



A Study of NGO Relations with Government and Communities in Afghanistan

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Definitions and Glossary of Terms

<i>Arbab</i>	The head of a village
<i>Ma'arif</i>	Head of a Provincial Education Department
<i>Mullah</i>	A religious teacher or leader
<i>Sharwali welayat</i>	Provincial Municipality
<i>Shura</i>	A council or association, generally made up of elders
<i>Wali</i>	Provincial Governor
<i>Wolayat</i>	Province
ANDS	The Afghanistan National Development Strategy lays out the strategic priorities and mechanisms for achieving the Government's development vision. An interim version (I-ANDS) of this strategy was presented to the international community in January 2006. After further development and consultation a full ANDS will be published by mid-2008.
CDC	Community Development Council
NSP	National Solidarity Programme: A Government initiative that provides funding for small infrastructure projects in local communities. To obtain funding, communities must form democratically elected community development councils (CDCs). CDCs propose projects and manage implementation. The programme is managed through the provincial Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development office. NGOs ¹ , usually with experience in the particular region, are employed as facilitating partners and assist in developing CDCs, which then identify projects and manage their implementation. Projects must go through the MRRD head office in Kabul before final approval.

¹ Most facilitating partners are NGOs, however UN Habitat is also a facilitating partner for the National Solidarity Programme.

“Our aim is not to replace Government. Only a government can take forward a country and deliver for its own people. But there are large gaps as to what governments can do in poorer countries. NGOs’ role is to work at the local level and gather information to provide to the government at the national level”.

Oxfam UK Head, speaking at an Open Forum in Kabul: “The Role of NGOs in Afghanistan” August 2006

Abstract

This paper looks at the relationship between provincial and central government actors, communities and NGOs² in order to articulate the existing tensions between them. How do NGOs engage with provincial and local government structures, which in Afghanistan often exist in the most nascent of forms and where building government capacity is the overriding challenge facing the international community? Do NGOs challenge the government to be more service oriented? What effect is NGO assistance having on communities’ perceptions of government and the relations between the central and provincial government actors? What causes variety and what are the principle determinants of attitude?

Research undertaken in three provinces (Herat, Balkh and Kabul) will examine these dynamics and conclude that relations and perceptions are determined by a combination of factors relating to both the make-up of local government and of the NGOs themselves. A number of studies have been undertaken relating to NGOs and the dilemmas they face in this country. This paper builds on these and aims to challenge both NGOs and the Afghan Government to look at what their relationship could be – what they are trying to achieve in engaging with each other, and how can they best go about it in different ways. It is imperative that the Government and the NGO sector continue to strive to find an effective working relationship in order to improve the lives of the Afghan people.

Methodology

The findings in this paper are based on an inductive qualitative research strategy, including observations, structured, semi-structured interviews and group discussions. The objective of the data collection was to build up a composite picture of perceptions and relations among NGO workers, community members and government officials. Research was carried out over the course of three months and interviews were held at both the village level and throughout the various government ministries in three provinces: Herat, Balkh and Kabul. Interviews with both national and international NGOs were undertaken

² In this paper, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are those agencies which are members of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, and which have pledged adherence to the NGO Code of Conduct and the NGO Law. There are currently 95 member of ACBAR.

in all three provinces, as well as meetings with various central government ministers and representatives. The total number of interviews conducted in communities and in the provincial capitals was approximately sixty³. In addition, short, informal interviews were carried out with a number of people with a working knowledge of the development sector in Afghanistan. In order to widen the scope and perspective of the study and obtain as full a picture as possible within the research time frame, research was undertaken in both communities benefiting from the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), and those that were not. In Herat, a number of villages that had not yet participated in the NSP were visited. In Balkh, the communities visited had just begun working with NSP, although no projects had yet got underway. Both NGOs working as Facilitating Partners in the NSP, as well as those not participating in the program were interviewed.

The paper will be divided into three main parts with a number of sub-sections: the first part will examine relations between NGOs and government actors. NGOs are often relied upon by both the government and the people to deliver basic services and assist communities in areas where the people would like to see more government involvement. The second and third parts will deal with community and government perceptions and aim to determine what influences positive or negative attitudes towards NGOs with the aim of improving relations between NGOs, communities and the Afghan Government.

³ A group discussion is counted as a single interview.

Part I NGO-Government Relations

1.1 Overview of the NGO Working Environment in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is undoubtedly one of the most difficult countries for NGOs to work in. From the poor security environment, to having to share an operational space with military actors and working with a weak and, at times, hostile government, NGOs must find a space in which they can work effectively in order to assist the country's poorest and most vulnerable people.

In the past year there has been a considerable increase in insecurity and violence, which is having a serious impact on NGO activities⁴. Many have had to scale down their work or suspend operations in areas where before they were able to operate, and the number of NGO workers that have been threatened, kidnapped or attacked has increased significantly⁵. It is estimated that 4000 people have died so far this year in Afghanistan due to the continuing conflict.⁶ Persistent fighting and instability in certain parts of the country is undermining long-term development efforts.

In addition to the continued insecurity, NGOs must now develop their programming in line with the Afghan Government's national development policies. Many NGOs are involved in national priority programmes, such as the National Solidarity Programme or

⁴ So far none have pulled out of the country, with the exception in 2004 of Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF) in response to the government's reluctant / lack of investigation into the deaths of four MSF staff in western Afghanistan.

⁵ According to the BAAG Afghanistan Briefing in September 2006, 28 NGO workers were killed in the first 8 months of 2006, compared to a total of 31 killed for the whole of 2005. World Vision have also lost four of their staff this year in Badghis and Ghor provinces in western Afghanistan.

⁶ See news source available at: http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20061213/ap_on_re_as/afghan_special-forces-1

the National Emergency Employment Programme (NEEP)⁷. Whilst supporting the government's development efforts is necessary in order to help develop and improve services, provide training and improve planning processes, this collaboration with the government poses a number of problems for NGOs. One issue relates to the security of NGO staff, as they are seen to be working alongside the government, which is often the principle target of insurgents' attacks. Another issue is that it also entails an uncustomary collaboration with sometimes hostile, corrupt and/or ineffectual government ministries.

NGOs by definition are independent, impartial and neutral agencies, which provide relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and / or development assistance. NGO-State relations across the globe have occasionally been tense, where a government has been fearful of being substituted by NGOs and/or exposed for a lack of accountability and transparency with donor or public funds. Governments may also view NGOs as competitive rivals for donor funding. Whilst the mandates, organizational structures and approaches will differ between agencies, NGOs generally work at the grass roots level to provide aid, services and information both to those in need and to a wider audience of policy-makers, state organizations and donor agencies.

However the situation in Afghanistan is such that many NGOs increasingly find themselves in the position of having to redefine their roles, not least because they must operate in an environment where (1) military and quasi-military actors are carrying out humanitarian and development work, and (2) uncustomary collaboration with the government is necessary. The nature of both these new dynamics compromises the very principles upon which non-governmental organizations base their work. "NGOs working in intensified political engagements who seek to punch above their weight in peacebuilding terms face a constant dilemma, of on the one hand maintaining their neutrality and keeping a distance from the fray, and on the other hand being sufficiently embedded to understand and influence the key agents of change"⁸. Although broad contextual forces may shape the NGO sector at the national level and define its aggregate character, local conditions and institutional behaviour are fundamental to explaining the different approaches taken by NGOs operating in Afghanistan.

NGOs' principles of neutrality and independence from both the government and the military are therefore increasingly being called into question.

The pressure NGOs find themselves under in Afghanistan is considerable. Whilst the political or security environments are beyond the control of agencies working in the field, certain aspects of NGO work can be made less complex, such as an improved relationship with the government. Various studies have pointed out the extent to which NGOs are viewed negatively in Afghanistan. By examining and understanding the reasons for this, and the current dynamics between the government and NGOs, a more effective and harmonious relationship might be attained.

⁷ 80% of NGO work is currently concentrated on national priority government programmes, as donor funding is increasingly channeled through the government – for more information, see the ACBAR Briefing Paper November 2006.

⁸ Goodhand (2006): *NGOs and the Dynamics of Conflict and Peacebuilding*

NGO Roles

A senior programme advisor from the Swedish Committee in Kabul recently asked “what is our role now as NGOs? We used to deliver services. NGOs are almost becoming contract takers. Donors are now pushing for advocacy and capacity building, but how much money can be spent on capacity building workshops?” It might be further be asked how effective such workshops will be without effective, systematic reforms to government ministries and the civil service.

The *Joint Evaluation: Humanitarian and Reconstruction to Afghanistan* prepared by five donors countries pointed out: “Capacity building has been mainly devoted to the central level ministries led by ministers, whose importance is recognized by the international community. Priority has been given to ‘getting the job done’, outpacing time and resources for the transfer of knowledge and skills. It is critical that the efforts in the future should focus on long-term and sustainable capacity building⁹.”

A recent ACBAR Briefing Paper¹⁰ recognizes that both donors and the Afghan Government are now pushing for state-led service delivery due to concerns that NGO programmes create the potential for parallel structures, which inhibit capacity building and threaten the legitimacy of the State. However the State does not have the capacity to provide services and, as the paper suggests, current service providers must be identified, and a comprehensive picture gained of how are where they are operating. Plans for scaling up service provision can then be built around this¹¹. Within this structure, ways must be found to build government capacity.

Challenges posed by the Government

According to a recent study¹², there remain a great number of significant challenges to developing the surviving administrative structures into an efficient and fiscally affordable civil service focused on the delivery of key services in what remains a very complex, aid-dependent post-conflict environment. Given the increase in violence many would argue the term ‘post-conflict’ is not applicable.

In addition to a difficult working environment, where perceptions of NGOs are often negative, the boundaries between different actors are blurred and more importantly the roles of these different actors operating within the country is unclear to the Afghan population. One significant obstacle faced by NGOs working in Afghanistan is that the government has the ability to facilitate or obstruct NGO operations. Whilst governments

⁹ A Joint Evaluation: Humanitarian and Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan, 2001-2005 (undertaken by Denmark, Ireland, The Netherlands, Sweden and the UK).

¹⁰ ACBAR Briefing Paper November 2006: *Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan: At a Crossroads*

¹¹ The same paper also suggest that donors give financial support for the processes which will enable agencies to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of their interventions.

¹² Lister in AREU Briefing Paper (September 2006): *Moving Forward? Assessing Public Administration Reform in Afghanistan*

the world over tend to regulate NGO activities, according to one NGO representative in Kabul, “NGOs are constantly required to jump through hoops, and whilst NGOs face this everywhere, in Afghanistan things seem to be even more bureaucratic”.

According to a recent law designed to address NGO accountability and transparency and ostensibly to enhance coordination, NGOs must consult with the government before they can implement projects. Whilst these procedures are of course standard and enable the government to keep track of NGO operations, this system must be revised and made more efficient as it is currently hampering NGOs’ ability to implement projects in a timely manner. Both NGOs and the government should be sharing the same objective: to prioritize assistance to beneficiaries. A number of NGO representatives interviewed stated that proposals had been sitting on government employees’ desks for months without comment or action. They stated that communication was poor and e-mails go unanswered. An international NGO programme manager in Balkh stated: “The problem comes when you require something from the government. The bureaucracy is overwhelming. They want NGOs to solve problems but then you need their response and you don’t get it. Our NGO sent two or three emergency proposals months ago, but I haven’t been able to contact anyone in the last three weeks. They demand that you hurry up but then they don’t deliver”.

One NGO Country Director expressed her frustration with the inefficiency within the ministries: “ the relationship can be very inefficient and time consuming. For example, it has taken six months to sign an MoU. We started the project regardless in the end, thanks to the provincial governor in the area where we were working. But why is it taking the government so long to sign this? Are they waiting for a bribe?” This highlights the difficult dynamic between the central Ministry of Economy and provincial government. Frustration at the provincial level at their own inability to move ahead due to slow responses with projects is causing significant resentment on many levels¹³. The interviewee continued: “Each time you go to the Ministry of Economy to find out what the status of the MoU is, you end up talking to someone different. It is extremely time consuming. The structure and personnel change so often in the government, it’s impossible to build up relations with the government. Things are made difficult for NGOs at so many levels: customs clearances, motor vehicle registration, energy, leases...”

The complicated nature of the Afghan Government’s relationship with NGOs is key to understanding the possibilities that exist for agencies operating here to have a meaningful role in the reconstruction and development of the country. This is the fundamental issue here: the Afghan Government is weak, with very limited outreach; its institutions, particularly at the provincial and district levels, are in desperate need of rebuilding and strengthening. At the same time the Government relies on NGOs, which have retained capacity and are the dominant service providers, particularly in Health, Education and Agriculture.¹⁴ Therefore NGOs, to a great extent, must find a balance whereby they rely

¹³ This issue will be expanded upon in part 3.

¹⁴ The following footnote is taken from the 2005 ACBAR ADF statement and outlines some of the main tenets of NGOs: “NGOs’ overarching purpose is to alleviate poverty and ensure community development on a sustainable basis. This means helping communities to establish mechanisms and skills to ensure an

on their own experience and initiative to assist people, whilst respecting the legitimate role of the Government and working to build its capacity. A more respectful and clearly defined partnership between both sectors will improve the effectiveness of their efforts.

1.2 NGO Relations with the Government

Establishing an effective, coordinated working relationship with the Afghan Government at the central, provincial and district levels will be one of the most important aspects of NGO work over the next few years.

Research in the provinces under study revealed that relations between NGOs and government officials varied. Generally, it was found that the most effective working relations had been established where NGOs had worked to involve government personnel by informing them about their intended programmes and plans and by inviting them to events such as trainings and project inaugurations/celebrations. Relations also tended to be good between the government and agencies that had a long-standing presence in the area.

According to an international NGO agricultural programme manager in Herat, relations with the provincial government are generally good, but frustrated by expectations and low capacity. “The agricultural line ministry here is good at identifying crises; but the criticism they make of NGOs is often unfounded. Their criticisms are of a technical nature and there is little regard to the long-term sustainability of projects. Their minds are on emergency responses. The local government here view NGOs as a source of cash, but underestimate the technical expertise that NGOs bring. We work closely with the ministry and often offer technical advice – but the government’s capacity is incredibly low. Their access to facilities, equipment and training is very limited. Working procedures and assets are a huge problem. The way we go about working with the government here is to identify their problems and formulate our responses based on these: a significant percentage of our work is spent on extension (planning techniques, best practices). We initially hired agronomists and even hired them away from the government, but we see now that we have a responsibility to build government capacity.”

In Balkh, an international NGO representative stated that their relationship with the government at the provincial level was tense: “things are tense because there is a difference in approach with the government. The government expects things from NGOs that they can’t possibly do. For example the government are asking us to provide water in parts of the province where we don’t work. We aren’t able to and they are annoyed with us. This has been the issue in the last couple of months.”

equitable and sustainable use of assets provided to communities. NGOs work to provide services and implement programmes in a wide range of areas, including health and nutrition, education and vocational training, women and children’s development, employment generation, community development and governance support, rural development, water and sanitation and so on. NGOs do not make any financial profits.

The NGO representative continued: “Another problem is that the government has no connection with the NGOs working here”. In light of the government’s logistical constraints at the provincial level, perhaps NGOs could make a point of maintaining regular contact with provincial authorities, by arranging meetings once or twice a month to inform the government of their activities.”¹⁵

“There is also an information problem: there is no long-term ongoing assessment of the needs of communities. When villagers go to the provincial governor with emergencies, these get passed on to us because the government can’t deal with them. We end up with emergency cases, which turn out to be energy issues (no electricity, etc.). It’s not that the government doesn’t care, they do tend to understand issues and check facts. But there seems to be an in-built inability to react. The government doesn’t seem to have had any training.”

Given the low level of capacity in the civil service and the limited number of skilled labour for the public sector, the training and development of existing and future civil servants presents an enormous challenge. According to one study¹⁶, training has so far mostly been delivered in Kabul at the level of individual ministries and has mainly consisted of ad hoc, supply driven and uncoordinated initiatives. There have been a number of donor funded government training and reform programs, some of which have had some degree of success, whilst others have been discontinued (due to a combination of factors including a lack of political commitment, corruption and the severely low levels of government capacity).

One of the most important issues at stake with regards to improving public administration is the need to make public service providers more accountable to beneficiaries, as this will eventually lead to demands for an improved public administration, although this is likely to be a very slow process. Lessons from other countries show how social accountability measures can improve public service provision, which as one study¹⁷ states, should be the end goal of public administration reform. Initiatives such as social audits, citizen report cards, community scorecards and user-committees have all helped citizens hold public administrations accountable. This is an area where NGOs could play a significant role, by helping to improve citizens’ ability to demand better public services.¹⁸

A national NGO worker in Balkh was more enthusiastic about relations with the government: “yes, capacity in the government is weak but we have a good relationship with them, especially with the Ministry of Economy. They regularly participate in meetings. The government supports our activities. We were recently awarded second place for services rendered to the agricultural sector”.

¹⁵ This is an issue of great importance and will be examined in greater detail in part 3.

¹⁶ S. Massing and A. Bari (November 2005): *Capacity Development during political Transitions – the Case of Afghanistan*

¹⁷ AREU (September 2006): *Moving Forward Assessing Public Administration Reform*

¹⁸ Ibid.

In Kabul, one senior programme advisor for an international NGO which has been in country for a good number of years offered a more positive view of their relations with the government, however one which highlights the confusion of what their role should now be: “the interesting thing is that the Education Department is inviting us more and more to provide expertise and advice. We are wondering whether the government has simply been confused as to what type of partnership it wants with us, but recently their advisors have seemed more confident. We are thinking that they are looking at the possibility of having more of a strategic partnership with NGOs.”

Government officials interviewed for this study often had negative views, but which were somewhat contradictory. When asked about their relations with NGOs, most initially responded negatively: “NGOs get a lot of money but their work is not effective. Most of the donor money is spent on luxurious lifestyles for their staff”¹⁹. Throughout the course of the interviews, most government respondents ended up by saying that they very much relied on NGOs and needed their help: “Our government is still weak and it will take time to respond to the needs of the communities. Therefore we do rely on NGOs”.²⁰

Information on what NGOs have done and are doing to assist the government is clearly not widely known, neither at the central or provincial levels. NGO support has been given to the government in a number of forms, through physical infrastructure creation, service delivery, development of professional resources within the government, building civil society by increasing individuals’ capacity to be responsible, active citizens and the development of information resources. Furthermore, as mentioned above, NGOs have played an important role in assisting in the development and implementation of national government programmes, such as the National Solidarity Program (NSP), the National Emergency Employment Program (NEEP), the Rural Expansion of Afghan Community Health (REACH) and alternative livelihood programmes.²¹ The Ministry of Public Health contracts most of its public health services to NGOs, with USAID and World Bank funding. The Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS) is the official policy of the MoPH, and is undertaken by NGOs in areas where there are no government health services and where people are living in underserved areas.

Yet mistrust and resentment are still very much prevalent amongst the vast majority of government personnel outside of Kabul. This is largely a result of either being misinformed, or not knowing what NGOs do. This was clearly stated at the Afghan Development Forum last year²², and must be reiterated once again: both the government and NGOs must work to alter this negative image and provide clear, strong facts on what NGOs’ roles are. Without a public statement from the government recognizing the legitimate role of NGOs and civil society in the reconstruction and development efforts of the country, NGOs’ work will continue to be severely undermined.

1.3 Tense Relations Undermining Development Efforts

¹⁹ Head of the Provincial Council, Herat

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ 2005 ACBAR ADF statement

²² ACBAR statement for ADF 2005

NGOs clearly feel frustrated with the government's lack of trust in them and more significantly, the lack of skilled and trained staff within the government. A national NGO director in Herat stated: "If NGOs don't take over service provision and project implementation, who will do it? The government simply does not have the capacity. I feel sorry for the government. Sometimes, for example, computers are donated to them. But I know that there is no one in the government who can use these computers."

Government personnel, on the other hand, feel frustrated with, and in some cases threatened by NGO staff: for the most part they feel excluded from NGOs' plans and activities in their areas and resentful that donors choose to channel funds through NGOs instead of through them.

In some cases, these feelings are legitimate, in others they are not. The relationship is of course complex and different in many cases.

As a result, the government is increasingly trying to regulate NGO activities and makes little public show of support or encouragement to NGOs.

One step that was taken in response to growing government criticism of NGOs was the NGO law, promulgated last year in a bid to ensure greater transparency and accountability, as well as to improve the quality of assistance provided by NGOs.

A senior NGO advisor in Herat pointed out: "You cannot deny the knowledge that someone in the field has. The role NGOs have is crucial. They can identify why and how a system is failing". Indeed, fears about government intentions towards NGOs is marginalizing their relatively better access to public opinion, which in the absence of a more systematic polling, is a precious planning resource given the nature of the task confronting assistance agencies.²³ The government should encourage NGOs to carry out public opinion and needs assessments in order to gain an understanding of community concerns; in turn NGOs should share this information with the government so that it is better able to respond to people's needs. Again, the issue highlighted here is the lack of information between the government and the people. One idea might be that both the government and NGOs work together to set up media initiatives such as radio broadcasts including interviews with both community leaders and government representatives to promote a flow of information.

1.4 Involving the Government

Many provincial government representatives complained that there was not enough collaboration between the ministries and NGOs. In some cases, this is certainly so.

The NGO respondent mentioned above acknowledged this but further stressed the importance of going through the right channels – as the NGO he works for does - when

²³ Stockton, N (2002) AREU Issue Paper Series: *Strategic Coordination in Afghanistan*

implementing a programme or project: “First, a problem is identified and discussed with local farmers, *shuras* and the village *arbab*. Then the project is discussed with the Ministry of Economy, who then write a letter to the district governor, *wali* or relevant authority, outlining the project and stating our NGO’s intended involvement.”

The point here is that whilst NGOs might have the best intentions and want to get a project underway rapidly in order to meet the needs of beneficiaries, it is very important that they consult with the ‘right’ people beforehand so that the government doesn’t feel undermined or sidelined. NGOs can discuss this with the line Ministry of Economy in order to get advice on whom best to contact. Whilst this might be viewed as time consuming and unnecessary in some cases, these simple formalities and shows of respect can have an immeasurably positive impact on NGO-government relations.

A similar view on not involving the government enough was expressed by a national programme manager from another large NGO, which has been working in Afghanistan since the early 1980s: “It is extremely important to involve the government when implementing projects. NGOs should include the government in their activities, invite them to events, to see different projects. We have a good relationship with the government, and we invite them to our events and trainings. We also send them a monthly progress report; so far we have had no feedback on these reports, but we continue to send them. For us the most important aspect is the sustainability of projects. We are aware that one day the government will take over and therefore we must foster links with the government now.”

Various government ministers at the provincial level stated that the relationships that worked the best in their view, were the ones where the NGOs kept them informed of their programmes, future plans and essentially kept them in the picture. One senior advisor to an NGO in Herat put: “Many NGOs don’t involve the government in their work. Both the government and NGOs have responsibilities. The government should focus more on a coordinating role to bring NGOs together. NGOs should build government capacity.”

The Minister of Agriculture in Herat posited that one of the most important areas concerning relations with NGOs was the lack of coordination: “only two organizations here in Herat coordinate with us. There are lots of NGOs working in agriculture yet very little coordination happens with us. There is always promise of coordination but in practice very little is done. We know where certain projects should be happening. NGOs aren’t as familiar with communities as we are. Last year for example, saffron seeds were going to be planted in Injil district, but then they were put elsewhere by NGOs. There needs to be coordination between us. We just want to be in the picture”.

Whilst some will contest this assertion, the minister’s sentiment that the government simply wants to be in the picture, rather than having total control, reaffirms the government’s feelings of being undermined and sidelined. It also presents an example of poor coordination and development goals being undermined.

A leading member of a national NGO based in Kabul stressed the need for NGOs to engage with all local actors, not just with the government. “Often, NGOs come into an area where they are not well established and they don’t even bother to get to know the tribal elders and the people who have the most influence. NGOs should spend time and money getting to know the communities in which they work, invite them to lunches and always discuss their plans with them.” He added the importance of NGOs establishing their presence and legitimacy: “NGOs should engage in activities and offer projects such as building mosques or something like this. Get people onside and gain their trust, build respect. Donors must understand the context in Afghanistan and give more leverage to NGOs to engage in such activities. NGOs need to adopt a more local approach.”

Part II Community Perceptions

2.1 Community Perceptions of NGOs and Government

A commonly held view as to why perceptions of NGOs are negative is that Afghans have an inherent distrust of foreigners. One international aid worker in Kabul put forward that projects were generally received better in local communities by national NGOs. However a senior advisor to a large international organization also working in Kabul rebuked this: “where decent, professionally staffed and well trained NGOs have been operating, results have been good, regardless of whether they are national or international agencies. This contrasts with the South, where projects have been implemented through big contractors, and outcomes have been negligible. Vast amounts of funding are being tied up in these large contractor’s overheads. Good qualified and well respected NGOs are doing a tremendous job and where outcomes are good, the local population views NGOs favourably. Perceptions of NGOs are linked to the outcomes of the projects they implement.”

Findings in Herat suggest that people want to see more government involvement and presence in communities. However people generally rely more on NGOs to provide them with services than they do on the government.

In Gozara district in Herat, a number of villagers, *arbabs* and *shura* leaders were asked whether they were happy with the assistance provided them by NGOs, and what they thought of the government. All of those interviewed responded that the work undertaken by NGOs in their village had been well received and people were grateful for the assistance, although many stated that they would prefer the government working in their communities.

One complaint was that NGOs had implemented projects regardless of what villagers had asked of them. “An organization came to our village to ask us for our views on what type of assistance we needed, but then they did what they wanted”²⁴. It is imperative that NGOs listen to beneficiaries and consider their requests, only then proceeding to seek an

²⁴ Herat, Gozara district, Gowargi village *arbab*

agreement on what will actually be done, based on NGOs' own expertise, knowledge and mandate. However in another village, a *shura* leader stated "NGOs come here and they are very straightforward; they tell us what they can provide us with, and are honest with us. They are hard-working and regularly supervise the projects they are implementing".

A particular issue that came up was that in some villages where there had been a food for work programme, a UN agency had been bringing wheat, rice and *gui* to the village, but food was given to the village *arbab*, who then distributed it unfairly, according to some villagers interviewed in Gozara district. Frustration was directed at NGOs – even though they were not the implementer, the UN agency was²⁵. This type of dynamic is certainly something NGOs should be aware of: that these types of programmes, if not implemented correctly or fairly, can exacerbate existing tensions within communities, where power holders may favour certain groups over others.

All community members interviewed in Herat brought up the weakness of the government. One villager in Herat stated: "Our government is very weak and we need the support of foreigners. We need them and they should be here to support us. However NGOs should be more attentive to what communities are asking for."

2.2 Growing Community Resentment

Research showed that views of the government differed among the local population in Herat and Balkh.

In Herat, there appeared to be growing resentment towards the government for their lack of engagement in communities, some of their policies and their inability to provide services. Most villagers spoken to seemed bitter about the government: "Foreigners are working but the government isn't. People trust NGOs more than they trust the government. The government is doing nothing so we have to help ourselves".²⁶ This view was expressed a number of times. Another villager said angrily: "The government has done nothing. They have asked us to stop cultivating poppy, but in Kandahar and Helmand, they are free to cultivate it. It isn't fair".

In Balkh, however, the majority of local people spoken to, whilst not entirely happy with the government's performance, were not as resentful because the security situation in the province was good. The government's lack of engagement and services did not translate into a lack of faith or increased resentment by the local population. Those interviewed were satisfied on the whole because they felt safe. Interviewees in two villages all said they expected assistance from the government and service delivery was poor; but despite the lack of government presence in their communities, in general people were not as critical. A local district police chief stated that so far they had received nothing from the government and they desperately needed roads, electricity, water, clinics and schools. "But people are happy with the government in this province because our *wali* provides security for us".

²⁵ This example highlights the confusion regarding what NGOs are, and will be discussed in a later section.

²⁶ Herat, Gozara district, former village *arbab*

A national NGO representative in Balkh put forward his views on communities' responses: "the communities do believe in the government, but they mainly expect security from them... The people can't realistically expect much else, besides they are more closely involved with NGOs... Communities rely mostly on NGOs and express their problems more readily to them because the government doesn't come to the communities and it is felt that most problems can be solved by NGOs."²⁷

2.3 No Presence in Communities and No Long-Term Vision

This view was echoed by an NSP facilitating partner in Balkh province: "the problem is not so much with the central government as with the provinces. The government has no long-term planning strategy: they know the people, they know the area and the drought patterns [for example], but there is no long-term plan [to deal with problems such as droughts] and no presence in the communities. Whilst they know the area, the MRRD line ministry here has no idea what's going on in their communities. All the information they receive is through personal connections with villagers or influential community leaders."

This is an area of particular concern, as future government policies and programmes determined on the basis of the information derived from biased sources could have a negative affect on the local population, and risk being a source of tension or even conflict within communities.

The interviewee added: "the government has no money for transport to visit communities. What would be ideal, would be a provincial MRRD representative to come to the area where NGOs work and bridge the gap between the communities and the NGOs. The government alone has the capacity to do this. I believe donors would fund this if NGOs asked for it".

The *Ma'arif* in Balkh, who is also a member of the provincial council and a *mullah*, put forward his frustration with his own ministry's inability to access communities: "when we collect data from the communities, there are huge logistical problems. The Education Department has one vehicle. We get two hundred litres of fuel a month. We also use an old vehicle borrowed from the Governor. The government has tasked us with undertaking an education needs assessment for the whole province with this one vehicle. How can we possibly do this? Even missions from the central government's education department in Kabul request the use of our vehicles when they come here."

The fact that local government representatives cannot access districts and communities under their jurisdiction is not only severely undermining reconstruction efforts but also exacerbating tensions with NGOs. NGOs can afford to make frequent visits to local communities; provincial government actors do not have the means to travel or the

²⁷ Balkh Province, Mazar-e-Sharif, national NGO representative

capacity to undertake such an assessment with so few resources or qualified staff, and feel disempowered and resentful as a result.

The need for NGOs to share community assessments with the government is even greater in light of these issues. Without this knowledge, the government cannot develop effective programmes to address people's needs; their lack of information and understanding of the people will only further widen the gulf between government and people. Here NGOs can have a meaningful role in bridging this gap. Whilst this is not a long-term solution for the government to effectively build up its knowledge and database of information on communities, by facilitating information sharing, NGOs will help to build government management capacity and confidence.

Part III Government Perceptions and Expectations

3.1 Government Perceptions of NGOs

Provincial government views of NGOs differed significantly to those of local community members. Many government line ministers (or ministry representatives), members of the *sharwali welayat* and provincial council representatives were interviewed in both Herat and Balkh province, as well as a number of government employees in Kabul. With few exceptions, perceptions of NGOs were overwhelmingly negative.

Most people interviewed gave similar responses: "The work NGOs do is not useful. Qualified workers must work for the government, but all the best people are being recruited by NGOs due to higher salaries. All the work is being done by NGOs so the government is losing credibility".

Local community members questioned did not share these views: most were just thankful to have someone taking an interest in them and trying to help. A local villager said "we have a very good perception of NGOs, and why not? Most of the work done in our village has been done by NGOs. There are now one hundred and forty wells and we have some new schools".²⁸ Another villager stated: "People trust NGOs. People can see that money is not being wasted. Things are transparent. NGOs are doing a good job."²⁹

3.2 Government Expectations of NGOs

Whilst government representatives were quick to denigrate the work of NGOs, most line ministry personnel pointed out their understanding of why communities relied more on NGOs than on the government. "We know that the government has done nothing for the people over the past four years".

²⁸ The villager was in fact referring to a UN agency, which had been implementing a number of projects in the area, but this highlights the general confusion about what and who NGOs are, and will be discussed in a later section.

²⁹ Head of a village *shura*, Gozara district

Perceptions are often negative but despite this there are expectations at the various government levels that NGOs should provide provincial level government actors with training and capacity building. When questioned on what type of assistance was wanted from NGOs, the Balkh Provincial Council deputy head stated that they expected capacity building and workshops from NGOs. “But we also need equipment and vehicles so we can go out to the communities”.

One provincial governor stated that the work done by NGOs was poor. “We accept that the government has low capacity but it does not mean that the government cannot do anything. NGOs should share projects with the government.” This again highlights the government’s frustration and the challenge facing NGOs: government officials very much want to be a part of the reconstruction effort but through the gaping lack in resources and access to information, their hands are tied. A first reaction in all ministry personnel interviewed has been one of resentment and frustration. Only afterwards comes acknowledgement that they would like NGOs to cooperate with them.

The Minister of Economy in Balkh said that in his view very few of the NGOs working in Balkh were effective: “out of thirty eight NGOs working here, only eight are doing a good job, and with those eight we have an excellent relationship. Coordination is crucial. Some of the projects being proposed are completely useless. As for NGOs’ role, they should give advice and training to the government”.

He did, however, point out that reliance on NGOs was considerable: “We depend on NGOs for everything almost. No funding has yet come through the government for projects here. Last year we implemented eighty-nine projects. The government neither funded nor implemented these projects. The majority of our support comes from NGOs and not from the government”.

3.3 Ineffective Disbursements of Development Funds

This is a worrying issue. According to a recent report on aid flows in Afghanistan³⁰, between 21st March 2005 and 21st March 2006, \$3,2 billion was committed to the National Development Budget, of which only \$1,6 billion was actually disbursed on development projects (unrelated to military or electoral budgets). Various reports have cited serious shortages of skilled staff within the government, no institutional framework (particularly no fiscal framework), and unrealistic expectations of implementation schedules and security problems as some of the main reasons development spending in the government budget is continually falling short of planned disbursement levels.³¹ However the large differences in resource allocation between Kabul and the provinces, and the resulting concerns over transparency is causing political discontent; increasing resource allocation to the provinces should now be a government priority³².

³⁰ ACBAR: *Where Does the Money Go? A Study on the Flow of Aid to NGOs in Afghanistan* Nick Pounds, May 2006.

³¹ Asian Development Outlook Report 2006: www.adb.org/Documents/ADO/2006/documents/afg.pdf

³² World Bank Report: *Afghanistan: Managing Public Finances for Development* (December 2005).

According to a National Solidarity Programme Manager working for a large international NGO, the availability of funds for development projects has a considerable impact on people's perceptions of the government, which should not be underestimated: "In Khost, people have been extremely positive about CDCs – whereas in the first year of NSP implementation, there was complete resistance amongst the people to government interference in traditional governance matters, people began to support the initiative when the money started coming in. People understand that this is a government programme, and they were very happy with the government as a result of this programme; but it has also been good for NGOs, as people have much more trust in NGOs since NSP started"³³.

There are of course downsides to NGOs assisting with nation-wide government programmes, such as the potential for increased risk to NGO staff, and the compromising of NGOs' principles of independence and neutrality (as mentioned in section 1). In addition to this, there are numerous funding issues that NGOs face working with the Government. For example, there is an overwhelming backlog of community block grants yet to be disbursed for the NSP. In addition, NGOs have sometimes had to wait up to eight months for their own funding to come through for projects. This clearly has a very negative impact on communities' perceptions of NGOs and their ability to deliver services, when good relations and trust have been established. One NGO in the South was forced to pull out of a province because funding came through too late and the risk of the NGO going bankrupt was too high.

3.4 Misconceptions

One particular issue that frequently arose throughout the course of this study and appears to be having a negative impact on NGOs' work in the field is a general misunderstanding of who and what NGOs are. In both Herat and Balkh provinces, UN agencies were constantly referred to as NGOs by local community members interviewed. According to a research consultant who recently undertook an extensive study of large private contractors working in Afghanistan, many people interviewed often referred to these contractors as NGOs.³⁴ The military and, more specifically Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are also often thought of as NGOs.

Whilst this confusion has been stated a number of times in previous reports, greater clarity regarding the identities and purposes of the many actors working in development and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan is urgently required. It must once again be stressed that NGOs' ability to deliver aid to those in need may be severely compromised in the long-term if these lines remain blurred. Mutual trust and respect based on clear understandings must exist if NGOs' are to work effectively to assist those people who need help the most.

A senior Minister in Kabul ventured that whilst NGOs weren't necessarily weakening the government, they weren't contributing to the national statebuilding process either, which

³³ Interview with NGO worker in Kabul, August 2006

³⁴ Question put by the author to Ms. Fariba Nawa, author of CorpWatch's *Afghanistan Inc.* during a presentation of her paper in Kabul, September 2006.

in light of the programmes mentioned above, highlights the dichotomy between perceptions and reality. “NGOs aren’t adapting themselves to the ground realities. Of course there is a variation in NGOs and some are extremely flexible and understand the situation here. But NGOs must align their programmes to the strategy of the country.”

There is clearly a differing of perceptions and facts here: many NGOs gather accurate information from the field and adapt perfectly well to the ground realities. Again, the government personnel are often quick to sully the work carried out by NGOs, basing claims on nothing other than a general negative and widely held perception of what is seen as western interference. He also brought up the issue of collaboration and coordination: “The government of Afghanistan has set benchmarks with the international community. By the end of 2010, we have set a goal that all of rural Afghanistan will have clean and safe drinking water. But we need more information from NGOs [in order to start work on this].

IV Conclusion

Research found that a favourable impression of NGOs generally depended on the commitment and long-term presence of an NGO in an area, and the extent to which the NGO had managed to establish an effective relationship with both the community and the government. Afghans interviewed in rural communities expressed positive views on both national and international NGOs where they had received assistance and projects had been successful.

Provincial government representatives interviewed were quick to point out that NGOs were wasting resources and weren’t implementing necessary projects, however they expressed their admiration for NGOs which had shared information and been in the country for some time and had spent time and effort to gain an understanding of local leadership, community structures and relations.

In summary, the study found that government personnel perceptions of NGOs were good where:

- NGOs had involved the government by sharing information about their plans, programmes, activities and results
- NGOs had invited the government to events, trainings, workshops, project inaugurations, field trips, etc.
- NGOs had a long-standing presence in an area and had spent time and efforts to get to know the community members and leaders
- NGOs had made efforts to coordinate activities with the government

Almost all government officials interviewed stated that they wished to see greater NGO collaboration.

What generally marked the differences in government employees' views of NGOs were, interestingly, the different levels of ministry staff awareness, knowledge and capacity. In ministries where staff and the organization were weak, common perceptions of NGOs were overwhelmingly negative. Where it was apparent that more experienced, knowledgeable and capable staff had been recruited, perceptions of NGOs were more balanced, and there was generally more recognition of the value that NGOs can bring to Afghanistan.

The government should recognise that NGOs are one of the main builders of Afghan management capacity, which is regularly recruited into the Afghan government. As one leading researcher on Afghanistan states: "An important but under-recognised impact of NGOs is their role in both supporting community-level leadership and holding in cold storage civic leaders within their own organizations, in an environment where there were few other options for the educated. In Afghanistan NGOs stemmed human capital flight and nurtured a cadre of workers who now play a central role in the reconstruction process. Such individuals who have the capacity to link the small politics of society with the big politics of the state may be strategically important actors in peacebuilding processes. In many cases, NGOs (and particularly local NGOs) have probably had the effect of keeping a larger proportion of the middle classes engaged with politics than would otherwise have been the case."³⁵

Government-NGO relations are generally likely to be more constructive where a confident and capable government meets an NGO that works to pursue mainstream development programmes. The Government in Afghanistan is neither wholly confident nor uniformly and fully capable of fulfilling its responsibilities. Therefore one step that NGOs can take to help build a stronger state capable of delivering services is to implement programming fully in line with government development strategies (as mentioned in section 1.1).

A recent paper³⁶ on Afghanistan suggested that the delivery of services and accountability for public expenditure should devolve to lower levels of government in order to create the potential for integrating local governance (in many cases devolving from tribal and/or customary practices) into the current State. To this end, the report stated, the government and donors should do more to encourage grassroots development cooperation by empowering provincial councils and administration to coordinate local development activities. This is another area where NGOs and the Government can have a significant and positive impact, by continuing to support and work through legitimate governance structures, for example CDCs and Village Councils. Indeed several local governance support initiatives have recently begun with USAID funding, where NGOs are being sub-

³⁵ Goodhand, Jonathan (2006): *NGOs and the Dynamics of Conflict and Peacebuilding*, p.110

³⁶ Rubin, Barnett (2006): *Afghanistan's Uncertain Transition from Turmoil to Normalcy* Council on Foreign Relations

contracted to help build mechanisms of coordination between the local and central government levels³⁷.

The challenge going forward, as it has also been for the past few years, will be for all development actors to balance the need for government capacity with the need to implement relief and development projects with communities. The process will undoubtedly be frustrating, as government capacity will take time to build and NGOs will surely feel that such efforts may be less than fruitful and time consuming, while their efforts must also be focused on helping those who need it most.

In certain cases NGOs may not even want to be associated with what they perceive to be corrupt and unaccountable government structures. The reconstruction effort is gargantuan, but as one senior NGO advisor in Herat put: “the government is the biggest development agency in the country and NGOs should realize this. NGOs’ role should be to create models for development, which the government can follow. The field level worker cannot simply take decisions, but he should advise and inform. Both the government and NGOs should realize that NGOs are working to fill the void; but both should work together in this empty space relative to development. NGOs’ and government’s roles should be complementary. It is good to have both actors in development. A complementary role is possible; but hopefully routine implementation will be done, eventually, by the government.”

V Recommendations

NGOs must continue the development of a more coordinated approach with Government ministries and keep them up to date with their activities: planning where possible; progress in reporting at the very least. However, whilst there is scope for NGOs to have a greater collaboration with the Government, it is vital that they retain their independence as civil society actors, and are seen by all to be independent, albeit complementary actors, particularly during this pivotal time in Afghanistan’s development towards a functioning State.

As its own status and capacity evolve, Government leaders and employees must acknowledge that the security of NGOs and their staff could be compromised in some areas if they are seen to be working for the Government. NGOs’ principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality must be observed and respected.

Possibilities for better relations between NGOs and government might include:

1. NGOs:

1. NGOs must design their programmes and projects in line with the Government’s development plans and priorities

³⁷ Such as the USAID-funded *Local Governance and Community Development* project

2. NGOs must have MoUs at national, provincial and local (district and community) levels to describe relations and roles within those partnerships. At the very least, NGOs must have national level MoUs with the ministries relevant to their work / projects
3. NGOs must report to the Government on a regular basis³⁸(as stipulated in the NGO law)
4. NGOs should always include government colleagues in capacity building events, such as trainings and workshops, as well as project-related events (e.g. project inaugurations.)
5. Both NGOs and the Government must work to alter the negative image of NGOs and provide clear, strong facts on what NGOs' roles are.

2. Government:

1. The Government should take seriously the request of making a more open and public demonstration of support to NGOs as longstanding and viable partners of humanitarian and development work for all Afghan people.
2. Relevant government staff should strive to follow up on NGO activity reports and be as responsive as possible to NGOs when they receive requests for information, support and/or for partnerships.
3. The NGO law must be revised and made more efficient in order to improve NGOs' ability to implement projects in a timely manner.
4. The government should try to develop a strategic partnership with NGOs, acknowledging their skills and expertise and learning from them.
5. The established Provincial Development Committees should be strongly supported and serve as a base for provincial communication and coordination to take place.

3. Donors:

1. Donors should continue to support the strengthening of sub-national government structures.

³⁸ Currently, the Ministry of Economy NGO department requires bi-annual reports in both Dari and English from all projects, civil society partners, relevant ministry contacts, locations, timelines and funding sources and flows, with a breakdown of overhead/administrative costs against total project budgets.

2. Donors should recognize the current state of service delivery provided by NGOs and support these efforts as well as building relevant government capacity for the longer term.
3. Donors should provide flexibility for community based context specific approaches so that both the Government and NGOs can have the space to build grassroots programming.

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