



Is independent humanitarian action over in Afghanistan ?

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What are humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) good at or, indeed, as many resentful Afghan government officials have openly put it, good for? Since the international community, led by the United States, decided to reinvolve itself in Afghanistan in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, NGOs have been called on to play many roles, then often harshly criticized, more rarely simply sidelined, for failing to play their part as told.

The word NGO itself has come to mean about everything, as around 1000 organizations – 200 international and 800 national ones –, with necessarily different mandates, agendas and funding sources, are now registered as such in the country. The terms of reference of the World Bank's program for the Afghan health system, the Performance-based Partnership Agreement (PPA), even include for-profit actors in its definition of NGOs.

Within this highly heterogeneous group, the few humanitarian organizations that were once praised for staying on during the two decades of conflict and independently providing assistance to the war-affected civilian population, are now facing increasing resistance and misunderstanding on the part of the Afghan government, donors and UN agencies alike in trying to preserve their independence and maintain a neutral, yet critical view on the fragile peace and reconstruction process they are asked to join. While the current agenda of stabilization and reconstruction facing the country does require new actors and approaches, is it to say that there is no longer a need for independent humanitarian action in Afghanistan?

The independence of humanitarian NGOs first came into question with the decision by the Bush Administration to launch a global war on terrorism, the first step of which was Operation Enduring Freedom, designed to topple the Taliban regime and hunt down its Al-Qaeda allies in Afghanistan. For Georges W. Bush, quickly echoed by Tony Blair, this new war required a "military-humanitarian coalition", in which NGOs were expected to hold out the kind hand of "civilization" to the Afghan population, thus convincing it to drop support to the Taliban and their terrorist associates and to welcome the military coalition fighting against them. In line with Georges Bush's catch phrase – "You are either with us, or against us" – the global war on terror could seemingly not accommodate itself with the core principles of neutrality and independence held by humanitarian NGOs, asked in effect to side with one belligerent against another.

Despite that call, which, to be sure, few, if any, humanitarian NGOs were ready to answer, the military coalition carrying out Operation Enduring Freedom was in any case determined to "win the hearts and minds" of the population on its own

terms. Food rations were thus dropped by the US air force in the course of its bombing campaign. Largely symbolic and often dangerous for civilians, this initiative nevertheless paved the way for international troops present in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban to join the ranks of aid providers and to request coordination, if not cooperation, with humanitarian NGOs.

In the first year of the peace process, set out by the Bonn Agreement, easy funding was suddenly made available both to civil affairs units of international military contingents and to NGOs, with state donors often encouraging joint assistance projects involving “their” NGOs and the troops they had contributed to the Coalition or the International Security Assistance Force. Judging by the small number of peacekeepers in Afghanistan as well as the essentially small-scale, short-term nature of funds provided for aid projects, however, states’ support for humanitarian action in post-Taliban Afghanistan was primarily an indication of their lack of political vision and policy choices for the future of the country.

Many countries have contributed troops more to honor international commitments or to demonstrate their relevance to their strategic partners than to undertake a genuine stabilization of Afghanistan. International donors proved also unsure of the level of involvement they were prepared to sustain in the region and still defiant of the new government’s accountability. Playing up the so-called humanitarian role of international soldiers was thus essentially aimed at domestic audiences, as were the images of the profusion of quick-impact and largely uncoordinated projects carried out by the many NGOs that had just come to Afghanistan with little knowledge of the context and needs.

Yet, by the end of year 2002, the daunting challenges to the new Afghan government of rising factionalism and on-going fighting against reorganizing insurgent groups in the South, began to convince the international community, also anticipating the demands of the looming war in Iraq, to strengthen the political process and step up reconstruction in preparation for the general elections in 2004.

While this was potentially a healthy realization of the need for greater political and financial commitment toward the peace process, the consequence was a general trend toward a politicization of aid in Afghanistan, as all NGOs were asked to follow donors in their shift of policy toward supporting the Afghan government. The concurrent initiative of the US-led Coalition to set up teams of armed and uniformed reservists to work with, if not bring discipline to, the NGO community in carrying out reconstruction projects on behalf of the Afghan central government to extend the latter’s authority has elicited strong criticism against this renewed confusion between military and humanitarian roles. Yet, few humanitarian NGOs seem to have noticed that, beyond the risk of association with the military, pressure by donors to have them subscribe to their political agenda was equally jeopardizing their independence and neutrality.

In the many large-scale projects now designed by the main donors and often imposed from above on the Afghan government, NGOs are now commonly referred to as “implementing partners”, donors’ jargon for service providers. Their newly attributed roles range from providing jobs to demobilized soldiers to substituting the Afghan health authorities in providing healthcare to whole provinces. In filling the latter role, they’re in effect asked to uncritically carry out the neo-liberal economic policies promoted by the World Bank and demonstrate the validity of their assumptions in being more cost-effective than the Afghan State. This new approach was made even clearer by Andrew Natsios, director of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), who asserted in a recent speech that NGOs funded by USAID were carrying out the American foreign policy and were thus expected both to carry the American flag and to refrain from making public statement without prior approval.

Humanitarian NGOs also have themselves to blame for this evolution. A rising number of them show themselves ready to cover almost all the health needs of the country and to bid for contracts designed to put in place, through them, the new Afghan health system. In doing so, they not only forego their independence in assessing needs and choosing their programs, they also overlook their *raison d’être* and the necessary limits to their capacity and responsibilities.

Humanitarian NGOs intervene when states are unable, or unwilling, to support part or all of their population in a situation of crisis. Medical humanitarian action is thus only an action by default, which, while focusing on reducing mortality and answering basic needs, also points out, by its very presence, the failure of states to fulfill their responsibilities. They cannot substitute themselves to political action, without running the risk of losing their mandate. The nature of their action in answering emergency situation in Afghanistan gives them neither the responsibility nor the expertise or capacity to provide adequate answers to, or act as the instrument of, the global reconstruction of the national health system.

Unlike humanitarian action, reconstruction and development are political processes that imply an endorsement of the country’s government and its policies. In that sense, the call of President Karzai to see international assistance paving the way for reconstruction and development rather than focusing on humanitarian needs is a legitimate goal for a newly established government eager to assert its authority and to acquire the capacity to fulfill its responsibilities toward its population. Humanitarian NGOs, however, should not be blamed for independently continuing their action in a context of political uncertainty, social and economic distress and on-going fighting. Nor should they be made the scapegoats for the lack of coordination and clear political will displayed by state donors in providing the financial and technical resources needed for the reconstruction of the country.

Yet, if NGOs, trapped in their needs for funding and visibility, accept to become the private contractors of states anxious to delegate their political responsibilities, they shouldn't be surprised to be made responsible for any possible failure in the reconstruction process and will also have to share responsibility for the loss of an independent humanitarian space in Afghanistan. Judging by the growing number of attacks directly targeting the aid community, it may already be too late.

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