

Karl Sandstrom Post-fieldwork report for Afghanistan 2010-2012

Country research context

The research was undertaken in an independent capacity in the sense that the researcher was not embedded with an organisation. The length of time was also to the benefit of the project since eight months of field research allows for the research to adapt to the circumstances and to penetrate the narratives being offered. The securitised nature of the aid and development environment, even in terms of NGOs, has made it necessary to rely on the willingness of potential respondents to reply and to participate. In Kabul, the environment is dominated by the fortress-like constructions of foreign and domestic military and domestic agencies. Movement could be, and was, undertaken on foot or by car or taxi between meetings at either compounds or one of the restaurants and cafes almost exclusively frequented by foreigners. In terms of flights, a major donor allowed the researcher to fly with their flight system to research locations in other parts of the country. The research in Mazar-e Sharif was largely hosted by an NGO in terms of facilitation. Accommodation was however sought in a wedding hall. The security situation in Mazar city allows for a more relaxed security position than in many other parts of the country and movement was undertaken with researchers from the Afghan partner organisation who are well familiar with the city. The initial visit to Kandahar airfield was by invitation from ISAF and gave a glimpse into the realities of the complexities involved in the bureaucracy. The subsequent visits to Kandahar city, Jalalabad, and Herat, were all hosted by a contractor's non-profit section that provided transportation, security advice, and accommodation. Contacts with respondents outside of the host organisation were arranged by the researcher. The researcher has moved between secure spaces and had the opportunity to view them as an outsider on both sides of the wall. Low profile movement has been the chosen approach in all research sites with 'soft-skin' vehicles. However, apart from the risk of collateral damage from IEDs or other armed violence, the usage of low-key vehicles also makes ISAF soldiers uneasy on occasion.

Outline of the research period

The research was divided into six phases of which five were in Afghanistan. The first phase took place in November 2010 with orientation interviews, discussions, and alignment with the local research partner. This research was exclusively located in Kabul and was followed by a

second phase of UK based literary research. In order to widen the perspective a number of semi-structured interviews were held in London in March with representatives from insurance agents and underwriters involved in the aid and development sector, providing an understanding of how insurance actors viewed the aid and development industry.

The second phase consisted of three months in Afghanistan from late April to late July and focused on interviews and conversations with a range of actors in Kabul. Some research was also undertaken at Kandahar Air Field (KAF), in Mazar-e Sharif, and in a district in the northern parts of Kabul province.

The third phase focused on developing the research to be undertaken by the Afghan partner organisation Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO). The partnership meant that the researcher was based in their offices and had the opportunity to get to know, as well as travel with them. The fourth phase was focused on discussions and reflections by respondents on the emerging themes from the PTRO research. It also focused on setting up the necessary contacts for an effective impact delivery in the final part of the field engagement.

The fifth phase of the field research commenced in October. Professor Mark Duffield came to Kabul in November to be present at the PTRO debrief and for a contextualised development discussion of the research. Before and after this visit Dr Sandstrom travelled to a number of sites across the country to do interviews in the operational context. It also included meetings with specific individuals identified in the course of the research in order to develop a format for the impact platform.

The sixth phase consisted of delivering the impact platform to the identified sample groups and presenting the findings to those that had been part of the informal reference group in country. This impact delivery focused on two categories of actors: NGOs, facilitated by the ACBAR coordination agency, and select UN agencies based on earlier engagement.

Interviews and data

The majority of interviews performed by the researcher have been intended to cover relevant staff in terms of knowledge of operational constraints and mitigation strategies. Also Afghan staff who more often occupy the field-level positions have been interviewed and a partner organisation has performed interviews in communities located in different parts of the country. All the interviews have had a semi-structured format, sometimes ranging to more of an open discussion.

The interview research has also been supplemented by observation and participation in the different forms of engagement present in the international community. This has been in part by purely listening to interactions and in part by gaining access through the 'gatekeepers' that can get people on the security lists that inevitably accompany most of the parties in order to restrict the levels of attendance. The research and the various impressions gained have also benefitted from extensive discussions with Afghan researchers at the partner organisation in order to contextualise and make certain aspects more understandable for the researcher.

All data has been stored on external servers during the research and protected by encryption when stored locally. When transcribed, notes have been physically destroyed. All interviews are anonymous.

Partnership with local researchers

Much of the research development with the local partner PTRO focused on what we wanted to ask the communities they were going to visit, and what aspiration levels we could set. The work they usually do is strict questionnaire work commissioned by a wide range of in-theatre actors. However, part of this project was to add to their capacity development and after discussions with the research coordinator we agreed on a format where we used the questionnaire format as a base but where the questions went deeper. The research conducted by PTRO focused on the perceptions and concerns of local communities and local aid and development staff in relation to the effects of the aid and development presence in a local and national context. It also sought to explore the conditions and views of local Afghan aid and development representatives when asked about these issues by Afghan interviewers. The focus of this part was on how the role of the local representative is shaped by the local pressures and employer pressures, and how the local representatives interpret and act out their roles. What is their position in the local social and political context, and does that reflect on what they can do? It also asked how they are seen by the local communities and how they see their own role. Are they for example seen as representatives of the project or of the community?

The questions themselves were developed in cooperation with the researchers as part of an experience development for them but also in order to adapt the questions to a language relevant for the intended respondents. The capacity-development engagement also provided opportunities to discuss some of the techniques used. Adding to this is the focus of the questions that do not follow the normal format of impact assessments that the Afghan

researchers are used to doing, but instead focuses on slightly different themes with a greater variation in answer and interview interaction. This required a greater degree of independent and context-specific thinking and adaptation from the researchers in their field situations.

The research sites were determined in discussion with the researchers and we decided on four province centres and five districts. The instruction for the choices was that we wanted a provincial population centre in each site as this is where the aid and development presence is generally the most intense, and a variation of districts with different types and levels of international presence. The researchers were also asked to make notes and observations after each interview and to document their sample selection and the circumstances surrounding each interview. This was all intended to provide us with as much context as possible, but also to contribute to their research experience and critical thinking and due diligence in research.

The output of the PTRO research surpassed the relatively modest expectations placed on it. In general, the researchers gained very good access and when encountering problems in this regard in Helmand, they utilised existing networks to fulfil the task. The data itself contains a number of surprising results resulting from a frank and open reflection.

Main challenges and problems

There have been some distinct issues with access to some organisations. In terms of NGOs there have been no significant problems. Most have been happy to contribute and interested in the research. A slight problem has been access to Afghan staff which has at times been somewhat problematic. The second wide strand of organisations has been those in the UN system. While access has not been overly complicated after a little vetting and discussion, a central unease was evident and I was informed that if I wanted to talk to the field offices a clearance would be required from New York. After four to five months of sporadic discussions this has suddenly changed and UNAMA engaged directly with me in order to negotiate terms of them lending support. That discussion terminated when they did not come back after a promise of discussing the suggested arrangement. The third strand has been donors and for profit contractors. In regards to the former there has been a positive response from isolated pockets, in part because of personal contacts. It has however displayed a system of compartmentalised cliques where intra- and inter-departmental competition seems to repeatedly drop things between chairs. The for-profits are mainly paid through American money and at an extensive vetting meeting with one of them, one of the few who have bothered to respond to repeated

requests for meetings, they expressed the need for an approval from USAID before granting me access to their staff. A blanket approval from USAID for me to speak to any of their contractors was obtained from USAID in Washington DC but there were instead clear issues with reaching the relevant persons again despite repeated attempts via email and phone calls. Alternative contacts were instead made and several contractors engaged during field trips to other parts of the country than Kabul.

Physical security has presented a challenge a couple of times in terms of travel. A planned trip to Taloqan in Takhar province had to be cancelled after an ISAF night-raid killing four individuals resulted in angry street protests, which in turn caused the German troops to open fire and kill eleven Afghans. This made the planned stay with an NGO problematic. A meeting in Kandahar also had to be postponed when a 36 hour fire-fight erupted in the governor's compound. The attacks in Kabul have not represented any major problem beyond cancelled office-days and minor incidents. The nature of the security measures in place means that there is no chance of arriving unannounced at the gate and asking for a meeting. As a consequence, respondents claiming to have 'forgotten' emails, phone calls, and meetings, suffice as an excuse for blanking out requests for interviews, meetings, or access to facilities. The hierarchy of access made itself evident when Professor Duffield arrived and people who had not bothered to respond to earlier requests for meetings were suddenly very much available.

A concern that was not possible to effectively mitigate under the constraints of the research was the access to female respondents. In terms of international respondents, this was less of a problem and interviews have been sought by position, not gender. In the course of this a number of female respondents have been engaged in the research. In terms of Afghan respondents this has been less successful. There are a very low number of female voices in the Afghan response data but this is a result of several factors. Afghanistan is a strongly Patriarchal society and much of the socio-political dynamic plays out between men. There are exceptions within predominantly government institutions but these have not been a strong part of the research as the focus from the start has been on the capacity of aid and development actors to mitigate risk and still deliver in the Afghan context. The research into the practices and perceptions of the actors engaged with was again focused on function and role rather than gender. The researcher has thus spoken to female staffers where these have been made available and their function and role provided a relevant link to the activities of the organisation. The all male Afghan research team were under similar constraints.

Key findings from the field research

The field research saw an emerging image of a fragmented perspective among aid and development actors. Differences occurred along a number of dividers such as geographical area or operations, type of operations, proximity to security objectives, dependence on security measures, ideological and principle positioning, length of organisational experience, organisational culture, and the levels and degrees of separation from the Afghan recipients. Even the basic views of the dynamics of the overall conflict vary to such a degree that it has generated a number of separated and sometimes highly opinionated and entrenched ways of thinking about the current problems, future developments and the strategic relationship to a presence and capacity to operate. A number of these strands of thought and associated narratives emerge from the research conducted with the international organisations and especially their international staff.

A slightly different narrative emerged from the Afghan staff engaged with. As they often occupy the field level positions, their perspectives are seemingly often more grounded in the local Afghan realities and their own lives and priorities, than in the objectives of the organisation in question. From a research perspective, much of the discussion in these interviews focused on the role and pressures of national and local staff as part of the physical and programmatic risk generated in the interaction between the physical representatives of a specific organisation and agenda, and the recipient communities. This generated some surprising reflections indicating that there were no larger issues attached to this that were not already part of what they as Afghans had to navigate on a daily basis. The relationship to the communities was generally seen as good, while the relationship to the state system was more complicated.

The Afghan community research represents an entirely different image than the one projected by donors and many implementers from especially European countries and the United States. Despite the diversity of geographical location, the sentiments are largely the same, painting a depressing image of failure to reach the 'deserving' and a constant appropriation of means by officials and community leaders in an intense low level system of corruption, facilitated and fed by the engagement strategies, insecurity, and lacking monitoring by the international aid and development system in general. Talk of social unrest and concerns over who will be the victims when there is no more aid to steal come through as warnings of possible future developments. While the contractor structures employed by some donors and the

military come under especially intense criticism, the aid and development presence as such is also brought into the critique. As for perceptions, simple conceptual differences contribute to distancing the international debate on security in aid and development from a local Afghan reality where there is only one word for organisation and the most clear distinction is made between 'PRT' (Provincial Reconstruction Teams), meaning anything military or associated with that can include any actor such as for example the UN, and 'organisation', which can sometimes include counter-insurgency contractors. International workers, Afghan staff, and Afghan community members contributed insights, suggestions, and experiences that have helped them navigate this conceptual jungle of confusing narratives in order to deliver in the face of the perceived risks, and to mitigate pressures and demands from all directions. While the research paints a bleak picture of systemic dysfunction and denial, raising a warning finger over the destabilisation of stabilisation, these alternative perspectives highlight the possibilities that are nevertheless present on the other side of the walls of concrete and narratives.

Discussion platform development

As part of the impact delivery, a discussion platform is developed. The platform is intended to encourage aid and development actors to engage actively with some of the issues emerging from the field research. As part of this development process, three workshops and a separate meeting were conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, in April 2012. The purpose of the workshops was to present NGOs with the discussion platform that emerged from the preceding research results and an opportunity for a select group of NGOs and UN agencies to provide feedback and input into the platform format. This was done with the intention of adapting the discussion to a perspective that was more relevant and useful at the practitioner level.

The NGO events were held at the offices of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) with them convening, while the UN workshop was held at a UN agency office.

ACBAR as well as our local partner the Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO) were also participants in the NGO meetings. The participants were informed that statements made during the meeting were non-attributable and would serve to feed into and amend the discussion framework. The finished Afghan framework will be returned to ACBAR for use in training and internal discussions. The framework itself will also feed into the more generic platform developed in the project based on feedback from both Afghanistan and South Sudan. In addition to this, the ambition was to deliver a similar workshop for a select group of UN

agencies active in Afghanistan and based on previous engagements. The meetings with both the NGOs and the UN agencies were held under a premise of anonymity and non-attributable discussions. The different participating organisations have therefore not been identified here in order to respect this arrangement.

The NGO workshops

The researcher provided the names of ten organisations that should be invited with the option for ACBAR to add more. ACBAR has then invited said organisations plus one to the meetings. The workshops were to be held over two half-days and aimed at different categories. The first day was initially intended to be held for national staff only and the second for international staff at country director level. The reason for the separation was to glean any possible differences in reasoning and conceptualisation between the peer groups. This order was changed around by ACBAR in order to match the schedule of meetings in their offices. The format on the day was initially intended to be centred on a power-point projection of each suggested question of the framework with a discussion of each. The framework at the time of the workshops contained 17 questions and the time allotted was three hours.

ACBAR had received confirmation from nine of the eleven organisations that they would participate both days. This made it quite a surprise when only two organisations on the list showed up day one (international country directors) and two other organisations on day two (national staff). ACBAR and PTRO participated both days. At the first workshop the country director of an additional organisation expressed an interest in participating and was allowed to do so. The participating country directors were experienced and provided a full and extensive discussion that lasted slightly over three hours.

The second day discussion was held with the two national staff representatives and with ACBAR and PTRO in attendance again. Both participating NGO workers were extremely experienced with many years' experience. This raised the quality of the feed-back and the discussion which again lasted more than three hours.

The UN

The UN meeting was intended to be an informal gathering of a select number of agency representatives. These were chosen based on their demonstrated interest and motivation

during previous engagements. The initial six invited were also supplemented by a representative from UNAMA invited by one of the other participants.

The UN session was unexpectedly vibrant and engaged. All agencies were contributing strongly with the possible exception of UNAMA in a discussion that outlasted the allotted time. There are at least two processes ongoing within the UN system that attempts to engage with some of the issues raised and the agencies present at the meeting expressed satisfaction that the framework was feeding into these discussions already.

The feedback was constructive and contributed to the further development of the discussion platform. The UN agencies were subjected to the additional questions resulting from the preceding discussions with the NGO representatives and also added their own suggestions. In addition to this two hour discussion, the researcher was invited to a subsequent private meeting with the head of UN OCHA for an exchange of thoughts on these subjects and the situation from OCHA's perspective. This further added to the development of the discussion platform.

Reflections

The low attendance numbers at the NGO sessions were disappointing and somewhat annoying given the confirmations given by nine of the invited organisations. However, the persons that did participate were knowledgeable and experienced practitioners who were interested in the issues and offered their reflections freely. The resulting discussions were interesting and constructive, and provided very strong feedback and reflection from a practitioner's point of view. Despite the turn-out, it is felt that these sessions made important contributions to the development of the discussion platform reflected in the fact that it resulted in immediate amendments to the framework as it stood and an expansion of the issues addressed.

The UN session was interesting in that it represented an unexpected role reversal from the anticipated levels of engagement. Based on the research period the year before, the NGOs were expected to show more enthusiasm and the UN to be more reluctant to discuss the issues. As it turned out the complete opposite was true. ACBAR was notably disappointed in the low NGO participation and noted that these are sensitive issues that people 'are obviously not too keen to discuss', suggesting that there were liability implications. If you pretend the issues are not there, you do not have to take responsibility for them.

By contrast, the UN agencies were very much in the process of developing new perspectives and seeking alternative solutions, taking a fresh look at what the potential and hidden problems were, and how to connect in order to address this. It is an ongoing process and the enthusiasm on display in the two meetings may yet be curtailed by operational and political realities, but at least it is an active process into which the discussion platform has already fed into while also becoming informed by it.

Research overview

Formal interviews averaged around 90 minutes. Informal discussions and conversations are not recorded here.

Org name	Org type	Date	Location
TLO	NGO	16 November 2010	Kabul
PKF Auditors	Contractor	21 November 2010	Kabul
ANSO	NGO	23 November 2010	Kabul
UNODC	UN	24 November 2010	Kabul
UNAMA	UN	25 November 2010	Kabul
GIZ	Donor/contractor	25 November 2010	Kabul
HALO Trust	NGO	10 March 2011	UK
Hiscox	Insurance/risk	25 March 2011	UK
N/A	Security consultant	25 March 2011	UK
Miller	Insurance	25 March 2011	UK
AKE	Sec/Insurance	06 April 2011	UK
Miller	Insurance	12 April 2011	UK
N/A	Security consultant	12 April 2011	UK
FLAG	Contractor	26 April 2011	Kabul
SCA	NGO	26 April 2011	Kabul
ANSO	NGO	26 April 2011	Kabul
CRS	NGO	29 April 2011	Kabul
CARE	NGO	01 May 2011	Kabul
DDG	NGO	01 May 2011	Kabul
Diplomat	Diplomat/Donor	02 May 2011	Kabul
DFID	Donor	02 May 2011	Kabul
AKE	Security	02 May 2011	Kabul
IOM	UN	02 May 2011	Kabul
CARE	NGO	03 May 2011	Kabul
USAID	Donor	03 May 2011	Kabul
TLO	NGO	08 May 2011	Kabul
TAF	NGO	09 May 2011	Kabul
UNAMA	UN	09 May 2011	Kabul
DAI	Contractor	11 May 2011	Kabul
UNDSS	UN	17 May 2011	Kabul

ICRC	IO	19 May 2011	Kabul
World Bank	Donor	20 May 2011	Kabul/Skype
WFP	UN	24 May 2011	Kabul
UNOPS	UN	27 May 2011	Kabul
SCA	NGO	18 June 2011	Kabul
DFID	Donor	18 June 2011	Kabul
ISAF	Military	20 June 2011	Kandahar
SCA	NGO	28 June 2011	Mazar-e Sharif
SCA	NGO	28 June 2011	Mazar-e Sharif
SCA	NGO	28 June 2011	Mazar-e Sharif
SCA	NGO	28 June 2011	Mazar-e Sharif
PRT	Military	28 June 2011	Mazar-e Sharif
StC	NGO	20 July 2011	Kabul
GIZ	Donor/contractor	22 July 2011	Kabul
OXFAM	NGO	18 August 2011	Kabul
UNAMA	UN	31 August 2011	Kabul
UNAMA	UN	01 September	Kabul
UNAMA	UN	01 September	Kabul
ACBAR	NGO	26 October 2011	Kabul
ACBAR	NGO	26 October 2011	Kabul
ACBAR	NGO	27 October 2011	Kabul
CADG	Contractor	28 October 2011	Kabul
Afghan Red Crescent	NGO	31 October 2011	Kabul
ACBAR	NGO	03 November 2011	Herat
CRS	NGO	03 November 2011	Herat
CADG	Contractor	03 November 2011	Herat
IOM	UN	03 November 2011	Herat
CADG	Contractor	04 November 2011	Herat
ACBAR	NGO	13 November 2011	Kabul
Merlin	NGO	13 November 2011	Kabul
Action Aid	NGO	14 November 2011	Kabul
ANSO	NGO	14 November 2011	Kabul
StC	NGO	15 November 2011	Kabul
UNICEF	UN	15 November 2011	Kabul
OXFAM	NGO	16 November 2011	Kabul
Habitat	UN	16 November 2011	Kabul
DACAAR	NGO	16 November 2011	Kabul
CARE	NGO	17 November 2011	Kabul
DFID	Donor	17 November 2011	Kabul
Researcher	Independent	18 November 2011	Kabul
UNAMA	UN	19 November 2011	Kabul
WFP	UN	20 November 2011	Kabul
CADG	Contractor	21 November 2011	Kandahar
CADG	Contractor	21 November 2011	Kandahar
CADG	Contractor	22 November 2011	Kandahar
CADG	Contractor	22 November 2011	Kandahar

CADG	Contractor	22 November 2011	Kandahar
CADG	Contractor	22 November 2011	Kandahar
Habitat	UN	22 November 2011	Kandahar
WFP	UN	22 November 2011	Kandahar
Black and Veatch	Contractor	23 November 2011	Kandahar
SIGAR	Oversight agency	23 November 2011	Kandahar
CADG	Contractor	26 November 2011	Jalalabad
CADG	Contractor	26 November 2011	Jalalabad
ANSO	NGO	27 November 2011	Jalalabad
UNHCR	UN	28 November 2011	Jalalabad
WFP	UN	04 December 2011	Kabul
UNICEF	UN	07 December 2011	Kabul
Diplomat	Diplomat/Donor	12 December 2011	Kabul
EU	Donor	14 December 2011	Kabul
DFID	Donor	15 December 2011	Kabul
UNOCHA	UN	22 April 2012	Kabul

Workshops

NGO Internationals	NGO	18 April 2012	Kabul
NGO Nationals	NGO	19 April 2012	Kabul
UN Internationals	UN	21 April 2012	Kabul

Documents collected

	No.
Embassy weekly security briefs	43
ANSO weekly briefs	48
ANSO incident reports and updates	680
SCA operating policies	4
Contractor intelligence brief	17
Demining tender	2
Demining insurance structure	1
Aid flow documentation	1 (around 8000 pages)
UN internal meeting notes on risk management	1
UNOPS Ops map	1
UNOPS security and social inclusion framework	1

Additional

'Life in the Archipelago' reports	20
Books	2
Articles	
Photos	
Video	

The researcher has also written two commentaries for the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University, US, under their neimanwatchdog.org project 'What should journalists be asking' at their request and based on the field research of this project. It discusses the

problematic outcomes of aid and development delivery in Afghanistan, as well as raises questions about the stated capacities of the Afghan security forces.

The first piece is available at:

http://www.niemanwatchdog.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=ask_this.view&askthisid=00564#last