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MANTAINING DEVELOPMENT MOMENTUM OR JUST PROVIDING AID?

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Afghanistan is again preparing for change. Most international forces are about to leave the country by end of 2014, Afghans expects to have a new President over the summer and there are signals of a major reduction in international assistance for the coming years. Many Afghans question if the positive developments the country has gone through since 2001 are robust enough to meet these challenges. Will they be able to continue on the development path, though possibly on a slower pace, or will they again have to depend on humanitarian assistance for their survival?

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Introduction

There have been many positive developments in Afghanistan since 2001. Not least has humanitarian and development assistance helped improve the living conditions for many Afghans, and provided the younger generation with new opportunities and prospects. Access to education, including vocational and higher education, is a major achievement, and improved health services and rural development has laid a foundation for further development. Women and girls have benefitted grossly from these projects, and have the most to lose if progress is reversed.

Still there are a range of upcoming challenges that need to be addressed. Donors are expected to place more demands on the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) for proper use of their funds, and to make visible efforts to control nepotism and corruption. Still, a reduction in aid is not necessarily a negative development in the situation Afghanistan is now. It can lead donors to set clearer priorities and improve their coordination, and overstretched Afghan ministries might be in a better position to manage and control funds. Fewer and more professional non-governmental organisations (NGOs) may ensure better quality of aid delivery, and fewer projects can be more easily monitored and evaluated.

This brief will look at the history of aid delivery in Afghanistan, and how politicised and partisan assistance provision has been at times. It will identify and discuss some of the challenges humanitarian and development actors are expected to meet over the coming years, and will provide suggestions for how these might be addressed.

The History of Assistance delivery

It all started with humanitarian assistance in the early 1980s, as refugees started to stream into Pakistan following the Soviet invasion.

International NGOs and UN agencies provided support in camps in Pakistan. Solidarity NGOs channelled assistance and cash across the Pakistani border to mujahedeen controlled areas of Afghanistan, primarily through commanders from the Islamic resistance parties. Through provision of school books, medical supplies for health workers and support for immunization of children was a foundation laid for more development oriented assistance. The NGO community was divided in three groups with limited collaboration, “western”, “Islamic” and “Afghan” NGOs. The latter group was only counting around 10 organisations until 1989 when UN announced support for establishment of new NGOs and the number increased to 250.

The assistance was highly partisan in this period. Those living in areas controlled by the Soviet supported government were excluded from the cross-border assistance. Concerns about violations of human and women

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rights were hardly raised, that had to wait until Afghanistan was liberated. But with the Soviet withdrawal was aid levels dramatically reduced, the political motivation for the support was no longer present.

The early 1990s became a challenging time for aid delivery as mujahedeen commanders and parties divided Afghanistan between themselves. NGOs struggled to deliver assistance and to distance themselves from commanders seeking to control the support. With relative stability in some areas came a gradual shift from humanitarian assistance to more rehabilitation and development activities. With the establishment of the Islamic State of Afghanistan in 1992 was there a stronger demand on the NGOs to work with rather than to oppose them. But the situation was highly volatile, not least following the internal fighting over Kabul that made 0,5 million Kabulis fleeing their homes.

Then did the Taliban emerge in 1994. Security improved as fighters were disarmed, NGO staff could travel safely and supplies were no longer looted. But it came at a cost. The Taliban formalised the rural scepticism against projects empowering women and education of girls. That did not stop the support, more classes for girls were established by Afghans and NGOs. But sanctions were imposed on the Taliban as the country was gripped by drought, and the UN and NGOs tried to meet the needs from meagre budgets.

Then, did it all change in late 2001. The Taliban was overthrown and the international aid machinery rolled in from 2002. International donors, the UN, the World Bank and IMF were all on the scene, an Afghan development plan was developed and millions of dollars made available for rehabilitation and development of Afghanistan. The GoA took on a firm role, demanded that assistance was to channelled through the ministries, and aligned with national plans and priorities. Several donors were reluctant to do so, not least USAID, and different military continents continued to spend millions of dollars aimed at “winning hearts and minds”. Basic principles for assistance were set aside for military and political objectives, leading to nepotism and corruption as the Kabul Bank scandal illustrates.

Despite billions of dollar spent on development assistance since 2001 is Afghanistan not ranked higher than number 172 of 187 countries on the UN Human Development Index. The explanation provided by the GoA is that 60 % of what has been classified as development assistance has gone towards establishing/running the Afghan police, with only limited budgets made available for i.e. education, health and other development priorities. While that might be correct, Transparency International has documented that widespread corruption is another factor that has limited the impact. That concern, together with a number of others relating to governance

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capacity and accountability, had the donor to develop a set of criteria for governing assistance provision. It was labeled the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TAMF), and signed in 2012. Many observers expect donors to take a much tougher stand on the GOA's fulfillment of their parts of the obligations when most military troops have withdrawn by end of 2014.

By mid-2014 it is therefore a number of major challenges that is confronting the Afghans and those providing humanitarian and development assistance, as will be discussed in more details in the below. There is a concern that increased insecurity might hinder access and make development interventions more difficult, and that it will be followed by reduced funding from key donors and higher demand for documenting the impact and effect of assistance provided.

Security Outlook

The security situation has become a major concern over the last years and increasingly so in early 2014¹. The most obvious threat is an increase in confrontation between Afghan armed forces and police, and armed opposition groups. In addition to suicide attacks in the larger cities are there ongoing battles for control of major roads and districts/towns, now expanded to northern and western parts of Afghanistan. This is likely to make it more difficult for aid actors to negotiate access to designated areas, move supplies along major roads, and for their staff to monitor and evaluate programmes.

But it is not only armed opposition groups that might be a challenge. Another concern, looking back at the early 1990s, is that a reduction in military related support might encourage the various security actors affiliated with the government to take control over development/humanitarian assistance to maintain and secure their influence. There are frequent reports of contingents of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) imposing "protection" tax on the local population, intervene in local development projects and capture equipment that can be resold.

A deteriorating security situation is likely to lead to a rise in crime and kidnapping². Staff of aid organizations is here likely to be targeted due to their visibility and access to financial resources.³ The International NGO

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¹ See M. WALDHEIM, *War Without End?*, London, Chatham House, Expert Comment, 2014, available at <http://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/14614> (visited 01.06.2014).

² See i.e. *Attacks on Aid Workers Rise in Afghanistan, U.N. Says* http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/03/world/asia/attacks-rise-on-aid-workers-in-afghanistan.html?_r=0 (visited 26.06.2014).

³ For further reflections see J. VAN DER LIJN, *Development Assistance in Afghanistan*

Safety Organisation (INSO) that monitors the security situation in Afghanistan had by end of November 2013 recorded 111 abductions of NGO staff.

This will require NGOs and other aid agencies to be fully aware of the conflict context and be in a position to analyse risks and plan for ways to mitigate risks. Thorough and continuous risk assessments, training of field staff and an attention to how they best can “do no harm” and not initiate and increase conflicts in the communities where they plan to work are essential preparations for a more insecure environment⁴. Experiences afghan NGOs and afghan staff might here have a major advantage over internationals, as they might have better contextual knowledge, can move more freely and attract less attention.

Talking to the Otherside

Planning and preparation might not be enough though. Humanitarian and development actors will have to be prepared to negotiate their access through areas of conflict and into areas that might be controlled by other groups – but where humanitarian needs might be the highest. Then we are back to the classic dilemma of the 1980s, should aid providers follow the humanitarian principles or should they take side in the conflict?

This time is it more challenging though as there, on the one side, is an internationally recognised government in place in Kabul that demand the NGOs to abide by Afghan laws and development strategies, and report on their activities. The GoA might argue, as has been done before, that assistance going into opposition controlled areas can be used to bolster the opposition groups rather than meeting critical needs. And, on the other side, a more uniform and organised armed opposition that can place higher demands on the assistance providers to ensure permission to operate. This might include demands on agencies to adhere to Taliban priorities and to register with their administration⁵. While in other areas might local elites and power-holders use their influence or connections to other groups to try to impose their will on those seeking to provide assistance.

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after 2014: *From a Military Exit Strategy to a Civilian Entry Strategy*. Stockholm, SIPRI Insight on Peace and Security No. 2013/4 October 2013, available at <http://books.sipri.org/files/insight/SIPRIInsight1304.pdf> (visited 23.06.2014).

⁴ See i.e. Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, *How To Guide to Conflict Sensitivity*, 2012, available at http://www.conflictsensitivity.org/sites/default/files/1/6602_HowToGuide_CSF_WEB_3.pdf (visited 30.11.2013).

⁵ As of 2012, 26 NGOs had registered with the Taliban to work in their areas, according to A. Jackson - A. Giustozzi (2012) *Talking to the Other Side: Humanitarian Engagement with the Taliban in Afghanistan*, HPG Working Paper, December 2012, <http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/6993-aid-conflict-humanitarian-engagement-policy-taliban-afghanistan>.

This is not an unfamiliar situation either in Afghanistan or internationally, but it is a challenging one⁶. The difficulty is to strike a balance between acknowledging and relating to the demand of various power holders without giving up own principles for delivery of humanitarian and development assistance. The principles should include the right to decide who the beneficiaries should be and where the projects should be implemented, and the right to monitor and evaluate the assistance delivered. Rather than negotiating for access, on any condition, should there be a more principled and common stand. At the moment does it appear that agencies negotiate individually for recognition and for access, some do this locally, some with the Taliban and some with both.

That leaves everyone vulnerable, and the NGOs have a limited possibility of applying a more principled and common approach, exposing them for pressure from all parties to the conflict. Such a strategy made NGOs extremely vulnerable for pressure during the 1980s, and it is an experience that should not need to be repeated. You need to talk to everyone, you explain your priorities and principles, but in the end is it the need of the intended beneficiaries – not the armed groups – that set the priorities.

Ways to Monitor and Evaluate

With reduction in aid budget will donors be increasingly concerned about impact and effects of their assistance, which is a very welcome development. That will then place larger importance on how assistance delivery can be monitored and evaluated. Again can we draw on past lessons, combined with the possibility of using new monitoring technology and evaluation methods. As we learned, the intended beneficiaries must be included and have a possibility to report if standards are not met. They can then be the “eyes and ears” that report and correct if the projects is not implemented as planned. Assistance providers must ensure that beneficiaries can report in confidence, and that any report is responded to, and that other than the regular project staff meet the communities to discuss their concerns. As suggested in a recent report “...make sure that staff members working in the same reporting line are not related”⁷, and that “..remote management cannot be a permanent substitute for ongoing

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⁶ See HPG, *From the Spanish Civil War to Afghanistan: Historical and Contemporary Reflections on Humanitarian Engagement with Non-state Actors*. London, HPG Working Paper, May 2014, available at <http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/8408-humanitarian-negotiations-engagement-armed-group-rebel-opposition-history>.

⁷ APPRO, *Transition and Non-Governmental Organizations in Afghanistan: An Assessment and Prospects*, January 2014, Kabul available at <http://www.baag.org.uk/whats-new/report-launch-transition-and-non-government-organizations-afghanistan> (visited 1.02.2014).

onsite management because the quality of the work would very likely suffer.”

New technology, as mobile phones with camera and GPS, open up a range of new opportunities for monitoring progress - or lack of such. Community members and/or neighbours to a project can be asked to report regularly on progress, and to provide pictures of what is being constructed. Quality is more difficult to ensure, and require a regular field presence of qualified staff.

That can then be combined with a more systematic use of impact evaluations, including randomised controlled trials, and applying a “theories of change” approach⁸. Another way is to complement direct measurements of impact with the use of “proxy indicators”. These can help confirm more general development trends, or the lack of such , and i.e. be used to identify corruption problems and measure changes in relevant sectors, institutions and processes⁹.

Much can be achieved if agencies and donors are willing to collaborate towards establishment of joint systems or appointment of a common agents for monitoring and evaluation, and for sharing of own data and reports. If they pool resources can they set up larger evaluations for a geographical area or for types of interventions across geographical areas. This might allow for comparison and assessment of impact as is increasingly demanded by donor agencies.¹⁰ And you don’t need to bring in international consultants or companies, there is an untapped afghan survey and evaluation capacity to be drawn on.

Looking to the Future

History can help us avoid repeating mistakes but does not necessarily provide all answers to how aid providers should plan for an uncertain future. Securing gains from the last 12 years is a minimum of what should be achieved, but there is a fear that increased insecurity might hinder that in parts of Afghanistan for shorter or longer periods of time. Then, of course, will there be a need for humanitarian assistance for a period, but that should try to utilize established community structures for delivery,

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⁸ See M. GAARDER - J. ANNAN, *Impact Evaluation of Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Interventions*. Washington D.C., The World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 6496, 2013.

⁹ J. JOHNSØN - P. Mason, *The Proxy Challenge: Why bespoken proxy indicators can help solve the anti-corruption measurement problem*. Bergen, Chr. Michelsen Institute, U4 Brief 2013, p. 2.

¹⁰ OECD, *Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities in Settings of Conflict and Fragility: Improving Learning for Results*, DAC Guidelines and Reference Series, OECD Publishing, 2012.

not depend on armed groups. To be able to operate with the Government in Afghanistan, donors and NGOs need a common understanding of challenges, what principles that should be applied and how limited resources can be pooled and shared to make the best use for the Afghans.

Some suggestions for NGOs and donors:

- Don't give up the development priorities and projects even if insecurity increases. But adapt a flexible approach and prioritise strictly what provides the best result for the Afghan population – not the elite. Gains must be secured for the future generations.
- Be transparent and don't resort to corruption even under pressure. It does not only reduce the value (and impact) of single projects, it reduces the trust in those delivering assistance. A trust that combined with quality of assistance is the prerequisite for operating in a more insecure environment.
- Be proactive in risk assessments and in developing and diversifying monitoring and evaluation functions, share experiences and join forces and resources in building and developing capacity in these fields.
- Introduce and test new and innovative ways for monitoring and evaluation, combine approaches and methods to safeguard aid delivery and measure impact.
- And, set an example in own organisation – then others might follow!