



STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: A Review Of NGO Coordination in the Field

Case Study: Afghanistan 1988-2010

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Version 1.2

Background Note

During the 1990s ICVA supported NGO coordination in the field in various ways and published two resource books: “Meeting needs: NGO Coordination in Practice” and “NGO Coordination at Field Level: A Handbook”. Commissioned by ICVA in 2010, this review builds on that earlier work, comprising three parts: an Overview Report introducing some key issues in NGO coordination; a series of Case Studies providing insight into how NGOs respond to those issues in the field; and a Lessons Learned bringing together critical points identified in the Case Studies.

These Case Studies include responses to both natural disasters and complex political emergencies from a range of countries around the world. The studies are specifically concerned with formal coordination bodies convened by international NGOs, although some of them include or support national NGOs. While every effort has been made to present an accurate picture of each response, gaps in the record and errors in recollection are inevitable. However any errors in the studies are the responsibility of the consultants and ICVA, and corrections and updates are welcome.

Background

Following the signing of the Geneva Accords on Afghanistan in April 1988 and the subsequent withdrawal of Soviet military forces, the United Nations Office for Coordination in Afghanistan (UNOCA, changed to UNOCHA in 1993) was formed to administer the Afghanistan Emergency Trust Fund established by the UN Secretary-General. UNOCA quickly opened offices in Kabul, Islamabad and Peshawar, while the UN agencies – which had limited their activities to areas under the control of the Kabul government during the war – now sought to expand their coverage.

At this point international NGOs dominated service provision within Afghanistan through cross-border networks which had taken years to build. By 1997-1999, 75% of a total NGO expenditure of \$376.4 million was managed by 45 NGOs out of an estimated 300 NGOs working in the country. On the other hand, international NGO primacy had led to a relatively weak national NGO community, and coordination between NGOs was weak. There had been some attempts to improve coordination, the best known example being the Coordination of Health Committees in Peshawar, which sought to agree standards for drug lists, medical training, and related issues.

One thing that united NGOs working in Afghanistan was a strong sense of independence which had developed in the absence of both government and UN presence. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator asked ICVA to send a mission to set up an NGO coordination function, but before that around 40 international and national NGOs came together independently in a series of meetings in Peshawar. A steering committee was formed, and statutes drawn up for a new coordination body, and on 20th August 1988 the Agency Coordination Body for Afghanistan (ACBAR) was formed.

The Proliferation of Coordination

Before 2001 – and especially before 1996 when there was essentially no government – ACBAR played a key role in setting policy and standards – for example in health, education and agriculture, all of which had sub-committees within the ACBAR structure. These sub-committees were open to all, and UN agencies and non-ACBAR NGOs frequently attended; however they varied in terms of performance depending on leadership, with health being the most active and effective. A month after the formation of ACBAR, the Southwestern Afghanistan and Baluchistan Agency for Coordination (SWABAC) was formed in Quetta by 12 national NGOs working in the south of Afghanistan (currently it has 40 members). The main purpose of both organizations was to coordinate NGOs for the purposes of preparing for an eventual repatriation of the refugees and a reconstruction of Afghanistan.

The Afghan NGOs' Coordination Bureau (ANCB) was formed in 1991 to develop national NGO capacity (although some of its 180 members are also members of ACBAR), and another two bodies followed: the Islamic Coordination Council (established in 1986) and the NGO Coordination Body (established in 1995 in Herat). A variety of network organisations were also formed over the years, including the Afghan Women's Network (AWN, formed in 1996) and the Afghan Civil Society Forum (formed in 2001). NGO consortia also met outside Afghanistan, such as the British Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG, comprising 27 major British and Irish NGOs), the European NGOs Network for Afghanistan (ENNA), and the US-based Afghanistan Reconstruction Working Group. Unlike ACBAR, however, some of the national NGO coordinating bodies such as ANCB and AWN became involved in fundraising on behalf of their memberships.

The fact that ACBAR, and particularly its sub-committees, were based in Peshawar, was a cause of frustration for some NGOs working from inside Afghanistan. In the late 1990s ACBAR as a body was expelled completely from Kabul by Taliban; to fill the gap, several NGOs based in Kabul created the NGO Forum as an open meeting to ensure information exchange. The Forum was run by 6 executives; MedAir chaired the first term, although the chair rotated every six months. Tension between NGOs based in Kabul and those in Peshawar was resolved when ACBAR absorbed the NGO Forum when its Head Office opened in Kabul in 2002. This has been the only successful example of bringing the various NGO coordination bodies into alignment; other attempts to bring the various coordination bodies together have failed.

Such failures were at least partly due to INGOs not fully understanding the political dynamics between Afghan NGOs, since many national NGOs (and some international NGOs) were members of more than one such body. While ACBAR has consistently been the strongest voice in NGO advocacy both nationally and internationally, this proliferation means that Afghanistan is often held up as an example of the difficulties of coordinating NGOs. It is worth noting, however, that the profusion of NGO coordination mechanisms is mirrored by a similar trend the UN/donor structures that have been established over the years.

“Coordination” from the Top Down

In addition to efforts amongst NGOs to coordinate their own activities, from 1997 onwards the UN and donors introduced a number of reforms. NGOs played a role in some of the bodies created by these reforms but many NGOs were concerned by the direction of the reforms. In particular, attempts to achieve coherence between political, humanitarian and human rights efforts through the innovative Strategic Framework and Principled Common Programming approaches were perceived by NGOs as potentially reducing their programme flexibility and compromising humanitarian principles. One particularly relevant body was the Afghanistan Programming Body (APB), on which ACBAR and SWABAC were both represented. With secretariat support from UNOCHA, the APB met in Islamabad on a bimonthly basis to provide strategic guidance for programming. NGOs were concerned that the APB focused too much on the annual UN Consolidated Appeal Process, and ACBAR members were concerned to reform the body to ensure that it followed through on sectoral commitments; this was agreed in 1999 with the formation of sectoral sub-committees.

These efforts were also seen by the NGO community as an attempt by the UN to create a leadership position for itself without necessarily having the authority to do so. Although there were questions about how to ensure the participation of and representation for the NGO community in the Strategic Framework process, ACBAR was able to send representatives to key meetings who could report back to the ACBAR General Assembly. The Strategic Framework debate exposed a key tension between the concept of strategic coordination as conceived by the UN and sectoral coordination as conceived by the NGO community.

At the same time, the rise to power of the Taliban, culminating in the taking of Kabul in 1996, meant that for the first time in many years there was a central authority which NGOs had to deal with, albeit one with limited reach and capacity. As a result ACBAR moved into a negotiating role, struggling with the policy issues raised by the Taliban stance on key development issues, such as whether to support boys-only education with limited success. In some cases a more active role was required, such as the 1998 expulsion of INGOs from Kabul by the Taliban; with mediation by the UN, ACBAR sent three representatives to negotiate the return to Kabul.

However the latter half of the 1990s saw ACBAR entering a period of crisis. Although ACBAR has had a relatively stable donor base – with European Commission, Swiss Development Corporation, Danida and the Netherlands as long-term donors – there was a steady decline in funding from 1997-2001, as donors felt that it had gone beyond its core business. From its inception, ACBAR drew a subscription fee from its members, but this covered 15-20% of running costs at most. It also raised a number of issues: many donors did not allow NGOs to use their project funding to cover their subscription, and did not want to provide project funding to ACBAR because of possible competition with their NGO partners. (ACBAR also created a novel income stream, albeit relatively small, by charging private companies to advertise their job vacancies on its website.)

Bouncing Back

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US, events moved rapidly. The invasion of Afghanistan and removal of the Taliban from power, absorption of UNOCHA by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), creation of the Afghan Interim Administration (AIA), and the AIA's 2002 replacement by the Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA) changed the operating environment rapidly and completely. While the UN mission or Afghan government had internationally-recognised mandates for coordination – making the case for a separate NGO coordination body less convincing to some – they had neither the capacity to carry that out or necessarily the legitimacy across the entire country, leaving a clear role for ACBAR.

ACBAR at this stage was on life support, with basic functions (such as thematic committees) maintained largely through the direct involvement of INGOs with a long-term commitment to the organisation. ACBAR's base in Peshawar – while perfectly suited for the cross-border operations that had dominated the 1980s and 1990s – put it at a strategic disadvantage now that the key meetings were being held in Kabul and Islamabad. In November 2001, the Steering Committee finally addressed the need for reform. Oxfam seconded an international staff member to act as ACBAR's Interim Coordinator while funds were raised and a permanent Executive Coordinator was recruited (a process which eventually took 9 months).

As older NGOs returned and newer NGOs arrived in Kabul, ACBAR began to grow again, with membership rising from 46 to 70 members in the course of 2002; the ACBAR Head Office moved to Kabul in 2002, followed by regional offices opening in Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat and Jalalabad (Peshawar remained as a sub-office until 2005). Governance remained the same as originally established, with the Steering Committee (SC) elected on an annual basis. A strict balance was maintained between international and national NGOs on the SC, although the Chair held the deciding vote and was always an Afghan representative. SC members tended to be drawn from the larger and older NGOs, which generally meant the SC could draw on a deep well of experience and wide range of contacts.

With a core membership that included most of the major INGOs and Afghan NGOs, ACBAR was taken seriously by the UN and was included in regular coordination meetings: however ACBAR sectoral committees were absorbed into UNAMA coordination meetings, although ACBAR coordination meetings continued to take place at province level. By the time the reform process was complete, ACBAR's services could be divided into five broad categories: information and communication (including facilitating coordination; policy and advocacy; capacity building and civil society mobilisation (including the NGO Code of Conduct – see below); government relations and legal services; and dealing with cross-cutting issues such as gender.

The natural role for ACBAR was to move from coordination to advocacy on the wide range of issues raised by the new environment: government relations and legal analysis (NGO law, taxation, human resources and so forth), civil-military relations (ISAF and NATO – especially around the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, or PRTs) and broader issues such as aid effectiveness. ACBAR created a Policy and Advocacy Coordinator position, supported by key ACBAR members (particularly CARE), and was able to develop position papers to address some of these issues; funding was also made available for a diverse series of publications, including a Handbook for Understanding NGOs (targeted at the Afghan population), a Study of NGO relations with government and communities, and The Case for Small and Medium Enterprises.

Caught between Relief and Development

The formation of the ATA was the biggest change and most difficult challenge faced by NGOs. For the first time in the experience of many organisations, there was an internationally-recognised government with the support of the donor community. NGOs that had been used to being the most important voice at the table found large institutional actors such as the EU, World Bank and USAID – as well as the UN operational agencies – establishing offices in Kabul. The creation of a government also changed the operating environment in a more political way: both the ATA and donor governments (particularly members of the NATO coalition) declared that Afghanistan was now a development situation.

Once the Afghan National Development Framework was introduced in 2002, donors became less supportive of NGOs and increasingly preferred to channel their funding through the government, and the NGO community had little choice but to embrace the transition from a humanitarian to development approach. However it was far from clear that Afghanistan was now a pure development scenario, as humanitarian needs remained persistent across the country, but few NGOs limited themselves to purely humanitarian activities and many NGOs found themselves caught between the two. In some cases NGOs failed to adhere to humanitarian principles because they believed that they were in a development situation, while in others they mistakenly applied humanitarian principles to development activities.

The natural desire of the ATA (and later the government that emerged from that Administration) to control NGO activities was in tension with the lack of government capacity to take on those activities (or even to coordinate them). This led to populist attacks on the NGO community by various government officials – up to and including the Afghan Assistance Coordination Authority, the body created in 2002 to oversee international aid. As a result the Ministry of Planning was given responsibility for NGO coordination in 2004-5 and took an aggressive approach. Accusations of NGO corruption and state disruption were amplified by national media and fed into a feeling among Afghans that progress since the fall of the Taliban was slower than they had been promised.

In some ways INGOs were partly responsible for the negative perceptions within the government. Years of bypassing central government, and sometimes even working against government wishes, had led to a strong sense of independence, and attacks from politicians served notice to NGOs that they could no longer operate in this way. However many government officials had also worked in the NGO community at some point in their career, some in senior positions and even on the ACBAR Board, and so there was a recognition that NGOs were indispensable in the delivery of basic services and their involvement essential in planning the transition from relief to development.

ACBAR was invited to represent NGOs in meetings to develop the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) from 2005, but the development of policy documents in post-Taliban Afghanistan was a far more complicated endeavour than it had been during the days of the APB. The number of actors involved had increased, the coordination structures were less clear, the overall process was more bureaucratic, and it proved difficult for many NGOs (including those with long experience in Afghanistan) to provide their inputs. ACBAR addressed this challenge by establishing a Secretariat in its Kabul office to represent Civil Society in the ANDS process, and by a series of publications fed into the process. These included a Guide to the Afghan National Development Strategy, six Advocacy Papers on various topics and a Report on the findings of the Afghanistan Pilot Participatory Poverty Assessment (APPPA) carried out through member and non-member NGOs.

Caught between Civil and Military

While relations with the government remained difficult periodically, two other trends proved even more of a challenge. UNAMA was a political mission, and by absorbing UNOCHA it brought the UN's relief and development activities into a political framework. At the same time the approach taken by NATO militaries – particularly the PRTs that began operating in 2003 – blurred the lines between civilian and military development activities, and consequently between civilian and military actors. Both these trends took place against a backdrop of continuing violence as the Taliban mounted an insurgency, causing concern for the NGO community.

ACBAR developed civil-military guidelines to describe a protocol for NGO-military interactions in Afghanistan. From 2001 a civil-military Working Group began meeting in Kabul to address issues between the NGO community, CSOs and ISAF, facilitated by OCHA. However relations between the two sides were strained, turnover at the meetings was high, both sides began to send lower-level representatives and the working group was defunct by the end of 2009. ACBAR presented a concept note that was submitted to the UN, ISAF, NATO and the NGO community for a “Contact Group” of a small number of (primarily international) NGO country directors to meet with the ISAF deputy commander. This more informal concept, with no elections, no set agenda and lower expectations, was accepted and the group began to meet with a focus on preserving humanitarian space.

These issues exacerbated previously minor divisions between international and national NGO members. INGOs could afford to refuse funding from the PRTs based on principles of neutrality and impartiality, while national NGOs were in a more difficult position since they had more difficulty accessing funds; it was difficult for ACBAR to negotiate a position which accounted for both perspectives. While that tension persists, ACBAR took a leading role in advocacy around civil-military relations, adopting a strong position against military involvement in development work while acknowledging that such involvement had now become part of the operating environment.

Caught between Public and Private

One of the issues at play in this debate was the question of what constitutes a legitimate NGO. From 2001-2004, around 2,400 NGOs had been “registered” with the government, but many international and national NGOs felt that some of these were not NGOs, but private contractors claiming NGO status. Facilitated by the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law, government legislation clearly establishing a distinction between the two groups was presented in 2003 and passed in mid-2005, with ACBAR playing a crucial role in its development. Around 2003, 120 NGOs participated in a workshop, which led to development of an NGO Code of Conduct, drafted jointly by ACBAR, ANCB, SWABAC and AWN. A Secretariat was created within ACBAR to finalise the draft, and the

Code launched in May 2005. To become a signatory (which is mandatory for ACBAR members), NGOs are required to submit documents proving their NGO status, including legal registration, coordination body membership, financial records, and proof of reporting to the relevant ministry.

While these activities represented good examples of NGOs coming together in the framework of a coordination body to successfully pursue common goals, some of ACBAR's efforts were not so successful. As early as 2001, ACBAR members recognised the need for a code of conduct to address issues such as ensuring comparable salaries between agencies and preventing poaching of staff. While there was agreement between the UN and the NGO community that such a code should be developed, the process was never completed and those human resources problems remain; however it should be noted that these problems are not unique to Afghanistan, but can be found in any situation where a large number of international organisations are operating.

ACBAR has also faced persistent challenges in engaging national NGOs in advocacy initiatives, for a variety of reasons: there were different understandings of what advocacy entailed, issues that were important to internationals were not always important to national organisations, and some organisations did not feel that advocacy formed part of their work. The continued existence of other coordination bodies mentioned earlier – some of whom sit on the same policy bodies as ACBAR – is testimony to the survival of Afghan civil society, although not necessarily its healthy growth.

The Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO)

Towards the end of 2002 a number of US NGOs in Afghanistan realised the need for improved security. With support from the Security Advisory Group at InterAction, a proposal was prepared for USAID; however sensitivities about US support in the post-war period lead to funding being provided by ECHO and the Swiss Development Corporation. ANSO was established in 2003 as an independent project with offices in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Jalalabad and Kandahar. IRC hosted the project until 2006, after which Deutsche Welthungerhilfe (German Agro Action) took over hosting until the present day; the project was co-located with ACBAR in three of its five field offices until 2006, after which all of its offices became separate. Hosting responsibilities raised questions around overhead costs, organisational liability and reputational risk; it is worth remembering that at the time no NGO had the experience of managing such a project.

The situation in Afghanistan was chaotic and most stakeholders did not have a reliable source that could provide clear and accurate information; the only alternative source for security information were UN security reports, which suffered from bureaucratic restrictions that lead to accusations that they were vague, inaccurate and politically biased. As an independent body, ANSO could act as a facilitator for an open-source network that went beyond the NGO community, dealing with the one issue that affected every actor in the country; as an advisory body, it could then use the information gathered to develop and deliver products which added value for different actors in that network, but specifically for its NGO clients.

Key to ANSO's success was its client orientation, providing a range of services including security updates, daily alerts and location-specific advisories; organisational and personal security advice; analysis of security incidents; and coordination of security-related training (in partnership with RedR). Another critical success factor was the high level of engagement by the NGO community, particularly via the NGO Advisory Board. There is a consensus that ANSO is now a critical part of both the aid and security infrastructure in Afghanistan, and attempts have been made to replicate a similar model in other countries, most recently with the Paksafe project in Pakistan.

Although risks remain, ANSO has avoided many of the potential pitfalls of working in Afghanistan. It has not become a target for armed opposition groups, it is not perceived as an intelligence agency by the national government, and it has managed to continue to provide sufficient analytical value to its NGO clients. In early 2011 ANSO registered as an NGO in the UK and was renamed as the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO), with an explicit mission of replicating ANSO in other countries.

A brief update to 2010

2008 saw severe deterioration in security across the country, leading to decreased access to basic education and health services for Afghans even as the UN introduced the cluster system of coordination. OCHA re-established an office in Afghanistan in January 2009 – although still within the UNAMA political framework – and, shortly after, a monthly Afghanistan Humanitarian Forum was launched, co-chaired by OCHA and ACBAR. This meeting, open to all humanitarian actors, was intended to provide a forum to discuss issues of concern that could be passed on to the UN Humanitarian Country Team meeting. By October 2009, eight clusters were operational; six of these had NGO deputy leads and one had an NGO co-chair. ACBAR continued to play a strong role, but the future of NGO coordination was uncertain in the face of continued violence within the country.

Critical Factors

- This case study has focused on ACBAR as the most prominent NGO coordination body, but other NGO coordination bodies have played important roles at different times. The proliferation of NGO coordination bodies in Afghanistan reflects divisions within the NGO community, but also reflects the political and social climates in which they were formed, illustrating the reactive nature of NGO coordination.
- The relatively long history of ACBAR is both its strength and its weakness. On the one hand, it has managed to weather several periods of crisis successfully, managing to remain relevant despite the changing context. On the other, the institutional form of ACBAR was created in a very specific set of circumstances, and changes in those circumstances inevitably lead transitional periods in which questions of its role and relevance are resolved. ACBAR has more or less successfully negotiated these transitional periods, partly due to the perceived necessity of an NGO coordination body both by the NGOs and external actors.
- This durability has a negative as well as a positive lesson for NGO coordination. The history of ACBAR raises the difficult question: when should a coordination body cease its operations? Some respondents felt that the ACBAR Steering Committee should possibly have closed the organisation at times when it was clear that it was unable to play the representational role that was critical for its members. ACBAR has become so much part of the institutional landscape that it is hard for many to imagine it gone; while all respondents felt that ACBAR still has a role to play, this also inhibits discussion of an exit strategy.
- ACBAR's longevity compared to other coordination bodies leads to the question of whether its success was the result of a specific set of circumstances in Afghanistan, or whether it can be generalised to other situations. The consensus amongst respondents was that Afghanistan was a unique case for the NGO community, but that lessons can be learned; in particular, that the successes (and failures) of ACBAR have rested largely on the quality of leadership provided by ACBAR members (and later by the quality of full-time ACBAR staff).

- ACBAR fulfils a secretariat function for its membership, but has regularly expanded this function beyond the explicit requests of the membership. The Secretariat can only deal with those issues with the support of the membership, and it must be clear at all times that the General Assembly and Steering Committee are responsible for raising issues and pushing them forward. Given the demands on members' time, however, ACBAR Executive Directors have continually sought to balance supporting the membership and taking the lead on critical issues that must be addressed.
- While funding was more limited in the 1980s, NGOs undertook a wide range of activities supported by bilateral coordination within their own community; however this took place in the absence of a functioning state and a large degree of freedom for NGOs. Increased funding made a wider range of activities possible, but also increased the reliance of the mechanism on that funding. In addition a number of the NGO coordination bodies were initiated or encouraged by donor governments; while this could be seen as donors facilitating coordination, it has also increased the complexity of NGO coordination. Donors must take more responsibility, both in encouraging their grantees to participate in coordination activities and ensuring that their own policies do not complicate the situation.
- ACBAR and its members have had to negotiate between relief and development, civil and military, and public and private, but the single biggest defining factor has been the presence, role and capacity of the state. All respondents agreed that, despite the relative freedom of the stateless 1990s, and despite the challenges of maintaining productive relations with the post-Taliban government, a relatively well-functioning state was essential for the future of the country. The question of how NGOs fit into that picture has still not been resolved, however.
- In particular the difficulty of reconciling the competing requirements of relief and development has challenged ACBAR. While ACBAR was built around the principles of emergency response, the prolonged conflict environment of Afghanistan and lack of government capacity meant that many NGOs were undertaking what would usually be considered development activities while maintaining a relief mindset. This has made the transitions mentioned above more problematic, and has been one of the sources of conflict with the ATA.
- The strength of ACBAR, clear both to its members and to external actors, is that of a common voice for 60-70 NGOs at key meetings in the relief and reconstruction effort. It also provides an element of continuity for the NGO members in an operating environment which has changed considerably and repeatedly over the years. In terms of activities, its key role has been that of information network, disseminating information and providing a forum for information exchange, although this remains a persistent challenge given the political and communication challenges of working in Afghanistan.

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