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AID RESPONSES TO AFGHANISTAN: LESSONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

DAC Senior Level Meeting, 12-13 December 2001

AID RESPONSES TO AFGHANISTAN: LESSONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

Submitted by Niels Dabelstein, Chair of the DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation to the DAC Senior Level Meeting, 12-13th December 2001.

Whilst Afghanistan is a larger and more populous country than many previous major crisis zones[1] and certain aspects of the current situation are unique, many elements and their likely evolution bear direct comparison with previous crises and the international response to them. Evaluations of responses to earlier crises conducted by DAC members and other development and humanitarian organisations constitute an important and valuable body of lessons for the international community as it attempts to respond effectively to the evolving situation.

The DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation meeting on 14-15 November 2001 suggested that the Chair distil key lessons from previous evaluations which may have direct or potential relevance to the current, highly fluid, context in Afghanistan[2].

The following nine lessons are based on a review of more than 50 formal evaluation reports supplemented by key evaluative studies - the most important of which are listed in the annex. They were compiled with the support of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) and an expert group[3].

The current climate, characterised by a justified sense of urgency among aid agencies to maximise the impact of aid and avoid the recurrent problems of the past, provides a real opportunity to put into place effective mechanisms for getting the relief and rehabilitation effort in Afghanistan "right".

DAC Members and other key international actors should consider how to ensure that the lessons from previous operations are built into the planning and co-ordination mechanisms for aid to Afghanistan and how to institute the necessary actions and safeguards. Such arrangements need to take into account relevant lessons both at the international level as well as at the regional and national operational level.

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[1] The total population of Afghanistan is an estimated 25 million (including Afghan refugees). By comparison the population of East Timor is 0.5 million, Kosovo 2 million, Bosnia-Herzegovina 4.5 million Rwanda 7.5 million, Haiti 8 million and Somalia 10 million. The geographical area of Afghanistan is 75 per cent of the combined area of these six countries.

[2] This note was prepared during the first week of December, at which time only pockets of Taliban military resistance remained and, on the political front, the meetings of Afghan factions with international actors were beginning to address post-conflict reconstruction issues.

[3] The group consisted of John Borton, ALNAP, ODI; Ian Christoplos, Collegium for Development Studies, Uppsala University; John Eriksson, Operations Evaluation Department, IBRD; Shepard Forman, Center on International Cooperation, NYU; Hans Lundgren, OECD/DAC; Larry Minear, Humanitarianism and War Project, Tufts University; and Joanna Macrae, Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI. (www.alnap.org).

1.   Develop a coherent policy framework that recognises that humanitarian aid requires its own 'space'

The central finding of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda was that aid can not be a substitute for political action. In the absence of a just and sustainable political settlement the potential achievements of aid will be modest. International responses are most effective when the full range of tools and forms of influence (political/diplomatic, military, economic, administrative, legal, social, rule of law and human rights instruments) are employed in a complementary manner. In East Timor and Kosovo (once UNMIK had been established) the international community achieved significant coherence in its approach, resulting in improved effectiveness of assistance activities.

Policy coherence should not lead to integration of all these tools into one monolithic management framework. They should be seen as complementary but different, sometimes uncomfortable bedfellows. When seeking coherence it is important to respect the comparative advantages and different modus operandi of different types of organisations. For instance, the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality and provision of aid on the basis of need have to be respected in relation to humanitarian work. The evidence is that overriding or disregarding such principles is likely to lead to reduced access to at-risk populations and endanger the lives of humanitarian aid personnel.

As a result of the UN-led Strategic Framework for Afghanistan (SFA) process launched in 1997, the international community has significant experience of attempting to achieve policy coherence in the previous Afghanistan context. However, despite some success as an aid coordination mechanism the SFA failed in its policy coherence aims and did not realise its full potential as an aid coordination mechanism for a variety of reasons, most important of which is differing conceptions of what "politics" can do and what aid can do. Other factors were: the project level focus of the assistance system and the failure of donor organisations to agree to the creation of a common fund; the limited influence that could be wielded by what was then an under-resourced and fragmented aid effort; and the difficulty of achieving common, consistent approaches between UN actors and between donor organisations. The difficulty of working with the Taleban regime did not help but this was taken as a given by the SFA. The lessons of this experience, including both the importance and the difficulty of putting into place a functioning SFA, should be heeded. Particular attention should be given to the need for a clearer conception of the role of aid in relation to politics. The DAC members should agree on a single conception of the role of aid and design their structures/programmes in Afghanistan accordingly.

2.   The results of peace building efforts have been mixed; the need for international engagement to be long-term and inclusive is clear

Whilst post-Cold War experience of peace building has had very mixed results, understanding of the elements required is improving over time and with successive crises. The two most critical lessons seem to be that:

−   The process has to be 'owned' by the population concerned.

−   High levels of international engagement need to be sustained for many years in order to create the 'space' and necessary framework of incentives and disincentives to enable all parties to learn to live and work together and to achieve meaningful changes.

Where these conditions are not met (e.g. as at key points in Somalia, Rwanda, Angola and Sierra Leone) the situation can rapidly deteriorate and conflicts resume and deepen.

Inclusiveness and 'local ownership' should be seen to embrace not only the leadership of different factions but also key elements of civil society. Somalia's experience was that early efforts to establish a centralised, internationally recognisable form of government tended to play into the hands of factional 'warlords'. Later strategies of undercutting the power-base of such factional leaders by strengthening the standing of elders, traditional leaders, and women's organisations have been broadly effective. However, the potential and procedures for transferring and scaling-up such initiatives are unclear, particularly when the situation remains complex and fragile. In any event, emergency activities need to be undertaken in ways that lay the groundwork for enduring social change.

3.   Approach and manage the situation as a regional crisis

In Rwanda, Somalia and Kosovo neighbouring states were involved, sometimes deeply, in the conflicts and were also impacted by the crisis as a result of refugee movements, trade disruptions and the need to host military forces involved in peace-enforcement/peacekeeping interventions. In all three countries the international community's response initially failed to take into account the regional nature of the crisis and the need to closely co-ordinate the approaches inside the affected country with the approaches in the neighbouring countries. In Rwanda this resulted in the pursuit of refugee and stabilisation/recovery strategies that were contradictory, sending confused or inappropriate signals to key parties which delayed conflict resolution and prolonged the need for humanitarian aid.

Instigating a regional approach requires some form of regional political framework and the involvement of regional and sub-regional organisations. The so-called '6+2 Group' (Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and China plus the USA and Russia) together with the UN would seem to offer a key element of such a framework. At the operational level a regional approach requires:

- Appropriate arrangements within organisations where two or even three separate departments may be responsible for Afghanistan and its six neighbours.

- Good communications and regular face-to-face contacts between key personnel working in Afghanistan and the neighbouring states.

- A cross-border communication/media strategy so that all actors are informed about the goals and how aid and other forms of intervention are structured to realise them.

- Clear accountabilities framed according to the agreed division of labour among organisations.

4.   Co-ordination requires clarity of structure, leadership and a willingness not to "fly national flags"

Co-ordination is vital in sensitive, potentially volatile contexts where disjointed aid is less than fully effective, sending unintended 'signals' and affecting local perceptions of the role of external assistance. Evaluations reveal a tendency for large-scale responses to generate multiple, overlapping co-ordination mechanisms where lines of authority (and consequently accountabilities) are unclear. The recurrent pattern is for many organisations and agencies to disregard co-ordination mechanisms when it does not suit their perceived interests. The initial relief response in Kosovo was markedly bilateral with wide discrepancies in the level of provision for beneficiaries served by different national agencies. Co-ordination has been good in some places such as East Timor and in Rwandan refugee camps in Tanzania, where strong leadership by agency personnel was reinforced by an ability to exercise control over physical access by agencies and their ability to access financial resources. Bilateral and multilateral donor organisations have a critical role to play in supporting international, national and local co-ordination mechanisms through their own behaviour, in vesting greater responsibility in the principal co-ordination mechanisms, and in their selection of operational agencies and sector activities. Donor organisations should collectively take the

lead in developing criteria and benchmarks for assessing the performance of co-ordination mechanisms and the behaviour of those being co-ordinated.

5.   The primary role of external military forces should be the provision of security and protection rather than aid delivery

External military and peacekeeping forces have assumed varying degrees of 'humanitarian' aid delivery roles in many of the large-scale emergency operations since 1990 (e.g. northern Iraq, Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Haiti, Kosovo, East Timor). Where their role has been evaluated, the evidence is that they are several times more expensive per unit of aid delivered than humanitarian or commercial suppliers. In contexts where fighting has just ended and where the capacity of those channels is not sufficient, the military may play a useful role in the immediate restoration of vital infrastructure (roads, bridges, public utilities, tele-communications). Where external military forces undertake security roles, and particularly in those situations where they are belligerents in the conflict, a clear separation has to be maintained between such forces and any humanitarian and other aid delivery. Confusion of roles and of local perceptions of humanitarian and aid agencies can endanger the activities of agency personnel.

6.   The relief-rehabilitation-development transition requires delegation of authority, flexibility and strengthened monitoring

Evaluations of relief-rehabilitation-development transitions reveal continuing disjunctions between initial relief provision and the delivery of rehabilitation and longer-term development assistance. Implicated in the difficulties are: differences in relation to conceptual frameworks; the fragile legitimacy of new governments; inadequately linked and differential timetables; high turnover of agency personnel; cumbersome organisational aid structures and procedures, micro-management by donor organisations; and rapid falls in what may have been initially generous levels of assistance in the face of the very real difficulties of working in weak institutional environments and the diversion of attention and resources to subsequent crises elsewhere. Current assessments of best practice point to the need for:

− A vision of the end goals which is shared by the donor community and key local actors.

− A joint needs assessment that prioritises the essential elements of basic needs and peace-building efforts.

− Early support for rule of law (judiciary, security/policing) and land tenure institutions.

− Rapid dispersal of funds for prioritised recovery needs, preferably through a common fund.

− Delegation of spending authority to the field, and avoiding tying funds to particular projects, functions, or donor country nationals, which inhibits its flexible and effective use.

− The establishment of a tracking system for aid flows and benchmark measures in order to enable mid-course corrections, inform communication strategies and ensure accountability at all levels.

− Clear schedules and assigned responsibilities for hand-over from emergency personnel and agencies to their successors undertaking rehabilitation and development programmes.

− Debt relief and underwriting of recurrent costs for civil administration are often important elements of recovery giving local populations a sense of confidence that there are structures in place to deliver the goods, services and protection they need.

7.   Strengthen, use and support local institutional capacity

After such a long period of conflict and instability the notion of what constitutes 'normality' may not be altogether clear in the Afghanistan context. However, evaluation evidence points to the critical role of normal daily activities and functioning local institutions (governmental and civil society), particularly those concerned with the rule of law, in creating a sense of progress, security and routine. In Rwanda the level of destruction and disruption was so great that it took a considerable time to build up the implementation capacity of central and local government – a delay that increased local suspicions about the sincerity of the international community's commitment to the country. Great care is needed in providing institutions and organisations with sufficient resources to rebuild confidence in them whilst preventing the growth of corruption and in identifying local partners which are legitimate and not associated with violence, and engaging with them in a principled way. International aid actors often fail to give appropriate priority to capacitating local structures, however weak they may be.

Unmanaged influxes of aid agencies – multilateral, bilateral and NGOs – are an increasing feature of high profile international political-military-aid interventions. In Rwanda approximately 200 organisations were present, in Kosovo some 300. Such influxes drive up office and housing rents, draw good local staff away from their normal roles/jobs, spur "bidding competition" among organisations, and create the perception that the agencies and their personnel are "benefiting more than the local population". The heightened cultural/religious sensitivities in Afghanistan reinforce the need to limit the number of international agencies and personnel and ensure the quality and training of those agencies and staffs operating in Afghanistan. The most efficient way to contain the problems of expatriate dominance and disruption is to prioritise the identification and engagement of local and national emergency and rehabilitation actors, even where national and governmental structures remain weak or not fully legitimate. The significant skills and capacities within Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora should be recognised and harnessed.

Leadership and action by donor organisations is required to ensure that the familiar problems of earlier crises are translated into changed practice on the ground.

8.   Control the "war economy" and confront the risk of entrenched chronic violence

Evaluations and other studies on Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, and Cambodia have shown that semi-legal and illegal activities can be an important motivation for factional conflict and for sustaining certain faction leaders in power. In the Afghanistan context narcotics production plays a very significant role and it will be necessary to understand how such activities may be influencing political negotiations and ongoing instability, and work to reduce the incentive for poppy production. Early efforts to rehabilitate irrigation systems and re-establish production of food and other legal crops will be required together with efforts to regulate and reduce the role of illicit trade. If drastic narcotic substitution programmes are implemented, safety nets will be required for those who may be rendered destitute.

After such a long period of conflict Afghanistan faces the very real prospect of entrenched chronic violence. Evaluative evidence points to the need for demobilisation and the regulation and reduction of war economies as being vital for effective peace-building. Evaluative evidence from Ethiopia, Namibia and Uganda and other cases points to the need for the careful design of three phases for effective demobilisation: i) demobilization per se (including disarming and discharge); ii) reinsertion into civilian life; and iii) reintegration into the economy and society.

9.   Accountability and learning mechanisms of the aid system require strengthening

Weaknesses in the accountability structures of aid organisations have been recurrent findings of many evaluations. The Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda recommended the establishment of

an independent monitoring entity and ombudsman function. While this recommendation has not been acted upon, it did lead to the creation of the Humanitarian Accountability Project (which is planning to field test methods for ensuring the accountability of all aid agencies in Afghanistan over the next few months).

Donors have a particular responsibility to provide leadership in promulgating consistent standards of accountability to beneficiaries of their assistance as well as to taxpayers. Codes of Conduct that have been developed in several contexts (including South Sudan, Sierra Leone, the Great Lakes and Somalia) have proved of some benefit and deserve consideration and adaptation for use in the Afghanistan context. Mechanisms for ensuring that lessons from previous operations are incorporated into new and on-going operations are insufficiently developed in many organisations and the aid system generally. A potential mechanism at the field level is the Learning Support Office concept developed by ALNAP.

The Rwanda crisis remains the only occasion where a collaborative, system-wide evaluation of the overall response has been undertaken, making that crisis a particularly rich source of lessons for Afghanistan. Generalised lessons from crises situations such as Kosovo are limited by the specific agency, sector and issue focus of much of the evaluation evidence. Despite the significant level of expenditures on rehabilitation, recovery and peace building, few formal evaluations have been undertaken of such programmes and their relationship with humanitarian efforts. Given the centrifugal tendencies of the humanitarian system, it would be helpful for the DAC to consider possible vehicles for orchestrating a system-wide evaluation of efforts in Afghanistan.

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