

HPG Background Paper

Coordination structures in Afghanistan

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1. Introduction

This case study of humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan examines changes in the degree of influence exerted by donor governments over the various stages of humanitarian aid, including its allocation and distribution. It addresses two principal propositions:

- that there has been an increase in ‘bilateralisation’; and
- that this ‘bilateralisation’ has led to a reduction of humanitarian space and compromised the impartiality and neutrality of humanitarian action.

Bilateral transactions are defined as those which are made to ‘national and international non-governmental organisations active in development’, or funds made available to multilateral organisations, where the donor controls the disposal of these funds. ‘Bilateralisation’ is therefore interpreted as ‘an increase of roles and responsibilities of donors in relation to humanitarian action’. Multilateralism, on the other hand, is defined as an ‘institutional form that co-ordinates relations amongst three or more states on the basis of generalised principles of conduct’ (Ruggie, 1993: 11). Whilst these principles of conduct should be independent of the strategic interests of the parties involved, and therefore distinct from power politics or strategic alliances, multilateral organisations are in practice often used as instruments of state power politics. The influence exerted by states, even when acting as donors within the humanitarian realm, tends to mirror the power relations that prevail within the wider international system, and multilateral organisations are not immune from such influence. Multilateralism can occur in a number of settings, including international organisations, and is perceived as more stable when embodied in organisations, such as agencies or programmes of the UN, with a specific mandate or purpose of upholding the principles or norms in question.

In order to address the propositions above, this case study sets out the context in which donors and recipients operate in Afghanistan, and specifically their roles and responsibilities in the coordination structures that have been put in place. It identifies key trends in funding for humanitarian purposes, focusing on a range of key issues and sectors, in order to illustrate the possible extent of ‘bilateralisation’. The study also explores the potential implications of this phenomenon, how this might have affected humanitarian space for implementing agencies, and the extent to which the principles upon which humanitarianism is based might have been undermined.

2. Methodology

The research for the case study was undertaken during October and November 2001. Based on extensive reading of background material, a series of key questions related to the phenomenon of bilateralisation was developed, and a questionnaire sent to 20 respondents. These were identified on the basis of their experience of humanitarian activities in Afghanistan, and included previous and current donor representatives, UN and NGO personnel and independent

researchers. The aim was to obtain a cross-section of informed opinion, rather than interviewing every current donor or agency representative. A list of respondents is provided in Annex 1.

A range of respondents from donors was identified to reflect both the diversity of political positions on Afghanistan, and the varying degrees of humanitarian involvement. The degree of political engagement ranges from countries that sought to isolate (and latterly eliminate) the *Taliban*, such as the US, to those such as Switzerland pursuing a policy of engagement and dialogue as a means of making progress on political issues. In terms of humanitarian involvement, respondents were sought from countries which delegate most decision-making on resource allocation to field missions in Islamabad, as well as countries like the US and Canada which manage the process from their capitals.

Representatives from six bilateral donors were interviewed, as well as delegates from ECHO and the European Commission. Interviews with representatives from the UN covered the key agencies and, because of the importance of rights-based programming in Afghanistan, the Human Rights Adviser of the UN Coordinator’s Office in Islamabad. Interviews with representatives of NGOs included a mix of Afghan and international NGOs, determined by their experience in the country and their ability to comment on funding patterns. A number of independent researchers on Afghanistan were also interviewed.

Where possible, phone interviews were undertaken to follow up on responses to the questionnaires. In the case of respondents based in Islamabad and Peshawar, many of whom did not have time to fill in questionnaires, responses were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Given the situation in Afghanistan at the time that this case study was being prepared, the researchers would particularly like to express their thanks to all those who made time available despite the enormous pressures of work.

In addition to questionnaires and interviews, information was obtained from UN and other documentation related to humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan. This included Consolidated Appeals (CAPs) and the annual Afghanistan Support Group (ASG) meetings between 1998 and 2000, as well as informal notes on periodic donor meetings in Islamabad during 2000, made available by the Chair of the ASG at that time. Information was cross-checked from several sources. Where this proved not to be possible, this is qualified in the text (by phrases such as ‘one respondent said’).

3. The Afghan context

The end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1989 marked the start of a period of confusion as to how the international community might respond to the needs of Afghans. The ensuing process of political fragmentation in the country posed a range of challenges, for the political and aid community alike. There was acknowledgement, on a global level, of the need to forge new forms of international

engagement with zones of instability if greater coherence was to be achieved between political and assistance efforts. There was a perceived need to ensure that political efforts to bring peace should take account of, and where feasible build upon, humanitarian programmes on the ground. This was in part a response to growing criticism of the negative role that international assistance could play in conflict situations, and to calls for reform as the UN reassessed its role and organisational structure.

Afghanistan was identified by the UN in 1997 for the development of a Strategic Framework (SFA). This came at a time when the UN political mission faced specific challenges, given the absence of a government that enjoyed domestic legitimacy, or control of all of the country. The seven-party alliance that 'liberated' Kabul in 1992 soon fragmented into a number of competing factions. Continual shifts in allegiance between these factions frustrated attempts to find political common ground. The aid effort had been compromised by its dependence on factional commanders for the cross-border activities that had characterised much of the humanitarian response during the 1980s and early 1990s. This resulted in the strengthening of the new, armed elite at the expense of more traditional structures (Roy, 1991). It also saw the widespread diversion of resources. Both issues were explored at a crucial meeting convened by the UN in Ashkabad, Turkmenistan, in 1997. The meeting brought together key political and assistance players to discuss ways of rendering international efforts more effective, and specifically to explore measures to reinforce the political and assistance processes.

While other countries were initially identified by the UN for the development of a Strategic Framework, these processes were never realised, and Afghanistan therefore is the only country where this approach has been adopted. The final document spelling out the aims and objectives of the SFA did not emerge until September 1998, by which time the *Taliban* was effectively in control of all but the north-east of the country. The formation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under the *Taliban* restored the sense of a single state, albeit with a limited and coercive form of governance. However, the international community failed to adjust to the phenomenon of *Taliban* control (Duffield et al., 2001).

The SFA represented an important milestone in efforts to bring politics, human rights and international assistance together. As set out in the final version of the SFA, the aim of the initiative was to provide 'a more coherent, effective and integrated political strategy and assistance programme' through a 'common conceptual tool that identifies key activities ... on the basis of shared principles and objectives'. The overarching goal of the UN is articulated in the same document as facilitating 'the transition from a state of internal conflict to a just and sustainable peace through mutually reinforcing political and assistance initiatives' and ensuring 'no "disconnects" between political, human rights, humanitarian and developmental aspects of the [international] response'. While the overarching goal of the SFA was a sustainable peace, it was never clear how this was to be reconciled with the political interests of state actors,

who might also be donors to Afghanistan.¹ It was clear from 1995 onwards that, for some donors, peace under the *Taliban* was not acceptable.

4. Coordinating structures

For the assistance community in Afghanistan, the primary vehicles for the realisation of the aims and objectives expressed in the SFA were the consultative and coordination structures that supported the aid effort. While coordination systems for humanitarian and development activities existed prior to the SFA, a comprehensive restructuring was undertaken from 1998 onwards. This restructuring envisaged more systematic linkages between the wider humanitarian community and political actors within the UN through the development of 'principled common programming' (PCP). The extent to which this opportunity for consultation between the political and aid wings of the UN was explored, or resulted in greater coherence, was limited (Duffield et al., 2001). This was partly due to the fact that the SFA process was not matched by comprehensive reform of the management within and between the UN agencies concerned. This also had an impact on the ability of the UN to determine a common position on a range of assistance issues (Newberg, undated).

The coordination structures that were developed to facilitate the SFA and PCP provide a range of entry-points for donors who wish to contribute to the overall direction of the humanitarian aid programme in Afghanistan. These range from donor-only consultative groups to platforms for operational coordination.

4.1 The Afghanistan Support Group

The Afghanistan Support Group (ASG), a grouping of the main donors, provides a forum for dialogue on Afghanistan with an emphasis on the overall direction of the assistance effort. In addition to periodic meetings in Islamabad, the ASG holds an annual meeting to which representatives of UN agencies, the World Bank and NGOs are invited. The ASG held its first six-monthly meeting in London (June 1998), followed by Tokyo (December 1998), Stockholm (June 1999), Ottawa (December 1999), Montreux (December 2000) and Berlin (December 2001).

By the end of 1999, donors had agreed on a number of measures to improve the effectiveness (defined by the Chair as 'having a positive influence') and efficiency ('treating a good number of important topics') of the ASG. Among these was the formation of a management 'troika', comprising the former, current and future chairs of the ASG, to provide overall direction for the group, and identify issues to be addressed at the annual meetings, as well as form sub-groups to deal with specific issues. In addition to the regular cycle of consultations, special meetings of this

¹ The principal donors to Afghanistan between 1995 and 2001 were the US, Japan, the UK, Canada, the European Union, the Netherlands and Sweden.

group have been convened, such as the 'mini-ASG' held in Islamabad in 2001, in order to discuss the humanitarian situation, and an emergency meeting in Berlin in October 2001.

Efforts by specific donors, as demonstrated during the chairmanship of Switzerland during 2000, have contributed to developing the work of the ASG. There persists, however, a degree of ambiguity as to its precise role, beyond serving as a clearing-house for the ideas or positions of state actors on humanitarian issues. This is perhaps borne out by the failure of the members to prepare terms of reference for the ASG, or agree on shared objectives for the group. Moreover, the decision not to minute ASG meetings in Islamabad points to an unwillingness on the part of donors to be bound by collective decisions that might be agreed within the ASG. While the periodic meetings in Islamabad clearly provide an important forum for sharing ideas, the impression persists that the annual ASG is a platform for public positioning. This tends to result in the adoption of the lowest common denominator of positions.

4.2 ASG sub-groups

Following discussions in Ottawa in 1999 on developing the role of the ASG, a number of sub-groups were formed. These were initially tasked to address Programme Management (which included relations with the authorities, peacebuilding and human rights), repatriation (including internally-displaced people (IDPs) and immigration), food security, long-term funding (including the issue of donor fatigue) and mine action. In fact, only the repatriation and food security sub-groups met, although some work was done on 'capacity-building' (as a sub-sector of relations with the authorities). The meeting of 8 November 2000 discussed a suggestion from UNOCHA/MAPA that a Donor Steering Group for mine action be formed, and it was recorded that the majority of countries were in favour. However, at the following meeting, on 25 November, the decision was against the formation of such a group.

The refugees and repatriation group was chaired by the EC representative, with significant input from the representative of the UK. The link between this group and the thematic group on refugees and repatriation (see below) was limited, as the latter only met to discuss the formulation of proposals in the run-up to the preparation of the Consolidated Appeal. The food security group was initially chaired by the representative of the Netherlands, who handed over this responsibility to the US.

4.3 The Afghanistan Programming Body

The Afghanistan Programming Body (APB) is the overall coordinating body for the realisation of PCP. It meets about every two months in Islamabad, and includes representatives from donors, UN agencies, the World Bank and NGOs. It is chaired by a representative of the country chairing the ASG, although both meetings are not necessarily chaired by the same person. An APB standing committee, comprising

one donor, one UN representative and one NGO representative, emerged after an NGO-initiated group met in 2000 to discuss the overall effectiveness of PCP. One of the tasks for this standing committee was to set the agenda for the APB, which had hitherto been agreed between the APB chair and the UN Coordinator (UNCO). APB meetings usually included a briefing on the humanitarian situation from the UNCO's office, and on occasions a political update from the UN Special Mission (UNSM).

4.4 Thematic groups

Five thematic groups, which should report to the APB, were set up in late 1998 as part of the coordination architecture put in place by the UN to realise PCP. The themes reflect the five principal components of the assistance effort set out in the final SFA document. These are Alleviation of Human Suffering, Repatriation of Refugees, Sustainable Livelihoods, Human Rights and Basic Social Services. Participants are primarily from operational agencies. They share information, attempt to develop common approaches and deal with the practical aspects of coordination in the field. The Basic Social Services thematic group split into sectoral groups to deal with health, education and water and sanitation separately.

While there were hopes that the thematic groups might serve as the focus for strategic planning, a number of respondents drew attention to the fact that they have functioned unevenly, and that some meet only prior to the formulation of the Consolidated Appeal. Their performance hinges on the extent to which technical support, in the form of professional skills, is available. This is borne out in the case of groups that were felt to be the most active (human rights and education), both of which had sustained involvement from staff of UNCO and UNICEF respectively. It is less clear why some agency staff saw it as their role to support these groups whilst others did not, but this seems to have been largely an individual decision.

4.5 Regional coordination bodies

Regional Coordination Bodies (RCBs) aim to provide a platform for operational UN agencies, NGOs and (occasionally) donors to discuss issues that affect the humanitarian effort at a regional level, over and above the practical issues addressed within sectoral groups, which also meet periodically at a regional level. RCB meetings are usually held in the various regional centres identified by the UN, whose representative acts as a secretariat. Although the original Strategic Framework/PCP project envisaged these groups as having a strategic planning role at a local level, this has never really happened. The extent to which the various RCBs have contributed to operational planning has varied over time. WFP, for example, indicated that RCBs were important in facilitating the planning for emergency food needs in 2001, and that as a result their ability to undertake emergency feeding programmes was significantly improved from earlier years. In some cases, efforts have also been made to involve the local authorities in certain regions

in consultations with participants of the RCB. These were essentially local initiatives, and not undertaken at the instigation of donors.

4.6 Other coordination groups

A number of other *ad hoc* coordination structures have been created to address emergency needs. These have included groups established by operational agencies in the field to deal with specific issues, such as IDPs and food security, and inter-agency groups set up in Islamabad to undertake emergency coordination. Examples include the drought emergency task force during 2000, and the Crisis Management Group set up after September 2001. Such groups have had occasional donor participation.

None of the national-level groups actually meets in Afghanistan, because all donors, UN heads of agencies and many NGO directors are based in Pakistan. This precludes any sustained contribution to these groups by Afghanistan-based field staff. At the same time, the practical effectiveness of field coordination structures has been reduced due to the limited delegation of authority to the field within UN agencies and some NGOs.

5. Priority-setting and donor involvement in coordination

Having outlined the possible entry-points available to donors in determining collective or individual priorities for humanitarian intervention, there is a need to explore the various ways in which donors determine their priorities in response to the range of humanitarian needs, and the role, if any, of coordination structures in such decisions.

Papers prepared for the annual ASG meetings suggest certain shifts in the focus of donor concerns. For example, efforts in Stockholm in 1999 to define some areas of 'common ground' in dealings with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan gave way to a more conditional approach in Montreux in 2000. This reflected not only the concerns of Canada, as chair during 2000, about human rights and gender issues, as well as a wider political concern with the policies of the *Taliban*.

The extent to which the collective concerns of donors articulated during the ASG meetings have been consistent with funding patterns is, however, less clear. Most respondents acknowledged that the funding priorities set by donors bore, at best, an incidental relation to the deliberations within the various thematic groups, which were intended to 'drive' the PCP project. For example, only 12% of proposals put forward in the 2000 Consolidated Appeal under Sustainable Livelihoods were in fact funded, despite the fact that this had been one of the key themes within the SFA.

Direct donor involvement in the coordination processes, beyond the ASG and APB, has varied significantly between countries and over time. The experience of the ASG sub-groups indicates that active donor involvement in

coordination depends to a large degree upon the skills, time and commitment of staff in the field. Respondents confirmed that, in missions without staff dedicated to assistance work, there is often limited time for substantive involvement in these and other groups. The most consistent levels of donor engagement in the thematic groups have been with those on food security and human rights, although even here the level of participation has varied. In a number of cases, the degree of engagement of a mission can be directly linked to the professional skills or experience (in development or humanitarian issues) of those assigned to Afghanistan. For example, the mission of the Netherlands in Islamabad contributed significantly to coordination efforts in 1998–2000, but this level of engagement has not been maintained due to key staff not being replaced. While there is nothing to suggest that this represents an implicit deprioritisation of Afghanistan in the foreign policy interests of the Netherlands, it effectively removed a key advocate of 'quiet diplomacy' within the donor community. On the other hand, the mission of Switzerland has demonstrated a growing engagement in coordination efforts, as borne out during its chairmanship of the ASG/APB, and the increase in personnel assigned to deal with Afghanistan. Likewise, the UK, US and Canadian missions in Islamabad have maintained their involvement in inter-agency coordination.

Information-sharing on funding decisions was mentioned by a number of donor respondents as the basis for their engagement in coordination structures. Most acknowledged that they did no more than this, and none could identify cases where donors might have collectively explored funding 'gaps' and shifted their priorities to meet these needs.

While there may be few direct links between the deliberations of coordination groups and funding allocations, an indirect benefit of more systematic consultations has been the opportunity that they have opened up for NGOs, especially Afghan NGOs, to contribute to the debate on assistance issues. The Afghan voice has over time been stronger at both the annual ASG and the APB, and has influenced attitudes towards funding time-frames and, in some cases, determined priorities. A number of donor respondents referred to the importance of being informed of Afghan perspectives, through the range of consultative processes that exist. The major international NGOs, especially those based in Islamabad, have always enjoyed better access to donor representatives through informal channels such as networking and social occasions, and have therefore been able to exert greater influence on their decisions. Formal fora have been more important to Afghans. Afghans based in Pakistan have mainly benefited; although some donors have actively encouraged a shift in consultations to the field proper, the focus remains on consultations in Peshawar/Islamabad.

There remain, therefore, significant gaps between the stated intent to undertake common programming and the actual outcomes that are pursued by participants, including state actors. While coordination structures represent an opportunity for taking public positions, significant influence continues to be exerted through informal networks.

While certain donors continue to pursue, within the

humanitarian realm, approaches that suit their political interests in Afghanistan, there is little direct evidence of attempts to co-opt the coordination structures to further these ends. A number of respondents indicated that, if influence was to be exerted (in pursuit of national interests, quality or other purposes) the coordination structures might not in fact be their primary entry-point. This is perhaps borne out by the difficulties encountered in getting donor representatives to participate in the thematic groups, and the lack of participation by senior staff from some donors in the APP.

On the whole, most donors seem ambivalent about collective positions, especially where these might compromise their independence of action. This was perhaps most evident at the ASG meeting in Stockholm in 1999, when efforts to define an appropriate process of engagement on rights issues were countered by those such as the US that publicly asserted their intention to act unilaterally, if necessary.

6. Funding trends

Bilateral aid to Afghanistan, in the sense of traditional direct government-to-government funding, has been very limited since the withdrawal of Soviet support for the communist regime in Kabul. The bulk of humanitarian assistance to the Afghan population has, therefore, been routed through UN agencies, the ICRC or IFRCS, or international and Afghan NGOs.

The absence of definitive figures on overall humanitarian expenditure in Afghanistan makes it difficult to draw conclusions as to the patterns that have prevailed. Nevertheless, despite perceptions within the UN of donor fatigue during the late 1990s, funding for core humanitarian activities in Afghanistan appears to have been reasonably consistent, given the levels of instability in the country. Although funds received under the CAP dipped from \$76.5 million (72% of requested funds) in 1995 to \$40m (22%) in 1999, before recovering again to \$107m (48%) in 2000, this represented only part of the picture. For example, while in 1999 the CAP only received \$40m, the recorded total humanitarian aid inputs to Afghanistan were estimated to be some \$300m per year (Danida, 1999). This difference was mostly due to major emergency programmes following the Wardak and Badakhshan/Takhar earthquakes, although a number of organisations (of which the most significant is ICRC) regularly receive funds outside of the Appeal. Although agencies have not received the levels of funding requested within CAPs, this has been partly due to the perception on the part of donors that appeals have come increasingly to represent a series of 'wish lists', with little reference to priorities or actual capacity. A number of respondents stressed that the CAP was not the prime determinant of their contributions, but that they also took account of the track record and capacity of the implementing agency.

A further dimension of overall funding trends, particularly during 2000–2001, has been the shift in time-scales, in response both to UN/NGO pressure and academic work.

The need for more attention to medium- and long-term investments was acknowledged by a significant number of donors during the ASG meeting in Islamabad in June 2001. The European Commission adopted a longer-term approach towards funding in the early 1990s, but by mid-2001 a significant number of other donors had also moved in this direction. Switzerland started spending development funds, which had reportedly not been done in Afghanistan for 20 years. Canada set up mechanisms for longer-term funding and Sweden shifted to two-year funding, with a provision for three-year cycles in the future.

The response to the attacks on the US on 11 September has resulted in significant changes in the scale and pattern of resource allocation. The fact that funding levels surged at the start of the military campaign in Afghanistan in late September suggests that certain donors not only sought to mitigate the potentially serious humanitarian impact of military intervention, but also wanted to be seen publicly to respond to the needs of civilians. 'They want to show,' said one respondent, 'that no one has died in Afghanistan.'

As a result of this dramatic shift in political priorities, Afghanistan was the recipient of significant new pledges of assistance. Available information indicates that a total of \$345m had been pledged by the time the Bonn agreement was reached on 5 December 2001, as compared to the reported total of \$107m for the CAP during 2000. This was despite the fact that security (which hitherto had been portrayed as a major constraint to humanitarian activities) was in fact deteriorating, as a result of the military intervention and its consequences. Specifically, there was a resumption of warlord behaviour in many parts of the country. The main roads from Peshawar and Quetta both became extremely unsafe for both Afghans and expatriates, as did many parts of the countryside. A number of respondents referred to the manner in which resources have effectively been thrust upon the established aid agencies, while others are being encouraged to set themselves up as soon as possible. Alongside this increase in funding, procedures for applications and the approval of grants have been streamlined.

The increased levels of funding resulted in significant new resources to multilateral agencies. Areas of activity which had been short of funding before September 2001, such as coordination and support for refugees, enjoyed greatly increased pledges, and some donors were prepared to commit significant sums of money to UN agencies with few strings attached; thus, US support for UNHCR increased, for instance. While some NGOs have received significant increases in funding for humanitarian activities since September 2001, the amounts have been limited when compared to the money made available to UN agencies. Parallel to the increased funding to multilaterals, a number of donors began to explore the possibility of direct support to the *de facto* authorities, even before a political agreement, and the pace of funding increased dramatically after the Bonn agreement on an interim administration. For example, the Netherlands pledged \$1m, 'untied and unearmarked' for 'quick disbursement', just a day after the agreement was signed.

In looking at funding trends, however, it seems as important to explore the patterns and possible motivation that underlie continuity, as much as the perceived discontinuities, or evident changes in behaviour, that have emerged.

6.1 Key aspects of continuity

In Afghanistan, the bulk of funding has been disbursed to the same organisations for the same kinds of activities year after year. Consistent levels of non-earmarked funding have been made available to agencies mandated to provide essential supplies or services, including ICRC and the World Food Programme (WFP). This demonstrates a continuing degree of multilateralism on the part of certain donors, including the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), both of which reportedly allocate a fixed proportion of their humanitarian budget to UN agencies and the Red Cross movement. Likewise, Sweden has demonstrated consistent support for the UN in its allocations over the past three years. Respondents put this down to a variety of factors, including organisational inertia on the part of donors, the degree of confidence towards certain implementing partners and, in the case of some donors, a commitment to the UN because of what it represents. A number of donor respondents also drew attention to the fact that funding UN agencies is relatively easy, especially for those without sufficient staff with appropriate skills in their Islamabad missions to assess proposals in detail. The US Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM), for instance, acknowledges that it does not have the capacity in Islamabad to track individual grants, and therefore tends to make a limited number of unearmarked allocations to UN agencies.

6.2 Key aspects of discontinuity

In terms of discontinuities in funding, a range of trends can be identified in relation to sectors and operational issues, agencies, timescales and influence on coordination structures.

6.2.1 Education

In response to the *Taliban's* closure of girls' schools in Herat in 1996, and the subsequent protests of SCF/UK, much of the funding for official education programmes was withdrawn. By 1997, UNICEF too had curtailed support for formal education in areas where access was limited. There followed a protracted debate within the assistance community as to how to defend the principle of access for all to education, although no consensus emerged as to whether to engage or maintain conditionality on funding. While there was some acknowledgement by the *Taliban* (in a Memorandum of Understanding signed with the UN in 1998) of the need for a 'gradual' shift towards the restoration of official education for girls, formal permission for non-madrasa education was rarely forthcoming. Despite these constraints, a number of donors invested in NGO community-based education initiatives in some parts of the country once it became apparent to many that an 'all or nothing' approach could be counter-productive. The Swedish

Committee for Afghanistan supported rural schools in Logar and Ghazni, for example.

Active lobbying by agencies over a number of years has resulted in education being highlighted as a priority need, but allocations have come largely from emergency sources, with a one-year time-scale for implementation. Only very few donors, for example DFID, have responded to educational needs with a more developmental perspective, and many of the NGOs working in education have struggled to keep programmes going. UNICEF, which funds its education work from core funds and contributions from country committees, has enjoyed a substantial increase in funding for education, from approximately \$250,000 per year in 1996–98 to \$2m in 2000, due primarily to the country team giving a greater priority to education.

6.2.2 Refugees

Funding to refugees shifted during the mid-1990s from Pakistan-/Iran-based care and welfare programmes to in-country investments to induce refugee return and reintegration in stable areas. With the emergence of the *Taliban*, however, concern was expressed by UNHCR and others at the possible denial or violation of the rights of returnees, even in the context of voluntary return to areas where stability was felt to be a major determinant of confidence. This led, from 1995 onwards, to a portrayal by UNHCR and others of large areas of Afghanistan as essentially uninhabitable for returnees, despite the fact that non-assisted return continued. This shift in perceptions, and the resulting changes in the focus of programmes, is acknowledged by respondents to have been driven by the political agenda of certain major donors to UNHCR, rather than by humanitarian considerations. This is borne out by the shift in US funding for UNHCR, from repatriation and reintegration activities to earmarked grants for the education of refugee women and girls in neighbouring countries. Agencies have, however, come under contradictory pressures from different donors, as demonstrated by the 'showcase' repatriation exercise undertaken in the *Taliban*-controlled Azro/Tizin district with support from Japan.

6.2.3 Food security

There has been widespread acknowledgement by donors of the need to address the impact of the devastating drought in Afghanistan, in response to which food security has moved to the top of the assistance agenda. While the need for a shift in emphasis towards long-term food security strategies has been recognised, the limited capacity of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) seems to have affected donor responses. However, rather than bringing about a change in the performance of a potentially key implementing partner, donor dissatisfaction resulted only in a reduction of funding for FAO, which in turn perpetuated a reliance on short-term approaches, including deliveries of imported food. It is clear, however, that the need for visibility and domestic lobbying are also major factors in decisions by certain donors to provide food aid, as borne out by US in-kind food contributions to Afghanistan. Of the \$44m allocated by the US to WFP since September 2001, \$6m was cash for regional purchases (this was regarded by WFP as high by the normal standards of US donations).

Donors' political considerations were also evident in programmes such as the WFP's 'food for education' during 2000 in parts of Badakhshan, at the time almost the only part of the country controlled by the Northern Alliance. This scheme, in which a major NGO refused to participate and which UNICEF criticised at the time, aimed to stop school drop-out and to encourage more girls to attend through the provision of incentives. Initially, WFP had intended that only girls should get rations, but given the refusal of its NGO partner to implement what the partner believed to be an unworkable scheme, a compromise was reached whereby both girls and boys received basic rations, while girls were entitled to an additional supplement. While there was doubtless a need to get additional food supplies to Badakhshan, the area had no greater food deficit than other remote (*Taliban*-controlled) areas to the south, which were not considered for the programme, due to restrictions on girls' attendance at official schools.

Pressure from agency headquarters, and their executive boards, also affected the viability of humanitarian programmes on the ground. In the case of WFP and its partners, directives from headquarters aimed at ensuring women's participation required that at least half of the direct beneficiaries of food-for-work projects should be women, even in the case of rehabilitation activities which involved manual labour. This was clearly unworkable in Afghanistan (as it would be in many other parts of the world), and significantly reduced the support that could be offered in *Taliban*-administered areas of the country through food-for-work. Locally, however, WFP staff sought to find creative ways to introduce flexibility.

Another dimension of donor attitudes towards food aid is illustrated by the provision of support to NGOs to establish food pipelines independent of WFP, but going into the same parts of the country and with the same food rations. While the need for independent pipelines might in some cases arise from the shortcomings of WFP, the fact that such pipelines are more lucrative for the NGOs concerned is also a factor. At their best, as part of a coordinated effort, independent pipelines allow NGOs to reach places or groups WFP fails to, or to provide complementary foods. At their worst, over-supply disrupts local markets, damages long-term food sufficiency, inflates transport costs, causes inequity between different parts of the country and results in supply being driven not by need but by politics. While donor representatives are aware of the problem, decisions have reportedly been driven by powerful domestic agricultural lobbies.

6.2.4 Human rights

The issue of human rights serves as a good illustration of the gap between what is deemed a collective priority, in terms of what donors say in fora like the ASG and APB, and what is actually funded. At a time of widespread international concern at the human rights situation in Afghanistan, investment in rights-centred activities has been limited. In 1999, only one human rights project received funding, the UNCO's human rights office funded by Norway. The situation was better in 2000, although the actual amount requested was low. Despite the development of terms of

reference for the Human Rights Thematic Group, and the election of members (currently the US, Switzerland, Norway, Canada and Sweden) it proved difficult to attract significant donor involvement in the work of the group. In recognition of the difficulty of making progress through the larger thematic group, a smaller Consultative Group, without donor involvement, was set up in 1999. The creation of this group has gone some way towards defining appropriate approaches to the issue, due in part to the specialist input of the UNCO human rights adviser.

While both groups have raised the profile of human rights issues in Afghanistan, and served as a forum for briefings, they have not succeeded in attracting significant additional funding. This might be due in part to the lack of familiarity of most mission representatives in Islamabad with rights issues, which they might perceive to be difficult to fund compared to more conventional humanitarian activities. The limited responses to other requests might be put down to the difficulty that the agencies have had in conceptualising distinct human rights activities.

Concerns among donors about rights have in some cases also had direct operational implications. For example, donors encouraged the relocation of several agencies to Mazar i Sharif after the *Taliban* occupation of Herat in 1995. This was justified by donors and agencies alike as a means of continuing work directly with Afghan women. When serious security concerns led to Mazar i Sharif being evacuated in 1997, agencies shifted to (Hizbe Wahdat-controlled) Hazarajat, which was one of the few remaining areas not under *Taliban* control, and where work with women was still felt to be possible.

6.2.5 Payment of recurrent costs

The gap between 'principled' positions and actual humanitarian practice, while always controversial, is cast in a new light in the highly politicised environment of Afghanistan. This is perhaps best illustrated by the payment of recurrent costs for essential services, especially health, in areas under *Taliban* administration.

In order to sustain health structures at a time when support from the central or regional administration was negligible or non-existent, direct payments of 'incentives' to public health professionals and support staff in Afghanistan became routine throughout the 1990s. These programmes were vital to maintaining health services in many areas of the country. Following the controversy about female healthcare in Kabul in 1997, and more general concern at the policies of the *Taliban*, some donors excluded from their allocations payments to presumptive governmental structures. The stated concern was the risk of indirectly supporting discriminatory practices. However, in response to pressure from NGOs and ICRC to maintain support for public health staff providing vital services, payments to individuals continued in many cases. Despite the public positions taken during the controversy about female healthcare in Kabul, major donors (including at least one who had restricted NGO payments) continued to support ICRC, which paid incentives to all staff of the major hospitals in the city. These payments, which reportedly represented the single largest

counterpart staff expenditure by the ICRC globally, were generally acknowledged to have been instrumental in ensuring continued access for female patients in Kabul's two largest hospitals.

6.2.6 Security

The issue of security is one where donor perceptions have been influential, and in a number of cases have had direct operational implications for humanitarian agencies. One such example is the position taken by the UK/DFID to withdraw funding from NGOs that fielded expatriates inside Afghanistan, in the aftermath of the killing of an UNSMA staff member in Kabul in August 1998, the day after US missile attacks on Khost. While certain UK/DFID partners withdrew expatriate staff, the major international NGOs that had previously received support from DFID sought alternative sources of funding to maintain their programmes inside the country. The ban on expatriates in Afghanistan was not lifted until mid-2001, and remained contingent upon stringent security assessments.

At the same time as the DFID decision, the UN bowed to pressure to withdraw staff with US or UK nationality from Afghanistan, in response to alleged security concerns on the part of both governments. While the move was apparently in response to 'compelling evidence' of specific threats to US/UK nationals, the nature of these risks was never explained by the UN to those responsible for security in the field. The ban, which was not lifted until early 2001, had a limited direct impact on the overall UN programme, but did call into question the neutrality of the organisation. While most donors acknowledged the security risks in Afghanistan, few showed the degree of interest of the US or the UK. Throughout this period, guarantees of security for humanitarian personnel became central to discussions between the UN and the *Taliban*, both in Kabul and elsewhere.

Insecurity is likely to remain a major constraint to the delivery of assistance inside Afghanistan, even with the deployment of an international force. Despite growing insecurity inside Afghanistan since October 2001 and the risks that this poses to the humanitarian operation, the threshold of tolerance among donors seems to have risen.

6.3 Funding to agencies

Funding to agencies has been affected both by global trends and by the local situation. For example, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) has seen core funding diminish globally since 1992. While Afghanistan for a time withstood this trend, due to under-spends from previous allocations, by 1999 almost half of UNDP funding for Afghanistan was non-core funding, in the form of donor support for specific agency projects. Despite initial support from donors for the UNDP Peace Initiative from 1998, there has been a gradual erosion of support for the rural development component of this programme (implemented by the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS)/Afghanistan Rural Rehabilitation Programme (ARRP)). Apart from UNOPS/Comprehensive Disabled Afghanistan

Programme (CDAP), whose core programme received external funding, most agencies working under UNDP receive funding, usually in the form of short-term grants, only for specific projects. For example, UNCHS Habitat, which receives significant funding from emergency sources, has found it more difficult to secure resources for more developmental aspects of its work, such as community fora.

Funding for the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (UNDCP) has also been bound up with global trends, as political pressure grew to limit drug inflows to countries that are major donors to Afghanistan, and local considerations, as donors demonstrated their objections to the policies of the *Taliban*. Having received significant levels of political and funding support during the 1990s for programmes of advocacy and drug-crop substitution, UNDCP was unable to respond to the *Taliban* ban on poppy cultivation, due to unwillingness on the part of donors to 'reward' the *Taliban* for curtailing illegal activities. As with human rights, this demonstrates the evolution (and, to a degree, selectiveness) of international concerns on specific issues, and how these have affected investments by donors.

While the majority of resources for humanitarian activities in Afghanistan continue to be made available to UN agencies or ICRC, a pattern of earmarking contributions to the UN emerged during the 1990s. While there was at the same time an increase in direct support to NGOs on the part of some donors, this remains a relatively small part of overall allocations.

The shift towards earmarking funds to multilaterals has manifested itself in a variety of ways, which in turn affects the ability of agencies to respond to needs. Some donors have adopted a selective project-based approach ('cherry-picking', according to some respondents), while others specify only broad activities or sectors. For example, Switzerland provided three-year funding to the UNDP Peace Initiative, specifying only the split between the various components of the allocation.

Where donors have increased their funding to NGOs, respondents generally said that this had been to gain more control over programmes and costs. Until 1998, for example, Switzerland allocated almost all of its funds for Afghanistan to ICRC, UNHCR and WFP. The subsequent move to more direct partnerships with NGOs was reportedly motivated by a wish to have more influence over the quality and type of activities.

Patterns of funding by the UK/DFID also indicate a shift away from multilaterals to more direct funding of NGOs. This is illustrated by the move away from supporting UNHCR (which in turn sub-contracted care and welfare programmes to Pakistan-based NGOs) to direct funding of the NGOs themselves. It was felt that funding UNHCR gave little added value as long as competent technical partners were present. This was matched by the perception that UNHCR should concentrate less on service delivery, and more on protecting refugees. The position taken in 1998 by UK/DFID to withdraw funding from NGO partners with expatriates inside Afghanistan lost them several key

partners, with the result that the strength of the UK/DFID programme now lies outside the country, with projects for Afghan refugees, especially in Iran, where relatively few donors are actively involved.

Despite a general trend in recent years towards donors requiring more detailed project proposals, several respondents acknowledged that demands on multilaterals, in terms of both proposals and reporting requirements, are less stringent than for NGO partners. Furthermore, as pressure to spend money quickly grew after September 2001, a number of donors significantly reduced the amount of documentation required for funding applications – although some, driven by a need to provide evidence of their intervention to their governments, continue to require detailed information on programming. WFP, for example, reported that the US and DFID had ‘insatiable’ demands for information.

7. Intrusions into humanitarian space

Whilst a move towards bilateralisation has sometimes affected the ability of agencies to deliver humanitarian assistance within Afghanistan, a far wider range of factors has reduced ‘humanitarian space’.

Until late September 2001, *Taliban* policies arguably represented the most significant constraint to ‘principled’ humanitarian action, especially in urban centres, and restrictive policies severely constrained the access of women to health, education and employment. It is clear, however, that the reaction of certain donors was driven by a wish to isolate the *Taliban* politically, rather than simply being a consequence of what was, or was not, possible in terms of humanitarian programming. Even in *Taliban*-controlled areas, NGOs continued to support girls’ education and to work with women in health, yet many struggled to get these programmes funded. Care and Oxfam, for instance, supported girls’ schools in *Taliban*-controlled areas, and Care in particular was constantly frustrated by the difficulties of getting adequate funding for education programmes. Similarly, Action Contre La Faim (ACF) almost had to close down women’s health programmes in Hazarajat because of a lack of funding. One of the results of this was the perpetuation of the notion of an emergency, despite agreement that the emergency/development split made little sense in Afghanistan, and actually worked against good programming. The short-term funding that was the consequence of this distinction limited investment in health, education and other sectors, while creating major operational difficulties for agencies, which had to find ways of bridging the funding gaps created by reliance on a series of emergency grants.

Perceptions as to the impartiality and neutrality of the international community were further influenced by the imposition of UN sanctions in November 1999, followed by a one-sided arms embargo in January 2001. While a number of donor representatives questioned the effectiveness of imposing sanctions in these circumstances, the resolution was passed almost unanimously by the UN Security Council.

Even prior to the US military campaign in Afghanistan, events since 11 September cast the nature of international engagement in a new light. Although there were few immediate security incidents and winter was approaching, WFP stopped all food deliveries, and for a time even halted the distribution of food stocks already in the country, because of the evacuation of their international staff. A public campaign by NGOs and the foreign press resulted in a resumption of food deliveries. Significantly, representatives from the US (WFP’s major donor) in Islamabad spoke out against the suspension shortly before the decision was rescinded.

While the military intervention initially had a minimal impact on security, particularly in areas outside of Kabul and Kandahar, it again resulted in a hiatus in convoys. Ironically, as security began to deteriorate, so pressure from key donors to resume operations grew.

Whilst the political agenda has had a mixed effect on humanitarian space in relation to food, the effect on human rights has been more clearly negative. Prior to September 2001, concerns had been repeatedly expressed about the partial way in which the human rights agenda was prosecuted by certain donors and agencies (Duffield et al., 2001). But while human rights issues (specifically women’s rights) were used to justify the US military campaign, there was a concerted campaign to silence humanitarians who attempted to speak out about abuses that took place as part of the war.

8. Conclusions

The conclusions of this case study are as follows:

1. What donors say and what they support, directly or otherwise, are not one and the same.
2. The SFA and PCP have had relatively little influence on the priorities of donors and on decisions made about allocations, which in many cases are determined at headquarters.
3. While there has clearly been a reduction of humanitarian space in Afghanistan, this has been caused by a range of factors, of which bilateralisation is not the most significant. Other reasons for the reduction in humanitarian space have been:

- the diminution in the credibility of the UN, due to political decisions including the imposition of sanctions and the ban on US and UK nationals, which in some cases has affected its ability to undertake assistance work;
- the wish of certain donors to condition their funding as part of the pursuit of a ‘principled’ position. Under-funding of health and education, for example, further reduced women’s access to basic services;
- the lack of a clear strategy on the part of donors regarding the terms of engagement with the *Taliban*, which weakened the negotiating position of operational agencies;
- the reliance on short-term funding, due to the persistent definition of Afghanistan as an ‘emergency’; and
- the scale of allocations by some donors, which gave them

considerable influence, whether or not they earmarked funding.

4. There is a trend towards more earmarking of grants to multilateral organisations, and some increase in funding of NGOs at the expense of multilaterals. Among other factors, this has been driven by a search for quality and frustration at the failings of some UN agencies, but it has not necessarily reduced humanitarian space, because:

- the extent of allocations lost to NGOs is small compared to overall UN agency budgets;
- multilaterals are not necessarily the best guardians of humanitarian space; and
- earmarking itself is not necessarily negative; this depends on the way that it is used. For example, broad-band earmarking tied to the pursuit of quality (rather than political goals) and linked to longer-term funding commitments can be positive.

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