

Humanitarian Action and the Afghanistan Crisis

Issues Note for NGO Policy Dialogue X

November 15, 2001

Humanitarianism and War Project

Feinstein International Famine Center

Several issues are emerging as central to the upcoming reflection on Afghanistan, the tenth in our series of policy dialogues among North American relief and rights NGOs. This Note frames selected issues for purposes of discussion. It is circulated in advance so that participants may come prepared to share their agencies' experience in the current crisis and their views of the relevance of earlier humanitarian responses. A number of those who will participate on November 15 come from agencies that are currently involved in the crisis or are in the process of determining whether to become so.

Given the shortness of the time available, we will begin our day by prioritizing the issues to be discussed from among those identified below. Other suggestions are welcome as well. Attached are the electronic files of a dozen recent NGO statements, editorial comment, and analysis as additional background for the discussion.

Historical background

As the Afghanistan crisis has evolved, it has assumed monumental and even intimidating proportions. A UN spokesperson recently described the situation as "the most serious complex emergency in the world – ever." The magnitude of the crisis, or at least of its coverage, have pushed other humanitarian emergencies to the margins of the agendas of policy-makers and the public.

In reality, the Afghanistan crisis is neither unprecedented nor unexpected. The challenges of humanitarian access and of assistance and protection of civilian populations are familiar ones, and the actors seeking to meet them also form a well-known cast of characters: UN and bilateral aid organizations, NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, and outside military forces.

The humanitarian challenges of the crisis, in keeping with the dilemmas of other complex political emergencies, have their roots in the history and culture of the region. The humanitarian actors, too, bring with them their own historical and contemporary baggage. Earlier periods of involvement include the Cold War era, particularly the years beginning in 1979 with the Soviet invasion and occupation, the post-Cold War era of the Nineties, and now, following September 11, 2001, what some are calling "the New Cold War."

Reviewing activities in the Nineties, a Humanitarianism and War Project study by Antonio Donini, currently a senior UN official coordinating UN efforts in the region, noted that “the roots of the humanitarian assistance programs in Afghanistan are planted firmly in the Cold War context. ... The strictures of superpower rivalry [made it] out of the question for UN development or relief agencies to work officially in mujahidin-controlled areas. At the time, the only agency to work quietly and officially on both sides was the ICRC, which carried out its traditional medical and protection activities. NGOs had a freer hand, however. ... The double absence of UN agencies and of NGOs with impeccable relief or development credentials was a distinguishing feature of the beginnings of the cross-border effort.”

Over time, the H&W study continued, there developed “a flourishing cottage industry of cross-border programs implemented by a bewildering number of NGOs financed by a maze of bilateral grants from donor countries [and of contracts with UN agencies].” Most NGO activities “were carried out under a veil of secrecy both for security reasons and because it was technically illegal to cross the border. ... The competing political agendas of the mujahidin parties resulted in competing pressures on humanitarian programs. Assistance, even if it was labeled humanitarian, often supported the military effort of the mujahidin and was provided to or through military fronts. ... One observer estimated that ‘less than half of the overall assistance designated for Afghanistan is believed to have gotten through to the intended recipients.’” [A more extended excerpt from Donini’s study is found among the attachments.]

A just-released study commissioned by the UN’s Strategic Monitoring Unit for Afghanistan and written by Mark Duffield, Patricia Gossman, and Nicholas Leader underscores the politicization of earlier activities. “The era of cross-border aid to Afghanistan during the 1980s and early 1990s ... was a time when external assistance was blatantly partisan.” Following the emergence of the Taliban in the mid-1990s, the study observes, donor agencies became increasingly conditional in their approach to providing assistance, specifying multiple objectives that it would have to serve and restrictive terms under which it would be provided. This politicization of aid created tension with aid organizations and with humanitarian principles, which require that emergency assistance be provided without extraneous political agendas. The three analysts view the now-accepted description of Afghanistan as a “failed state” as a label of convenience used to justify approaching such aid as a “tool for conflict resolution, social reconstruction and behavioural change.”

The past two decades of activities by humanitarian organizations in and around Afghanistan provide the backdrop for current NGO decisions about the nature and extent of their involvement. In addition to identifying lessons learned from previous work in the region, the experiences of responding to other recent crises elsewhere may also be relevant. The clearest parallels to the Afghanistan situation may be with the situations in northern Iraq in 1991 ff. and in Kosovo in 1999 ff. There, too, a largely Western humanitarian apparatus was engaged in high profile activities among predominantly Muslim populations. The work was funded by governments that were belligerents in the conflicts and that also provided humanitarian assistance through their own troops as well as through private agencies. Other vexing issues in

Iraq and Kosovo that resonate with the Afghanistan scene include medium-term reconstruction and the upstaging of serious humanitarian challenges elsewhere in the world.

Session 1: The Political Context

Humanitarian activities are taking place within the context of the broader international effort to identify and eliminate terrorist groups harbored by the Taliban authorities. The anti-terrorism effort has unusually wide political support, both in the United States and among other nations. UN resolutions on the subject have had the support of all five of the permanent members of the Security Council and virtually all of the members of the General Assembly.

Within the prevailing political context, humanitarian objectives loom large. Humanitarian efforts represent a visible way of demonstrating that the anti-terrorism initiative is not an attack against the people of Afghanistan. Aid efforts are being pressed to assist people in situ in an attempt to reduce the destabilizing effect of large-scale outmigration to neighboring countries, many of which have closed their borders to Afghan refugees. Conversely, however, a major humanitarian catastrophe would undercut the broader political objectives of the anti-terrorism initiative.

Reflecting the widening suffering and displacement caused by the bombing and the problems that the warfare has created for aid actors, criticism of the current political-military strategy has increased among humanitarian organizations, commentators, and the population in the region. “A reversal of American policy is necessary,” wrote Jonathan Schell in the current issue of *The Nation*. “At present, political goals have been treated as a footnote to military goals ... and humanitarian goals have been treated as a footnote to political goals. ... This policy must be stood precisely on its head.” Responding to this criticism, the administration has reaffirmed that the military campaign will continue until its objectives are achieved.

NGOs are of several minds about the prevailing political context. Some are comfortable with (or at least resigned to) working within it, acknowledging that the aid funds available to them and the humanitarian space within which they function reflect international political givens. Those political realities are conveyed by the comment of Professor Graham Allison of Harvard, “American policy makers must not think of the humanitarian campaign as an afterthought or charity work. It should be regarded as a genuine second front.”

By contrast, other NGOs and the ICRC are keeping their distance. Some have opted not to seek or accept U.S. government funds for humanitarian activities in the region. Some are accepting such funds but using them – for the moment, at least – only among refugees outside the country. Some are relying on private donations, which come with fewer strings. Some are open to using funds provided by the UN or other governments, although the UN system and its humanitarian organizations are facing some of the same strategic issues relative to the anti-terrorism initiative.

Analysts have also noted that within the broader initiative, the political objectives and strategies of U.S. policy are evolving as the crisis proceeds. The original goal of disabling Osama bin Laden and his network has been broadened to include ousting the Taliban government that harbors him. Earlier reservations about multilateral approaches to international problem-solving have eased, as has earlier resistance to U.S. involvement in nation-building. The United Nations is now expected to play a major role in eventual reconstruction work, although it is expressing some reluctance about the terms of its engagement.

The task faced by NGOs of positioning themselves in relation to the broader political context involves various dilemmas. Those who participate, or are viewed as participating, under the umbrella of the anti-terrorism initiative take certain risks. As Ed Schenkenberg of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies has observed, “during the days and weeks to come, political grounds and humanitarian goals will totally interfere with each other. Those who wish to provide aid in Afghanistan under American management will have to put aside the principles of independence and impartiality.” Those who choose not to participate, however, are in a weaker position, at least for the moment, when it comes to meeting their humanitarian mandates.

Discussion questions: How does your agency view its activities in relation to the broader political context framed by the anti-terrorism initiative? To what extent does your positioning of your agency reflect your experience in other emergencies, particularly in northern Iraq and Kosovo? What safeguards, if any, do you see as available to protect the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence? To what extent can the prevailing political framework be expected to support and protect the welfare of the Afghan people in the short and longer term?

Session 2: Operational Issues

Many challenges confront NGOs wishing to make a programmatic contribution to Afghan assistance and protection activities. Included are the following:

(1) Given the volatile nature of the situation on the ground, operational agencies need to plan for various possible scenarios. Variables include how long the bombing continues, how long the Taliban remains in power, and what configuration of post-Taliban polity emerges. Contingency plans may also need to take into account the possible failure of U.S. policy objectives or a delay in their realization. The eventual roles of the United Nations at various stages in peace negotiations and reconstruction processes, themselves still being clarified, also need to be anticipated.

What are the major scenarios and what would be your course of action in each? What expertise is available to NGOs for identifying and selecting among the options? Would it make

sense to think in terms of (a) the current period during which the Taliban and Northern Alliance are fighting, and (b) a period of national reconstruction with a coalition government to follow?

Should NGOs content themselves for the time being with concentrating work outside of Afghanistan, and if so in which countries? To what extent do agencies working in refugee camps need to be concerned about these being used as staging areas for anti-Taliban forces? Should NGOs seek at the earliest possible moment to work within the borders of Afghanistan? What constraints may be expected in doing so? Would a strategy make sense that involved working within Afghanistan in specific areas in which the conflict is limited or the authorities more cooperative?

(2) How will NGOs reach decisions about the sectoral areas in which to mount activities? Are you comfortable with the current emphasis on food shortages and food aid, or do you give credence to the view expressed by some that health sector problems are probably more implicated in the incidence of mortality than are nutritional shortfalls?

Do you see a danger that, as in other crises, protection needs will be shortchanged in the rush to provide emergency assistance? To what extent can aid agencies approach their programming of assistance with an eye to proceeding in ways that provide physical presence and protection to vulnerable populations? What kinds of collaboration do rights groups envision with aid agencies?

As more and more NGOs gear up for eventual operational involvement, to what extent do you envision a danger of replicating the pandemonium among agencies that developed and undermined efforts in Goma and Pristina? Is your agency prepared to “sit out” this particular crisis in the interest of a more rational division of NGO labor on the ground? Are you exploring geographical and sectoral niches not sought out by others? What are the risks involved in not becoming directly operational? Are there other options to achieving a better division of labor and improved coordination among various agencies?

(3) NGOs seeking to become active in the crisis face issues related to the security of expatriate staff, not only within Afghanistan but also in neighboring countries. What are the appropriate ground rules for reaching decisions about security matters? Are US NGOs prepared to live within the strictures laid down by the U.S. government as regards U.S. nationals underwritten by its grants and, for those cooperating with the United Nations, within the decisions of the UN’s security apparatus (UNSECOORD)? In earlier circumstances, some NGOs have felt that such decisions were too risk-averse and also infiltrated with political considerations.

(4) If US NGOs have within Afghanistan either local counterpart organizations or local staffs of their own pre-existing programs, what should be the terms of their utilization? Should U.S. NGOs supply information requested by U.S. authorities about how many national employees remain on their payrolls and what capacity they have to continue to function? To

what extent should programs be mounted without direct expatriate oversight? What should be the ground rules for engagement and disengagement involving local organizations and personnel?

(5) Western NGOs, particularly U.S.-based agencies and, even more so, faith-based groups, would be entering a setting in which humanitarian need is caused, at least in part, by an anti-terrorism initiative perceived as anti-Muslim in nature. What bearing should the religious sensitivities involved have on the profile, staffing, and activities of US NGOs? Is this an occasion in which U.S. agencies should particularly seek to work through counterparts?

(6) Muslim NGOs in some numbers are active in the region. They have varying mixtures of humanitarian and political motivations and activities and are infused to different degrees with religious objectives. Some have international links; others are primarily local. Several such NGOs based in North America have had their assets seized by the U.S. and Canadian governments. Pakistan has reportedly expelled expatriate staffs of several agencies identified as sympathetic to the Taliban. One UN organization has come under pressure regarding its funding of Muslim NGOs. Hezbollah, widely identified in the West as a terrorist organization, operates large welfare programs in Lebanon from which many people benefit and has considerable political legitimacy in its own context, holding several seats in the Lebanese parliament.

What kinds of standards may be devised to guide examination of the work of Muslim NGOs? What precautions may be taken to avoid negative impacts on the broader task of building local capacity through humanitarian action?

(7) Truth is said to be the first casualty of every war, and indeed there are difficulties in the current conflict in monitoring the evolving situation on the ground. Belligerents in the conflict, including the U.S.-led coalition, naturally seek to put their own spin on military developments. The assumption in some quarters appears to be that in the absence of international humanitarian personnel on the ground within Afghanistan, information about the humanitarian situation is equally murky, partial, and even suspect.

Yet the presence of significant numbers of indigenous humanitarian personnel, supported by outside resources, may give the humanitarian enterprise something of an advantage in the compilation and dissemination of real-time information. One consortium of faith-based agencies, for example, is connected with some 2,000 Afghan aid personnel in all parts of the country. The accounts of such personnel may be closer to the action even than some of those compiled by other humanitarian groups, certainly those of bilateral donors and perhaps also those of the UN's own agencies.

What sources of information are available to your own agency? How reliable do you find these to be? Are you pursuing any strategy of seeking to develop your own data on the humanitarian situation? What would the elements of such a strategy involve?

(8) Looking beyond the current emergency, the challenges of reconstruction will be huge. In the agriculture sector, for example, the FAO paints a bleak picture. “A decade-long destructive war with the Soviet Union and the subsequent civil strife for nearly 13 years have devastated infrastructure in agriculture and other sectors of Afghanistan’s economy. The irrigation systems are in complete ruin, while agricultural services are virtually non-existent and farmers have little access to necessary agricultural input supplied. Thousands of hectares of prime agricultural land have been taken out of production due mainly to lack of irrigation and the presence of millions of land mines. . . . During the past three years, the country has witnessed a devastating drought which compounded the impact of years of conflict and brought a large section of the population to the brink of starvation.”

A number of NGO statements have underscored the involvement of NGOs in one sector or another in Afghanistan in the years preceding 2001 and their commitment to see the task through after the current emergency is past. Several have called on policy-makers to commit themselves to providing resources and the necessary political will over the longer haul. “After the War, Rebuild a Nation. If It is a Nation,” reads one recent analysis in the New York Times.

The international community has a poor track record in staying the course once the emergency phase of a conflict is past. In Central America, the politically driven timetable for the withdrawal of UN peacekeepers forced the pace of the work of the UN’s development agencies. In Bosnia, international efforts continue to nurture the multi-ethnic polity and society envisioned by the Dayton Accords, but the going is slow and the threat of reduced international involvement ever-present. Some NGOs have found that reconstruction requires different “skill sets” from those essential to emergency responses. The development of democratic institutions in settings where there were none presents a formidable challenge.

What is your agency’s view of the reconstruction challenge and of your own role?

(9) To what extent should U.S. NGOs cooperate with U.S. troops and related military forces? While it seems unlikely for the moment that ground forces will tackle civic action activities, as in the Iraq and Kosovo crises, it is conceivable that once the bombing has stopped, a range of relief and reconstruction activities may be thrust upon or sought by the military.

Building on the experience of earlier crises, the mechanisms now seem to be in place for good communication between humanitarian and military institutions. Major aid agencies have stationed people at the headquarters of the U.S. Central Command in Tampa. One of the fruits of such collaboration is the initiative by InterAction to inform target planners in the military of the routes and timing of humanitarian convoys into Afghanistan being organized by its member agencies “so that pilots can be instructed not to attack them.”

Graham Allison has expressed the view that “An effective humanitarian mission in the context of an ongoing military operation requires a level of cooperation between the US military, the UN

relief organizations, and their nongovernmental organization partners that can be achieved only by maximum effort from all parties. Operation Provide Comfort [in Northern Iraq] was explicitly directed to provide a seamless transfer of responsibility to nongovernmental organizations once security had stabilized.” Does your agency agree with Allison’s view? What kind of expertise and resource commitments do you envision making to the collaborative process?

Discussion questions: Which of these questions do you see as most pivotal for your agency and how do you propose to deal with them? (As noted above, we will seek to identify for discussion only those that are viewed as most critical.) Do you envision any particularly creative programming options?

Session 3: Advocacy

The terrorist acts of Sept. 11 were so heinous and had such major humanitarian impacts in the United States itself as to require a clear and definitive response. Debate has revolved about the nature of that response: how concerted and multilateral, how its military and political/diplomatic components should be balanced, how deliberate and measured or, alternatively, how preemptive and swift it should be.

Some NGOs have expressed the view that in the initial weeks of public debate, there was little space within which to present alternatives, or that elaborating such alternatives was beyond their own competence. Pleased that the administration waited a month before launching military action, some agencies were reluctant to criticize such action once it was launched.

Now that the bombing is proceeding, debate about the appropriateness of the strategy chosen to the ends sought is beginning to take place. Even now, however, some humanitarian organizations feel themselves on shaky ground, wishing to avoid the perception of hand-wringing and second-guessing in circumstances with admittedly few viable options.

Some agencies believe that the bombing is ill-advised and should be halted. On October 12, in the first week of the military campaign, UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson warned of the negative impacts of the bombing on assistance activities. On October 15, the UN Human Rights Commission’s special rapporteur on the right to food condemned food drops by the military as “catastrophic for humanitarian aid, for all the extraordinary work that UN agencies and the [ICRC] and [MSF] are doing.” On October 17, Oxfam International and 5 other agencies urged that the bombing “be suspended to allow food to be delivered in safety and at sufficient quantities to sustain people through winter.”

In recent weeks, human rights groups have criticized the human rights records of both the Northern Alliance and the Taliban and have identified as a major problem “uncontrolled weapons flows,” past and present, from countries such as Pakistan, China, Iran, the Russian Federation, and Central Asian states to one side or the other. While the Taliban’s rights record

was no secret, attention to Northern Alliance practices made that faction less desirable as partners in an uncritical military alliance with the United States. Rights groups have been joined by humanitarian agencies in flagging the problem of anti-personnel mines, among which some of the humanitarian daily ration (HDR) airdrops have fallen.

InterAction has pressed a number of policy recommendations in letters to President Bush and discussions with US and UN officials. (See attachments.) At a monthly meeting of InterAction with OFDA and the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, one NGO suggested that the U.S. government aid officials be represented whenever the administration was making key decisions. That had not been done, the NGO observed, in the Iraq conflict.

A number of individual NGOs have clarified their views and made recommendations to policy-makers and the public on issues of humanitarian principle and operations. Some have addressed the broader concerns related to the anti-terrorism initiative; others have focused more narrowly on the humanitarian sector. (See attached statements.)

At the same time, other humanitarian organizations have refrained from commenting on the appropriateness of the bombing or on the broader question of the legitimacy of the war. In keeping with past practice, notes one review, Amnesty International "has refused to advocate or oppose military action under any circumstances, whether or not that intervention is aimed at preventing human rights abuses." While the ICRC, which sustained two direct hits on its premises in Afghanistan, has noted the impacts of the bombing on civilian populations, it has not called for a halt in the bombing.

On the broader issue of encouraging the use of force in support of international peace and security, few aid agencies "have developed institutional positions on the morality of the use of force," reports the International Council on Human Rights Policy. "Like human rights organisations, they have taken positions case by case -- or avoided taking a position on the grounds that it is not appropriate for them to do so. Humanitarianism is not a pacifist ideology (though some pacifist organisations do provide humanitarian aid and assistance). [However,] based on their direct experience in societies like Somalia, Rwanda and Kosovo, many relief workers are skeptical that military action can produce a just or sustained peace."

There may also be the need for advocacy regarding the consequences of a diminished lack of attention to other humanitarian crises elsewhere. Aid groups are already transferring significant numbers of seasoned staff to the region. Human rights groups have cautioned against a falling off of concern about human rights in Chechnya, reflecting the importance of Russia to the anti-terrorism coalition. Some observers have suggested that NGOs carefully watch for any identifiable humanitarian consequences on international activities and strategize regarding what steps might be taken to avoid negative fallout on assistance and protection objectives resulting from the perceived reduction in the importance of other crises.

Discussion questions: What is, or should be, the content of your agency's advocacy regarding the Afghanistan crisis? What is the process by which you reach decisions on such matters? To what extent do you take into account the views of other NGOs? Given the divergence of views that exist among NGOs on the issues involved, is there a serious downside to such advocacy efforts? What additional mechanisms might be put in place to facilitate a vetting of views and strategies in the advocacy area?

What is the relationship between your advocacy and your operational programs? Do you believe that it is appropriate to mount humanitarian activities as discussed in Session 2 without addressing the broader political issues identified in Session 1? Conversely, are the political constraints so serious that as to delay or circumscribe your operational involvement?

This Note was prepared by Larry Minear, with assistance from Humanitarianism and War Project consultants Thomas G. Weiss and Greg Hansen.

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[The attachments listed below are provided in a separate file.]

Attachments

Canadian NGO statement of September 26 highlighting the need for protection of civilians and the work of the 10 signatory agencies in and around Afghanistan.

A Statement by 18 international NGOs, October 5, "Working to solve the crisis in Afghanistan."

MSF Statement of October 9 opposing US air drops of HDRs and rejecting linkages between military and humanitarian action.

Care International, October 9, "Humanitarian Agenda for Afghanistan: A Care International Policy Paper."

USCR Statement of October 10, giving qualified support for US airdrops of food.

InterAction letter to President Bush, October 1, 2001.

Two excerpts from Antonio Donini, *The Policies of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique, and Rwanda* (Providence, RI: Watson Institute, 1996).

Graham T. Allison, "Bombing Afghanistan with Food: War's Second Front," *The Boston Globe*, October 14, 2001.

Edward Girardet, "US, beware the consequences in Afghanistan," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 22, 2001.

Greg Hansen, "War could make the terrorist threat worse," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 24, 2001.

Larry Minear, "Our Do-Gooder Delusions in Afghanistan Are in for a Shock," *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 2001

Larry Minear, "Reconstruction in Afghanistan," *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 48, No. 13, September 26, 1988, pp. 318-321.

David M. Shribman, "Campaign may portend a new Cold War," *The Boston Globe*, Oct. 23, 2001.

Other relevant resources [not attached]

Larry Minear, U.B.P. Chelliah, Jeff Crisp, John Mackinlay, and Thomas G. Weiss, United Nations Coordination of the International Humanitarian Response to the Gulf Crisis 1990-1992 (Providence, RI: Watson Institute, 1992).

Antonio Donini, The Policies of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique, and Rwanda (Providence, RI: Watson Institute, 1996).

Larry Minear, Ted van Baarda, and Marc Sommers, NATO and Humanitarian Action in the Kosovo Crisis, (Providence, RI: Watson Institute, 2000).

[The previous three publications may be downloaded in their entirety from the Humanitarianism and War Project's website at hwproject.tufts.edu]

Mark Duffield, Patricia Gossman, and Nicholas Leader, "Review of the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan" (UN Strategic Monitoring Unit: Islamabad, Pakistan, 2001).

Special Section on Afghanistan, Humanitarian Exchange Issue 19, (London: Humanitarian Practice Network, September 2001).