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# Paradoxes of presence

**Risk management and aid culture in  
challenging environments**

**March 2013**

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**with Carol Berger, Diana Felix da Costa and Karl Sandstrum**



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# Executive summary

The international policy context and circumstances of development action and humanitarian relief have changed profoundly over the past two decades, with aid agencies now operating in an increasingly diverse array of conflict-affected contexts that are also considered by Western governments as major threats to international peace and security. A new and aggressive phase of direct international engagement and liberal interventionism in so-called ‘fragile states’ has assigned a new strategic role to aid as a key component of ‘comprehensive’ efforts to change and transform whole societies, and has created powerful incentives for aid agencies to be present and operational in insecure environments.

This is reflected in the rapid expansion of the aid industry at every level – geographical reach, funding, the number and variety of organisations involved and the range and complexity of their activities across overlapping and competing operational and policy areas, which have blurred the lines between the many different types of contractors and service providers involved. Aid agencies have inevitably experienced the friction and tensions this can engender, including their exposure to insecurity and other risks to a degree that is probably unprecedented, prompting substantial new investment in security management and a proliferation of security-related networks, inter-agency platforms, joint UN/NGO initiatives, good practice guides and security-related consultancy work.

One consequence of the raft of security initiatives has been the progressive withdrawal of many international aid personnel into fortified aid compounds, secure offices and residential complexes, alongside restrictive security and travel protocols. This ‘bunkerisation’ has contributed to the growing physical and social detachment of many international aid personnel from the societies in which they work, and a substantial shift towards ‘remote management’ techniques as aid managers attempt to administer or evaluate programmes from a safe distance, through national and local field workers, subcontracted intermediaries and new technologies. UN agencies and larger NGOs have also sought to circumvent their own security restrictions by outsourcing activities to other NGOs and for-profit subcontractors.

In practice, maintaining institutional or personal presence in challenging environments depends on resolving the basic tension between accepting risks and remaining safe. Access and presence may have been achieved, but only on certain conditions and frequently at the risk of creating, accepting or ignoring other significant risks and hazards, including the securitisation of aid delivery, the development of unequal hierarchies of protection and access and the transfer of risk to the margins of the aid establishment. The remoteness of

international aid staff can also weaken strategic engagement and decision-making, undermine acceptance and compromise the ability to effectively report on and monitor programmes. Such detachment can also create self-referential social worlds, with their own internal hierarchies, competition and distrust.

Recognising that these hazards cannot be easily eliminated, this study points to the need for a broadened risk agenda that includes the management of security risks, but that also links directly to other aspects of agencies’ programmatic and strategic risk management. This calls for debate and discussion that openly acknowledges the often irresolvable nature of the hazards and contradictions that aid actors face when engaging in conflict-affected countries. This report does not intend to paint an unwarranted negative picture: aid agencies get much right in environments that are unquestionably challenging and difficult. The purpose of this discussion is to broaden and deepen the risk agenda beyond the immediate preoccupations of operational security risk management. This inevitably entails a focus on the difficulties and dilemmas of engagement more than on its positive achievements.

## • **Poor contextual knowledge and analysis and weak information base to support programming and decision-making**

Aid agencies are weak on contextual understanding and analysis to support their programming in conflict-affected countries. The reasons for this are often attributed to the ostensibly short-term nature of humanitarian action, a failure to invest sufficient resources to support better information-gathering and analysis, the absence of suitable research tools and analytical frameworks and agencies’ failure to incorporate what contextual information and analysis they do have into their planning and programming. Yet the findings of this project suggest that the problem is actually more to do with the behaviour and culture of aid actors. The physical and social distancing of many aid personnel from the local human and political context not only creates barriers to security hazards and threats, but also makes it difficult for them to appreciate or understand the people and societies that they are engaged with. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the current security risk agenda and the approaches that it encourages is the extent to which these are focused on the risks for agencies themselves, rather than risks to civilians within the host population.

Without investing in more systematic approaches to context analysis, a common default position is instead to claim reliance on the supposedly superior situational knowledge of national and local staff. In challenging environments, a national aid worker’s ethnic or cultural background is frequently seen



*Kenyan WFP pilots, Bentiu, South Sudan*

as giving them an insider's view of local power dynamics; equally, though, it can easily translate into fears of bias and susceptibility to community pressure. Many agencies also rely on security-related information and 'intelligence'. This stream of security data and alerts can clutter, obscure and complicate analysis of complex security environments. While the level of detail contained in security reports does not necessarily correlate with increased accuracy in prediction, it does serve to reinforce the perception of a constant and active threat, potentially fuelling paranoia or, conversely, desensitising the target audience to real threats.

**• Weakened relations and engagement with client populations and external stakeholders and heightened risks of doing harm**

In theory, the larger established international aid agencies have long recognised the importance of understanding and managing their relations with external stakeholders. Yet, in practice, the main rationales for agencies analysing and engaging with other actors often appear limited to the imperatives of achieving or improving access, staff security and local aid delivery. This risks eclipsing attempts to properly comprehend or account for the implications and impacts of agencies' actions and activities. Whilst an aid agency may be valued or 'accepted' by certain power-holders, this does not necessarily mean that all members of the community are happy, and relations at community level are likely to be strained and volatile.

The greater the distance and detachment of senior aid personnel and the greater their ignorance of local political and

social realities on the ground, the greater the risk that their agencies or partners will do harm through their engagement and relationships with external stakeholders. Where the objectives of aid interventions are to alter or 'stabilise' the social and political order in the interests of peace- or statebuilding, the potential liabilities associated with weak, distorted or biased relationships with external stakeholders are particularly acute. These hazards are compounded by the increasingly common practice among UN and other international agencies of devolving or outsourcing access negotiations and strategies to partners, subcontractors and national or local staff.

**• Securitised and privatised aid presence and delivery**

The securitisation of aid has become a major defining factor in the operating environment of aid agencies. Attention has focused particularly on the assumed heightening of the security risks to humanitarian and other aid workers and assets resulting from their association with political and military elements of international interventions. Much less debated is the flip-side of aid securitisation, resulting from aid agencies' own protective and deterrent security measures, including security advice and training from the security services and private security companies. While much of this market is dominated by the bigger international players, agencies also regularly turn to smaller and/or local security providers, about which they often know very little. Inevitably, there is the risk that such firms will be connected with criminal, political or armed actors. The risks of aid agencies inadvertently empowering criminal or armed groups or fuelling war economies are significant.

### • Hierarchies of protection and risk transfer with remote management

Arm's-length aid management inevitably involves the transfer of security risks and associated liabilities from international staff to national and local staff or subcontracted and partner organisations. Few agencies have reportedly taken steps to plan for when and what forms of outsourcing, remote management or risk transfer practices are appropriate or justified for different situations and contexts, and there is little discussion and no common framework to support decision-making.

In practice, the means by which many aid organisations gain or maintain access to insecure contexts often rest on security arrangements that exclude the vast majority of their more exposed front-line implementers from access to the protected and exclusive aid 'archipelago' enjoyed by international personnel. Indeed, some of the most crucial aid implementers – including those involved in the logistics side of aid delivery, such as pilots and truckers – are not recognised as 'aid workers' as such by the sector's international elite. Despite the fact that national and local personnel represent over 90% of aid workers in the field and consistently suffer far higher rates of security incidents and fatalities compared to internationals, agencies' staffing policies and guidelines rarely consider the distinct threats faced by their national staff. National and local staff usually have less access to security training and protective or other security measures or to the security-related information and briefings that are provided for international personnel, and they are usually excluded from the additional support arrangements that are assumed necessary for international staff. Aid workers employed by local partner NGOs or other subcontracted entities are likely to receive even lower levels of security support. With the physical and social separation between international staff and national field staff and the stark differences in their relative exposure to risk and access to protection and other benefits comes a high potential for mutual resentment and mistrust.

### • Weakened control of aid delivery chains and distorted aid programming and coverage

Competition for funding impels aid organisations to maximise their competitiveness in relation to others in order to remain operational and maintain a presence. Under these conditions, most agencies will seek to protect their bottom line, and construct an image of being good performers and appropriate implementers in order to secure funding. Competition among aid agencies drives a need to reduce any potentially negative messages, and a perception of success can be maintained regardless of actual programmatic impact and effect. This in turn undermines the capacity for lesson-learning and the

adjustment of programmes and projects that might have had negative outcomes.

Strengthening accountability for outcomes and impacts requires detailed understanding of the local context and transparent and evidence-based monitoring and assessment – both of which are difficult to achieve remotely. With operational aid activities increasingly subcontracted or outsourced, the level of responsibility and accountability for outcomes becomes increasingly unclear. Liability for negative outcomes can be avoided by claiming ignorance: reference to the security risks and obstacles involved in monitoring outcomes provides an alibi for not knowing; meanwhile, any vested interests in the status quo may seek to exaggerate the scale of the danger.

Many aid agencies' operational programmes have been distorted, driven by their donors' objectives rather than assessed needs on the ground. This compounds other distortions in the overall coverage or prioritisation of aid across different areas or groups resulting from security conditions and more basic logistical and other factors. The greater the detachment of donors and aid managers from the field, and the more limited and restricted agencies' presence is on the ground, the higher the risk that these distortions will go unrecognised or ignored. Agencies' actions and responses are liable to be further distorted by adaptations or curtailments in programme and project focus and objectives to suit the imperatives of security risk management. Food, for instance, is a lot more difficult to deliver through low-profile approaches than vaccines.

### Conclusions

The contradiction between the expectation that international aid workers accept more risks and the countervailing pressures to limit exposure seems irreconcilable. The organisational, ethical, personal and financial difficulties involved in working in challenging environments, and the fundamental tension between 'staying' and 'staying safe', suggests that bunkerisation and remote management are an unstoppable trend. The aid industry has yet to systematically discuss the wider implications and possible consequences of these trends. The tensions between organisational and individual risk acceptance cannot be resolved simply through recourse to better security management techniques. Indeed, narrowing the focus to supposed technical and managerial fixes risks drawing attention away from the more fundamental dilemmas and hazards that define the messy and uncertain realities of being present and engaged in complex security environments. Recognising the liabilities associated with staying and delivering depends on agencies adopting a broadened risk agenda that is not confined to the immediate preoccupations of ostensibly manageable *security* risks, but which encompasses attention to the host of interconnected challenges and hazards involved.





# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Since the 1990s, aid agencies have significantly expanded the reach and ambitions of their engagement in war-affected and chronically insecure fragile states, providing humanitarian assistance as well as engaging in programmes of social and political transformation led and funded by Western donor governments. While there has been some recent research into aid worker security, and there is a rapidly expanding body of work on good practice in risk and security management, there has been surprisingly little research into how aid agencies are actually responding to the real or perceived security risks they face in these unstable environments. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the implications are significant, affecting every level and aspect of agencies' presence and programming. However, while informal conversations yield many stories, actual practices cannot be properly assessed and examined unless these stories are documented (Van Brabant, 2010).

This report seeks to address this gap.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on fieldwork in South Sudan and Afghanistan between late 2010 and early 2012, it documents some of the challenges that aid workers and their organisations face in these difficult contexts, and explores the implications for programming. What aid actors tell themselves and others that they are or should be doing and what they are actually doing are often quite different things. Our findings challenge much of the received wisdom and assumptions that underpin the current mainstream discourse and guidance on risk and security management across the sector, including the presumption that aid workers and agencies are likely to act and behave in rational, predictable and principled ways in these difficult environments. In reality, and as the history of the aid encounter shows in countries such as Afghanistan and South Sudan, operating in conditions of chronic insecurity is a messy, uncertain and compromising business. Because it is so focused on the immediate practicalities of trying to stay physically safe while keeping



*UNOCHA visitors walkway, Kabul, Afghanistan*

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operations going, mainstream risk management has so far failed to properly capture the higher-level strategic and programmatic problems, challenges and trade-offs that result from aid actors' engagement in contexts that they consider to be actually or potentially dangerous.

This report deliberately refers in broad terms to 'aid agencies' and 'aid workers', reflecting the extent to which the aid sector encompasses a diverse array of international, regional, national and local actors engaged in a wide variety of interventions (Collinson, Elhawary and Muggah, 2010). The dividing lines between the many different types of contractors and service providers are blurred, sometimes deliberately so, with many

agencies working in a variety of programming areas and many aid personnel rotating in and out of different types of organisation and across different sectors of intervention. In South Sudan, for instance, many international aid workers move between the larger 'high-end' international NGOs, UN agencies, peacekeepers and private contractors. The resources controlled and managed by the humanitarian aid sector are dwarfed by other forms of aid in these countries, and the numbers of agencies that can be clearly identified as 'humanitarian' are relatively few.

A key frame of reference for this study is the concept of humanitarian space as a social arena, as developed by Dorothea Hilhorst and Bram Jansen (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010). This space, they suggest, is best viewed as a social and physical arena where a variety of different actors – donors, UN agencies and INGOs, headquarters and field staff, aid recipients, local private suppliers, peacekeepers and other military actors – negotiate the various activities and outcomes associated with aid. This social negotiation 'encompasses any kind of strategy, including coercive violence, written statements, formal interactions, schemes deployed in the shadows of the official process and the banalities of everyday gossiping' (*ibid.*: 1120). The idea of the social arena is defined by an actor-oriented approach that assumes that people's behaviour will often be reactive, irrational and unpredictable, that their practices are influenced by other actors and that

<sup>1</sup> This research was made possible by a two year ESRC–DFID research grant (RES-167-25-0439) entitled 'Achieving Policy Coherence in Challenging Environments: Risk Management and Aid Culture in Sudan and Afghanistan'. The research was jointly managed by the Global Insecurities Centre (GIC), University of Bristol and the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI, London.

they will be driven by different motives and in response to their subjective interpretation of the situation they are in. It recognises that action will be based on a range of driving forces, and that motivations for action will be mixed; humanitarian action, for instance, is unlikely to be based solely on a desire to alleviate suffering, but will also be driven by other motivations, such as organisational pressures to continue operations and retain staff or to demonstrate publicly that the agency is doing ‘good work’.

This approach means paying attention to the ‘life-worlds’ of aid workers and the ways that they shape and interpret the reality of aid in a given context. Rather than being examined primarily in terms of its avowed policy aims, the international aid system is understood more as a cultural and spatial phenomenon. Through ethnographic observation of the everyday practices of different actors, it is possible to depict how various drivers and dynamics of aid delivery interact with and influence each other. How people define and organise their work is influenced by the mission or mandate of their agency, their understanding of the context and assessment of needs, their personal expectations and frustrations and the associated organisational culture (*ibid.*, citing Walkup, 1997). It is also shaped by the fears and anxieties of international aid workers themselves (Duffield, 2010).

The research drew on a range of ethnographic and interview-based methodologies, including participant observation and conversation, in-depth and semi-structured interviews, focus group meetings and multi-stakeholder workshops. It aimed to explore how security risks are understood, negotiated and managed among different actors in the various interconnected aid arenas that they occupy or encounter, and what the implications of this and of enhanced risk management are more generally for the modalities and dynamics of aid delivery in high-risk contexts such as Afghanistan and South Sudan. The main research sites were the physical spaces occupied by international aid workers, located mainly but not exclusively in urban areas and including fortified and lower-profile aid compounds and offices, restaurants, hotels and various other recreational spaces used by international aid personnel. Away from these (international) urban spaces, research was conducted in various sites including provincial towns (restaurants and hotels, hospitals, NGO offices and compounds) and rural communities, and while travelling cross-country by road or air.

<sup>2</sup> Approximately 200 interviews were conducted with over 80 donor, UN, NGO and for-profit organisations. For further details of the research methodology, see Annex 2.



US State Department ‘Safe Haven’, Rumbeck, South Sudan

The research encompassed conversations, interviews<sup>2</sup> and participant observation with a broad range of actors connected in different ways with the aid sector: representatives of donor governments, UN agencies, secular and religious INGOs and national and local NGOs, civilian subcontractors and security firms, local service providers, peacekeepers, journalists, private consultants, political and security advisers, UN pilots and a cross-section of local people from communities receiving aid.<sup>3</sup> The research was conducted entirely independently and without the direct support of any international organisations. The research on host populations’ perceptions of the aid industry was conducted in partnership with two local research institutions – in Afghanistan with the Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO), and in South Sudan with Small and Medium Entrepreneurship Capacity Building Consult, South Sudan (SMECOSS).

With direct observations drawn from the actor-focused field research and supporting literature review, this report aims to provide a grounded account of some of the key challenges and dilemmas faced by aid workers and agencies in countries such as South Sudan and Afghanistan that, it is hoped, will stimulate much-needed debate on the future of aid in challenging environments. In framing the context of this report, however, it is important to note that the growing concern with security has highlighted the hierarchy of inequalities that define the aid system, in particular the pivotal distinction between in-country expatriate or *international* aid workers and local or *national* aid workers. Rather than being ethnically

<sup>3</sup> Much of this has been archived with the ESRC’s Economic and Social Data Service (ESDA).

or racially defined, the international identity is primarily contractual. Mainly recruited externally, besides US or European nationals, many Asian, Latin American and African men and women are contractually international aid workers. National aid workers are mostly either the local or regional employees of international agencies, usually recruited in-country, or are working for national NGOs or local community organisations. It is estimated that internationals constitute just 10% of aid workers globally (Egeland et al., 2011: 31). In other words, in any given aid programme, nationals comprise the overwhelming majority.

Thus, while situations vary, the country programme of a typical international NGO or UN agency usually comprises a small minority of expatriate staff on international contracts, with the vast majority of the organisational workforce being locally recruited on national contracts. Senior in-country management positions are monopolised by the few internationals, while national personnel, besides the basic ancillary roles of drivers, guards, cooks and cleaners, typically occupy supporting management, assessment and implementing positions. Besides significant differences in remuneration compared to international arrangements, national contracts are usually less generous regarding health benefits, insurance, access to transport and security entitlements, such as evacuation eligibility (*ibid.*: 40–46). Although only a minority, international aid workers are also the main beneficiaries of the significant investment in security and risk management that has taken place since the 1990s. International managers commonly assume – sometimes incorrectly – that national staff are less exposed to risk than themselves (*ibid.*). In challenging environments, a national aid worker's ethnic or cultural background is frequently seen as giving them an insider's view of local power dynamics. Equally, though, it can easily translate into fears of bias and susceptibility to community pressure. Depending on the circumstances, a national aid worker's ethnic or community identity may even put them at direct risk.

While fully cognisant of the inequalities and uneven policy focus within the aid system, this report is largely concerned with the security of aid as an 'international' phenomenon. The following section provides a brief review of the changing context of risk and security management as it relates to mainstream aid actors operating in chronically insecure environments. Paradoxically, while aid agencies have significantly expanded their presence in conflict zones, the risks that they have encountered in doing so have triggered the proliferation of a raft of institutional, managerial and architectural security measures stemming from insurance requirements, employer duty-of-care concerns, standardised security protocols and field security training that reflect trends in Western societies that are themselves becoming more risk-averse and security conscious. This has meant the progressive withdrawal of many international aid personnel into fortified aid compounds, secure offices and residential complexes and other forms of self-contained and privately guarded gated communities, alongside restrictive security

and travel protocols covering visits to project sites, movement outside of defined areas, residential arrangements and evening curfews. In turn, this 'bunkerisation' has contributed to the growing physical and social detachment of many international aid personnel from the societies in which they work, and a shift across the aid sector towards 'remote management' techniques as senior, usually expatriate, aid managers attempt to administer or evaluate programmes from a safe distance, through national and local field workers, subcontracted intermediaries and new technologies.

The third section takes a critical look at the evolving security risk management agenda. It highlights a shift away from risk *avoidance* to risk *management* that, at least at the rhetorical level, is intended to enable agencies to operate in dangerous places despite the risks (Egeland et al., 2011). The discussion challenges some of the basic assumptions that underpin this agenda, highlighting in particular the limitations of an approach to risk and security management that assumes that agencies and aid workers are willing to expose themselves to residual risks, and that counts on objective, rational and accountable decision-making and action within agencies and on acceptance as a reliable cornerstone of risk mitigation. None of these assumptions stands up to scrutiny against observed realities on the ground; rather than reflecting an ideal framework of risk management, maintaining agency 'presence' in challenging environments more often depends on multiple compromises, contradictions and trade-offs at all levels, and current approaches to risk management remain generally 'ad hoc, inconsistent and fragmented' (Metcalf, Martin and Pantuliano, 2011: 6).

Current discourse and received wisdom on operational risk and security management beg a host of critical and contentious questions about what it really means to be 'present' and what the ultimate objectives of this presence are. What does the acceptance of risk mean in practice, and what does it really entail to 'stay and deliver' in war zones and other crisis contexts? Is growing remoteness and a culture of anxiety among international aid workers an acceptable price for claiming presence? The fourth section looks more closely at some of the implications for aid agencies and their operations of 'staying' and 'delivering' in challenging environments, highlighting the significant programmatic and strategic hazards that can result either directly or indirectly from the practical measures that agencies take to avoid, manage or mitigate security risks. These include the securitisation of aid delivery, the development of unequal hierarchies of protection and access within the mainstream aid establishment and the transfer of risk to its margins, limiting the quality and scope of programmes and censoring advocacy and allowing control or manipulation of assistance by political and military actors. The remoteness of international aid staff can also weaken strategic engagement and decision-making, undermine acceptance and compromise the ability to effectively report on and monitor programmes. Such detachment can also create

self-referential social worlds – the aid bubble – replete with internal hierarchies, competition and distrust.

Recognising that these hazards cannot be easily eliminated, the conclusion discusses the need for a broadened risk agenda that includes the management of security risks, but

that also links this directly to other aspects of agencies' programmatic and strategic risk management. This calls for debate and discussion that openly acknowledges the often irresolvable nature of the hazards and contradictions that aid actors face when engaging in conflict-affected countries such as South Sudan and Afghanistan.

## Chapter 2

# The changing context of security risk management

The international policy context and circumstances of humanitarian relief and development action have changed profoundly over the past two decades. Aid agencies are operating in an increasingly diverse array of war-affected contexts that are also considered by Western governments as major threats to international peace and security. Based on the rationale that peace is impossible without development and development impossible without peace, Western preoccupations with these so-called ‘fragile states’ have triggered a new and aggressive phase of direct international engagement seeking to ‘stabilise’ these countries and mitigate the threats they pose. Integrating both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ forms of intervention, both military and civilian (Collinson, Elhawary and Muggah, 2010), the current chapter of liberal interventionism has assigned a new strategic role to aid (Duffield, 2001), with the UN now an aligned force, if not a warring party, directly supporting partisan political groups and committed to achieving defined international security outcomes (DAC, 2003; Eide et al., 2005; Sida, 2005).

This has created powerful incentives for aid agencies to be present and operational in chronically insecure countries. During the 1990s, when the Taliban held power in Afghanistan, the UN mission would withdraw on the slightest provocation, including in one instance the throwing of a coffee pot at a UN official (Donini, 2009: 8, fn. 14); today, even the deaths of aid workers are met with a defiant resolve to remain (BBC, 2011). Where donor governments and the UN are engaged and determined to stay, so too are the many international NGOs and consultants that subcontract for them. Those ‘fragile states’ deemed important to Western security are also the aid industry’s most profitable areas, and where the contract culture is most active. While aid agencies like to see their presence as a reflection of programmatic or humanitarian ‘criticality’, it is also true that, to maintain market share, they have little choice but to follow the money (Van Brabant, 2010: 10). For international NGOs, not having a visible presence in challenging environments threatens brand loyalty, weakens



*US defence subcontractor convoy, Rumbeck, South Sudan*

financial sustainability and raises questions about an agency’s capacity for humanitarian action.

The aid system has undergone unprecedented expansion at every level – in terms of geographical reach, funding, the number and variety of organisations involved and the range and complexity of their activities across overlapping and competing operational and policy areas. Official funding for humanitarian assistance increased from \$2.1 billion at the beginning of the 1990s (Buchanan-Smith and Randel, 2002) to \$12.4bn in 2010, with total recorded humanitarian assistance including private donations totalling an estimated \$16.7bn in 2010 (Global Humanitarian Assistance, 2011); meanwhile, the number of field-based aid workers employed by the UN humanitarian agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and international NGOs is now thought to exceed 200,000 (Harvey et al., 2010). In Sudan, the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 between the government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) in 2005 saw an exponential increase in the number of international aid agencies in South Sudan,



*Perimeter fence, Kabul, Afghanistan*

from around 50 to 155 registered agencies by 2010, along with a similar number of national NGOs.<sup>4</sup> Organisations are engaged in activities ranging from recovery and reconstruction to political stabilisation, peace-building, state-building, humanitarian relief and development, with donors encouraging the integration of aid and political activities to create ‘comprehensive’ or ‘integrated’ approaches.

As witnessed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and now increasingly in South Sudan, Western aid’s wider post-Cold War aim of ‘catalysing change and transforming *whole* societies’ (Stiglitz, 1998: 3) has proved more difficult than first imagined, and aid agencies have inevitably experienced the friction and tensions this can engender. While the empirical evidence is unclear on the extent to which, and under what conditions, aid work is actually becoming more dangerous (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012; Fast, 2010; Stoddard et al., 2006), a dominant narrative among aid agencies is that they are working in increasingly hostile and difficult operating environments, in which direct security threats are growing and their ability to act is becoming more constrained. The prevailing theme is that things are getting worse: agencies’ access is becoming more difficult, attacks on aid workers are increasing and respect for international humanitarian law is declining (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012; HERR, 2011).

Although difficult to square with the rapid and continuing expansion of their reach and ambitions in challenging environments across the world, this narrative of ‘shrinking’

<sup>4</sup> See the NGO Forum website: <http://southsudanngoforum.org/ngos-in-southern-sudan>.

humanitarian space nevertheless reflects the problems for aid programming that result from the insecurity and volatility of many of the environments in which aid actors are seeking to operate. The large aid presence in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Somalia inevitably means that aid agencies are exposed – or are exposing themselves – to a variety of security and other risks to a degree that is probably unprecedented. This is reflected in the statistics, with reported aid worker casualties tripling over the last decade and significant increases in politically motivated targeted attacks, kidnappings and criminal acts against aid agencies and their personnel (Egeland et al., 2011; Metcalfe, Giffen and Elhawary, 2011; Stoddard et al., 2009).

These trends have prompted a new focus and substantial new investment in security management. The role of the dedicated security officer has gained new prominence, with the recruitment of many ex-military and security service personnel to these posts.

The expansion of this security apparatus within agencies has been matched by the proliferation of new security-related networks, inter-agency platforms, joint UN/NGO initiatives, good practice guides and security-related consultancy work. Following the bombing of its offices in Baghdad in 2003, the UN established a new Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) and developed Minimum Operational Security Standards (MOSS) that set guidelines for emergency planning, security training, essential communications and the physical protection of residential and office buildings. Many agencies have introduced security risk management frameworks or adopted guidelines such as the UN’s 2009 Guidelines for Acceptable Risk (Egeland et al., 2011). The UN and NGOs have jointly sought to implement a ‘Saving Lives Together’ initiative to improve security collaboration between the UN and NGOs at field level. In January 2011, the UN launched a new Security Level system, designed to shift security management from limiting activities according to assessed risks to a new ‘enabling’ approach focused on how to achieve programme goals in insecure and high-risk operating environments.

There is a tension between the tacit acceptance of risk and the origin of many international aid workers and organisations in Western societies that, themselves, are increasingly risk averse (Furedi, 2006; Nolan, 1998). Recruitment and induction activities are governed by insurance and other contractual imperatives that demand basic risk avoidance and heightened levels of direct and demonstrable protection. The extensive security measures that aid agencies have adopted since the mid-1990s is evidence of this (Bruderlein and Gassmann, 2006). Periodically reinforced by high-profile

targeted attacks like those in Nigeria, Iraq and Afghanistan, but irrespective of the extent that one can generalise from such events, the dominant response has been for the aid system to harden itself by stepping up protection and adopting stronger deterrence measures (Van Brabant, 2010: 8).

For host populations, the most visible impact of these measures has been the widespread retreat of international aid personnel into expatriate 'green zones' that are all but entirely inaccessible to locals and detached from the local social context – the UN and international NGO compounds, embassy complexes, secured residential units and leisure facilities that form clearly demarcated, separated and secured spaces (Boone, 2009; Duffield, 2010). Exclusive gated communities have sprung up, together with the spread of fortified aid compounds and, in some locations, the placement of aid sections within military bases. These compounds have come to represent a highly visible and separate 'island of modernity' that exposes the exclusivity of the international space and its unequal relationship with the surrounding environment – interconnected by exclusive means of transport and representing private spaces that mesh into what, spatially at least, could be likened to a secure archipelago of international aid (Duffield, 2010). In contexts such as South Sudan, defensive living is increasingly seen as the *only* way to operate. As one interviewee for this study put it: 'You can live all your life in Juba without leaving the compound – go to work, exercise, shopping, partying'.<sup>5</sup> The programmatic implications of these increasingly restrictive practices are obvious. According to one interviewee, a senior UN official: 'During the war I could do all kinds of things with UN Security approval that I can no longer do. I was dropped with a radio set and a tent and stayed for weeks in the bush. Today no one walks, no tents. This means that we have no access, nor the flexibility to go to the areas where there is the greatest need'.<sup>6</sup> In order to enter the UN's logistical system in Sudan it is necessary for visiting HQ staff or temporary consultants to first pass the UN's Basic and Advanced Security in the Field training modules (UNDSS, 2012). Without passing these modules, it is impossible to obtain a UN ID card, and without an ID card it is impossible to enter UN compounds, board UN flights or travel in UN vehicles. Likewise in Jonglei,

<sup>5</sup> Juba interview, November 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with senior UN official, Juba, October 2011.



*UN convoy, Rumbeck, South Sudan*

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for instance, the requirement that UN staff travel with two cars and always carry a satellite phone on patrol missions means that, if they follow these guidelines, a civilian section of around ten people will only be able to conduct one patrol at a time because the section is only likely to have one phone.<sup>7</sup> On arrival in South Sudan, the first experience many NGO workers are likely to have of the UN is a safety course prepared by the UNDSS.

Politically, South Sudan is presented as a post-conflict country engaged in recovery and reconstruction. While this is partially true, many areas remain insecure, particularly along the border with Sudan and in areas where rebel militia groups are most active. One

expatriate South Sudan analyst with many years in the country argued that the reason why aid agencies operating currently in South Sudan are so risk averse is that many came in after the CPA, which raised hopes of peace, stability and recovery, yet found themselves engaged in highly politicised and unstable environments. The way the country is viewed – as a humanitarian emergency or as a recovery context – affects the way security is approached, with recruitment often handled by HQ staff with little understanding of the socio-political and security context. An emphasis on development is reflected in the jobs section for South Sudan of the humanitarian website ReliefWeb, with the majority of jobs falling under the 'recovery and development' banner. This is likely to signal to applicants that the context is safe, with the consequence that many aid workers arrive mentally unprepared for the actual conditions they find themselves in.

The most obvious and immediate corollary to the bunkerisation of international and senior personnel is remote management, whereby bunkered or restricted international aid managers transfer risk by attempting to administer projects at arm's length, either through local aid workers (their own staff or local NGOs) or private contractors and, increasingly, new technologies such as GPS (Rogers, 2006; Huls, 2011; O'Connor, 2012; Stoddard, Harmer and Renouf, 2010; IRIN, 2009; Dobbs, 2008). While in the past remote management represented an exception in agency practice, limited largely to the most severe situations of threat or insecurity, it is now, in various guises, a more or less typical and ubiquitous feature of international aid engagement in conflict-

<sup>7</sup> Bor interview, November 2012.

affected countries (Stoddard, Harmer and Renouf, 2010; Steets et al., 2012; Egeland et al., 2011). The concept covers a variety of management and programming arrangements, ranging from the extreme of long-term 'remote control' from another country, as witnessed in the case of Nairobi-based management of international aid programmes in Somalia, to situations of more partial or temporary delegation of responsibility for programme or project implementation to national and local staff or partner organisations (Steets et al., 2010; Abild, 2009). What all have in common is the reluctance or inability of international and senior staff to be present on the ground in the places where their agency's programmes and projects are being implemented.

Much effort is also being put into the development of satellite and telecommunications-based humanitarian remote sensing, together with mapping and visualisation software (Kemper et al., 2011; Lavers et al., 2009; Stollberg and de Groot, 2012). The increasing use of remote technologies as a means of reducing risk is an attractive proposition as it appears to solve many problems, including meeting aid agencies' duty of care obligations, reducing field costs and limiting physical exposure while simulating the experience of proximity. At the same time, there is a certain inevitability that, with the growing sophistication, reliability and accessibility of these technologies, claims will be made that remoteness, rather than being a problem, actually offers new ways of engaging, mobilising and enfranchising aid beneficiaries (Rogers, 2006; Huls, 2011; O'Connor, 2012; Stoddard, Harmer and Renouf, 2010; IRIN, 2009; Dobbs, 2008).

Risk-aversion and the bunkerisation of international staff are considered by most commentators as a problem that particularly affects UN agencies owing to the UN's political profile and the central orientation towards protective and deterrence measures, despite steps now being taken to implement a more flexible security system (Metcalf, Giffen and Elhawary, 2011: 29; Egeland et al., 2011: 9; Stoddard and Harmer, 2010: 3). But risk-averse defensive and deterrent approaches are also

predominant among many NGOs as well as some commercial service providers, as reflected in many organisations resorting to remote management or contracting hard protection from private security firms. Beyond the UN, the rapidly escalating number and variety of aid providers – including faith-based, national, local and for-profit organisations – have remained free to jostle for funds, access and leverage, often acting outside of any normative or joint operational frameworks. Thus, with an increasingly commercialised and competitive aid market to call upon, the UN agencies and larger NGOs have been able to circumvent their own security restrictions and conditions by outsourcing many key activities, such as food distribution and field assessment and monitoring, to smaller NGOs and for-profit subcontractors.<sup>8</sup> While various cross-agency initiatives have led to the formulation of joint standards and codes of conduct, such as civil-military guidelines and country-level initiatives to strengthen security-related information-sharing and coordination (e.g. the Afghan NGO Safety Office (ANSO)), these have generally proved too weak or too limited to ensure any real consistency in practice. In reality, diverse aid actors work with widely varying priorities and different mandates and missions, and their actions are often based on ideology, personalities or institutional interests rather than any shared strategies of engagement (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012; Harvey et al., 2010). Taken together, these developments have profound implications for the nature and quality of the interactions between international aid agencies, their national partners and beneficiary groups, raise many serious issues around accountability and have important political implications. Yet, up to now, there appears to have been relatively little appetite to acknowledge and address them or to openly scrutinise their repercussions for the practice of aid.

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<sup>8</sup> In Afghanistan, for example, previously UN-contracted national staffers have been moved to contracts with private sub-contractors such as CTG Global, with 'equal or better' conditions that allow them to operate at their own discretion in insecure areas. There are also examples of international staff operating on CTG contracts that allow them to move and live where they please rather than inside one of the UN's fortified compounds (Kabul interviews, December 2011).



# Chapter 3

## ‘How to stay’ in the evolving security risk management agenda

Reflecting the many incentives and imperatives for agencies to remain active and operational within challenging environments, the dominant narrative of security management today is how to ‘stay and deliver’ (Egeland et al., 2011), with the priority no longer seen as avoiding risks so much as managing and mitigating them so that operations can continue or expand. This, it is argued, depends on a conscious departure from centralised and risk-avoiding security policies based on predefined risk thresholds or phases triggering automatic bureaucratic responses such as programme closure, agency withdrawal or restrictions on staff movement. To stay and deliver requires instead a conceptual and practical shift to a more resilient ‘enabling’ posture that ‘depends on organisations and individuals accepting a certain amount of risk – the risk that inevitably remains after all reasonable mitigation measures have been carried out’ (*ibid.*: 2). The more critical the aid programme is to people’s survival and wellbeing, the greater the level of risk that may be accepted. This, it is argued, ‘is a conscious and calculated assessment, intended to prevent both recklessness and risk aversion’.

### 3.1 Guidance versus realities of practice

Reflecting aid actors’ most immediate preoccupations with gaining and maintaining their presence or access in difficult environments, the problems agencies and the wider aid

industry face in these contexts have been posed as practical challenges that ought to be amenable to more or less practical or technical solutions. The quest to remain present in these contexts has thus given rise to a fast-expanding body of practical guidance and advice that is intended to support and improve agencies’ security management on the ground. Systematic risk assessments and security management frameworks are deemed necessary to avoid otherwise subjective and unaccountable decision-making on the part of aid workers, which might be based on biased or distorted views of the possible risks and responses to them. A high-profile review of operational security management commissioned by the Humanitarian Practice Network, for instance, argues that organisations should conduct security risk assessments before starting operations in a new location, with the aim of weighing the level of risk in undertaking a programme against the benefits it brings to the population being helped. Noting that ‘[g]lut feeling is not good enough’, it advises that effective risk management needs to start with ‘an attempt at a disciplined and reasoned assessment’ conducted ‘in a structured and disciplined manner’ (HPN, 2010: 27–28). Agencies are urged to develop and implement comprehensive and clearly structured security management frameworks through which they can determine the threshold of acceptable risks for the organisation and its capacities to manage them and, on the basis of this, develop operational



UN and WFP aircraft, Bor airstrip, South Sudan

security strategies for specific contexts and situations (*ibid.*: 8). Within this framework, risk assessments should include detailed and continuous context and programme analysis, threat and vulnerability assessments and risk analysis. Possible security strategies may encompass a range of risk mitigation and risk avoidance measures.

In terms of what can be observed, however, aspiration as regards recommended security risk management appears to have got increasingly out of step with practice. As discussed further below, most aid agencies have signed up to the ideal of gaining acceptance with communities and key stakeholders, rather than relying on physical protection and deterrence measures, yet few have implemented an active or systematic acceptance approach (Fast et al., 2011a and 2011b) and, in reality, most continue to rely to a greater or lesser extent on the harder forms of security management. Few agencies will argue with risk assessment and risk analysis models that advocate good context analysis, programme analysis, threat analysis and vulnerability analysis (HPN, 2010), but by the same token, very few even try to achieve this in practice. Identifying and branding themselves as ‘humanitarian’, many agencies espouse the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence as essential for their security and integral to their access and operations more generally, and yet the majority are closely and often willingly tied through their operational engagement into the political agendas and associated funding of Western governments. Engaging in activities such as recovery, development and peace-building goes far beyond the core humanitarian objective of saving lives and alleviating suffering in crisis, and is neither politically neutral nor impartial (Van Brabant, 2010). Most agencies endorse the idea of jointly collecting and sharing information and analysis of contextual risks, as reflected, for instance, in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s Early Warning – Early Action process. Yet at field level, there is usually little in the way of effective platforms for information sharing. Even where these exist, agencies apply very different decision-making to the information that they have, as reflected in contrasting approaches to risk between ‘development’ and ‘humanitarian’ actors, with the former often assumed or expected to have a more cautious stance towards programmatic and institutional risks (Metcalf, Martin and Pantuliano, 2011: 6).

Perhaps most importantly, the majority of guidance is premised on the assumption that agencies’ decision-making will be rational and objective and supported by clear and dependable processes and pathways. In reality, however, different actors’ assessments of the risks and their willingness to take them on are always influenced by multiple and often competing or conflicting organisational and personal attributes and priorities and by differing experiences, perceptions and attitudes regarding the risk environment – both relating to the nature of the risks involved and to the likelihood of being exposed to them (Bankoff and Hilhorst, 2009; Pennings and Grossman, 2008). Risks are likely to be viewed and assessed

differently away from the field (Van Brabant, 2010), with individual aid workers’ attitudes to security risks often quite different from the stance of the organisations they work for. In a survey of aid workers’ views on risk and security conducted for the 2011 *Stay and Deliver* study, most respondents reported the view that national and international staff perceive security differently, and that internationals tend to overestimate the risk (Egeland et al., 2011: 41). Key decision-makers may be under pressure from their superiors or donors to either maintain or restrict operations in situations where it is not clear whether the risks are acceptable or not (Metcalf, Martin and Pantuliano, 2011).

Individual calculations of acceptable risk will be strongly influenced by personal circumstances, financial incentives, career or livelihood priorities or altruistic concerns. For some, the real or perceived dangers of aid work provide opportunities for positive or ‘heroic’ narratives of personal identity, with risk exposure providing a vector for self-discovery and self-awareness (Duffield, 2012). For many others, however, the perceived threat environment engenders high levels of anxiety, with negative views of the security context often influenced directly or indirectly by field security training and the constant circulation of risk and security incident reports that emphasise multiple and pervasive risks to personal security and the importance of personal vigilance and risk minimisation. Interviews for this study revealed differing opinions as to how much risk aid workers should be willing to expose themselves to. The background of the individual, their experience, their family circumstances and whether they had worked in high-risk environments previously all play a role in this decision. According to one senior UN officer in South Sudan, ‘it all comes down to individual leadership – their experience and exposure, willingness and commitment to the job. You’ll find a lot of people less experienced, less committed, more thrill-seeking and less risk-seeking. At the end of the day, you need committed people on the field. If a manager is smart, he’ll look for people willing to rough it out’.<sup>9</sup>

Aid workers carry a set of personal expectations regarding levels of comfort and security. In Afghanistan, respondents with the same contractor organisation expressed a range of views. Among some, the level of risk acceptance was seemingly high – sometimes apparently higher than with some Afghan staff – and confidence in finding solutions equally elevated. Respondents from a variety of organisations questioned an attitude of wanting to work in a war zone and ‘be safe’. Their position was that, if an individual accepts a job in a risky environment, then they have to accept some level of risk. According to a former UN official, ‘[m]any NGO staff members feel they have the right to go and do what they want, where they want. Many of them are non-conformist by nature ... Sometimes they also just believe in their cause and some are misfits’.<sup>10</sup> One informant, a Western national responsible

<sup>9</sup> Bor interview, November 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Kabul interview, April 2011.



*Ruins of CARE compound, Kabul, Afghanistan*

for an NGO's security, commented that long-term residents can become complacent: 'It's a bit of a bell curve. The most inexperienced people are the ones who say "God will save me". And then there are the ones who have been here so long that they think they are invincible – myself included. I am on one side of the bell curve. I feel too complacent and confident'. Crucially, individual assessments of risks and their acceptability relative to the importance or 'criticality' of the mission or operation are heavily influenced by the (often poor) quality of knowledge and information about the risk environment. No calculated decision about acceptable risk exposure can ever be made if the individual or agency concerned has little or no understanding or information about the risks that they face in a given situation.

Aid workers will often try to circumvent restrictive security rules and protocols. This may be easier for more experienced and more confident staff, who are able and willing to challenge the bureaucracy. UNMISS civilian staff described several occasions where they had to take difficult decisions that involved bending the rules. For example, while policies coming from New York and Juba might not allow any official contact with rebel militia groups, in the field UN civil affairs officers cannot ignore them: 'Civil affairs have to coordinate between New York, national and local level. If X goes to the field and one of her key interlocutors is a rebel leader, what do you do – you call him a chief. I call it bending the rules; you can't ignore these key figures ... so officially you may have to call him a different name, for the papers' (Felix da Costa and Kalsrud, forthcoming).<sup>11</sup> One UN official described how the former head of a UN agency in South Sudan with decades of humanitarian experience in difficult contexts had an enabling effect, not only for that agency but

<sup>11</sup> Malakal interview, November 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with UN official, Juba, June 2011.

also for other UN agencies and humanitarians.<sup>12</sup> For her, this was 'a perfect example of how individuals can make a difference' – an 'enabler' who was senior and well-respected enough to take decisions – he 'stretched the rules' and 'gave that mindset to all of us' (Felix da Costa and Karlsrud, 2012).<sup>13</sup>

While much decision-making relating to security risks may well be conscious and calculated, it is inevitably subjective and often based on anecdotal information or stories (Van Brabant, 2010). Although many aid organisations are institutionally prepared and incentivised by

reputational and financial interests to take on a greater exposure to security risks to sustain their presence and operations (Van Brabant, 2010), and although many individual aid workers are willing to work in uncertain and high-risk environments, these 'enabling' tendencies are in direct tension with powerful counter-imperatives that encourage risk-aversion. Moreover, the nature and level of threats and security risks that different aid actors face vary considerably according to their specific profile, activities, locations and type of engagement, as does the view of who is actually at risk. With the rapid expansion in international private security and commercial companies offering 'humanitarian' services of various kinds, the terms 'aid agency', 'aid worker' and even 'NGO' are becoming increasingly ambiguous, with various actors using these labels operating in very different ways, and some much more willing and able than others to take on the security risks or mitigating action required to work in a conflict zone.

In reality, responses at field level are more likely to be decided outside of any formal security management framework. Indeed, it is the relatively unfettered nature of real-life security management and practice that, overall, has probably allowed so many aid agencies to operate on such an unprecedented scale in conflict-affected countries like South Sudan and Afghanistan. Relative autonomy may allow for the freedom of action that many agencies and individuals require in order to remain operational in complex and volatile contexts, enabling them to negotiate their own presence and pursue their own programmes as they see fit (Rieff, 2011; Collinson and Elhawary, 2012). Moreover, across varied and complex operating situations, no single or preordained strategy will necessarily prove more successful than another. As found in a recent evaluation and review of humanitarian access strategies in five countries

<sup>13</sup> Interview with UN official, Juba, June 2011.

including Afghanistan and (North and South) Sudan, what works in one situation can be counter-productive in another, even if the challenges appear similar. And while principled and strategic action can assist agency access in many cases, this is not always so; in practice, staying and delivering probably depends more on agencies' and aid workers' subjective, varying and often unaccountable forms of adaptation and response to insecure environments than on any rational and structured frameworks of risk assessment and decision-making.

### 3.2 Implementing the 'security triangle'

Reflecting the essentially subjective, varied and often *ad hoc* nature of agencies' and individuals' responses to security risks, implementation of the so-called 'security triangle' of acceptance, protection and deterrence approaches remains a fragmented affair, replete with contradictions, compromises and inconsistencies in principle, policy and practice between different agencies, individuals, contexts and approaches. This reflects the heterogeneous and loosely governed nature of the aid system (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012).

Supporting the determination to be present, the 'acceptance' approach – enabling access and presence through gaining consent and approval from client populations and other key stakeholders – is viewed by most humanitarian agencies as the essential cornerstone of effective security risk management. The Humanitarian Practice Network's review of operational security management, for instance, stresses that acceptance 'can and should be the foundation of all security strategies' (HPN, 2010: 56), and most NGOs (as well as the ICRC) have adopted acceptance as their principal and preferred security strategy, at least in theory (*ibid.*; Metcalfe, Martin and Pantuliano, 2011; Fast et al., 2011a and 2011b; Van Brabant, 2010; HPN, 2010).

Whether recognition or adoption of the acceptance approach across the sector has really carried over into better security management in practice is unclear. A recent review of agencies' understanding and implementation of acceptance concludes that, whilst most NGOs claim to base their security management strategies on acceptance, few have any explicit policies on how to operationalise this approach. Where these do exist, many fail to systematise or detail what acceptance consists of as a distinctive security management approach, and little has been developed in the way of monitoring mechanisms (Fast et al., 2011b: 1). In short, 'acceptance is neither well-conceptualized nor consistently operationalized by many NGOs', with 'little consensus on what acceptance means, what steps must be taken to gain acceptance, and how an organization can determine whether it is accepted in a given area' (Fast et al., 2011b: 1, 4). Thus, while most organisations have to engage in one way or another with local communities and other stakeholders to gain access and consent for their programmes, the kind of active, systematic and nuanced strategies that are arguably necessary to properly support acceptance remain the exception, with most agencies lacking not only basic policies

and operational guidance but also the requisite financial and human resources (Stoddard and Harmer, 2010). A few of the larger agencies have invested in developing proactive acceptance approaches involving improved context analysis and more active and strategic stakeholder engagement and negotiation, but the majority approach is much more passive and ad hoc. This is often based on an assumption that acceptance from 'the community at large' will result automatically from the agency providing assistance and doing good work for a particular population (*ibid.*), or involves the transfer of risk to partner or subcontracted organisations as an easier alternative to resourcing and supporting more active acceptance-based security management.

What operational guidance there is on acceptance acknowledges that, however well planned and implemented, this approach cannot guarantee security (HPN, 2010: 56). Most agencies also rely on harder protective and deterrence measures to a greater or lesser degree, whether in response to changes in the local or wider security context or – as is often the case for UN agencies, private aid contractors and some NGOs – as their primary or default security management approach, sometimes more or less regardless of the actual security risks faced on the ground (Hansen, 2007: 49). The tensions and contradictions between the aspirations of acceptance and the realities of protection/deterrence measures are obvious: the most recent HPN Good Practice Review notes, for instance, how agencies' acceptance and their ability to convey principles of non-violence and independence may be compromised by using deterrent measures such as driving with armed escorts or hiring armed guards, or by protective measures that weaken direct engagement and relationships with local stakeholders and make it easier for suspicion, resentment or hostility to take root, sometimes feeding local perceptions that aid actors are tied to particular belligerent groups (HPN, 2010: 56).

As regards military assets, most humanitarian agencies have policies on the use of armed protection, often based on generic principles and guidance such as the IASC's 2001 'Guiding and Operating Principles on Civil–Military Relationship & Use of Military Assets', or joint agency guidelines developed at country level, such as the 2008 'Guidelines for the Interaction and Coordination of Humanitarian Actors and Military Actors in Afghanistan' and the 2008 UN 'Civil Military–Coordination Guidelines for Sudan'.<sup>14</sup> For instance, the 2008 Afghanistan guidelines state that military or armed protection for humanitarian agencies or for specific humanitarian activities should only be used in exceptional circumstances in order to meet critical humanitarian needs. However, with most aid funding and activity focused on rehabilitation, reconstruction and state-building or peace-building activities, the majority of organisations that label themselves 'humanitarian' (both NGOs and private contractors) are also engaged in non-emergency assistance, and many willingly work directly with military and

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.unocha.org/what-we-do/coordination-tools/UN-CMCoord/publications>.



*UN vehicles en-route from Khartoum to Juba, Bor, South Sudan*

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civil–military actors, such as the Provincial Reconstruction Teams; most use armed protection and escorts, and often not as a last resort. The guidelines therefore beg important questions around what constitutes a ‘humanitarian agency’ and ‘humanitarian activities’ or, indeed, a ‘military actor’ in a context such as Afghanistan, and how this affects security management practice.

In situations where their own acceptance and other security strategies or logistical capabilities prove insufficient, NGOs have frequently turned to the UN or international military organisations for additional security and other forms of direct support, resorting to the harder or more risk-averse protective and defensive responses and capabilities that characterise the UN’s and other political and military actors’ security management frameworks, such as the emergency evacuation of staff from a particular location. According to a recent study of UN integrated missions and the implications for humanitarian action, the attitudes and access of different agencies to the UN’s security and other logistical support are highly inconsistent, with differing views among non-UN humanitarian actors on the appropriateness of using UN civilian or military assets (Metcalfe, Giffen and Elhawary, 2011: 29) and varying and inconsistent support by different UN actors. There are no established policy frameworks to guide what non-UN agencies (or, indeed, the UN’s own humanitarian agencies) might expect or accept in terms of logistical and other security support from the UN’s various military and civilian actors. The ‘Saving Lives Together’ initiative has supported steps to strengthen collaboration between the UN and NGOs on security management, but progress has been slow (Stoddard and Harmer, 2010; Steets et al., 2012; Metcalfe, Martin and Pantuliano, 2011).

Research for this study in South Sudan found differing opinions about the extent to which the UN is responsible for the safety of expatriate NGO staff. Depending on which region NGOs are operating in, different UN policies appear to apply. For instance, in Abyei, an area of ongoing conflict between the Sudanese government and the SPLA, the UN reportedly assured all NGOs that they could take refuge in the fortified UN compound in the event of major threats. In Lakes State, violence is between local southern Sudanese actors and, on occasion, directed against foreign NGO staff. Unlike UN officials in Abyei, the acting head of UNMISS for Lakes State has repeatedly told NGOs that the UN would not support them in the event of violence against foreign or non-Sudanese staff. As a result, NGOs are unclear about the short- and long-term ramifications of what they consider to be inconsistent UN policy.

Agencies may decide to withdraw from particular situations when insecurity and other risks are seen to outweigh the imperative to stay. Yet few agencies appear to have formulated clear or accountable exit strategies or risk thresholds to support decisions to remain or leave (Metcalfe, Martin and Pantuliano, 2011; Egeland et al., 2011). A Feinstein International Center consultation on humanitarian assistance in Iraq, for instance, found that agencies were split within and among themselves over whether to quit the country as humanitarian needs had progressively declined. The report observes that there are no shared criteria on the issue, with funding and other institutional imperatives further distorting critical decisions: ‘[w]hen it became clear that there was no major food or displacement crisis and only pockets of vulnerability among civilians, the issue was fudged for reasons of institutional survival ... The stark choice was between cooption and irrelevance: for fear of losing

funds and contracts, many agencies found reasons to stay on, regardless of their particular mandate' (Feinstein International Famine Center, 2004). Although many organisations did withdraw, there was 'no discernible pattern among them in their approaches to security' (Hansen, 2007: 48).

Mainstream commentary and guidance have focused on the management and mitigation of the most immediate operational security risks, with far less consideration given to other types of risk (Metcalf, Martin and Pantuliano, 2011). Serious contextual risks might include critical developments such as a return to violent conflict, large-scale displacement or the collapse of markets and the rule of law; programmatic risks might include programme failure or doing harm by resourcing a war economy or empowering warlords; institutional risks, meanwhile, would include potentially substantial reputational and fiduciary liabilities (*ibid.*). The narrow focus on security risk management has meant that comparatively little attention appears to have been paid to how aid actors' security strategies can *themselves* generate other security, contextual, programmatic or institutional hazards and risks (*ibid.*). The picture painted by mainstream operational guidance is that stronger security management frameworks and practices should ensure better access and improved and more effective engagement by

aid agencies; while this assumption no doubt holds true up to a point, overall the realities of seeking and maintaining access and presence in insecure environments are a lot less certain and clear-cut. In practice, maintaining institutional or personal presence depends much less on the tidy formulae of security management frameworks than on the many critical compromises that are made by or result from organisations and individuals trying to resolve the basic tension between accepting risks and remaining safe. Access and presence may have been achieved, but only on certain conditions and frequently at the risk of creating, accepting or ignoring other significant risks and hazards. 'Presence' does not always equate with proximity: many international aid organisations and personnel may be physically or institutionally present, but at the same time essentially remote from their client populations and, indeed, from their own national and local employees. The findings of this study suggest that many of the hazards that affect international aid engagement in insecure or conflict-affected environments stem from the basic conundrum of aid organisations seeking, maintaining or expanding their presence while simultaneously limiting key aspects of their proximity so as to reduce or minimise the exposure of international staff to security risks. What, then, does it really mean for aid actors to stay and deliver in challenging security contexts?

# Chapter 4

## The hazards of ‘staying and delivering’ in challenging environments

The hazards that ensue from the increasing bunkerisation and detachment of senior aid managers from their agencies’ operations, local populations and the general context are multiple, far-reaching and cumulative, and are liable to increase as the degree of remoteness grows (Steets et al., 2012: 44). General awareness of the problems associated with remote management has grown as the practice has proliferated across the sector (see, for instance, Norman, 2012; Abild, 2009; Egeland et al., 2011; Stoddard and Harmer, 2010), yet most agencies treat it as an ad hoc adaptation to adverse security conditions, without properly scrutinising or planning for it as a recognised or established feature of their presence and engagement (Egeland et al., 2011). As a consequence, the various hazards involved, if acknowledged at all, are more likely to be seen in isolation. Some – but by no means all – of these hazards are highlighted below. The intention is not to paint an unwarranted negative picture: aid agencies get much right in environments that are unquestionably challenging and difficult. The purpose of this discussion is to broaden and deepen the risk agenda beyond the immediate preoccupations of operational security risk management. This inevitably entails a focus on the difficulties and dilemmas of engagement, rather than its positive achievements.

### 4.1 Poor contextual knowledge and analysis and weak information base to support programming and decision-making

There is a well-rehearsed and well-recognised critique that aid agencies are weak on contextual understanding and analysis to support their programming in conflict-affected countries and complex humanitarian emergencies. While good situational knowledge and information would be considered a prerequisite for aid programming in any context, it is seen as all the more critical in volatile and risky political and security situations where the complexities of engagement and the consequences of flawed interventions are significantly heightened (see Collinson et al., 2002). Despite the aid sector’s growing expansion and



*UNHCR residential compound, Juba, South Sudan*

investment in these environments and over two decades of rhetoric on the issue, however, good contextual knowledge among agencies remains as scarce as ever.<sup>15</sup>

The reasons for this are often attributed to the ostensibly short-term nature of humanitarian action, organisations’ failure to invest sufficient human and financial resources to support better information-gathering and analysis, the absence of suitable research tools and analytical frameworks and agencies’ failure to incorporate what contextual information and analysis they do have into their planning and programming. All of these obstacles would seem more or less amenable to institutional or technical ‘fixes’ of one kind or another, hence the repeated refrain for aid agencies to do something about them. Yet the findings of this project suggest that the problem is actually more to do with the behaviour and culture of aid actors. The physical and social distancing of many aid personnel from the local human and political context not only creates barriers to security hazards and threats, but also makes it difficult for them to appreciate or understand the people and societies that they are engaged with. Bunkered compounds, restricted and protected movement and short deployments all contribute to

<sup>15</sup> This problem is not confined to the aid industry. In Afghanistan the remoteness of the military from the Afghan communities among which they operate has also been problematic in terms of cultural understanding and lack of language skills, compounded by the constant rotation of troops.

aid actors ‘substituting acquaintance for knowledge, activity for understanding, reporting for analysis, [and] quantity of work for quality’ (Cowper-Coles, 2011: 52).

This creates an immediate and obvious hazard for security management. Without any depth of experience in the countries where they are deployed and lacking the kind of accumulated understanding and knowledge of the social and political environment that might come from a longer and closer connection, many senior and expatriate staff – including security personnel – cannot gain the kind of detailed and comprehensive contextual understanding that, it is argued, is critical for effective security management. As Greg Hansen observed in Iraq, distance and dislocation in the aid community encouraged many international staff, donors and policymakers to treat insecurity as a ‘nebulous, generalized, persistent, and insurmountable challenge, rather than as a series of serious incidents, each of which can be analyzed, placed into (often localized) context, and used as a spur to adaptation’. Hansen suggests that aid actors’ inadequate understanding of the security environment might have become a rationalisation for reduced assertiveness, creativity and engagement, and for an ‘astonishing lack of curiosity about the ... context among some aid staff’ (Hansen, 2007: 53 and 22). As one interviewee for this study put it: ‘You get so many lenses that people use through which people see, or refuse to see. I don’t think it is a conclusive kind of thing. They all have this mental image of what they prefer to see. There are so many cultural stereotypes, and so much fear, fear to go out of their comfort zones’.

In terms of the overall quality and impacts of aid programming, the problem is far wider than just security risk management: there is hardly any aspect of aid activity which is not hampered in one way or another by poor situational knowledge. Without knowing and understanding the context, aid managers are unable to properly plan, monitor and assess the outcomes and impacts of their aid programmes and projects; cannot steer, support or gauge acceptance strategies effectively; cannot assess whether their or their partners’ activities might be doing short- or longer-term harm in particular places or at a wider level; cannot easily judge or will not know if they or their programmes, staff or partners are or might be co-opted or manipulated by belligerents or other political or military power-holders; cannot negotiate effectively with external stakeholders for humanitarian access or for approval of their aid inputs and projects; are less likely to detect or control diversion and corruption in their funding and delivery chains; cannot recruit and deploy national or local staff with sufficient sensitivity to ethnic and other personal or social profiles; cannot properly filter, collate or judge the quality or bias of information or analysis provided by local or national staff or partners; and cannot properly scrutinise the suitability and credentials of partners and other subcontractors. Perhaps most importantly, they are more liable to overlook, misinterpret or misunderstand the security and protection needs of beneficiary populations. One of the most striking aspects of the security risk agenda

and the approaches that it encourages is the extent to which these are focused on the risks for agencies themselves, rather than risks to civilians within the host population. Strategies and mechanisms that might be effective for protecting aid agencies do not necessarily protect civilians in the same context, and the security and access of aid agencies often wins out over the security of civilians.

With many organisations having failed to invest in more systematic approaches to context analysis, a common default position is instead to claim reliance on the supposedly superior situational knowledge of national and local staff. Recent guidance on security management and acceptance states that national staff have a key role to play in contextualising messages, identifying stakeholders and acting as organisational interlocutors (see, for instance, Fast et al., 2011b: 8; HPN, 2010: 58); a recent Acceptance White Paper produced by an inter-NGO project on security management notes that ‘[n]ational staff with the ability to communicate in culturally appropriate ways ... are crucial to success as international staff often lack experience and knowledge of the culture or language of their country of assignment (Fast et al., 2011b: 11, citing Carle and Chkam, 2006: 14). The Humanitarian Practice Network’s updated Good Practice Review on operational security management lists a long and highly demanding set of descriptors for the analytical and other competencies required of agency staff if they are to succeed in implementing an active acceptance approach, including the ability to analyse changing political and security conditions, the ability to map out key actors and establish a wide network with key stakeholders and the ability to systematically use and update tools such as security audits and plans (HPN, 2010: 69). This looks a tall order, particularly for local and national employees who will often have been recruited on the basis of other skills and experience or particular ethnic or other identity criteria.

It also goes to the heart of the deep inequalities within the aid industry between a minority (10% or less) international managerial elite – the overwhelming focus of the huge investment in security over the last couple of decades – and the majority national (and regional) workforce. While usually aware that their local staff will often know more than expatriates, in reality it is still rare for agencies to fully acknowledge or draw upon this indigenous knowledge base in any systematic or strategic way, tending instead to depend on local staff simply to use their local knowledge to facilitate and support particular projects at the local level. In the survey of aid workers’ attitudes to security risk management conducted for the *Stay and Deliver* report, a number of national staff complained that they were not listened to by international colleagues who ‘project themselves as experts’; the report notes that ‘it is easy to see how such international attitudes and obstacles to national staff consultation on security matters could amount to missed opportunities at best and dangerous missteps at worst’ and that the aid organisations interviewed ‘who had demonstrated successful secure access all made strong use of their national





Queuing outside WFP compound, Bentiu, South Sudan

colleagues' (or partners') information and analysis, consulted them as co-equals ... and often had nationals in senior leadership or analytical positions in the security area' (Egeland et al., 2011: 45–46). In Afghanistan, this research found that the views and perspectives of local Afghan NGO workers often differed substantially from their international colleagues, with a focus on the local context and their own lives and priorities rather than on broader organisational objectives.

Often lacking comprehensive situational knowledge and understanding among key staff, and without effective systems or frameworks for providing context analysis, many agencies end up relying on security-related information and 'intelligence' to guide their programmes and operational decision-making. Access to this type of information is highly varied, however, with different organisations and individuals having different positions and capacities as regards what information is collected, shared or accessed, and who with. Variations in organisational policies also affect the type of intelligence that is sought and communicated, and considered actionable. The Afghan NGO Safety Office (ANSO, now part of the International NGO Safety Office (INSO)), for instance, restricts its security-related information and advice to member NGOs, and relies largely on its own analysis; official intelligence organisations often do not report 'credible' threats to the supposed targets. At the same time, intelligence is becoming increasingly privatised as other organisations and for-profit companies disseminate, for a price, highly detailed security reports that have obvious sources in the intelligence community.

This stream of largely disconnected and decontextualised security data and alerts can clutter, obscure and complicate accurate understanding and analysis of complex security

environments. While the level of detail contained in security reports does not necessarily correlate with increased accuracy in prediction, it does serve to reinforce the perception of a constant and active threat, potentially fuelling paranoia or, conversely, desensitising the target audience to real threats. The constant circulation of detailed threat reports risks creating a fear of exposure that can paralyse an operation; while aid agencies do face real access difficulties in many places – if not direct threats to the safety of their employees – *perceptions* of increasing danger are much more widespread. These perceptions are reinforced by generic forms of field security training and the growing influence of security professionals within the aid sector. As one expatriate aid worker in South Sudan put it to this study:

*NGOs are now more risk averse. No doubt about it. Part of it is probably liability, insurance, risk of being sued. Part of it is that a security industry has grown up within the NGO industry. They all have security advisers now, all ex-military and obviously they look at things from a military point of view and they have to justify themselves.*

#### **4.2 Weakened relations and engagement with client populations and external stakeholders and heightened risks of doing harm**

In conflict-affected and chronically insecure countries such as Afghanistan and South Sudan, aid actors have become integral and often powerful players in the political economies of the communities and societies concerned. As argued by Collinson and Elhawary (2012: 4), important aspects of 'humanitarian space' are determined by the interplay of

interests among a variety of political, military, economic and other actors, organisations and institutions, including aid agencies and affected populations. In theory, the larger established international aid agencies have long recognised the importance of understanding and managing their relations with external stakeholders, whether for the purposes of ‘doing no harm’ (Anderson, 1996), to distance themselves from donor governments or other political and military actors (Reiff, 2011), to negotiate access (HPN, 2010; Egeland et al., 2011) or as a key component of acceptance strategies (Fast et al., 2011b). A recent White Paper on acceptance by the USAID-funded ‘Collaborative Learning Approach to NGO Security Management’, for instance, advocates an ‘active’ approach to acceptance that takes account of different degrees of acceptance by different stakeholders, including beneficiary communities, host governments, local government officials, religious authorities, traditional leaders and militant groups (*ibid.*). Yet, in practice, the majority of agencies lack any systematic or reliable approach to understanding or engaging with the interests and agendas of other stakeholders, a problem significantly compounded by the social and physical detachment and weak contextual knowledge of many international workers.

To the extent that they seek to do it at all, the main rationales for agencies purposefully analysing and engaging with other actors often appear limited to the imperatives of achieving or improving access, staff security and local aid delivery. This is in conspicuous contrast to the wider and more outward-looking concerns of the ‘do no harm’ and civilian protection agendas that were much more to the fore a decade ago, and arguably reflects the extent to which international aid actors have become preoccupied with their own security and operational priorities rather than those of client populations (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012: 11). The Acceptance White Paper referred to above, for instance, takes as its starting point a definition of acceptance as ‘cultivating and maintaining consent from beneficiaries, local authorities, belligerents and other stakeholders’ as ‘a means of reducing or removing potential threats in order to access vulnerable populations and undertake programme activities’. The objective of stakeholder analysis is therefore ‘to accurately identify and analyze the motives, attitudes, capabilities and relationships of actors who might influence programmatic success, including security’ and ‘help determine the appropriate parties to engage in dialogue and negotiation in order to enhance staff security’ (Fast et al., 2011b: 8).

This focus on the immediate priorities of access and security risks eclipsing any attempt to properly comprehend or account for the bigger picture in terms of the implications and impacts of agencies’ actions and activities, whether at local or wider levels (Collinson (ed.), 2003: 9; Collinson and Elhawary, 2012). It is all too easy for senior managers to assume that, as long as access is sustained and programmes are continuing, their agency and its activities are ‘accepted’, and that all is well (Fast et al., 2011a). Yet, whilst an aid agency may be valued or ‘accepted’ by certain power-holders, this does not necessarily mean that

all members of the community are happy. No ‘community’ is undifferentiated, and relations at community level are likely to be strained and volatile in situations of insecurity and vulnerability (du Toit et al., 2005; Collinson, 2011) – as is typical in Afghanistan, where patronage and the control of economic and political resources by local and regional elites sustain sharp inequalities at the village level (Pain and Kantor, 2010). Chronic insecurity and vulnerability can generate extreme local grievances, often fed by rumour and innuendo (Collinson (ed.), 2003: 5). In Afghanistan, community consultations carried out for this project and previous consultations by the Feinstein International Center in 2005 and 2006 revealed widespread and entrenched alienation *vis-à-vis* aid actors and the overall development process (Donini, 2006). Vilification of aid actors by politicians and the media and overwhelmingly negative perceptions of NGOs and other agencies at the local level have contributed to a serious credibility crisis for aid actors (*ibid.*).

Since the majority of agencies do not assess or monitor local perceptions of their presence and activities (Fast et al., 2011a: 11), and since their senior managers’ direct presence on the ground is often limited, they may often remain largely unaware of how negatively they are viewed among the majority of their client populations (*ibid.*). In this study, Afghan community respondents described an almost total lack of contact with foreign aid workers. According to one focus group participant in Nangarhar: ‘The foreigners do not have contact with people generally. If they make contact with people, they come to the district administration and then ask the Maliks and elders to go to the district administration and visit the foreigners’. Likewise, a Helmand farmer complained: ‘The foreigners are inside of district house – they are not coming out of the district centre. They meet a few elders there and no one else is allowed to meet them, so those people benefit who are meeting them, not the local people, because they don’t have any contact with local people’ (PTRO, Helmand 2011). Aid agencies’ access to communities was widely seen as predicated on the relationships of their staff and partners with local power-holders, local NGO workers and officials, and was frequently seen as (actively or inadvertently) feeding corruption and inequality by channeling aid resources through local gatekeepers (see also Fishstein and Wilder, 2012; Farrell and Gordon, 2009). Recipients were commonly identified by elders, who created lists of who was ‘deserving’ of help and directed and controlled assistance. Many respondents pointed to elders, *shuras*, district administrators, local commanders or police chiefs diverting or taking a share of aid resources and monopolising aid-related contracts to benefit their own families or other interests (PTRO, Helmand 2011). Some respondents advocated a gradual removal of support altogether (PTRO, Balkh 2011), while others suggested that direct implementation and house-to-house distributions by foreigners would be a better alternative than working through Afghan representatives and gatekeepers (PTRO, Helmand 2011).

The greater the distance and detachment of senior aid personnel and the greater their ignorance of local political and social



*Expatriates shopping, Kabul, Afghanistan*

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realities on the ground, the greater the risk that their agencies or partners will do harm through their engagement and relationships with external stakeholders. A recent global review of humanitarian access strategies conducted for ECHO reports how agency staff ‘run the risk of developing “tunnel vision” by focusing on project implementation and losing sight of the bigger picture’, often ‘with an attitude that the humanitarian imperative trumps all other concerns, so that almost anything seems acceptable as long as lives are being saved’; this, in turn, ‘may lead them to accept compromises for short-term access gains that undermine humanitarian standards and principles in the long-run’. In the case of Somalia, for instance, the report highlights that many aid workers interviewed felt that humanitarian agencies had accepted too many compromises in order to keep operating in the country, and that agencies have often used lengthy and largely unmonitored chains of contracting and subcontracting and effectively tolerated and supported a situation in which aid diversion and humanitarian assistance have become important pillars of the war economy, benefiting armed groups, so-called gatekeepers, security firms and kidnappers (see also Hammond and Vaughan-Lee, 2012). Reliable monitoring, the report notes, has been difficult if not impossible, with international managerial staff generally unable to visit project sites and local monitors subject to intense pressure, with several killed (Steets et al., 2012).

Where the primary objectives of aid interventions are not simply to deliver material assistance but to purposefully alter or ‘stabilise’ the social and political order in the interests of peace or statebuilding, the potential liabilities associated with weak, distorted or biased relationships with external stakeholders are particularly acute. In counter-insurgency contexts such as Helmand, ‘quick impact’ reconstruction and development projects designed by distant military and aid planners have been

founded on arguably simplistic and naive assumptions about the relationship between short-term development initiatives, local perceptions and associated political and security dynamics (Collinson, Elhawary and Muggah, 2010). Where the political settlement is contested, these so-called ‘hearts and minds’ projects can have the adverse effect of creating instability by legitimising one party over another (Goodhand and Sedra, 2010).

These hazards are compounded by the increasingly common practice among UN and other international agencies of devolving or outsourcing access negotiations and strategies to partners, subcontractors and national or local

staff. Recent reviews of humanitarian negotiations and the implications of UN integrated missions by the Humanitarian Policy Group note that UN humanitarian agencies and many of their NGO partners have worked under an assumed policy of ‘no contact’ with certain non-state armed actors, including the Taliban in Afghanistan and Al-Shabaab in Somalia. UN leadership of humanitarian negotiations with such groups has significantly diminished since 9/11, particularly at senior levels, and few humanitarian agencies pursue structured negotiations, with many avoiding any direct contact by subcontracting to national NGOs (Metcalf, Giffen and Elhawary, 2011; see also Jackson, 2012). In Afghanistan, some UN agencies and NGOs have limited their direct engagement on the ground or have operated a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell policy’, whereby national staff are engaging with local-level Taliban, but without the explicit authorisation or support of their organisation. This lack of direct engagement by senior international staff is seen as limiting humanitarian advocacy and undermining efforts to obtain security guarantees to access populations in need, as well as ethically questionable when responsibility for negotiating access is delegated entirely to the local level. As Jackson argues, the practice of devolved, ad hoc and unmonitored contact and negotiation risks being inconsistent, precarious and potentially dangerous for the local humanitarian workers involved (Jackson, 2012).

### 4.3 Securitised and privatised aid presence and delivery

The securitisation of aid has become a major defining factor in the operating environment of aid agencies, both in the sense of the co-option of aid actors into wider security agendas and through measures connected with the physical security of agency staff (Donini, 2006: 24). Since 9/11, Western-led stabilisation

approaches have exerted a powerful and pervasive influence over aid policies and UN engagement in conflict-affected and other fragile states, including Afghanistan, Sudan and South Sudan. Western governments and multilateral institutions have introduced ‘integrated’, ‘comprehensive’ or ‘whole-of-government’ approaches, while ‘integrated missions’ (or ‘integrated peace operations’) have sought to create greater coherence between the UN’s multiple components within an overarching political–strategic framework that includes development and humanitarian capacities (Eide et al., 2005; Collinson, Elhawary and Muggah, 2010). On the ground, this has led to significantly increased interaction between military and security actors and civilian entities. In Afghanistan and Iraq, military and civilian actors worked together within PRTs to provide relief and reconstruction support, including ‘quick impact’ projects and other ‘hearts and minds’ activities. The hope (or, rather, assumption) has been that these activities would perform a necessary short-term security function, while also enhancing the space for longer-term development.

Donor policies that are purposefully intended to securitise aid delivery have created new opportunities for aid actors to expand into – or ‘stay and deliver’ in – conflict-affected environments, but in order to exploit these opportunities many agencies have either placed themselves under an international security umbrella (see for instance Hansen, 2007; Donini, 2006), or have progressively securitised their own presence in order to manage and mitigate the security risks involved. In short, aid actors have become key participants in militarised international interventions and, as such, have simultaneously militarised themselves so as to remain operational in these contexts. According to Duffield, ‘[w]hen militarisation is coupled with concerns over psychological stability, insurance requirements, including aid agency fears of litigation over lax security procedures, a powerful ... technology for changing behaviour and shaping new forms of subjectivity has come into existence’ (Duffield, 2010: 463). In reference to the proliferation of guarded aid compounds in Sudan in 2010, Duffield observes the irony that, ‘after decades of war and dislocation ... militarised buildings are among the first material or built expressions of “peace”’ (Duffield, 2010: 455–56).

The real or perceived programmatic and institutional hazards of engaging in stabilisation and ‘integrated’ interventions have been recognised and debated by aid agencies for the past decade. They revolve principally around the flawed assumptions and approaches of political and military actors, such as the efficacy of ‘hearts and minds’ activities, and around concerns that stabilisation and UN integration have suborned the priorities and imperatives of human security and humanitarian action to political and military objectives (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012; Metcalfe, Giffen and Elhawary, 2011). In the context of these debates, and specifically as regards concerns around security risks, attention has focused particularly on the assumed heightening of the security risks to humanitarian and other aid workers and assets resulting from

their or other agencies’ association with political and military elements of international interventions. A recent independent study conducted for the UN Integration Steering Group found no clear evidence of a direct link between UN integration arrangements and attacks on humanitarian workers, but found that the majority of security analysts believe that the association with political actors can be an additional risk factor in particular environments, especially high-risk contexts where the UN mission is implementing a political mandate that is opposed or contested by one or more of the conflict parties (Metcalfe, Giffen and Elhawary, 2011: 2). In response, some NGOs have started withdrawing from UN humanitarian coordination fora in Afghanistan, and are threatening to do so in other contexts as well (*ibid.*: 4).

Much less debated is the flip-side of aid securitisation, resulting from aid agencies’ own protective and deterrent security measures (see Stoddard, Harmer and DiDomenico, 2008); indeed, to a large extent this has deliberately been kept out of any open discussion or scrutiny, with agencies finding it much easier to blame external actors for the perceived assault on ‘humanitarian space’ and their ability to operate in these environments. Yet it is clear that, in some situations, the hard security measures employed by aid agencies can heighten their exposure to targeted attacks. As observed in a recent wide-ranging review of humanitarian access strategies, ‘[w]here humanitarian offices resemble military bases, it becomes difficult for both civilians and armed groups to distinguish between civilian aid workers and legitimate military targets’; according to one interviewee in the review: ‘You need an armed convoy because it is insecure. You get attacked because you have armed police with you. So, you will need more armed convoys to protect you from attacks. After a number of attacks, the whole area becomes a no-go zone and you are unable to make the contacts that could guarantee your safety’ (Steets et al., 2012: 44).

In Afghanistan, many NGO respondents made reference to the military mentality that they have seen take hold with an influx of ex-military security advisers into UN agencies and NGOs, and the proliferation of private security providers contracting their services to these agencies. Several were keen to emphasise the ‘new thinking’ that sought risk mitigation officers from outside of the uniformed professions. Within INSO (formerly ANSO), for instance, NGO experience is given greater credence than a security background, and some UN staff suggested that the type of people hired when UNDSS was created and expanded would not be considered for a position today.<sup>16</sup> The fact remains, however, that the aid sector has opened up a fast-expanding market for security advice and training that many from the security services and private security companies have been quick to exploit. AKE, for example, which describes itself as a ‘client-focused risk mitigation company’, has a dedicated page for NGOs on its website advertising a range of services to aid agencies, including the

<sup>16</sup> Interview, Kabul, November 2011.

development of security policies, security training and the brokerage of insurance packages for staff deployed in risky environments. DynCorp International Inc. – listed as twelfth in a recent ranking of US government contractors and partners – describes itself on its main homepage as providing ‘[r]apid response capabilities in emergencies, world-class post-conflict and transition programs, and sustainable solutions for long-term development, with an emphasis on building local capacity’; its subsidiary, DI Development, is described as having the capability ‘to assess, plan and execute the creation of major population support facilities in times of distress and emergency’ (DynCorp International Inc., 2011, at <http://www.dyn-intl.com/development.aspx>).

As Peter Singer, a leading commentator on the private military and security market, has noted, private military and security provision offers aid agencies a means to strengthen their protective or deterrent security capacities as an alternative or addition to state or international police and military cover (Singer, 2006: 69). But whereas established police and military entities are easily identifiable and have clear lines of authority, the private security market – including the sub-market in NGO security contracting – remains all but entirely unregulated and includes multiple and often shadowy international and local firms whose activities are subject to little or no screening, sanction or control (*ibid.*). Likewise, the steps taken across the sector to guide and regulate engagement with military actors have not been matched with comparable guidelines or regulations relating to aid agencies’ use of private security and military firms. The extent of contracting between humanitarian actors and these firms is much greater than is generally recognised, and aid agencies are reluctant to openly acknowledge it in their own practice. The private military market, Singer observes, is to a large extent hidden: most contracting is ad hoc and unaccountable, and there are no agreed guidelines on how aid agencies should relate to these firms (Singer, 2006, also citing Van Brabant, 2004; see also Stoddard, Harmer and DiDomenico, 2008). Singer’s research identified only three humanitarian agencies that had formal documents on how their employees should relate to private military firms and their staff, and one senior humanitarian expert interviewed only knew of one organisation that had detailed oversight guidance for its staff, including rules of engagement and procedures for handling weapons (Singer, 2006: 70).

In the interest of legitimising their businesses, many of the larger firms are keen to advertise their ties to aid agencies, while NGOs are more inclined to hide or downplay their relationships with these companies for fear of tarnishing their public image (Engler, 2010). Singer reports that the sensitivity of the issue meant that, in the course of his research, most interviewees from the humanitarian sector chose to stay anonymous (Singer, 2006: 70). Although difficult to uncover, Singer identified more than 40 different contracts between humanitarian actors and private military firms for services

including armed guarding and escort and security logistics support. While much of the market is dominated by the bigger international players, such as ArmorGroup and DynCorp, agencies also regularly turn to smaller and/or local security providers, about which they often know very little. Inevitably, given the contexts concerned, there is the risk that local and some international military and security firms will be connected directly or indirectly with criminal, political or armed actors, including militias and other armed elements, warlords, protection rackets, kidnapping networks or drug cartels, but most NGOs lack the capacity or systems to screen the firms they hire. Singer reports that the only screening mechanism he found was ‘word of mouth’ (*ibid.*: 75).

The associated hazards are obvious. Most agencies would be aware of the reputational risks involved; indeed, the continuing secrecy that surrounds the issue represents an attempt to reduce or mitigate these risks. More immediately, the risks of aid agencies inadvertently empowering criminal or armed groups or fuelling war economies are significant, and all the greater for the lack of oversight or screening involved and the secrecy that surrounds this area of contracting. At a broader level, there is an ethical hazard involved, with aid agencies playing a role in the privatisation of security in contexts where the civilian population is as much or more at risk from violence and insecurity. As Singer argues:

*The privatisation of security risks is reinforcing internal divisions in weak states between those who enjoy security and those who do not. When security is a profit-driven exercise – a commodity to be bought and sold – the wealthy are inherently favoured ... That this should take place in the humanitarian sector is not a happy development and certainly not one that fits well with humanitarian ideals. Determining who enjoys protection and who does not is a political act; when they hire PMFs, humanitarian actors are taking upon themselves decisions that were once the prerogative of the state ... Not only are the worst threats deflected from privately protected areas, but those portions of society come to rely on declining, unstable or non-existent public means (Singer, 2006: 77, citing Huggins and MacTurk, 2000; see also Engler, 2010).*

The contracting of private military and security companies can be seen as part of a wider tendency among aid agencies – particularly UN agencies – to contract out operational activities to commercial providers in response to insecurity and as a means of circumventing internal security, human resources and insurance conditions and restrictions. A recent review of humanitarian access strategies notes that the use of private contractors to transport supplies through insecure areas is a common practice that is clearly justified in terms of humanitarian access and aid efficiency, but also suggests that agencies’ reliance on private contractors has become excessive in some countries, with many UN agencies in



UN cargo flight, Bor, South Sudan

particular reducing their recruitment of national staff and using private contractors instead. The review research team report that one field office it visited was entirely staffed by employees of a private firm (Steets et al., 2012: 46).

#### 4.4 Hierarchies of protection and risk transfer with remote management

Under so-called 'remote control' arrangements, key decision-making is retained by international managers who are relocated in a safe and usually distant location, while national and/or local staff and subcontracted organisations remain in situ to deliver assistance and implement operations on the ground, usually with little in the way of direct monitoring or support and often in conditions of considerable insecurity and volatility. Less extreme 'remote management' arrangements involve a partial or temporary delegation of some decision-making and other managerial responsibilities to national staff with some support and oversight from (physically removed) international staff. 'Remote support' and 'remote partnership' entail more conscious and planned strategies intended to transfer decision-making and authority to national staff or local organisations (see Hansen, 2007; Hansen, 2008; Abild, 2009).

Whether intentionally or not, these different forms of arm's-length aid management all involve the effective transfer of security risks and associated liabilities from international staff to national and local staff or subcontracted and partner organisations and their personnel. While this is increasingly acknowledged by the more established international agencies, few have reportedly taken any steps to plan for when and what forms of outsourcing, remote management or risk transfer practices are appropriate or justified for different situations

and contexts (Stoddard, Harmer and Renouf, 2010; Egeland et al., 2011), and despite growing awareness of the significant ethical issues that these practices raise there is as yet little discussion and no common framework to support decision-making that can properly accommodate proper attention to the moral dilemmas involved (Van Brabant, 2010). As acknowledged by the *Stay and Deliver* report, '[d]espite its commonplace and often protracted usage ... very few agencies have systematically or strategically planned for when, whether, and how to employ this practice as an effective programmatic adaptation, as opposed to an ad hoc response' (Egeland et al., 2011, citing Stoddard et al., 2010). The report notes the findings of a high-profile 2006 study of trends in providing aid that identified only one example of a humanitarian agency that had any written guidelines for situations of remote management (*ibid.*, citing Stoddard et al., 2006).

The authors of the *Stay and Deliver* report suggest that the unequal exposure of international and national/local personnel to security risks may not necessarily be indicative of neglect or unethical approaches by international agencies, but it may well result from contextual ignorance and false assumptions on the part of their (often distant or 'bunkered') senior managers. They may wrongly assume, for instance, that national staff will be at lower risk of attack because of their knowledge of the local context and lower visibility. These assumptions entirely overlook the specific security and other hazards that national and local workers may face owing to their particular ethnic, religious or other identity or affiliations or resulting from their position as agency representatives and gatekeepers in contexts where aid inputs represent an important and often contested component of the local political economy (Egeland et al., 2011: 40; Abild, 2009;

Hammond and Vaughan-Lee, 2012). The assumption that local aid workers are well-placed to assess what are ‘acceptable’ risks and respond appropriately ignores the potential for their judgements concerning personal risk to be influenced by financial or other competing priorities and incentives that encourage risk-taking. It may also assume too much as regards their knowledge or understanding of local security conditions which, in volatile and uncertain environments, will often be flawed or incomplete.

At a sector- or system-wide level, a charge of unethical neglect towards national and local employees and contractors across the aid sector may not seem entirely unwarranted. Despite the fact that national and local personnel represent over 90% of aid workers in the field and consistently suffer far higher rates of security incidents and fatalities compared to internationals, agencies’ staffing policies and guidelines rarely consider the distinct threats faced by their national staff (Fast et al., 2011b: 12, citing Rowley, Burns and Burnham, 2010: 4). Indeed, while their overall risk exposure is substantially higher, national and local staff usually have less access to security training and protective or other security measures or to the security-related information and briefings that are provided for international personnel, and they are usually excluded from the additional support arrangements that are assumed necessary for international staff, such as hazard pay, R&R leave and counselling (Van Brabant, 2010; Egeland et al., 2011, citing Stoddard, Harmer and Haver, 2006). Aid workers employed by local partner NGOs or other subcontracted entities are likely to receive even lower levels of security support through their organisations. Despite the growing practice of subcontracting or outsourcing the implementation of their aid operations, the role and responsibilities of international agencies as regards the security of their local operational partners or local contractors has hardly been addressed (Van Brabant, 2010; Egeland et al., 2011: 44). Research for the *Stay and Deliver* report suggests, overall, that international humanitarian organisations have ‘significant room for improvement in tackling the inequities between international and national aid workers in terms of providing adequate security resources, support, and capacities’, with the majority of national aid workers surveyed feeling that they were more exposed and under a greater burden of risk than international staff (Egeland et al., 2011: 3). The tendency to regard remote management as a capacity-building exercise for national staff, many of whom have years of experience of working for aid agencies and considerable expertise in the management and technology of aid programming, only reinforces the unequal relationship between national and international aid workers.

Whilst the stay and deliver agenda is concerned with gaining or maintaining agency access to insecure contexts, the means by which many aid organisations achieve this rests on security arrangements that effectively exclude the vast majority of their more exposed front-line implementers from access to the protected and exclusive aid ‘archipelago’ enjoyed by

their more senior international personnel. Indeed, some of the most crucial aid implementers – including many involved directly in the logistics side of aid delivery – are not recognised as ‘aid workers’ as such by the sector’s international elite. In many complex emergencies, including South Sudan, air transport and cross-country trucking form the backbone of humanitarian operations. Without this support, the aid programme would collapse, and yet the risks facing pilots and trucking operators are all but entirely neglected; in South Sudan, for instance, this study found that helicopter pilots working for UNMIS were almost entirely dismissive of UN security briefings, during which UN staff read prepared statements which referred only to numeric classifications of risk.<sup>17</sup> As one pilot put it: ‘We can refuse to fly if the helicopter is not okay. But we cannot say we cannot fly because the SPLA will kill someone’. When asked if helicopter crews received background information about security conditions before a flight, he replied: ‘We just get a task. We get all the clearances. And we go’. Sources within the UN reported to the study that UN flight crews were routinely detained and harassed by the SPLA, and several helicopters have been shot at.<sup>18</sup>

With the physical and social detachment between international staff and national field staff and the stark differences in their relative exposure to risk and access to protection and other benefits comes a high potential for mutual resentment and mistrust. As Van Brabant observes, ‘[a]nybody who spends some time in the Western-dominated aid world cannot but be astonished by the pervasive levels of distrust: distrust between people within agencies, between agencies, between agencies and their alleged “beneficiaries”’. Abild reports how, in the case of Somalia:

*Both the Somalis and expatriates that I met described the cynicism born from the Nairobi-Field divide in very clear terms. In the ‘Nairobi Village’ – the third biggest UN centre in the world after New York and Geneva – international staff work and live relatively comfortable lives, many of them making considerable amounts of money in the process. By contrast, in Somalia, local staff, who actually implement the programs, and who are subject to pressure from many sides and live in very difficult conditions, are paid far less. It thus comes as no surprise that these stark differences in existence reality foster cynicism and mistrust (Abild, 2010: 12).*

In Juba, representatives of major international donors and senior members of the government live in large compounds serviced by two-lane hard-top roads, while outside local Sudanese are crowded into mud-walled huts and garbage fires burn along rutted roads. Observing the defended aid compounds of South Sudan, Duffield notes how these are:

<sup>17</sup> The United Nations employs a standard numeric identification for levels of risk. For example, regions classified as ‘Category 3’ are described as ‘Transitional’, while a ‘Category 4’ denotes a high risk.

<sup>18</sup> South Sudan interviews, April 2011.

*exclusionary and disempowering in their workings and appearance ... Even within the ... aid archipelago ... aid workers themselves are distinguished according to their relative mobility or stasis. While those on international contracts are able to move and circulate, local aid workers, like beneficiaries are ... immobile onlookers* (Duffield, 2010: 455–56).

Hansen reports how, in Iraq, working relationships became increasingly strained as agencies shifted to low-profile and remote modes of operating, with high levels of distrust between Iraqi and international staff based in remote offices, and communal tensions affecting relations among national and local staff (Hansen, 2007). These internal divisions are compounded by the real and perceived physical, social and psychological distance between many international staff and their national and local counterparts, often reflected in the conspicuously contrasting lifestyles, values and behaviour of international aid personnel and sometimes arrogant or derogatory attitudes towards national staff and populations – attitudes that can easily take root where foreign aid workers have little or no contact with local people. Donini notes how, in Afghanistan, the top-down and sometimes arrogant externality of the aid enterprise has led to a dominant–dominated humanitarian dialectic and a lack of appreciation for the coping mechanisms of local communities (Donini, 2006: 14). Respondents for this study in Afghanistan described the aid and development system as increasingly populated by individuals with a technocratic worldview who have seemingly little interest in the country or its people.<sup>19</sup> In this context a posting can be viewed as a career step, and the task seen as a compartmentalised technical problem isolated from other issues. Several international respondents reflected negatively on the presence of pure careerists who showed no ‘real’ interest in what they were doing. Even for those who do take an active interest in outcomes, efforts are often hampered by short rotations, which encourage a more detached approach.

#### **4.5 Weakened control of aid delivery chains and distorted aid programming and coverage**

Threat perceptions, risk mitigation strategies and an expansion in the subcontracting of aid implementation have effectively driven a retreat of donors and lead UN agencies and many international NGOs from the point of aid delivery, and increased reliance on subcontracting and proxy monitoring and reporting in lengthy aid delivery chains (see for example, ICAI, 2012: 7). At the same time, predefined ‘problems’ and standard ‘solutions’ that are largely disconnected from the context encourage ideologically and politically driven assumptions in place of grounded evidence or consultation with client populations in the planning and assessment of aid programmes. Eide is particularly critical of the US search for ‘simplistic solutions to complex problems’ based more on ‘wishful thinking’ than local realities (Eide, 2012:

<sup>19</sup> NGO interview, Kabul, October 2011.

229–30). In the resulting gap between intent and outcome, the real results and impacts of project interventions often disappear from view and oversight. In Afghanistan, Donini reports ‘yawning’ information and communication gaps, with agencies seemingly ‘unable to explain in a credible manner what they are achieving with the funds entrusted to them by the international community’ (Donini, 2006: 12). The review of humanitarian access strategies complains similarly of the loss of control and oversight, risks of aid diversion and poor programme quality that can result from remote management (Steets et al., 2012: 57).

In any aid and development environment containing competition for funding, the system conditions organisations to maximise their competitiveness in relation to others in order to remain operational and maintain a presence, and expectations about performance potentially push implementers to what in reality becomes external programme control from funders. For organisations lacking core funding and working on a project basis, donor decisions and preferences are critical in terms of overall staffing and operational capacity; as agencies seek to expand their presence and operations in these programmes, they inevitably become part of wider donor-led political projects (Barakat, Deely and Zyck, 2010: 313). Organisations that view or portray themselves as neutral or apolitical may have to choose between cancelling a project, conforming to demands made by major donors or presenting their funding proposals and reports in such a way as to maximise the chance of gaining funds.

Under these conditions, most agencies will seek to protect their bottom line, and just as local communities and gatekeepers can adjust their narratives to become ‘appropriate clients’ (Mosse, 2005), so aid organisations consciously construct an image of being good performers and appropriate implementers in order to secure funding. In its recent review of DFID funding in Afghanistan, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) found that ‘organisations in the delivery chain have a vested interest in reporting success’ (ICAI, 2012: 14). As one respondent observed, ‘the more facts are spun the less they will be respected ... But a movie that does not make money does not get a sequel’.<sup>20</sup> There is thus a structural incentive to create and manage a certain image in relation to implementation and outcome, and the greater the separation between the point of intent and the point of implementation, the greater the risk of distortion. Controlling the narrative becomes important, and this is not only about what message or information is projected but also about what information is *not* shared. The control of self-perceived negative information at different levels within agencies can constitute risk mitigation in terms of how reliable the organisation is seen to be by donors as a performer, thus reducing potential programmatic risk. As long as this is accepted or not seriously questioned by donors, the logic of competition drives a need to reduce any potentially negative messages: a perception of success can be maintained regardless of actual

<sup>20</sup> Interview, Kabul, May 2011.





UNOCA gate, Kabul, Afghanistan

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bridge this gap in a number of ways, such as ensuring a presence at distribution points, signing public agreements with communities or arranging alternative sites where communities and expatriates can interact directly; some are looking at technical solutions using satellites, mobile phones and GPS tracking. But with operational aid activities increasingly subcontracted or outsourced, the level of responsibility and accountability for outcomes becomes increasingly unclear; as put by a contractor interviewed for this study, as soon as a task has been subcontracted, the outcome is no longer their responsibility.<sup>21</sup> If a contractor or implementing partner does not have any responsibility in relation to the overall objective or the outcomes of their particular project, implementation will most likely come to reflect this. By withdrawing from the point of implementation, liability for negative outcomes can be avoided by claiming ignorance: reference to the security risks and obstacles involved in monitoring outcomes provides an alibi for not knowing; meanwhile, any vested interests in the status quo may seek to exaggerate the scale of the danger.



UNHCR compound, Yei, South Sudan

© Duffield

Distortions in the priorities, coverage and modalities of aid resulting from donors' political objectives within stabilisation and state-building interventions are well-recognised and often clear to see. For example, Pain's analysis of donor funding to Afghanistan reports that:

*of the top 10 bilateral donors, who from 2002–2009 have provide nearly 75% of aid, eight of them also have a military presence through ISAF and OEF and aid linked to military objectives that does not meet the criteria of ODA and nor is it systematically or reliably reported ... There is ... indicative evidence of selectivity in terms of how funding is geographically allocated between provinces, which is further confounded by differential levels of 'development' spending by military actors. Waldman (2008: 12) drew attention to the disparities in PRT (Provincial reconstruction team) spending with more insecure provinces (Uruzgan and Kandahar) receiving \$150 per person and less insecure receiving substantially less (\$30 per person in Faryab, Daikundi and Takhar). On the basis of an analysis of Ministry of Finance data, he also suggested that there are higher levels of spending by government and donors in more insecure provinces – Helmand receiving more than \$400 per capita and substantially less in what have been seen as secure provinces – about \$50 in Sari-Pul, Ghor and Wardak ... There is certainly a perception by people in the north that there is a greater level of donor funding to the south, where there is greater insecurity and more opium, and this was given as a contributory reason to return to opium poppy cultivation (Pain, 2012: 11; see also Poole, 2011).*

programmatic impact and effect. This, in turn, undermines the capacity for lesson-learning and the adjustment of programmes and projects that might have had negative outcomes. In their review of DFID Afghanistan, for example, ICAI found that no comprehensive assessment of 'aid leakage' had been done and that, out of the 25% of interviewed organisations even willing to provide an assessment, all of them assessed fraud and corruption as 'non-existent or trivial' in their own programmes (ICAI, 2012, 14–15).

Strengthening accountability for outcomes and impacts requires a closer link between the point of intent and the point of implementation, detailed understanding of the local context and transparent, evidence-based monitoring and assessment – all of which are difficult to achieve remotely. Numerous contractors, agencies and organisations consciously try to

By following the money, at least to areas that they can access, many aid agencies' operational programmes have

<sup>21</sup> Contractor interview, 23 November 2011.

been similarly distorted, driven by their donors' objectives rather than assessed needs on the ground. This compounds other distortions in the overall coverage or prioritisation of aid across different areas or groups resulting from security conditions and more basic logistical or arbitrary factors, such as geographical distance, the location of airstrips and other transport hubs, the condition of transport links to particular locations or simply historical accident in terms of where particular organisations and their partners happen to be established. The greater the effective detachment of donors and aid managers from the field, and the more limited and restricted agencies' presence is on the ground, the higher the risk that these distortions will go unrecognised or ignored, and that substantial humanitarian and other assistance and protection needs in parts of the host population will not be met. There is little accountability for not meeting needs that have not been identified in the first place.

Agencies' actions and responses are liable to be further distorted by purposeful adaptations or curtailments in programme and project focus and objectives to suit the imperatives of security risk management. The very low-profile programming seen in contexts such as Somalia and Iraq represents an extreme example, but they are almost certainly just one end of a spectrum of self-censorship that results in certain forms or sectors of programming being favoured over others. Food, for

instance, is a lot more difficult to deliver through low-profile approaches than vaccines. Hansen reports how, in Iraq, an experienced MSF staffer acknowledged the tensions between security and the humanitarian imperative, observing that, while large-scale high-profile humanitarian programmes were untenable, it was still possible to perform 'individual acts of medical humanitarianism' such as emergency surgery and support to medics through remote operations (Hansen, 2007: 50). Here, he reports, the humanitarian presence diminished in scale, but also became 'hidden' to the extent that it was more or less invisible; aid workers used the terms 'covert', 'surreptitious' and 'furtive' to describe humanitarian agencies' low-profile operations. This, Hansen argues, provided greater safety for humanitarian workers, but at a cost to acceptance by local populations (*ibid.*: 52).

The hazards of self-restriction or self-censorship in the interests of minimising security risks are more obvious as regards public advocacy. The recent review of humanitarian access strategies reports that most agencies have reduced their public advocacy to a minimum, seeing this as necessary so as not to jeopardise their operations on the ground. Where agencies prioritise access and security for material relief over the protection needs of civilian populations, and thus remain silent in the face of violence or human rights abuse, ostensibly benign judgments around programme 'criticality' become deeply problematic.

# Chapter 5

## Conclusion

Maintaining an aid presence in challenging security environments is full of contradictions and ambiguities. While rates of violence against aid workers have increased over the past decade, the empirical evidence is unclear as to how, and in what way, aid work has actually become more dangerous, with the higher numbers of reported incidents also reflecting greater numbers of aid personnel overall and probably increased rates of reporting. Areas of real danger are not necessarily where defensive and deterrent security thinking and risk management measures are most pervasive. Nevertheless, there is a widespread perception among international aid agencies that working conditions in these and other situations of conflict and insecurity are becoming more dangerous, especially in relation to humanitarian or emergency situations.

Despite the real or perceived increase in the dangers involved, there has been an unprecedented expansion into these contexts at every level, in terms of geographical reach, funding availability, agencies involved and the range and complexity of their responsibilities. This has been driven by a new and unprecedented form of international political and military patronage of the sector, with the drive towards integrated missions, international stabilisation and the 'war on terror' producing vast and highly politicised and militarised flows of international aid into unstable environments such as Afghanistan. Given the significant amounts of money involved, many agencies – especially those involved in state- and peacebuilding – have been willing to work under this more partisan umbrella, while others have sought to emphasise distance and independence. There has also been an expansion in private and for-profit security companies and consulting organisations working in challenging environments. These new actors have added to the feeling of fragmentation and competition within the aid sector. The turn towards remote management as a risk-transfer strategy among more established agencies has added to this fragmentation, with a proliferation of partnership and subcontracting arrangements involving an increasing reliance on national aid workers and local NGOs. For international NGOs, private contractors and consultants, not to be 'present' in today's challenging



*ISAF vehicles, Kabul, Afghanistan*

environments not only affects financial viability, but can also impact on brand loyalty and claims to an international humanitarian capacity. For UN agencies, the willingness of the UN to stay despite periodic attacks on its staff and premises is a reflection of its new international strategic role.

This institutional expansion has been coterminous with the proliferation of a raft of institutional, managerial and architectural security measures stemming from insurance requirements, employer duty-of-care concerns, standardised security protocols and field-security training. Perceptions and calculations regarding security conditions are increasingly interpolated by security and insurance actors that have vested interests in fostering uncertainty and anxiety; the number of international aid workers who have been in simulated car-jackings, for instance, must far outnumber those who have faced the real thing. While encouraging aid workers to take more responsibility for their actions, much field security training generates a culture of fear and anxiety that promotes conformity to externally imposed rules and requirements. Meanwhile, approaches to stress and trauma emphasise the therapeutic qualities of the fortified aid compound as a necessary refuge from uncertainty and unpredictability. When one mixes in contractual issues, security protocols, insurance requirements and fears of litigation, it is clear that, while aid *organisations* may be willing to stay in challenging environments – and hence accept more risk – the reality is the increasing bunkerisation of anxious international aid managers and a corresponding turn to remote management.

Paradoxically, therefore, while agencies have expanded their presence in conflict zones, this has meant the progressive withdrawal of many core expatriate personnel into fortified aid compounds, secure offices and residential complexes and other forms of self-contained and privately guarded gated communities. Reflecting Western societies that are themselves becoming more risk-averse and security conscious, the fortified aid compound has become one of the signatures of the contemporary aid sector. This, in turn, has contributed to the growing physical and social remoteness of international aid personnel from the societies in which they work. Often enforced by restrictive security protocols, 'bunkerisation' has been accompanied by the proliferation of remote management techniques by many agencies as aid managers attempt to administer or evaluate programmes from a safe distance through national and local field workers, subcontracted intermediaries and new technologies. While organisations are accepting risks to maintain a presence in challenging environments, these are being transferred out and down increasingly long, diverse and fragmented delivery chains to a wide range of national, local, community, regional and private actors.

In many respects, the contradiction between the expectation that international aid workers accept more risks – no matter how residual or well-managed – and the countervailing pressures to limit exposure seems irreconcilable. The constellation of organisational, ethical, personal and financial difficulties involved in working in challenging environments, and the fundamental tension between 'staying' and 'staying safe', suggests that bunkerisation and remote management are an unstoppable trend. Commercial remote sensing and the increasing use of social media, together with advances in imaging and mapping software, potentially solve a lot of problems, even if 'presence' becomes an increasingly virtual reality. In this respect, it is sobering to consider that remote aid and remote war (e.g. drone attacks and human terrain mapping) use similar, if not identical, sensing technology, mapping tools and social algorithms as the growing field of humanitarian remote sensing.

The aid industry has yet to systematically discuss the wider implications and possible consequences of these trends. Finding new and more productive avenues will depend first and foremost on recognising and acknowledging the basic

challenges and contradictions that underlie the contemporary aid presence in countries such as Afghanistan and South Sudan. The tensions between organisational and individual risk acceptance and 'resilience' cannot be resolved simply through recourse to better or smarter operational security management techniques, however well designed and implemented. Indeed, narrowing the focus to supposed technical and managerial fixes risks drawing attention away from the more fundamental or higher-order dilemmas and hazards that define the messy and uncertain realities of being present and engaged in complex and challenging security environments, and therefore risks painting too positive a picture of what is really involved in gaining or maintaining organisational access and operations. Recognising the liabilities associated with 'staying and delivering' depends on agencies adopting a broadened risk agenda that is not confined to the immediate preoccupations of ostensibly manageable *security* risks, but which encompasses attention to the host of interconnected challenges and hazards involved, including hierarchies of protection and risk exposure and cultures of distrust among staff and beneficiaries, unmonitored local programming, asset transfer, securitised agency presence and delivery and weak, unaccountable or harmful relationships with external stakeholders.

When viewed and scrutinised as a lived reality, the contemporary aid enterprise in countries such as Afghanistan and South Sudan is revealed as a highly adaptable but also fragmented social arena in which the actions of individuals and organisations are driven by the interplay of subjective anxieties and mixed motives associated with the various risks and opportunities that these environments present: staying means adapting; adapting means compromising; and what compromises are made depends on the diverse and frequently conflicting interests and perceptions of all the actors involved. In these highly uncertain environments, the most important and urgent challenge for aid managers may not lie in implementing tidy security risk management frameworks, but in reaching a clearer understanding and recognition of the difficult balance between the opportunities and liabilities of adapting in order to stay and deliver. Staying and delivering in challenging environments is inherently risky on all fronts, and these risks cannot be managed or avoided through the progressive retreat of the industry's key decision-makers into the 'protected' and separated arenas of remote management.

# Annex 1

## Strategic hazard assessment framework for aid providers in insecure environments

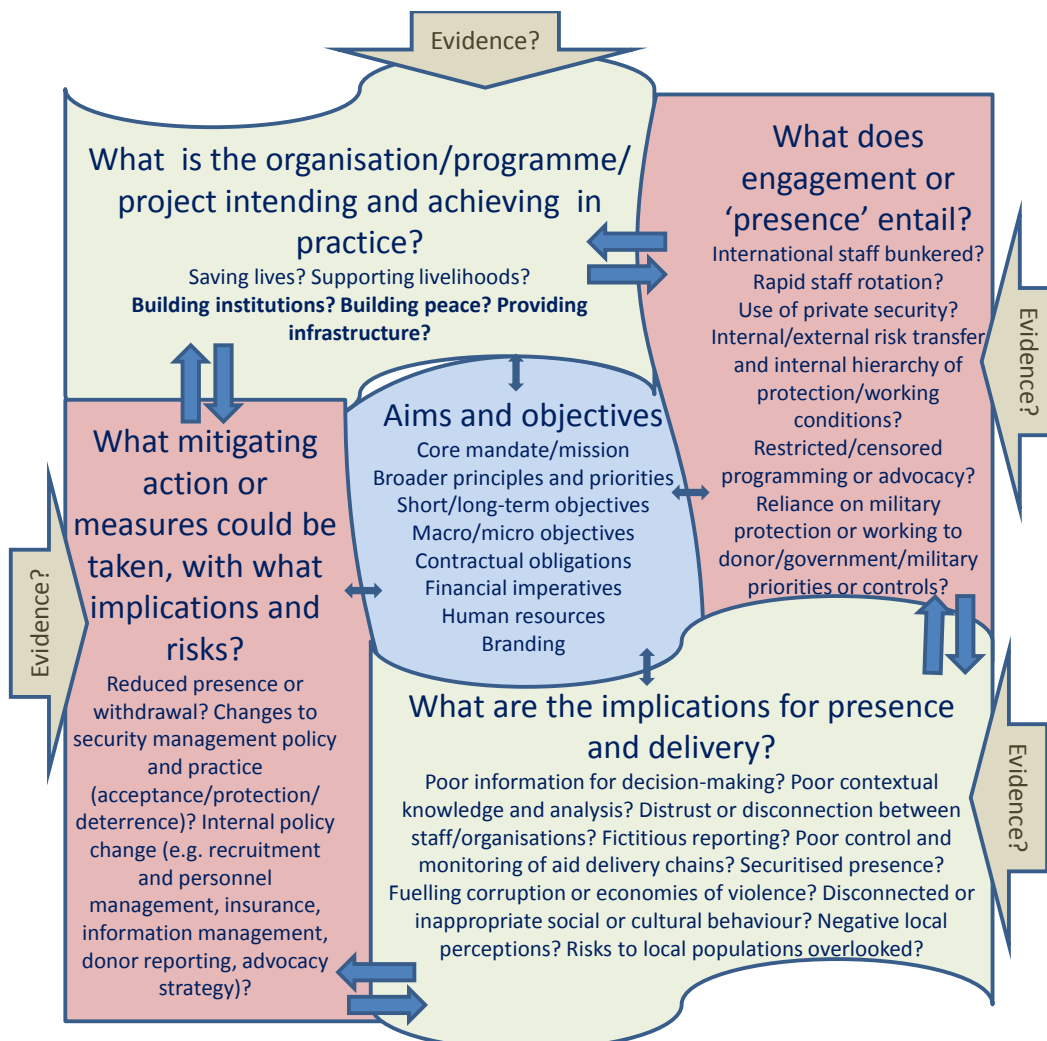
Since the 1990s, aid agencies have significantly expanded the reach and ambitions of their engagement in conflict-affected or chronically insecure contexts. Seeking to sustain their presence and operations in these environments has meant greater exposure to a host of security and other risks and hazards. Although many aid organisations are institutionally prepared and incentivised by humanitarian, reputational or financial interests to take on these risks, and although many individual aid workers are willing to work in uncertain and high-risk conditions, these enabling tendencies are in tension with powerful counter-imperatives that encourage risk-aversion.

This hazard assessment framework is intended to support critical debate and discussion that openly acknowledges the uncertain, difficult and sometimes irresolvable nature of the hazards that organisations or their employees may

face. It is designed to be used as a dynamic and continuing prompt for aid actors to pose critical questions, highlight challenges and seek to identify and examine the dilemmas and trade-offs involved. The key questions and issues that the framework highlights centre on the implications of the remote management of aid delivery, and the associated physical, social and institutional distancing of senior or international aid personnel from the contexts of their agencies' aid inputs and operations and from local populations.

The framework is intended to be applicable and adaptable to a diverse range of decision-making and operational levels and situations. These might include:

- Workshop settings.
- Operational decision-making at project/programme/higher levels.
- Programme and project monitoring and evaluation.



- Development of high-level or context-specific agency strategy and objectives.
- Facilitation of discussions and communication with internal and external audiences.

Whatever the context in which it is used, the quality of reflection, discussion and associated decision-making supported by the framework will depend crucially on the quality and transparency of supporting evidence.

The framework seeks to challenge aid actors to consider critically how their aims and objectives relate to what they and their partners are seeking to achieve on the ground. Whether and how aid actors achieve their aims and objectives is determined by complex interactions of individual and institutional interests, imperatives and influences at different levels, with decision-making often highly reactive and subjective and involving high levels of uncertainty. How organisations or their staff adapt to working in insecure and complex operating environments is often out of step with their assumed or professed standards, principles and key objectives. Institutional pressures and imperatives interact with programming objectives and priorities which are often

unclear. Assessments of risks and hazards vary substantially between individuals and different organisational levels, agencies and contexts, and are affected by subjective cultures of risk perception and risk management practices.

The framework does not assume that decision-making will necessarily be rational, objective or consistent, or that different aid actors are likely to reach similar conclusions or make similar decisions with regard to the key issues that it highlights. By encouraging aid actors to consider what action or measures might be taken to mitigate or respond to particular hazards, the intention is to support critical and informed consideration of the priorities and potential trade-offs involved, with an appreciation that many hazards cannot be easily eliminated. Engaging in challenging security environments means adapting; adapting means compromising; and what compromises are made depends on the diverse interests and perceptions of all the actors involved. The overarching intention of the framework is to help aid managers and their personnel reach an informed understanding and recognition of the difficult balances to be struck between the opportunities and liabilities of adapting in order to 'stay' and 'deliver' in these contexts.

# Annex 2

## Research methodology: extracts from field reports

### 1. South Sudan

Dr Carol Berger was the principal Research Assistant (RA) for the South Sudan component of the research.

#### Main details of the fieldwork

Apart from two months either on return visits to the UK or taking leave, the main South Sudan fieldwork was completed between November 2010 and November 2011. A short return visit was also made in April 2012. The research was largely completed in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, and Rumbeck in Lakes Province. Besides rural areas, time was also spent in other urban areas including Wau, Bor and Bentiu.

#### Overall conditions

The period of fieldwork covered a time of dramatic change in South Sudan. In a January 2011 referendum, South Sudan voted in favour of secession from Sudan and, six months later, on 7 July 2011, the region gained its independence as the Republic of South Sudan. As part of the transition, the UN Mission in Sudan was renamed the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). For the international humanitarian community, the period marked both an increase in IO/NGO presence, but also an effective reduction in agency reach due to worsening security. This insecurity was the result of internecine fighting, militarised groups opposed to the South Sudan government, rising levels of armed assault and robbery by uniformed police and soldiers and, in the early part of 2012, rising border tensions between Sudan and South Sudan. IOs/NGOs became involved in the delivery of food aid for war-affected civilians. Efforts were also initiated to negotiate access to disputed territories where conditions for local populations were deteriorating.

There are few roads in South Sudan and supply of basic goods and services is poor. There are also important seasonal constraints on travel. During the rainy season (April–October), travel throughout South Sudan is extremely difficult. This necessitates pre-planning regarding movement and places of domicile during the affected months.

In terms of logistics, the international community is independent of the society in which it operates. The UN, for example, has created and sustains its own transport system. This includes fixed-wing aircraft, transport and rapid-response helicopters and vehicles for both heavy goods transport and the movement of UN staff. Access to this transport system is controlled and primarily reserved for employees of IOs/NGOs and other agencies recognised by the UN as contributing to the aid effort in South Sudan. Given the reliability of this system, however, government officials and employees of state

ministries and departments are also included, as are, on a discretionary basis, individuals granted permission by senior UN staff to board UN vehicles or aircraft.

#### Methodology

The main research methodology comprised formal and informal interviews supplemented by participant observation among aid agencies and contractors operating in areas and regions considered to pose a security risk. Documents were also collected and a photographic archive built up.

Fieldwork in South Sudan focused on exploring the social relationships between IOs/NGOs, regional or East African aid workers, internationals and the indigenous community. While these social relationships – or the absence of them – are important in themselves, entering into them was an important way of facilitating movement in an otherwise difficult logistical environment.

In general, access to aid agency and private company staff was not a problem. This can be explained by Dr Berger having prior experience in South Sudan, which aid workers considered useful and important, and the research focus on risk and security being highly topical. Interviews were conducted among a wide range of individuals, including internationals in senior policy-level positions; NGO and IO staff from East Africa in both lower- and higher-level positions; nationals working for indigenous and international agencies; and internationals and nationals working for private security companies/consultancy firms.

An important factor in conducting interviews and participant observation was proximity and chance. The sites of contact included aircraft within South Sudan; at airports, while waiting for flights; at transport hubs, while waiting for land transport; at tent compounds and company residences in main centres; and, where pre-planning had been carried out, in offices and residences. In addition to interviews and observation, Participant observation including such things as staying overnight at NGO residences; travelling with de-miners to field sites; accompanying NGO staff on lengthy road journeys to remote field sites; attending the UNMISS weekly security briefings for NGOs in Rumbek, Lakes State; supporting the Carter Centre in a one-day workshop aimed at preparing newly arrived staff members to South Sudan; and facilitating recruitment of female volunteers from a secondary school in Rumbek for the Red Cross.

Due to the high turnover of international staff, a significant part of the research relied on observation and contacts with nationals of East Africa and South Sudan.

### Material collected

During the approximately ten months of fieldwork, more than 100 interviews were conducted, together with numerous informal conversations and opportunities for participatory observation. While the research took place mainly in Juba and Rumbeck, Bentiu, Bor and Wau were also visited.

Donor organisations consulted included USAID, the US Embassy, DFID and the Swiss Embassy. From the UN family, interviews were conducted with UNMISS, WFP, UNDP, UNHCR and UNDSS. IOs/NGOs included Oxfam, Non-Violent Peace Force, IRC, Red Cross, G4, Healing the Healers, Awake South Sudan, Samaritan's Purse, NGO Forum, USIS and the Carter Centre. Church groups included the Catholic Church, Evangelical Church, and Episcopal Church of South Sudan. Besides individual consultants, private contractors interviewed included Civicon, AECOM, PAE and Deloitte. Bulgarian, Ukrainian, US and Canadian pilots contracted to UNMISS were also interviewed. As well as government officials from the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Youth and Sport, representatives from the SPLA, the Boy Scouts movement, Traders' Union and South Sudan Chiefs were also contacted. Finally, a number of interviews with South Sudanese journalists and press officials were completed. In April 2012 two roundtable workshops on the preliminary research findings took place in Juba. One was aimed at IOs/NGOs, while the other was made up of South Sudanese employed by local NGOs.

In addition to interviews and observatory material, more than 100 documents relating to security matters (daily situation reports, incidences of insecurity, staff advisories) were collected.

### Local partner

Over a one-month period, between December 2011 and January 2012, a South Sudanese research team – part of the Juba-based Small and Medium Entrepreneurship Capacity Building Consult, South Sudan (SMECOSS) – was contracted to carry out individual and focus group interviews in Juba, Bor and Wau.

The team carried out interviews on the question of local understandings of the role of the international humanitarian community. The team targeted different interest groups, including youth, labourers, women, the educated and returnees (both from abroad and within East Africa). The interviews aimed at identifying whether people were conscious of the NGO/IO presence and what their feelings about that presence were. Members of SMECOSS attended the Juba workshops.

The complete version of the South Sudan End of Fieldwork Report can be found at <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/global-insecurities/esrc-dfid>.

### Additional South Sudan research

In September 2012, Diana Felix da Costa was contracted for a six-week period – between 1 October and 14 December 2012 – to conduct further research in Juba and in Jonglei State

(in Bor and Boma). This research was also ethnographically-driven and involved international, national and local staff of UNMISS, UNDSS, UN agencies and INGOs. In addition to interviews, the research sites included locations frequented by the aid community, such as compounds, restaurants and bars. In total, over 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with some 16 organisations, in addition to a number of informal discussions and observations. Diana Felix da Costa's field report can be found at <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/global-insecurities/esrc-dfid>.

## 2. Afghanistan

The principal Research Assistant (RA) for the Afghanistan component of the research was Dr Karl Sandstrom.

### Main details of the fieldwork

Interspersed with short periods back in UK or on leave, some nine months of fieldwork were completed between November 2010 and April to December 2011. A short follow-up visit was made in April 2012. The research, which was mainly completed in Kabul, was supplemented by short visits to Mazar-e Sharif, Kandahar, Jalalabad and Herat.

### Overall conditions

Central Kabul is dominated by the fortress-like constructions of foreign military, diplomatic and UN agencies. Movement within Kabul was undertaken on foot or by car or taxi between meetings at aid compounds or restaurants and cafes frequented by foreigners. Regarding flights out of Kabul, 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, Kandahar, Jalalabad and Herat was hosted by NGOs, private contractors or ISAF. Travel outside Kabul was often subject to last-minute cancellations due to the changing security environment. In general, low-profile movement was the chosen approach in all research sites, using non-military vehicles.

Access to aid agencies was sometimes problematic. While international NGOs were relatively open, it was more difficult to get access to their Afghan staff. UN organisations, moreover, sometimes required vetting and clearance from New York. This involved frequent delays. While some donor organisations were approachable, private contractors also insisted on vetting and the approval of USAID, the main funder. Eventually, a working relationship was established with several contractors. In general, gaining access required a good deal of effort and follow-up. A final point concerns the strong patriarchal culture of Afghanistan, which limited interaction with female respondents.

### Methodology

The main research methodology comprised formal and, especially, informal interviews supplemented with participant observation among aid agencies and contractors operating



inside and outside of Kabul. Documents were also collected and a photographic archive compiled. Besides interviews, participant observation within the aid industry in Afghanistan often hinges on gaining access through the 'gatekeepers' that are able to get people on the security lists that accompany most parties and social gatherings in order to restrict the levels of attendance. The research also benefitted from extensive discussions with Afghan researchers at the partner organisation, the Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO).

#### Material collected

During the approximately nine months of fieldwork, more than 90 interviews were conducted, together with numerous informal conversations and opportunities for participatory observation. While most of the research was done in Kabul, supplementary visits were made to Mazar-e Sharif, Kandahar, Jalalabad and Herat. Besides individual diplomats, donor organisations interviewed included GIZ, DFID, USAID, the World Bank and the EU. Interviews with IOs/NGOs involved ICRC, TLO, ANSO, the Halo Trust, SCA, CRS, CARE, DDG, TAF, StC, ACBAR, Afghan Red Crescent, Merlin, Action Aid and DACAAR. Interviews within the UN system included UNODC, UNAMA, IOM, UNDSS, WFP, UNOPS, UNICEF, Habitat, UNHCR and UNOCHA. Besides individual security consultants, private contractors contacted included PKF Auditors, FLAG, AKE, DAI, CADG, Black and Veatch and SIGAR. Regarding the military, besides individual PRT members, staff at ISAF were interviewed. Finally, the insurance companies Hiscox, Miller and AKE were contacted.

During April 2012, with the help of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), the local partner, PTRO, and the UN, three workshops were held in Kabul to pilot the Workshop Framework (see below). These were for international NGOs, national NGOs and UN agencies respectively.

In addition to interview material, a substantial number of security-related documents were collected, including more than 100 embassy security briefs, ANSO weekly security briefs and other miscellaneous items relating to agency operating policies, contractor intelligence and aid security. In addition,

nearly 700 ANSO incident reports were collected, together with substantial material on aid flows. Numerous photographs relating to the security environment in Afghanistan have also been filed.

#### Local partner

In addition to the research carried out by Dr Sandstrom, information was collected on local perceptions of the international aid effort by the Kabul-based Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO). National and local researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 158 respondents across a sample of districts in Herat, Balkh, Kabul, Nangarhar and Helmand provinces. The districts were chosen to give a wide range of aid presence. The interviews, carried out in September 2011, were based on open questions to let the respondents develop their answers independently. Respondents included local state officials, maliks, mullahs, teachers, NGO workers and a range of other categories. The researchers were instructed to inform each respondent that the questions were unrelated to any aid and development organisation and that no benefit or disadvantage would come from participation. The questions themselves were jointly developed by PTRO and Dr Sandstrom as part a capacity-building input.

#### Hazard Assessment Framework

As part of the impact plan, a Hazard Assessment Framework was developed in Afghanistan. The framework is intended to encourage aid and development actors to actively engage with some of the issues emerging from the field research. In piloting this framework, three workshops were held in Kabul in April 2012. Their purpose was to present NGOs with the results emerging from the research, together with an opportunity for a select group of NGOs and UN agencies to provide feedback and input into the framework. A revised version of the Hazard Assessment Framework was provided to ACBAR for training purposes, and later presented at a research stakeholder meeting in London.

The complete version of the Afghanistan End of Fieldwork Report can be found at <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/global-insecurities/esrc-dfid>.



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