

The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project

A chance to influence the humanitarian system



These agencies collaborate with the Project Steering Group in Afghanistan

Call for Strengthened Humanitarian Coordination in Afghanistan June 2010

The NGO and Humanitarian Reform Project (NHRP) has as its main objective to strengthen the effective engagement of local, national and international humanitarian NGOs in reformed humanitarian financing and coordination mechanisms at global and country levels. OCHA as the guardian of the reform plays a crucial role in supporting the humanitarian community to fulfill the objectives of ensuring that humanitarian response is predictable, equitable, standardized and effective for people in need.

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan remains critical, with the majority of the population vulnerable to poverty, increasing violence and natural disasters. Despite OCHA's re-establishment in 2009, humanitarian coordination and capacity remains weak. The NHRP urges OCHA take the following steps to assist the humanitarian community in addressing the mounting challenges of intensifying conflict, reduced access and complex protection issues.

Key recommendations

I. Strengthen and protect humanitarian space, including through dialogue with all parties to the conflict, to improve access and protection of vulnerable communities.

- Strengthen humanitarian access by engaging in a sustained and strategic dialogue, led by OCHA, with all parties to the conflict, particularly armed opposition groups, with regards to access to communities by aid organizations, and for vulnerable groups to access basic services.
- Ensure that OCHA is able to advocate and operate independently of UNAMA's political mandate.

II. Ensure humanitarian coordination is proactive, inclusive and appropriate to improve effectiveness of the response and accountability to the humanitarian imperative.

- Strengthen OCHA technical support to clusters so that clusters fulfil their responsibilities and establish appropriate presence and linkages throughout the country.
- Improve OCHA support to the HC and HCT on strategic analysis, positioning and response on humanitarian issues to ensure accountability to the humanitarian imperative.
- Strengthen OCHA outreach, in partnership with cluster leadership, to Afghan NGOs to increase their participation in coordination, funding and leadership mechanisms at both the field and national levels.

III. Prioritize the strengthening of OCHA's information management capacity.

- Support the clusters to develop common assessment tools to collect and analyze data and develop information management systems to facilitate baseline data collection.
- Ensure that OCHA field offices have the capacity and technical expertise to set up and manage information systems to support programming in the regions and national strategy planning.
- Work with all stakeholders, including donors and the Afghan government, to ensure that information is shared and appropriately disseminated so that aid agencies can better identify gaps and prioritize interventions.

Background

OCHA's re-establishment in Afghanistan on 1 January 2009 is a result of the acknowledged need for independent humanitarian coordination due to the worsening humanitarian and security situation. OCHA is mandated to promote and advocate for the respect of the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence and to dialogue with all stakeholders to facilitate and improve the provision of humanitarian aid.¹ Despite progress on some fronts, 18 months later, the political and security situation continues to deteriorate, and the humanitarian community lacks the physical and logistical access to meet the needs of the most vulnerable Afghans in a highly politicized environment.

During the past year, we have witnessed the drastic deterioration of security in the north and west of the country, the highest number of civilian casualties since 2001, a significant increase in the number of conflict-affected IDPs, and escalating security operations which threaten the lives and safety of civilians, including aid workers. In addition, the implementation of ISAF's counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy is reaching its full capacity with high-profile security operations in Helmand and Kandahar this year. All this has occurred in the context of extremely limited access in the south and east and slow recovery from the global food price crisis and ongoing natural disasters.

The progress made in Afghanistan since 2001 is being jeopardized by the spread of conflict, the short-sighted strategy of donors and rampant corruption. While some health and education indicators have improved dramatically over the past 8 years, there is fear that regression is occurring due to insecurity. At least 700 schools have closed, forcing 340,000 children out of school² and WHO estimates that half a million Afghans have lost access to basic health services, mostly in the south.³ The humanitarian situation has reached a critical stage and may reach crisis levels this year with the intensification and spread of conflict and fragility of the government.

The humanitarian community remains ill-prepared to meet Afghanistan's complex humanitarian challenges. Despite OCHA's achievements in strengthening humanitarian coordination, setting up funding systems, and maintaining a degree of independence from UNAMA's political mission, much more needs to be done to adapt to the rapidly evolving landscape.

In the past year, OCHA has facilitated the development of two humanitarian action plans, supported cluster coordination and set-up five field offices, the Emergency Response Fund and information management systems. Yet, both Kabul and field offices are under strain and have been unable to sustain a strategic focus on key issues due to inadequate staffing and material resources. Many aid organizations have been disappointed in OCHA's performance, but in retrospect, expectations were somewhat unrealistic, particularly given the severe deterioration of the security, political situation and other operational constraints. Given the deterioration in conditions, now is the time for OCHA to set out clear priorities and ensure that they have the necessary resources and support to fulfil critical functions.

The attrition of OCHA staff in recent months and the lack of senior personnel, including the Head of Office is cause for significant concern. There is limited information from OCHA headquarters on when these gaps are to be filled. This vacuum will slow the momentum in a number of critical areas, including access negotiations, at a critical time when military operations and violence are on the upswing across the country.

We urge OCHA leadership to fulfil its humanitarian mandate by providing the necessary tools and space to address the mounting challenges of intensifying conflict, reduced access and

¹ OCHA Afghanistan 2009 Concept Note, 17 December 2008.

² Ministry of Education, June 2009.

³ UNAMA Press Conference - 26 April 2010 <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/MDCS-84VHPX?OpenDocument>

complex protection issues. In light of the critical humanitarian needs and limited OCHA capacities, we recommend the following actions be urgently taken:

Strengthen and protect humanitarian space, including through dialogue with all parties to the conflict, to improve access and protection of vulnerable communities.

- Strengthen humanitarian access by engaging in a sustained and strategic dialogue, led by OCHA, with all parties to the conflict, particularly armed opposition groups, with regards to access to communities by aid organizations, and for vulnerable groups to access basic services.
- Ensure that OCHA is able to advocate and operate independently of UNAMA's political mandate.

With increasing conflict, UNAMA's political mandate is at odds with principled humanitarian action based on neutrality, impartiality and independence. With Taliban footholds in 80% of the country and approximately half outside of government control and UNAMA's mandate to support the Afghan Government and the International Military Forces, few UN agencies are perceived as neutral or impartial actors by parties to the conflict. OCHA's complete separation from UNAMA is virtually impossible, yet there are steps which can be taken to ensure that OCHA, other UN humanitarian agencies and its partners can fulfil their mandates. Principled humanitarian action, coordinated by an OCHA perceived to be independent of UNAMA, is a critical component to expanding the operational space against military and political pressures.

Security across the country continues to rapidly deteriorate due to increased military operations, the growth of local militias, shifting power dynamics and opposition attacks. While military operations in Helmand and Kandahar are the focus of public attention, previously stable areas in the northern regions, including key roads are also becoming increasingly risky.⁴ Under these volatile conditions, humanitarian agencies are re-positioning themselves vis-à-vis all parties to the conflict to maintain their impartiality in order to reach increasingly vulnerable communities.⁵ This stance should be supported by dialogue with insurgent groups led by OCHA, which is mandated to do so on behalf of the humanitarian community.

The ISAF counterinsurgency strategy, supported by \$1.5 billion in "hearts and mind" funding, remains a major concern with regards to the impact on civilian protection. The counterinsurgency strategy, which uses seed distribution, cash-for-work, and school and health clinic construction, is putting civilians at grave risk for targeted threats, kidnappings and assassinations by using aid as a weapon.⁶ In Helmand, farmers collecting free seeds from a UK government aid project designed to decrease poppy cultivation were targeted by a remote-controlled IED, killing 13 people. Acceptance of, or involvement in military assistance is perceived as taking sides, and may mark beneficiaries as potential targets. It is essential for the UN to use its unique position to strongly advocate against such donor policies which jeopardize the safety of civilians and undermine aid efforts in the long-term.

The draft Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP), which has been presented by the Afghan government to key donors, further threatens to instrumentalize humanitarian aid for political and security purposes. The proposed program is intending to award "immediate humanitarian assistance" to ex-combatants, their families and communities for their participation in a program that is seen as extremely risky it is simply unethical given the deep levels of poverty and vulnerability.

⁴ Afghanistan Analysts Network, "The Northern Front: The Afghan insurgency spreading beyond the Pashtuns," June 2010.

⁵ NGOs have re-evaluated their relationship with military actors due to the deteriorating security and as a result, the Civil-Military Working Group, a monthly forum for aid agencies and ISAF personnel to discuss issues of concern.

⁶ UNAMA Human Rights, Annual Report on Protection of Civilians, p. 12-15.

OCHA is mandated to facilitate coordination, advocate to meet humanitarian needs and protect humanitarian space, but it has not been adequately resourced or empowered to do so. As the UN comes under pressure to work within the counterinsurgency framework, UNAMA's involvement in humanitarian coordination mechanisms would revive strong concerns among NGOs as to the impartiality of the humanitarian voice. Humanitarian space must be protected within integrated missions and OCHA field and national offices should, at the very least, be located independent of the integrated mission, and be provided with the necessary logistical and administrative support from headquarters for implementation.

Ensure humanitarian coordination is proactive, inclusive and appropriate to improve effectiveness of the response and accountability to the humanitarian imperative.

- Strengthen OCHA technical support to clusters so that clusters fulfil their responsibilities and establish appropriate presence and linkages throughout the country.
- Improve OCHA support to the HC and HCT on strategic analysis, positioning and response on humanitarian issues to ensure accountability to the humanitarian imperative.
- Strengthen OCHA outreach, in partnership with cluster leadership, to Afghan NGOs to increase their participation in coordination, funding and leadership mechanisms at both the field and national levels.

The diversity of aid actors, in an environment as complex and challenging as Afghanistan, requires strong coordination infrastructure with dedicated support from OCHA. The UN-led cluster system, which was rolled out in 2008, has improved to varying degrees of success among clusters, but much more needs to be done to increase responsiveness, geographical coverage and participation of key humanitarian actors as critical components of the broader humanitarian strategy.

Effective coordination can help reduce duplication, increase effectiveness, responsiveness and transparency and hold donors and aid implementers accountable to meet pressing needs. While some of the clusters have made progress in linking to and supporting field-level mechanisms, mapping its capacities and developing training materials, most are unable to maintain a strategic focus without dedicated cluster personnel complemented by support from OCHA staff with humanitarian response expertise.

As the highest humanitarian official and mandated decision-making body in Afghanistan, the HC and the HCT are critical to providing the necessary leadership to implement the humanitarian strategy outlined in the HAP across UN agencies and NGOs. Yet the HCT has been unable to develop a workplan for 2010 to meet HAP objectives due to staffing shortages within OCHA. As the HCT secretariat and with its advisory role to the HC, OCHA needs to provide robust support and guidance to the HC and HCT, which is responsible for meeting the HAP strategic objectives and to ensure accountability of the clusters.

With 58% of the country considered medium to high risk for UN agency operations,⁷ aid assessments and implementation is increasingly reliant on NGOs and other civil society actors. More needs to be done to involve and better integrate them into the humanitarian response systems as full partners, at both the Kabul and field levels, in order to improve humanitarian response. Funding mechanisms like the ERF, one of the few directly accessible to Afghan NGOs, have been very useful in getting aid disbursed to NGOs with access and presence in remote areas.

Prioritize the strengthening of OCHA's information management capacity.

- Support the clusters to develop common assessment tools to collect and analyze data and develop information management systems to facilitate baseline data collection.
- Ensure that OCHA field offices have the capacity and technical expertise to set up and manage information systems to support programming in the regions and national strategy planning
- Work with all stakeholders, including donors and the Afghan government, to ensure that information is shared and appropriately disseminated so that aid agencies can better identify gaps and prioritize interventions.

While there has been increased recognition of humanitarian needs over the past two years, data and analysis of the gaps and trends remains weak or non-existent. Many humanitarian actors operate on the assumption that there is a crisis, given the already dire health, literacy and nutrition indicators, coupled with increased conflict which restricts access to, and provision of, basic services.

Yet in a funding environment where much of the aid is politicized and donor-driven, humanitarian agencies must build an evidence-based case for increased humanitarian capacity and flexible aid channeled in an independent and impartial manner. While the debate has often centered on classifying aid responses into either the relief or development frameworks, attention to quantifying, monitoring and understanding the needs on the ground has been inadequate.

There has been some progress among the clusters in establishing joint information collection systems, but humanitarian agencies need to increase technical expertise to develop common assessment tools and establish clear thresholds to mandate a rapid response from clusters and donors. Aid agencies regularly conduct assessments and baseline surveys in communities, yet there are no common tools with which to systematically collect data on a scale to identify gaps and vulnerabilities.

With a skeleton staff in the field, and increasingly at the Kabul office, OCHA is unable to process and analyze information to establish baseline figures and ensure ongoing and consistent assessments to determine areas of greatest need. Government statistics are often highly politicized and paint a positive picture of progress, despite the realities on the ground.⁸ The paucity of flexible and responsive humanitarian aid⁹ requires NGOs to make a much stronger, evidence-based case.

OCHA and the clusters have been unable to adequately manage information due to scarce technical capacity, particularly at its field offices. This has resulted in a lack of baseline data on which to monitor the quality and impact of humanitarian aid across sectors and weak analysis to monitor trends. OCHA needs to be properly resourced to undertake quantitative and qualitative analysis of humanitarian trends at the national and sectoral levels to advocate to stakeholders for improvements in humanitarian response. At its regional offices, OCHA needs information management officers to support local humanitarian actors and manage data coming from the field.

Conclusion

None of the above is achievable without a substantial capacity increase within the OCHA Afghanistan office. The NHRP is aware that at the global level, OCHA has committed to improve its human resources system in order to more rapidly recruit, deploy and maintain qualified and diverse staff. We acknowledge the achievements of OCHA within the constraints of limited resources. Yet as the humanitarian needs in Afghanistan are at a critical stage, we call on you to urgently strengthen OCHA Afghanistan's effectiveness in facilitating independent and principled humanitarian coordination capacity, outreach and response.

⁸ Recent figures of expanded health access and reduced child mortality figures have health experts sceptical as they have not been independently verified. The number of IDPs, which the Ministry of Refugees and Returnees tracks, is based on the varying capacities and vested interests of its respective provincial departments.

⁹ ECHO and OFDA, the only humanitarian donor offices, respectively have €33 million and \$30 million budgets for 2010.