

Coordination Mechanisms for International Humanitarian Aid during a Sensitive Period: The Case of Afghanistan

Étude de cas

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Septembre 2020

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Abstract

This paper analyses the process of defining a coordination mechanism for improving performance of the international humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, during the Taliban regime (1996-2001), undertaken by the *United Nations Co-ordination of Humanitarian Aid for Afghanistan* – UNOCHA. This paper discusses how, and why, major stakeholders involved in Afghanistan were seeing this country's stability through the effectiveness of humanitarian actions. More generally, the subjects discussed in this paper help meditations on questions such as 'how and why the instability of Afghanistan has affected - and would very probably affect - business, economic, social, political, and geostrategic aspects of life in Central and Southern Asia as well as in the Middle East?' Strategic management concepts and approaches, suggests this paper, can help 'reflections' and 'actions' related to these matters.

Keywords

Strategic management, Complexity, Coordination, Afghanistan, Humanitarian Aid, Donors, Non-profit-organizations, Beneficiaries.

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the efforts of humanitarian actors in Afghanistan to improve performance of their collective action, particularly during the Taliban regime in the country. It links international humanitarian aid to attempts for Afghanistan's stability, which is admitted as a key factor for betterment of business, economic, social, political, and geostrategic aspects of life in Central and Southern Asia as well as in the Middle East. Indeed, "*...for millennia, the land now called Afghanistan sat in the centres of the action, the meeting place of four ecological and cultural areas: the Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and even the Far East, for the Pamir Mountains intrude into Chinese Sinkiang*" (Dupree, 1980, p. xvii). In addition to the "*Highway of Conquest*", some scholars have called Afghanistan "*the Highway of Commerce*". This is because the current geography of Afghanistan "*...has been defined as much by its position on ancient trans-Asian trade routes as it has been by war or conquest*" (Lee, 2018, p. 30).

Concerning the existing crisis of Afghanistan, many scholars and observers tend to agree that it originated in 1978 subsequent to a communist coup in the country, which initiated in many ways the painful and tragic decades for Afghans. The day after their coup, the Afghan communists set out to change a traditional society into a soviet-like communist society - sparing no brutality, mass arrests and executions. Faced with these atrocities, thousands of families fled Afghanistan to seek asylum in the neighbouring countries. At the same time, various popular resistance groups emerged inside the country. Over time, frustrated by the lack of popular support, the new regime intensified the repression against the villagers, which inflated the ranks of resistance and refugees. To avoid the collapse of the weakened regime, on December 27, 1979, the former Soviet Union decided to invade Afghanistan – militarily, politically and economically – which exacerbated the conflict. By 1986, around one third of Afghanistan's total population had taken refuge in neighbouring countries according to the UNHCR. As these refugees were crammed into makeshift camps in abominable living conditions, international humanitarian aid began to arrive. With the

increase of aid, the concerned stakeholders created the *United Nations Co-ordination of Humanitarian Aid for Afghanistan* – UNOCHA in 1988.

Active until 2001, UNOCHA was to coordinating international humanitarian aid in Afghanistan in the areas of ‘food and agriculture’, ‘physical infrastructure’, ‘health, water and sanitation’, ‘human resources development’, ‘population movements’, and ‘mine-cleaning’. UNOCHA’s headquarters was located in Geneva (Switzerland) – with main offices in different urban centres of Afghanistan; i.e., Kabul, Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Mazar, and Faizabad. Additional representatives of UNOCHA were located in Peshawar (Pakistan), Islamabad (Pakistan), Tehran (Iran), and Termez (Uzbekistan).

A proactive organization, UNOCHA had gradually developed a culture combining strategic reflection and concrete humanitarian action. This paper is interested in UNOCHA’s main strategic reflection known as ‘Common Programming’ – a collective effort of how to improve coordination of international humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.

The remaining sections of this paper describes the research perspective and methodology (first section) followed by an explanation of the previous initiatives that inspired ‘Common programming’ (second section). The paper then describes the most important features of ‘Common programming’ – including the interactions with the ‘internal’ stakeholders (third section), and depicts feedbacks of the main ‘external’ stakeholders (fourth section).

1. Research perspective and methodological considerations

Adopts the mainstream organizational and strategic management perspectives, this paper is interested in cooperative ‘understanding’ and ‘managerial action’ of complex socioeconomic phenomena. Understanding means the effort of involved actors to grasp a myriad of intertwined factors affecting cooperative actions and results of these actions. The notion of ‘complexity’ becomes central in this regard. However, from the existing abundant knowledge on this notion, we consider the parts directly

related to the topic of this paper; i.e. clarification and sense-making of the multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of humanitarian aid in countries in crises.

According to Genelot (1992), a phenomenon is complex when it resides, in part, outside our comprehension and control. For Piaget (1967, 1970), 'complex' is the opposite of 'simple' and cannot easily be subjected to 'reductionist' perspectives. Consistent with Yatchinovsky (1999), complex approach combines both 'subjective' and 'objective' perspectives. In line with Morin (1977), complexity implies to consider a phenomenon from the perspective of the 'whole', which is different from the 'sum of its parts'. Accordingly, examining complex issues require a 'multi-disciplinary approach, which implies 'perspective-sharing' and 'theoretical integration' (Carr, & Rugimbana, 2009).

'Managerial action' in the context of this paper means purposeful decisions, and the efforts to correctly implementing these decisions, of the involved stakeholders in situations with a high degree of complexity. We suggest that the field of 'strategic management' is helpful in this regard. Some important classic and contemporary works in this regard include Wheelen & al. (2018), Drucker (2004, 1990, 1989), Prahalad & Hamel (1990), Porter (1996, 1990, 1980), Mintzberg (1990, 1987, 1973), Allison (1971), and Andrews (1971).

This paper evokes also 'case method' in general, and 'participating observation' in particular. According to Eisenhardt (1989), case method focuses primarily on understanding complex dynamics in a context. Synthesising the important works in the field of management that inspired from the case methodology, Eisenhardt proposes that this methodology has been used to 'describe', 'generate a theory', and/or 'test a theory'. This paper uses the case methodology to describe a complex situation. On the other hand, since the author was partially involved in the process of Common Programming, it is important to dwell on the notion of 'participating observation'. This method allows researchers to access first hand data. It also allows to better understand the complexity of human and organisational phenomena 'from inside' – including comprehension of the mores, customs, social practices and

symbolic aspects of the phenomena under study. Occasionally, this method also permits discovery of information and variables unknown to researcher (Usunier et al., 1993; Becker & Geer, 1958). However, this method is costly – in term of time, engagement, and funding; and requires following an explicit ethical guideline (Usunier et al., 1993; Angers, 1992; Walker, 1985). While being aware of the costs/advantages of ‘participating observation’, the author followed the required ethical guideline.

In term of data collection, this paper uses a ‘multi-method’ approach Brower & Hunter (1989); qualified by the authors as a synthesis of different research methods. The existing research suggests that a ‘multi-method’ approach is more appropriate for a phenomenon with high degree of complexity: related to the same research topic, it allows data collection and data dissemination through various means (Brower and Hunter, 1989; Martinet, 1990a). Accordingly, data for this research was collected from four complementary sources: (i) UNOCHA as an organization, (ii) the sister UN-related organizations active in Afghanistan during the events covered in this paper, (iii) Solidarités (an international NGO collaborating with UNOCHA), and (iv) different groups of Afghan beneficiaries. On the other hand, this paper uses a combination of public data, data collected through direct observation by the author (as participant and non-participant researcher), and data collected through semi-structured interviews.

Three further clarifications are important before closing this section. The first one concerns answer to why a case related to the remote period of 1996 to 2001 is pertinent for today’s management issues. It is possible to argue that this period corresponding to chaos in Afghanistan, has been incubator of several important interrelated regional and international changes. For example, this era prepared a fertile ground for (i) the birth and development of contemporary religious extremism in Central and Southern Asia; (ii) the production and trade of opium in Afghanistan; and (iii) a massive immigration disorder. Together, these changes have been affecting (and will likely continue to affect), social, economic, and political aspects of life in

Central and Southern Asia as well as in the Middle East, Europe, and North America. The second clarification concerns answer to how are humanitarian problems linked to organizational and managerial issues. Peter Drucker argues in this regard why should business organizations ‘learn’ important lessons from the organizations involved in humanitarian activities; the ‘non-profit organizations’ (Drucker, 1989 & 1990). In a joint paper published with his colleague, Michael Porter, discusses ‘value creation’ by the ‘philanthropy’ sector. The authors argue that the organizations involved in philanthropy sector “...can and should lead social progress. They have the potential to make more effective use of scarce resources than either individual donors or the government...” (Porter & Kramer, 1999: p. 122). The third clarification emphasizes this paper’s focus: this paper is interested in ‘how’ the involved actors defined Common Programming (a coordination mechanism); it is not interested in ‘what’ this mechanism was; it abstains from discussing the technical and operational details of Common Programming.

The above recall on methodology and research approach helps to contextualize this paper’s main topic; i.e., the process of defining a coordination mechanism for international aid in Afghanistan. However, challenges in this area have existed before. The next section recalls the most important previous initiatives in this regard.

2. The previous initiatives

Three important initiatives inspired UNOCHA’s Common Programming: (i) PEACE initiative leaded by the UNDP, (ii) ‘Strategic Framework’ initiated at the UN’s headquarters in New York, and (iii) ‘Ashgabat Forum’ organized by the leading humanitarian actors involved in Afghanistan. In fact, one can see UNOCH’s Common Programming as a continuation, and a response to the main recommendations, of these earlier initiatives. Figure 1 illustrates this situation and the following subsections detail each initiatives.

 INCLUDE FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

2.1. PEACE initiative

‘PEACE’ - Poverty Eradication and Community Empowerment – was initiated in 1997 by the UNDP/Afghanistan. Its goal was ambitious: “...to contribute to the restoration of peace in Afghanistan through poverty alleviation, good governance building and community empowerment in both rural and urban areas” (UNDP, 1997, p.5). A relatively extended field study constituting the bases of PEACE initiative was revealing that years of conflict had damaged every aspect of life in Afghanistan. Significant numbers of farmers had lost their land due to dislocation and erosion, mining by belligerents, and irrigation structures’ damages. Like rural areas, main urban infrastructures (physical, economic and social) had been subject of massive destruction. Internally displaced people and returning refugees from neighbouring countries were exacerbating these problems; by then, around three-quarter of the Afghan population was amassed in rural areas while about 85% of the country’s population depended on farming and agriculture for their subsistence. On the other hand, with relatively large population growth in Afghanistan, already limited resources had becoming scarcer (UNDP 1997: p. 5). Overall, PEACE initiative endowed a crucial role to international aid and its effective coordination:

«...In the absence of a fully functioning government, the aid community plays a catalytic role in the design and planning of integrated reconstruction and development programs for Afghanistan. UNDP will play a leadership role in facilitating the coordinated planning and implementation of high-impact interventions. Furthermore, it will establish a regionally based mechanism to support aid coordination...» (UNDP, 1997, p. 12).

2.2. ‘Strategic Framework’

Alongside with actions and reflections of the local humanitarian actors, the UN’ ‘Administrative Committee for Coordination’ initiated in 1996, at its headquarters in New York, an important reflection exercise which became known as ‘Strategic Framework’ (UN, 1998). The main idea was to study how to improve their actions in a complex conflictual situation. Afghanistan was selected as a case to study.

Between September and October 1997, a delegation travelled from New York to Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries in order to study the ground realities. The

findings were revealing that while international assistance had saved many lives in Afghanistan, it had lacked an overall unifying vision – particularly in the areas of reconstruction and humanitarian aid where the projects were qualified as largely ‘*supply-driven*’ and ‘*inconsistent*’. Other issues highlighted included a lack of reliable data and an absence of adequate evaluation systems to assess the impact of these projects. The Strategic Framework’s main recommendation was a system-wide radical change in processes – with two important characteristics: (i) reaching consensus among stakeholders on the nature of political, economic, social and humanitarian issues in Afghanistan; and (ii) defining clear principles that guide all international community’s assistance and relations with Afghans. The Donor Community mandated UNOCHA to ‘operationalize’ these recommendations. Subsequently, UNOCHA initiated a gathering of the main stakeholders. The following subsection highlights the important features.

2.3. ‘Ashgabat Forum’:

Conform to the Strategic Framework’s recommendations, the principal humanitarian aid actors gathered in Ashgabat (capital city of Turkmenistan) during 3 days in January 1997. The main participants included representatives of major donor countries, concerned UN institutions, international and local NGOs, neighbouring countries’ political authorities, and the Bretton Woods institutions. The objective was to seek consensus among these stakeholders on a road map, which integrates international aid, peace, and reconstruction prerogatives in Afghanistan (UN, 1997, p. 2). Among challenging issues, they examined the causes and consequences of a local governance’s ineffectiveness; a lack of basic socioeconomic services and infrastructures; an extreme poverty caused by food shortage, an acute migration; an inconsistent urban growth; and a severe environmental disaster.

The Ashgabat Forum ended with two important outcomes: (i) creation of the ‘Afghan Support Group - ASP’, and (ii) recommendation of a general coordination mechanism for humanitarian activities in Afghanistan. The ASG was bringing together around 20 countries that were the largest donors of humanitarian aid for Afghanistan – among

them Germany, Australia, Canada, Denmark, the United States, France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. As for the coordination mechanism, the Forum's report explained it the following way:

«...An assistance strategy for Afghanistan needs to be coordinated and led, and must also be accountable. In the absence of strong accountable leadership, programming decisions will continue to be made partly on the basis of individual agencies' success in lobbying donors, on the professionalism with which project proposals are made, and on other ad hoc considerations....Coordination, leadership, and accountability are required among each of the major aid constituencies in Afghanistan – that is among donors ; among NGOs ; and among UN organizations. These three also need coordination and leadership...» (UN, 1997, p. 11)

Overall, findings of the initiatives highlighted in this section provided solid analyses of the external and internal contexts of the international humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. All the stakeholders needed at this stage was conceptualization of a coordination mechanism claimed by major stakeholders. The following section describes the processes of this group activity.

3. A description of how 'Common Programming' was defined

To define Common Programming, a coordination mechanism for international humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, the chair of UNOCHA established an ad hoc team early in 1998. Members of this team from the UN family included a senior advisor of the UN representation in Islamabad, the UNHCR director in Islamabad, a representative of the UN Department of Political Affairs from New York, and a representative of the UNDP from Kabul. The team also included a World Bank consultant, a representative of the Danish NGO DACCAR from Copenhagen, and the author ('*In Charge of Mission*' for the French NGO Solidarités). Overall, these team members interacted from 30 March until 4 April 1998 in a suburb of Islamabad (Pakistan).

Despite the organizers' best efforts, a number of difficulties slowed down the teamwork processes at the beginning. Some members' were episodically absent from the teamwork, and they needed to be briefed when they were back. The team lacked a

working methodology – which was regularly causing circular discussions. Additionally, team members did not share the same understanding of Afghanistan’s complexity and the actual humanitarian efforts undertaken in this country. The topic of whether including or not (in the draft) political and diplomatic dimensions besides humanitarian actions had also generated passionate debates. Nevertheless, the team decided to focus solely on humanitarian action in Afghanistan leaving aside the political and diplomatic dimensions. Although the team made this decision on a consensual basis, one cannot ignore the Head of HNOCHA’s influence who wanted *"something realistic, achievable, and concrete"*.

The team submitted a first draft of the Common Programming to, and asked feedbacks from, representatives of the ‘donor’ agencies, the UN agencies involved in Afghanistan, a number of leading NGOs active in this country, and the World Bank’s local office.

The team met then with the UN Regional Coordination Officers in Afghanistan to hear feedback from them and their staffs (April 13, 1998). During a lively meeting, the participants discussed in detail different parts of the Common Programming document – including different philosophies of coordination. Several Regional Coordinators highlighted coordination methods that worked well for them. Others brought in some mismatches between the ground realities of Afghanistan and the content of Common Programming. For example, one participant retorted about the existing gaps between data availability and war zone such as in Afghanistan: *“One of the problems is the lack of good data. You can’t get the information. There is a real problem with the information.... ...[There is a] need for continuous assessment, treatment of information....”*. Pointing out *“vagueness of the mandates of institutions and NGOs working in Afghanistan”*, another participant claimed that almost no ‘Country Director’ could clearly say what an UN agency’s mandate in Afghanistan is. Relatedly, another participant added: *“NGOs say that their mandate is to work with the community,...but in fact their staff usually spend the day in the offices...”*. The ‘costs’ of coordination, and by extension, the ‘costs’ of Common

Programming's recommendations – particularly in financial and human resources terms – were other important discussion topics during this meeting. Nevertheless, at the end of the meeting, the Regional Coordination Officers endorsed unanimously the draft of Common Programming.

Another meeting held in Islamabad (April 1, 1998), gathered the 'Appeal' professionals – those in charge of raising fundraising for humanitarian projects in Afghanistan. After a brief description of fundraising technicalities by these professionals, the discussions focused on how to match fundraising effectiveness to Common Programming recommendations. Perhaps more than other partners, the fundraising professionals acknowledged that despite its relatively high costs, Common Programming was very useful for the humanitarian aid projects' effectiveness. They also agreed to integrate all aid programmes and projects in Afghanistan to a fundraising mechanism called 'Consolidated Appeals' (UNOCHA, 1998: pp. 9-13).

The working session of April 15, 1998 was entirely devoted to meeting with the, and hearing the priorities of, major donors of funds. The interaction with the German Embassy representative in Islamabad was particularly interesting in this regard (Germany being a major donor of funds for Afghanistan at that time): *"donor countries are reserved on any idea of coordination - especially when it is done by the United Nations or by NGOs"*. He added that while donors do not have a problem with the idea of coordination, they decisively want to preserve their freedom to provide funds to any NGO, and any region of Afghanistan.

In sum, the internal stakeholder groups mentioned above rather quickly endorsed the final draft of Common Programming, submitted on 24 April 1998. The next section recalls important points of the external stakeholders' feedbacks.

4. External stakeholders' reactions to the Common Programming

The process of Common Programming offered a good opportunity to the involved stakeholders to discuss the broader challenges of Afghanistan, including cooperation between the UN and the NGO community. However, related to the Common

Programming specifically, beyond requests for some minor modifications in the final document, the reactions were generally positive. The concerned UN agencies, the Islamic Conference, and the ‘donor’ community (represented by the Afghan Support Group) unanimously accepted the Common Programming and mandated the UNOCHA to implement it the soonest possible. Relatedly, in a letter addressed to the UN Secretary General (May 27 1988), the US Secretary of State was expressing his satisfaction in the following way:

“...On May 5 the Afghan Support Group, ...met in London to discuss current issues and give input to UN agencies working in Afghanistan....The Afghan Support Group strongly supported a «Common Programming» approach for implementing international assistance to Afghanistan....”.

The topic of how to ‘operationalize’ the end-users (or the beneficiaries) of the international humanitarian aid in Afghanistan was continuing to be subject of debates even after the submission of Common Programming final draft. The Strategic Framework document (Feb., 1998, p. 4) was already pinpointing an ‘*important disjunction*’ in Afghanistan – among ‘the Afghan people’ and their ‘international partners’. Answering these questions ‘which Afghan group represented the actual recipient/beneficiary of the international humanitarian aid?’ was important mainly because the donor community had been insisting to integrate ‘Afghan Ownership’ to humanitarian projects in Afghanistan. Two Afghans involved with humanitarian aid made a compelling proposal in this regard, with three main points. First, about who are the actual beneficiaries of the international humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, they proposed: those needy people who were born in Afghanistan and who had been identifying themselves as Afghans. Second, about how to involve these beneficiaries in the process of implementing the Common Programming’s recommendations, the proposal was suggesting creation of an “*Afghan Advisory Board*” which would counsel stakeholders on matters pertaining to aid strategies in Afghanistan. Third, about how to identify and engage these Afghans, the proposal was suggesting detailed practical criteria.

To collect the NGO community's reactions, ACBAR (Agency Coordinating Body for Afghanistan Relief) organized a meeting in Kabul (June 20, 1989). Reactions of three NGOs were reflecting the general mood of the NGO community - those of MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières), MDM (Médecins du Monde) and AREA (Agency for Rehabilitation and Energy Conservation in Afghanistan). MSF's representative expressed four (4) main concerns: (i) ignorance of several NGO principles by the UN, (ii) desire of monitoring humanitarian activities in Afghanistan by the UN, (iii) minimal decision-making role for NGOs, and (iv) fear that the UN would work directly with local authorities (i.e., the Taliban), which was qualified as "*something unacceptable*". Supporting MSF's position, the representative of MDM reminded the audience that, with the implementation of Common Programming, NGOs would risk "*losing their identity, independence and history*", particularly in term of funding. The representative of AER reminded the audience that coordination of humanitarian activities was '*not such a bad idea*', and proposed definition of a '*mechanism that conduit NGOs contributions*'. At the end of this gathering, the Executive Director of ACBAR announced the acceptance of Common Programming by the NGO community (communiqué of ACBAR, 30 June 1998).

DISCUSSION

Common Programming started to generate positive outcomes in the relatively high complex context of Afghanistan during the end of 1990s. Nevertheless, the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 in United States stopped the activities for which it was designed, since soon after, the US and its allies were going to attack, and replace, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Summarizing the Common Programming's processes into 'reflection' and 'action', one can view it from a strategic management viewpoint. Reflection at this level allows linking the humanitarian aid to Afghanistan's general context and to overall international humanitarian aid. Action consists of designing, planning, organizing, monitoring, and leading different aspects of humanitarian projects in Afghanistan.

Beyond approaching the complexity of humanitarian action in a holistic way, a strategic perspective offers room for meditations on why and how the events of Afghanistan has affected (and will affect very probably) economic, social, demographic, and political aspects of life in Central and Southern Asia as well as in the Middle East. Relatedly, subjects discussed in this paper allow proposing what is needed, and how, to “fix” Afghanistan’s four decades-long puzzle. Alongside, the political and geostrategic issues discussed in this paper give room to identify lessons learned from Afghanistan’s ordeal for comparable countries.

The topics discussed in this paper can also lead to a critical outlook of humanitarian aid in general and in the particular context of Afghanistan. It is important to recall that besides praises, humanitarian aid has been subject to severe criticisms. A well-known example of critique is the assessment of Hancock (1989) related to the ‘*mega development projects funded by international aid*’. This study is based on facts and evidences from the author’s own experience with the international aid community as well as interviews with consultants and experts in this domain. The author evokes “*monumental mistakes made*”, the “*waste of money raised on behalf of the poor*”, “*corruption*”, and the “*negative socio-economic consequences of aid*”. One can also refer to Frank’s (1967) study of the effects of international aid on developing countries. Adopting a Marxist perspective and using the cases of Chile and Brazil during the 1960s, this study concludes that international aid is an instrument for maintaining the dominance of capitalism over the poor countries. In the case of Afghanistan too, humanitarian aid has had challengers. A notorious example in this regard is the position of Bashar-Dost – a former Afghan Minister of Planning who had to resign because of his opposition to NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) activities in Afghanistan. In an interview, Bashar-Dost was saying that the NGOs working in Afghanistan “...[had] established an embezzlement system out of the international aid...” (Voltairenet.org, 19 Sept. 2005). He kept going with the following statement: “...the Afghani economy is right now in the hands of ...Non-Governmental Organizations ...while maintaining an army of western consultants

whose standard of living significantly differs from that of the population. Also, each program must be ratified by the government or the UN mission. In both cases, the NGO's would secretly pay a 20% commission to those in charge of making decisions to have their support" (ibid.). Such harsh critiques of the international humanitarian aid are obviously serious; and require further academic research; particularly in terms of the actual value created by humanitarian aid in countries that are in conflict or post-conflict phases.

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Figure 1. Previous initiatives to Common Programming

