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AFGHANISTAN: A NEW ERA OF HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Executive Summary

Undoubtedly, Afghanistan represents one of the most complex and difficult environments in which humanitarian agencies could operate. Working amidst ongoing military operations, continuous insecurity, and the massive displacement of populations, humanitarian agencies also have to cope with a rising demand for their services and a radically different political and social environment. Shifting from a policy that effectively isolated the former Taliban regime during the last six years, the international community is now gearing itself to actively support the political rehabilitation and social reconstruction of the country. This support, resulting in a new availability of funding and political backing, represents to many Afghans a much awaited engagement of the international community. Unfortunately, it has also generated a number of new challenges due to the sudden availability of political and economic resources emerging amid an operational infrastructure that cannot absorb, coordinate, and manage them properly.

These challenges are particularly salient when it comes to a discussion of humanitarian aid. As interviews conducted for this study have indi-



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cated, many of the problems that have plagued past humanitarian aid operations in the Balkans, Africa, and Asia have re-emerged with full force in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Aid agencies keen to operate in this well-funded, high-profile environment are now rushing to the region, often paying scant attention to the necessities of coordination, the need to recognize and build upon current capacity, or to thoroughly analyze Afghanistan's complex political, social and economic environment.

Perhaps more importantly, access to vulnerable groups in some areas of the country has been hindered by insecurity and extortion of aid by warlords and armed militias. Associated with neither the Taliban nor Al-Qaida, these warlords, while remaining valuable allies of the United States and the Afghan Interim Authority (AIA) in the war against terrorism, have openly challenged the control of the central Afghan authority. Many of these warlords are associated with serious human rights abuses, especially against minorities in the north of the country. The ongoing impunity for these acts, committed during and after the war against the Taliban, is a growing source of concern for humanitarian actors and represents a serious threat to humanitarian access.

This policy brief provides a first critical analysis of the current efforts to provide humanitarian aid in post-Taliban Afghanistan, with a view towards offering some guidance to donors and agencies involved in the country. It is based on a series of interviews conducted with practitioners in the field from January through March 2002. At the heart of this analysis is the belief that the difficulties that the Afghan people have faced—often exacerbated by the international community itself—demand that aid agencies, donors, and the United Nations address seriously the systemic deficiencies of international aid operations. A hopeful outcome of this reappraisal will be a willingness on the part of agencies and donors to commit themselves to coordination mechanisms and be bound by well-established codes of conduct.

Aid during the Taliban era: an Overview

Aid under the Taliban (1995-2001) was characterized by a number of acute dilemmas, some common to humanitarian practice the world over, and others particular to the political realities under the Taliban's consolidation of power. While it is beyond the scope of the current brief to describe in detail the limitations that existed during this period, several problems must be noted due to their influence on the strategic approach of international donors and agencies today. Included in this analysis are issues related to coordination, the politicization of aid, and a reliance on short-term, urban-centered emergency interventions.

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(Human Rights Watch, July 2001)

The search for coherence and the politicization of aid

Afghanistan has served as a test case for many of the aid industry's newest approaches, and among these was the idea that international political, humanitarian and human rights actors take a coherent strategic approach to conflict. Developed in the mid-1990s, the idea of a "strategic framework" posited the view that international initiatives at all levels should work together to create peace in conflict-ridden countries. According to this approach, coherence was to be obtained through "principled engagement" with local actors. In reality, however, principled engagement led to conditional engagement with local actors on all matters other than the provision of life-saving assistance.

The Strategic Framework for Afghanistan (SFA), established in September 1998, two years after the Taliban takeover of Kabul, was the primary expression of this new approach. The SFA represented one of the most serious attempts yet to organize and streamline international assistance efforts, the credibility of which had been significantly undermined in the chaotic deployment of hundreds of organizations in complex emergencies such as Somalia, Rwanda and Kosovo.

As much of the literature on Afghanistan and many of the interviewees for this report have pointed out, the Strategic Framework never achieved its goals. In a recent review of the SFA, Mark Duffield, Patricia Gossman, and Nicholas Leader attribute this failure to the fact that the SFA existed on the assumption that Afghanistan was a failed state, when it was in fact treated as a rogue state presided over by the Taliban. As the report points out, this misunderstanding led to divisions between the political and humanitarian missions, on the one hand, and between different humanitarian actors themselves, on the other hand, in their approaches to the *de facto* authority.

While in theory principled engagement was intended to socialize the regime through engagements on the political and humanitarian fronts, divergent views existed among political and humanitarian actors as to how this should be accomplished. Many international humanitarian and development actors were trying to engage the Taliban to gain access to populations and temper the Taliban's behavior through interaction. Meanwhile, many political actors, and in particular the UN Security Council, led by the United States and Russia, sought to isolate and destabilize the Taliban regime for their harboring of Osama Bin Laden. These political efforts involved targeted UN

For more information on the dilemmas of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, please click on the following links:

[Strategic Framework for Afghanistan Towards a Principled Approach to Peace and Reconstruction](#) (Assistance Afghanistan, 15 Sept. 1998)

[Review of the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan](#) (Mark Duffield, Patricia Gossman, Nicholas Leader, SMU Afghanistan, October 2001)

[Coherence or Cooption?: Politics, Aid and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan](#) (Haneef Atmar, Jonathan Goodhand, The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance, 30 July 2001)

[Humanitarian Exchange 19](#) (Humanitarian Practice Network, September 2001)

[The Strategic Framework and Principled Common Programming: a challenge to humanitarian assistance](#) (Harrison, Penny, Humanitarian Practice Network, 10 Sept. 2001)

[Humanitarian Challenges in Afghanistan: Administrative Structures and Gender and Assistance](#) (Arne Strand, Karin Ask, Kristian Berg Harpviken, Chr. Michelsen Institute, January 2002)

[Politics at the Heart: The Architecture of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan](#) (Paula R. Newberg, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 1999)

sanctions (including an arms embargo against the Taliban), U.S. air strikes in 1998, and general diplomatic isolation. They also led to the withholding of any assistance which the Taliban movement might use to consolidate its power. Together, these efforts further alienated the Taliban, reducing what leverage the international community initially had, and favored the Northern Alliance.

As several studies have noted, the search for coherence in Afghanistan between the political, humanitarian and human rights elements broke down because of conflicts between political and humanitarian missions. In some cases, assistance became a substitute for effective sustained political involvement on the part of donor governments. In the end, aid failed as a tool by which to influence the Taliban authority.

Short-term funding

The hostility toward the Taliban invariably led to the funding of programs that focused overwhelmingly on short-term, life-saving emergency assistance against the better judgment of agencies who knew that this programming would create dependence, undermine local coping mechanisms, and draw rural populations from their villages to displacement camps. While some emergency funding was necessary, key long-term programming objectives on livelihood strategies, education and capacity building went largely un-funded.

Disengagement from development programs as a way of isolating the Taliban

The funding levels in the annual UN Consolidated Appeals demonstrate the international community's approach. By 1997, i.e. one year after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, donors focused their resources on emergency programs. The budget for such programs rose to 75 percent of all official development assistance for Afghanistan, up from just 25 percent in 1993. Education funding, meanwhile, fell to just 0.3 percent in 1997 from 22 percent in 1993, according to the OECD's Development Assistance Committee. In another instance, livelihood initiatives only received 12 percent of their requested funding in the 2001 UN Consolidated Appeal, while emergency programs received 78 percent of the requested funding.

This emphasis on emergency aid later became a serious problem when drought, the worst in 30 years, hit Afghanistan in 1998. As acknowledged by the UN in its 2001 Appeal, longer-term agricultural programs that could have helped mitigate the effects of the drought had not received funding prior to its onset¹.

[Afghanistan: Reconstruction and Peacebuilding in a Regional Framework](#)
(Barnett R. Rubin, Ashraf Ghani, William Maley, Ahmed Rashid, Olivier Roy, KOFF Peacebuilding Reports 1/2001)

For more information on funding in Afghanistan, please click on the following link:

[The 2000 Assistance Programme in Review](#)
(Assistance Afghanistan, 2001)

While many thousands of lives were undoubtedly saved by humanitarian and development actors during this period, the effectiveness of this programming was often undermined by the political goal of isolating the Taliban. And ultimately, there is very little evidence that the suspension of agricultural or other assistance played any role in the demise of the Taliban regime.

Emphasis on Camps and Urban Environments

Another aspect of the focus on emergency aid is that it led toward an emphasis upon the maintenance of camps for the displaced, a fact which many agencies said created a “pull factor,” drawing vulnerable people from their homes, creating increased dependencies and weakening communities. This was especially true in rural areas missed by most aid interventions, particularly in the north and northwestern provinces, resulting in the proliferation of large camps in urban centers such as Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif. Much of the aid during this period emphasized delivery of goods rather than real achievement or the reduction of vulnerability in the country. This strategy emphasized moving tonnages rather than addressing the root causes of conflict that were causing the humanitarian crisis.

The aid community did seem willing to deal with this problem during the last year of the Taliban regime, partly in view of the impact of the drought and on the urging of NGOs who complained that the emphasis on emergency aid was causing more harm than good. In a meeting in Islamabad in June 2001, the Afghan Support Group (ASG), a coordination body composed of the main donor agencies recognized the need to shift toward more long-term, community based aid programs. By the time of the terrorist attacks in the U.S. in September 2001, bilateral donors, including USAID, had stated explicitly that they wanted to shift their funding strategy in this direction.

Poor Coordination

Difficulties with coordination also pervaded the whole aid operation, despite one of the most developed coordination systems in the entire UN system. At the center of the coordination challenge lay the fundamental problem that coordination was and remains elective, rather than compulsory, for nearly everyone involved. Thus, when agencies or donors found coordination inconvenient, inefficient or politically distasteful, it was possible to ignore the process, often to the detriment of the effectiveness of the humanitarian mission as a whole.

For more information on the drought in Afghanistan, please click on the following links:

[Natural Disaster Profile – Afghanistan \(EM-DAT: The OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database\)](#)

[Drought in Afghanistan \(Assistance Afghanistan Site\)](#)



Click [here](#) to see larger drought map

[UN Under-Secretary-General Kenzo Oshima's Opening Remarks at the International Donors Conference in Tokyo \(Afghanistan Support Group, Assistance Afghanistan, 7 June 2001\)](#)

[USAID- Humanitarian Crisis in Central Asia](#)

Related to this problem was the sheer—and uncoordinated—proliferation of coordination mechanisms themselves. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Afghanistan had an original mandate to coordinate all aspects of the UN's involvement in the country. After 1993, however, that mandate was restricted to humanitarian affairs alone, despite the difficulties of clearly demarcating humanitarian from the development activities. The ensuing split between OCHA and UNDP regarding humanitarian and development missions led to the creation of two separate coordination mechanisms for Afghanistan, a fact which has led to significant confusion and continuing conflict within the system. Although the lead position of the two mechanisms has been merged in the person of one individual, the two mechanisms remain distinct in their strategy and orientation.

Coordination mechanisms also existed outside the UN. At the highest level of activity was the Afghan Support Group (ASG), which consisted of main donors who held periodic meetings in Islamabad in addition to annual meetings in a donor capital on the overall direction of the aid effort. Aside from the ASG, the "6+2 Forum" was created to increase dialogue among Afghanistan's neighboring states, along with Russia and the United States, in recognition that the Afghan crisis was regional, and that incentives for peace would have to be created at the international political level. The Afghan Programming Body (APB), meanwhile, was meant to operationalize the principles outlined in the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan, itself a mechanism that was initiated by the UN, donors, and NGOs in 1998 to create coherence among the international community's political, humanitarian, and human rights agendas. Within the Strategic Framework, the Principled Common Programming (PCP) was intended to help convert the strategy in the Strategic Framework into workable operations on the ground.

In 1998, it was decided that the APB should develop a series of thematic subgroups, but in reality most of these groups only met just before the annual UN inter-agency Consolidated Appeals Process. Also, because the conflict in Afghanistan has significant regional implications (not to mention significant involvement of neighboring states) regional coordination bodies were also established for operational UN agencies, NGOs, and donors to deal with regional issues. Coordination mechanisms also existed at the field level, with separate UN bodies, Afghan bodies such as the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) working with local Afghan

[Afghanistan Report:
Coordination in a
Fragmented State](#)

(Antonio Donini, Eric
Dudley, Ron Ockwell, UN
Department of
Humanitarian Affairs,
December 1996)

[ReliefWeb Afghanistan](#)

Coordinating Bodies:

[UNOCHA](#)

[Principled Common
Programming](#)

(Assistance Afghanistan)

[Afghanistan Support Group](#)

(Assistance Afghanistan)

[Afghanistan Programming
Body](#)

(Assistance Afghanistan)

[Agency Coordinating Body
for Afghan Relief – ACBAR](#)

(Assistance Afghanistan)

NGOs, and, separately, ministries in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran running their own coordination mechanisms. In the end, as many have pointed out, navigating the coordination bodies themselves became a strain on agency resources. As one aid worker said: "Simply coordinating the coordination groups was a problem in coordination."

Preliminary observations

Numerous efforts have been made to address the operational deficiencies of humanitarian assistance during the Taliban period. Very few of these efforts, however, addressed the inconsistencies of the dual political and humanitarian agenda of the UN system in Afghanistan. On the contrary, this duality was often dressed in an inflexible human rights and principled discourse that made critical dissent a major offense. The predictable results of the politicization of aid, a short-term vision, poor programming, and multiple layers of coordination should not be forgotten. If humanitarian aid is entering a new era after the fall of the Taliban regime, the Afghan people in many ways are not. Drought, economic breakdown, violence, dislocation, isolation, and a lack of access to essential services will plague the country for years to come. The international community should take its share of responsibility for contributing to this situation. More importantly, it should make sure that the corrective humanitarian measures it engages in are true to the humanitarian principles of being independent, neutral, and impartial, and in the process, it is hoped, highly effective.

A New Era of Humanitarian Aid

The U.S.-led war on terrorism and the departure of the Taliban have finally given the people of Afghanistan the international attention they have desperately needed in the last decade. Unfortunately, Afghanistan now faces the problem of having to cope with too much attention, as money, aid, and agencies flood the country. The veteran aid workers interviewed for this article appreciated the new resources at their disposal, but were also alarmed to witness the same mistakes carried out in Afghanistan as in other high-profile post-conflict situations such as Kosovo and Rwanda. In addition, many of the problems of the Taliban-era mission remain.

A major shift in environment: A cooperative government

With the Taliban's departure and the establishment of a recognized government, it is vital to acknowledge the radically different political

[Afghanistan: The Challenges of Post-conflict Assistance](#)

(Hilde Frafjord Johnson ed., Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, 4 Feb. 2002)

[Afghanistan World Bank Approach Paper](#)
(World Bank, November 2001)

[Rebuilding Afghanistan: Fantasy versus Reality](#)

(Marina Ottaway, Anatol Lieven, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2002)

[Preventing New Afghanistans: A Regional Strategy for Reconstruction](#)

(Martha Brill Olcott, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2002)

[Peace-building Strategies for Afghanistan](#)

(Astri Suhrke, Arne Strand, Kristian Berg Harpviken, Chr. Michelsen Institute, 14 Jan. 2002)

and legal environment that humanitarian agencies now face. For one thing, the AIA, as a recognized sovereign, and Afghans themselves, should own and direct aid operations at all levels. Agencies will no longer be able to conduct humanitarian interventions without consulting the new authorities. Equally, it will no longer be appropriate or justifiable to engage local communities without proper cooperation and coordination from national authorities.

Limited Capacities and Security Concerns

Complicating this issue, however, are the limited capacities of both UN agencies, and NGOs to ramp up their activity quickly, on the one hand, and the limitations of the Afghan government, on the other hand, to take a lead in coordinating such large-scale operations. The capacity concerns are particularly acute for the AIA, which not only must coordinate humanitarian actors, but also must deal with its own limited control over large portions of Afghan territory due to warlords and armed factions who present significant security and operational risks to those seeking access to populations outside Kabul. Interviewees noted that these operational dangers for agencies have not existed since the period of internecine *mujahideen* conflict in the early 1990s, and make the Taliban era appear peaceful by comparison. As a result, agencies and donors must carefully consider the impact that aid will have upon political actors inside and outside of Kabul, particularly upon the various legitimate and quasi-legitimate authorities that have established themselves at the provincial, district and village levels.

A Poverty of Riches?

Interviews with a range of Afghan and international professionals involved in the current relief efforts have illuminated a number of issues regarding the current deployment of humanitarian agencies. It is the opinion of the authors that these issues exemplify systemic shortcomings in the international regime by which aid is provided in conflict and post-conflict situations. This list is not meant to be all-inclusive, but instead is meant to document several of the most important aspects of the current mission.

“Too much money, too many agencies, too little coordination”

Among the most serious challenges to humanitarian agencies in Afghanistan today regards the sheer number of agencies now flocking

For more information on the Afghan Interim Authority, please click on the following links:

[Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Reestablishment of Permanent Government Institutions](#)
(United Nations, December 2001)

[Bonn Talks: The Afghan News Administration – Interim Government](#)
(Afghan-Info.com)

[Hamid Karzai: Profile](#)
(Afghan-Info.com)

For more information on security issues and warlords, please click on the following links:

[Dealing with Warlords](#)
(R. Grant Smith, Central Asia - Caucasus Institute, 30 Jan. 2002)

[Afghanistan and Threats to Human Security](#)
(Barnett Rubin, Social Science Research Council, 15 Dec. 2001)

[Unfinished business](#)
(The Economist, 19 Feb. 2002)

[Conflict Prevention Initiative - Central Asia Portal](#)

to the field. As several interviewees indicated, some of these agencies pose serious threats to the effectiveness of many well-established programs that have existed in Afghanistan for years. Unscrupulous agencies have begun to snatch away long-time workers from both local and international NGOs by doubling and tripling traditional salaries, causing a loss of institutional memory and generalized wage inflation. The trend is particularly damaging to the Afghan government, which typically pays its employees far less than many NGOs or international organizations. It also seems to be occurring despite pledges by major Western donors to limit funding to agencies with little or no prior experience in Afghanistan. Other problems also exist. As one aid worker said:

“A very negative aspect (of the influx of new agencies) is that they have helped to make aid operations for the already established organizations difficult. While we assume (these organizations) are a temporary phenomena, they have disturbed the other established organizations’ long-term activities by short-term emergency and relief operations, by depriving these organizations of their committed staff by paying higher salaries, by fiercely helping to raise the cost of living, especially the house rents in the major cities, which makes it impossible for the other established NGOs to pay for the high rents. House rents in Kabul have probably become the highest in the world.”

Rent inflation

Wildly inflated rents are a particular problem. The head of one international NGO that has been working in Afghanistan for two decades complained that the agency would have to curtail education (for women teacher training and health education programs) because its landlord in Kabul has suddenly jacked the agency’s rent from \$1,000 to \$15,000. ACBAR, the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, said it has been told to pay \$7,000 per month in rent or face eviction.

These stories are neither unusual, nor limited to Kabul. All of the NGOs spoken to for this study reported similar increases in rent, a trend occurring not only because of rent-seeking landlords in the cities. As interviewees noted, the source of the problem is that donor governments, UN agencies, and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) have been too willing to accept such prices. Those most hurt by the rising rents are, of course, local Afghan NGOs, the very agencies that the international community wants to nurture in its

attempts to develop civil society. “It is really bad for us NGOs that have been here for a long time. They are destroying everything,” said the head of one reputed aid agency.

Weak coordination

Chaos among coordination mechanisms has accompanied the rush to Kabul and the cities. While many NGOs are participating in coordination meetings, veteran NGOs state that this participation does not translate into real cooperation. “Everybody talks about coordination but nobody cooperates,” said Azizurrahman Rafiee, program manager at ACBAR. Part of the problem is the inheritance of an extremely complex coordination system that was developed over the last decade which new players have yet to understand. In addition, new coordination mechanisms are in the works or have recently been added, creating uncertainty for everyone involved.

Several interviewees argued that these problems stemmed from donors. While donors themselves explained that the reason for not cooperating related to the proven slowness and general inefficiency of the current coordination bodies, those representing the coordination side have emphasized that donors exacerbate the system’s inefficiency by not cooperating. While both sides of this argument have a point, it must be noted that interviewees on the donor, UN, and NGO sides all agree that international assistance can only be made to work if coordination improves. As it stands, implementing agencies are not currently evaluated against their effective involvement in coordination systems, a fact which could be addressed.

The result of the confusion has been overlap, inconsistency, and in some cases increasing social tensions. DACAAR, the Danish relief agency, for example, which has been working in Afghanistan for two decades, has been engaged in cost recovery programs in Ghazni province that have made the program more viable over the long run and increased community involvement. According to DACAAR, new agencies have arrived near some of its areas of operation and are now giving out goods at no cost, spoiling long-standing relations with local communities, who accuse DACAAR of corruption. Other agencies setting up operations in the immediate vicinity are also attempting to poach workers. “Some agencies are absolutely ruthless,” said the head of one agency. “We have been here for 20 years. Suddenly a new agency comes in and doubles the amount they will pay in salary... I’ve never seen anything like it. They are doing more harm than good.”

For more information on
DACAAR, please click
[here](#)

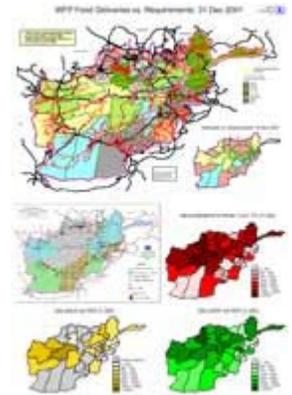
Overemphasis on Short-Term Emergency Aid, Especially Food Aid

Many aid workers noted that the biggest problems in Afghanistan are related to both security and the pressing need to provide Afghan citizens with more buying power. However, much of the donors' attentions remain focused on short-term emergency funding food distributions in urban centers. These food programs are causing NGOs to spend large amounts of time on monitoring and logistics when labor and capital might be better used elsewhere in much needed cash-for-work programs. Food programs are also ensuring that populations in urban camps remain high.

One aid worker explains: "Food aid in some places is OK. It is very important, but it is a mistake to say that Afghanistan has nothing and is solely dependent on food aid. The country's human and natural resources can easily be tapped to yield a good result."

Aid workers were quick to note that pockets of extreme hunger do exist in Afghanistan, and particularly in remote rural areas that depend on rain-fed agricultural production. Nonetheless, many areas of the country are not confronted with a humanitarian emergency, a fact which flies in the face of some donor impressions that all Afghans face starvation unless food aid is delivered immediately. As one aid worker said: "People feel very confident in assisting the Afghans and are trying to do all kinds of positive actions, but these will have negative impacts if they do not prepare them well. Preparedness is the most important, but of course people never do that..."

Part of the problem seems to be the desire by agencies to implement quick impact projects (or QUIPS). Some argue, however, that QUIPS are reinforcing the short-term, hand-out mentality and are encouraging new waves of displacement. "Everybody has decided all of a sudden that Afghanistan is an emergency, so lots of feeding programs are being started, even though the situation has not changed that much... Basically, all it is doing is causing more people to turn up in the camps."



Click [here](#) to see larger food deliveries map

USAID Announces \$15 Million in Quick-Impact Programs for Afghanistan's Reconstruction
(USAID, 29 Jan. 2002)

*Food Aid and Misguided Incentives
One Example among Others: WFP's Food-for-Education Program*

Several agencies said an influx of new food aid initiatives are already damaging local programming. The World Food Program's nationwide move to begin food-for-education programming illustrates this point. Both local and international aid workers vehemently objected to the food-for-education programs that WFP is now initiating in preparation for the opening of the new school year on March 21. Interviewees said these programs will siphon off students enrolled in the schools run by NGOs such as the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA), which has not traditionally refused give away free food. Agencies such as SCA have argued that food-for-education programs can send the wrong signal about the reason for going to school. Such programs, they say, have also been proven to provide massive incentives for corruption as teachers and school administrators are led to inflate enrollments and engage in other rent-seeking behavior in order to obtain more wheat. As it stands, the desire for education is so strong that food-for-education programs seem unnecessary, but WFP has persisted in the idea. Some interviewees suspected this is because the organization is under donor pressure to move significant quantities of food aid into the country.

Association of Military and Humanitarian Operations

U.S. and other military actors have an important role to play in providing security in Afghanistan, rebuilding infrastructure and providing support to key humanitarian missions. However, military forces engaged in the latter activities are often working in unidentified civilian clothing, a practice will lead to confusion for many Afghans about the vital distinctions between military operations and neutral and impartial humanitarian operations. Such confusion may ultimately endanger the security of humanitarian workers if Afghan factions cannot distinguish between the two very different types of personnel and their radically different missions.

For more information on WFP activities in Afghanistan, please click on the following links:

[WFP in Afghanistan: From Relief to Rehabilitation](#)
(WFP, ReliefWeb, 26 Feb. 2002)

[WFP Afghanistan update on humanitarian situation No. 57 - WFP Plans for School Feeding](#)
(WFP, ReliefWeb, 26 Feb. 2002)

A Continuing Culture of Impunity

Aside from these problems, an ongoing culture of impunity related to widespread violations of human rights continues to persist. Few in the international community have expressed a real desire to tackle the issue of suspected war crimes and rights abuses committed by forces armed by the U.S.-led coalition that helped overthrow the Taliban. This dangerous trend will likely jeopardize the vital protection role that humanitarian agencies also have, leading to further insecurity and rights abuses, and creating a situation in which the provision of humanitarian assistance is easily jeopardized. New trends of persecution of Pashtuns in certain areas of the country further indicate that this trend has not been reversed.

Footnotes:

¹ The UN Inter-Agency Appeal for 2001; lamented this trend in funding: “Key lessons...were the missed opportunities to mitigate against the effects of the drought. Funding and implementation of assistance activities of a longer-term nature that support and strengthen agricultural productive capacity could have gone a long way to reduce the suffering and hardship that is currently being experienced by virtue of the drought in Afghanistan.”

Recommendations and Observations

Afghanistan has embarked upon a vital journey towards social, economic and political reconstruction. To facilitate this journey, the international community's investment in Afghanistan must strive toward the ultimate goal of promoting stability and rehabilitating civil society in the country. As this takes place, humanitarian agencies seeking to meet the immediate needs of Afghans have entered a new era posing a new set of challenges. The combined challenge of addressing Afghanistan's long-term goals and short-term humanitarian needs has several implications for humanitarian agencies:

1. *Agencies should reconsider the general assessment that Afghanistan's greatest need is for a large-scale provision of emergency aid. Instead, a longer-term, more nuanced approach that considers the urgent need for economic opportunities is needed.*

As confirmed by a number of the practitioners interviewed, the primary need in Afghanistan is not for a massive influx of emergency aid. While some areas and certain populations do urgently need short-term humanitarian assistance, the larger problem is that many families lack the economic means to purchase food and other goods in markets. For this reason, agencies should make greater efforts to accurately assess and address the true needs of accessible populations.

Related to this is the fact that weather conditions, landmines, or poor security make the provision of urgently needed assistance difficult in many mountainous rural areas. Agencies must be careful not to divert food reserves needed in these regions to urban or other areas where access is easier. Such short-term assistance in urban areas, often motivated by a desire to generate quick and impressive humanitarian impact, not only invites corruption, but also disrupts markets, encourages displacement among inaccessible rural populations, increases dependence, and damages fragile long-term programming to rehabilitate local economies. A much greater emphasis on long-term, market-based programming should be placed on these more accessible areas. Such programming can help create incentives that do not exist when aid agencies dump massive amounts of easily-monetized commodities into an economy.

2. *Agencies should not use food as a currency for services or as an incentive for education.*

In the Afghan context, agencies should refrain from injecting food into the social and economic system as a "currency" or incentive for services. Wherever possible, direct employment projects should be used instead of food-for-services programs. In contrast to other contexts where political and logistical contingencies may prevent direct cash payments, such as North Korea or Somalia, and where food-for-service represents a viable alternative to development aid, Afghanistan needs tangible and substantive support (in both resources and strategic planning) for the reconstruction of its economy and infrastructure. Food aid can do little to address these needs, and can run counter to them by discouraging local agricultural production in a predominantly rural, agrarian society.

Recommendations and Observations

Agencies should consider refraining from food-for-education programs in particular. While food-for-education programs can help increase enrollment rates among girls in conservative areas, it tends to send the message to families that education is not a value in and of itself. In post-Taliban Afghanistan, the problem is not the lack of demand for education. Demand, in fact, far outstrips the supply. Food aid, when used in this way, should be highly targeted to reach the most vulnerable populations, and should be particularly focused on rural areas, and must be monitored closely.

- 3. Aid agencies should reaffirm their commitment to the implementation of codes of conduct and set up mechanisms to better coordinate their deployment and activities.*

Stories of agencies offering double or triple salaries for aid workers and paying astronomical rents in urban centers indicate that aid agencies should consider re-affirming their commitment to the full implementation of codes of humanitarian conduct. These include the Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, as well as the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and its set of standards. Significant efforts should be devoted to creating mechanisms through which the impact of the deployment of aid agencies on communities can be properly assessed and addressed. Participation of community leaders and local organizations in this process is vital.

Donors have a vital role in this process. As several interviewees for this study noted, the only way that international assistance can be made to work is if implementing agencies are evaluated against their effective involvement in coordination systems. Only donors can impose this behavior, by making their grants conditional on coordination. Experience suggests that voluntary memoranda of agreement or protocols can only do so much in this context. It is, ultimately, in the long-term interests of donors to create mechanisms that ensure the aid operations they fund are efficient and effective.

Regarding operational coordination, aid agencies should consider streamlining coordination efforts and supporting a common programming approach at the field level. Too often, coordination is carried out at a managerial and planning level with minimal inputs from the field, where most of the benefit of better coordination could be obtained. The coordination schemes among donors, UN agencies, and NGOs need to be better organized in order to avoid duplication, and their connection with existing operations in the field should be asserted to make them more effective.

- 4. Aid agencies should adopt safeguards to prevent the politicization of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.*

Despite the recent political developments in the country, the prospects for peace in Afghanistan are still overshadowed by serious concerns regarding the viability of the interim administration as well as insecurity in the regions. Aid agencies should ensure that the programming of their activities remains firmly out of the grasp of donor politics, so that these agencies can remain independent, neutral, and impartial.

Recommendations and Observations

The dialogue with the AIA, donors, and political counterparts within the UN system should remain focused on professional operational criteria and the strict requirements of humanitarian assistance. Competitiveness for funding opportunities should not override the agencies' professionalism in the planning and deployment of their activities. In this context, "principled programming", which was in the past a platform for much politicization of humanitarian aid, should be transformed into a basis for "professional programming." Such a platform, among other criteria, should assert the independence, impartiality and neutrality of humanitarian agencies, and emphasize local participation, capacity building, and operational coordination. It should also highlight protection and human rights concerns, particularly those regarding gender.

In addition, donors should avoid bypassing coordination mechanisms and avoid filling the field with grants and quick-implementation programs that may have little relevance over the long run and may affect the viability of existing operations.

Governments involved in the international assistance mission should also clearly separate out their military activities from all humanitarian activities. The international coalition's military operations in the country have had a specific political agenda of destroying Taliban and Al-Qaida forces, something very different from the impartial and neutral role humanitarians should fill. For this reason, there is a potential for civilian humanitarian workers to become associated with the military agenda and be put in danger. Soldiers doing any kind of humanitarian or development work should only work in uniform to demarcate the work they do from the work that humanitarian agencies are doing.

5. Donors should prioritize the funding of organizations with significant experience in Afghanistan.

As interviews demonstrated, Afghanistan's complex ethnic, political and social environment makes it an extremely difficult place to initiate effective programming quickly. For this reason, donors should seriously consider limiting their funding to agencies with significant experience in the country. Such a move would help reduce the amount of competition for workers, programming and office space in urban centers, and would allow the overall humanitarian initiative to build better on existing humanitarian capacity.

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This policy brief aims at providing basic information on humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. For more information on the issues in this brief, readers are encouraged to follow the links attached to this document or to contact the Program as indicated on the cover page. This policy briefing was written by HPCR Consultant Daniel Langenkamp and Director Claude Bruderlein, with the assistance of Consultants Jolyon Leslie and Khalil Sharif, Central Asia Information Coordinator Timea Szabo, and the CPI research team.

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The Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research is a research and policy program based at the Harvard School of Public Health in Cambridge, MA. The Program is engaged in research and advisory services on humanitarian operations and the protection of civilians in conflict areas. The Program advises organizations such as the United Nations, governments, and non-governmental actors and focuses on the protection of vulnerable groups, conflict prevention, strategic planning for human security, and the role of information technology in emergency response. HPCR was established in August 2000 with the support of the Government of Switzerland and in cooperation with the United Nations.