

# ‘Dancing with the prince’: NGOs’ survival strategies in the Afghan conflict

*Jonathan Goodhand with Peter Chamberlain*

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## Introduction

In the era of democratisation and good governance, NGOs have become the donors’ ‘favoured child’, with access to growing resources and influence (Edwards and Hulme 1995). They are viewed both as ‘market actors’, which are more efficient and cost-effective than governments, and as the agents of democratisation, an integral part of a thriving civil society (Korten 1990; Clark 1991). Official donors show their support for the economic and political roles of NGOs in what has been called the ‘New Policy Agenda’ by channelling money through them (Edwards and Hulme, *op. cit.*). As one USAID official put it: ‘We get a double bang for our buck that way’ (Larmer 1994). Underpinning this consensus is the presumption that political democracy and socio-economic development are mutually reinforcing. The state, market, and civil society — which, following Korten (1990), we shall refer to as *prince*, *merchant* and *citizen* — are related in a series of virtuous circles. A basic tenet of ‘NGO lore’ is that NGOs promote and strengthen civil society, and thus subject the prince and merchant to greater public accountability. There is, however, an element of triumphalism in the discourse about the New World Order, and the belief that NGOs are ‘part of the warp and weft of democracy’ (Larmer, *op. cit.*). Such words ring hollow in a world characterised by instability, fragmentation, and deepening poverty. Far from ‘democratising development’, NGOs are often the providers of palliatives to competing factions in conflict (Slim 1994). Rather than promoting accountability, NGOs are perhaps ‘dancing to the tune of the prince’, whether the prince is a government, an insurgency movement, or a local war lord.

We should scrutinise and challenge the assumptions underpinning the mythology about NGOs; and donors should base their actions on a realistic assessment of NGOs' capabilities, rather than on the suppositions of 'NGO lore'.

## Background to the Afghan conflict

The end of the Cold War has not meant the end of history, as Fukayama suggested (Rupesinghe 1994). Far from being a 'New World Order', today's world is characterised by a dangerous disorder in which political instability is endemic.<sup>1</sup>

The Afghan war is a potent example of contemporary conflicts, often described as 'complex political emergencies' (CPEs), which are characterised by combinations of multiple causes, such as civil and ethnic conflicts, famine, displacement, disputed sovereignty, and a breakdown of national government. The Afghan conflict resulted from a complex mix of factors, caused by years of bad development, Cold War politics, militarisation, and tribal and ethnic schisms. It thus highlights many critical issues: the breakdown of the nation-state, ethnicity, fundamentalism, nationalism, displacement, sovereignty, and the role of humanitarian agencies.

CPEs are not temporary crises after which society returns to normal: they have long-term, structural characteristics and result from the failures of development. By the mid-1970s, Afghanistan had become a schizophrenic society, comprising an urban elite whose idea of a strong, unified state was at odds with the tribal and ethnic loyalties of the predominantly rural population. From these contradictions arose the socialist and the Islamist movements. Both were based on the 'myth of revolution', and it was the clash between these ideologies which became the catalyst for the conflict.

### *The 'Lebanonisation' of Afghanistan*

The Afghan conflict was characterised by the implosion of the nation-state, the development of predatory political movements and war economies, and the erosion of structures within civil society. Macrae and Zwi (1992) describe the deliberate targeting of production and distribution, as well as restriction of movement and disruption of markets, in the context of Africa. In Afghanistan, rural subsistence economies were deliberately destroyed by Soviet forces during the 1980s, and terror was used to cow the population, one-third of whom were displaced to Iran and Pakistan.

The withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1988 did not signal an end to the conflict. A process of 'Lebanonisation' (Roy 1989) followed, in which the contradictions within the resistance movement re-surfaced. The conflict mutated from a counter-insurgency war with an ostensibly ideological basis into one characterised by war-lordism and banditry. The overall picture is one of fluidity and turbulence; alliances are constantly shifting, and violent conflict is interspersed with fragile peace. Competing 'princes' have a vested interest in the continuation of disorder; where their fortunes are based on coercion and, increasingly, on the opium trade, they have little to gain from an emergent state. Conflict has come to represent the norm, not a diversion from it. Few donors are willing to resume bilateral aid to Afghanistan when dialogue with a strong central government remains impossible. Afghanistan has become the classic 'weak state' (Duffield 1994), suffering from systematic instability, and with declining strategic importance on the world stage.

## Prince, merchant, and citizen: new roles in Afghanistan

Korten's model of functional complementarities between prince, merchant, and citizen does not resonate in the Afghan context. New divisions in Afghan society are based on political allegiance and wealth. CPEs are often characterised by the emergence of parallel economies beyond the control of the state. The new 'princes' in Afghanistan are the commanders and mullahs. For example, the economy of Jalalabad is now largely based on smuggling, opium production, and banditry, and it is the commanders with influence in the regional council who control and encourage such an economy.

As one enters Jalalabad, a long line of repainted vehicles for sale at the side of the road, mostly stolen in Peshawar, provide a stern reminder of the type of forces really in control of the area. (Cutts 1993: 14)

Civil society is intensely segmented, and people's loyalties are directed towards family, clan, and lineage rather than community. Kinship loyalties have always been stronger than obligations towards the state. Dupree (1989: 249) describes the 'mud curtain' which villagers erect to protect themselves against the incursions of the state: 'Once the modernisation teams leave, the villagers patch up the breaks in their mud curtain and revert to their old, group-reinforcing patterns.'

With the fragmentation of the resistance has followed a process of re-tribalisation; political allegiances have waned at the expense of a renewed ethnic awareness. The Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, for example, have all found a new ethnic assertiveness as a result of the war. It is difficult to view such a chronically anarchic and divided society other than in Hobbesian terms. Villages have undergone the same process of fragmentation, with war sweeping away many of the traditional structures, and leaving an institutional vacuum that has been filled by the military commanders.<sup>2</sup> There are few stable foundations from which to reconstruct.

The conflict has produced a combustible cocktail in which both the traditional and state constraints have been eroded, while the technological means to conduct war have increased. NGOs are occupying the space left by the collapse of the state, and so wield great influence in the absence of effective government institutions.

## The humanitarian response

The humanitarian response to the Afghan conflict reflects trends in global aid allocation. While development budgets are stagnating, there has been a marked increase in relief aid and, since the 1980s, an enhanced role for NGOs. During the Cold War, when the UN was constrained by considerations of national sovereignty, NGOs attempted to supply humanitarian aid in contested areas (Duffield, *op. cit.*). NGOs are 'rushing in where soldiers and bureaucrats fear to tread' (Larmer, *op. cit.*), a phenomenon perpetuated by the sub-contracting of NGOs in areas where multilateral and bilateral agencies are unable or unwilling to get involved, such as controversial cross-border programmes.

With the 1979 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, virtually all Western development programmes came to an end.<sup>3</sup> NGOs intervened through non-mandated cross-border programmes. Until 1988, NGOs were the principal means by which humanitarian relief and rehabilitation was provided to areas held by the Mujahideen. Initially, intervention was on a limited scale, involving fewer than 15 NGOs and between US\$5 and US\$10 million per year. By 1991, however, there were some 100 NGOs involved in such operations. In 1989, total expenditure from the US government alone was US\$112 million (Nicholds and Borton 1994).

The 1988 Geneva Accords included an agreement that the international community, under UN auspices, should undertake a substantial programme of relief and rehabilitation inside Afghanistan.

The UN Secretary-General appointed a Coordinator for Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programmes Relating to Afghanistan (UNOCA) to assist in mobilising and coordinating resources. UNOCA (and many international donors) favoured strengthening the capacity of Afghan organisations to manage their own affairs, and 'Afghanisation' or 'de-foreignisation' entered the lexicon of Peshawar-based agencies.

UNOCA and other UN agencies thus encouraged the formation of Afghan NGOs (ANGOs), which were then sub-contracted for specific activities. The process is illustrated in the area of mine-clearance where, since the capacity of existing NGOs was limited, three were set up to cover different areas of Afghanistan (Nicholds and Borton 1994).

By 1994, there were over 200 registered ANGOs (Barakat *et al.* 1994), often scathingly referred to as 'UNNGOs', reflecting a view that they were merely a fabrication of the donors. However, ANGOs have become major players in cross-border relief and rehabilitation work. In 1991, approximately 21 per cent of UNDP's US\$2 million budget was channelled via ANGOs, through 66 projects or contracts (Carter 1991).

## Typology of Afghan NGOs

The term 'Afghan NGOs' covers a range of organisations, many of which bear only a tenuous relationship to the family of NGOs. Carter (*op. cit.*), for example, argues that 'Afghan Implementing Agency' would be more accurate. Rahim (1991, cited in Nicholds and Borton, *op. cit.*) distinguishes four types:

- 1 Independent NGOs formed by non-affiliated professionals.
- 2 NGOs backed by local *shuras* (groups of elders) and commanders.
- 3 NGOs established by political parties, either individually or in coalition.
- 4 NGOs established by international organisations (UN or international NGOs).

A fifth category, 'briefcase NGOs', might be added to describe organisations that exist only in name, spawned in response to the easy availability of external funding. In reality, most ANGOs are hybrids: all, for example, have to develop links with parties, commanders, and local administrations, whether they are a UN 'spin-off' or a professional 'consultancy firm'. Most have developed from the top down, and they are now having to work backwards to find a community base of support (Carter, *op. cit.*).

## Afghan NGOs: response to the conflict

Inevitably, such diversity has drawn varied assessments of ANGOs' roles and performance. Some claim that ANGOs could become the agents of transformation and reconstitute Afghan civil society from the bottom up. Critics argue that behind most ANGOs stands a foreign initiator and, therefore, a foreign definition of response to Afghan need. Pragmatists see a limited role for ANGOs, essentially as contracting mechanisms for the delivery of relief assistance.

CPEs have accelerated changes in the thinking and practice of humanitarian agencies, giving rise to the need for revised notions of change and causality (Roche 1994). Relief and development are not discrete processes which unfold separately; the imperatives are similar in terms of addressing vulnerabilities and building capacities to enable communities to cope with change and survive future shocks (Anderson and Woodrow 1989).

Some would argue that ANGOs may transcend the prevailing relief paradigm, and promote new forms of public action that build local capacities and foster peace. Rather than 'dancing with the prince', they constitute a countervailing force to the often arbitrary power of the prince.

Critics of the ANGO phenomenon argue that they were an opportunist response to a donor-led demand. Humanitarian agencies often respond to protracted crisis by '[replacing] well thought out, bottom-up participatory approaches, reintroducing the kind of top-down centrally driven crash programmes long ago discarded by the more thoughtful and experienced agencies' (ACORD 1993: 3). Baitenmann (1990) contends that most NGOs working cross-border were the conscious agents of political interests. In-field co-operation with combatants meant that NGOs made direct payments into the war economy. Cash-for-work projects, for example, were often re-directed to fund commanders' military activities. While NGOs may invoke the concept of neutral humanitarianism, 'dancing to the tune of the prince' has for them become an essential survival strategy.

A more pragmatic interpretation of ANGOs' role is that they are engaged in a holding operation. As Johnston and Clark (1982) note, 'when power confronts persuasion head-on, power wins' (p.13). By being non-confrontational, ANGOs may create some room for manoeuvre for themselves and for 'pro-citizen' groups within civil society. They may also have a role in protecting and nurturing future leaders, as they have in Latin America (Garilao 1987).

Positive change in such an environment can occur only through a process of 'transformation through stealth' (Fowler 1993). ANGOs have a 'Janus-headed role' (Edwards and Hulme, *op. cit.*), in which they claim to be apolitical, but have a core agenda of supporting democratisation and peace.

## The relationship between ANGOs and the prince

The humanitarian response to CPEs is characterised by divergence between the rhetoric of neutrality and the reality of aid that is increasingly politicised. In Afghanistan, this response has become part of the political economy of violence. Cross-border operations were part of a political and ideological Cold War battle against the Soviets. Cross-border NGOs strengthened the base of the insurgency, their very presence legitimising the rebels (Baitenmann, *op. cit.*). It may be asked whether NGOs were indeed strengthening civil society, or rather attempting to shape it in ways that external actors considered desirable. Today, Afghanistan has lost its strategic value and is what Duffield (*op. cit.*) describes as one of the 'weak states' on the margins of the global economy. Most of the Western players have made, or are making, a strategic withdrawal. A drip-feed of humanitarian assistance continues as a feature of the West's 'accommodation with violence' (Duffield, *op. cit.*), and the creation of ANGOs may have facilitated this withdrawal (Marsden 1991).

### *Dancing with commanders and parties*

ANGOs have two options in cross-border work: to co-operate with civilian authorities like *shuras*, or to develop ties with commanders. Initially, the latter was the only practicable option, since commanders constituted the real power-holders in any locality. In return for 'protection', commanders insisted on a share of donors' *largesse*. NGOs had a real impact on the local balance of power by supporting some commanders in preference to others. They may have contributed to local conflicts and diminished social cohesion. Cash-for-food distributions in the early 1980s are an extreme example, where poorly monitored programmes are suspected of having provided Mujahideen commanders with funds for their military activities. Some donors were prepared to accept 'wastage levels' of up to 40 per cent for their programmes in Afghanistan (Nicholds and Borton, *op. cit.*).

Channelling aid through commanders and parties has created precedents which NGOs find difficult to break. As military assistance declined, so humanitarian aid assumed importance as a source of patronage for

commanders. Many NGOs have become an extension of the patron-client relationship between commanders and communities, and villagers clearly associate particular commanders with certain NGOs (Goodhand 1992). The dilemma is that projects will not survive if they threaten the established power-holders; but unless they maintain a distance, they become part of the patronage system. Survival depends on understanding the local configurations of power, and success depends on the ability to draw on this authority without being co-opted by it. There is a fine line between survival as a means to an end, and survival as an end in itself.

The strategies adopted by ANGOs to remain operational in a turbulent environment are various. Some of them are considered below.

**The human factor:** The importance of creating space is illustrated in an ANGO director's comment that he spent 80 per cent of his time on political issues, 15 per cent on tribal matters, and only 5 per cent on the projects (Goodhand, *op. cit.*). ANGO managers have to be pragmatists, and they recognise that the support of commanders and parties is a prerequisite for survival. They must also have the Mujahideen credentials, party connections, and family background to build the necessary support and alliances, both inside and outside Afghanistan. Some ANGO managers may well emerge as future leaders of Afghan society. Working for an ANGO may, in retrospect, prove to be a more astute career path than that followed by the political party careerists.

**Selective collaboration:** ANGOs are playing a new game by old rules: an intricate balancing act of exploiting the 'economy of affection' of parties and commanders without being colonised by them. However, there is a danger of 'meeting villainy halfway'. The key to creating space is selective collaboration, rather than identifying with any one leader. It is a case of building strategic alliances with political and religious leaders, without losing one's room for manoeuvre.

**Diversification:** Some ANGOs have employed staff from various political backgrounds to guard against being partisan, and to maintain their range of options and contacts. Diversification is an essential strategy for survival; it is about trying to cover all your bases and to cope with uncertainty.

**'Pointing the finger':** When under pressure, field staff are often able to deflect it by pointing the finger towards a distant authority outside the network of patronage — whether it is the head office, an expatriate adviser, or the donor. Donors and international staff can be valuable in

absorbing such pressures on local NGOs, provided that there is a level of understanding and trust between the two parties.

**Keeping a low profile:** Keeping a low profile is about not making enemies. It may mean submerging one's identity and occasionally allowing the prince to take credit. A dual role is needed: the de-politicised public operation which emphasises humanitarianism, and the private operation which retains a core agenda of empowerment (Edwards and Hulme, op. cit.). Providing some bags of wheat to a commander, or employing some of his Mujahids, may be a necessary price for long-term gains.

### *Pragmatism and values: a Faustian pact?*

When does the struggle for survival become an end in itself? At what stage does strategic co-operation become co-option? Many ANGOs have fallen into a kind of Faustian pact, in which 'eternal life' is brought at the price of their 'pro-citizen' soul. But all interventions represent an interaction between pragmatism and moral values, and the weighting given to each will vary with every decision. Management becomes the 'science of muddling through'. Responding to commanders' demands involves a constant balancing of ends against means. Coherence comes through having a strong sense of values and a guiding philosophy. 'Dancing with the prince' may be a means to an ultimate end of peace and reconstruction.

### *The relationship between ANGOs and the citizen*

UNOCA encouraged the development of ANGOs in the belief that they constituted the most effective mechanisms for delivering aid. Their understanding of the cultural and political dynamics of Afghan society, and their network of local contacts, enable them to get to the parts that international NGOs cannot reach. ANGOs have extended the reach of aid programmes to remote communities.

It has been argued that ANGOs are not only more effective, but also more cost-efficient. A UNDP evaluation found that they had significantly lower costs than organisations employing many expatriates (in Carter, op. cit.). Also, owing to the high turnover among expatriates, there was considerably more continuity within Afghan organisations than in international NGOs. Finally, ANGOs have provided on-the-job training, especially at the senior management level, which expatriate-run NGOs cannot provide. Many Afghans are now developing skills in managing organisations and dealing with donors that will be essential in a future government (Carter, op. cit.).

## Working behind the 'mud curtain'

ANGOs' principal advantage is that they were formed for Afghans by Afghans. As such, they have the political instincts and cultural awareness to act with sensitivity and caution in the complex web of Afghan society. Many Afghans have voiced a fear that external agencies undermine Afghan cultural values. ANGOs, however, can work quietly and carefully behind the 'mud curtain', and may thus also be producing an important resource: a cadre of 'organic intellectuals' with community-mobilisation skills.

### *Gender: constraints, openings, and missed opportunities*

Conflict has brought new opportunities and new threats to NGOs seeking to address gender-related issues. While the disruption of the war years created an environment which challenges traditional gender roles, an upsurge in fundamentalism has tended to restrict women's rights.

Most NGO projects focusing on women have worked with the relatively accessible refugees. It may never again be so easy to reach women from so many different parts of Afghanistan (Dupree, in Huld and Jansson 1988). However, NGO attempts to work with women have tended to be rather superficial — through handcraft and health projects, for example, that do not challenge existing power relations. ANGOs occupy an uneasy position. On the one hand, they are more vulnerable than international NGOs to conservative pressures from a patriarchal society. On the other, they are better able to work behind the 'mud curtain', where access to women is restricted to those with kinship and social ties. Currently, there are very few women in positions of responsibility within ANGOs, and this will be slow to change. But ANGOs do at least have the understanding of social and cultural norms to recognise opportunities and take advantage of them.

While some commentators are optimistic about the possibilities for social change, the barriers are considerable.<sup>4</sup> Women's projects are often associated with the Communists' earlier attempts at 'social development'. One Pakistan-based ANGO director felt that if his group initiated activities that benefited women, he would be out of business in two weeks (Carter, *op. cit.*). If ANGOs confront the issue head-on, they may put their entire programme in jeopardy. Some ANGOs, after building up their credibility in a community, have incrementally introduced activities directed at women, though usually in traditional areas. Further

success is likely to be slow and painstaking, requiring stealth as much as technical and managerial proficiency.

However real the constraints, ANGOs have all too often avoided dealing with gender-based oppression on the grounds that it is 'too sensitive' or threatens local (patriarchal) culture. Opportunities have been missed to develop programmes that would directly benefit women in areas such as agriculture, fuel collection, and food production.

### *Reconstituting civil society?*

The conflict has presented new opportunities in the sense that NGOs can work directly with communities, unencumbered by a government bureaucracy (Marsden, op. cit.). ANGOs may represent an important bridge between the people and emerging government structures. They can help to re-connect people with the state by communicating local needs to the government, and reducing the princes' monopoly over the flow of information. Optimistic observers would argue that ANGOs represent an alternative development path for Afghanistan: an alternative to the schizophrenic society produced by modernisation. Radical visions may, however, risk being associated with communism.

In rural Afghanistan, elders, religious leaders, and local *shuras* all function as stabilising points in a volatile environment. Most ANGOs have used these as the foundations for their projects, despite the danger of skirting round the issue of re-distributing power and resources. NGO interventions in the agricultural sector, for instance, risk reinforcing a highly unequal structure. The issue is to strengthen indigenous capacity in a way consistent with humanitarian principles.

Rather than confront these issues directly, some ANGOs have tried an incrementalist approach. By focusing on productive activities, they have made a strategic response to practical needs. Many ANGOs, for example, have initiated *karez* (cleaning) programmes.<sup>5</sup> In the short term, this improves irrigation and food production; in the long term, such projects may develop into new forms of collective action. The *karez* programmes have in some cases led to the revival of irrigation councils and to new village organisations coalescing around the ANGOs' projects. As Marsden (op. cit.) notes, there are few organisations in Afghan civil society above the grassroots level, and ANGOs may form an important nexus. Ultimately, collective action may become an empowering process which will meet the long-term strategic needs of vulnerable sectors — described earlier as 'transformation by stealth' (Fowler, op. cit.).

## *Demilitarising the mind*

It is naive to imagine that ANGOs can be the catalysts for a grassroots peace movement in Afghanistan in the way that local NGOs have mobilised civil society in, for example, the Philippines and parts of Latin America. Any positive transformation will take place through small, incremental changes from the individual and community levels upwards. It is as much about demilitarising people's minds as about getting the princes together at the negotiating table. Although they could not explicitly refer to it as peace-building, ANGOs' work is contributing to a peace process within civil society. Several ANGO managers maintain that reconstruction and development will encourage Mujahids to lay down their guns, by offering them viable alternative livelihoods. Their projects embrace different tribal and ethnic groups, which may also contribute to a peace process to be built upwards by facilitating local co-operation (Marsden, *op. cit.*).

## Questioning the comparative advantage of ANGOs

### *External organisations*

'NGO lore' depicts ANGOs as an integral part of civil society, though in many respects the ANGO-community relationship mirrors the wider urban-rural divide. In a society where only five to ten per cent of the population is literate, ANGO staff represent an educated elite, who entertain many of the biases and prejudices that education has imparted.

Although the leadership may be indigenous, the organisational model and response is not: it is that of Peshawar-based international NGOs. Consequently, ANGOs have reproduced and cultivated many of their models' intrinsic weaknesses. Like international NGOs, ANGOs tend to be based in Pakistan and are top-heavy, with more office staff than field staff.

The lack of long-term, flexible funding — including administrative costs — has trapped ANGOs in the 'project-by-project' system, reinforcing the image of ANGOs as service-providers, since they become contracting agencies for specific, time-bound projects drawn up to someone else's agenda. ANGOs are not 'owned' by rural communities; they commonly 'belong' to donors, commanders, or Afghan technocrats. They are accountable upwards to the donor or commander, but rarely downwards to the communities.

It is hard for ANGOs to insulate themselves from the ethnic, political, and religious pressures impinging upon them. Staff are under great pressure to benefit kith and kin, and some family-run ANGOs are susceptible to using assistance to improve the position and prestige of their family and clan (Carter, op. cit.). ANGOs have also been charged (like some international NGOs) with corruption. In Baitenmann's view (op. cit.), they were at least accessories to a relief programme that was plagued with corruption. And because of the clandestine nature of their work, cross-border NGOs were unavoidably drawn into a web of corruption, forced to pay bribes to Pakistani police or government officials, and protection levies for the right to travel within the country.

Most ANGOs were founded by charismatic individuals who have retained control over their organisations as they grow. This has inevitably placed these now powerful Afghan managers in an exposed position, accentuated by the political fluidity of Afghan society and the bitterness created by the conflict. Some ANGO personnel have been assassinated in recent years. Good political instincts are crucial for survival, both literally and figuratively. Such a situation militates against open and participatory management styles. The leader is unwilling to delegate authority because of the potential consequences of a 'bad' decision, so strategic planning tends to be subservient to crisis management. Centre-field relations become hierarchical, with field staff having little authority or status, and only the head-office senior managers allowed to see the whole picture.

### *Prisoners of a relief paradigm*

There is some evidence that the general direction of change in NGO approaches has followed the pattern described by Korten: from the 'first generation' approach of relief and welfare, towards the 'second generation' stage of community development, and in some cases towards the 'third generation' stage of 'sustainable systems development' (Korten, op. cit.). Some cross-border NGOs are embracing development concepts related to community participation, monitoring and evaluation, participatory needs analysis, and so forth. However, they are influenced by a legacy of more than 15 years of relief operations. Most Afghan and international NGOs are still based in Pakistan, and find it difficult to break from their cross-border mode of operation.

Many NGOs have been active in Nangarhar Province in Eastern Afghanistan since the mid-1980s, because of its proximity to the Pakistan border. Free hand-outs were the norm, and are now expected by local

communities; relief has precluded, for the time being at least, an approach which places responsibility for development with local people. Critics would argue that the internal and external constraints already mentioned make ANGOs unlikely vehicles for transforming this paradigm. There is very little in their background to suggest they can fulfil such a role. With their defining features — dependency on donors, staffed by a Kabul elite, hierarchical and centralised structures, susceptibility to penetration and colonisation — they appear singularly ill-equipped to transcend the prevailing pattern of relief. Even supposing this is part of their vision, the means are not consistent with the ends.

### *Going it alone*

Over the years, NGOs working cross-border have demonstrated a remarkable inability to coordinate, or to avoid duplication. This ‘lack of coordination and unified strategy amongst NGOs’ was noted at a conference of ANGOs and donors (Barkat *et al.*, op. cit.). Although coordination has since improved, it continues to be a problem for several reasons. ANGOs are competing for a declining market-share of resources from donors. They may be responsive to demand, but it is a demand created by the donors, rather than by the beneficiaries. Projects become little more than pins on a map as evidence to meet the donors’ criteria. Security and contacts, perhaps understandably, have been the primary factors in deciding where to work; long-term needs often appear almost incidental. Consequently, 150 NGOs are working in Jalalabad, and less than a handful in the central province of Hazarajat. Coordination takes place in Pakistan, in isolation from relevant government departments in Afghanistan. A lack of coordination encourages duplication and undermines local initiative. For example, in 1994, the World Food Programme (WFP), by distributing food hand-outs in Hazarajat, undermined the more participatory initiatives of local NGOs (Cutts, op. cit.).

### *A holding operation?*

Claims that ANGOs can transcend the political pressures, and their own internal limitations, to bring about a shift from relief assistance towards a more inclusive developmental approach must still be treated with some scepticism. Afghanistan is not the dance floor for a confrontational ‘pro-citizen’ stance. Most commonly, ‘dancing with the prince’ has involved co-option, or — at best — the creation of a little room for manoeuvre through compromise and selective collaboration.

ANGOs are not a panacea for the intractable problems of development in Afghanistan. They do, however, have a role to play in an environment where the state and civil society structures have been eroded. The key is to analyse the success stories — those ANGOs that have ‘danced with the prince’ and maintained their integrity — and develop strategies for replicating them.

## Donors and their impact on the dance

The future direction of ANGOs will be determined largely by the policies of the donors and their intermediaries, the international NGOs. How can these identify, learn from, and ‘scale up’ the successes?

First, their policies and practice should be based on an informed analysis of the nature of conflict and its relationship to development. This means recognising that conflict is a strategic issue, not to be ignored by the development planners.

Second, a more flexible and long-term response is required. In Afghanistan, funding requests were often turned down on the basis that they were ‘too developmental’: donors’ thinking and institutional arrangements are based on linear notions of the ‘relief to development continuum’. Experience in Afghanistan exposed the lack of institutional frameworks within which to provide assistance for *transitional* activities which are neither ‘relief’ nor ‘development’.

Third, a more informed political analysis is vital. In Afghanistan, donors must make difficult choices about which princes or which citizens to support. What are the political implications of policies which strengthen provincial structures rather than central government, or ANGOs rather than community organisations? It needs to be explicitly acknowledged that ANGOs do have a political role, in that they can affect and are affected by the dynamics of the conflict. It is naive to regard them purely as service-delivery mechanisms.

### *Towards a new form of engagement*

There are tensions in trying to achieve multiple objectives in supporting NGOs. For example, funding ANGOs for delivering relief — to meet the objectives of the donors — has often been to the detriment of longer-term aims of capacity building. Ways are needed to broaden the relationship beyond that of being simply partners in aid delivery. Duffield (op. cit.) argues that engagement should be linked to a ‘new ethics’, i.e. showing solidarity, rather than keeping a distance from the fray and paying lip-service to neutrality.

Fine words, but what do they mean in practice? A starting point must be a broader and more flexible relationship between donors and ANGOs: breaking out of the 'project syndrome' (where projects and development are assumed to be synonymous), and making a long-term and open-ended commitment to selected ANGOs. Projects in Afghanistan are often risky and involve slow and careful work which cannot be melded into 'projectised chunks'. This means moving from the 'culture of concrete results'. However, although capacity building is a fashionable term, it is not always clear what it actually means. In Afghanistan, it often translates into building the capacity of ANGOs to implement their donors' agendas. However capacity building should not be limited to 'skilling up' organisations, or providing a technical fix. It implies a wider dialogue, based on shared values and ethics. Some donors and NGOs have now started to work in this way, to formulate working principles for peace-building and reconstruction in Afghanistan (Barakat *et al.*, op. cit.).

In general, ANGOs have had to dance to the tunes both of the donor and of the prince. These roles need to be reversed in order to make a reality of the civil society rhetoric. A starting point might be to introduce mechanisms that empower organisations *within* civil society, whether these be NGOs or community groups, to help to set the agenda and so call the tune.

## Notes

1 According to the UNDP 1994 Human Development Report, in 1993 42 countries experienced 52 major conflicts and another 37 countries experienced political violence. Only three of the 82 conflicts between 1989 and 1992 were between states. In 1993–4 alone, there were four million deaths as result of ethno-political wars, mostly civilians. Without an effective international ombudsman, and with the thriving international arms trade, conflict is bound to continue.

2 Many NGOs latched onto the concept of *shuras* (councils of elders), believing them to be stable, community-based organisations which could be building blocks in the reconstruction process. However, this is to misunderstand

the character and role of *shuras*, which are loose consultative bodies, brought together on an *ad hoc* basis to discuss particular issues or resolve conflicts (Marsden 1991).

3 Neither the UN nor the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) could work cross-border; the UN because of its mandate to work with recognised governments, and ICRC because it could not secure the consent of all parties in the conflict.

4 The emergence of the Taleban — a movement of religious students — from late 1994 has further narrowed the scope for agencies involved in women's programmes. The Taleban now control much of the country and insist that women and girls should remain within the confines of their compounds.

5 *Karezes* are traditional underground irrigation systems.

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