Redefining humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan

A contextual analysis

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Afghanistan's evolving humanitarian context

"If you want a guarantee, buy a toaster"

Clint Eastwood

After 10 years of operations, the deployment of more than 90,000 US troops and a loss of more than 1,500 soldiers "killed in action", the Obama administration now has a defined timeframe for the withdrawal of US troops. Beginning in the summer of 2011, the reduction of troops will near completion by summer 2014. By that time, the responsibility for security as well as the reconstruction of Afghanistan must be transferred to the Afghan authorities through a transition process.

At this turning point in the US military campaign, Afghanistan is in the midst of a complex humanitarian situation influenced by the convergence of security, social, economic, and political challenges. These challenges have affected household livelihood systems, rendered community market structures increasingly volatile, and restricted institutional responses and the development of core infrastructure. Most humanitarian and development actors now recognise that in situations of emerging or ongoing violent conflict, or extreme volatility, the "business as usual" model often exacerbates the situation.

The geographic scope for humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan has diminished over the past decade. Whereas it was possible in 2003 or 2004 to travel without any particular security measures to most provinces, many areas are simply inaccessible today. Even the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had to reduce road movements at the beginning of 2011 due to an increased level of insecurity on secondary roads. Not only is it more limited, but the scope for humanitarian intervention is gradually being redefined by a loss of political control in rural areas and the proliferation of armed groups. The inability to freely move to rural areas and the increasing constraints on operating in urban environments call into question the ability of International Organisations (IOs) to intervene and develop skills pertinent to the Afghan environment.

UN humanitarian agencies' strategies, planning and decision-making need to be sensitive to the operational environment and based on robust analyses. As such, the objective of the present context analysis is to draw on the expertise of researchers who have shown, over the last ten years, a thorough understanding of the different political, social, and economic interactions that shape today's context in Afghanistan. As such, the first section of the present report draws a broad picture of the political and social interactions that shape today's context. Based on the lessons learned, the second section then aims to deliver practical recommendations to UN humanitarian agencies present in Afghanistan, in an environment characterized by a worsening security and political situation.

Towards which political transition in Afghanistan?

Political context assessment in the light of the 2014 handover plan

Two phases can be distinguished in the history of the Afghan regime following the 2001 invasion. Up until 2005, it can be argued that there was a general desire for the construction of the Afghan state. This was true both in a political sense – as evidenced by the relatively well-organised 2004 and 2005 elections – and an institutional sense with growth (albeit limited) of central institutions and attempts to bring in peripheral powers, (*e.g.* Ismaël Khan in Herat or, in another dimension, NGOs).

After 2005, the rise of the Taliban and corresponding rise in insecurity precipitated a gradual erosion of Afghanistan's institutions, as demonstrated by the greater autonomy of local authorities, the weakness of democratic institutions and a decreased capacity of the state to rule over the population. The countless reports on state-building circulating today seem disconnected from reality, especially as the United States' ability to influence the Afghan government rapidly diminishes. Three main conclusions may be drawn from an analysis of the present situation:

1. Afghan security institutions will not be ready to meet the 2014 transition horizon. Consequently, the current shape of the Afghan regime will disappear, either morphing into a coalition government or progressively collapsing with the gradual withdrawal of international forces.

2. Regional dynamics within the country will shift dramatically. The Afghan government will be incapable of controlling the periphery immediately following the withdrawal of international forces, even if a political agreement with the armed opposition is reached in the upcoming months.

3. The humanitarian sphere will change in scope, rather than disapper. Interesting opportunities will emerge for IOs and NGOs, should they be able and willing to (re)build their image as neutral actors.

1. Contradictions in the US strategy

The US strategy at a glance – Riddled with ambiguities, the US strategy as defined by the Obama administration is far from clear-cut. In the field, the army still believes in military success[1]; targeted strikes against Taliban leaders are the preferred military method to destabilise the insurrection and compel combattants to turn themselves in[2]. The Taliban "reintegration" programme, funded by the US to the tune of 50 million dollars, represents the concrete institutional implementation of this policy. In parallel, military operations in Kandahar and Helmand provinces must be successful in order to disorganise the Taliban movement in its strongholds and change perceptions both in Afghanistan and in the West.

This strategy requires time and means, hence the importance of July 2011, which marks the beginning of the military withdrawal, in view of the more important deadline set for the end of the transition period in 2014. In reality, the US army will maintain its military focus on the Taliban over the next two years as it gradually transfers security responsibilities to the Afghan army.

Behind the words – With little-to-no chance of success, this strategy tends to obscure the only realistic solution – opening negotiations with Taliban leaders. Furthermore: the current approach exacerbates rather than resolves its two main hurdles: opposition from Pakistan and the systemic weakness of the Afghan state (See Section 2).

[1] Other actors within the American government are pushing for a negotiated settlement, but the US Army still defines the policy on the ground.

[2] Probably several thousand Taliban cadres have been killed since the surge began.

Pakistan is now in on an opposition course with the US, as it seeks a negotiated departure of US forces in order to regain regional hegemony and ensure its link to Central Asia. The Pakistani army's support to the Taliban has increased in recent years, and Pakistan's opposition to the direct military activities of the US (drones, CIA agents) greatly limits the possibilities of fighting the insurrection in Pakistani territory. Specifically, Pakistani military offensives have had negligible impact on the insurgency in border areas, and the insurgency grew in strength in early 2011.

Field Reality – With the gradual reduction of resources up to 2014, the coalition has now basically turned to a defensive strategy. No major military operation could foreseeably take away territory from the insurrection, as it is impossible to displace the surge troops mobilized in Helmand and Kandahar due to the insecurity and volatility of those two provinces. By focusing its effort in Helmand and Kandahar, the coalition has given free rein to the armed opposition in other regions where the situation continues to worsen. Hence, instead of getting weaker, the insurrection is growing stronger as seen in the growing number of attacks against the coalition. Even in the southern provinces, the Taliban have not been marginalised despite the scale of the efforts. The events of of spring 2011 – the assassinations of Ahmad Wali Karzai[3], Ghulam Haider Hamidi[4], and the Kandahar police chief, the mass prison escape, and the three-day city centre hostilities in May – demonstrate, without any ambiguity, that Kandahar remains under Taliban influence.

The coalition has made limited gains in Kandahar (and Helmand), exclusively dependent on the physical presence of a large number of troops. Hindered by the continued weakness of the police and other state institutions, the authority of the Afghan state has not been reestablished thus far. Most of the other Pashtun regions, in particular the border provinces, are similarly out of government's reach and control, and the northern provinces are equally influenced by opposition groups.

The gradual weakening of the Karzai regime does not demonstrate a straightforward takeover by the the Taliban. The opposition includes other groups, mainly Hezb-i islami and transnational jihadists (Lashkar-i Taiba, Al Qaida), as well as local strongmen and commanders.

US Contradictions – The US strategy towards Afghanistan suffers not only from a short-sighted approach, but also damaging contradictions. By nature, "reintegration" is fundamentally contrary to any negotiation process, as it implies a gradual weakening of the insurrection. Furthermore, as military offensives target the more nationalist Taliban in regions where foreign combatants are rare, the coalition's presence has diminished in regions where the penetration of transnational jihadist groups is more significant. The intention of the US to maintain long-term military bases in Afghanistan[5] presents an obstacle to the initiation of negotiations, given that one of the central requests of the Government of Pakistan (and to a lesser extent Iran) is the departure of US troops. The risk, in case of deteriorating relations with Pakistan, is to witness the Pakistani army giving up on a negotiated solution in support of a military victory for the Taliban.

[3] Head of Kandahar Provincial Council and half-brother of President Hamid Karzai, assassinated in July 2011.

[4] Mayor of Kandahar, the "honest man in a city of thieves", killed in July 2011.

[5] According to statements by the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy to the US Senate.

Picture 1: A militiaman in Farah province (Farah, November 2009)

2. The gradual erosion of the Afghan State

Karzai's attitude towards the coalition – The coalition is progressively losing influence over Karzai, who is less and less susceptible to pressure for two main reasons. First, many of the men surrounding Karzai are opposed to the coalition for ideological reasons (members of Hezb-i Islami or former members of Etihad of Sayyaf) and because they believe they are targets of the Western media (Wali Karzai and General Fahim). Second, the presence of coalition-friendly voices in the Karzai administration is dwindling, as evidenced by the dismissal of Atmar and Saleh, heads of internal affairs and intelligence respectively.

The 2009 elections hightlighted the absence of any real legitimacy for Karzai, who is becoming more and more dependent on his allies. Karzai sought the support of local chieftains (often former commanders), and won votes with favours (donations of state land, amnesties, positions, etc.). And as compensation for being faithful to Karzai, these new allies obtained very lucrative positions within the government or as head of militia.

The Afghan government is becoming increasingly aggressive in an effort to show its autonomy from the coalition in cases of civilian deaths, which reinforces the coalition's unpopularity in the country.

Shortfall of legitimacy – Although the scale of electoral fraud renders precise analysis difficult, the general population clearly demonstrates a high level of cynicism and rejection of the government. Even in areas where the security level is reasonable, Afghan citizens largely abstained from voting in the 2009 presidential election.

The latest legislative elections further weakened the political system, as election outcomes exacerbated ethnic tensions, particularly in a province like Ghazni. Elected officials are often local strongmen (or their representatives) attached to their autonomy vis à vis the central authority, and with close ties to the Taliban[4].

The shortfall of legitimacy of the Karzai regime, apart from the election issue, is very much associated with his perceived lack of autonomy vis-à-vis the coalition. Internal studies by the US army, reiterated by the shared experiences of journalists and researchers, highlight the fact that a large majority of the population in combat zones now consider foreign forces as occupation forces[5]. Military operations polarise the population against foreign forces and further weaken the Karzai regime, which

appears to be unpopular and perceived as illegitimate.

Political representativeness – While politial parties are allowed in Afghanistan, legal provisions do not allow legislators to run their electoral campaigns under the banner of a political party. As a consequence, legislators are detached from parties, thus explaining why the parliament finds it difficult to get anything done. This also explains why the parties (which should have been required to develop nationwide bases) are unable to adequately represent the population.

Lack of genuine representation has generated a perception of overaching corruption within the government, which extends far beyond petty forms of corruption that remain tolerated amongst Afghans. This corruption is perceived as a major factor of political illegitimacy and represents a crisis in the relationship between the state and individuals[6], as most Afghans consider that they have nothing to expect from their political, economic, and social elites.

Despite being accused of corruption on numerous occasions, many high level advisors and politicians have been released or pardoned. Faced with such blatant cases of corruption (*e.g.* political elites have used national funds at Kabul Bank for their own private funding), the lack of any punishment has, inevitably, negatively impacted the population's perception of the state.

National Security Forces – The weakening of the Afghan regime seriously hinders the coalition's capacity to reduce its involvement through a gradual "Afghanisation" of the security apparatus. The London Conference established that a transfer of responsibility to Afghan forces will begin in 2011 and should be completed, for the most part, in 2014. The Afghan National Army (ANA) will be called upon to provide security at the frontline in a number of provinces with the support of NATO troops. Between 2011 and 2016, the goal is to maintain an army of 240,000 soldiers and a police force of 160,000 police officers.

Is such a transition policy credible?

- First, the current number of active individuals in the ANA and Afghan National Police (ANP) is largely inferior to suggested figures. The army likely has around 60,000 soldiers that can be effectively mobilised and does not maintain a significant presence in all provinces. The official recruitment figures are inflated by high turnover rates within the ANA (25%) and ANP (70%) due, in large part, to lack of financial incentives
- Second, one of the basic problems of the army is its inability to technically and strategically operate independently of the coalition.
- Third, the growing risks of infiltration by the Taliban insurrection and recurring tensions between ethnic groups significantly undermine the capacity of both the ANA and the ANP to actually fulfill their security missions, which is essential to the long-term stability of the country.
- Last but not least, this year alone US$12bn will be spent on building the ANA – sum equivalent to Afghanistan's entire economy – which leads to the big question: how long will the US agree to pay for ANA's running costs? Estimates suggest that after 2014 the ANA and the police will require $6-8bn a year: *"Although that is a fraction of the $120bn the US is spending on its own military operations in Afghanistan this year, it is a vast sum that would see the country consuming more direct US military aid than Israel and Egypt combined"*[7].

For these reasons, modest goals would be more realistic, but the coalition would then have to acknowledge that the autonomy of both the ANA and ANP can only be reached in the very long-term.

[6] *Afghan's Experience of Corruption. A study across Eight Provinces*, Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA), Afghanistan, 2007,

[7] Boone, John, *"Afghan National Army prepares for life after NATO",* Guardian, July 20, 2011.

3. The decay of center-periphery relations

Pictures 2 and 3: Election day for Adela and Farzana (Kabul, August 20, 2009)

Failed centralisation – Twenty years of conflict produced a class of military commanders, often at the expense of traditional tribal elders, who were able to exert their influence through factional support, access to resources, force of arms or a combination thereof. After the fall of the Taliban, the police, provincial administrations, and newly elected governors associated with the central government lacked resources and manpower; they could often do little when confronted with the powerful strongmen who *de facto* ruled over districts and provinces.

In order to weaken strongmen and political factions hostile to centralisation, Karzai and his centralist and nationalist allies had therefore to utilise manipulative tactics, primarily divide and rule. By splitting factions internally and pitting one strongman against his neighbour, the central government sought to gradually undermine their power and allow weaker local representatives of the government to increase their influence. The understanding was initially that over time government institutions would grow in strength, as more human and material resources became available, and would then be able to consolidate their influence, opposition having being eliminated.[8]

The revenge of the strongmen – Gradually, the factions and individual strongmen started adapting to the new, relatively unfriendly political environment. Some started deploying counter-manipulative techniques by using the central government against their local enemies, strengthening their positions in the process and gaining leverage with the government or the international community. Breaking up the central government again was not an option for dissenting factions and strongmen as long as a strong foreign presence continued in the country. By exploiting the deteriorating security situation, the strongmen regained leverage vis-à-vis Kabul; in turn they developed an interest in

[8] A. Giustozzi, "Dilemmas of governance in Afghanistan: between patrimonialism and bureaucratisation", in Afghanistan: beyond the wild tribes, ed. By A. Schlenkhoff and C. Oeppen, London : C. Hurst, September 2010.

keeping the security situation unstable enough to justify their role.

Another key factor influencing centre-periphery relations has been inconsistent pressure from the international community for the Afghan government to improve governance and align with Western concepts of how it should be managed. Such pressure was strong until 2005, but started weakening afterwards. One reason for such weakening was that UNAMA, the lead UN agency, started gradually losing influence. At the same time most European countries started losing hope in the possibility of "fixing Afghanistan" after 2006 and gave up on any agenda of reform.

Finally, the increasingly compromised security environment tipped the balance so that short-term concerns prevailed more and more often over long-term plans. By 2010 there was a growing acceptance, even among Canadians and Europeans, that it was necessary to co-operate with the strongmen in order to "manage" them and control the situation in critical provinces. As a result, the strongmen, once regularly criticised by Western embassies, finally re-established a significant degree of legitimacy.

Risk of atomisation – After ten years of soft conflicts between the centre and periphery, most of the country remains very unstable, with the exceptions of Balkh province where Atta Mohammed remains in control, as well as Panjshir, Bamyan and to a lesser extent Parwan where local networks of strongmen still have the situation under control. This instability is a result of the government's failure to produce a coherent policy of centre-periphery relations. In all of these provinces, distrust of the central government runs high and even strongmen once allied with Kabul are hedging their bets and courting anti-government sentiment.

Demonstrations, riots and outbursts of violence are increasingly used for the purpose of putting pressure on the government, on local rivals and the international community. The intent of the organisers, usually connected with one of the main factions or strongmen, is not to cause loss of life; however, riots frequently spin out of control because of the inability of provincial governors and police officers to control them.

In short, the environment could be described as increasingly fluid, with actors trying to maximise their short-term gains in the face of an extremely uncertain future.

Weak provincial institutions – Investments in government infrastructure, civil servant capacity and bureaucratic reform and co-ordination have remarkably improved the comparative ability of the government to provide public services over the past ten years. However, while public service delivery has improved, provincial government institutions themselves remain embryonic with weak institutional linkages, little capacity, and limited communication, and the public continues to have a poor understanding of their mandated roles.

National funding programs have invested heavily in the construction of buildings and equipment[9]; but most of their efforts have been directed towards a coterie of departments or directorates that are believed to increase the legitimacy of the government (*e.g.* the Afghan National Police, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development as well as provincial governors' offices and provincial councils). Other departments including Ministries of Agriculture, Education, Religious Affairs and Women's Affairs often decry the absence of investment in their respective departments.

In contrast to a sustained provincial focus, the belated attention afforded to governance at the district level ensured that perceptions of governance in the provinces were largely negative, which continues to impact on the legitimacy of the state. Poor public perception is fuelled by problems within the provincial government institutions, including a poorly educated work force, a sclerotic bureaucracy, absenteeism, the absence of dedicated buildings, widespread corruption and a general inability to fulfil basic government services.

Whereas informal governance institutions are viewed as closest to the people and perhaps hold a greater degree of legitimacy than the

[9] Examples include the Afghan Stabilisation Initiative (ASI) for infrastructure; UNDP's Afghanistan Sub-national Governance Programme (ASGP) for capacity building across all levels of sub-national governance, and more localised programs.

government, their capacity remains limited. A particular concern is that the *shuras*, which have received substantial amounts of capacity building and have become accepted by communities are still under-utilised by development actors, the government themselves and then by extension the communities.

Focus on the political impact of internal migration…

Since 2002, 5.6 million Afghans (including 4.6 million assisted returns by UNHCR) have returned to Afghanistan. This return by roughly 20% of the country's population has strained the provision of basic services, created social tensions and given rise to conflicts over housing, land, food, water, and electricity.

Evidence shows that returnees, unable to manage reintegration, have joined internally displaced person (IDPs) flows, those typically displaced from conflict- and natural disaster-affected areas. The latest (and most conservative) estimates estimate the population of IDPs at 420,000 (which represents an increase of 60,000 individuals in the first quarter of 2011).

Given their sheer number, returned refugees and IDPs in Afghanistan have a major political weight in supporting or undermining political, social and economic stability in the country. They are key players in the Afghan process, and their allegiance could become a key source of support to anti-government forces, an increasing worry among policymakers in Kabul.

The displaced constitute the majority of UN humanitarian agencies' beneficiaries in today's Afghanistan: the number of returnee households in the highest return areas amounts to 55% of the population, and current migrant households amounts to approximately 10% of the population. A report launched by UNHCR and The World Bank in May 2011 shows that, even in urban areas, IDPs fare worse than their urban poor counterparts against a set of indicators (literacy, employment activity, wage levels, food consumption).

Looking ahead, three dynamics link displacement with the overall political context.

1. Instability will lead to new population movements coinciding with protracted displacement and longer-term settlement. The intersection of the different groups will build fertile grounds for social conflict over resources: *i)* older settlement patterns intersect with new ones; *ii)* already populated settlements will become occupied by new arrivals; and *iii)* migration profiles will mix and gravitate towards the same livelihood strategies. The first problem will likely revolve around ethnic tensions; whereas, the second and third will revolve around economic tension and competition over scarce resources, especially in underdeveloped areas (informal settlements or poorly planned urban and peri-urban areas).
2. A widening gap between the centre and periphery will lead to an inability to provide for the needs of vulnerable groups in rural areas. This will, in turn, lead Afghans to migrate in greater numbers to the country's main urban areas. Urbanisation trends throughout the country have been widely analysed as a consequence of rural-urban, economic and voluntary migration. Pressure on urban areas will further limit their absorption capacity; the displaced will begin to move wherever possible, exerting a downward pressure on living conditions and increasing vulnerabilities.
3. A worsening political and security context leads to new flows of cross-border migration in the region and further west to Europe. While Afghans continue to rely on migration as a livelihood strategy, European governments have increased their policy of containment, using forced return as a tool to manage Afghan migration. These two opposing forces – forced return and irregular migration – create a dynamic that situates humanitarian actors between the contradictory political objectives of states, on the one hand, and livelihood objectives of beneficiaries on the other.

These three dynamics are totally new and unregulated trends that UN agencies (especially WFP, UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, ILO or UNHABITAT) will have to build into their strategies. New pockets of vulnerable populations and rural and urban poverty, will be created, with the risk of creating a domino effect throughout the country, as well as in volatile border regions along Afghanistan's two frontiers with Iran and Pakistan, with further destabilising effects on national and regional stability.

4. The politicization of humanitarian actors

Aid workers at risk – In this context, it is worth raising the questions of (i) the operational outreach, (ii) security, and (iii) the legitimacy of humanitarian aid. At the field level, some groups are systematically opposed to the presence of IOs and NGOs, particularly transnational groups (*e.g.* al Qaida, Lashkar-i Taiba) in provinces like Kunar or Nuristan, since building the social fabric is not an objective for their movements. When these groups are marginalised and their influence is limited to a few known areas, small armed groups tend to exploit opportunities created by the inability of the government security forces to cope. Therefore, the proliferation of armed gangs and the resurfacing of militias are bound to affect the operations of humanitarian organisations more and more. Whereas the old armed groups (around since 2001) are by now mostly hooked into smuggling operations or have found ways to milk money out of the government, the new comers are going to be more aggressive in their predatory search for sources of occasional revenue. Often run by young men with little experience, their behaviour is unpredictable and potentially violent.

Political Neutrality in question – The blurring of lines between humanitarian and military objectives tends to undermine humanitarian actors' capacity to actually deliver operational assistance to their beneficiaries. The first part of the Counter-Insurgency (COIN) strategy involved expanding security, and this was the key responsibility of one group only: the security forces of the coalition. The civilian-military teams, such as Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), then stepped into the theatre of operations to implement stabilisation activities and undertake "quick impact projects", injecting sizeable amounts of money to get buy-in from communities, and dissuade them from supporting the opposition. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) are the donors possessing the most explicit understanding of the comprehensive approach: their strategy aims at supporting the role of their troops through the implementation of development and stabilisation programs.

Many IOs and NGOs are then caught in the ambiguity of implementing development activities in a conflict environment: instead of aiming solely at development objectives, they are also contributing to the stabilisation agenda. The perception of the NGO

Picture 4: Children in a WFP training centre (Mazar-e-Sharif, August 2010)

implementing those projects will strongly depend on the degree of impartiality of the program: the more the NGO will be able to choose the beneficiaries without any political consideration, the better its perception will be in the eyes of the community. Some implementing partners are maintaining such close relationships with the coalition forces, especially when it comes to managing their security, that this can be confusing as to the real nature of the NGO. UN agencies are falling into that category. The recent attacks against UNAMA premises[10] are a strong deterrent for NGOs to get associated with the UN, even with UN "humanitarian" agencies. UN "humanitarian" agencies are being part of an integrated mission, and as such their activities contribute to UNAMA's mandate, which is to support a government challenged by an armed opposition. There is thus a true reluctance by the NGOs to be associated with politicised actors such as UN agencies, and this is motivated by security concerns[11].

Necessary negotiations – As for now, some NGOs have already engaged with the warring parties on the ground to make sure that their presence is accepted and to negotiate some security guaranties with local commanders. But the idea of negotiating at a higher level, with the leadership of the opposition groups is not unanimously supported by the NGO community: there are initiatives from this community in order to pave the way for an increased negotiated access with anti-governmental actors but it has not yet been practically spelled out. By contrast, the idea of negotiating with anti-governmental forces is still a political taboo for UN humanitarian agencies, due to their implicit alignment on the political agenda of both UNAMA and ISAF.

[10] The attack against the Herat office in 2010 as well as the attack against the UN guesthouse in Kabul in 2009 are strong elements pointing out toward a targeting of the UN by the armed opposition.

[11] A recent study by CARE/World Bank draws a similar link, demonstrating that schools constructed by PRTs, or even visited by PRT representatives, are at increased risk of attack by anti-governmental forces (Glad, Marit (2009) *Knowledge on Fire: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, Risks and Measures for Successful Mitigation.* CARE/World Bank, p. 42).

Picture 5: Drug users around a bukhali, in the former russian cultural center, in Dehmazang area (Kabul, January 2008)

The Sun Also Rises in Afghanistan

Operational recommendations for UN humanitarian agencies in Afghanistan

UN humanitarian agencies are at a historical turning point in Afghanistan today: the practical feasibility of their mission is now at stake in an environment characterised by a worsening security situation in almost all 34 provinces and compounded by the planned withdrawal of the coalition in 2014. These two factors have already affected the way in which international organisations (IOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) rethink, redefine, redesign their role, and go about implementing their mission. Over the last five to six years UN organisations had to progressively upgrade their security level according to the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) security regulations, as the trend of increased attacks on humanitarian workers was increasing. Progressively, the number of UN "security compliant" districts has been drastically reduced, which mechanically led UN agencies to reduce their operational reach and associate its humanitarian assistance with military escorts. The legitimacy of UNDSS rules is not questionable, considering the Afghan context and the current structure of UN organisations; however, the vicious cycle between deteriorating security conditions and increasing security regulations has had worrying practical consequences for most UN agencies in Afghanistan:

- **Perception of UN humanitarian agencies** – UN agencies' image among programme beneficiaries and local communities was negatively affected as security restrictions have physically distanced the programmes from the local population (whereas many international NGOs have been able to adapt their security policy with a wise and progressive mix of acceptance and increased security measures. In Kabul and most provincial capitals, the bunkerisation of UN compounds and the systematic use of armoured vehicles have bred the idea that the UN – more than most international organisations – is not a relief actor working on the side of the Afghans but invisible coloniser working in a parallel reality.
- **Implementation** – At the field level, military escorts tend to feed a negative perception of the nature of humanitarian aid; a military presence clearly challenges the safety of both staff and beneficiaries on the ground with immediate consequences and longer-term ones — reputational damage of perceived links with international military forces and the Afghan National Police.
- **Human Resources** – The UN staff has progressively adopted a "bunker mentality", showing a clear reluctance to go to the "field" (mythologized word used for "outside the compound"), which increasingly raises the question of the legitimacy of international staff presence in the country. In the meantime, the question of the adequacy of current staff profiles has also been raised, as the Afghan environment would obviously require specific skills (more practical, with a good awareness of the local cultural and linguistic characteristics, a direct understanding of the life of the beneficiaries, and a strong field experience) and other types of contractual agreements (implying different HR regulations, with longer contracts, individual agreements on security and salaries, etc.).
- **Remote Management and Monitoring** – Most UN agencies have hired additional implementing partners and contractors to ferry relief and implement their humanitarian projects in various medium-risk, high-risk, and no-go areas, but the quality of the small cartel of private contractors operating in high-risk areas for UN organisations is very poor and it is still impossible to actually check the effectiveness of their work on the fields.

In these regards, this section advocates for a pragmatic and down-to-earth approach, which considers that UN agencies cannot stick to their traditional approach, as the security context prevents these organisations from managing their operations on the ground and evaluate the accuracy and quality of the work of their implementing partners; by contrast, UN agencies should rather focus on a reduced number of "accessible areas", where the main tasks of their respective programmes can actually be performed in a politically neutral way. This second way implies a few drastic organisational and strategic changes.

1. Political Neutrality: the mandatory cornerstone

In today's Afghan context, international agencies tend to be less and less perceived as development actors and more and more perceived as stooges of foreign policies and instruments of governmental designs. For most UN agencies operating in Afghanistan, this local perception has been shaped by two key factors:

- The blurring of lines between the international military's objective and strategy of "winning hearts and minds"[12] of local populations through relief and development assistance;
- The complex mandates and multiple strategies of the twenty UN agencies operating under the integrated mission UNAMA in Afghanistan (political, development, humanitarian).

The Military Agenda – The trend towards the integration of political, military and humanitarian objectives has found supporters in many think tanks and governmental research institutes[13]. In practice, today, most large humanitarian emergency programmes, reconstruction and development projects are explicitly integrated into the security strategies of the coalition. However, if USAID programmes are now clearly aligned on the US military strategies, there must be some room for discussion when it comes to UN humanitarian agencies. Practically, this alignment of relief and military approaches have already proven to be largely counterproductive: 1) by sending wrong signals to the Afghan population and formally associating UN aid workers with the coalition military forces in people's minds[14], while the success of relief missions in such complex environments often rests on the actual and perceived distinction between humanitarian workers and political and military actors; 2) by subordinating humanitarian and development policies to military agendas, which compromises the neutral and civilian nature of humanitarian action, and; 3) lastly, by reducing the actual field of operations of humanitarian workers as the access by other civil interveners in unstable areas is sometimes greater when they know how to project an image of neutrality. Finally, as the co-ordination of civilian and military field objectives always turns out to be a strict "alignment", it naturally undermines UN humanitarian agencies' capacity to gain acceptability among the population and establish long-term relationships with local partners; as stated in a 2008 UN internal note,

[12] A recent example of this policy: in September 2009, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan (Gen. Stanley McChrystal) told CBS's "60 Minutes": "We want more troops and a new strategy -- but most importantly, we want to win the battle for the hearts and the minds of the people in the war-torn country […] What I'm really telling people is the greatest risk we can accept is to lose the support of the people here. […] If the people are against us, we cannot be successful. If the people view us as occupiers and the enemy, we can't be successful and our casualties will go up dramatically." It was probably a good analysis… but poorly implemented and eight years too late.

[13] See a remarkable example in Hebbert-Larsen's *"UNAMA in Afghanistan, Challenges and Opportunities in Peace-Making, State-Building, and Coordination"*: "The international community should have only one body that is responsible for coordinating civilian and military efforts. The body should also delineate an overarching strategy for all parties, in agreement with the host government" (Iselin Hebbert-Larsen, *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs* 2010).

[14] More recently, after the attack of the UNAMA compound in Mazar or Usama Bin Laden's death, WFP staff was preventively bunkerised in the provincial PRTs, which raises two correlated issues: 1) ethically, it associates UN agencies with international military forces; 2) strategically, it is short-sighted as the withdrawal of most PRTs is already programmed. Off-the-record, many UNAMA staff we know said it would conduct them to seriously reconsider their commitment with the organisation in Afghanistan.

"this complex interaction of political/military and humanitarian agenda and modus operandi have severely constrained humanitarian programming, and has increased disconnect between the humanitarian agenda and real concerns and needs of local populations"[15]. In these regards, it seems that without a clear separation between military and political actions on the one hand, and humanitarian needs on the other, humanitarian programmes will be associated with third-party militaries, and will thus be at increased risk of attack.

The Political Agenda – Determining a clear distinction from the political UN is sometimes complicated in integrated missions. In Afghanistan, given UNAMA's dual nature (development *and* political), the mission is not only collaborating with the Government but also co-operating with ISAF, and hence UNAMA cannot play a neutral political role. In this context, the progressive deployment of the Afghan version of the "Delivering as One" initiative[16] raises a number of legitimate questions on the underlying political reasons of such an overarching scheme in a country where the subordination of humanitarian principles to political priorities is – in both theory and practice – a major mistake. Therefore, in such a politicised aid milieu, UN humanitarian agencies should probably better balance their co-ordination needs with the need for operational independence by reaffirming its neutrality with regard to any political or military programme. From this point of view, it is worth noting that their implicit alignment on political strategies tends to prevent UN humanitarian agencies to develop dialogue platforms with the warring parties on the ground. This is of course regrettable, as UN humanitarian agencies should stay as neutral as possible with regards to all the conflicting parties, while seeking to strengthen the effectiveness of their program by negotiating some security guaranties with local commanders. By contrast, UN agencies urgently need to regain their values as non-governmental actors by stepping aside from the fulfilment of a political agenda.

2. Long-Term Strategy: toward a more comprehensive approach

In a highly volatile environment, UN aid workers are already extremely restricted in their movement and the emphasis is now seemingly equally placed between contingency or evacuation plans and long-term strategic planning. In this context, is it worth staying in Afghanistan for a UN humanitarian agency? The following recommendations take two parameters into account: 1) the humanitarian objectives of UN agencies, as stated in their programming objectives; 2) the reality of the Afghan social and political context today. The general philosophy of these recommendations is to focus on outcomes rather than outputs, on a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach rather than basic food-delivery, on pragmatism (accessible areas and beneficiaries) rather than theoretical missions (the poor in general).

Scope Adjustment – As the number of accessible areas will probably be even more reduced in the next few months and years and as most UN agencies have no control in these areas, a "net" of manageable and workable provinces and districts should be defined. This reduction should not be based on the intensity of socio-economic insecurity (targeting the poorest of the poor) but rather on the operational feasibility (targeting potential beneficiaries)[17]. Programme beneficiaries would *actually benefit* from humanitarian aid, and the outcomes and outputs of these activities could be managed, monitored, and

[15] UN internal note, Afghanistan, 2008.

[16] The United Nations launched the "Delivering as One" pilot initiative in 2007 to align programmes and funding more closely to national priorities. The idea is to strengthen local government leadership and ownership, by ensuring that governments have a clearer access to the experience and expertise of a wide range of United Nations organisations to respond to their national priorities.

[17] It should be noted that in 2008 the country office management decided to temporarily withhold approval of projects in areas where access, either direct or through outsourced monitors, was not possible. This essentially espoused a "no access, no food" policy. If this option can be discussed for NGOs, we strongly believe that it is now the time to consider that, in today's context, many UN agencies would better focus on long-term coordinated development initiatives in "go-areas" or "medium-risk areas" rather than putting their security as well as other actors' security at risk.

better tailored to the needs of vulnerable and needy people. Of course, a short-sighted interpretation of this new approach is to say that UN humanitarian agencies accept to reduce their geographic coverage of the country and choose to abandon needy people for the security of their staff and operations; this is clearly not our point of view as we consider that this revision of UN agencies' activities, priorities, and strategy in Afghanistan is the only way to stick to their original mission statement on the long-run by: 1) understanding that in today's context, most provinces and districts are not accessible and – as a consequence – that UN activities are not likely to help people without putting beneficiaries and staff at risk; 2) refocusing on a reduced number of areas where operational activities can be managed, strengthened, and monitored with additional partnerships and technologies, to develop sustainable and resilient socio-economic local environments; 3) apply, in the second and longer-term stage, the success and lessons learned from these selected areas in newly accessible districts and provinces. This 3-step approach implies a tightening of the geographical scope of UN agencies' reach in order to solidify the process and outcomes of its programmes, before branching out and expanding again when this qualitative basis has been established. The idea is hence tightening in the short-/medium-term to expand in the longer-term.

Pragmatic Co-ordination – In parallel, UN humanitarian agencies should systematically co-ordinate with all the trustable and recognised stakeholders in the targeted areas of operation. To progressively establish such a reduced but reliable "network" of districts and provinces, politically neutral UN agencies should co-ordinate among themselves to define shared areas of opportunity and better position the core pieces of the UN system (political, development and humanitarian): this is the only way to give some substance to the concept of "Delivering as One" and avoid playing a dangerous and contradictory political role on the Afghan scene. In the meantime, other international actors should be taken into consideration (like GIZ or AKDN, for instance, which strongly benefit from their local network in Northern provinces, as well as most of the NGOs operating at the district or provincial level). Local implementing partners should of course be considered, providing that thorough selection criteria and clear guidelines can be defined with these key players. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that even if partnerships with governmental agencies (from Ministries or provincial Departments to Governors) are a key factor of success for UN agencies, there is still no clear monitored evidence of the actual capacity and integrity of these institutions: UN agencies should therefore be much more demanding with governmental agencies and consider partnerships on a case-by-case basis at the provincial or district levels (which would also improve its credibility among the population). Last but not least, even if formal governance institutions[18] at the provincial level remain hostage to factional and occasional individual interests, institutionalised corruption and a poorly educated bureaucracy, they remain the only access point to local communities and a key factor of success and acceptability among beneficiaries and targeted communities.

Long-Term socio-economic assistance – In contexts such as Afghanistan, where a need for long-term assistance is anticipated, quality, in-depth humanitarian assistance should exclusively focus in places where management, service delivery, and monitoring is actually feasible. In the medium- and long-term, this approach could:

1) Minimise harm (corruption, food diversion, misuse of resources);
2) Build some trust and improve the image of UN agencies among the population;
3) Enhance the socio-economic resilience of targeted districts and provinces; and
4) Increase the overall security of these areas.

As a first step, pilot tests of the initiative are highly recommended to be held in food insecure districts of two to three target provinces; the targeted provinces and districts would benefit from an integrated and co-ordinated package of UN responses aimed at raising resilience to natural, political, economic, and social shocks. These pilot projects would become showcase project areas, providing the opportunities to fine-tune

[18] Namely, shuras and CDCs (see Priestley and Giustozzi).

the mechanisms required for replication and scaling-up. The entry-point for the programme would of course be the local *shura* and/or Community Development Committees (CDCs); where required local capacity would be reinforced to ensure community-driven implementation, participatory problem solving, and cross-fertilized experiences.

Integrated monitoring – Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) should not be considered as an indicator posterior and external to the project cycle and its communities; rather, it should be fully integrated in the project, from conception to implementation, to better breed the decision-making process and incorporate communities' perceptions and opinions on ongoing projects. Following the same logic, it is crucial to be more selective in identifying M&E implementing partners. The establishment of a selected list of knockout criteria (report writing, long-term staff, qualitative outputs, etc.) could be a helpful contribution to this process. In this regard, and to help in the selection of the M&E partner or third-party, it is crucial to streamline contractors' activity by:

1) Defining an overarching M&E training plan for UN collaborators and contractors to improve their reporting mechanisms and capacities, in order to evolve from a system based on a set of "number indicators";

2) Building the capacity of the selected contractor's evaluators to help them conduct both quantitative and qualitative assessments of the targeted areas;

3) Using the same M&E templates in all provinces, to allow for benchmarking and information sharing); and

4) Developing an analytical M&E framework that takes into account the multiple dimensions of the UN Human Development Index (HDI), which measures poverty, literacy, education, life expectation, and other socio-economic factors.

Negotiating Access – Similar to NGOs, UN humanitarian agencies may have an opportunity in the future to renew their principles of neutrality and independence by negotiating with combatant parties. Humanitarian actors, both NGOs and the UN, are aware that their long-term presence in Afghanistan after the withdraw of international military forces is determinant on community and opposition group perceptions and hence acceptance. These negotiations should be opened at national (Quetta Shura), provincial, and district levels, to make sure that UN humanitarian forces are not only understood but also accepted by all warring parties. This is the only way for UN aid workers to keep doing their job and for UN humanitarian missions to keep delivering assistance in today's and tomorrow's environment.

Focus on informal governance institutions…

The complexity of the challenges to sub-national governance has often lent support to a more inclusive approach towards informal governance. In northern Afghanistan, there are often numerous informal governance councils or shuras *at the district or sub-district level that are considered to be more representative and legitimate than the district government. The* shuras *are primarily comprised of local village, tribal, ethnic or religious (*ulema*) figures who have either inherited the role or been selected due to their abilities to solve local conflicts and effectively represent the interests of their village or valley. The vast majority of local disputes over water, land and family are resolved by informal tribal or elder* shuras*, usually including several religious figures. It is also common to hear reports of district governors or judges themselves sending cases back to the communities to resolve. Rampant corruption in the formal justice sector, where often both parties are obliged to pay '*bakshish*', has also led to the formal courts being considered the 'last resort.'*

In the absence of district councils, the institutionalised shuras*, such as District Development Assemblies (DDAs), District Community Council's or province-specific* shuras*, including the People's* Shuras *in Faryab, are an important component of sub-national governance. They have the ability to introduce higher levels of government accountability, prioritise development projects, assess humanitarian needs, monitor development implementations and bridge what is often seen as the widening gap between the government and communities. Currently their capacity to act as interlocutors with organisations such as UN agencies remain limited due to capacity constraints. The issue is amplified at the village level, where the capacity constraints are most evident. However, even if they are less structured, more ad-hoc and often lacking the resources for roles that are commonly envisaged for them, these informal governance institutions remain an important, although underutilised, aspect of sub-national governance. For international development actors, such as UN agencies, tribal or elder's* shuras *should be viewed as important representatives of the community, who are not only likely to provide a degree of governmental accountability but also able to grant humanitarian actors access to long-term relations with the community.*

3. Resources: toward a more flexible and pragmatic HR policy

Over the next two years, the already shrinking area of operations of UN humanitarian agencies in Afghanistan will likely continue its drastic decline, as more and more districts become "no-go" areas. Faced with an uncertain future, we can put forth two hypotheses:

- **Areas of Operations:** In the most dangerous environments, including highly criminalised environments, UN agencies will no longer be able to work anymore and remote management will not be effective.

- **Service Delivery:** Acceptance by local population and successful long-term implementation for UN agencies will depend on their ability to fulfil commitments and demonstrate tangible results for targeted beneficiaries.

UN agencies should thus favour a long-term, comprehensive, and co-operative approach in "green areas" where humanitarian aid and development are still realistic options.

When asked whether remote management would work in the Afghan context, a former MSF deputy director said: *"One thing we know about remote management: it never works!"* Often considered as a wise and practical alternative option to "bunkerisation", remote management programming raises many questions in terms of implementation, accountability, and monitoring.

In a recent publication, OCHA proposes a few good practices in this area, which include "investing in highly localised staff structures for field offices, recruiting staff members in consultation with their communities, and appointing nationals from the diaspora as international staff"[19].

[19] *"To Stay and Deliver - Good practice for humanitarians in complex security environments"* (Jan Egeland, Adele Harmer, Abby Stoddard), OCHA

However, in the Afghan context, shifting responsibilities for programme delivery to local staff or local partners raises a number of red flags:

1) National staff members are often wrongly assumed to be at less risk than internationals by virtue of their nationality. In reality, they are first and foremost perceived as potential sources of income and have to deal with a lot of pressure not only in the field but also at home (frequent personal threats of kidnapping, as reported by many international aid workers).

2) Third-party implementing partners (in charge of food-delivery and monitoring) do not offer all the guarantees that UN agencies often expect of them.

International Staff – During the presidential elections of 2009, all UN non-essential staff was sent abroad, which clearly gave a contradictory message to the population, as if development agencies were abandoning the country on its more significant political day. More generally, this anecdote leads us to rethink the current HR principles that prevail in UN humanitarian agencies. Due to heavy security rules, many UN workers we have interviewed and seen over the last two or three years now suffer from the "compound syndrome" or "bunkerisation" as they cannot have access to any kind of local reality and only have a virtual idea of the country.

On the long run, "bunkerisation" tends to develop significant biases (*e.g.* over-Westernised cognitive bias, over-theoretical approaches, cultural prejudices, etc.) and psychological side effects (*e.g.* disinterest, exclusive focus on the career path and R&R, reluctance to even meet with local counterparts, fear). Moreover, due to the high turnover in most positions (12-18 months), it is extremely hard to develop real learning curves in such a complex environment.

There is clearly a contradiction here, as this sort of engagement restricts the ability of UN agencies to accurately assess the volatile and risky environment in which they are operating. In 2004, the UNHCR addressed this contradiction in its "Review of Security Policy" by stating that *"given the danger in the environment in which UNHCR must operate if it is to protect and assist refugees, it is inevitable that staff members will be hurt and killed. It has happened in the past and it will happen again"*.

This does not mean that UN humanitarian agencies should now start hiring military experts or security contractors; it merely indicates that sound risk management also depends on *"individuals accepting a certain amount of risk —the risk that inevitably remains after appropriate analysis and all reasonable mitigation measures have been carried out"*.[20]

As such, UN agencies have no other alternative but to:

- Change their current recruitment standards (NGO profiles, practitioners, internationals with a few years of Afghan field experience, etc.),
- Adapt their security policy (more flexible contracts for international UN workers, legal adjustments to avoid court cases and liability claims, low-profile cars and compounds, acceptance rather than deterrence security approach, etc.), and
- Hire the absolute minimum number of internationals.

National Staff – Hiring skilled local staff is of course not only useful for strategic purposes (capacity building, hand-over, exit strategy); it is also a smart way to facilitate working relations with communities. Unfortunately, the highest number of fatalities and kidnapping among UN staff has been among national recruits (who are seen as relatively easy economic and political targets). As such, UN local staff who were interviewed in July and August 2010 in Jalalabad and Herat considered that they were more exposed and under a greater burden of risk than their international counterparts.

and Humanitarian Outcomes, April 2011. See also *"Providing aid in insecure environment: 2009 Update"* (Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, and Victoria DiDomenico), HPG Policy Brief 34, April 2009.

[20] *"To Stay and Deliver - Good practice for humanitarians in complex security environments"* (Jan Egeland, Adele Harmer, Abby Stoddard), OCHA and Humanitarian Outcomes, April 2011.

As a result of the added risk they incur, UN local staff have developed low-profile individual approaches such as not mentioning their UN work or position with family and friends, using cabs far from UN offices to return homes, etc. As such, it seems that a review of the existing security management procedures is needed to ensure comprehensive care for national staff, including an identification of distinct risks and needs for female and male staff.

"De-Internationalisation" is often mentioned as a universal solution to keep working in high-risk environments. The systematic "Afghanisation" of UN staff at the field level, however, is not an adequate solution in the long-term. This policy can place enormous pressure on national staff at both provincial and district levels. As suggested by the MSF and Acbar representatives we interviewed, local beneficiaries tend to have higher expectations of Afghan aid workers than of internationals: aid recipients (especially in the South) often expect the Afghan workers to do more, feeling that they somehow "owe" something. In contrast, international aid workers are more likely to play a neutral role and be perceived as unbiased (at least at the community level), even if they do represent a target for anti-governmental factions and terrorist groups.

Picture 6: Kite runners in Kabul (October 2010)

4. Information: toward a more systematic knowledge management

Dynamic strategic analyses – Most agencies operating in Afghanistan admit that they have insufficient knowledge of the contexts in which they operate and that they lack local networks and information sources. For instance, UN agencies have almost no clue of the ongoing unregulated migration dynamics and often define their strategies with a "relief-as-usual" approach; however, the domino effect around the country, as well as in volatile border regions along Afghanistan's two frontiers with Iran and Pakistan could have a disastrous humanitarian impact in the region and should be carefully: 1) watched (through early warning, monitoring, and rapid assessments); and 2) analyzed (through long-term or ad-hoc strategic redefinitions at both provincial and national levels). In this regard, the organisation roundtables with all the relevant stakeholders could strongly enhance the operational capacity and political weight of UN agencies: for example, a collective analysis of the ongoing migration dynamics shared between UN key players and other actors (IOM, NRC, NGOs, governmental actors) could contribute to mainstreaming the existing initiatives.

Knowledge Management – Following this logic, UN humanitarian agencies would strongly benefit from a thorough knowledge management and database system, centralising information from all area offices and providing the capacity to analyze data related to the programme quickly and efficiently. It would allow the programme to benefit from lessons learned at both national and provincial levels. In this regard, the programme should: 1) streamline the existing flow of information at the field level; 2) enhance the co-ordination and information sharing between offices (Kabul to provinces and province to province); 3) co-ordinate national and provincial pilot plans (capacity building of the staff, selection criteria of beneficiaries and implementing partners, monitoring and evaluation, choice of outsourced activities and private partners, etc.). The purpose is to lay the emphasis on qualitative sharing of good practices, and provide tangible information tools to feed the decision-making process at the national, provincial, and district levels: static tools (political context analyses as well as specific conflict or threat analyses, perception surveys) and more dynamic instruments (crowd sourced information, continuous M&E assessments) should probably be considered.

Communications Strategy – In parallel, we recommend developing a full communications strategy with local communities about the duration of the programme, its goals and the process of beneficiary selection. In parallel, perception management campaigns promoting the organisation's principles, objectives, outputs, and outcomes should be prioritised to clearly delineate the humanitarian perimeter from the political – and progressively strenghten acceptance of UN humanitarian agencies. However if advocacy should be a key aspect of UN humanitarian agency programme components, it should be noted that the success of the program will mostly depend on its capacity to reach its objectives in terms of co-ordination, actual implementation and sustainability.

Conclusion: Cornerstone or Tombstone?

"Virtue makes the goal right, practical wisdom the things leading to it"

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics

A Gallup poll conducted a few days after Osama Bin Laden's death in May 2011 found that 59% of Americans say the U.S. "has accomplished its mission in Afghanistan" and "should bring its troops home"[21]. While the definition of "mission" in this context is debatable, such a significant majority clearly demonstrates a gap between Western opinion and the Afghan reality. Likewise, most European countries consider that Afghanistan is not a priority anymore and that too many soldiers have already died in this remote country for unclear political motivations. Given the political turmoil and informational chaos that surrounds the planned withdrawal of the coalition forces, it is good to take one analytical step back to get a more comprehensive picture of the political and social game.

There remains much to be done in almost all development fields in Afghanistan. Time is running short and the number of accessible districts and "go-areas" is shrinking. Aid workers and NGOs that have operated in Afghanistan will never be the same, knowing what was could have been done, and what – unfortunately – has not been done. As one interviewee explained, it seems that *"development agencies have lived their Vietnam War here".*

The objective of this paper, however, is not to point out mistakes made, but rather to provide insight and analysis for the way forward. It would be premature to produce scenarios of political fragmentation in Afghanistan, and we strongly believe that nothing is written in the Afghan stone. The road ahead for all UN agencies, while unclear, will demand courageous choices made in a strategic and timely manner. These decisions should take into account the political and social context to better favour long-term development and pragmatic solutions by:

1) Reaffirming the programme's independence from military strategies (ISAF and UNAMA) and carving out operational humanitarian space through regular, direct, and transparent negotiations with *all* the warring parties;
2) Refocusing, in the short and medium term, on a reduced number of manageable areas and developing co-ordinated development schemes with other actors to increase local political and socio-economic resilience;
3) Defining new HR political options to allow UN aid workers to work directly with the beneficiaries and communities they are supposed to assist; and
4) Creating new communications tools (security, assessment, monitoring, etc.) to inform the decision-making process at both national and local levels.

The approach suggested here does not contradict UN key principles, nor does it advocate for abandoning needy and poor people. However, a revision of UN agencies' activities, priorities, and strategy in Afghanistan has become necessary to simply keep working in this country and delivering services to the poor. Now is not the time for abstract virtue; it is a time for practical wisdom and sound action plans.

[21] *USA Today*/Gallup poll based on telephone interviews conducted May 5-8, 2011, with a random sample of 1,018 adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia.

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Samuel Hall *is a research and consulting company with headquarters in Kabul, Afghanistan. We specialise in perception surveys, policy and socio-economic research, evaluations and impact assessments for governmental and non-governmental organisations. Our teams of technical experts, practitioners, and researchers have years of field and research experience in Afghanistan. This has allowed us to (i) acquire a firm grasp of the political and socio-cultural context of development in Afghanistan; (ii) design data collection methods and statistical analyses for monitoring, evaluation and planning of programmes; (iii) apply cross-disciplinary knowledge in providing integrated solutions for policy interventions.*

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