believes it is "winning" simply because it cannot be defeated militarily—and partly because the international community, rhetoric aside, apparently values humanitarian principles less than it did twenty years ago.

> *A prescient Afghan noted in October 2001: "The Taliban are like broken glass. You don't see it, but when you step on it, it hurts." He did not know how right he was. Now the Taliban are winning, he says: "For them not to lose is already victory. They are succeeding in making the place ungovernable."*

II. A Downward Spiral: Key Changes since 2006

In the following paragraphs we briefly summarize, on the basis of our interviews, the key changes in the humanitarian situation as they relate to the four themes of the HA2015 research.

Universality

Our 2006 study highlighted the increasing instrumentalization of humanitarian action in the service of political and military agendas. Many aid agencies still defined their operating environment as "post-conflict" and did not see the dangers of trying to

operate both as government-implementing partners while, at the same time, trying to maintain a modicum of principle in addressing humanitarian need. These dangers now appear in much starker terms: humanitarian space has shrunk around the country precisely because aid agencies are seen as adjuncts to the US-led coalition intervention and because of their perceived support of an ineffective and corrupt government. The lack of peace, and of a peace dividend, fuels resentment against the aid community. While denial among aid agencies, and to some extent among donors, is being gradually replaced by more realism, the aid community, despite its rhetoric, has not (yet?) measured the consequences of past choices. It has yet to shift into a humanitarian mode.

There are a number of reasons for this. As mentioned above, apart from the ICRC, there are few humanitarian players on the ground. Key NGOs that traditionally provide humanitarian assistance in conflict situations are absent. Multi-mandate NGOs with large donor-funded programs in Afghanistan are torn between principle and institutional survival: some have started to raise their humanitarian profile, but donors, in the main, are not keen to fund humanitarian activities, as this would be tantamount to recognizing the failure of their nation-building strategies. For its part, UNAMA has been until recently loath to push for a humanitarian perspective, as it was felt that doing so would embarrass the government.

> *"The word 'humanitarian' was taboo. Donors did not want to hear it." - NGO country director, Kabul*

Moreover, the scale and scope of the humanitarian caseload are unknown. The paucity of hard data on the actual extent of the humanitarian situation has been used by some to bolster the narrative of denial. The consequences of dismantling the UN humanitarian capacity, which had allowed for analysis, coordination, and even elements of common programming throughout the Taliban years, after the establishment of the UN integrated mission in 2002, only started to become apparent in early 2008. With shrinking access and no information collection and analysis system at hand, aid agencies had at best only anecdotal or second-hand evidence of how badly the crisis was biting and of the relative weights of conflict-related and natural factors. Inferences were being made from snapshots of information, but there was no global picture, and even less of a strategy, on how to address the crisis.

Finally, the increasing restrictions on access, the absence of an independent UN humanitarian coordination capacity, and the perception that, given its association with the Coalition and the government, it was impossible for UNAMA to play a neutral and impartial role in negotiating access and space for the wider aid community led a group of international NGOs in Afghanistan to openly campaign for the establishment of a separate OCHA office outside the integrated mission. While this has now been achieved—the new head of the OCHA office arrived in early January 2009—it will undoubtedly take time before a capacity to

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things have deteriorated considerably. Girls' schools and teachers have been targeted, hundreds of schools are now destroyed or closed; health facilities and staff are also under attack. These programs, as well as NSP, are largely implemented by NGOs.

[6] See Antonio Donini, *The Policies of Mercy. UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique and Rwanda*, Occasional paper #22, Humanitarianism and War Project, Providence, RI, 1996, p. 35, (available online at **http://fic.tufts.edu**).

negotiate access, nurture humanitarian principles, and provide the necessary analysis and guidance for an effective humanitarian response can be built up. On the positive side, there are a few signs that some parts of the UN system are prepared to pursue more neutral and independent approaches that include negotiating access with the "other side." The success of the brief truce for the immunization campaign in late 2008 is an example of this.

Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go to re-establish the bona fides of humanitarianism in Afghanistan. If there is a lesson about universality here, it is that the manner in which a situation is defined can have serious consequences on the ability of the humanitarian enterprise to address needs arising from an evolving situation.

Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism

In our 2006 report, we noted that the global war on terror was the defining environment of the situation in Afghanistan. At the time, there was still widespread hope that the world-ordering experiment in Afghanistan (and Iraq), built around the imposition of a *Pax Americana*, would prove successful. No such optimism was recorded during our 2008 visits. "Failure" and "anxiety about the future" were frequent terms used by Afghans to describe the situation. Aid workers noted that access over time seemed to be inversely proportional to foreign troop deployments. One quipped that "what was happening was not conflict resolution but conflict generation."

Two new factors, however, were of particular concern to aid workers. The first was the increasing disconnects between rhetoric and reality concerning the rationale for the presence of Coalition forces. The vast majority of Afghans had welcomed the military intervention that had toppled the Taliban regime, but now they were not so sure. Conspiracy theories abounded on "the real reasons why they are here" (these ranged from preparing an attack on Iran to the discovery of precious and hidden mineral resources). For aid agencies, the growing disaffection of the general public with the foreign military presence has obvious implications, especially for those who are seen to be working closely with the PRTs and/or the government. The GWOT agenda forces difficult choices, particularly on NGOs: institutional shrinkage because of the paucity of funds for principled humanitarian activities and diminishing access to vulnerable groups in areas where insurgents are active vs. survival as handmaidens of belligerent donors.

The second factor relates to the question of civilian casualties and, more generally, to the perceived contempt shown by Coalition forces vis-à-vis civilians. Civilian casualties attributed to the Coalition have not only increased in numbers,[7] they have also become a source of increasing acrimony between the Coalition and the Karzai government. Afghans interviewed in Kabul and Jalalabad—including some who had been at the receiving end of bombing raids or brutal house searches—were united in their revulsion of Coalition tactics. Many felt that these only fuelled support for the Taliban. Resentment against the Coalition presence is never far under the surface. Aid workers feel that it could explode at any time—as the riots in which several aid agencies were attacked in Kabul and Jalalabad in 2006 demonstrate. Aid agencies are justifiably concerned that they may be tarred with the same brush as the foreign militaries, with potentially deleterious consequences for their security. The militarization of relief and the usurpation of the term "humanitarian" by foreign militaries and their PRTs add to the dangerous blurring of lines between military and other actors pursuing radically different agendas.

Absent a radical rethinking of the US and Coalition anti-terrorism strategy in Afghanistan, current trends do not bode well for agencies attempting to work according to principle. In our 2006 case study, we had concluded that "so far, it would seem that rather than suppressing terrorism, the western military intervention has given it a new lease of life."[8] We can only confirm this finding. For aid agencies, the implications are even more worrisome than they were two years ago: whether they work for the government or the Coalition or not, they are seen as guilty by association. In Afghanistan (as in Iraq), extricating humanitarianism from the minefields laid by the GWOT is likely to be a difficult and tortuous task.

Coherence

Afghanistan is now at the forefront of so-called joined up, comprehensive, or coherent approaches to conflict resolution. While the UN has had an integrated mission since 2002, which we assessed in our earlier report as being on balance a hindrance to principled humanitarian action, Coalition approaches to integrated responses, where political, military, and civilian activities fit into a single strategy, are relatively new but gathering pace. These can be grouped under the moniker of "stabilization" operations or, in the language of the military, "shape, clear, hold, and build." Essentially, these involve a concerted set of actions in "swing" or critical districts that might otherwise fall to the Taliban. Once the district is secured, the theory goes, the UN and its agencies, the government, and the NGOs come in to transform physical security into more durable human security. Quite apart from the validity of the postulate that hearts and minds and other assistance activities actually deliver durable security,[9] the approach is problematic, for a number of reasons, from a humanitarian perspective.

There are two questions here:

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[7] As detailed in the UNAMA human rights report on civilian casualties issued in February 2009, available at **http://www.unama-afg.org**.

[8] p. 26.

[9] This is the subject of ongoing research coordinated by Andrew Wilder at Tufts/FIC.

ANA soldiers deliver assistance in Qaysar district (Faryab province) in Dec. 2007 as part of the Coalition "information operation" mentioned on this page. Photo by Brian P. Seymour.

with institutional survival. There is a "rice bowl" issue here: if the NGOs refuse to do the bidding of the stabilization donors, the private contractors or the military itself will do the job.

Moreover, there have been flagrant instances of blurring of lines:

• A recent pertinent example: In August 2008, USAID requested applications for a five-year, $150 million project. The request contained several alarming objectives for any independent aid organization. Among other things, USAID asked for organizations to demonstrate programmatic flexibility to implement "post-battlefield cleanup" operations, essentially requesting that they work with communities in the aftermath of a battle, operate alongside PRT officials, and communicate to the general public a U.S. government story regarding alternative development.[10]

• Should humanitarian action be linked to, or included within, comprehensive or coherent approaches to conflict resolution?

• Even if they are not included, what is the impact of such approaches on principled humanitarian action?

The answer to the first question is straightforward: humanitarians should not take sides. They should not make pronouncements on whether a war is just or unjust, as this would undermine their ability to address need. Obviously, then, they should not engage in controversies of a political nature and, even less, join up in action with belligerents. Neutrality is not an end in itself; it is a means to fulfill the humanitarian imperative. And the perception of being associated with a belligerent carries potentially deadly consequences for humanitarian aid workers, as well as for vulnerable groups who are denied assistance because of this association.

The answer to the second question is more complicated. It has to do with the political economy of the relationships between the range of military, political, and assistance actors on the ground. The UN is, and is seen as, aligned with the US-led Coalition intervention. So far, it has provided uncritical support to the Karzai government. The UN's humanitarian capacity is weak and further diminished by its incorporation into an integrated mission. As already mentioned, the majority of NGOs work as implementing partners for government programs, or in any case are seen as part of the international enterprise that supports the government. Unlike other conflict situations, there are few NGOs with a humanitarian track record or mandate in Afghanistan. As for bilateral donors, they see "their" NGOs as force multipliers for their political and military objectives. Indirectly, therefore, stabilization operations affect humanitarianism because that is where the money is and NGOs are forced to balance principle

• Improper use of the term "humanitarian" by the military: A NATO/ISAF press release reads: "Humanitarian assistance operations are helping both the people of Afghanistan and coalition forces fight the global war on terror. Under a strategy known as 'information operations,' coalition mentors assigned to Afghan Regional Security Integration Command-North are developing humanitarian projects for even the most remote villages in the Hindu Kush Mountains. During a recent mission in both Faryab and Badghis Provinces, the Afghan National Army and their coalition mentors…provided relief to the Afghan people.…In return for their generosity, the ANA asked the elders to provide them with assistance in tracking down anti-government forces." [11]

• UN agencies are not immune from direct linking of military action and relief: according to a knowledgeable UN official, the World Food Programme coordinates its food deliveries with ISAF. In some cases, ISAF does pre-convoy patrols that sometimes engage with "the enemy." This gives impression that ISAF is fighting for WFP.

These examples show that even if humanitarian agencies are not involved in stabilization activities, these can have potentially dangerous consequences for the perceived neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian actors. They are likely to make the negotiation of humanitarian space—which requires a minimum of acceptance and trust from all belligerents—that much more difficult. So far, only the ICRC has been able to develop a steady dialogue on access and acceptance with the Taliban. Now that

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[10] Refugees International, 26 January 2008.

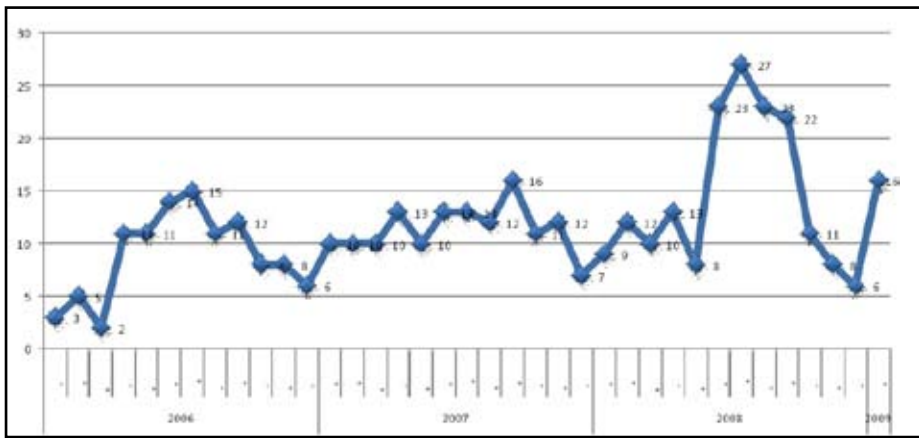[11] 23 December 2007; available at **http://www.nato.int/isaf/**.

Fig. 1. Attacks against NGOs 2006-2008. These are total figures including attacks by anti-government elements as well as by criminal groups countrywide against national and international NGOs (Source: Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO), Kabul).

bearing the brunt of these attacks. According to the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO), attacks have become more frequent and more deadly. In 2008, NGOs were involved in more than 170 security incidents (up 20% from 2007) in which 31 aid workers were killed, 78 abducted, and a further 27 seriously wounded.[12] Because of its increasingly risk-averse posture and shrinking area of operations, the UN has suffered a much smaller number of attacks, with two staff killed in 2008.

The primary explanation for the increase in attacks against aid workers is the expansion of conflict (up by 50%, according to ANSO), while criminal attacks appear to be on a downward trend. The vast majority of attacks are attributed by ANSO to the perception that NGOs are

there is a separate OCHA office outside the UN integrated mission—whose traditional function would be to negotiate access with all belligerents on behalf of the wider humanitarian community—it will be interesting to see the reactions of Coalition forces on the ground and the tensions that will inevitably arise within the UN system around the issue of supporting the government and its political outreach vs. promoting humanitarian principle.

functionally linked to the political-military agenda of Coalition forces, i.e., the NGOs are seen as having taken sides. ANSO's analysis stresses that "the ability of NGOs to address this perception by demonstrating neutrality, has been severely constrained by both the dangers of establishing reliable contact with an inconsistent and hostile Armed Opposition and the prohibition of such contact (explicit or implied) by Government, foreign donors and military forces who generally perceive it as an act of collaboration with the enemy."[13]

In sum, there are practical reasons for separating or insulating principled humanitarian action from stabilization activities. An even stronger theoretical argument points to the flaws of incorporating humanitarian action in the "coherence" agenda. Humanitarian action derives its legitimacy from universal principles enshrined in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration, and international humanitarian law. Such principles often do not sit well with Security Council political compromises; politics, the "art of the possible," is not necessarily informed by principle. Incorporating a function that draws legitimacy from the UN Charter (or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) within a management structure born of political compromise in the Security Council is questionable and possibly self-defeating.

Most interviewees considered that attacks against aid workers were likely to escalate in 2009 because of both the expansion of the Taliban areas of influence and the announced surge in US troops. Both were seen as resulting in more fighting, more civilian casualties, and more risks for aid workers. Aid agencies were particularly concerned with the potential impact of the so-called "shape, clear, hold, and build" strategy, as this would further politicize the delivery of aid by integrating it into "post-battlefield" operations. Association, real or perceived, with such operations would carry obvious risks.

The issue of better insulation of humanitarian action, if not complete separation from politics and stabilization approaches, is likely to remain an unresolved one on the humanitarian agenda for some time. The ICRC and other Dunantist humanitarian organizations remain wary of, if not hostile to, integration. Some (for example, MSF) have now officially seceded from UN and NGO humanitarian coordination bodies precisely because of the blurring lines between principled action and politics.

All NGOs have tightened security procedures. Most (but not all) no longer fly the flag outside Kabul or the relatively safe northern provinces. International staff travel minimally or not at all outside these areas. Risk has by and large been transferred to national staff of INGOs and Afghan NGOs, who travel in unmarked vehicles or by public transport. Becoming invisible is seen to be the best guarantee of security and of reaching people in need. Signboards, once the trademark of NGOs, have been taken down, even in Kabul.

Security

The deterioration of security for aid workers and the politicization of security issues continue apace. Throughout 2007 and 2008, the number of attacks against aid workers has continued to rise, with NGOs and particularly the national staff of NGOs

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[12] ANSO Quarterly Report, 4th Quarter 2008, January 2009.

[13] Ibid., p. 1.

An experienced national staff member of an INGO explains: "I go to the field less and less. When I do, I wear dirty clothes. I leave my ID and mobile phone behind. I don't even take a notebook. If the Taliban stop me at one of their checkposts, I say I am a trader going back to my village. It is becoming more and more difficult."

The UN has hardened its armor. Their staff travel in armored vehicles with heavily armed police escorts and, increasingly, by helicopter in areas that were considered safe only 12 or 18 months ago. NGOs eschew armed guards, whether it is on the road or to guard their compounds. Some are debating whether they should hire armed protection and, reportedly, at least one NGO has agreed to travel with armed guards at the behest of its donor.

NGOs still rely to a large extent on community acceptance strategies for their security. Instances of communities warning NGOs of impending danger are widespread, but so are instances where threats were received or cautionary advice provided but not heeded. The acceptance strategy has its limits, however, because communities are far from homogenous, members are themselves under pressure from insurgents, and access often requires travel through territory where the agency is not known or is not working. Moreover, the difficulty of identifying trusted interlocutors, or the unwillingness to do so, is an additional factor of risk.

It is hard to evaluate the impact of the security situation on actual humanitarian operations. Agencies are reluctant to share information on the threats they receive and on the measures they take. It is more than likely that threat goes underreported, both by local field staff who are justifiably concerned that their projects will be suspended or closed down, and by senior staff who fear that donors will cut their funding. As in Iraq, much is done by remote management. Over time, the quality of supervision, monitoring, and accountability inevitably suffers.

In Afghanistan, the social contract of acceptability between humanitarian agencies, affected communities, and belligerents is rapidly breaking down. The capital of respect and acceptance that aid workers had once enjoyed has been squandered. Absent a concerted effort to begin to mend this contract, through negotiations for access and respect of IHL with all parties to the conflict—a task for which the new OCHA office is potentially uniquely suited—security and the collective ability of the humanitarian enterprise to address humanitarian need will deteriorate even further.

It is worth recalling that, from the 1980s to the end of the Taliban period, attacks against aid workers were extremely rare. Afghans generally welcomed the presence of foreign-based aid agencies and their work, as this was the only window on the world that communities could count on. As we noted in our earlier report, there was a taboo against harming aid workers. This taboo no longer holds, in Afghanistan as in Iraq, largely because the aid enterprise is seen as tainted by its association with external political/military agendas. It is unclear how this taboo could be reinstated, but an obvious place to start is through a better separation between principled humanitarian action and politicized forms of intervention.[14]

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

Our findings suggest that there is a strong case for supporting more principled and narrowly-defined forms of humanitarian action in Afghanistan separate or insulated from the international community's world-ordering agenda. The act of saving and protecting the lives of civilians caught up in crisis and conflict can and should be kept separate from partisan or politically-driven stabilization operations. A space needs to be reserved for humanitarian actors working according to time-tested principles who are thus prepared to engage with all sets of belligerents. Donor governments who have subscribed to the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative have a key responsibility here. They should recognize the seriousness of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and agree to fund urgent humanitarian action with no strings attached (as they do for the ICRC). Of course, UN and NGOs need to clean up their act, too. They cannot cloak themselves in the mantle of principled humanitarianism while simultaneously working for the government or the PRTs. This puts them and the communities they work with at risk. Distinction is key.

Some will no doubt argue that in today's asymmetrical conflicts, there is no space for neutrality—you are either for or against. Our view is that Afghanistan (and Iraq) demonstrates the exact opposite: the shrinking of humanitarian space and the instrumentalization of humanitarian action have had deleterious effects for communities needing assistance, for the security of humanitarian aid workers, and for the credibility of their organizations. Thus, a more modest humanitarian enterprise, closer in ambition and intent to classical, time-tested humanitarian principles, stands a better chance of saving and protecting larger numbers of lives than does today's increasingly politically-driven and militarized forms of relief.

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[14] For the UN, this would also require depoliticizing the management of staff security. Afghanistan is one of the most dangerous duty stations for UN staff, yet the security phase has no relation with actual risk on the ground. Most of the country, including Kabul, is in "phase three." In Taliban times, the UN was in phase five (which basically entails evacuation). Staff ceilings were kept deliberately low. US and UK nationals working for the UN were prohibited from entering the country (by the UN Secretary-General at the behest of the governments of these two countries, not by the Taliban). The UN would withdraw its international staff for long periods at the slightest incident (as when a provincial governor allegedly threw a coffee pot in the direction of a UN staff member). Yet Afghanistan was far safer for UN staff under the Taliban than at any time since the fall of the Taliban.

From a humanitarian perspective, the first priority in Afghanistan today is to alleviate human suffering, staunch the loss of lives, and, especially, protect civilians from avoidable mortality, hardship, and displacement. All belligerents must respect IHL and abide by the core principles of distinction and proportionality. The aerial bombing of weddings is never proportional;[15] neither is putting bombs in crowded areas. The UN has spoken out against these abuses, and this is a welcome development, but much more needs to be done to advocate for the rights of civilians and to ensure their protection.

As for the humanitarians, and the international community that supports them, there are two key areas where urgent attention is needed.

1. Rebuild a humanitarian consensus.

The social contract of acceptability that allows humanitarian agencies to work with a modicum of safety in crisis countries is broken in Afghanistan. Immediate steps should be taken to build a relationship of trust with all parties to the conflict. This is not rocket science: the humanitarian community needs to be more forthright in occupying the space that is available to it by reverting to time-tested humanitarian approaches, in particular through the insulation and separation of humanitarian action from political agendas:

• This will require the separation of the humanitarian wheat from the development/government support chaff. In order to increase the likelihood of their acceptability, aid agencies wishing to undertake humanitarian tasks should clearly assume a humanitarian profile and modus operandi. The same agency should not attempt to do both humanitarian work according to established principles and reconstruction or development work for or alongside the government or PRTs. In volatile and fraught environments such as Afghanistan (and Iraq), acceptability and staff security are likely to hinge on the affirmation of a narrower humanitarian mandate—a more Dunantist approach—than in more settled environments. Agencies should decide on one or the other and make their choices clear. This is easier said than done, of course. All aid agencies, including the ICRC, have their offices in Kabul and government-held cities. They have to engage with government and respect its sovereignty. This inevitably creates a web of contacts and associated perceptions. Nevertheless, a more principled approach based on a greater independence of action for those agencies who declare themselves to be humanitarian is necessary (and possible).

• A process of certification for agencies who pledge to abide by humanitarian principles should be instituted. This could be done

in a verifiable manner through the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) or another recognized certification entity or a consortium of NGOs if not a revamped ACBAR (the Afghanistan NGO coordination body).

• An alternative to certification could be the creation of a consortium of humanitarian agencies that would operate under a common logo, rather than their individual emblems. This would allow agencies that pledge to work according to time-tested humanitarian principles to join forces in addressing urgent humanitarian need, while retaining their individuality for other types of activities. Similar approaches have been successful in the past (e.g., in Cambodia during the Vietnamese occupation[16]) and deserve to be tested in Afghanistan.

• Certified humanitarian agencies (or agencies participating in the "pool") should ensure they have a recognizable profile so as to minimize confusion about their identity and role. In addition to a clearly articulated humanitarian profile centered on respect for principles, humanitarian agencies should distinguish themselves from other actors[17] through the adoption of immediately recognizable emblems or symbols (this could be done by painting humanitarian vehicles pink or using pink flags, as MSF did in Angola in the 1990s, for example).

• In order to bolster their humanitarian credentials, humanitarian agencies, and the donors who support them, should subscribe to a set of verifiable and widely disseminated humanitarian principles, based on the Humanitarian Operational Requirements (HOR) negotiated by the UN with the Taliban in 2000 and/or on the Basic Operational Guidelines (BOGs) developed by the aid community in Nepal and Sri Lanka.[18] These BOGs should be widely distributed and carried at all times by all humanitarian personnel.

• An advocacy strategy to promote the HOR/BOGs and the work of humanitarian agencies should be launched, with special emphasis on the vernacular media in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As a first step, a workshop on the HOR/BOGs approach should be convened in Kabul. All belligerents should be approached and invited to commit to respecting the BOGs.

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[15] According to UNAMA, in the aerial bombardment of the village of Azizabad in western Afghanistan by US forces on 22 August 2008, 90 civilians were killed, including 60 children who died in their beds; **http://www.un.org/apps/news/story. asp?NewsID=27816&Cr=Afghan&Cr1.**

[16] The experience of the "Consortium for Cambodia" is chronicled in Brian Walker, "NGOs Break the Cold War Impasse in Cambodia," in L. Minear and H. Smith (eds.), *Humanitarian Diplomacy. Practitioners and their Craft,* United Nations University Press, 2007, pp. 133-152.

[17] For example, UN agencies, private contractors, donors, and special forces, all of whom seem to travel in white vehicles.

[18] On the HOR, see A. Donini, "Negotiating with the Taliban," in L. Minear and H. Smith (eds), op. cit. On the BOGs, see the HA2015 Nepal case study at https://wikis.uit.tufts.edu/confluence/display/ FIC/Humanitarian+Agenda+2015--Nepal+Country+Study. The Nepal BOGs can be viewed at http://www.un.org.np/resources/ index.php.

• As a matter of urgency, humanitarian agencies should engage with the Taliban—through their representatives or trusted proxies—and other insurgent groups to explain their principles, modus operandi, and activities, and to negotiate access and protection. The outcome of the negotiations, and any violations of agreements, needs to be made public in the vernacular media. The newly re-established OCHA office should take the lead in negotiating access. As a prerequisite for these negotiations, OCHA should seek the commitment of the Humanitarian Country Team to support this approach and engage key humanitarian donors in a dialogue in order to enlist their support (and find pragmatic ways of addressing donor prohibitions of contacts with groups that are included in their "terrorist lists").

• A joint mechanism for humanitarian agencies (and the donors who support them) should be established in order to monitor access and BOG compliance issues. The UN humanitarian wing should be associated with this mechanism only after it is able to demonstrate its compliance with the BOGs.

• The establishment of a separate OCHA office outside the integrated UNAMA mission is a welcome development. It is also essential for OCHA to move out of UNAMA premises. Physical separation in Kabul and the other regions of the country will not be sufficient proof of independence. Possibly, this should be complemented by the appointment of a Humanitarian Coordinator separate from the position of UN Resident Coordinator/Deputy UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General. At present, the three functions are combined. In any event, the re-establishment of an OCHA humanitarian coordination and leadership capacity will take time, as will the perception that it is de-linked from the UN's political agenda in Afghanistan.

2. Develop a coherent humanitarian strategy.

The issue of the absence of a humanitarian critical mass in terms of capacity and funding for humanitarian action needs to be immediately addressed.

• Donors who have signed up to the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) principles should meet at the Kabul level, as well as internationally, to address the issue of funding for humanitarian activities in Afghanistan, which at present is exceptionally low. Some mechanism for the pooling of funds should be introduced in order to ensure a more multilateral and needs-based approach. At present, apart from ECHO, there is very little humanitarian donor presence in Kabul. Donors should bolster their own humanitarian capacity in country, by appointing dedicated staff, in recognition of the deteriorating humanitarian situation.

• A humanitarian information management and analysis facility is urgently required in order to provide the evidence base for a coherent humanitarian strategy that takes into account the different nature and level of needs in different parts of the country. Ideally, the facility and the coordination of the preparation of the strategy should be the responsibility of OCHA.

Given the absence of an OCHA structure, at least until the new OCHA office is able to hire and deploy competent staff and open separate premises from UNAMA in Kabul and other locales, consideration should be given to the establishment of this facility under the aegis of an NGO or NGO consortium, until such time as OCHA is able to take over.

• An emergency task force associated with the above facility should meet regularly to provide oversight and impetus to the overall humanitarian effort. It should be composed of all certified humanitarian agencies, the Red Cross movement, and UN operational agencies. Special meetings open to humanitarian donors should also be held.

• OCHA and the donors who support OCHA should put the item of coordination arrangements in Afghanistan on the agenda of the next OCHA-donor meeting.

• The IASC should meet, at the principals' level, to discuss the lessons of Afghanistan in the context of continuing analysis of the implications of the integration and coherence agendas. The IASC should also ensure that a separate HC with proven humanitarian credentials is appointed to UNAMA.

• The HA2015 final report has taken a position that the disadvantages of UN integrated missions from a humanitarian perspective outweigh the advantages.[19] The debate on "integration" and "coherence" is likely to continue. Arguing against integrated missions on the basis of principles, however, is unlikely to sway the orthodoxy of the political UN. Putting facts on the table may help. The ERC has already agreed to provide an assessment of the effectiveness of current humanitarian coordination arrangements by mid-2009. An independent report to document the impact of integration on humanitarian action, and on accountability to beneficiaries, should also be commissioned. It should be based on the views of a broad range of beneficiaries of humanitarian action and aid agency personnel. 🔒

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19 Antonio Donini et al., "Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power, and Perceptions: The State of the Humanitarian Enterprise," Tufts/FIC, March 2008.

ACRONYMS LIST

ACBAR	Agency Coordination Body for Afghan Relief
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANSO	Afghanistan NGO Safety Office
BOGs	Basic Operational Guidelines
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Aid Department
ERC	(UN) Emergency Relief Coordinator
GHD	Good Humanitarian Donorship
GWOT	Global War on Terror
HA2015	Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power, and Perceptions
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
HC	(UN) Humanitarian Coordinator
HOR	Humanitarian Operational Requirements
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NATO/ISAF	NATO International Stabilization Assistance Force
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PRTs	Provincial Reconstruction Teams
RC	(UN) Resident Coordinator
SRSG	Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General
UNAMA	United Nations Mission in Afghanistan
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme

About the author:

Antonio Donini is a Senior Researcher at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, where he works on issues relating to the future of humanitarian action. From 2002 to 2004, he was a Visiting Senior Fellow at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. He has worked for 26 years in the United Nations in research, evaluation, and humanitarian capacities. His last post was as Director of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan (OCHA), from 1999 to 2002. Before going to Afghanistan, he was chief of the Lessons Learned Unit at OCHA, where he managed a program of independent studies on the effectiveness of relief efforts in complex emergencies.

He has published widely on evaluation, humanitarianism, and UN reform issues. In 2004, he co-edited the volume *Nation-Building Unraveled? Aid, Peace, and Justice in Afghanistan* (Kumarian Press), as well as several articles exploring the implications of the crises in Afghanistan and Iraq for the future of humanitarian action. He has coordinated the Humanitarian Agenda 2015 research project which has analyzed local perceptions of humanitarian action in 12 crisis countries, and in 2008 was the main author of the final HA2015 report, *The State of the Humanitarian Enterprise.*