

FIGHTING FOR HUMANITARIAN SPACE: NGOS IN AFGHANISTAN¹

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More than 800 international and indigenous Afghan NGOs operate humanitarian, reconstruction, development and peacebuilding programs in Afghanistan to aid recovery efforts after decades of war.² However, in Afghanistan the two international military coalitions present, the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), have also made relief and reconstruction a central part of their mission. Their co-existence with so many active NGOs makes Afghanistan a test case for how an international military peace enforcement operation and avowedly neutral humanitarian and development NGOs can work alongside each other, much more so than Iraq where few NGOs operate.

The deep involvement of the military in aid work and the deliberate murder of over 90 aid workers in Afghanistan since 2003 have shaken many humanitarian NGOs. Afghanistan is fraught with practical challenges to NGO operations as well as challenges to their very historic identity and self-perceptions as independent and neutral providers of assistance to populations in crisis. Long-held principles of humanitarian neutrality and independence, and rejection of armed guards have been questioned and abandoned by some aid agencies, while many others have vocally rallied around these.

¹ This article draws on previous work the author conducted for the Afghanistan pilot project of the Peace Operations Monitor, a project of the Peace Operations Working Group of the Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee. (<http://www.peacebuild.ca/powg/POM/>) This work was conducted together with David Peabody, now the Coordinator of the Peace Operations Working Group, who I would like to thank for researching some of the material presented in this article.

² Moh Hashim Mayar, deputy director, Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), interview with author, September 12, 2006. (While currently approx. 800 NGOs are involved in registration process, Mayar estimates the real number of Ngos to be between 1000-1400).

New types of military-humanitarian dialogue have been emerging with NGOs mobilizing in coalitions to directly lobby the military, bringing these two unlike communities into closer contact than ever before. This has resulted in some changes seen as constructive by NGOs, though the troubling overall framework of tying military and reconstruction aid remains unchanged.

This article will first describe the overall landscape within which NGOs work in Afghanistan, both the humanitarian needs and the multifaceted international assistance effort. Then, how NGOs view three interrelated issues in Afghanistan will be explored, 1) the problems of NGO security, 2) concerns about the militarization of aid, and 3) the public scapegoating of NGOs for the failures of the overall aid effort.

Afghanistan's Humanitarian Needs:

Decades of internationalized civil strife, earthquakes and drought have left Afghanistan the poorest country in Asia and killed over 1.5 million people. Its infrastructure was left in ruins, at one time half the population was internally displaced and 4.5 million Afghans ended up as refugees. Today, even as the international efforts focus on long-term development and reconstruction, millions of Afghans remain dependent on lifesaving humanitarian aid.

Some bleak 2005 statistics illustrate the needs and the challenges³:

Approx. 50% of children in Afghanistan are malnourished, and one in three people living in rural areas cannot meet daily nutritional requirements.

- 6.5 million people are dependent on food aid, 1/3 to 1/4 of the population. More than half the population, estimated to be around 24.5 million, live below the poverty line.

³ Alex Whiting, "CRISIS PROFILE: Afghanistan still the 'sick man' of Asia," Reuters Alertnet, June 20, 2005., <http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/11192674179.htm> (All statistics from here except where otherwise noted.)

- Afghanistan has one of the lowest life expectancies in the world - just 44.5 years.
- A fifth of children die before they reach the age of five.
- 25 per cent of the population has access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. There is just one doctor per 6,000 people, and one nurse per 2,500 people.
- 5-7 million landmines and large quantities of unexploded ordinance remain and kill or wound up to 100 people monthly.
- Most of Afghanistan's roads have been destroyed, and many of the most vulnerable communities live in inaccessible mountain regions, which are often cut off by heavy snow during the winter.
- Adult literacy rates are low, at 43 percent for men and 14 percent for women⁴.
- 3.5 million Afghan refugees have returned since 2001, some to their original communities but about 40 per cent ended up in Kabul where they have no roots or family and live in extreme poverty.

The Overall Framework for Afghan Reconstruction:

These daunting needs exist in a climate of ongoing conflict and weak capacity of the new Afghan government institutions. Five years after the U.S.-led coalition overthrew the Taliban, Afghanistan still cannot be called a post-conflict country. The establishment of an elected government and efforts to rebuild the economy and infrastructure have taken place amidst continuing low-scale conflict with remaining Taliban fighters, and other armed groups collectively dubbed “anti-government elements”. Establishing a secure environment and extending the authority of the central government still remain key priorities for the two sets of international military forces. OEF has primarily focused on the ongoing search for Al Qaeda and counterinsurgency, fighting the remnants of the Taliban in the southern and eastern provinces. ISAF, established with the 2001 Bonn Agreement, has focused on enabling a secure

⁴ United Nations World Food Program, “World Hunger: Afghanistan”.
http://www.wfp.org/country_brief/indexcountry.asp?country=004

environment for reconstruction, initially only around Kabul but since 2003 in a phased expansion to cover the whole country. (In August 2006, ISAF forces took over from the OEF mission in the volatile southern provinces, and are expected to assume control of central and eastern Afghanistan from OEF by the end of 2006). But in practice the distinctions between these two military missions have blurred as NATO's ISAF expands to the more volatile areas, with ISAF forces having engaged in offensive operations against resurgent Taliban fighters in the southern provinces.

As many analysts have noted, international efforts in Afghanistan are expressly political - a state building mission with foreign donors helping the newly elected government of Hami Karzai extend its authority and ability to provide security and services to the Afghan people.⁵ This effort includes major foreign military, political and development assistance to the government alongside large amounts of humanitarian assistance to address the immense needs of the population described above.

The mission of the international military coalitions in Afghanistan, both OEF and ISAF, more than any other international mission to date, has merged security with providing relief and reconstruction. Humanitarian assistance to win 'hearts and minds' is provided directly by military forces, as in other conflict settings, primarily for instrumental reasons - force protection, enabling intelligence gathering, and helping ease acceptance of foreign troops. However, in Afghanistan the merging of military and humanitarian assistance is highly institutionalized in the Provincial Reconstruction Teams - the main framework for foreign military assistance outside of Kabul. Given the unwillingness of foreign nations back in 2002 to provide the large numbers of foreign

⁵ See Alexander Costy. "The Dilemma of Humanitarianism in the Post-Taliban Transition." And Nicholas Leader and Mohammed Haneef Atmar, "Political Projects: Reform, Aid, and the State in Afghanistan." In *Nation-Building Unraveled? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan*. Ed. Antonio Donini, Norah Niland, and Karin Wermester. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2004.

troops that many observers felt were necessary to assert real security throughout the country, the PRT model emerged instead. These are provincial bases which combine limited contingents of foreign troops (up to 150) to establish a deterrent presence with small numbers of civilian aid personnel to direct reconstruction work in these areas, much of it undertaken by the militaries themselves, or contracted out by them. Their dual mandate is to provide security coverage with minimal investment of forces, and promote relief and development efforts. PRTS are led by different countries that provide most of the personnel and govern the specific operations of the PRT.⁶

On the political reform side, the U.N. and key donor states have focused on supporting the step by step political stabilization and building of new Afghan political institutions as laid out in the Bonn Agreement of 2001, and in working with the new government on reconstruction and economic recovery. The United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), has played a strong role in shepherding the political process. (UNAMA is an example of the new kind of integrated U.N. missions that combine political and humanitarian roles under one chain of command.) International donors have pledged US\$ 20.5 billion in aid to Afghanistan through three major aid conferences since early 2002.⁷ The US is by far the largest donor, followed by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the European Commission, and Canada is among the top 10 donors to Afghanistan.⁸

⁶ Many of the NATO-led PRTs are restricted in their operations by 'national caveats' ruling out certain types of engagement, particularly offensive military operations.

⁷ Peace Operations Working Group, "Peace Operations Monitor Afghanistan: Overview of Relief and Development Efforts", Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee.

<http://www.peacebuild.ca/powg/POM/http://www.peacebuild.ca/powg/POM/afghanistan/Afghanistanrelief.htm>

⁸ The Government of Afghanistan. Afghan Donor Assistance Database. www.afdad/

The Afghan government has struggled to gain control of the foreign assistance entering the country, with some limited success in establishing broad frameworks for assistance. The U.N., donors and the elected Afghan government have tried to channel foreign assistance to priority areas defined in a national development framework and through several “trust funds” jointly managed by the government and donors that contribute directly to the Afghan national budget. But donors and aid agencies have often insisted on direct implementation of projects, citing low government capacity and their own accountability procedures.⁹ The January 2006 Afghanistan Compact, the most recent political accord reached between the Afghan government and donors, puts renewed emphasis on Afghan ownership of the reconstruction effort. But these measures remain voluntary and a tension exists between direct implementation of aid by foreign organizations and building the service capacity of the Afghan government, and therefore its legitimacy with the population.

The NGO Role in Afghanistan

Within this context, a wide range of international humanitarian and development NGOs are involved in providing humanitarian relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction, development and peace building assistance to Afghans, often working directly with communities at the grassroots level. Some of these have been providing humanitarian relief to Afghans for decades, while others have begun programs only since 2001.

The majority of NGOs are Afghan, but the largest programs are implemented by established international relief and development NGOs, staffed overwhelmingly by

⁹ Leader and Atmar, 2004.

Afghan nationals, with a handful of expatriate staff.¹⁰ Some of the largest NGOs employ over 1000 people, making NGOs a significant source of employment for Afghans.

The main sectors of NGO programming span the continuum between relief and development, focusing on health, education, food security, school reconstruction and educational programming, livelihoods and economic development, agriculture and capacity building and the government's community development effort, the National Solidarity Programme. Some NGOs are active in governance programs, mine action, peace building efforts, and elements of security sector reform as well. Given the acknowledged lack of implementing capacity in the Afghan government, NGOs are deemed to be indispensable to the implementing of aid efforts by both donors and the Afghan government alike.¹¹

In a 2005 statement to the Afghanistan Development Forum, the Afghanistan-based NGO Coalition ACBAR noted a few key differences between NGOs and construction contractors or other assistance providers such as the military.

¹⁰ Christien. Michelsen Institute (CMI) and Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), "Afghanistan Peacebuilding: NGOs." <http://www.cmi.no/afghanistan/index.cfm?id=110&NGOs>

¹¹ Leader and Atmar, 191.

“While some NGO programs also help communities build physical assets, their overarching purpose is much broader – alleviating poverty and ensuring sustainable community development...This means that we help communities establish mechanisms and skills that ensure an equitable and sustainable use of the assets provided...as schools and clinics are ineffective without skilled teachers, midwives, nurses and health workers...Beyond the vital sectors of health and education, NGOs are building the capacities of district and provincial staff of other ministries to plan, coordinate and implement services...NGOs are one of the main builders of Afghan management capacity which is then regularly recruited into the Afghan government.¹²

Furthermore many NGOs are part of an ongoing learning process within the humanitarian community about how to provide the most effective assistance – with expertise developed over decades in numerous settings. Over the last decade in particular, intensive self-examination by NGOs of their experience working in conflict areas has led to many guidelines, lessons learned and codes of conduct for assistance in conflict areas.

Given the outside appearance of one integrated international military-aid mission in Afghanistan, it bears reminding that NGOs operate separately from the two military coalitions, OEF and ISAF, and also separately from UNAMA. As elsewhere in the world, NGOs routinely coordinate their activities with these other actors in the field in order to share information about programs, to avoid duplication and waste, and to pool security information to best protect the safety of aid workers and beneficiaries. However, most NGOs insist on their political neutrality and independence of action and operate in accordance with guidelines set by their own organizations.

¹² Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), “Statement to the Afghanistan Development Forum 2005”, 2-3.
http://www.acbar.org/display.php?page_id=12

In the Afghanistan context of enormous humanitarian needs in the situation of foreign-supported political reform¹³ there has been much soul-searching among NGOs as to what their role in this process should be.¹⁴ This has led to much controversy over how much humanitarian NGOs should allow their work to be coordinated by the new Afghan government as it has tried to bring all foreign assistance in the country under a national development framework and show the Afghan population it can provide the services a government should. Humanitarian NGOs, those focussed on providing short-term lifesaving relief, are used to operating in situations of open conflict and are more concerned that when the bullets start to fly, the humanitarian response be separate from the military and political response so that they can still provide assistance to civilians caught in the crossfire. Development NGOs have had less concern with this issue as their work has traditionally been focussed on working with recognized governments on national development priorities. However it bears noting that these once strict distinctions between humanitarian and development NGOs are much blurred these days as many NGOs are involved in both spheres in what is seen as a continuum between relief and development with many overlapping stages and roles.

Even more heat has been generated in debates over how much NGOs should accept coordination and integration efforts by the foreign military forces and donor governments, as these two groups openly pursue the political goals of supporting and expanding the legitimacy and capacity of the Karzai government.

¹³ Leader and Atmar 2004, 169. The term "reform" is preferred by the authors to the depoliticized "reconstruction", to show that the assistance to Afghanistan is supporting a political process of statebuilding, not simply responding to a humanitarian emergency.

¹⁴ Paul O'Brien. "Old Wood, New Paths, and Diverging Choices for NGOs", 191. In *Nation-Building Unraveled? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan*. Eds. Antonio Donini, Norah Niland, and Karin Wermester. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2004.

Such NGO concerns have often been voiced as the need to protect “humanitarian space”. By humanitarian space they mean the independence and neutrality from military and political forces that has allowed NGOs and to some extent the United Nations itself, to provide life-saving aid to needy civilians on all sides of a conflict. The fundamental principles of humanitarian action as spelled out in numerous conventions and codes of conduct are ‘the right of citizens of all countries to assistance’, the ‘independence of aid from political and religious standpoints’ and the ‘impartiality of aid, to be given on the basis of need alone’¹⁵. In countless wars and disasters, the acceptance by governments and belligerents that humanitarian groups follow these principles has been the biggest source of security for NGO personnel operating in conflict areas and has meant that humanitarians can gain access to needy people on all sides of a conflict.¹⁶

In Afghanistan as elsewhere, humanitarian NGOs are divided about the extent to which humanitarian aid should address the political causes of suffering. Should NGOs aim to promote peace, human rights, and good government through programs and advocacy (what some called the new humanitarianism), or should humanitarians limit their efforts to minimalist goals of reducing suffering and the consequences of war and disasters?¹⁷ These larger divisions within the humanitarian community often inform how

¹⁵ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross, “The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief”, <http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/57JMNB#a3>

¹⁶ Most international humanitarian NGOs see their security deriving from their close connections to local communities and reject the use of arms, and have adopted explicit policies against the use of armed guards. This position stems from their desire to distinguish assistance as neutral and separate from belligerents in a conflict.

¹⁷ See Joanna MacRae, Editor. *The New Humanitarianisms : A Review of Trends in Global Humanitarian Action*. Humanitarian Policy Group Report 11, Overseas Development Institute, April 2002. Or Fiona Fox, “New Humanitarianism: Does It Provide a Moral Banner for the 21st Century?” *Disasters* 25, No.5 (2001), <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-7717.00178?cookieSet=1&journalCode=disa>

NGOs relate to the expressly political actors in Afghanistan – the government, the foreign military coalitions and donor governments.

Major Concerns for NGOs

1) NGO Security

Security of staff is the number one issue for all NGOs working in Afghanistan today. Afghanistan has become the most dangerous country in the world for aid agencies. The Global Civil Society yearbook shows that “terrorist incidents” targeting NGOs have gone up 1300% from the early 1990s to 2005.¹⁸

While the average number of violent deaths among aid workers was 2.6 annually from the period 1997 to September 2001, in 2003 there were 12 fatalities, doubling to 24 fatalities in 2004, and jumping again to 31 killed in 2005 – the majority of victims Afghan national staff.¹⁹ To date in 2006 there have been 27 aid workers murdered between January and September.²⁰ In May 2006, one of the worst months ever, 10 aid workers were killed - 2 UNICEF staff and 4 ActionAid staff were shot in their vehicles in separate incidents, and 4 health workers from the group Afghan Health Development Services were killed when their vehicle was hit by a remote controlled explosive device.

Attacks on aid workers have also become more geographically widespread. While killings used to be focused in the south and southeast, where the Taliban

¹⁸Centre for the Study of Global Governance, London School of Economics. “Terrorist Incidents targeting NGOs: Record 19, Data Programme.” *Global Civil Society Yearbook 2005/6*, 432. Available online <http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Publications/Yearbooks/2005/recordsection05.pdf>

¹⁹ Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) and CARE, NGO Insecurity in Afghanistan. May 2005, 3-4. Available online http://www.careusa.org/newsroom/specialreports/afghanistan/20050505_ansocare.pdf

²⁰ Jan Egeland, “Sudan: Season of Sorrow for UN Aid Workers,” *The East African Standard*, September 15, 2006. Available online <http://allafrica.com/stories/200609150104.html>

remnants remain strongest, since 2004 attacks happen equally in the north and west as well.²¹

In a survey of 52 NGOs across Afghanistan conducted jointly by ANSO (Afghan NGO Security Office) and CARE in 2005, fully 30% reported an attack on a staff member in the last year, and almost half (44%) reported that the security situation had led them to curtail or modify planned projects, with 35 % reported that the deteriorating security had led to them operating in fewer districts.²²

The targeting of aid agencies has led to a situation where some NGOs cease operations altogether, while others curtail programs. In the most high profile NGO pull-out, Mediciens Sans Frontiers (MSF) ceased all operations in Afghanistan after 24 years, when five of its staff members were shot and killed in June 2004. Today, international staff of most NGOs remain bunkered down in Kabul, flying in to other areas for monitoring visits only, severely limiting their direct contact with the people they aim to help. National staff conduct almost all programming, facing equally high risks - most of the aid workers killed in recent years have been Afghan nationals.

The costs, beyond the tragic loss of lives of aid workers, are major disruptions in assistance and implementation of urgently needed projects that affect millions of Afghans. As the violent anti-foreigner riots in Kabul in May 2006 illustrated, public anger at the lack of visible improvements is mounting. If the most volatile areas of the country receive very little aid, the resulting discontent can fuel more resentment towards the foreign community and its partner, the Karzai government, in effect recruiting for the insurgency and fuelling more insecurity in a vicious cycle.

²¹ ANSO and Care, *NGO Insecurity*, 2005.

²² ANSO and CARE, *NGO Insecurity*, 2005, 6.

Why are NGOs targeted?

Many international NGOs believe the attacks on aid workers are due to a dangerous “blurring of the lines” between aid workers and foreign military forces because of the military’s widespread use of “hearts and minds” reconstruction projects and the Provincial Reconstruction Teams model. They claim that the U.S.-led coalition OEF, in particular, has deliberately blurred the distinction between military and humanitarian groups. The U.S. military has openly said it can ‘use’ humanitarian actors as ‘force extenders’ for its own ends²³, and spokespersons for the Coalition have said repeatedly that the military and NGOs ‘share the same goals’. Furthermore, for the first few years coalition soldiers engaged in reconstruction activities operated in plainclothes and drove in the same unmarked vehicles that NGOs use.²⁴

MSF had been one of the most vocal critics of the military coalition’s tactics. It had publicly and repeatedly denounced the consistent efforts by the US-led coalition to use humanitarian aid to build support for its military and political aims. For example, in May 2004, MSF publicly condemned the coalition's decision to distribute leaflets in southern Afghanistan that conditioned the continued delivery of aid on local people's willingness to provide information about the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.²⁵

Many NGOs believe that such military tactics have compromised public perceptions of humanitarian assistance as politically neutral and have led the population

²³ Tiziana Dearing, “For Aid Workers, A Deadly Blurring of Lines,” *Boston Globe*, November 28, 2004. Available online <http://www.e-ariana.com/ariana/eariana.nsf/7eca40d3d348841987256b79007d1cb8/08cfd686aaa8f86887256f5a004fd42a?OpenDocument>

²⁴ Scott Baldauf, “In Afghanistan, Friendly Ire,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 19, 2003. Available online <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/afghan/2003/0219ire.htm>

²⁵ Medecins Sans Frontieres, “Afghanistan: MSF leaves country following staff killings and threats”, December 16, 2004. Available online http://www.msf.org/msfinternational/invoke.cfm?objectid=F446039F-4965-4FB0-9D21CF4C695F80C9&component=toolkit.article&method=full_html

to see NGOs as simply part of the foreign military presence. For example, in explaining its decision to leave Afghanistan, MSF cited the assertion made by Taliban representatives after the killings that organizations like MSF work for US interests and were therefore targets for future attacks.²⁶ Interestingly, U.S. military personnel interviewed during one study claimed they believe Afghans see no separation between the military and foreign NGOs.²⁷ NGO representatives report that in some places local people say that “PRTs are the good NGOs” because whoever helps people are seen to be NGOs, since NGOs were the main international presence in Afghanistan for decades.²⁸

NGO criticisms have also focused on the PRT model itself. Because the politically-motivated PRTs undertake many of the same reconstruction activities as NGOs, NGO programs in the same areas can be perceived as political.²⁹ When PRTs deliver aid, Taliban and other anti-government elements tell people that they are really spies and should not be cooperated with, which has clear implications for NGOs that are seen to work closely with the PRTs.³⁰

In a recent example, local partners of the international NGO, CARE, in one region were reportedly approached by the Taliban and told that as long as they continued to operate in the same way, they would not be targeted. But if they accepted

²⁶ MSF, December 16, 2004.

²⁷ Clinton Watts. “Indicators of NGO Security in Afghanistan,” 75. Paper for Course IP653 Security and Development, United States Military Academy at West Point, December 14, 2004. Available online. http://ctc.usma.edu/research/Indicators_Watts.pdf

²⁸ Mayar, interview with author, September 12, 2006.

²⁹ Gerard McHugh and Lola Gostelow, “Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Humanitarian-Military Relations in Afghanistan.” *Save the Children* (2004): 50.

³⁰ Mayar, interview with author, September 12, 2006.

funding from the military-led "provincial reconstruction team" (PRT), their security might be threatened."³¹

Reflecting the diversity of the NGOs active in Afghanistan, NGO views on PRTs run the spectrum from blanket refusal to engage with the military to what some see as "principled pragmatism" on the other – that is that NGOs should engage with the PRTs in order to minimize negative impacts on their work.³² However, some NGO personnel see the presence of foreign militaries through PRTs as a pragmatic security umbrella that enables their work through providing means to evacuate staff or to use military machinery and helicopters to transport aid to inaccessible areas. Also, in many places it is simply too dangerous for NGOs to work, so some in the aid community think, why shouldn't the military conduct humanitarian and development work there?³³ However, many international NGOs, with backing from the UN, have dedicated themselves to vocal advocacy about the serious threat to humanitarian space they see from military involvement in reconstruction in Afghanistan.

Other views exist in the NGO community in Afghanistan on the causes of the violence toward aid workers. In a 2005 survey of 52 NGOs, only a small number actually pointed to 'blurring of the lines' as the cause. More saw deteriorating security as a result of increased criminal activity, resistance to poppy eradication efforts, increased activity by armed groups during the elections, and a worsening public perception of NGOs.³⁴ Some point to the public perception that NGO work directly

³¹ Reuters Foundation Alertnet, NewsBlog May 5, 2006. Available online <http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/114683076096.htm>

³² Barbara Stapleton. "Presentation on Afghanistan." Paper presented at the Copenhagen Seminar on Concerted Planning and Action of Civil Military Activities in International Operations, Copenhagen, Denmark, June 20-21, 2005, 2. Available online [http://www.acbar.org/downloads/Copenhagen%20Seminar%20\(Advocacy\).pdf](http://www.acbar.org/downloads/Copenhagen%20Seminar%20(Advocacy).pdf).

³³ Mayar, interview with author, September 12, 2006.

³⁴ ANSO and Care, NGO Insecurity, 2005, 5.

supports the Karzai government. “NGOs are seen to be helping the government because they are working to improve people’s lives”, according to M.H. Mayar, deputy director of the NGO coordination body, ACBAR. “If the lives of regular Afghans improve, more ordinary people would support the government and this is what the insurgents do not want.”³⁵

Most agree though that another key factor is that NGOs are widely seen as ‘soft targets’ and are vulnerable to attack because of their visible presence in communities and the fact that most of them reject armed guards as a matter of principle.

2. Concern about the Effectiveness of Military Reconstruction Assistance.

NGOs are concerned that aid projects undertaken by the military have shown to be neither cost-effective, nor high quality, nor sustainable, yet they displace other aid efforts. They worry that scarce foreign aid from donor governments is channelled to the military for assistance whose goals are more political than humanitarian. Such concerns are often dismissed as ‘turf wars’ by NGO critics, but NGO advocates point out that there is no understanding of the effectiveness of the military-led reconstruction and aid programs. They worry that when aid is viewed as an instrument in the larger political and military goal of stabilization, these goals necessarily guide the criteria used to decide aid beneficiaries and the models through which aid is delivered.

Despite repeated calls by NGOs for evaluations of the effectiveness of other development actors including the military and private sector, serious evaluations have

³⁵ Mayar, interview with author, September 12, 2006.

not been undertaken.³⁶ However, there are many examples of schools built that have never been used, and projects decided more for their impact on quickly winning the goodwill of local people rather than for their contribution to long-term sustainable development.

For example, in Afghanistan's Badghis province, one of CARE's local partners had started up a micro-loan business with interest rates of around 10 percent, as part of a long-term community project. The PRT came in and set up a short-term loans project with no fee, which brought people flocking to what CARE sees as a less sustainable option.³⁷ Sometimes differences between military-run aid projects and those run by NGOs have fueled distrust and cynicism towards NGOs, who often ask people to contribute labour and other local resources to build in local ownership of a project. As military-led projects in the same area have not asked for such inputs, rumours start that the NGOs have simply stolen money and materials meant for the project.³⁸

Also the military conducting aid work directly in a situation of ongoing conflict can endanger the population by linking users of the resources to what is perceived, by some, as a foreign army of occupation. Like the NGOs, the aid projects and the civilians who use them become 'soft targets' for combatants. For example, to date, 121 schools that were rebuilt have now been burned down.³⁹ The tragic Iraq-style suicide bombing of Canadian NATO soldiers handing out school supplies to children in Kandahar on

³⁶ Barbara J. Stapleton, "Nato: New Tasks and Responsibilities", Paper presented at the NATO-WIIS Conference, July 11, 2005, Page 2.

[http://www.acbar.org/downloads/NATO%20\(Advocacy\).pdf](http://www.acbar.org/downloads/NATO%20(Advocacy).pdf)

³⁷ Alertnet NewsBlog May 5, 2006, Re: Afghanistan

<http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/114683076096.htm>

³⁸ Mayar, interview with author, September 12, 2006.

³⁹ Mayar, interview with author, September 12, 2006.

September 18, 2006 illustrates that military 'hearts and minds' efforts leave both soldiers and the civilians who associate with them vulnerable to attacks.

3) *Scapegoating of NGOs for the Failures of the Overall Aid Effort*

Popular anger, at the overall slow pace of the reconstruction effort so far and the lifestyle and behavior of some foreigners, has unfairly blamed the NGO sector.⁴⁰ Afghans believe little has been done to date, despite the billions of dollars of international funds pledged. Because they work directly with communities, NGOs have become the most highly visible symbols of the international aid effort.

Many in the aid community understand the resentment. While the distinction between international NGO staff, foreign contractors working for government donors and foreign private security companies seems straightforward to those in the aid business, for much of the Afghan public, there seems little difference between these groups. They are all foreigners, drive around in expensive four-by-four vehicles, and tend to live in walled compounds in Kabul because of the security risk. As a result, bad behavior by a few individuals who may have little to do with NGOs tends to tarnish the reputation of the whole foreign community.⁴¹ In an alarming sign of public perceptions, the term "NGO warlords" has emerged to describe foreigners who rent expensive homes in Kabul, just like the warlords of the past.⁴² As well, it is clear that ordinary Afghans have so far seen few concrete benefits. According to some, this is because the assistance to date has put too much emphasize on infrastructure and roads, and not

⁴⁰ James Bishop, Director, Humanitarian Policy and Practice, Interaction (American Council for Voluntary International Action), interview with author, September 8, 2006.

⁴¹ Bishop, interview with author, September 8, 2006.

⁴² Anonymous staff member of international NGO, interview with author, September 2006.

enough on creating employment and livelihoods for ordinary Afghans.⁴³ In turn, opium and the poppy economy have revived to record levels as Afghans try to sustain themselves and the revival of powerful drug cartels fuels new instability in the poppy growing districts. According to a new UN report, opium production has grown in 2006 by 49 percent over 2005; areas under poppy cultivation by 59 percent. The predicted 2006 opium crop is 6,100 tons, significantly breaking the 1999 record when Afghanistan was still under Taliban rule.⁴⁴

Afghan government members have also publicly accused aid agencies of hindering the growth of local firms and squandering billions of US dollars earmarked for reconstruction efforts. Asraf Ghani, Afghan Finance Minister from 2002-2004, was highly critical of the funds devoted to aid organizations in Afghanistan. Mr. Ghani claimed that the Afghan government, if given the funds, could provide similar services for a fraction of the cost and that capable Afghans were being lured away from government positions by lucrative salaries offered by foreign aid agencies.⁴⁵

NGOs have responded in a variety of ways to correct what they see as gross misrepresentations and a scapegoating of NGOs for the many failures of the overall aid effort to date. In 2004, ACBAR responded by publicly asserting that NGOs are not the reason for the current wage inflation, and demonstrating that NGOs were losing staff at increasing rates, with UN and donors offering higher salaries. Aid workers say the government is confusing them with highly paid private contractors and profitable organizations, many of which were then registered as NGOs with the Ministry of

⁴³ Bishop, interview with author, September 8, 2006.

⁴⁴ John K. Cooley, "Just say no to opium poppy cultivation," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 21, 2006. Available online <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0921/p09s01-coop.html>

⁴⁵ Toby Poston, "The battle to rebuild Afghanistan." *BBC Online*, February 26 2006. Available online <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4714116.stm>

Economy. (The government's previous NGO legislation had in fact defined NGOs as part of the private sector.) After concerted lobbying by the NGO and donor community, in mid-2005 the Afghan government passed a new Law on Non-Governmental Organizations and began a re-registration of NGOs⁴⁶. In doing so, the government agreed there is a need to differentiate between NGOs and the private sector and through the re-registration process, many of these "fake" NGOs are expected to be weeded out.⁴⁷ Of the estimated 2,400 national and international NGOs as of May 2005, only 800 are now in the process of re-registering with the Ministry of the Economy.⁴⁸

Furthermore, in trying to untangle responsibility for the poor results to date, ACBAR pointed to a report from the Afghan Ministry of Finance showing that out of US \$13.4 billion pledged between 2002 and 2004, only \$3.9 billion had been physically disbursed to the country by mid-2005. The same report indicates that only 9% of donor funding was given directly to NGOs, with 45.5% going directly to the United Nations, nearly 30% to the government, and 16% to private contractors."⁴⁹

Another NGO response to these accusations has been a Code of Conduct launched by a group of national and international NGOs in May 2005. The 21-article code sets high standards to ensure greater transparency and accountability, as well as to improve the quality of services provided by NGOs.⁵⁰ It has been applauded by

⁴⁶ International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) and ACBAR, Afghan Law on NonGovernmental Organizations, 2005. Available online (

[http://www.usig.org/countryinfo/laws/Afghanistan/Afghan%20NGO%20Law%20Final%20ENG%20\(10.July.05\).doc](http://www.usig.org/countryinfo/laws/Afghanistan/Afghan%20NGO%20Law%20Final%20ENG%20(10.July.05).doc)),

⁴⁷ Ben Arnoldy, "Afghans left out of their own rebuilding," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 24, 2005. Available online <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0524/p01s04-wosc.htm>

⁴⁸ Mayar, interview with author, September 12, 2006.

⁴⁹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "AFGHANISTAN: New code of conduct to regulate NGOs," IRINnews.org, May 31, 2005. Available online

<http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=47410&SelectRegion=Asia&SelectCountry=AFGHANISTAN>

⁵⁰Code of Conduct for NGOs engaged in Humanitarian and Reconstruction Activities in Afghanistan. ACBAR, Available online <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/EVIU-6D5EBR?OpenDocument&rc=3&emid=ACOS-635N96> or at

donors and government representatives as helpful in distinguishing real NGOs from the many other entities in Afghanistan calling themselves NGOs. However, more than a year since its launch, only 136 agencies have signed up, donors have not made it a criterion for their funding, and it has been difficult to monitor and enforce the code's provisions.⁵¹

Both the government's re-registration of NGOs and the Code of Conduct have been helpful in weeding out real NGOs from the many entrepreneurial entities that have emerged as contractors for the international assistance coming to Afghanistan. However, NGOs understand that reviving their reputation, and respect for their principles and work, remains a central task and many have developed strategies to promote a much clearer understanding of the principles by which humanitarian and development NGOs operate.

Collective Action by NGOs on these Issues: The Fight for Humanitarian Space

Given the above challenges, NGOs networks have emerged to coordinate policies and advocacy efforts on these key issues. The Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) is the most active Afghanistan-based coordinating agency. With almost 100 members, including many of the biggest international and Afghan NGOs, it runs an NGO Security Office, provides briefings, networking and advocacy with the government and the international community. Two foreign-based NGO

[http://www.acbar.org/downloads/Code%20of%20Conduct%20\(UNAMA\).pdf](http://www.acbar.org/downloads/Code%20of%20Conduct%20(UNAMA).pdf)

⁵¹ Mayar, interview with author, September 12, 2006.

networks are also very active in lobbying their home governments on key issues in Afghanistan. The British Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG), comprises 27 major U.K. and Irish aid agencies operating or supporting projects in Afghanistan. InterAction is a consortium of over 160 U.S. NGOs based in Washington D.C., which runs an Afghanistan Reconstruction Working Group and has been engaged in actively lobbying the U.S. government and military on issues of concern to U.S. NGOs.

As in many conflict settings, the UN has played a humanitarian coordinating role at the national level, with UNAMA acting as the main coordination point between the PRTs and NGOs. In 2004, a Civil Military working group was established by UNAMA with the purpose of resolving operational issues and to provide a channel for NGO concerns and perspectives to the military, the Afghan government and foreign donors.⁵² Another point of contact has been through ACBAR, and its Afghan NGO Security Office (ANSO). ACBAR now hosts monthly meetings for NGOs and the military to coordinate on areas of common concern and on sectoral programs.⁵³ In addition, some NGOs have contacts directly with PRTs in their areas. While PRTs at the local and national level feel they have good contacts with NGOs, this is not always the view of the NGOs. There is a sense of unease about working with the PRTs, especially among Afghans who worry about being seen as cooperating with what some see as a foreign occupation force.⁵⁴ NGO advocates claim that much of the field-level coordination remains ad hoc and personality driven, easily changing as people rotate in and out. The result is that

⁵² Barbara Stapleton. "Presentation on Afghanistan." Paper presented at the Copenhagen Seminar on Concerted Planning and Action of Civil Military Activities in International Operations, Copenhagen, Denmark, June 20-21, 2005, 3. Available online [http://www.acbar.org/downloads/Copenhagen%20Seminar%20\(Advocacy\).pdf](http://www.acbar.org/downloads/Copenhagen%20Seminar%20(Advocacy).pdf).

⁵³ Mayar, interview with author, September 12, 2006.

⁵⁴ Japan Network of NGOs, "Civil Military Relations," 4. Available online <http://www.jca.apc.org/~jann/Documents/Civil%20Military%20Relations.pdf>

some military commanders understand the need to respect humanitarian space and keep a low profile, while others come in, publicly claim ownership of projects and treat the NGO simply as a contracting partner.⁵⁵

Ongoing dialogue, lobbying and advocacy by NGOs with the military and donors have produced some positive changes.

1) The establishment of regular meetings and dialogue itself between NGOs and the military is a huge change, though the vast cultural differences between the NGO and military cultures mean that the dialogue is not always easy or productive. In the words of one NGO observer, “many people come out of those meetings shaking their heads”⁵⁶. None the less the ongoing communication appears to be yielding results. NGOs report seeing more receptivity on the part of the military to NGO concerns.⁵⁷

2) The practice of the U.S-led Coalition’s soldiers operating in civilian clothes and unmarked vehicles was stopped after concerted lobbying of the U.S. government by Interaction and other groups.⁵⁸

3) Some NGO concerns about PRTs have been partially addressed and PRTs now exist in a variety of working models. So far the American model of the PRT has focused a lot on joint military civilian actions (MCAs). The UK PRTs, established in 2003 in the northern cities of Mazār-e Sharif and Meymaneh, unlike their American counterparts, split their civil and military tasks, with the military focusing on demobilization, police-training and other security sector projects, and the civilian elements of the PRT focusing on reconstruction. The PRT model fielded by the UK was the result of a series of consultations between the British government and U.K. NGOs (the BAAG group) and it has received praise from NGO personnel.⁵⁹ UNAMA, with some NGO support, lobbied for the British model to be universal for all PRTs in 2003, and was partially successful in securing a shift toward focusing on security sector reform in ISAF-led PRTs. However the U.S.-led Coalition’s PRTS have continued to implement military-civilian quick impact projects as a key part of the counter-insurgency strategy.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Stapleton, Copenhagen Seminar 2005, 5.

⁵⁶ Anonymous staff member of international NGO, interview with author, September 2006.

⁵⁷ Bishop, interview with author, September 8, 2006.

⁵⁸ Bishop, interview with author, September 8, 2006. See also Interaction, “Humanitarian Leaders Ask White House to Review Policy Allowing American Soldiers to Conduct Humanitarian Relief Programs in Civ” May 6, 2002.

<http://www.interaction.org/library/bushletter1.html>

⁵⁹ McHugh and Gostelow 2004, 28.

⁶⁰ Stapleton, Copenhagen Seminar, 2005, 2.

Conclusion:

Reconstruction in Afghanistan combines foreign military, political and development aid to shore up the new government with meeting the urgent humanitarian needs of a population living with continued conflict. The situation is full of paradoxes. As one aid worker put it,

“PRTs doing school reconstruction doesn’t make a lot of sense. If the security situation is so bad that an NGO can’t do this work, then kids can’t go to school anyways.”

This is not a comfortable environment for humanitarian NGOs committed to neutrality. Anyone on the side of stability and recovery is seen as a political ally of the government and its foreign partners in this situation. NGOs argue that OEF’s and ISAF’s use of aid and role in reconstruction has eroded the neutral ‘humanitarian space’ necessary to effectively meet civilian needs and suffering in this situation, endangering NGOs and perhaps ultimately delaying or undermining Afghan recovery.

As a highly diverse community, NGOs are divided about how to relate to the foreign militaries present in the country, both in practice and in principle. None however, dispute the need for military assistance to Afghanistan and for security measures for the transition period, before Afghanistan establishes its own effective security forces. In fact, many NGOs and observers were lobbying early on for much bigger UN-mandated security force for the whole country, and see the current PRT-led model as an ineffective ‘security on the cheap’ approach.⁶¹ In fact, when Afghanistan is compared to other post-conflict and stabilization operations across two dimensions, maximum

⁶¹ Stapleton, NATO, 2005, 6.

international troop presence and average yearly assistance during the first two years, in per capita terms, it rates far below all Balkan operations, East Timor and Iraq, and even below Namibia and Haiti in the 1990s.⁶²

Many NGOs in Afghanistan are fighting to preserve humanitarian space through advocacy and dialogue with the military and donors, even as they get on with their work with partners and Afghan communities. Some observers and some NGOs themselves see the alarm over humanitarian space in Afghanistan as exaggerated. Yet without an effective state, or much greater international military presence that can truly impose order on the whole country, preserving humanitarian space at least offers a way of attempting to meet the enormous needs of Afghan civilians equitably.

⁶² Barnet Rubin et al. *Afghanistan 2005 and Beyond: Prospects for Improved Stability Reference Document*. Netherlands Institute of International Relations, "Clingendael", Conflict Research Unit, April 2005. 54.

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