

# BRIDGING THE GAP FOR RETURNING REFUGEES

## A Practitioner's View of the Relief-Development Divide in Post-Taliban Afghanistan

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### **Introduction**

This paper is a practitioners view of attempts to bridge the gap between relief and development in Afghanistan in the first year after Sept 11, 2001. It draws on experience of being seconded by UNDP to UNHCR in an attempt to facilitate a partnership which would support the sustainable reintegration of refugees returning home. After a brief review of the theoretical state of the art on the relief development gap the paper discusses UNHCR's approach and raises three dilemmas faced by the UN system in seeking to address it.

### **Background**

By 2001 Afghanistan's civil war had been raging for 23 years. Around a third of the population had become refugees, mostly in Pakistan and Iran, and governance had collapsed especially under the Taliban regime. International assistance had fallen to a low point with minimal donor interest in a forgotten country.

September 11 2001 changed that in a dramatic way. Following the Coalition War, amidst fears of a humanitarian crisis, an Interim Administration was installed in late December. For war weary Afghans this created a tremendous sense of hope for the future and was to lead to the spontaneous return more than 1.6 million refugees from Pakistan and Iran during 2002.

### **The Relief-Development Gap in Theory**

The gap between relief and development has been much debated over the last decade, including in the General Assembly of the United Nations (Suvieu,1996). It arises in complex political emergencies when humanitarian agencies leave an area

after crisis has subsided but before incoming development agencies have established programmes and it is characterised by poor coordination, cumbersome donor procedures and unstable governments.

Literature on the gap is underpinned by the notion of a continuum between relief and development which can be bridged by making relief aid more developmental and encouraging development agencies into areas of conflict at an earlier stage. This has also given rise to the currently popular belief that development assistance can play a significant role in reinforcing processes of peace and preventing further conflict. In practice, a wide range of multilateral and non-governmental agencies have reoriented their programmes to this end.

### **UNHCR and the Gap**

UNHCR's global strategy for the reintegration of refugees is based on the concept of a post-conflict transition from war to peace and a parallel aid transition from relief to development. It has two objectives, one to respond quickly to repatriation movements and the other to ensure sustainability of UNHCR-initiated reintegration interventions. Although performance on the first objective is good, evaluations show that sustainability of short term quick impact projects is a problem (Macrae 1999).

The solution is defined as identifying more effective aid partners with a development, rather than relief, agenda and in the improvement of coordination and aid management processes. Key assumptions of the strategy are that there is a functioning state which has the legitimacy and the capability to coordinate and implement

development policies and that the inevitable institutional weaknesses resulting from complex emergencies can be addressed. Recent research, however, shows that the majority of refugees return to unstable 'quasi states' and that institutional weaknesses are so severe that they are likely to take decades rather than years to address (Macrae 2001).

In line with the strategy a great deal of importance was attached to a partnership with UNDP in Kabul as a means of bridging the gap and providing an enabling environment within which the massive refugee return could be sustained in the context of a war-shattered country and a four year drought. At the same time UNHCR energetically promoted improvements in the UN coordination system.

### **The Middle Ground between Relief and Development**

The idea of a continuum implies the potential for a smooth transition between relief and development. In Afghanistan, prior to the coalition war, most assistance was humanitarian in nature and implemented outside government. There were some small projects in community development but almost no development assistance channelled through government. This made the process of supporting reconstruction extremely difficult and slow which frustrated both government and donors and gave rise to the perception that there was too much humanitarian assistance at the expense of development. Although donors pledged US\$4.6 billion for the reconstruction of Afghanistan in January 2002, by October only \$1.4 billion had been disbursed, predominantly humanitarian aid through the UN and NGOs. This was in spite of repeated pleas by the government to invest more in development through government itself in order to build confidence in the people.

The gap was therefore glaringly obvious from the beginning and the scene was set to enter the murky area of the inter-changeably named recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction phase. This middle ground has been characterised as a period of fragility, inexperience, anxiety, confusion and political myopia (Moore 1999). Far from

promoting collaboration in the spirit of partnership it tends to result in competition between humanitarian and development agencies for turf, money and credit. This was true in Kabul, creating rivalries and misunderstandings which could be vitriolic. Ironically the very coordination system which should have been the solution was one of the main problems, mired in competition, confusion and opaque processes. It was April before the new United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) came into being and July before it began to function properly.

What was strikingly absent were processes and mechanisms for managing change. Government, the donors, and the UN all struggled with basic issues of security and the lack of office and residential accommodation in a half-destroyed city. The first six months was therefore about 'muddling through' rather than strategic change. For the UN, alongside time-consuming operational and security challenges, there were many dilemmas to resolve in order to begin to address the needs of Afghanistan. Three of those dilemmas were defining an appropriate relief-development balance, learning how to work effectively with a new government, and facing up to the enormity of the challenge.

### **Defining an Appropriate Relief-Development Balance**

In January 2002 the humanitarian agencies swung into action with new staff, offices and new vehicles. UNHCR, daunted by its own predictions of 800,000 refugees returning to a country with a wholly inadequate infrastructure to sustain them, needed help. In line with its global strategy to bridge the relief-development gap it sought a partnership with UNDP as the lead development agency in the UN family. UNDP, however, was struggling with no additional resources to overcome a longstanding identity problem and was not ready to think through what kind of partnerships it wanted, with whom, and at what stage. As a gesture of intent it seconded a staff member to UNHCR to improve coordination and to work on common programming but processes within

the two agencies were out of synch and the usual scenario of UNHCR racing ahead and UNDP lagging behind was played out. By August more than 1.6 million refugees had returned, double the estimate, but new development programmes were still in the planning stages with nothing operational to begin the process of sustaining return.

Could it have been done differently? The humanitarian agencies, flush with funds and sophisticated systems to respond to emergencies, did what their mandate requires of them and “got on with it” to prevent a winter crisis. The development agencies meanwhile received little additional funding and were struggling to identify their role in the new circumstances. The Special Representative of the Secretary General had also instructed, given the political sensitivity, that agencies should be low profile in order to allow the Afghans to manage their own processes in their own time.

In theory bridging the gap requires humanitarianism to slow down and developmentalism to speed up. In practice this would have been wholly unrealistic. The humanitarian agencies were under enormous media and NGO pressure to counter a crisis and so leapt forward. The development agencies, with mandates to work as counterparts to government, could only inch forward tentatively. If the development agencies were struggling to work out an appropriate developmental response it follows that the humanitarian agencies would not have been able to make their relief programmes more developmental. But, although the desire to bridge the gap was there in some agencies, perhaps the impossibility of doing so is a function of the timeframe within which it was expected. Whilst everyone hoped for miracles, even ordinary Afghans would ponder the possibility that, if it had taken 23 years to destroy the country, it might take as many to rebuild.

### **Learning how to Work Effectively with a New Government**

The second dilemma concerned learning to work with government. After five years working outside the Taliban regime both UN

and NGOs were used to pursuing their own agendas and found it difficult to know how to engage. This was complicated because the Interim Administration would only be in place for a few months until the Loya Jirga elected a Transitional Government for the next two years. In the case of returning refugees the government at least was very positive in welcoming them back.

Accepting the new government required major attitude and behavioural shifts for all UN staff. International staff who had come from UN administrations in Kosovo or East Timor were frustrated at the style and pace of Afghan governance but there were particular difficulties for the Afghan UN staff. Many had been based in Pakistan for as long as twenty years and their experience of the different power holders was negative. Additionally most of them were majority Pashtun, and the new government was predominantly minority Tajik, so they privately challenged its legitimacy and were more comfortable engaging with it as superiors rather than equals. When the UN began to send staff into the ministries few were enthusiastic about the prospect. These issues created great tensions but they were crucial issues if the process was to be, as promised, genuinely Afghan-led.

Other factors were common to all collapsed states. The structure and functions of government had almost totally atrophied under the Taliban regime and there had been a serious loss of civil service expertise. With the new Ministers comprising, at worst, many of the old warlords and, at best, well intentioned but inexperienced outsiders, there was almost no base upon which to develop and administer policy.

Initially, under great pressure from donors to deliver results, agencies dealt cautiously with government but the new Afghanistan Assistance Coordination Authority took a critical and controlling line, rejecting projects which did not seek to build government capacity. As pressure grew agencies realised that the capacity problem would never be overcome without a proper programme to address it. UNHCR was particularly unsure about how to approach capacity building. It recognises that it has little capacity in its own human resource for

such process-oriented development work and it knows that donors do not wish to support what they see as 'mission creep' by humanitarian agencies. These issues have been explored regularly over the years (Crisp 2001).

Although UNHCR saw developing capacity in government as UNDP's role it knew that UNDP could not engage within the timeframe needed by UNHCR for its quick impact interventions to be institutionally sustained. Thus UNHCR reluctantly entered the capacity building arena, placing international and Afghan staff within government ministries. Having done so, and moved from doing things themselves to supporting government to do them, the next dilemma was the quality of programme to be delivered. UNHCR programmes are well funded, use large numbers of international staff and rely on expensive high technology systems. In government there was no budget, no computers, nor staff who had the skills to use them, and even basic communication in English was a problem.

Capacity building is not yet approached with the seriousness it deserves if government is really to lead the process of reconstruction in a way donors will be willing to fund. This links to the third dilemma and concerns the difficulty agencies have in comprehending and responding to the challenge of reconstruction of a country which has seen such prolonged conflict and devastation.

### **Comprehending and Meeting the Challenge**

From the earliest days of the Joint World Bank/UNDP/ADB Needs Assessment, when the assumption was that what was needed was a scaling up of existing programmes, to the present when the assumption is that capacity can be built by seconding a few individuals into Ministries, there has been a reluctance to acknowledge the immensity of the task. As a psychological reaction this is understandable as simplifying the problem allows it to be downsized and therefore less intimidating. However, avoiding the reality of the gargantuan task is tantamount to denial which may ultimately prohibit appropriate responses.

In the first instance the challenge defies definition beyond the general. When agencies attempt to define it they reflect their own interests and expertise. When government defines it they reflect the big picture but get lost in the detail and envisage a larger and more intrusive form of government than is either fashionable or affordable. What government and the UN agree on is that peace will have a much better chance if reconstruction is seriously undertaken and can demonstrate visible results. The Afghan Foreign Minister recently pleaded for US\$20 billion over the next five years, arguing that 'without more aid, extremists will take opportunities to destabilise the nation... when the people have a choice of jobs and opportunities, they will no longer carry guns' (Abdullah 2002).

This leap of faith between funds for reconstruction and a future peace has been a continuing refrain. In urging an expanded international contribution to security in Afghanistan, the UN Secretary General commented that 'adversaries of the peace process ... are actively trying to take advantage of popular frustration with the pace of reconstruction... reconstruction is critical to the viability of the peace process' (Annan 2002).

Although the creation of jobs and new economic opportunities would almost certainly play an important part in restoring hope and confidence within the general population it is unrealistic to argue that it is enough. Regional warlords have benefited greatly from the war economy, earning many times more from illicit cross border trade than they would benefit from through aid programmes. We also now know enough about the membership of radical religious organisations to know that poverty and unemployment are not necessarily contributory factors. In Afghanistan the history of foreign-supported jihad (holy war) has been long and complex.

When politics, religion and culture are seriously factored in, much of the debate about the technical aspects of reconstruction can seem very naïve. Similarly with the subject of the gap between relief and development. It may be meaningful to those involved in official assistance but it is

unknown and irrelevant to many of the power holders.

Because definitions of the challenge rarely go beyond the general it becomes very difficult to set objectives for programmes and almost impossible to monitor outcomes. Planning for repatriation and reintegration was done with wholly inadequate information and the logistics of huge operations is such that changing direction is difficult. Combined with budget shortfalls requiring continuous programme amendment the result is interventions which are not always the most effective or which have lost direction. Discussion of this, however, in a positive 'can do' organisational culture, tends to be unwelcome.

Reintegration of refugees is a very complex concept which is not well defined. It requires sustainable livelihoods, food security, personal and political security, reconciliation and a government capable of delivering these through macro-economic and other policies. In the specific context of Afghanistan, no-one knows exactly which factors will enable people to reintegrate and which will result in secondary flight. Therefore, even if partnerships with the development agencies were more advanced, it is unlikely that programme planning would be sufficiently sophisticated to identify those interventions which might make the most difference.

These realities are a concern to UNHCR, and it is making concerted efforts to plan effectively. At the same time it knows that it is only there in the short term and that donor funding will decline, programmes will close, and future evaluations will identify lessons and make recommendations which are important but often impossible to implement. Overall this means that there are few incentives to face the harsh realities.

## **Conclusion**

The idea of bridging the gap between relief and development presupposes a continuum between the two which may make sense in theory but which appears almost impossible in practice. From the practitioners

perspective there is no doubt that there is a problem which frustrates sincere attempts to create sustainable solutions and it is common to hear aid workers parrot the supposed solution. But relief and development are very different processes and approaches, supported by donors with often fickle political agendas. Where attempts are made in practice to bridge the gap they appear doomed to failure, at least within the short term.

In Afghanistan the attempt by UNHCR to enter into a partnership with UNDP has not yet gone beyond dialogue almost a year later. This is because the in-between of relief and development is a messy middle ground where the rules of the game are not clear and agencies muddle through as best they can. There are many dilemmas to work through, three of which have been highlighted here. Defining an appropriate relief-development balance and introducing change into long established programmes with vested interests is complicated, time consuming, and difficult for large bureaucracies which are notoriously unresponsive and lack effective mechanisms. Learning how to work effectively with a new government is uncharted waters which requires a trial and error approach in the face of uncertainty. But the greatest difficulty lies in comprehending and meeting the challenge.

Afghanistan is a complex and troubled country which has a long history of foreign interference and of rebellion against it. It has hosted Al Qaeda and there are many Afghans who continue to support the ultra fundamentalist Taliban. Many areas of the country remain insecure. Ten months after the collapse of Taliban, the Special Representative of the Secretary General informed the Security Council of the UN that the UN could only hope to fight small incidents of violence but could not address the causes of the conflict which still raged in various parts of Afghanistan (Brahimi 2002). To be reminded of this is continually necessary if we, as practitioners and theoreticians, are to avoid lapsing into simplistic development-speak solutions.

In conclusion, planning and programming for recovery, reconstruction and development are simultaneously woefully inadequate and over-ambitious given the political, cultural and institutional environment. There *is* a gap in our practice, and it is a huge one, but it is not between relief and development. It is the gap between the reality of the challenge and the feasibility of addressing it.

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