

Dedicated to Prof. Paul Willner (DPhil Oxon, DSC Oxon)

For 36 years of inspiration, encouragement, positive reinforcement, and tireless editing.

Thank You Dad!

... and Happy 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday!

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**Mercenaries, missionaries and misfits:  
Competition in the 'aid marketplace' in Afghanistan.  
A case study of UNHCR (2001-2015)**

*Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of  
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*by*

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## Thesis Abstract

**Title:** Mercenaries, missionaries and misfits: Competition in the ‘aid marketplace’ in Afghanistan. A case study of UNHCR (2001-2015)

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Both practitioners and academics have recently begun referring to humanitarian agencies operating within an active ‘aid marketplace’ in which limited funding pits actors against each other in pursuance of their own projects and wider aims. This thesis seeks to explore how the pressures of a competitive environment impact on the motivations and actions of aid actors at an individual and organizational level. Based on the common saying that aid workers are ‘mercenaries, missionaries and misfits’, I construct a typology of pressures (interest-based, altruistic, and bureaucratic), which, it is argued, can be used to explain and understand much of this competitive and collaborative behaviour. A particular focus of the thesis is the impact of these various influences on the process and politics of information transfer and discourse creation regarding the process of needs assessment, monitoring and evaluation. I explore all of these issues through the medium of a case study of UNHCR’s interventions in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2015, and seek to provide a detailed history of the agency’s activities, politics and challenges during this period. In particular I am interested in the motivations driving the agency’s actions; the strategies it has employed to achieve its aims; the calculated narratives that it has crafted to justify its interventions and attract greater support; and the very different ways in which it has approached the needs of different categories of displaced people.

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## List of Acronyms

AAN – Afghanistan Analysts Network  
ACSU – Afghanistan Comprehensive Solutions Unit  
AHF – Afghan Humanitarian Forum  
AIHRC – Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Council  
ANDS – Afghanistan National Development Strategy  
BAFIA – Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs  
BPRM – Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration  
CAP – Consolidated Appeals Process  
CD – Country Director  
CHAP – Common Humanitarian Action Plan  
CNA – Comprehensive Needs Assessment  
DevCo – Development Cooperation  
DoRR – Department of Return and Reintegration  
DHA – Department of Humanitarian Affairs  
DRC – Danish Refugee Council  
ECHO – European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office  
EU – European Union  
ExComm – Executive Committee  
FAFA – Financial and Administrative Framework Agreement  
FAO – Food and Agriculture Organisation  
HAP – Humanitarian Action Plan  
HCT – Humanitarian Country Team  
HDG – Humanitarian Donor Group  
HNO – Humanitarian Needs Overview  
HRA – High Return Area  
HRP – Humanitarian Response Plan  
HQ - Headquarters  
IAD – Institutional Analysis and Development  
ICCT – Inter-Cluster Coordination Team  
ICG – International Crisis Group  
IDMC – Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre  
IDP – Internally Displaced Person  
ILO – International Labour Organisation  
IO – International Organisation  
IOM – International Organisation for Migration  
KIS – Kabul Informal Settlements  
LAS – Land Allocation Scheme  
MDTF – Multi-Donor Trust Fund  
MEC – Monitoring and Evaluation Committee  
MICS – Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey  
MoRR – Ministry of Return and Reintegration  
MRRD – Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development  
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation  
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

NPP – National Priority Programme  
NRC – Norwegian Refugee Council  
NRVA – National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment  
NSP – National Solidarity Programme  
OCHA – Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs  
OED – Oxford English Dictionary  
OIOS – Office for Internal Oversight Services  
PIU – Programme Implementation Unit  
PoR – Proof of Registration  
PRS – Protracted Refugee Situation  
PRSP – Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper  
PRT – Provincial Reconstruction Team  
QIP – Quick Impact Project  
SAFRON – Ministry of States and Frontier Regions  
SGBV – Sexual and Gender Based Violence  
SRP – Strategic Response Plan  
SRSG – Special Representative of the Secretary General  
SSAR – Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees  
UN – United Nations  
UNAMA - United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan  
UNDAF – United Nations Development Assistance Framework  
UNDP- United Nations Development Programme  
UNHABITAT – United Nations Human Settlements Programme  
UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
UNICEF – United Nations International Children’s Fund  
UNOPS - United Nations Office for Project Services  
UPR – Universal Periodic Review  
US – United States  
WFP – World Food Programme

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Stating of Research Questions

The 'aid marketplace' is in some ways an oxymoron. Providing 'aid' entails helping others, while actors in a 'marketplace' help themselves. Aid workers are often perceived as selfless, committed, and principled individuals who make personal sacrifices for those in need; or alternatively are criticised for being aloof and caring more about their own positions and institutional survival than the people that they are there to serve. The divergence of views between seeing the aid world as an altruistic endeavour or as a competitive marketplace; and between aid workers as selfless or selfish, are not necessarily irreconcilable. Rather, like the wider world of international politics and global society of which it is a part, the aid sector is a complex place in which multiple pressures and incentives influence behaviour and outcomes can rarely be explained by reference to a single simplistic set of assumptions or theoretical perspectives.

What is it that aid workers and the aid agencies that employ them are seeking to achieve? What determines whether they compete or collaborate in the aid marketplace? And how do the various pressures and motivations of the environment impact the way that they portray information, specifically in terms of classifying and prioritising humanitarian needs?

These are all broad questions. In one form or another various scholars have attempted to answer them and doubtless many more will continue to address them in the future. They are not merely topics of academic interest, but questions of quite literal life and death importance due to the way that they impact the direction of scarce aid resources to populations in need.

This thesis cannot of course provide a comprehensive response to any of these questions. The most it can hope to do is to shed some light on certain aspects of them. The medium for doing so is a detailed case study of the lively Afghan aid sector, and one actor specifically within it: the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

My focus is on the dynamics of competition within what many have termed the 'aid marketplace'; that field of competition inhabited by actors vying for limited aid resources. It is a social space regulated by shared norms of acceptable behaviour in which actors are influenced by interests, values and more mundane pressures. I am particularly interested in how these pressures impact the seemingly neutral and objective task of needs assessment.

My broad, overarching research question, and its two related sub-questions, are the following:

*What are the pressures that serve to exacerbate or mitigate competition between and within actors in the aid marketplace, how is this competition manifested, and*

*what impact does it have on the process of assessing and communicating humanitarian needs?*

*How do the pressures that serve to exacerbate or mitigate competition impact relations between and within different actors in the aid marketplace?*

*What impact do these pressures have on the process of discourse creation and information transfer between actors, in particular in terms of situational and needs analysis?*

My approach to answering these questions is an explorative and inductive one and my intended audience is anyone with a scholarly interest in the competitive dynamics of the aid world. Rather than focussing on a single, narrow body of theory I adopt a more holistic approach drawing on diverse disciplines.

Every actor in the aid system has its own specific and unique characteristics. Part of what makes UNHCR distinct from other actors is its focus on particular types of people, based on their formal status of having been 'displaced'. While UNHCR's own interests are in some ways intimately connected with the fates of these people, UNHCR staff are also genuinely dedicated to alleviating their suffering, and promoting greater attention to be paid to their needs. To do this UNHCR faces stiff competition from other actors with different conceptions of need and differently defined target populations that they in turn are responsible for championing.

Though more of a sub-text than a hypothesis or a question, to a certain extent my thesis can also be read as an implicit critique of 'status-based' mandates for aid organisations, i.e. organisations that provide assistance to people based on their belonging to a group with a certain status. An important finding of my thesis is that for various interest-, value- and bureaucracy-related reasons organisations with such an orientation are likely to seek to promote the needs of the group for which they have particular responsibility within the aid marketplace (as all organisations promote their own particular narrow goals over wider collective objectives), and that in turn this implies deprioritising the needs of other groups, even when they may be objectively deemed to be more vulnerable, and portraying the needs of their main target groups as exceptional in both nature and magnitude. This then implies that resources are likely to be directed to the populations with the most powerful advocates in the aid marketplace, rather than those who may be most in need.

## 1.2 Overview of the thesis

There is a common saying within the aid world that the industry is peopled by 'mercenaries, missionaries and misfits'. In other words aid workers may be categorized into those who are there to make money, those with a desire to 'save the world', and those who do not 'fit in' back home and are thus seeking are seeking a form of escape. According to Stirrat (2008), who has also used this taxonomy in his anthropological research of aid workers, "The origins of this tripartite characterization of the aid community are unclear but certainly it has a

currency, or at least a resonance, within the industry.” It is, of course, a gross simplification, but it nevertheless holds a kernel of truth. Somewhat modified, I propose that this categorisation may be applied to all actors (both institutional and individual) in the aid world, reflecting the different pressures to which they are subject in the exercise of their functions.

In the following chapter I provide a theoretical framing of the aid marketplace, bringing together literature from various disciplines to provide a holistic overview of the various interests, values and bureaucratic pressures that serve to influence aid agencies and aid workers in the implementation of their tasks. I also outline how these pressures are likely to influence the way that they create action-oriented narratives to depict, and create, social reality, and how this in turn may be used to pressure more powerful actors in the aid world.

Each empirical chapter then seeks to explore a different aspect of my wider research questions. Specifically the questions that I seek to explore in each chapter are the following:

- **Chapter 3.** What are the various pressures that serve to exacerbate or mitigate competition in the Afghan aid marketplace generally?
- **Chapter 4:** How do these pressures impact information transfers from implementers to donors regarding needs assessment and performance?
- **Chapter 5:** What are the motivations and pressures specifically driving the actions of UNHCR in Afghanistan?

- **Chapter 6:** How has UNHCR fared in the aid marketplace in respect of its primary objective in the country of promoting the needs of returning refugees (returnees)? What tactics has it adopted at various junctures and why; and how successful have these been?
- **Chapter 7:** How has UNHCR used its moral and expert authority to promote a specific discourse regarding the needs of returnees and to what extent has this corresponded with other data sources?
- **Chapter 8:** How has UNHCR advocated for the needs of its other ‘populations of concern’ in the aid marketplace and to what extent has this been based on objective need?

In chapters 3 and 4 I aim to provide a contextual overview of the Afghan aid world, the various pressures affecting actors, and the impact that this has particularly on the process of discourse creation. I aim to demonstrate the utility of adopting a holistic approach to studying the motivations of aid actors, how and when these may clash, and the resulting impact for the processes of creation and sharing of information regarding assessments of needs and performance.

In the following chapters I move on to my detailed case study of UNHCR, which forms the bulk of my thesis. There are many factors that make UNHCR a unique organisation. Its distinct history, its internal culture, and its relative size and authority all make it stand out in the humanitarian world. However the aspect which is perhaps the most interesting in terms of its participation in the aid marketplace is its particular status-based mandate. UNHCR is founded on the explicit principle that certain people are more deserving of its support than others,

i.e. those who have been displaced. UNHCR hence sees its role as advocating for these people more generally; indeed this is its primary missionary aim, and one which it has fully internalised. UNHCR cannot however assume that others share its objectives or its tendency to view the world through this status-based prism. This in turn raises two interesting questions: How does UNHCR persuade others to prioritise those issues that it deems important? And how does UNHCR interpret its mandate in light of other people in need? Indeed one of the principal findings of this thesis is that the development, and internalising, of missionary objectives upon this status-based foundation is potentially more important for organisational behaviour in a competitive marketplace than the pragmatic, mercenary-oriented behaviour that would be expected by purely rationalist theories.

In my UNHCR case study I have attempted to balance two somewhat divergent objectives. The first is to recount the history of UNHCR in the country since 2001. Particularly in regard to the development of UNHCR's Solutions Strategy this thesis represents the first time this history has been told in anything approaching a comprehensive manner. The Solutions Strategy represented a potentially important chapter for UNHCR, for Afghanistan, and for displaced people in the region, and the institutional politics leading to its development (and the development of a supporting narrative regarding returnee vulnerability).are hence of scholarly interest. The second objective has been to apply to this case study a coherent theoretical framework regarding the workings of a competitive marketplace. While this theory is directly relevant to much of what UNHCR has done, the complexities of actual experience inevitably extend beyond the confines of theory, however holistic, and touch on many more issues for which the

theoretical connection may be weaker. Where there has been a need to make choices between 'telling the story' and sticking strictly to only the empirics that are directly relevant to my theory I have opted for the former. Nevertheless this does not mean that implications for theory are neglected, only that they are on occasion addressed in earlier or later sections rather than alongside empirical observations.

Thus the three strands of scholarly enquiry which run through this thesis are the two made explicit by my research questions, regarding the motivations driving action in the aid world, and how these impact the creation of strategic discourses surrounding needs, and a more implicit question regarding the impact of status-based mandates within this wider competitive context. Each chapter addresses a different aspect of these three topics in regard to either UNHCR or Afghanistan more generally.

### **1.3. Methodology**

#### **1.3.1 Research Methods**

My approach is predominantly sociological and inductive. The intention is ultimately to explore the world of aid in Afghanistan and to draw a nuanced, complex picture of the dynamics of competition that exist within it, rather than setting out to fully 'prove' or 'reject' a central hypothesis. The findings of my research are predominantly based on a mixture of elite interviews and document analysis, while for certain sections I use a limited amount of data analysis.

In the course of my research I conducted 71 elite semi-structured interviews, involving 82 individuals. These took place predominantly in Kabul, Herat, Geneva and Brussels with a few occurring in other cities such as Oxford, London or Paris. Many were conducted remotely via telephone or Skype. In addition to those individuals directly connected with the Afghan aid marketplace (the vast majority) I interviewed a very small number of people with relevant experience of the wider aid world, and its competitive dynamics, in order to provide a wider contextual understanding. In terms of the breakdown of interviews, the largest number, unsurprisingly, was with both the staff UNHCR and its donors (22 interviews conducted with staff of each). I also conducted 12 interviews with NGO staff, 11 with members of other UN agencies, and 4 with members of the Afghan government. The sampling was not random and I targeted in particular individuals in either decision-making roles (high level managers, policy makers etc) or in positions with external relations functions.

References to all of my interviews are anonymised. Interviewees are identified by organisational affiliation alone, and occasionally, where relevant, with further information about their particular role or location. While text based sources are identified in the text, interview references are given in footnotes. In terms of organisational affiliation the following categories are used: 'UNHCR', 'UN Agency', 'NGO', 'Donor', and 'Government'. Interviewees from IOM are classified under UN Agency, even though the organisation was not formally part of the UN at the time of interviews.

Beyond interviewees, and besides the most high profile public figures (such as the various UNHCR High Representatives), I have chosen not to identify any individuals who feature prominently in the events covered. Occasionally, it would not be difficult, with a little external research, to uncover the identities of some of these individuals (for instance the UNHCR Afghanistan country directors); a situation that is unfortunately unavoidable though I nevertheless do not feel it necessarily warrants their being named specifically in the text.

I also rely heavily on documentary sources to construct my history of UNHCR in Afghanistan, and for my analysis of its discourse on the vulnerability of returnees. For this I relied primarily on the websites Refworld and Factiva, as well as documents that I found for myself online or that were provided to me by interviewees. From Refworld, a website run by UNHCR, I read and analysed 280 documents regarding the agency's Afghan operations. From Factiva, a global media database, I read and analysed 1,669 media reports containing the words 'UNHCR', 'Afghanistan' and 'returnees'. Combined, these provided a rich history of UNHCR's actions, the public pronouncements of its staff, and its approach to promoting the issues that it cares about.

In 2013-14 I designed, managed and wrote-up a survey for Samuel Hall Consulting that involved interviewing almost 900 returnees and IDPs in four provinces of Afghanistan (Samuel Hall 2015). I have made (very limited) use of this data in chapter 8. I am exceptionally grateful to Samuel Hall Consulting for their role in assisting me to carry out my research.

In addition, for specific sections I drew on particular data sources. For my analysis of the local Afghan NGO sector in chapter 3 I used the records of the Ministry of Economy, which were available online. Data on UNHCR appeals figures and numbers of returnees came from UNHCR's global reports and appeals. For information on the relative vulnerability levels of Afghan returnees in chapter 7 I refer to the various editions of the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA), as well as various other external reviews and surveys quoted in the text. In critiquing UNHCR's own use of the NRVA data to support its arguments I use my own analysis from the micro-data of the survey, which I was able to obtain from the Central Statistics Office<sup>1</sup>. I also correlated data on returns (in absolute terms from UNHCR, and relative to the wider population from the NRVA) with area-specific vulnerability indicators (from the 2014 Common Humanitarian Action Plan and the World Bank's Provincial Briefs).

Academic works also provided background and insights into the workings of UNHCR and the Afghan aid marketplace. Of particular note in this regard is the 2013 doctoral thesis of Giulia Scalettaris who wrote a 'bureaography' of UNHCR Afghanistan from her perspective as a donor liaison and reporting officer there. Further references are too numerous to mention here but are quoted appropriately in the text and bibliography.

It is also necessary to mention here a caveat. The interpretative approach I have adopted deals primarily with the subjective perceptions of those involved in the

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<sup>1</sup> Obtaining these data was not easy, and was further complicated by the reluctance of staff there to respond to my emails.

aid marketplace in Afghanistan. It is by no means comprehensive and nor does it necessarily reflect the opinions of all those that work in that sector in the country, let alone more widely in the world. Notably, the important role and influence of individuals in the system, including the nature of inter-personal relations between them, make many trends generalizable only to a limited extent, as each individual is inherently unique and thus as much of a misfit as a rational, predictable actor, whether mercenary or missionary. However, notwithstanding the inherent limitations of any analysis relying on subjective perceptions, and the difficulties of generalisations in an area that is as much a social field as a marketplace, certain trends may nevertheless be identified, and it is these that I have sought to identify within the current work.

### 1.3.2 Reflexivity

All research is, to greater or lesser degrees, impacted upon by the prior assumptions of the researcher, which in turn are closely related to their particular experiences, characteristics and background. There is therefore a constant need to question “what sorts of factors influence the researcher’s construction of knowledge and how these influences are revealed in the planning, conduct and writing up of the research” (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). This is especially true as my method is interpretative “which unavoidably means it relies to a certain degree on the judgment of the researcher.” (Hammerstad 2014)

Having worked in organisations that are both donors of international aid, and recipients of it, I inevitably approach the current research project from the

perspective of an 'insider' to the humanitarian and development environment. Indeed, my own career path is common enough to be a cliché. It is succinctly summarised by the following description by Rajak and Stirrat (2011): "One of the most common career paths is that which takes a person from working as a volunteer in an NGO, through a paid job within an NGO, up through NGO management, into the world of bilateral and multilateral agencies."

In writing this thesis I draw not only on insights from Afghanistan, but also the aid sector more widely, and specifically my own personal experience of it. This includes insights drawn from my time living and working in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sierra Leone; but also participating in the, at least as equally active, aid marketplaces of Brussels and Washington DC. Through those experiences I have observed much to be proud of in the aid industry, but also some aspects with which I am much less comfortable. Largely this revolves around the way that competitive dynamics shape the way that information is presented to outside observers. In this respect I have been as 'guilty' as any actor in this thesis. This includes, for instance, on the one hand, my involvement in what I perceived to be the re-packaging of unsupported opinion as authoritative expertise on behalf of a network of peacebuilding NGOs in Brussels in order to influence the actions of the EU, and, on the other hand, the dramatising and exaggerating of the problem of landmines in the Democratic Republic of Congo in order to secure funding from donors. These experiences have left a deep impression on me. It is doubtful that while in those posts I could have done differently in either case (besides leaving the organisation, which in both cases I eventually did) but the fact remains that while employed I complied with all expectations incumbent upon me, on occasion

voicing concern but falling into line when required. The desire to identify and 'correct' such side-effects of a competitive aid world constitutes at least part of the motivation behind embarking on a doctorate on this topic. Thankfully UNHCR is an actor that I strongly admire, and hence the temptation to criticise is more than tempered by awareness of the good that the organisation does, and the deep 'missionary' motivation of its staff, who are often working in uncomfortable or dangerous positions, to help vulnerable people.

It is nevertheless worth noting also that, as a former aid worker, I have likely internalised many of the values and assumptions of the aid world and remain a strong believer in the potential benefits of aid if used well. This prior understanding on my part has necessarily shaped both the construction of my research questions and the way in which I have conducted my research. For instance, while I seek to assess the impact of incentives within the aid system, I do not call into question the validity of the system itself, as some academics do.

More specifically, and potentially more problematically, having worked in Afghanistan in the position of a donor to UNHCR for a period of almost two and half years, I already had a degree of knowledge of some of the questions that I cover within the thesis before embarking on it and had inevitably formed some opinions regarding UNHCR's role in the country. There is a risk therefore that these prior assumptions may impact on my role as a neutral investigator.

Nevertheless prior knowledge and personal involvement may in some circumstances be an advantage in a research project. Mosse (2001) has written for instance of the insights that may be gained as an "observant participant", fully

immersed within the processes being studied. Johnson (2007) also notes that, in such a situation, “in contrast to the often spurious ‘objective’ or ‘detached’ perspective of traditional ethical approaches, researchers care about the outcome of the study they undertake. In short they want to make a difference”. This is not without risks however. Johnson goes on to state that “this explanation does not necessarily absolve the researcher from attempting to maintain academic integrity in reporting research outcomes as they were rather than as they would like them to be” (Ibid). To counteract this dynamic I have actively sought out as wide a range of perspectives as possible from my interviews and written sources and have attempted to reflect all of these, as best as I am able, within the current thesis.

#### **1.4 Choice of Case Study**

Before providing an outline of the ‘objective’ reasons that make UNHCR and Afghanistan a suitable case study in which to explore my research questions, it would be dishonest not to acknowledge the role that personal experience has played in this choice. As noted, I worked for the EU Delegation to Afghanistan for just under two and a half years and was during that time responsible for managing funding to UNHCR, among (many) other portfolios. This vantage point gave me an opportunity to observe the Afghan aid marketplace from a close perspective, and in particular it enabled me to watch with interest the evolution of UNHCR’s Solutions Strategy, to build up a network of contacts, and to be aware of a large range of viewpoints and inter-institutional dynamics before even beginning my research. Rather than restarting afresh with a completely new case study it

seemed eminently logical to me to rather build on this experience and hence draw on insights gained over the past years. That said, there are, in addition, other reasons beyond my own personal experience that make both Afghanistan and UNHCR interesting subjects in which to examine dynamics related to competition in the aid marketplace. These are covered below.

#### 1.4.1 Afghanistan

Following years of relative neglect from international donors the Afghan 'aid marketplace' exploded in size following the 2001 NATO-led invasion of the country as international donors poured money into the country. As covered in chapter 3, from around \$150 million in 2000, combined humanitarian and development aid increased year upon year to a high of around \$7 billion in 2011, leading inevitably to rapid changes to the aid sector. Eager to 'win hearts and minds' among the population, development was seen by powerful donors as a way of both supporting military aims (leading to then US Secretary of Defence Colin Powell (2001) to notoriously refer to NGOs as "force multipliers"), and making the country more stable and less likely to re-descend into chaos in the future. The events of September 11 2001 had forcefully underlined the dangers of neglecting Afghanistan's development.

Due to its high-profile focus throughout the 2000s Afghanistan has been extensively written about by scholars. Their focus has largely been on the

challenges of insurgency and peace-building<sup>2</sup>; state-building in a country largely lacking a tradition of central government<sup>3</sup>; and the perceived militarisation of aid<sup>4</sup> Relatively less attention has been devoted to studying the interests, values and bureaucratic dynamics of the national and international actors involved in delivering the humanitarian and development services that have been funded by international donors to the Afghan population.

As a relatively weak state, the management of the aid sector has largely been decentralised in Afghanistan. The Afghan government is gradually taking on more and more responsibility for setting priorities, overseeing aid, and controlling funding in the development sector, as part of the 'Kabul process'. But the humanitarian sector remains largely under the governance of international actors, in particular the UN. In such a horizontal management structure the potential for independent action by aid agencies is increased, making it easier to study divergences of objectives between organisations and their promotion of them. Competition in this realm has fully included both international and national actors. As Monsutti (2012) has noted, humanitarian assistance is intrinsically part of Afghan politics.

Additionally, from the point of view of studying assistance specifically to displaced people, there are few countries more prominently placed than Afghanistan. Until January 2015, when they were overtaken by Syrians, Afghans had for decades

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<sup>2</sup> See for example: Atmar and Goodhand 2002; Johnson and Leslie 2004

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Brown 2014; Monsutti 2012; Ghani and Lockhart 2009; Bizhan 2016; Brinkley 2013; Burke 2014; Lockhart 2007

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Barnett and Snyder 2008; Waisova 2008; Waldman 2008; Donini 2010; Howell and Lind 2009; Benelli, Donini, and Niland, 2012.

represented the largest single caseload of refugees globally. Afghanistan has been at war almost continuously for much of the past forty years. Conflict has transmuted during this time from a popular Islamic insurgency against the Soviet-backed communist government (1978 – 1992), to civil war between rival warlords, and latterly the Taliban (1992 – 2001), to the present Taliban insurgency against the current government (2001-present). During the first decade of war over six million Afghans fled the country and sought refuge primarily in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Mass exoduses have since characterised each increase in intensity of conflict, punctuated by sporadic, and prior to 2001 limited, returns processes.

Over the past fifteen years however, following the fall of the Taliban regime, over 4.7 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan from these two countries, making this the largest ever assisted refugee returns process in history (UNHCR, 2012d). Nevertheless a further 2.7 million still remain in Iran and Pakistan, amounting to 96% of all Afghan refugees globally, and of these around half were in fact born in exile (Saito, 2009). Political pressure from both countries for these refugees to return is growing, while Afghanistan's absorption capacity is under stress, and migration flows are increasingly turning in the other direction (Since 2011, for the first time since 2002, the country has a negative migration rate and more Afghans are leaving than returning; Samuel Hall and Maastricht University 2012). Thus, despite Afghanistan's Protracted Refugee Situation (PRS) having been a constant focus of both political and academic attention for a decade and a half, the prospects of 'solving' this continue to recede.

Migration from Afghanistan is not merely a product of political conflict, violence, and natural disasters but is also driven by economic factors and has long been used as a coping strategy during times of hardship for certain groups (Monsutti 2008, 2010a; MacLeod 2008). Cross-border networks therefore constitute an essential component in the livelihood systems of many Afghans (MacLeod 2008; Schmeidl and Maley 2008), as well as an important economic resource for the country as a whole (Monsutti 2010a; Scalettari 2013). Up to two thirds of all Afghans may have been displaced at some point in their lives (Schmeidl and Maley 2008). The nature of long-staying Afghan refugee populations in Pakistan and Iran has evolved over the years. Reasons for not wishing to return may no longer be related to the original reason for flight but rather may be more closely connected to social and economic networks that have been built up over time abroad (Long 2009), or the lack of equivalent economic opportunities in Afghanistan.

In both Iran and Pakistan, originally welcoming attitudes to refugees have begun to harden in recent years. In the absence of significant pull factors to tempt remaining refugees to return both countries have instead resorted to push factors to increase return rates. These have included restricting access to social services for Afghans, limiting the areas in which they are allowed to live or travel, restricting the trades they may practise, increasing levels of harassment and discrimination, levying taxes, launching mass roundups and deportations of unregistered Afghans, and revoking the refugee cards of Afghans arrested for petty offences (Schmeidl and Maley 2008; Schuster and Majidi 2013; Human Rights Watch 2013; Hoodfar 2010). Afghan refugee populations are also used by both countries as a “political football” (Schmeidl and Maley 2008; Human Rights Watch

2013) in regional politics and as a means to exert influence over their weaker neighbour and its western backers.

Meanwhile, within Afghanistan itself, the country has had to face the challenge of re-absorbing millions of returning refugees while at the same time struggling to build state capacity and address some of the most pressing and acute humanitarian and developmental needs anywhere on the planet. As one of the poorest countries in the world there is no lack of objective needs in Afghanistan. And while aid levels have grown rapidly they are nevertheless still finite. How this funding has been used to address these needs, and which needs are deemed to be most pressing, has depended to a large extent on inter-organisational negotiation and bargaining among the most powerful actors in the aid system. Understanding some of the dynamics behind that process is the objective of the current thesis.

#### 1.4.2 UNHCR

UNHCR is not only the world's premier refugee agency, is it also the "UN's foremost humanitarian agency" (Loescher, Betts and Milner 2008). From inauspicious beginnings it has expanded rapidly, demonstrating "an extraordinary capacity for perpetuation and growth" (Loescher 2001), to the extent that in many refugee situations UNHCR's authority is so expansive that it has even come to share features of a state (Slaughter and Crisp 2009). Indeed according to some measures it is in fact larger than many states. Its available funding in 2015 at \$3.7 billion was higher than the entire GDP of 35 individual countries (UNHCR 2015c; World

Bank 2015) and its 'population' (i.e. the global number of refugees) would make it the 73<sup>rd</sup> largest country in the world (and if one takes into account all of UNHCR's 'populations of concern' it would be the 23<sup>rd</sup> largest country in the world; UNHCR 20015c; UN Population Division 2015).

UNHCR has expanded significantly not only in size but also in scope. It has taken on new roles in humanitarian work, IDP protection, environmental displacement and natural disaster, as well as engaging in debates on international migration (Betts 2013). Further, it has taken on these roles of its own volition rather than following requests from states (Ibid).

This pre-eminent position in the aid world has been achieved through a confluence of various factors, including most particularly UNHCR's highly effective ability to operate successfully within the aid marketplace, to attract funding, and to see off competitors. But while achieving such impressive results UNHCR has managed to simultaneously retain and even increase its already high levels of global respect and admiration for its altruistic actions on behalf of some of the world's most vulnerable people. There is therefore a wealth of scholarship regarding these different features of the agency and, though not presented in such terms, its various mercenary, missionary and misfit attributes and identities. UNHCR is thus an ideal subject for study regarding how powerful actors negotiate the aid marketplace.

In terms of UNHCR as a mercenary actor, many academics have noted that competing in the aid marketplace has been not so much a choice as a functional

necessity for survival. Only around 3% of UNHCR's budget comes from general UN contributions making it highly dependent on voluntary contributions (Loescher, Betts and Milner 2008). The wider humanitarian marketplace has itself become increasingly competitive and UNHCR is now competing with a larger than ever number of other actors for funding. As new issues arise on the refugee policy agenda UNHCR has been faced with the choice of whether to take on new tasks or to cede them to others (Betts 2013). Whether, to what extent, and under what conditions, it has done so in each case has depended on a complex mix of factors, both internal and external to the agency that have served to determine which priorities it chooses to pursue and how best to achieve them.

As a result of "striving for institutional pre-eminence among humanitarian organisations" (Loescher 2001), and the consistent need to remain relevant to its donor states, UNHCR has adopted what some have referred to as an expansionist culture (Crisp 2009a). It has been criticised for seeing its primary function as self-perpetuation (Wigley 2005), and for being unaccountable, defensive towards criticism and focussed on presenting a good image to donors (Loescher 2001; Gottwald 2010). There is very little external scrutiny of the organisation and no mechanism to hold it accountable (Ibid). Further, once UNHCR has decided on a course of action it has sometimes shown a tendency to shun disconfirming evidence of its policy prescriptions and to avoid asking the tough questions that might serve to undermine its desired policy outcome (Barnett and Finnemore 2004).

In keeping with the external pressures of a competitive context, UNHCR's principal competitors, other aid agencies with closely related mandates, have often been regarded as a threat, rather than collaborators in a shared endeavour. UNHCR has consistently attempted to thwart the ambitions of OCHA (and its predecessor, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs – DHA) to fulfil its role of overall humanitarian coordination (Crisp 2009b; Loescher 2001), while its relationships with IOM, UNDP, and NGOs have all been marked by competition (Loescher, Betts and Milner 2008).

But missionary factors can equally be pointed to in terms of explaining UNHCR's rise and its actions more generally. Some, for instance, have highlighted the failure of states to fulfil certain roles vis-à-vis refugees, which has left UNHCR with no choice but to expand its mandate, for instance in terms of camp management, provision of material assistance, status determination, and monitoring of non-refoulement (Loescher, Betts and Milner 2008). Crisp (2009a) also suggests the emergence of new and more complex migration trends, a changing political landscape since the end of the Cold War, and a growing international awareness of humanitarian disasters as important factors in necessitating UNHCR to take on new responsibilities.

Crucially though, UNHCR sees itself not only (or even) as a service provider but as an organisation incorporating a moral community (even one that is morally superior to states) and this has been a key driving force behind its actions (Scalettari 2013). Within the agency its mandate and certain other of its key documents are considered sacred, with a universal force and validity (Ibid).

Moreover, UNHCR staff are deeply committed to the missionary goals of the organization (Wigley 2005). Indeed this missionary identity has been a source of UNHCR's strength. The very fact of being perceived as value-driven rather than interest-driven gives UNHCR moral authority (Barnett 2011b). UNHCR's humanitarian character may in turn then be used as "a stealth weapon in the service of organizational expansion" (Barnett 2001), which may also be in the interests of UNHCR's beneficiaries as a sidelined principle-bound UNHCR is of no help to displaced people (Ibid). But this moral authority, which has been such an asset for UNHCR, may be put at risk by UNHCR expanding to meet states' interests (Betts 2013) and this is hence likely to serve an important mitigating influence against the most overt mercenary tendencies.

Besides being both a mercenary and a missionary, UNHCR is also a misfit in that it is at times a disjointed, lumbering bureaucracy, that spends much of its time addressing mundane tasks, and whose actions are circumscribed by factors entirely unconnected to either interests or values. While bureaucratic dynamics create their own path dependency and predictability, organizational complexity militates in the opposite direction producing unpredictable results.

The simple fact that UNHCR is a large bureaucracy means that, to a certain extent, its actions follow a certain conventional logic. As Wigley (2005) has noted, on a day-to-day basis UNHCR staff are predominantly pre-occupied with fulfilling their own specific routine tasks, which may serve to obscure wider goals. Some of these tasks include fund-raising, which may come to be seen as a good in itself, rather

than as a means to an end. Under such conditions expansion may become a self-perpetuating goal.

As Loescher, Betts and Milner (2008) have noted, it would be problematic to speak of UNHCR as a single coherent actor without recognising the complexity of relationships within the organisation. According to some, UNHCR demands a certain conversion of its employees that happens quickly and unconsciously (Scalettaris 2013), but though this process of socialisation may lessen the tendency for diversity between individuals, it does not remove it. Indeed in some cases it may serve to exacerbate differences of opinion within the agency as its distinct sections may strive to pursue different goals. Notably this has been highlighted in terms of disagreements between the protection and operations sections. Barnett (2001) also talks of quarrels between UNHCR's "pragmatists" and its "fundamentalists", with the latter adhering to a strict, and more limited, definition of UNHCR's role and purpose.

Within Afghanistan UNHCR has demonstrated strong evidence of all of these characteristics. It has brought to bear a powerful machinery in the service of its goals, and has engaged in vigorous internal and external debate in terms of determining what is most important to it as an agency. It has struggled with a difficult operating context, the complexities of the largest assisted returns process in history, an expanding and later contracting aid marketplace, differing views from individuals in positions of power, the involvement of active competitors and collaborators, and competing visions of what UNHCR can and should be doing to best assist vulnerable people in Afghanistan. Its efforts in the country, described

as “persistent and partially successful” (Jamal 2008), provide a fascinating case study of how powerful, and often well-meaning, actors operate within the competitive confines of a dynamic aid marketplace.

## 2. Theorising the Aid Marketplace

### 2.1 Key Premises

The common saying that aid workers are ‘mercenaries, missionaries and misfits’ is perhaps not so much of a description as an accusation. Nevertheless, somewhat modified from its original usage, it provides a useful basis on which to found a taxonomy to describe the pressures impacting the actions of both aid agencies and the individuals working for them. According to the theoretical framework laid out below I argue that aid organisations, and aid workers, are, to a certain extent, rational and self-serving (mercenary); altruistic, though nevertheless focussed more on some issues or types of people than others (missionary); and influenced by a bureaucratic context in which objectives are only imperfectly translated into action and individual diversity defies simple generalisation (misfits).

The result of a clash between narrowly defined mercenary and missionary objectives is the existence of a highly competitive arena, though competition may be mitigated or aggravated by various factors. One of the most important, and understudied, dimensions of how actors approach interactions in the aid marketplace is the question of identity and self-perception, which in turn has an impact on how actors prioritise the multiple objectives that they seek to achieve, and how they turn vague overarching goals into specific and more concrete ones.

Due to the structure of the aid delivery chain, donors have little direct contact with beneficiaries and rely on external actors to provide them with the situational analysis, or at least crucial elements of it, on which they design their interventions, and which also serves to shape their own preferences. In large part the organisations providing that information are not neutral observers but rather have a stake in the outcomes. There is therefore a strong temptation, conscious or otherwise, to engage in a strategic approach to discourse creation in ways that further the interests of these actors, however they may conceive of them. The process of 'needs assessment' is generally presented externally as dispassionate, objective and technocratic, but it is the contention of this thesis that it forms part of an action-oriented discourse; and thus may be the locus for various struggles between actors. That all actors have a vested interest in portraying the aid world (and hence their own role in it) as needs-based and neutral, largely explains why such struggles are mostly concealed from external actors beneath a gloss of collaboration and technocracy, and have thus avoided greater study.

The current chapter develops these premises in more detail. It expands upon the categorisation of mercenary, missionary and misfit incentives and pressures and explains how all three dimensions are important and need to be considered in any analysis of the aid world. It then outlines the relevant theory regarding information transfers and discourse creation and how this is influenced by actor preferences.

## 2.2 An inter-disciplinary approach

The word 'marketplace' in its original and traditional sense refers to a physical space in which products are exchanged, usually for money. Besides this definition however, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) offers two additional definitions. The first is "Any place or environment where ideas, etc., are sought or exchanged. [Usually] with [a] distinguishing word designating the type of environment." So, for instance, to use some of the examples given by the OED, it could denote an 'academic marketplace', an 'ecumenical marketplace', or a 'conceptual marketplace'. The other definition provided is of an "arena of commercial dealings". In both cases an element of competition is implied. In the former case the promoters of ideas, concepts or practices jostle for supremacy; in the latter it is, most likely, the purveyors of goods and services, who seek to distinguish their products. But only in the second definition is the exchange specifically denoted as 'commercial', in other words conducted for the purposes of advancement of the parties, i.e. for profit.

The 'aid marketplace' falls between these two definitions. It is not purely commercial. The actors within it (discounting the companies that provide development services who are not the subject of the current thesis) do not operate for profit, at least not in the sense that proceeds from 'sales' are directly distributed to owners or shareholders. But on the other hand it is more than ideas that are exchanged. Money changes hands, goods and services are provided, and livelihoods are secured or lost.

The two definitions lead to very different theoretical conceptions of the 'aid marketplace'. On the one hand it may be defined in market-based terms, as a site of exchange governed by the dispassionate rules of economics, or, on the other hand, as a social space, which also happens to be an arena of competition but in which actors do not necessarily act first and foremost as rational power maximisers. The two visions are not, of course, entirely mutually exclusive, and viewing the aid world through either lens is likely to yield interesting but limited insights.

Viewing the marketplace only, or predominantly, in cold, rational, economic terms (the approach generally taken by political scientists and economists), obscures many of the non-market related dynamics at play. As a social space it is regulated by shared norms regarding what is perceived to be acceptable behaviour (the focus of study of sociologists and anthropologists). This also means that many actors, including some of those interviewed, do not identify with the marketplace analogy. Rather, most see themselves engaged in an altruistic mission in cooperation, rather than competition, with other actors in the field. On the other hand, viewing it without taking into account the very real interests at play leads to conclusions that many would regard as naïve and equally misguided.

For this reason this thesis seeks to incorporate both political and sociological writing on aid in order to accurately reflect the interest-based and ideals-based dimensions of aid. To an extent these are as inseparable as they are important. Bourdieu's (1975) writing on the 'academic marketplace' is highly relevant in explaining the dynamics at play in the social world of aid. He describes how actors

compete within academia but also share, and reinforce, an understanding of the underlying principles and values that serve to legitimate the sector, and by extension their own place within it. Thus, he concludes, it is impossible to separate the “political” and the “pure” dimensions of struggles in the scientific field as the two are intimately linked. Bourdieu also makes another observation that resonates in the ‘aid marketplace’ and supports the inclusion of a sociological dimension to any analysis of it. Notably the primary aim of the participating actors is not necessarily financial gain, but rather they seek “symbolic profit”: in other words accumulating symbolic capital in the form of enhanced reputations, authority, prestige and respectability. Of course these may all be later converted into financial capital, but the symbolic capital is not viewed simply as a means to an end but also as an end in itself. Indeed Krause (2014) maintains that it is competition for a very specific form of symbolic capital, humanitarian authority, which is the driving force in the aid marketplace.

The marketplace analogy is useful as it allows for a holistic, non-reductive analysis of the aid sector. As Asard and Bennett (1997) have written, conceiving of competition between established interests in democratic discourse as the “marketplace of ideas” is a useful form of analysis that avoids “placing undue emphasis on single factors such as institutions, behavior or culture”. Rather, it enables all of these factors to be considered, without relying exclusively on any.

Writing about UNHCR’s attempts to approach the issue of its own accountability, Sandvik and Jacobsen (2016) conclude that the topic is complex, and multi-layered, and thus “best described from a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary context.”

Gibson et al (2005) agree. In the following quote they explain how different disciplines each bring important elements to the study of the aid world, which, when combined, enables a more detailed and richer picture to be developed:

“Multilevel and broad analyses of development demand a multidisciplinary approach. Economists are concerned with the efficient use of resources. Anthropologists and historians have developed tools to analyze the context within which a situation is located. Political scientists tend to examine the power relationships among actors.”

Finally, a multi-disciplinary perspective is also worthwhile due to the tendency of the different disciplines to focus on different units of analysis. Anthropologists generally study individuals and small communities, while International Relations (IR) scholars tend to abstract large organisations, or even countries, to a single unitary actor. Sociologists, political economists, and political scientists all pitch their analysis at different levels between these two extremes. By incorporating elements from all those who have studied competition in the aid world it may be possible to gain a better understanding of both ‘the wood’ and ‘the trees’.

### **2.3 The aid delivery chain**

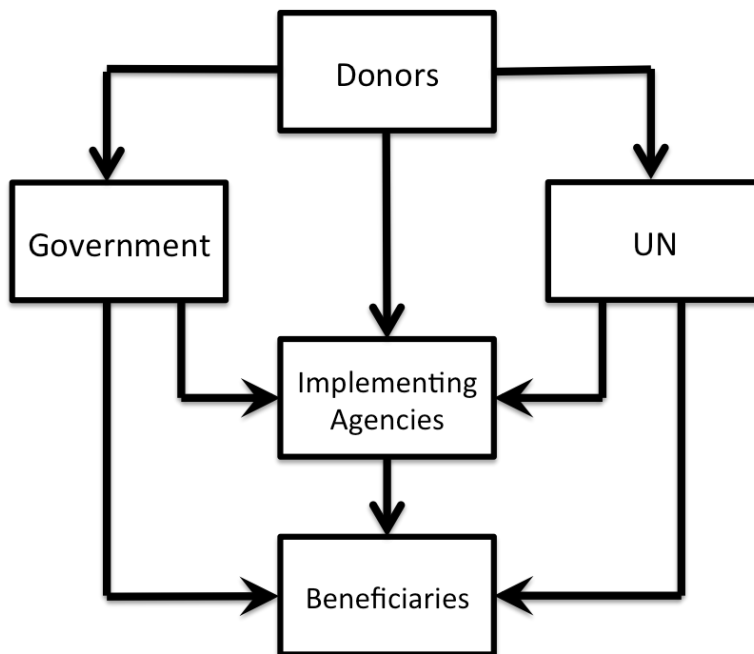
While donors nominally provide funding for people in recipient states it passes through a series of intermediary actors before it reaches the final beneficiaries.

With few exceptions donors do not implement projects directly but rely on others

to turn the money that they provide into goods and services for targeted populations. In well functioning, democratic, and accountable states a large percentage of the aid intended for the beneficiaries of that country is channelled through the existing national institutions of the host state. Such states, however, are generally in less need of international aid than those that may be described as 'fragile', or, in the worst case, 'failed'. In conflict situations recipient states may be a party to the conflict further complicating the delivery of aid through state channels and conflicting with humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence. Coupled with the problems of low capacity, and low levels of trust, this mean that donors do not always rely, or at least do not rely exclusively, on national institutions to deliver their aid to the people it is intended to reach (Dietrich 2016). Rather, intermediary actors, from whom donors contract implementation-related services, have emerged to fill this market opening. This is what is often referred to as the "aid delivery chain" (Wallace, Bornstein and Chapman 2007; Gibson et al 2005; Martens et al 2002; House of Commons 2016).

The 'aid marketplace', for the purposes of this thesis, signifies the competitive arena in the aid delivery chain occupied by the intermediary actors that serve to link donors and beneficiaries in the aid chain and to turn aid funding into services. Gibson et al (2005) are right to point out that the aid delivery chain brings to mind linear linkages that to a certain extent obscure the overlapping relationships in aid delivery, but in purely financial transfer terms the aid marketplace resembles figure one. Donors provide their funding directly to the host government, to the UN, or to implementing agencies (consisting of private companies, international NGOs and national NGOs). Both the government and the UN implement many

projects themselves on behalf of beneficiaries but also sub-contract to implementing agencies for specific tasks that can be provided more effectively or efficiently by these actors. Occasionally aid will be sub-contracted multiple times before it reaches beneficiaries.



**Figure 1: The structure of the aid marketplace**

As is clear from the above diagram, donors have little direct contact with the final recipients of their aid. Further, it is also clear that not all actors in the aid delivery chain are formally equal. The UN, and other international organisations, occupy a position that was referred to in a recent UK government report as “first tier partners” in the “aid delivery chain” (House of Commons 2016). These first tier partners sub-contract much of their aid to second tier partners, who in turn may sub-contract it to third tier partners and so on. At each level in the chain the intermediary actor provides two important services: firstly in terms of directing

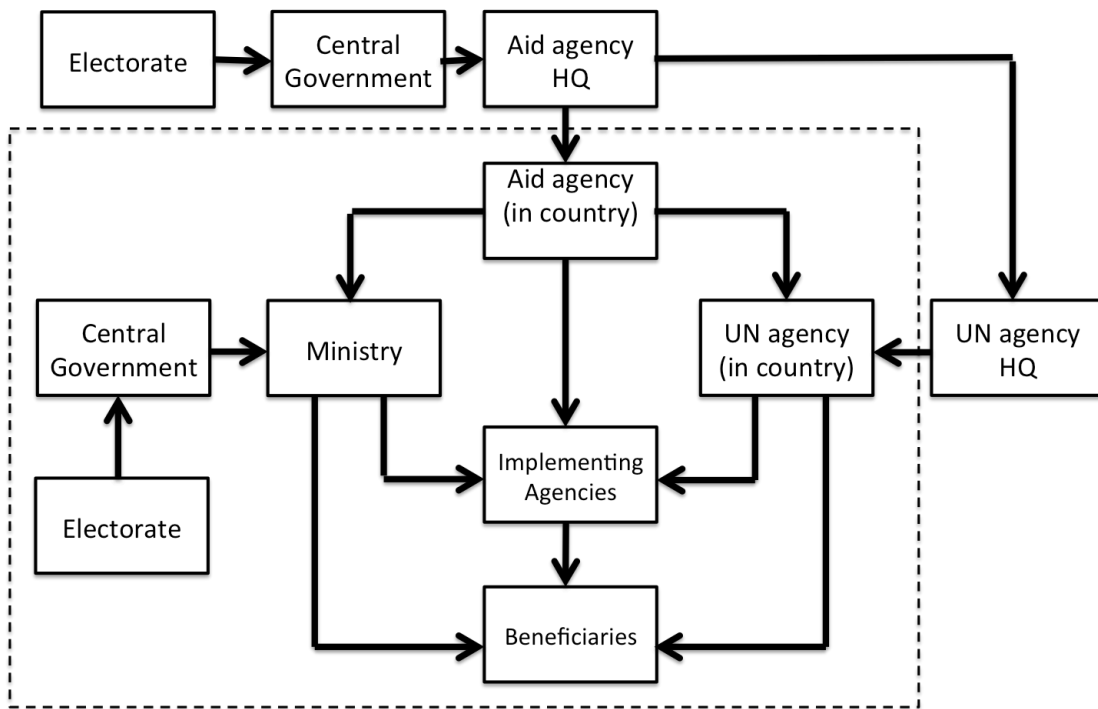
the aid ever more specifically to where they believe it is most needed, and secondly overseeing the level directly beneath them. Funding for national NGOs for instance is often channelled through international NGOs in order to lower donors' own administrative costs (which would otherwise involve overseeing large numbers of low value contracts, rather than a smaller number of high value contracts), while providing an oversight function at a level that is more proximate to actual implementation. To a certain extent national recipient governments also sub-contract part of their funding for service delivery, but on a much more limited basis. Intermediate actors such as the UN are thus simultaneously recipients and donors in the aid marketplace.

While the process of sub-contracting multiple times (with each actor in the chain taking a 'cut' for their services) has been roundly criticised by many commentators, it is worth noting that it is not clear however that the alternatives are necessarily preferable. 'Cutting out the middleman' would imply either increasing the number of aid management staff in donor agencies to administer and oversee a much larger number of small value contracts, or accepting a lower level of oversight of aid delivery. Both alternatives evidently imply their own risks and costs.

At each level of the aid chain actors receiving funding need to justify their use of it to the actor providing it. Indeed, such upwards accountability may mean that those receiving the aid have the least power to influence its trajectories. It has often been noted that it is "a unique and most striking characteristic of foreign aid ... that the people for whose benefit aid agencies work are not the same as those

from whom their revenues are obtained.” (Gibson et al 2005). In practice this means that the input of beneficiaries in the aid marketplace is highly limited (Martens et al 2002; Easterly 2006; Werker and Ahmed 2008; Barnett and Walker 2015; Wallace, Bornstein and Chapman 2007; Meyer 1995) and that implementing actors “face more direct incentives to manage donor satisfaction than beneficiary welfare.” (Werker and Ahmed 2008).

The above diagram however only shows a part of the aid delivery chain. In so far as it portrays all participants as unitary actors it is misleading. Aid resources are raised from general publics in donor states through taxation. Central government, in principle reflecting the will of the population that they represent, then allocates these finances to its various ministries, including those dealing with international development. This ministry in turn needs to make strategic choices about how much to delegate to its sub-offices in particular countries, and will also generally make contributions to particular UN agencies, that may or may not be earmarked for specific countries or programmes. Such decisions all occur before the funding even arrives in the beneficiary country. At lower levels the decisions are then replicated as the aid is transferred often multiple times, for instance to the country office of a UN agency, then an international NGO, which in turn subcontracts to a national NGO, until finally reaching its intended beneficiaries. To a certain extent one could expect some marketplace dynamics to be present at all such levels of decision-making. Figure 2 presents a more holistic view of the aid marketplace though even this too is necessarily simplified:



**Figure 2: Structure of the aid marketplace (internal and external dimensions)**

At every level in the above diagram there is a plurality of actors and a large amount of diversity between them. Central government for instance is a broad term that may encompass the offices of the president, the prime minister, and their cabinets, the upper and lower houses of parliament, and any number of sub-national governance arrangements feeding into these. Typically there are large numbers of UN agencies, hundreds or sometimes thousands of NGOs, scores of donor agencies and so on, operating and interacting in a particular country. Commonly aid recipients will receive funding from multiple different sources. This diversity and complexity is not captured in the diagram. Further, some financial linkages in the chain are also not shown, particularly at the level of implementing agencies. Specifically the headquarters of implementing agencies will often receive direct

transfers from both general publics and headquarter-based branches of aid agencies, and, in country, international NGOs often subcontract aid to national NGOs.

In terms of differences between the 'humanitarian' and 'development' marketplaces, the primary point to note in terms of the functioning of the marketplace is that the former tends to rely more on the UN and NGOs to deliver aid to beneficiaries, while the latter relies more heavily on the government, generally in terms of service delivery, but if not then at least in terms of setting priorities and overseeing aid delivery. Nevertheless UN, NGOs and government are all involved to differing extents in both domains. In any case, rather than two separate worlds, it is perhaps preferable to view the two marketplaces as a continuum. The lines between what is humanitarian and what is development are becoming ever more blurred (Stoddard 2006; Mattner 2008). Some academics even reject the neat 'humanitarian' and 'development' labels, preferring instead to designate actors more loosely depending on the extent to which they seek to address underlying causes or simply to treat symptoms. For some, such as Rieff (2003) and Stoddard (2006), the distinction is between 'Wilsonian' (underlying causes) and 'Dunantist' (symptoms) organisations; for Barnett (2011), who divides organisations along similar lines, it is between 'alchemical' and 'emergency' orientations. Commitment to 'humanitarian' principles such as neutrality and independence forms part of this continuum, as does the assertion to be non-political, something that Barnett and Weiss (2008) refer to as "a convenient fiction that can only be sustained through rhetorical flourishes and discursive practices that allow for a particular category of politics." A small number of vocal

humanitarians at one end of the spectrum espouse complete and unswerving dedication to these principles and seek to distance themselves at every turn from states, while most large development agencies at the other end of the spectrum are fully and openly aligned with state agendas. Most organisations working in crisis or emergency zones however tend to adopt a more pragmatic approach, interpreting adherence to humanitarian principles flexibly, taking into account surrounding factors, seeking to advance multiple long-term and transformative goals, and applying a more consequentialist and context-specific approach to their interpretations of humanitarian principles, even if presenting their actions externally as in full compliance with them.

Beyond noting that the practice and theory of the humanitarian-development divide is more blurred than is often depicted, it is still necessary to recognise that in terms of aid architecture there are some important distinctions that do need to be taken into account. Primarily this is because, despite frequent similarities in the way it is used, aid tends to be officially designated as either 'humanitarian' or 'development' and organisational bureaucracies have been built up around these distinctions. Aid agencies therefore tend to provide humanitarian and development-designated aid through different channels, or sometimes entirely separate structures. In terms of needs analysis and priority setting the most authoritative process in the humanitarian field, since the Humanitarian Reform Agenda of 2005, is the cluster system<sup>5</sup>; complemented by assessments by individual UN agencies for specific topics. Within the development world it is host

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<sup>5</sup> The cluster system consists of sectoral coordination groups that bring together both UN agencies and NGOs to assess needs, plan and monitor humanitarian aid provision

countries that are expected to define their own priorities through Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) (in Afghanistan for instance this is represented by the Afghanistan National Development Strategy – ANDS – and the more detailed National Priority Programmes – NPPs).

This overview provides a brief introduction to the structure of the aid marketplace and the surrounding context in which aid agencies operate but it does not shed light on what drives their actions, nor, besides the ability to provide funding, how they may exert influence on other actors. These are the issues that I examine in the remaining sections of this chapter.

#### **2.4 Mercenaries, missionaries and misfits: Interests, incentives and motivations in the aid marketplace**

What is it that the actors in the aid chain are seeking to achieve? This is an important question and one which many scholars have grappled with over the years. The motivations of aid agencies ultimately influence how they are likely to approach any particular aid-related task, and hence an overview of what these motivations are is crucial to any analysis of how the ‘aid marketplace’ operates. Relevant literature suggests three possible answers to the question. Firstly there is the view that aid agencies are essentially rational and self-interested. According to this view, whatever other concerns they may have, their over-riding interest is their own self-preservation and this in turn influences their approach to competing in the aid marketplace. Viewing aid actors through this lens is common

among IR and political economy scholars and I term it the 'mercenary' approach. Secondly, there is the view that aid agencies claims to be working for essentially altruistic outcomes should be taken at face value. This is the approach favoured by much of the non-discipline-specific writing on aid, and also of many anthropologists who have looked at the motivations of individual aid workers. This is what I term the 'missionary' view of the aid world. Finally there are the organisational sociologists who point out that the machinery of bureaucracy through which aid is always delivered, creates its own dynamics that are unrelated, or only loosely related, to overarching motivations, and that inherent diversity at the individual level defies simple categorisations. Thus aid agencies are 'misfits'; unpredictable and inadequate for the task of translating intentions into action. While these positions may appear to be contradictory, the three different perspectives are in fact complementary. Each reveals a different aspect of aid agencies and the incentives that they are likely to face (which may pull in different directions). To claim that one is 'right' and another 'wrong' would be to miss the point. In practice, most scholars do tend to recognise at least a certain degree of complexity and mixed incentives, and consequently incorporate elements of all three dimensions into their analysis. It is nevertheless useful to examine the three perspectives in their essentialised forms, as in the following overview of relevant literature.

Before proceeding, however, a few points of clarification are worth noting. Firstly, while there may be a tendency for specific disciplines to focus their analysis within one of the three categories outlined above, and to adopt its related assumptions, there is no reason why this should necessarily be the case, and indeed there are a

great many exceptions to this rule. For instance, while anthropologists have tended to be the most likely to accept an altruistic orientation of the subjects they study, they also explore issues of culture and interests, and do not accept statements of intention uncritically. Equally, in my own work, I adopt a predominantly sociological approach but apply it equally to all three dimensions of organisational behaviour. Secondly, though the term 'missionary', as a synonym for altruistic motivations, may be presumed to have positive connotations, I apply it in a more neutral sense. Specifically, I use it to refer to behaviour *perceived of as altruistic by the actor involved*, but this does not necessarily mean that there is a consensus by others that these actions are in any way positive, valuable or constructive. Indeed, the missionary objectives of one actor are not necessarily the missionary objectives of another and these objectives are often (unconsciously) shaped by mercenary context. Thirdly, it also has to be conceded that in some ways the term 'misfit' is an imperfect one in so far as it evokes images only of dysfunction or, at an individual level, social exclusion. Doubtless much of what agencies do may be considered dysfunctional (and indeed that is a particular focus of the current thesis) but equally that is not all they do; and even their most maligned tendencies could also be considered rational and reasonable responses to external stimuli and context from certain perspectives. I use the term simply to take note of two specific points; that the process of implementation through bureaucracies creates dynamics of its own that are independent of both interests and values, and that complexity and diversity within and between organisations militate against predictability or conformity to expectations based on theory. Just as 'missionary' is not necessarily meant positively, 'misfit' and 'mercenary' are not necessarily meant negatively.

#### 2.4.1 Mercenaries: In pursuit of rationalist agendas

The more traditional branches of IR and political economy make little allowance for actors acting in any other way than the pursuit of their own self interest. This view is also shared by many commentators of the aid world, whether discussing the reasons that states contribute funding for humanitarian and development causes in the first place, or the ways in which the actors that deliver that aid condition their own responses. Indeed the image of a mercenary, someone “whose actions are motivated primarily by personal gain, often at the expense of ethics” (OED), is not far distant from some of the more cynical writing about aid. While it is a caricature that many (though clearly not all) in the aid industry would not recognise, almost all commentators agree that organisational and individual interests do play at least some role in conditioning the actions of aid workers and that national interests are part of the reason that state-provided aid funding exists.

At a macro level, peacebuilding, state-building, poverty alleviation and other goals of international assistance all have benefits for donor states to an extent that their involvement in providing aid may be, and often is, viewed as essentially self-interested. In addition states seek social recognition and prestige from other states (Wendt 1999) and thus seek to be perceived of as good global actors that fulfil their international commitments and act responsibly. Such symbolic capital is an important asset in the international arena. Even when a donor contributes to a global public good therefore, or to an issue area of low strategic interest, it may nevertheless have positive secondary benefits for the donor, for instance in terms of reputational benefits; and indeed such secondary benefits may be the primary

motivation behind the intervention. For these reasons many academics reject an altruistic view of aid (Alesina and Dollar 2000; Schraeder, Hook and Taylor, 1998). Equally, states are likely to seize opportunities in the delivery of aid to promote their own interests. Tied aid, for instance, in which donors favour organisations based in their home countries, or goods created in them, is one such, often criticised, example (Easterly and Pfutze 2008). But rational self-serving approaches may still lead to positive outcomes. As both donors as states, and donors as bureaucracies, are concerned about their reputations, they may be expected to seek to enhance these through the provision of development and humanitarian aid that is perceived to be both professionally managed and designed to address recognised needs.

As states lack the capacity to implement development programmes in other countries, or prefer for various reasons, for others to undertake these tasks on their behalves, they fund implementing actors to do the actual work (as per the aid delivery chain outlined above). Principal-agent theory offers one prism through which to analyse these relationships. From this perspective, the entire aid chain, from donor publics to beneficiaries, may be conceived of as a series of 'contracts' in which the agent is at each level mandated to further the interests of their principal directly above them. Principals have various mechanisms for ensuring that agents act in their interests, including the power to (1) design contracts; (2) select and screen agents; (3) monitor and evaluate performance; and (4) put in place institutional checks, such as requiring one agent to sign off on the actions of another (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991). Additionally it has been shown that bureaucratic compliance with the wishes of principals is generally due to agents

sharing the preferences of their principals, rather than the existence of coercive mechanisms, meaning that preferences are often closely correlated (Brehm and Gates 1997). Consequently, the interests of states may be furthered by their implementing agents either explicitly, when states dictate specific instructions to them, or implicitly, when an organisation anticipates the desires of states and acts accordingly (Hawkins et al 2006). Furthering the interests of the principal may also serve as a useful strategy for implementing agents to increase their own power; for instance states are more likely to give flexibility to international organisations that are seen to be “like-minded” (Martin 2006).

Principal-agent models also anticipate agents acting to further their own interests, as distinct from those of principals, in certain specific circumstance. Specifically, when state preferences are weak or non-existent, there is no consensus between states, or oversight mechanisms are limited, a certain amount of “slack” is created (Hawkins et al 2006; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991). This slack represents a limited sphere of discretionary action, within which it is assumed that agents will act primarily to pursue their own interests (Ibid).

Implementing agents may increase the amount of slack by exploiting asymmetric access to information or by playing principals off against each other (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Where slack exists, then the possibility for moral hazard (agents taking independently motivated action unobserved by principals) and adverse selection (agents having privileged access to information that they are able to manipulate) serve to increase the ability of agents to pursue their own interests (Hawkins et al 2006).

Principal-agent models tend to transpose onto implementing agents the realist assumption that actors in the international system are self-interested power maximisers. The primary interest of bureaucracies is therefore seen to be their own expansion through larger budgets, influence and mandates (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Brehm and Gates 1997). Equally, and relatedly, game theory and rational choice theory adopt similar assumptions (Gibson et al 2005). Even if organisations, and the people working within them, were inclined to put wider interests ahead of their own, they would “face a nearly overwhelming obstacle to exercising that inclination” (Downs 1964) due to the competitive pressures of the wider environment in which they operate.

In reference particularly to International Organisations (IOs) some academics have analysed the conditions under which these organisations are most likely to push to expand their remit and power, rather than to simply act as willing conduits for state preferences. According to these scholars there is a certain amount of path dependency in the way in which organisations develop dynamics of adaptation (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Hanrieder 2015). If strategies have been employed in the past and have been perceived to be a success they are therefore more likely to be employed in the future. It has been theorised that IOs are more likely to be independent, and therefore to push for a greater role for themselves, if they are larger (as they will be more complex and composed of competing sub-units); older (as they will have had more time for evolutionary change); led by strong leaders with inclinations towards independence; and are connected to one or more networks that provide them with resources to shape their capacity for action (Oestreich 2012). Additional strategies that serve to increase agent autonomy

include interpreting mandates in such a way that states are persuaded that agent preferences are close to their own; expanding permeability to third parties (who may in turn exert influence contrary to that of principals); and resisting monitoring through focusing attention on elements that please principals and adopting a superficial approach to reporting (Hawkins and Jacoby 2006).

Equally, approaching the issue from a political economy standpoint, the New Economics of Organisation (NEO) yields similar assumptions to principal-agent theory regarding the behaviour of IOs and NGOs in a competitive marketplace (Cooley and Ron 2002; Meyer 1995). The prescriptions of both NEO and principal-agent models are that, faced with the imperative of securing future funding, implementers will shape their interventions, and exploit inequalities in access to information, to their own advantage (Ibid).

In recent years there has been growing recognition that large complex organisations cannot be reduced to a single decision-maker, that different branches are likely to act in different ways, and that there is therefore a need for a more nuanced approach to understanding competing interests and influences (Oestreich 2012; Loescher, Betts and Milner 2008; Brehm and Gates 1997; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Hanrieder 2015). It has therefore been claimed that “it is largely meaningless to think of bureaucracies as unitary actors with homogeneous preferences” (Brehm and Gates 1997). Some scholars have indeed focussed on the role of individuals, though this has tended to be limited to a small number of elites or a single central leader (Loescher 2001). Where high levels of autonomy exist

within an organisation there is also a need to understand the role of individuals at different levels of decision-making.

Looking then beyond the “black box” mirage of unitary organisations, the dynamics outlined above are, assumedly, as likely to apply *within* organisations as between them. Donor and recipient governments, UN agencies, and even large international NGOs are composed of many sub-divisions and generally many hundreds, or thousands, of individuals, each with their own, from a certain perspective, rationalist, agendas. It has been noted that inter- and intra-organisational dynamics of competition share similarities and individuals also tend to follow similar goals for their own advancement (Brehm and Gates 1997). According to governmental politics theory, for instance, bureaucratic decisions are made primarily through bargaining games between sub-units, with each unit pursuing its own interests defined again broadly in terms of budgets, authority and prestige (Allison 1972). Ghani and Lockhart (2009) lend support to this position with their claim that “Governments themselves can be characterized as a series of organisations, each of which hopes to maximize its position.” Hierarchical principal-agent relationships also exist within organizations; for instance in terms of the relationship between central government and the donor agency, or between the donor agency management and its various country desks.

It is worth noting however that, even from a rationalist perspective, it may be expected that not all individuals, or sub-units within an organisation, will pursue expansionist, power-maximising strategies, on behalf of the wider organisation at all times. Bouchikhi (1998) maintains, for instance, that all organisations are

subject to concurrent pressures of expansion and contraction (or at least maintaining current size) as individuals within the organisation constantly balance the perceived benefits and risks of expansion *to themselves*, which may not be identical to the impact on the organisation as a whole (as, for instance, some individuals may find themselves marginalised or have their control weakened as a result of expansion).

Due to the possibility that support will shift to other agents, implementing organisations need to be constantly attentive to the issues that their principals deem are important and for which they are likely to hold them accountable. For instance, to keep their own positions, donors need to satisfy relevant parts of the government that general goals are being achieved and that more support is needed (Gibson et al 2005). Notably, accountability structures almost always function hierarchically, with actors lower in the chain being accountable to those above them.

Though much less studied than competition for financial capital, there is also competition in the marketplace for social capital; in terms of reputations, legitimacy, and influence over decision-making. These are not evenly distributed and play an important role in the marketplace as a significant source of power. Social capital may be an end in itself. According to Barnett and Weiss (2008) “aid workers give to others but expect power, esteem, and social status in return.” But it is also a means to an end. Burt (1995), for instance maintains that in the marketplace of organisations “social capital is the final arbiter of competitive success.”

Due to a combination of the information imbalances, and the ostensibly altruistic nature of the actors involved, trust plays perhaps a more important role in the aid world than in other marketplaces. In the field of diplomacy Hardt (2014) goes so far as to say that human trust is currency, and strong parallels may be drawn with the aid world. In any competitive arena where informational imbalances are common, trust is likely to play an important role (Arrow 1963). But in the aid world it is an arguably understudied aspect of the marketplace.

Because of their non-profit nature, altruistically-portrayed organisations within the aid industry may be seen as more trustworthy than, for instance, for-profit companies (Meyer 1999). This may provide these actors a major advantage in the marketplace. Equally where trust in a host government is low, donors are more likely to turn to actors in whom they have more confidence (Werker and Ahmed 2008). At the same time, “the same monitoring problems that encourage consumers to choose the nonprofit sector over the private profit sector because it may be more trustworthy ensure that opportunities exist for abuse of this trust.” (Meyer 1999)

The importance of symbolic or social capital has various consequences. On the one hand it means that the need to maintain reputations is particularly important in the aid world and may incentivise actors to operate in ways that appear not to be self-interested (or at least to present self-interested action in altruistic terms).

Paradoxically it may mean that acting in ways that are not perceived to be self-interested may bolster an organisation’s credibility and, thus, ultimately serve

their interests. Redfield (2008) provides an example of this by noting that MSF's public refusal of funding following the 2004 tsunami "surely benefited the group's iconoclastic reputation, and in that sense it could ultimately prove self-serving."

Another form of social capital is authority. According to Barnett and Weiss (2008)

"Authority can be understood as the ability of one actor to use institutional and discursive resources to induce deference from others." Barnett and Finnemore

(2004) explain how International Organisations possess both moral and expert authority (as well as social construction power) and use this to influence the

behaviour of states. Such power is not limited to international organisations.

Humanitarian NGOs, according to some, fulfil the criteria for epistemic

communities (Stoddard 2006), and such epistemic communities are also holders of

expert authority and thus able to affect state practices (Haas 1992). In particular,

aid organisations may be able to use this expert and moral authority to directly

influence donors' own principals, i.e. their general publics. Thus one could expect

that organisations would seek to accumulate moral and expert authority and, once

attained, to guard it jealously. Krause (2014) even maintains that such authority is

not so much a means to an end, but the ultimate objective of aid agencies:

"It is important to note that in contrast to markets for simpler commodities, humanitarian relief is not so much directly shaped by competition for funding or other economic resources as by competition for a specific form of symbolic capital, humanitarian authority."

Thus the above body of theory presents an interest-based account of the aid world. According to these theorists, states provide aid primarily in order to promote their own interests through the medium of compliant agents. When given a chance these agents then act rationally and seek, wherever possible, to accumulate both financial and social capital. Due to the nature of the aid world this may entail presenting actions externally as altruistic in order to bolster levels of trust and maintain reputations. Organisations, departments and individuals are all subject to similar pressures and seek to maximise power at their own level in ways which may, or may not, be mutually supporting.

#### **2.4.2 Missionaries: In pursuit of altruistic agendas**

The above analysis, rooted in IR and political economy literature, is based on the assumption that all actors act in essentially rationalist, i.e. self-interested, ways. This theory undoubtedly offers many convincing insights into the way that actors in the aid marketplace behave. However, to anyone who has actually worked in the aid world it appears at best incomplete, and at worst misleading. A crucial distinction between the humanitarian marketplace and other marketplaces is that organisations within it do not *only* pursue their own interests, they also pursue the wider objectives of aid, especially those enshrined in their mandates. The IR and political economy literature outlined above mostly does not leave room for allowing the possibility of commitment to normative agendas that surpass, or even counteract, organisational or individual self-interest. For that one needs to look at

the sociological and anthropological literature on aid, as well as, to a lesser extent, within constructivist schools of IR.

A starting point is to note that it is not at all clear that, as suggested above, at the national level, funding is provided for international aid for solely rational reasons. Funding decisions are the result of complex negotiation between competing interest groups and hence it is difficult to overlay a single simple explanation on such decisions. There is thus little agreement among political scientists on how to attribute motivation to foreign policy (Stoddard 2006). Donor publics, their elected representatives, and domestic civil servants, all play an important role in deciding whether, how, and how much, to invest in international development and they may be driven by a range of different, and potentially conflicting, motivations. Crucially though, many of these motivations are likely to be altruistic. Some academics for instance have considered the “warm glow” motivation for charitable giving; and more specifically that the positive feelings prompted by selfless behaviour are their own reward (Lumsdaine 1993; Gibson et al 2005; Andreoni 1990; Krause 2014). Rieff (2003), for instance, comments: “Call it altruism, call it pity, call it solidarity, call it compassion, but the impulse to help is so deeply rooted in human culture that, whether it is intrinsic or learned, it can rightly be described as one of the basic human emotions.” It is likely therefore that the “emotional needs of the giver” may be an important driving force in humanitarianism (Barnett 2011).

There is variation between domestic publics in different countries and over time in terms of the issues that are important to them, the priority they attach to those

issues, and the ability of groups representing those issues to influence changes in policy, but a significant development over the past decades has been growing public awareness of humanitarian needs and action. Aid work and aid workers have received “Niagaras of adulatory media attention” (Rieff 2003). This is often translated into public pressure for governments to increase funding through recognised aid channels, though very rarely is such pressure prescriptive in terms of specifically how funding should be spent. Indeed there is often ignorance among general publics regarding how, and how much, aid is spent, but despite this public support for international development assistance has nevertheless remained consistently high, and, when asked, both general publics and donor governments tend to highlight, in particular, moral reasons for providing aid (Riddell 2007). Increased international awareness has also been accompanied by increased international expectations from domestic publics. According to Niland et al (2015) for instance, “the humanitarian system also functions as a moral community through which public opinion in the West, and increasingly elsewhere, has come to expect a rapid expression of global succour when confronted with the spectacle of human suffering.”. Such views run counter to the image of aid delivery being driven by rational power maximising dynamics.

Moreover, the aid industry is staffed by individuals who each represent highly unpredictable variables, are inherently unique, and have their own characters, interests and worldview that they do not abandon when they start working at a donor or implementing agency. Many are motivated by personal moral commitments and have chosen their line of work on that basis (Stirrat 2008).

Werker and Ahmed (2008) point out that even with comparatively low salaries

NGOs manage to attract highly qualified employees for whom the main perk of the job is, simply, the chance to work for an NGO, and that these organisations “are largely staffed by altruistic employees and volunteers working towards ideological, rather than financial, ends”. More generally, almost a century ago Weber (1924) made the observation that staff in bureaucracies may be said to have loyalty to supra-mundane and sacred values. Within the aid world this dynamic is perhaps even stronger.

The missionary analogy of this section is primarily meant to highlight the altruistic dimension of aid work. While it is not my intention to labour the religious dimension of the analogy it is worth noting that some parallels do seem to exist in the way that the aid world perceives, and presents, its role. The commitment to, and belief in, a higher cause are themes that recur in the literature and are often described in quasi-religious terminology. Rieff (2003) maintains that “Humanitarianism has come to see itself as a secular religion” and it, along with human rights, are “the established churches of the establishment.” Others have noted that “Most NGOs, including secular ones, have traditionally been “faith-based”: that is animated by an intrinsic faith in the inherent efficacy and utility of what they do.” (Feinstein International Famine Centre 2004), while Stirrat (2008) adds that the values that aid workers seek to promote, such as participation, empowerment and so on, “act as set articles of faith. They exist as ultimate values, unquestionable and absolute.”

The views and motivations of those working in the aid world are important and have implications for the ways in which aid organisations behave. In some

respects organisations are the sum of their constituent parts; for instance the social capital of organisations may be viewed as the aggregate of the social capital of its staff (Burt 1995). To an extent this holds true also in terms of preference shaping, with the preferences of organisations being in part defined by the aggregated preferences of staff members. However, the relationship also operates in the other direction and individuals find their own preferences being shaped by the environment in which they work. Specifically the twin processes of self-selection and formatting (including responding to internal and external incentives) play an important role in ensuring that to a certain extent individuals within an organization tend to have broadly similar views about certain issues. Those applying to work in the aid industry are likely to already be not only knowledgeable but also sympathetic to the goals of international development. Being surrounded by people of a similar mind-set; being confronted with the problems that aid seeks to alleviate on a daily basis; and facing incentives that encourage the taking of certain positions (or at least giving the outward appearance of doing so), is likely to reinforce certain shared tendencies. Bureaucracies are “open systems” interacting with the wider world and both influencing, and being influenced, by it (Scott 1998). Hence organisational culture is likely to be important and to influence outcomes irrespective of the wishes of states (Weaver and Leiteritz 2005; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Brehm and Gates 1997; Krause 2014). As organisations may be “best defined as social spaces torn in multiple contradictory directions” (Bouchkkhi 1998), this means effectively that one needs to look beyond the stated goals of principals, or simplistic assumptions of rational power maximisation, in order to determine the underlying dynamics that are actually at play. These may both complement, and on occasion contradict,

the prescriptions of the theory outlined in the preceding section. Meyer (1999), for instance, maintains that, all individuals and organisations have complex motivations and “looking beyond the purely self-interested economic agent, behavioural assumptions allow for loyalty, commitment, and altruism as well as opportunism.”

One mechanism for ensuring that staff identify with the goals of their wider organisation is through socialisation. Socialisation, also known as formatting, may take the form of role-playing, involving following rules without necessarily agreeing with them (type I socialisation), or internalising the rules and accepting them as morally justified (type II socialisation) (Chekhel 2005). Often type I socialisation leads to type II socialisation over time, and thus a rational strategic calculation (or a ‘logic of consequences’) may develop into a personal conviction (or a ‘logic of appropriateness’) as actors identify more closely with the positions that they outwardly espouse or emulate (Ibid). While recognising that “it is impossible to generalise for all who work in the development industry”, Rajak and Stirrat (2011) nevertheless note that aid workers are subject to certain pressures (shared experiences, organisational incentives, social insularity etc) that encourage a degree of conformity in the way that they tend to view and interact with the world. These social processes do not exclude decision-making based on rational calculation, but they do suggest that other factors are likely to play at least as important a role.

Both rationalist and altruistic motivations share a common feature, which is that they only take form when applied to achieve specific goals, which necessarily

requires defining them in more specific and limited ways. Aid organisations do not, indeed cannot, care equally about all aid goals all of the time; they need to focus their efforts through prioritisation. As outlined above, one of the ways in which they do this is through attentiveness to the issues that their principals deem to be important and that, by consequence, they feel they will be judged upon. Another way is through genuine commitment to some policy objectives (more than others). Often, through a combination of the two dynamics, the particular subset of issues that organisations care most about is defined in their mandates.

Mandates of individual aid organisations, or departments within them, may include particular ideals or the interests of certain types of beneficiaries. The humanitarian marketplace is therefore a competitive environment not only for entities within it but also for ideas and sectors of society. For instance, it could be expected that UNHCR, as a refugee protection agency, would seek both to promote the interests of *refugees* over other vulnerable groups, and to promote its conception of what *protection* should entail over competing interpretations, even on occasion when such advocacy is neither in the interests of its state backers nor its own interests (for instance because it decreases the likelihood of being awarded future funding).

Some scholars distinguish between 'soft' and 'hard' institutional interests in the humanitarian world (Weiss 2013; De Waal 1997), "Soft' humanitarian interests can be defined as the stated aims of humanitarian institutions: Succouring the poor and vulnerable, protecting human rights, preventing war, etc. 'Hard' humanitarian interests are the institutional demands of the organisations themselves and their

staff: for institutional expansion, career security, prestige, a sense of job satisfaction, etc.” (De Waal 1997). The promotion of the mandate would thus be equivalent to a humanitarian organisation’s ‘soft’ interests.

The aid world’s ‘soft’ interests are wide-ranging and thus different organisations focus on different aspects. Most donors do not always, or even generally, have established hierarchies of interests. Rather they tend to have a plurality of objectives that may push in different directions. Additionally a multiplicity of policy documents, each stressing the importance of different objectives, exists in every donor agency. Often there is no hierarchy between objectives (Martens et al 2002). In such a context compromises may need to be made at the relevant policy level, the effect of which may be to leave a margin of discretion, or slack, to individuals. Thus multiple objectives not only constrain room for manoeuvre but also give opportunities for flexibility.

This makes competition on behalf of normative agendas likely. Equally, as with rational agendas, as outlined above, such competition may exist within organisations. Organisational mandates tend to be broken down into component goals so that different parts of an organisation work on achieving different aspects of the mandate. Kissinger (1995), explains how internal competition and fragmentation may occur even, and particularly, in pursuit of normative agendas:

“The American foreign policy bureaucracy is for the most part staffed by individuals who have dedicated themselves to what is, in American society, a rather unorthodox career so that they may promulgate and implement

their views for a better world. Their opinions, moreover, are honed by a system in which policy emerges from bureaucratic struggles which ... are never finally settled. Segmented into a series of individual, and at times isolated, initiatives geared to highly specific problems, American foreign policy is rarely approached from the point of view of an overall concept. Ad hoc departmental approaches have more – and more passionate – spokesmen than does an overall strategy, which often has no spokesman at all.”

Though generally perceived as an arch realist, Kissinger, in the above quote makes the point that American foreign policy bureaucrats are motivated primarily by (a loosely defined) altruistic compulsion, which is focussed into ever more narrowly defined objectives through the medium of organisational context and design, and it is those objectives (not self-interest, nor organisational interests, nor even the overarching aggregated objectives of the institution) that these individuals are driven to promote.

This suggests that the way that duties are delegated will have an impact on the way that organisations and individuals within the aid chain perceive not only their own interests, but also the way in which they found moral claims about what is ‘right’. If this is true then the way in which an organisation interprets its mandate will have important implications for how it is likely to act in the aid marketplace and how it justifies those actions.

Barnett (2011), in his book *Empire of Humanity*, set out to explore the impact of funding and power relations on organisational change in the aid world, but became convinced that identity was a more important driving factor. In other words, questions of self-perception, and interpretation of an organisation's mission and, particularly, its *raison d'être*, are likely to be important factors that are ignored or misunderstood by an interpretation that focuses too narrowly on interests.

All this is not to say that mandates and missions do not play an important rationalist role in the marketplace. Rather, it is to say that they do not *only* play this role. According to Quelch and Kylander (2005), in the aid marketplace, “mission effect is the surrogate for profits. Mission aligns the organization with its stakeholders, sets the boundaries for the organization, and provides the foundation on which trust is developed. Strong NGO brands succinctly articulate their missions in terms of what, how, and for whom; these missions are equivalent in many ways to brand positioning statements.”

The way in which an organisation, or a component of an organisation, defines their mandate, and the weight that they attach to it is likely to have important consequences for their actions. If organisations take their tasks too much to heart this may have negative consequences for overall aid policy and wider collective action goals. According to Rubenstein (2008):

“It is likely that the most salient danger with regard to special duties is not that NGOs will fail to respond to them adequately, but rather that they will put too much weight on them vis-à-vis other responsibilities. For example

an NGO might continue to assist a particularly vulnerable group because of a sense of loyalty and attachment, even when that group no longer has a pressing need for aid.”

The pursuit of normative agendas may also lead to power-maximising behaviour. For instance, three sub-theories within constructivist IR and organisational sociology illustrate potential ways in which international organisations may act to expand their remit of activities in pursuit of the objectives of their mandates and for reasons other than narrowly-defined interests. Firstly, neo-functionalism describes how, in a complex inter-connected world, engagement in one policy area may lead naturally, through the accumulation of positive benefits at each stage of cooperation and the concurrent rise of bureaucratic institutions and processes, to engagement in further related policy areas (Haas 1958; Hawkins et al 2006). Secondly, the wide aspirational goals of IOs may put pressure on the circumscribed mandates within which they are expected to operate, leading to inevitable mandate expansion (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). This may happen by either learning through failure, when an organisation fails to achieve some of its goals and draws the lesson that its mandate was overly restrictive to allow it to succeed, or through the motivating impact that the aspirational goals may have on the staff of the organisation who are then likely to chafe at the restrictive rules that they see as impeding progress (Ibid). Thirdly there is ethics creep, which describes how once one problem has been taken on by an organisation there is a natural compulsion to treat other problems with which they have come into contact through intervention in the first area (Barnett 2011).

While the theories have much in common in the way they operate and serve to describe the enlargement of mandates over time, the driving force behind them is somewhat distinct. For neo-functionalism it is the operation of dispassionate bureaucratic logic that drives expansion. Objectives-mandate tension on the other hand is driven by the desire to achieve the utopian objectives of the IO's mission statement. While for ethics creep it is the triggering of feelings of responsibility through exposure and engagement that leads to a desire for further action. In none of the three cases however are the interests of the organisation the end goal; rather these interests are served, almost inadvertently, through the pursuit of normative agendas.

A fourth dynamic blurs the line between the pursuit of rational and normative agendas. It is best described by Ramalingam and Barnett (2010) who summarise the objectives of aid agencies as being "to assist targeted beneficiaries in such a way that our good works are seen and valued by donor communities and the profile of our agency is enhanced, so we can do more good works in the future, working in a collaborative fashion where possible." In other words agencies, driven by a desire to do good, are incentivized by the hard realities of the context to boost the profile of their own organization; though only as a means to an end.

In conclusion therefore altruism is likely to play an important role in the aid marketplace. Issues of organisational culture and, most particularly, how organisations and individuals seek, even subconsciously, to construct hierarchies of normative interests is an under-studied element of the aid world. While the theory of the previous section suggests that aid organisations may work in

altruistically perceived ways in order to boost their own interests (particularly in terms of trust, authority and other forms of social capital), the theory of this section suggests the opposite: that organisations may operate in rational ways in order to further their altruistic goals.

### 2.4.3 Misfits: In pursuit of bureaucratic agendas

The above analysis of both rationalist and normative agendas, pursued at organisational, departmental and individual levels, offers interesting insights into how aid organisations are likely to behave in a competitive aid marketplace. However, these theories need to be qualified to take into account that the machinery through which interests are translated into action creates dynamics of its own which may serve to undermine or refocus overarching goals.

As Krause (2014) outlines, it is not sufficient to focus merely on the over-arching missionary and mercenary objectives of aid organisations (she refers specifically to NGOs) without reflecting on how these objectives are actually translated into action:

“The problem with both of these accounts – the one emphasizing values and the other emphasizing interests – is that they seem to have already decided what relief NGOs are and what they do. Because the theoretical debate is shaped by these extremes, texts that intervene somewhere in the middle often circle around this problematic and rarely fully open the empirical

questions that arise about these organisations: Neither a focus on interests nor a focus on values directs us to look more closely at what these organisations are up to in practice.”

In its original usage to describe aid workers alongside ‘mercenaries’ and ‘missionaries’, the term ‘misfit’ in the phrase is meant in a literal sense to describe those who do not fit in back home and are thus seeking a form of escape through relief work (Stirrat 2008). In my own taxonomy of pressures impacting competition in the aid marketplace I use the term differently to describe the process-related pressures that impact all features of aid delivery and, by extension, competition in the aid marketplace. More specifically I focus on two particular dimensions of the aid world: its inherent diversity (which to a certain extent militates against generalisation and, thus, predictability based on theory) and the bureaucratic pressures that condition how actors approach their tasks. While bureaucracy is the machinery that translates objectives into action, it can also, on occasion, produce outcomes that directly contradict those objectives.

Starting with the first point, that of diversity, it suffices to note that the aid industry is staffed by people, not machines, and the natural variation among individuals defies generalisations beyond a certain point. As noted above the pressures of the environment and processes of socialisation ensure that there is a certain level of consistency in the approaches taken by people in similar functions. But these tendencies are not absolute. Subtle, and at times not so subtle, variation between individuals (based on any number of factors unrelated to their current role) will always have an impact on their behaviour and when individuals are in

positions of authority and able to wield influence over outcomes the impacts of random variation may be significant. Further, the inter-play *between* individuals is also likely to be important. For this reason, Hardt (2014) maintains that “Scholars’ previous understanding of how decisions were made in international organizations needs to be reformed to account for a key variable: human relations.”

Equally, with all actors defining their objectives differently and having unequal power to pursue them in the social space within and between organisations (for instance because they have greater or lesser powers of persuasion and charisma), also makes outcomes difficult to predict. As Mosse (2005) notes, “The problem is that this diversity and multiplicity of interests (and needs to be met) itself destabilises and militates against coherence.” Partly for these reasons Bouchikhi (1998), maintains that “it is indeed hard to acknowledge the complexity of organizations and, at the same time, build clear-cut theories of organizations.” These are not reasons to discard the theories above, but merely to bear in mind their limitations.

Secondly, beyond the issue of complexity and variation among and between individuals, is the question of the impact of bureaucracy itself on outcomes in the aid world. In the aid world bureaucracy is the principal machinery for translating interests into action and, as many scholars have noted, that machinery does not always work in the ways in which it is intended (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Mosse 2005; Gibson et al 2005). As noted perceptively by Ferguson (1994) referring to aid planners in Lesotho:

“Whatever interests may be at work, and whatever they think they are doing, they can only operate through a complex set of social and cultural structures so deeply embedded and so ill-perceived that the outcome may be only a baroque and unrecognizable transformation of the original intention.”

Bureaucratic dynamics take two forms. Firstly there are what have been termed “system goals” (Van Ufford 1998). These are related to ensuring organisational maintenance and survival and lead to practices “revolved around the preservation of rules, administrative order, and relationships of patronage.” (Mosse 2005). In essence they are micro-level rationalist goals, and hence sit easily in the theory outlined in the preceding section on mercenary goals.

Secondly, however, there are the unintended consequences of bureaucracy that arise not from any expression of particular interests, but rather from its narrowly focussed, rule-based culture, which may on occasion lead to “pathologies’ (Barnett and Finnemore 2004) that undermine over-arching goals. Organisations tend to be naturally suspicious of radical change, obsessed with rules, comfortable with tradition and addicted to habit (Barnett 2011). Once they have adopted and internalised rules and values they may continue to apply them even if they no longer serve the purposes for which they were created. Or rules may become an end in themselves, taking precedence in the minds of staff over the overarching goals that they were created to further (Wigley 2005). On occasion therefore the dispassionate following of impersonal rules, which is both the principal strength

and weakness of bureaucracies, may lead to unintended outcomes that are contrary to the interests of states, international organisations or their mandates (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Wigley 2005).

An example of what may be termed either a system goal or bureaucratic dysfunction is the pressure that exists in almost all aid organisations to spend allotted funding. Due to information deficits (examined in greater detail below), principals will often focus on the most visible aspects of their agents' performance, rather than, for instance, the impact of their interventions in cases where this would be difficult to measure or where complex environments make it difficult to attribute causation. One such visible measure of performance is expenditure rates. As many academics have noted, all public agencies face pressure to spend allotted funding or risk seeing their allocations decreased in the next budgetary cycle (Seabright 2002; Wildavsky 1984; Gibsen et al 2005). This means, according to Ghani and Lockhart (2009), that "the aid system has a strong incentive to report it has been able to spend the allocated funds. This is one reason that donors contract UN agencies, as funds transferred to them can be categorised as expenditures.". Ghani and Lockhart go on to note, with reference to the World Bank, that this incentive applies also at a personal, as well as organisational, level and that "Since the World Bank needs to lend a certain amount of money every year, bank staff and outside commentators have often pointed out that the ability to disburse large sums is a critical driver for the behavior of bank staff, whose rise up through the ranks is implicitly linked to their ability to lend." On the one hand achieving high expenditure rates is a system goal as it ensures that the agency will not be disadvantaged in later funding allocations, and is hence essential to organisational

survival and growth. On the other hand it may also be classified as bureaucratic dysfunction in which means (financial expenditure) come to be seen as ends in themselves, and thus the basis for accountability structures and incentives regardless of ultimate impact.

Such micro-level dynamics play an important role as they influence the way in which interests are translated into action. The aid delivery chain appears to be a hierarchical structure in which actors are responsive to the desires of their principals and hence one would expect power to be concentrated at the top. Many have indeed argued that this is the case, criticising the top-down nature of the aid world. Nevertheless the assertion that power is concentrated solely in the hands of donors and progressively diminishes at each stage of the aid delivery chain does not, entirely, stand up to scrutiny. In the words of Mosse (2005):

“In fact the naked exercise of donor power is moderated by the structurally determined weakness of donor management in relation to operational work, by the ambiguity of development goals which allow reinterpretation, by the constant need for negotiations across institutional interfaces and by the fact that, in the end, donor agencies need recipients to spend their budgets.”

The result of these dynamics may be that power in the marketplace is more diffuse than, for instance, principal-agent theory would suggest. If organisations lack flexibility, are overly focussed on micro-level goals at the expense of overarching objectives, focus on process over impact, or in other ways lack capacity to turn

interests into action and transmit them to partners beneath them, then the desires of principals are likely to be at best only partially furthered and, at worst, irrelevant.

In terms of power dynamics the observation that donor agencies need recipients to spend their budgets is an important one. In many ways the relationship between donor and implementer is one of co-dependence (even if the claims, common at all levels of the aid world, of working in 'partnership' sometimes ring a little hollow and more often serve to simply gloss over existing power imbalances).

Additionally, as aid organisations almost all receive funding from multiple sources there is likely to be a diversity of interests regarding expectations as to how they should behave and what they should focus on, which, as noted above, provides opportunities for these organisations to pursue their own agendas and to play principals off against each other. However one of the aspects that most serves to empower lower level actors in the aid chain is informational scarcity and this creates an opportunity for those with the ability to take advantage of it to influence higher level actors through a strategic approach to discourse creation, as discussed in the following section.

## **2.5 Informational asymmetries and discourse creation**

The above analysis has taken as its starting point that all organisations in the aid chain have defined objectives and that they participate in the marketplace in order to bring these to fruition. In fact this is rarely the case. Aid actors have multiple,

wide-ranging and vague objectives. In determining how to define specific goals and how to prioritise these for a particular situation or context, all actors need to be open to input regarding what are the most pressing needs in any particular situation or sector and how best to address these.

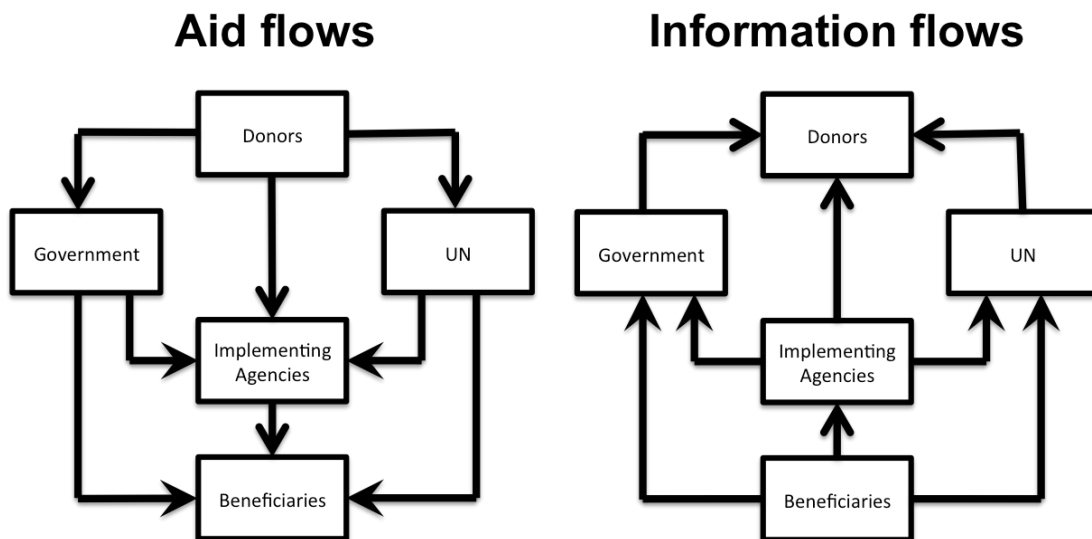
Informational scarcity exists in almost every marketplace. Information as power has long been studied in various disciplines. Weber (1924) wrote that bureaucracies guard their knowledge closely in order to retain their privileged position. In every competitive arena information does not spread evenly, not only due to secretive behaviour but also because not all actors are directly connected to each other (Burt 1995). Moreover, 'sellers' tend to know more about their 'products' than 'buyers'. The aid marketplace is no exception.

Within the aid world scholars have approached the topic of the information that actors transmit between each other principally from two perspectives. Firstly, political economists have looked at information transfers in a context of information scarcity, with assumptions essentially being that information exists as an objective quality, that some actors have more of it than others, and that there are incentives that influence which parts of the information the actors decide to share and how they choose to present it. On the other hand, sociologists and anthropologists have examined the content of this information as a specific type of discourse starting from the assumption that information does not so much exist as an objective quantity to be transmitted, but rather is created in the context of specific discourses, defined as "the process through which social reality comes into being" (Escobar 1995). Despite looking at essentially the same thing, albeit from

very different perspectives, writers within the different disciplines studying the creation, transmission and presentation of information in the aid world very rarely refer to research beyond whichever of the two frames of reference is favoured by the discipline in which they happen to be working. Very often though they reach similar conclusions, while couching their arguments in different vocabulary and referencing different sources.

For various reasons there is a downwards reliance for specific and contextual information regarding relative levels of needs and action undertaken to meet those needs. Even where information is readily available individuals tend to be overwhelmed by the flow, are only able to process and retain a limited amount, and thus rely on others to call attention to the parts that are particularly relevant (Burt 1995).

In some ways the information transfer chain works in reverse to the aid delivery chain, as outlined in figure 3:



**Figure 3: Aid v. Information Flows**

Each actor in the chain relies on the actors beneath them to pass on critical information. However, this creates opportunities for lower level actors. For instance, in regard to carrying out the wishes of their principal, “informational advantage gives bureaucrats the power to engage in some measure of non-compliant behavior” (Moe 2005). This is what Ostrom (2002) refers to as the problem of broken feedback loops. Information transfers take place not only from one organisation to another, but also within organisations. Hardt (2014) for instance notes that ambassadors have more information than their capitals and can control information flows to influence the direction of policy. Gibson et al (2005) have studied in depth the joint problems of misaligned incentives and informational imbalances in the aid world and how these serve to undermine collective action, using an Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework. They conclude that collective action is undermined by actors at different levels in the aid chain facing different incentives with the result that

information asymmetries are aggravated, and that a consistently smaller proportion of information is passed on at each level due to actors making strategic choices regarding their own interests.

Aid organisations may also highlight specific dimensions of the information they provide, for instance to argue that progress on the areas they care about is essential to advancing other issues which their donors may care about more. Betts (2010) calls this issue linkage, and says that for UNHCR it has been a “resource of power” (Betts 2011) in enabling it to influence the decisions of its state donors.

IR scholars and political economists have tended to look at information transfers almost in the same way as the exchange of goods: the agent has information and passes it on to the principal. They note that actors make strategic choices about which information to pass on, but they do not pay sufficient attention to the way that agents shape information by engaging in strategic discourse creation. For that it is necessary to turn to the anthropological literature.

The most celebrated work on discourse creation in development is probably Ferguson’s popular book *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994). Ferguson took the World Bank’s annual report on Lesotho as his main focus of study in order to show how the Bank portrayed a certain vision of the country and the development challenges it faced that was influenced, first and foremost, by the needs of the World Bank. Specifically the report concluded that what was missing from Lesotho’s development was the type of agricultural support programme that the Bank was able to supply. Complex political problems were portrayed simply and

in technical terms (or ignored all together in the case of corruption) and analysis was tailored to the World Bank's toolkit (for instance in terms of defining the sectors of the economy in line with the interventions that the Bank was able to offer). Ferguson's starting point was that the report served not only to analyse reality but to socially create it in ways that served its author.

Since Ferguson published *The Anti-Politics Machine* a number of other academics, primarily anthropologists, have taken forward his ideas on discourse creation in the aid world. The objective of discourse in development, according to these writers, is twofold: to depict, firstly, a certain image of the context in which programmes operate, and, secondly, an image of those programmes themselves. In terms of the former, the salient aspects of the context are 'what are the needs?' and 'how should those needs be addressed?'

The role of humanitarian and development actors in constructing a specific discourse surrounding needs is arguably one that is understudied. Some academics have addressed this topic but the dominant image in aid literature is of 'needs' as an objective metric that is impartially measured, rather than defined and interpreted through specific prisms, and then addressed by donors who are influenced first and foremost by pre-determined agendas, rather than finding their own preferences shaped through interactions with aid implementers. In fact the concept of need is always socially constructed. Different conceptions always exist of what is most pressing, what is 'needed' and what is merely 'desired'.

While money may be scarce, populations in need are not (Barnett and Weiss 2008). This in turn offers a prime fuel for organisational growth, according to the ex-head of the aid agency Medecins Sans Frontiers (quoted in Barnett 2011). By focussing attention on specific needs, aid organisations may hope to further both their 'mercenary' and 'missionary' ambitions outlined above. According to Lewis (1998) "external resource flows may help to determine the ways in which 'problems' are constructed, just as they help to structure the form in which interventions are made." But does this information actually serve to further the objective for which it is intended and influence donor agendas?

Some academics have argued convincingly that it does. Stoddard (2006) for instance has studied how information provided by NGOs serves to inform and influence US foreign policy. Rather than when they are directly seeking to persuade the US to take a particular position, NGOs have the greatest impact "by providing the situational information that shapes the understanding upon which the decisions are made – in effect by changing what actors know, and how the policy problem is framed." Information from NGOs is often critical to donor decision-making, as it may be the only information donors have to rely on, and NGOs are likely to provide this information and analysis based on frames of reference most suited to their particular position, even if, in most cases, this framing "is neither strategic, nor in some cases entirely conscious." (Ibid) In defining need NGOs have a tendency to think at least equally about what they are prepared to do as what is needed on some objective measure, with the result that medical NGOs naturally highlight health needs, food NGOs nutritional needs, and so on.

A first step in defining needs is to delimit them and subsequently underline their exceptionality. Green (2011) for instance writes about how organisations focussed on AIDS response in Africa sought to create and differentiate a specific category of AIDS-affected Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) as a group in particular need of support (more than for instance children who are vulnerable for non-AIDS related reasons), partly because of the way that budgets and institutional mandates are designed in the aid world, and partly due to genuinely-held beliefs about the exceptionality of the disease; even though, according to Green, the category does not map neatly onto social realities. These activists also had a second agenda however which was to shift the discourse on AIDS to view it not as a disease but as a problem of structural relations which demanded a response from the government. Thus, in contrast to academics who seek to deconstruct reality, “The aim of policy makers is not merely to describe and interpret social ordering, but to alter it” (ibid).

An example of how this may work in practice is Quillard’s (2015) investigation of the Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) sector in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. She found that an industry had been created surrounding the identified problem of ‘rape as a weapon of war’ and that all actors involved had an interest in fitting available facts within a certain narrative and resisted questioning too closely the production of data and figures that served to bolster that narrative, but which on closer inspection may not have been reliable. Indeed, the beneficiaries that aid agencies aim to help are part and parcel of the

'product' that they aim to sell to donors; and some beneficiaries may prove easier to sell than others (Krause 2014).

Beyond deeming needs to be exceptional, a second step in defining them is to render them technical in a way that organisational actors are convincingly able to offer a response. According to Murray Li (2011) "donors can only intervene in an arena they can effectively frame in technical terms and for which they can identify deficits that they are equipped to fill." Hence the need to remove aid responses from the realm of politics (Ferguson 1994). Lewis (1998) has written for instance about how aqua-culture in Bangladesh was represented by aid workers primarily as a technical, rather than political, problem in order to justify a specific type of response, despite significant evidence that the underlying issues were primarily political. Nevertheless Mosse (2005) points out that although official representations may portray issues as 'depoliticised', the reality on the ground may be very different, with actors well aware of political considerations, even if constrained to frame them in a certain way to external actors.

These dynamics do not only occur at the stage of portraying reality through the medium of programme documents, but are also likely to be present throughout the entire process of needs assessment. According to Barnett (2011) "Although they claim to give based on need, rarely do aid agencies undertake a systematic assessment of need." Yet many aid workers would contest this. Usually there is at least some effort to define needs through collecting information from the ground. The problem may be rather that this process is itself also subject to institutional pressure to produce certain predefined outcomes. Mosse (2005) for instance

writes that consultation with local farmers in the context of needs assessments “did not reveal so much as *modify* farmers’ knowledge so that it led to desired conclusions/solutions.” He adds that project workers retained the power to direct and shape information to fit it within predefined narratives, despite projecting themselves externally as mere facilitators of information transfer.

Beyond rendering issues technical, delimiting them and underlining their exceptionality, aid agencies also seek to present subjects in such a way as to evoke an emotional response from donors. Thus according to Barnett and Weiss (2008), “Appeals to donors must tug on their heartstrings and convince them they can help make a difference.” This also impacts on how beneficiaries are depicted and there is hence pressure to present them favourably as both morally pure and meriting of assistance. Rieff (2003) has commented that the aid world has a “Reliance verging on dependency on these tales of blameless victims richly deserving the help of aid workers and the money of the general public in the rich world”.

Once aid has been allocated, contracts signed and implementation has commenced, aid agencies face another set of incentives regarding how they report on the progress that their projects have made. Often there are genuine difficulties in making firm pronouncements regarding project results, and in situations where data is lacking, impact is difficult to measure objectively, and causation is hard to attribute, judgements about project success will necessarily be somewhat subjective (Birdsall 2004). This means that to a certain extent there is room for a more or less free interpretation of results. Mosse (2005) argues that when authorised observers construct stories affirming a project it acquires reality, “but

there are no objective meters here, only interpretations; only more or less accepted stories.” Meanwhile reports on project performance are action-oriented and serve to fulfil a prescriptive, rather than simply descriptive role, namely the extension or termination of a project (Ibid). Thus agencies face both a relatively large margin of discretion in interpreting results and concrete incentives that encourage them to present their programmes favourably (Werker and Ahmed 2008; Birdsall 2004; Wallace, Bornstein and Chapman 2007; Mosse 2005). What is less commented upon is that the donor agency *also* has an incentive for the project that they provided funding for to be viewed as a success, and hence may be less likely to question the judgment of the implementer. Werker and Ahmed (2008) hence note that “It is neither in the interests of the NGOs nor the official donor agency, complicit as a funder, to publicise less-than-stellar results”. As a result of the above “Reports get doctored up the chain to ensure future donor confidence and funding” (Wallace, Bornstein and Chapman 2007).

## 2.6 Conclusions

This summary of the literature yields an inter-disciplinary theoretical framework through which the actions of actors within the aid marketplace may be analysed. The starting point of this framework is that all actors are mercenaries and missionaries and misfits. They need to balance both rational motivations (defined in terms of the pursuit of both financial and social capital) and altruistic aspirations. These are very often, but not always, defined narrowly and are mutually supporting. They also need to compete in the wider environment in

pursuit of those objectives, against other actors with their own interests and normative agendas. Organisations are not unitary and equivalent incentives exist at divisional and individual level, replicating within organisations the dynamics of competition that are produced between them. The result of this is likely to be a competitive arena in which actors seek to benefit themselves and particular issue areas that concern them.

While many academics have pointed out the multiplicity of incentives that aid workers and agencies may face, few have sought to examine the process of prioritisation of objectives and how this may impact on their actions. Notably this prioritisation is likely to be reflected in the way that workers and agencies interpret and understand their mandates. Officially, or more often unofficially, this may lead to a hierarchy of objectives, which may in turn influence the strategic choices that actors make. This process is likely to be as influenced by questions of identity, self-perception and bureaucratic culture, as it is by narrowly defined interests.

Informational asymmetries create the opportunity for the creation of strategic discourse. This may shape the understanding of higher-level actors in the aid chain and lead them to change their preferences. Actors do this through information transfers, which are in fact an element of strategic discourse creation in which social reality is constructed, rather than simply transmitted. Due to information deficits at higher levels, actors rely on those beneath them to supply situational analysis and this in turn provides the basis on which they shape their

own preferences. However the process is also highly influenced by mercenary and missionary agendas and is by no means neutral.

This discourse creation tends to fulfil a number of different roles. Firstly, it renders the topic technical, removes it from the realm of politics and presents it as a problem that may be addressed, and solved, through intervention by the aid agency. Secondly, it delimits the issue area, erecting boundaries between it and other topics, and renders it exceptional, somehow distinct and more worthy of support. Thirdly, it seeks to present the foundations of its analysis as disinterested, resulting from objective analysis and bottom-up participatory information collection and input. Fourthly, it may seek to appeal to an emotional response, and thus be couched in language and framing that is designed to portray the topic in a way that provokes sympathy. And fifthly, there may be a tendency to exaggerate the scale of needs. Beyond needs analysis, for ongoing projects another set of incentives apply related to portraying the agency's actions and achievements in a positive light.

## 3. Competition in the Afghan Aid Marketplace

### 3.1 Chapter Overview

Before moving on to my case study of UNHCR it is useful to first examine the wider context in which the agency operates in Afghanistan. Indeed such an understanding is essential if one is to fully appreciate why UNHCR has acted in the ways that it has.

In this chapter I aim to analyse perceptions of competitive dynamics within the Afghan aid marketplace and to give a brief overview of the main actors within it: namely the donors, the Afghan government, UN agencies and NGOs. The objective is to show that all actors, at a certain level, may be perceived of simultaneously as mercenaries, missionaries *and* misfits: in other words that they balance both rationalist and normative agendas (which are often self-reinforcing), while focusing on micro-level process goals and displaying wide individual variation. Often, the result of this tends to be a focus on narrowly defined goals, which, especially when combined with a loose hierarchical structure, results in competition and the undermining of wider common action goals.

Views about the marketplace are many and varied. On the one hand there are those who feel, like one senior UN staff member, that “the marketplace is fun”<sup>6</sup> and that competition within it is lively, healthy and invigorating. But there are many

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<sup>6</sup>Interview, ‘UNHCR 3’

more who are uncomfortable perceiving of it in such terms, likely seeing the analogy as a veiled insult that demeans the collective aid endeavour they are engaged in and a part of. As one donor commented “The competitive thing is a bit of a cynical title. I like to think of it more as comparative strengths”<sup>7</sup>. Another interviewee gave a similar opinion saying “I don’t like the word competition. What matters is that the children get something. I’d prefer that they got it from us, but I don’t mind if it’s from UNHCR or WFP”<sup>8</sup>.

Generally though there is recognition of the dynamics of competition, which are the inevitable result of the way the system is designed. These dynamics are expressed in multiple different ways, explored below, and they are experienced differently by different individuals and organisations. Some recognise the positive aspects of the marketplace, for instance noting that it puts emphasis on projects to be credible, while others tend to focus on the negatives (for instance one interviewee commented that the trend of flooding intervention sites with banners and logos, even before delivering any services, “makes you realize it’s a multi-million dollar business and not a charity”<sup>9</sup>). Notably though such views are not mutually exclusive. Many studies have attempted to address the inherent problems of competition, primarily with regard to their negative impact on coordination (Steinwand 2015; Atmar and Goodhand 2002; Wilkens 2012; Ramalingam and Barnett 2010; Ghani and Lockheart 2009). However innovations to date have had only limited success. In any case squaring this circle may be impossible. In the words of one interviewee, “How do you incentivize

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<sup>7</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 2’

<sup>8</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 8’

<sup>9</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 1’

collaboration when the whole enterprise is based on competition? Every agency is fighting for its life”<sup>10</sup>.

In the following analysis I seek to explore some of these trends and the extent to which they serve to increase or limit the potential for competition in the aid world in Afghanistan. While in later chapters I look in depth at UNHCR as a case study, the purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the dynamics that interviewees noted as being important as serving to either increase or decrease the potential for competition. I aim to provide a broad snapshot of the aid marketplace in Afghanistan: The players that are involved; the institutional environment in which they operate; the agendas they seek to promote; and their perceptions of both the motivations of other actors and the positive and negative impacts of dynamics of competition. In addition I hope to show how and why it is necessary to consider interests, convictions and context simultaneously in order to avoid simplistic explanations for actions. Notably though, while I make the claim that interests, values-based objectives, and bureaucratic pressures are always present and serve to condition action, the nature of those interests, values and pressures is itself situationally contingent and likely to differ between actors. Additionally those pressures impact differently on individuals and organisations.

The following analysis is based on in depth interviews with over 70 people connected to the Afghan aid marketplace, including donors, government, UN agencies and NGOs. Where relevant I also draw on my own experience of working in Afghanistan. The purpose is to focus specifically on subjective perceptions and

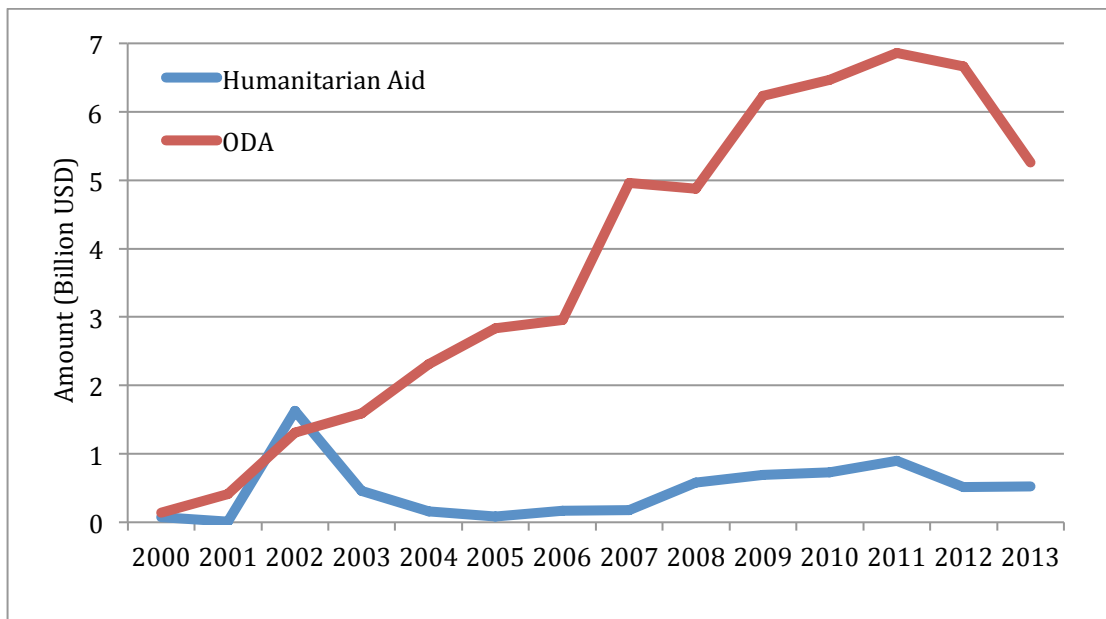
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<sup>10</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 6’

to highlight how actors within this environment think about the context, the motivations driving their own actions, and those that they attribute to others. The opinions expressed may in many cases be limited to the individual expressing them and claims regarding generalizability may be thus limited. However at a collective level the opinions expressed and reproduced here do serve, it is hoped, to paint a nuanced and textured picture of the social space that is the Afghan aid world.

### **3.2 The Afghan Aid Marketplace**

Aid is big business in Afghanistan. Following the 2001 invasion official development aid levels rose rapidly in Afghanistan from a low of 136 million in 2000 to a high of 6.8 billion in 2011, representing a fifty-fold increase in a little over ten years, as illustrated in figure four:



**Figure 4: Official Development Assistance (ODA) and humanitarian aid in Afghanistan<sup>11</sup>**

The rapid influx of such large quantities of aid has had significant benefits for Afghanistan. Economic growth averaged 9.4% per year between 2003-2012 (World Bank 2016). Health indicators have improved steadily year on year (CSO 2011/12). Illiteracy has fallen while school attendance has risen dramatically (Ibid). However aid has also had negative impacts. Notably it has helped fuel massive corruption, pushing the country near to the top of global corruption rankings (Transparency International 2015). There is also evidence that aid has fuelled conflict by providing income to insurgent groups and criminal gangs (SIGAR 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Source: OECD DAC International Development Statistics (ODA); OCHA Financial Tracking Service (Humanitarian Aid)

The aid mostly comes from a handful of northern donor states. For instance in 2013 the US, Japan, Germany and UK provided over two thirds of all Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Afghanistan (OECD 2015). That year 27 states provided \$528 million to the humanitarian sector, along with the EU, UN and other pooled funds and private donors (OCHA 2013). However while the top 10 donors in that list provided around 80% of total humanitarian funding (the US alone accounting for 18.4% of the total), the bottom ten states between them only accounted for 0.5% of the total (Ibid). “Buying power” in the market is thus highly concentrated in the hands of a few powerful actors.

Along with high volumes of aid, there is a great plurality of actors operating in the aid marketplace in Afghanistan. As noted, 27 states (and other actors) provide humanitarian aid, while even more provide development assistance. The Afghan government is composed of 25 ministries, parliament, the presidency, executive agencies and sub-national governance bodies. 24 agencies make up the UN country team, while multiple governance bodies (including the UN secretariat, General Assembly, and the management structures of individual agency) exert influence over these actors. In addition to many private companies, implementing agencies that are currently registered include 269 international NGOs and 1,675 national NGOs. Further, within every organisation noted above are diverse individuals who all have different backgrounds, characters, interests and motivations, and who collectively make up the aid world.

I have specifically titled this chapter the ‘aid marketplace’, rather than, for instance, the ‘humanitarian marketplace’ or the ‘development marketplace’. In

practice I focus predominantly on the humanitarian sector (particularly in later chapters) but a large number of my conclusions span both areas. The humanitarian and development worlds are generally viewed as entirely separate institutions, relying on different actors, funding streams, and coordination structures. Generally there is much criticism that the two worlds are too far apart and this is normally accompanied by regular calls for greater coherence, dialogue and joint planning between the two. It is worth noting though that in many ways the division between what is humanitarian and what is development is much more complex in practice than it may appear in theory. The line between the two worlds is becoming increasingly blurred (Stoddard 2006; Mattner 2008; Krause 2014). Occasionally it is almost invisible.

In terms of relevant actors, for instance, the vast majority of those interviewed, in donors, UN agencies or NGOs mentioned that their organisation had one foot in both camps. There are a few organisations that style their activities as purely humanitarian or development but increasingly these are a minority. Most donors for instance are not separated into distinct humanitarian and development organisations and even those that are, such as the EU, with ECHO delivering humanitarian aid and Devco providing development support, accept a certain amount of blurring of the lines, such as budget lines handled by the latter development-oriented actor for funding activities oriented towards 'food security', 'linking relief, rehabilitation and development', or 'aid to uprooted populations' that are arguably more humanitarian in nature than development.

According to one UN agency interviewee “Humanitarian funding is seen as more pristine because it’s lifesaving”<sup>12</sup>, yet a very large proportion of humanitarian funding and activities in Afghanistan go beyond attempting to save lives and instead aims to reduce vulnerability and, often, to have a long term impact on the ‘resilience’ of the affected populations. For this reason the Afghan government has not yet succeeded in producing a policy distinguishing between the two although at a certain point it had planned to. As a government interviewee commented:

“The line between these activities is also quite blurred. We have humanitarian activities that have a development sort of impact but then you also do some development work on a short term in the realm of sort of humanitarian activities. We haven’t been successful in that to be honest.”<sup>13</sup>

In any case, regardless of whether the difference between many self-styled humanitarian and development projects is substantive or strategic, the established humanitarian and development marketplaces are at least in some ways nevertheless quite distinct. In the development marketplace the Afghan government is the pre-eminent actor and establishes priorities based on factors internal to the government and through negotiation with donors. For the humanitarian world however, in the words of one UN interviewee, “The approach has been the international community is not contributing, it’s substituting”<sup>14</sup>. Afghan government involvement is hence limited and priorities are largely determined through consensus by the relevant, mostly international, actors. This

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<sup>12</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 4’

<sup>13</sup> Interview, ‘Government 3’

<sup>14</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 12’

makes it in some ways a more interesting marketplace to examine as there is no single over-arching actor monopolising legitimacy (at least if one does not count the UN) and negotiations between market participants thus take place in a more open forum.

### 3.2.1 Mercenaries

*“All these things work like businesses, non-profit businesses. They’re self-propelling machines”<sup>15</sup>*

A number of for-profit companies operate in Afghanistan and, in the words of a senior government interviewee, “make tons of money here”<sup>16</sup>. However, they are not the subject of the current analysis. While companies may naturally be expected to be driven by a profit motive and thus to act as rational power maximisers the same may not necessarily be expected of UN agencies and NGOs, donors or host governments. The observation that they often do act in similar ways may be explained by reference to various aspects of the incentive system inherent to the aid world. Indeed most interviewees seemed to feel that the design of the aid system (particularly limited funding based on competitive tenders) made a certain level of opportunism inevitable.

As recounted in Chapter 2, aid organisations, common to other bureaucracies, are subject to a certain level of what I term ‘mercenary’ pressures. In other words they

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<sup>15</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 18’

<sup>16</sup> Interview, ‘Government 3’

have a vested interest in increasing their budgets and influence and in any case are heavily incentivised to act in a self-interested manner simply by virtue of operating in a competitive context in which others may be expected to pursue their own interests (Gibson et al 2005; Cooley and Ron 2002; Meyer 1995; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Brehm and Gates 1999; Downs 1967). This observation provides a clear interest-based prism through which to analyse the aid sector. In the current section I develop that perspective and show that these interests are indeed an important influence and can thus be used to explain much activity, competition and inter-organisational disagreement. As noted in Chapter 2, this theoretical framing is predominantly reflected in IR and political economy writing, which both take as their starting point an assumption of 'rational' (i.e. self interested) behaviour.

In some ways the assumption that organisations, and the individuals working within them, act primarily to promote their own interests within the aid marketplace is perhaps the easiest conclusion to draw from a macro-level analysis of the aid world. Indeed, interviews uncovered ample evidence for this thesis. Interviewees from both UN agencies and NGOs openly admitted that they saw it as their role to promote their organisation, and its programmes, externally. Powerful organisations within the aid world were seen by both insiders and outsiders as vigorously seeking to defend their privileged positions. 'Turf wars' were often explained by reference to institutional interests. As a senior UN staff member

commented “all bureaucracies fear loss of power and influence”<sup>17</sup>, and in this sense the Afghan aid world appears to be no exception.

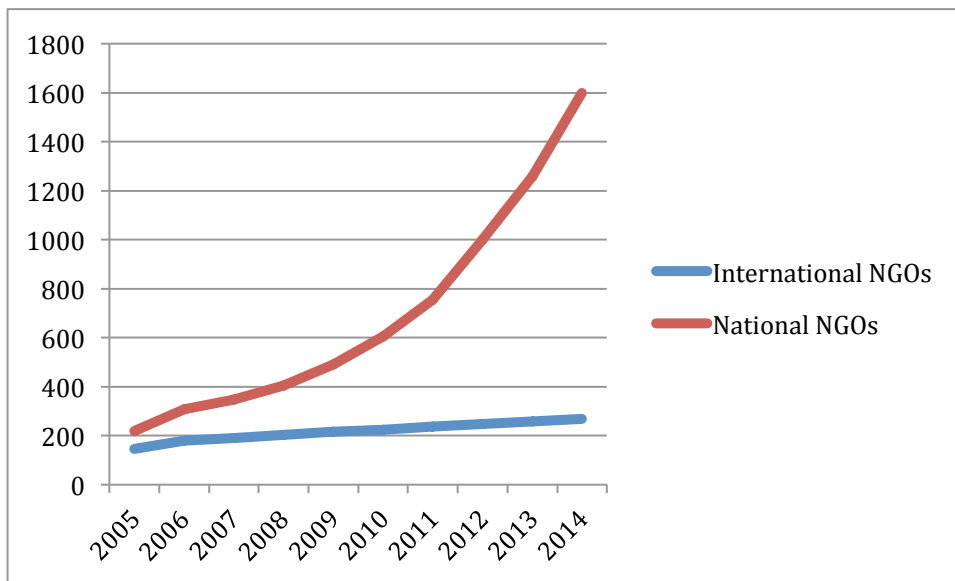
A macro-level examination of the NGO sector in Afghanistan (the lowest, yet also largest, rung in the aid chain) fits neatly within this framing. The ‘missionary’ view of the marketplace tends to perceive national NGOs as autonomous manifestations of local civil society, with a resulting legitimacy that neither local companies nor international NGOs are seen as having (Stewart 1997) and they are thus targeted for support by donors partly on that basis (Mercer 2002; Howell and Lind 2009). Yet, as described below, the Afghan experience appears to suggest an alternative framing corresponding more closely to ‘rational’ actors responding to market openings and opportunities.

In parallel with the increase in humanitarian and development funding the number of both international and national NGOs has increased sharply in recent years. With the influx in funding international NGOs reportedly increased from 350 in 1999 to what some sources estimated to be around 2,000 in 2003 (Johnson and Leslie 2004). The passing of an NGO Act in 2005, which required the official registering of NGOs, then reduced the total number of all NGOs (national and international) to around 1,100 (USIG 2007). Since that period, according to the Ministry of Economy’s records (where all NGOs are now required to register), the number of international NGOs has almost doubled from 146 registered in 2005 to 269 in 2014 (Ministry of Economy 2014). However when compared to national NGOs this increase seems exceptionally modest. The number of Afghan NGOs has

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<sup>17</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 11’

risen from 219 in 2005 to 1,598 in 2014, representing a seven-fold increase over 10 years, as illustrated in Figure 5 (2015 is not included as only partial data exists for the year but the total number of registered national NGOs is now 1,675). The ratio of international to national NGOs meanwhile has changed from 1:1.5 in 2005, to 1:5.9 in 2014.



**Figure 5: NGOs in Afghanistan<sup>18</sup>**

What do these NGOs do? An analysis of the names of the 1,675 national NGOs currently registered at the Ministry of Economy provides some insights and suggests that overwhelmingly these are organisations providing development services. Indeed (besides ‘Afghan’, ‘Afghanistan’ and ‘organization’) ‘development’ and ‘services’ are the two of the most commonly occurring words in the names of Afghan NGOs (they occur in the names of 449 and 205 NGOs respectively; representing 27% and 12% of the total). According to the information provided by

<sup>18</sup> Source: Ministry of Economy of Afghanistan

their names, Afghan NGOs work in key social services such as education (194) or health (81). Large numbers are engaged in providing vocational or training services (70), research (50) or other types of social welfare services (269 for 'social', 64 for 'welfare'). Target beneficiaries are women (255), children (51) and, more generally, communities (50). Many are present in the humanitarian (36) sector, working on rehabilitation (154), relief (34) and reconstruction (21). It is worth noting that these are all terms common to the aid industry. Indeed Afghan NGOs appear to have embraced many of the "buzz words" used by this community. Afghan NGOs thus work on capacity building (49), empowerment (44), sustainability (24) and awareness (11) among others. In other words the Afghan NGO sector seems to be remarkably attuned to the priorities of the international community and the issues that this latter is keen to fund. While it is not impossible that these priorities could have emerged organically without the availability of external funding, it seems somewhat unlikely. Indeed for a deeply religious country it may be surprising that the word 'Islamic' occurs only once. While there is a ministry devoted partially to the needs of 'martyrs' (the Ministry of Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled) and the word is commonly used to refer to war-wounded veterans who are a major focus of sympathy and support throughout the country, only one NGO includes the word 'martyrs' in its title, and not a single NGO contains the name of any of the major ethnic groups despite Afghan society being organised on largely ethnic lines.

These results would seem to suggest that national NGOs are predominantly service providers relying on international funding rather than autonomously-occurring citizens' initiatives. Indeed in purely economic terms it would be fully rational for

local actors to take advantage of the market opportunity provided by the sudden availability of large aid resources and to create organisations able to respond to the demand (from donors) for services. Notably pay structures even in national NGOs are generally higher than in local businesses making NGO formation an attractive market proposition. Of course this does not negate other reasons for working in the local NGO sector (and there are indeed a great many dedicated and committed individuals working in it), but as with all actors in the humanitarian marketplace both self-interest and principled motivations may exist concurrently and, to an extent, be mutually reinforcing. This is in line with the findings of both Cooley and Ron (2002) and Meyer (1995) who concede altruistic motivations at an individual level, but argue that at a macro level the wider competitive context makes self-interested behaviour among NGOs almost inevitable.

A further claim often made on behalf of national NGOs is that they are, by virtue of their grounding in local civil society, more sustainable than international NGOs. For instance, one interviewee echoing a strong, and common, argument in favour of national NGOs receiving more support, said that in contrast to international NGOs, they “are there before, during and after an emergency”<sup>19</sup>. However, the figures from the Ministry of Economy appear to challenge this assertion. In addition to lists of active NGOs, the Ministry also publishes the names of dissolved NGOs. To date 1,890 national NGOs have been dissolved, compared to 147 international NGOs. In other words, of all national NGOs that have been created in Afghanistan more than half (55%) are no longer operating, while just over a third (35%) of international NGOs have been dissolved (though some of these

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<sup>19</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 6’

international NGOs may only have been dissolved as part of the process of nationalisation of their Afghan operations and may still be operating as national NGOs). Thus, based purely on this evidence, international NGOs would appear to be more sustainable than national ones (as presumably might be the case if comparing national and transnational companies). Partly this is likely to be due to features of the aid marketplace in Afghanistan favouring international NGOs. For instance, concerns about fraud limit local NGOs' access to funding<sup>20</sup>, providing another example of the importance of symbolic capital (reputations and trust) in this marketplace. But it is also likely to be because international NGOs may have attributes that their local counterparts may lack, such as the ability to draw on reserves of capital to tide them over periods of low funding, larger reserves of human resources and expertise, and, perhaps most crucially of all, they are likely to be more skilled in the areas that ensure success in the aid marketplace: Specifically the creation of project proposals and maintaining relations with international donors.

International NGOs meanwhile flooded into Afghanistan in the early post-2001 era. One interviewee spoke of "an ambulance chase feel"<sup>21</sup> during this time as NGOs scrambled to establish themselves and secure contracts in the context of high levels of aid availability. The inflow of aid also brought changes to the sector. As budgets increased and experienced aid workers replaced or began to outnumber volunteers many organisations already in Afghanistan began to professionalise their operations. One interviewee described how his own NGO transformed

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Interview, 'NGO 9'

relatively quickly, dropping its original religious volunteer ethos to a large extent, and shifting into a higher gear “when money started to flow”<sup>22</sup>.

NGOs operate in a highly precarious business environment. Grants vary in length between a few months and a few years, but are seldom longer and there are never any guarantees about receiving follow-up funding. Staff are often employed on short-term contracts and are highly conscious that their position, or the project they are working on, may not be renewed. Unsurprisingly therefore, despite the high amount of funding currently available in Afghanistan, in the words of one NGO staff member, “competition for funding between NGOs can be quite ruthless”<sup>23</sup>. As failure to secure funding poses significant threats to an organisation’s survival, the capacity to adapt to changing market conditions is fundamental. As a UN interviewee commented “It’s a survival mechanism. If the money is in [Sexual or Gender Based Violence], that’s what NGOs become an expert in. So you need to be able to reinvent yourself”<sup>24</sup>.

Competition to maximise financial resources goes far beyond the NGO sector, affecting UN agencies, government ministries and even, to an extent, donor agencies. Beyond the image of unitary organisations, such pressures are just as likely to apply internally as individuals and sub-units within aid agencies may be expected to seek to advance their own positions (Brehm and Gates 1999; Allison 1972; Ghani and Lockhart 2009; Bouchikhi 1998; Hanreider 2015).

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 8’

<sup>24</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 20’

This means for instance that even within donor organisations (which, in the conventional sense are not seeking to attract funding, but to spend it) there is nevertheless a certain amount of internal competition for funding; with other departments of the civil service, and with representations in other countries. Multiple donors noted in interviews that they actively tried to attract funding towards their own sectors and the Afghanistan portfolio as a whole. As one commented, for instance, “Colleagues fight for more funding for their own programmes. In that sense [donor agency] is no different than any other department”<sup>25</sup>. Another donor noted that individual interests could play a role in this dynamic as sometimes there was a tendency “to measure your own importance in terms of how much funding you manage”<sup>26</sup>.

Describing UN agencies, several interviewees also made reference to the personal or career gains connected, generally, to furthering organisational interests. This took the form of securing funding, either for one’s own agency or under one’s own management within the agency, avoiding upsetting relationships with powerful actors, or proposing responses that fit within an individual’s existing experience or skillset so as to ensure continued employment and funding. Some commented that UN staff are particularly susceptible to formatting and that one outcome of that process is to encourage an aggressive approach to fundraising. For instance one donor, talking about the UN, spoke of “the way people in the organisation are rewarded for raising funds. The bigger the better. It’s a big career boost for those involved”<sup>27</sup>. Another, commenting on the inevitable competition that results from

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<sup>25</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 11’

<sup>26</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 16’

<sup>27</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 15’

these dynamics, stated that “Setting up a raft of UN agencies that are all self-funding, it’s a bit perverse”<sup>28</sup>.

There is thus some suspicion, at times even cynicism, regarding motivations. Many donors roundly criticised, in particular UN agencies, for, as they saw it, seeking to expand their mandates, letting institutional interests become the over-riding factor in questions of coordination, linking advocacy too closely to their programmatic functions, and attempting to “leverage the UN brand”<sup>29</sup> to promote their position vis-à-vis other actors. Some interviewees made direct comparisons to the behaviour of profit-making companies<sup>30</sup> while others noted that the UN is becoming “more corporate”<sup>31</sup>. Due to wide-ranging, vaguely defined and overlapping UN mandates if an agency has an interest in expanding into any specific sector then “You will find entry points”<sup>32</sup>, according to one interviewee, meaning there is a high potential for opportunistic, expansion-oriented behaviour.

On the other hand however there was some recognition that competition also has its advantages in terms of efficiency. Some donors even lamented a lack of competition between certain actors, feeling that it would produce efficiency gains and make those agencies strive to produce better programmes<sup>33</sup>. Provided donors have a clear idea of the needs they want to address then they may welcome organisations seeking to fill the market openings that they create. As one donor put it: “Agencies want to consolidate their market-share. If they fulfil a need we

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<sup>28</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 18’

<sup>29</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 15’

<sup>30</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 18’

<sup>31</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 6’

<sup>32</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 3’

<sup>33</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 7’

would say why not?”<sup>34</sup>. Equally, if the agency’s objectives do not correspond with the donor’s then this also is not necessarily problematic as the donor is not obliged to provide support. As another donor commented “Agencies run around and try to sell you stuff, but you’re not interested because they’re selling a solution to a problem that you don’t have”<sup>35</sup>.

Beyond funding there is also competition for control; political power in its most basic sense. The Afghan government for instance is in constant competition with other actors, particularly donors, to be able to retain control over the aid agenda in Afghanistan (Bizhan 2016). Primarily the government is seeking to increase the amount of aid funding that they control (termed ‘on budget’ aid) or which, failing that, is designated to be ‘aligned’, meaning it falls within nationally-defined priorities<sup>36</sup>. In terms of external actors, the government is increasingly seeing the UN also in competitive terms as it has noticed the tendency for agencies to become implementing partners, straying in their view from original mandates, and it is thus pushing them to return to advisory and capacity building roles, according to interviews. Equally this applies to NGOs, which may also be seen as competing with the government to be awarded scarce aid resources and to influence dominant narratives. Waisova (2008) maintains that, while NGOs and the government generally enjoy close collaborative relationships in Afghanistan, competition between them is growing, while others have noted that reliance on the NGO sector for service delivery risks undermining the Afghan state (McKechnie 2002; Ghani and Lockhart 2009; Lockhart 2007; Bizhan 2016). From the Afghan

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<sup>34</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 11’

<sup>35</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 16’

<sup>36</sup> Targets towards these commitments are enshrined within agreements in the context of the ‘Kabul Process’

government's viewpoint, according to an interviewee, if donors are working with NGOs "then they are following the lead of others. So if we don't lead someone else will lead. I think that's the overall perception now"<sup>37</sup>.

Crucially though, funding and political control are not the only focuses of competition in the Afghan aid marketplace and increasing social capital (in the form of reputations, authority and influence) is of at least equal importance (Barnett 2013; Hardt 2014; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Barnett and Weiss 2008). Such concerns permeate agency thinking. For instance, Wilkens (2012) has written how a desire to maintain national prestige effectively undermined efforts to coordinate Nordic countries input into the main donor coordination forum<sup>38</sup> as each country's representative was more concerned about the image of their country than in providing efficient and coordinated input. Equally, from discussions with donors in Afghanistan some clearly see the value of 'flagship' programmes that will increase the prestige of their agency and make them stand out from others; a concern entirely unrelated to efficiency in service delivery. Other interviews noted a desire among agencies to maximise visibility and receive credit for implemented actions. Equally, reputational concerns were often cited as the major disincentive to participating in potentially risky projects.

One outcome of these dynamics of competition for funding and prestige is the undermining of wider collective action goals, in particular hindering coordination. This is aggravated, according to interviews, by the extent to which coordination

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<sup>37</sup> Interview, 'Government 3'

<sup>38</sup> The Joint Coordination Monitoring Board (JCMB)

and decision-making structures are based on consensus rather than being hierarchical. In particular the exceptionally horizontal nature of the aid world allows agencies to successfully resist moves that would weaken their autonomy. Whether in donor, UN agency or NGO coordination forums, decisions are taken by consensus. Many interviewees complained of devoting too much time to consensus building, which was seen as having become an end in itself, and some bemoaned the lack of an actor able to take decisions that could override organisational interests (though a cynical observation is that often this was in the context of suggesting that their organisation should be invested with such authority). This horizontal decision-making in turn makes it more likely that competition will undermine coordination, and this dynamic appears from interviews to be pervasive.

One donor for instance described UNAMA's attempt to coordinate donors as akin to "herding a flea circus"<sup>39</sup>. Beyond the already mentioned concerns of national prestige, another interviewee mentioned that donors' commitment to their own priorities supersedes their commitment to a collective agenda, noting that "everyone speaks about government-owned until the moment it touches their own programmes"<sup>40</sup>. Donors are thus more interested in supporting their own projects than, for instance, in building government capacity (a collective action goal), something that is manifested in the tendency to attract higher capacity national staff away from the Afghan civil service (Ghani and Lockhart 2009). Such observations are in line with those of Ramalingam and Barnett (2010), Steinwand

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<sup>39</sup> Interview, 'Donor 16'

<sup>40</sup> Interview, 'Donor 15'

(2015), Atmar and Goodhand (2002) and others who have argued that a focus on narrow organisational goals tends to undermine donor coordination to achieve collective action goals.

The same dynamics are present within the UN and are also aggravated by the loose governance structure in which the agencies operate. All UN agencies are hierarchically responsible to their own headquarters rather than the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and hence coordination functions are based primarily on persuasion and moral authority to ensure commitment to shared objectives. The SRSG has few mechanisms available to exert control over the work of individual agencies and so UN coordination at the country level tends to be a negotiated process based on consensus. This is seen by many as incentivising competition. According to one donor in Afghanistan, as UN governance is “bottom up rather than top down, so each agency seeks to maximize its role”<sup>41</sup>. Competition between UN agencies in Afghanistan is not a new phenomenon. Rashid (2001) for instance details how competition between UN agencies in the 1990s undermined negotiations with the Taliban as each agency was more interested in implementing their individual projects than strengthening their collective bargaining positions, thus creating an opportunity for the Taliban to play one agency off against another. There have been multiple efforts to bolster coherence at the UN level, most notably through the One UN initiative. However, though it has been promoted by UNAMA, it has had limited success to date, according to one interviewee, expressing a widely held opinion, “because the

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<sup>41</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 15’

interests are too strong”<sup>42</sup>. Multiple interviewees noted the tendency of UN agencies to attempt, particularly in formal settings, to portray a united face to the external world, thereby masking the tensions beneath the surface. But despite this, few within the UN would call One UN a resounding success in Afghanistan. While a certain amount of frustration was common, the level of discontent apparent in interviews was generally not as high as that expressed by this former head of a UN agency in Afghanistan:

“This whole UN should basically kill all agencies or integrate them in one agency, call it UN Development, otherwise call it UN Humanitarian, and forget all this competition. It is competition, a competitive environment that you’re talking about. Agencies doing dirty games. I mean fighting themselves out. ... They’re fighting all for the same money. I think this competition among UN agencies is not doing any good. ... Sometimes I think let them all go into one single agency. I think the games that we see between the agencies, and the competition, and the politics, either they should give up a lot of these development projects or they should basically integrate them. Because One UN is not happening in Afghanistan.”<sup>43</sup>

This dynamic is also mirrored within the many constituent elements of the Afghan government. Rather than being a purely technical process, policies and priorities often emerge as the result of power games between, and within, Afghan ministries (Monsutti 2012; Ghani and Lockhart 2009). In particular, individual ministries

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<sup>42</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 16’

<sup>43</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 7’

depend heavily on their ability to convince either central government or donors, of the importance of the issues that they work on and to attract funding towards them. The inevitable risk is that this competition, often aggravated by donors, serves to undermine unified government strategy. Line ministries need funding not only to fulfil their objectives and to boost their prestige and that of their minister, but also for some ministries, in a period of declining aid revenues, to justify their very existence, according to multiple interviewees. Thus, they are very unlikely to ever turn down funding that fits within their own agenda (even if they lack the capacity to properly oversee its implementation) but which does not necessarily comply with the wider strategic priorities defined by central government and the ministry of finance. Some interviewees noted a tendency for line ministries to act possessively regarding the implementation of policies ascribed to them as a way of monopolising “all the money and all the glory”<sup>44</sup> associated with successful implementation. As a senior government representative explained, this fragmentation serves to undermine a unitary, holistic approach to budgeting:

“There is certainly competition among the ministries, who gets how much money. ... But donors are also manipulating this situation. So if I have a project, let’s say in the agriculture sector, and what I do is, I don’t approach the ministry of finance directly, because then I will be told that either they don’t need it or it’s not a good project etc. So what they do is that they approach the line ministry, exploiting this competition that exists, and they say ‘if you don’t get this money it will go to someone else’. And then they

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<sup>44</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 6’

put their stamp on this project and they say ‘well we want this funding’.  
Even if we say ‘no’ and it’s not in line with what the thinking is, they’re like  
‘oh this is what’s happening’. So that marketplace is there of course.”<sup>45</sup>

So, competition is widely perceived as causing opportunistic behaviour, weakening coordination and undermining collective action goals, whether in donors, UN agencies, ministries or NGOs. But it is important to note that even from a rational, self-interested, ‘mercenary’ perspective there are reasons to expect more principled behaviour to predominate. This is because trust and credibility are likely to play a particularly important role in the aid sector (Hardt 2014; Arrow 1963; Meyer 1999; Werker and Ahmed 2008) and thus the need to retain this form of social capital may serve to restrain some more overtly mercenary tendencies. This goes beyond the already-mentioned potential for competition to drive organisations to offer a better ‘product’.

In a marketplace in which information is scarce, credibility plays a very significant role. Numerous interviewees made reference to the need to retain credibility among donors and their peers, and there was a strong perception that any activities serving to undermine trust would ultimately hurt their own organisational interests. This consideration therefore likely serves to significantly limit, at least overt, competition, as well as information manipulation and exaggeration, within the Afghan aid world. Making unsubstantiated claims was, for instance, referenced by multiple interviewees as having a serious negative impact on organisational credibility. Conversely, organisations acting in ways perceived

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<sup>45</sup> Interview, ‘Government 3’

to be non-self-interested, for instance by turning down funding, were thought to gain a credibility boost that ultimately improved their position in the marketplace. The need to be perceived as acting in non-self-interested ways in order to retain credibility and trust is, in particular, likely to play an important role in the creation and transmission of information in the aid marketplace; the subject of the next chapter.

Further, mercenary behaviour does not always necessarily equate to an orientation towards expansion. There may be good reasons for organisations to refrain from attempting to secure an ever-larger market share, even beyond Bouchhikhi's (1998) observation that expansion tends to lead to re-balancing of internal power relations within an organisation making it unpalatable to some decision-makers. One example given by an interviewee for instance is that smaller technical NGOs often try to maintain a narrow focus on goals that they are confident in being able to achieve:

“They try to stay within their parameters. Because for them, organizational management-wise, it's actually within their interest. It's not a simple game of bigger is better, get as big as you possibly can, for all agencies. A lot of them it's about what can we manage, what's within our mandate and within our scope to handle, so that also holds back agencies and stops them just pushing for everything.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Interview, 'NGO 1'

Finally, rational behaviour at an individual level may also lead to more cooperative, and less organisational interest-centred, outcomes. Though individual and organisational interests were generally perceived as being closely aligned, interviewees also made reference to the high levels of mobility within the aid world meaning that one's professional development may not always be best served by being perceived as overly partisan. Hence, at a personal level, individuals may have higher motivation than their institutional context might suggest to compromise, to maintain good relations beyond their organisation, or to develop a reputation for honesty, meaning that individual and organisational interests may not always be in alignment.

In conclusion, looking through the 'mercenary' lens at the interests in the aid marketplace reveals interesting conclusions. At least in the perceptions of many, organisations, units and individuals in the Afghan aid sector compete for funding, power, and prestige, while seeking also to promote their reputations. The wider context of the marketplace appears to make a certain amount of competition and opportunism inevitable. It may also be intrinsic to the very nature of organisations. For instance, the macro-level examination of the NGO sector above appears to support Monsutti's (2012) conclusion that in Afghanistan "the grassroots dimension of many associations of so-called civil society is tenuous due to their dependence on international donors." The outcomes of a competitive context are not all perceived as negative however. Competition may produce more efficient or effective projects; the need to retain trust and credibility may restrain opportunistic tendencies; and incentives at the individual level may lead to more cooperative inter-agency behaviour. At the same time though, when combined

with loose hierarchies based on consensus, these same dynamics of competition and fragmentation may undermine wider collective action goals and lead to less coordinated behaviour from donors, UN agencies and government ministries alike.

### 3.2.2 Missionaries

*“You can sense the dedication and the passion, and the belief, and the this is what we have to do’ and to a point that, sometimes, it gets a bit religious maybe”<sup>47</sup>*

The above analysis presented a view of the aid sector that in some ways makes for depressing reading. Thankfully it is only part of the picture. In contrast to the work of IR specialists and political economists, the writing of (predominantly) anthropologists, sociologists and aid practitioners reveals a more positive image of the aid world and one that is more ready to take its claims to altruism at face value. This analytical framework thus takes as its starting point the assumption that aid organisations and the individuals working within them are predominantly motivated by the goals that they publicly claim to advance and that while organisational interests may play a role they are not the driving factor (Rieff 1993; Lumsdaine 1993; Gibson et al 2005; Andreoni 1990; Barnett 2013; Niland et al 2015; Stirrat 2008; Werker and Ahmed 2008; Meyer 1995; 1999; Weiss 2013; De Waal 1997; Hayman et al 2016). This is what I term the ‘missionary’ lens.

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<sup>47</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 3’

The problem with this lens is that, as seemingly altruistic behaviour may bolster trust and credibility and may thus ultimately prove to be self-serving (as outlined above), this opens up the potential to super-impose 'mercenary' motivations on almost any 'missionary' act. For example a few interviewees suggested, as examples of non-self-interested behaviour, their organisation turning down funding that they were offered. For instance, UNHCR turned down funding for activities in a province where its ability to monitor was low<sup>48</sup>, as well as to assist in the deportation of failed asylum seekers to Afghanistan<sup>49</sup>. Similarly UNHABITAT chose not to be involved in the development of the poorly-designed Land Allocation Scheme site Aliceghan<sup>50</sup>. Ostensibly, according to all three interviewees this was due to a matter of principle but the extent to which these decisions could have tarnished the agency's reputation probably also entered into play (and notably other organisations were willing to take on these activities). In another example, neither UNDP nor UNOPS were initially keen to take on the development of national identity cards, a project eventually taken on by IOM, due explicitly to caution related to the risk to the reputation of their agencies in the event of failure of the project.

Nevertheless the observation that altruistic action may ultimately be self-serving does not imply that at an individual or agency level calculations are necessarily made in such a strategic manner. Notably, interviews revealed a much more mixed, and less interest-based, picture. Many interviewees were uncomfortable even conceiving of the aid world in marketplace terms or talking of competition

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<sup>48</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 11'

<sup>49</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 21'

<sup>50</sup> Interview, 'UN Agency 7'

rather than collaboration. No interviewee admitted ever actively seeking to privilege their individual or organisational interest over and above that of the beneficiaries they aim to help (and probably never would). Any questions perceived as leading in that direction were vigorously denied. While aspects of competition were generally recognised, it was rather taken as a given that the primary underlying motivation of all actors, or at least all reputable actors, was altruistic. Those who spoke specifically of their individual motivations similarly tended not to do so in self-interested terms. One, for instance, spoke of “the philosophy I was brought up with”<sup>51</sup> as being antithetical to promoting organisational interest at the expense of beneficiaries. Another interviewee spoke of his religious convictions as being a driving factor behind his decision to work in Afghanistan and his impression that it was “a privilege”<sup>52</sup> to have the opportunity to, as he saw it, represent his country abroad. Others stressed that achieving humanitarian goals was more important to them than the benefits for particular agencies. A large number of interviewees made reference to deep dedication and commitment, not only when talking about their own organisations but also regarding others. Hence any analysis of the Afghan aid marketplace focussed only on interests is likely to be limited at best.

However an interesting finding is that the specific altruistic goals that individuals care about appear to also be shaped by organisational context. The aid world in Afghanistan, as elsewhere, is above all a social space in which individual behaviour is regulated by norms of social acceptability, and in which individuals’ outlooks are

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<sup>51</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 2’

<sup>52</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 9’

likely to be heavily influenced by both their particular experiences and responsibilities, and of those around them. This serves to ensure that to some extent individuals working in the same organisation or context tend to have similar views about particular issues. Beyond self-selection, aid agency staff members are formatted to think in certain ways and are influenced in their actions by the wider culture of their organisation (Weaver and Leiteritz 2005; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Brehm and Gates 1999; Bouchkkhi 1998; Checkel 2005; Rajak and Stirrat 2011; Downs 1967). This may result in a strong commitment to certain narrowly defined, ostensibly altruistic objectives, which agencies and individuals may feel driven to promote (Rubenstein 2008; Kissinger 1995; Rieff 2003; Feinstein International Famine Centre 2004; Stirrat 2008; Downs 1967). In turn, this may create another form of competition regarding the advancement of specific non-interest based agendas.

All interviewees from donors, UN agencies, and NGOs expressed strong attachment to the particular issues that their agency specifically addresses. Some acknowledged that there was a tendency for people to be biased towards their own particular areas, or to see issues through the prisms that they were used to employing in daily working life. But even among those that did not specifically reference this dynamic there was a significantly high level of conformity in terms of the positions taken between those working in particular positions, with particular types of beneficiaries, or on particular types of programmes. While some self-selection may take place regarding those who applied for these jobs, it seems more likely that it is proximity to specific issues and an obligation to focus on these at a professional level that leads to a concurrent attachment at a personal

level. Proximity also, it was noted by some, breeds greater sympathy, and, as Rajak and Stirrat (2011) have noted, shared experiences in the aid world breed shared understanding. Hence some interviewees noted that people often advocate for certain predictable positions not through any preconceived design or strategy but rather as a result of formatting. Socialisation therefore serves to determine how individuals understand interests and define altruistic goals. Generally the outcome of formatting is to strengthen organisational unity but occasionally this has led to interviewees questioning, or attempting to change, organisational policy when the area that they specifically work on is not highly prioritised within the wider structure.

This dynamic is not necessarily seen negatively. For instance one senior manager in a donor agency felt on balance that it was much better for people to be engaged and enthusiastic about their work and thus “Ideally people *should* be advocates for their sectors”<sup>53</sup>. Notably the driving motivation behind people promoting their own sectors was seen as primarily driven by personal commitment to those issue areas and a belief that they were important, rather than naked self-interest.

Beyond this, several of those interviewed bemoaned the low level of priority given to the issues that they work on and saw it as, to a certain extent, a failure of their agency in competing in the information marketplace, for instance in terms of the level of prioritisation given to certain geographical areas or types of people. They believed these issues should receive more attention, not because they were the issues that they happened to work on but because they deemed them to be important. Notably though no interviewees ever claimed that their particular

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<sup>53</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 16’

topics should be de-prioritised, and few advocated for increased attention to issues beyond their own mandates.

While, at a personal level, individuals appear to care more deeply about the issues that they work on than the fates of their agencies, the two are often closely connected. Notably it appears that the extent to which organisational incentives are at play may have an important impact on the degree to which there is conformity of views within and between organisations.

This dynamic is evident in comparing differences of opinion in debates in which organisational interests are at stake, and those in which they are not, or at least not to a large extent. Two topics, in which a high degree of disagreement was observed in interviews, provide a good example of this dynamic at play: These are the question of targeting aid on the basis of status or vulnerability, and the impact of urbanisation. Both of these topics are the subject of lively debate in the aid world in Afghanistan but looking closely at the two issues reveals very distinct fault lines in the way that they are understood.

The topic of whether aid should be provided on the basis of status (i.e. belonging to a specific group<sup>54</sup>) or on the basis of vulnerability criteria that is disconnected from wider group status, constitutes an exceptionally animated, and at times heated, debate among aid workers in Afghanistan. This issue will be looked at in depth in later chapters as UNHCR, as a refugee-mandated organisation, has

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<sup>54</sup> Most notably refugees or IDPs, but also children, women, disabled people, nomadic 'kuchi' people and so on.

adopted a very different position on this issue to its competitors in the aid world, notably OCHA (with donor interviewees seemingly divided largely on the basis of how their own agencies' mandates are articulated). At this juncture however, it is not necessary to delve into the arguments on either side of the debate and the ways in which both sides seek to support their claims through both moral and consequentialist arguments (though notably supporting arguments were never founded on the basis of organisational interest). Rather, it is important to note only two aspects. Firstly, the way that organisational mandates are designed means a great many aid organisations are bound to provide aid on the basis of status. These organisations are restricted to greater or lesser degrees to condition their support, and thus to limit their interventions, on the basis of status. Other organisations that are not designed to deliver support to particular types of people tend to use different measures (for instance vulnerability rankings or area-based approaches) to determine whom to target. Thus the question of whether aid should be delivered on the basis of status or vulnerability is one in which significant organisational interests are at play because conclusions from that debate are likely to shape the direction of aid resources. If donors prefer to target aid on the basis of status then it makes sense to make use of the organisations set up for this purpose. If on the other hand they adopt a vulnerability-based approach this effectively excludes those organisations that lack the flexibility to target aid on that basis.

The second observation to make is that differences of opinion on this issue were very closely correlated to organisational affiliation. In almost all cases those criticising a status-based approach belonged to organisations with non-status

based mandates, and those defending it were from organisations that had a status-based approach. Proponents on either side of the debate were equally passionate. There was little reason to believe that interviewees were adopting a strategic approach to their participation in the interviews (though of course this could have been the case), but rather that they were openly sharing their honestly-held opinions. In other words they appeared to have moved to what Checkel (2005) terms Type II socialisation and thus to have internalised their positions (even if that position may externally be seen as a rational calculation).

In contrast the issue of urbanisation was another topic on which strong divides of opinion were noted in interviews but, crucially, in which organisational interests are less implicated. The question of whether urbanisation has more positive or negative impacts is less likely to impact the direction of aid resources, or at least less directly. In theory at least it could impact the fortunes of organisations working in urban or rural locations but organisations generally enjoy greater flexibility on such issues than, for instance, in the status-versus-vulnerability debate, and secondly the outcome of whether urbanisation is seen as 'good' or 'bad' could play either way in aid debates (for instance if it is seen negatively then that may imply more aid for urban areas to offset the negative impacts there, or for rural areas to avoid incentivising further rural-to-urban migration). Consequently on this topic organisational affiliation had less of an impact and rather, it was nationality that seemed to be more of a determining factor in how individuals assessed the topic. Specifically, markedly different views tended to be espoused by internationals and Afghan nationals, regardless of the organisation. International aid workers, whether working for donors, UN agencies or NGOs, tended to stress

the positive benefits of urbanisation. They would typically view it as a natural process through which all societies would pass at some point or another, and thus an inevitable side effect of development, with concurrent advantages that were likely to outweigh the costs. They would mention that it has the potential to deliver improved quality of life for those moving to cities by giving them greater access to public services and enhancing their economic opportunities, as well as serving a social engineering function of softening tribal identities. They also tended to see urbanisation as a motor for job creation and economic growth on a more macro level, as a way of enabling more cost-efficient service provision, and as a means of reducing pressure on scarce rural land resources, while also creating new markets for agricultural products. In contrast Afghan respondents saw the process much more negatively. For them it was intimately connected with the insecurity in the country, and thus would slow down, stop or even be reversed were peace to come to the country. They also saw the impacts of urbanisation in terms of a strain on government services, exceeding the absorption capacity of cities and leading to unplanned urban growth not in conformity with city master plans. Continued rural to urban migration was blamed for an increase in crime, insecurity and disease. It was also believed to increase competition for jobs, depress wages, increase prices for houses and other commodities, and lead to other negative outcomes, such as traffic congestion, all of which it was felt made life harder for the resident urban population.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Much of this paragraph originally appeared in Samuel Hall (2014) and, like the majority of the rest of the report, was drafted by the author of the current work

In some ways it is not surprising that international expats and Afghans have different views of this subject and that nationality seemed a more effective predictor of opinions than organisational affiliation. Expats, it seems, view urbanisation both from the perspective of their home countries, in which urbanisation on a massive scale has generally already occurred and is now associated with industrialisation, economic growth, and later prosperity, and also through the prism of achieving progress towards development indicators. In contrast Afghan respondents, who tended to be long-term urban dwellers, have experienced this influx of rural dwellers into their cities differently. They are thus much more likely to view it from the perspective of their everyday lives, which are affected in myriad ways, that they often perceive negatively, unlike expats who are unlikely to notice, or be affected by, such changes on a personal level.

The contrast between the positions taken in these two debates (though many other examples could likely have been used) suggests that organisational incentives are likely to play an important role in socialising opinions, but if such interests are not implicated then other factors may have a greater influence.

Linked to this is the suggestion that the 'missionary' goals of actors in the aid marketplace are likely to be shaped (often subconsciously) by the 'mercenary' goals of their positions: In other words, what people feel is 'right' is likely to be influenced by what they feel is useful. Equally, while organisational incentives may impact how individuals form judgements about the world, the opposite is also likely to be true and these judgements are likely to influence individual interpretations of organisational interests. As Monsutti (2012) has noted in reference to the Afghan aid world, even when those involved are ostensibly

pursuing their own interests, it is nevertheless common to internalise new values and codes of conduct in the process, which in turn affects future action.

The point of this analysis is not to claim that missionary goals are merely a fig leaf for mercenary ones (though there may be an element of that) but rather to note that the two are often quite closely intertwined. Crucially though, the views of interviewees (who were on occasion also quite critical of their agencies) appeared to be genuinely held and their self-justifications for promoting certain topics or courses of action were almost always founded, and presented, in terms other than promoting self-interest. It would therefore appear to be personal commitment (albeit often closely, even subconsciously, linked to organisational interest) that is the driving force behind much competition in the aid world. This means that organisational culture, and particularly the prism through which individuals define, interpret and prioritise their goals, and their role more widely, in the aid system is likely to be highly important in any understanding of the aid world.

### 3.2.3 Misfits

***“That is just a matter of saying there is money allocated to a country and the only thing they don’t want is if there is any mistake in the budget, that there is any kind of questions about corruption. That is the only worry they have. So if it’s wasted, doesn’t matter. If it doesn’t reach the target group, doesn’t matter. But make sure there is no scandal and***

*get it done and make sure it is spent in the right timeframe and we're happy.*"<sup>56</sup>

So competition in the aid marketplace is driven by both interests and genuinely-held conviction. But what of the mechanism through which these goals are implemented? Objectives are not automatically translated into action but are mediated through distinct organisational logics, policies and processes; are constantly re-interpreted; and are put into action at each level by individuals armed with simple, pre-defined toolboxes yet facing complex contexts. The third set of pressures that I analyse, which I term 'misfit', are therefore related to the multi-faceted bureaucratic environment in which objectives are imperfectly translated into action in often unpredictable ways. This body of theory is largely rooted in the writing of organisational sociologists and recognises that organisations are complex places; individuals are inherently diverse; and outcomes depend heavily on specific contexts (Oestreich 2012; Brehm and Gates 1999; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Bouchikhi 1998; Mosse 2005; Hardt 2014; Van Ufford 1988). Moreover, bureaucracies' tendencies to focus on process over outcome, to treat rules as ends in themselves, to lack flexibility in adaptation, and to draw upon a limited set of defined responses, may trump, and undermine, more overarching goals (Ferguson 1994; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Wigley 2005; Mosse 2005; Allison 1972).

For one thing the extent to which trends are generalisable is likely to be highly limited due to the importance, and inherent diversity, of individuals in the aid

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<sup>56</sup> Interview, 'UN Agency 7'

sector (Hardt 2014; Mosse 2005; Bouchhikhi 1998). Supporting this argument, a very large number of respondents commented on the key role that individuals play within the system in either aggravating, or lessening, competition. Relations between organisations were seen as above all dependent on relations between individuals. Individuals could become an obstacle to working together, with a common perception being that “a lot of turf wars are based on personalities rather than who’s best placed to serve. ... Egos get in the way”<sup>57</sup>. Alternatively inter-personal bonds could work in the opposite direction, serving to break down barriers between organisations. As one interviewee commented “affinity with individuals counts for a lot. The human bond goes beyond the frameworks of agencies. It makes it enjoyable”<sup>58</sup>. There was therefore wide agreement that much of how the aid system works “comes down to people and personalities. If you like people at other agencies you tend to work well with them”<sup>59</sup>. This holds true for information transfers with one interviewee commenting that “sharing information between NGOs depends on the relation between the two people in touch with each other. It’s really person dependent”<sup>60</sup>. Likewise the likelihood of negotiation succeeding was seen as “always to do with personalities”<sup>61</sup> and, in particular, that it “depends on the readiness of individuals to compromise”<sup>62</sup>. The consequence of this is that trends are likely to be generalizable only to a very limited degree considering both the inherent variability of individuals and the perceived significance of this variable in terms of the workings of the aid marketplace.

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<sup>57</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 4’

<sup>58</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 8’

<sup>59</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 6’

<sup>60</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 8’

<sup>61</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 13’

<sup>62</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 11’

Beyond individual variability it is also necessary to consider the complex bureaucratic context in which aid decisions are made and funding is directed. On the one hand there is the constant challenge of taking action on the basis of limited information. This is the subject of the following chapter in which I detail the inherent problem of attempting to define and address needs while relying to a large extent on information provided by external actors who are eager to promote their own visions of what needs are most pressing and how they should be met.

There are also strong tendencies towards path dependency and bureaucratic inertia. Once a position has been taken it becomes more difficult for large organisations to change course, even if it may be objectively in their interests to do so (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). In terms of the sectors that donors are involved in in Afghanistan, for instance, this is to a large extent the result of these dynamics. Sectors of intervention were defined as part of the “Geneva raffle” (Burke 2014) in 2002, in which responsibilities were divided between donors without much reference to capacity or expertise (Ibid). Path dependency and the creation of bureaucratic interests then sustained those choices. Each donor built up relationships with particular ministries (Ghani and Lockhart 2009), made long-term funding commitments, hired or seconded staff with relevant expertise to manage allocated funding, and built up expectations from both other donors and line ministries regarding future support. As a result donors in Afghanistan may find that the sectors they are addressing are set in stone for historical reasons unconnected to need, or even wider interests, and that external efforts to realign support may meet with stiff resistance, according to both government and donor interviewees.

Additionally the question of convenience plays a strong role. At each level of the aid chain actors are seeking to disburse their responsibilities in a way that is effective but also manageable with limited resources. They engage in what Simon (1956) has termed 'satisficing'; adopting the simplest course of action that meets a certain threshold of satisfaction in relation to identified tasks, rather than 'optimum' solutions that would place a greater burden on the organisation. Thus for instance it may be in the interest of donors to view local NGOs and civil society as synonymous as it provides an expedient entry point for supporting the latter (Mercer 2002). NGOs in Afghanistan are thus "the part of civil society most visible to donors and most bureaucratically amenable" (Howell and Lind 2009). According to an interviewee from a consortium of NGOs operating in Afghanistan, donors are keen to support NGOs' claim to representative legitimacy as the alternative would be for consultation processes to become much more costly, cumbersome and time-consuming<sup>63</sup>.

Considerations of convenience also apply in other ways. For instance, it may be easier from a donor perspective to provide large amounts of funding to trust funds or UN agencies who then sub-contract to other implementers: As one interviewee noted, "it's easier to give money to one organization than to hundreds"<sup>64</sup>. In any case the strict system of rules and procedures designed to ensure fiscal and operational compliance severely limits the range of choices available to actors in the aid system, whatever their level.

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<sup>63</sup> Interview, 'NGO 6'

<sup>64</sup> Interview, 'Donor 11'

Organisations also do not necessarily have fixed hierarchies of interests (Martens et al 2003), leaving open the possibility that such interests are understood differently by different actors. For instance, donors in Afghanistan need to balance multiple interests including many (not always complementary) long-term strategic objectives and more immediate process-related goals, which include, according to multiple interviewees, seeking to maintain influence with the Afghan government (through funding), the Afghan people (through visibility requirements in aid programmes), and with other donors (through conforming to norms defining how a 'responsible' donor should behave, including abiding by international commitments). In terms of 'mercenary' interests, donors, including purely humanitarian ones, admitted that politics affects their funding commitments, not only in addressing issues closest to the donors own interests, but also in maintaining relationships with important actors in the humanitarian or development world. Further, some donors also promote their compatriot NGOs or companies; which some attribute to strong domestic lobbies, and others to proximity bred from socializing in a confined and limited context.

An obvious added complication in Afghanistan is that almost all donors are belligerents in the ongoing conflict. This has led to extensive criticism of politicization of aid and particularly the subjugation of humanitarian and development aims to military strategy (Waisova 2008; Waldman 2008; Donini 2010; Howell and Lind 2009). It also means that belligerent donors have a reputational stake in Afghanistan's reconstruction being, and being seen to be, a success.

Finally some donors referenced domestic politics impacting the direction of their programmes. For instance, as will be examined in a later chapter, some European donors noted that a push from their capitals to focus on displacement issues was fed by a desire to reduce onward migration to Europe. However, while noting the existence of these interests, interviewed officials seemed more likely to interpret humanitarian and development objectives at face value in terms of the altruistic ways in which they were framed.

As a way of ensuring progress towards certain goals, and ensuring that actors lower in the chain prioritise them, principals have the option of creating accountability structures for their agents. However these can also be self-defeating, particularly when they trump other, wider objectives. Accountability is generally perceived as positive, and the word was always used in such terms in interviews. However it is notable in Afghanistan the extent to which perceptions of accountability impact on individual and organisational behaviour, particularly in terms of prioritising certain outcomes over others. In my experience of working in the aid marketplace, donors, UN agencies, and NGOs were all likely to prioritise those tasks that they felt they would be judged on over issues that, while important, were less likely to be seen as their particular responsibility. Numerous examples in Afghanistan include the prioritising of particular types of beneficiaries, particular geographical regions, or closely monitored process-related indicators over less-monitored impact related indicators, even when the former may actually undermine the latter, in order to fulfil perceived accountability requirements. Hence, although accountability serves to ensure that

organisations take certain objectives seriously, the corollary finding, that it incentivises the downgrading of objectives of otherwise higher importance, seems to be less recognised and was certainly less referred to in interviews.

A notable example in Afghanistan of how accountability structures can create incentives for actors (in this case donors) to prioritise particular responsibilities pertaining to them specifically over collective action goals is provided by the system of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). PRTs operated until 2014 and were based on the premise that lead donors were given responsibility for coordinating all activities (civilian and military) in their particular province. PRTs have been much criticised for blurring the line between humanitarian and military goals (Donini 2010; Waisova 2008; Waldman 2009; Perito 2005; Howell and Lind 2009), but they also led to donors prioritising provincial development, for which they would be judged, over national-level outcomes. UNHCR, for instance, was encouraged to accept funding in specific provinces where the donor led the PRT, even though they preferred to use the funding elsewhere, according to a UNHCR interviewee<sup>65</sup>. While the PRT system was in operation donors would often allocate sectoral funding within their specific province and resist pressure from the Afghan government and other donors to re-allocate it beyond the province to areas where (according to the perception of these actors) it was most needed; a process that I observed at first hand on several occasions. In this case the incentive structure had the effect of rewarding effort towards certain specific individualized objectives more than to wider public goods objectives; as failure in the PRT province would imply reputational risks that did not apply to the same extent in provinces where

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<sup>65</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 11'

the donor agency was less implicated. Alternatively this dynamic may be viewed as an example of bureaucratic dysfunction, in which rules were designed narrowly and left little flexibility for re-interpretation even in the event that they proved to be self-defeating in terms of wider objectives<sup>66</sup>.

Another example of accountability structures creating misplaced incentives is the much commented upon pressure to meet disbursement targets within given timeframes, common to all public bodies (Seabright 2002; Wildavsky 1984; Gibsen et al; Ghani and Lockhart 2009). On occasion, such rules or objectives may become ends in themselves and give rise to a perception of officials focussing only on process and reputational risks rather than impact; or such at least was the impression of some interviewees.

### 3.3 Chapter Conclusions

The objective of this chapter has been twofold: Firstly, it aimed to provide a brief overview of the Afghan aid market, introducing the players involved and the incentives to which they may be subject. Secondly, it has attempted to show that at least three very distinct prisms may be brought to bear on the aid sector and reveal different conclusions about the way it operates. The mercenary, missionary and misfit theoretical frameworks presented here are intended to be complementary, as each, it is hoped, reveals a different aspect of the incentives and constraints faced by aid workers in Afghanistan. While it may be possible to

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<sup>66</sup> Though of course it is also worth noting that while wider objectives may have suffered, some provinces may also have benefited by receiving relatively more attention than they would otherwise have done.

analyse the aid world through any single lens (looking simply at interests; normative goals; or bureaucratic context) it is contended that that would produce a more limited understanding than the inter-disciplinary and wider-ranging framework presented here.

While individuals working in the aid sector generally perceive their role in altruistic terms, or at least present it as such, a number of incentives apply that tend to condition their actions to a certain extent. While aid agencies may not have official hierarchies of goals individuals are nevertheless likely to be formatted, or socialised, to perceive the issues to which that they are professionally dedicated, and to which they have most exposure, as important, and to advocate for them in the wider marketplace. They are also likely to prioritise those issues on which they perceive they will be judged. Self-interested and altruistic objectives may coalesce around narrowly defined objectives and thus be mutually reinforcing, while those who act in objectively rational ways may not perceive, or self-justify, their actions in such terms.

Dynamics of competition and fragmentation are present at all levels of the aid marketplace and serve to undermine collective action goals as each actor pursues, to a certain extent, their own agenda. Competition covers both financial and symbolic capital gains. This competition is exacerbated in non-hierarchical structures where decision-making is reliant on consensus, particularly in zero-sum games, but is limited by the need to maintain reputations of altruism and trustworthiness, which are an important currency of the marketplace.

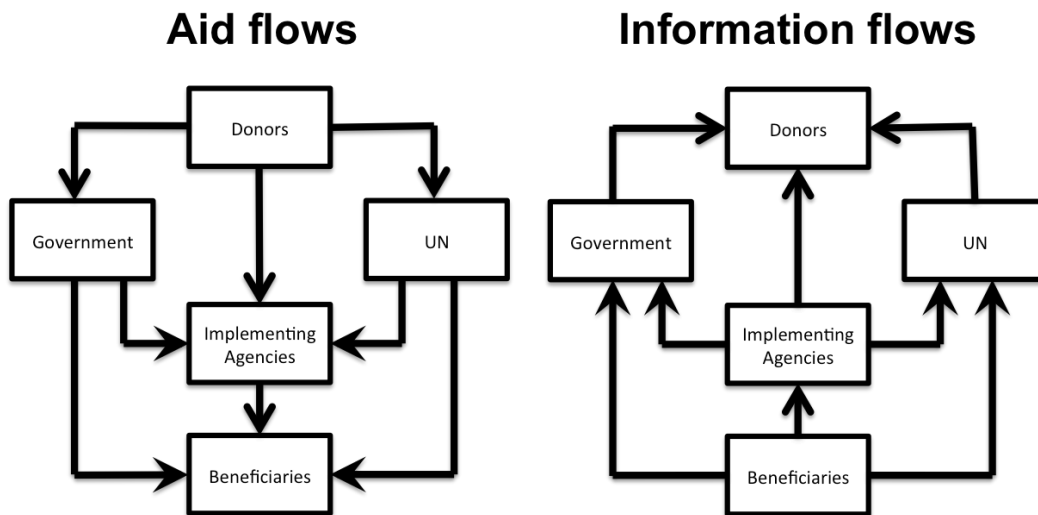
Beyond narrowly-defined 'mercenary' and 'missionary' objectives serving to foster competition within loose hierarchical contexts, 'misfit' dynamics also play an important role in influencing outcomes in the Afghan aid marketplace. In particular in relation to managing aid funding once committed, a focus on process, lack of flexibility to adapt based on new information, co-dependence in objectively hierarchical relationships, an inability and unwillingness to micro-manage, and information asymmetries are all important in influencing how interests are transformed (or not) into action. Some of these dynamics are examined in the following chapter on information transfers in the Afghan aid marketplace.

## 4. Information transfers and strategic discourse in the Afghan Aid Marketplace

### 4.1 Chapter Overview

In Chapter 4 I sought to show how dynamics of competition permeate the Afghan aid marketplace. In this chapter I seek to provide an outline of how those dynamics impact information creation and transfer, particularly regarding the process of needs assessment and project performance. Again the objective is to provide a contextual overview and theoretical framing of the relevant factors based on the subjective perceptions of the actual participants in the aid marketplace, which I will then further develop in later chapters focussing specifically on UNHCR.

As recounted in Chapter 2, informational asymmetries are common in any marketplace, including the aid world, and in this case the old adage that “information is power” holds much truth. Actors at the top of the aid chain are distant from beneficiaries and rely heavily on lower level actors to provide them with the information and situational analysis on which to base their decision-making (Moe 2005; Ostrom 2002; Gibson et al 2005; Hardt 2014). These actors in turn tend not to be neutral observers but rather active participants in the marketplace. To illustrate this process I allow myself to repeat the diagram presented earlier in Chapter 2:



**Figure 6: Aid v Information Flows**

Nevertheless the information provided upwards does not exist as an objective quantity per se but rather needs to be created by actors who make subjective judgments about which elements are relevant and how they should be portrayed, and in turn have a stake in the outcome of how the information will then be used. There thus exist ample incentives to adopt a strategic approach to information transfer. The academics who have studied the resulting ‘discourse’ have predominantly tended to be anthropologists and sociologists and hence it is to these writers that I have turned in creating my theoretical framing.

Most specifically, they point out that a crucial component of portraying information in the aid marketplace is likely to involve depicting problems in technical and depoliticised terms and in ways that suggest that problems are amenable to be solved by the type of interventions that humanitarian or development agencies are able to offer (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Stoddard 2006; Green 2011; Li 2011; Lewis 1998; Mosse 2005; Krause 2014). Moreover

analysis may overstate the extent of certain needs or may seek to trigger an emotional response designed to maximise funding (Mosse 2005; Barnett and Weiss 2008; Rieff 2003; Quillard 2015). Once such funding is allocated, the incentives to portray project performance and impact in positive lights are, if anything, even stronger, and may also be replicated upwards in the aid chain (Werker and Ahmed 2008; Birdsall 2004; Wallace, Bornstein and Chapman 2007; Mosse 2005). The current chapter provides an overview of these dynamics in the Afghan context and how they are connected to the influences outlined in the previous chapter.

## 4.2 Defining needs and responses

***“We’re very good at writing assessments, because assessments are the foundations of any proposals so therefore we have got good at it as a sector because it usually leads to money”<sup>67</sup>***

How do donors define and prioritise need in circumstances of exceptionally high levels of poverty and weak state services such as in Afghanistan? As one interviewee, working at a high level in a donor agency, put it “there is no scientific formula”<sup>68</sup>. Despite the established interests and limitations mentioned above, within their particular portfolios the donors interviewed generally did not tend to have clearly defined objectives and rather appeared to be motivated by the somewhat vague objective of addressing vulnerability. However on questions of

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<sup>67</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 1’

<sup>68</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 10’

how to differentiate and prioritise types of vulnerability, how to respond to these, and how to measure progress, there was in almost all cases a high reliance on their partners. For instance while almost all donors interviewed were interested in using the humanitarian portfolio to assist the poor and vulnerable they overwhelmingly look to their partners to define who specifically should be prioritised within programmes. All donors interviewed agreed that, to a large extent, in determining where and how to invest humanitarian funding in order to meet the most acute needs or to achieve the greatest impact, they look to actors lower in the chain to provide information derived from their experience that will assist them in planning funding priorities. This means that implementing actors may thus be under less pressure to attempt to *offer* what donors want, than to attempt to *influence* what donors want.

Information transfers, from field to funders, typically consist of several stages: For instance, information may be passed on from beneficiaries to NGOs; NGOs to a UN agency; the UN agency to donor field staff; and finally donor field staff to their headquarters. At each stage of this process the relevant actors need to make choices about the information they pass on and how they choose to present it (Ostrom 2002; Hardt 2014; Gibson et al 2005). Sometimes such choices will be strategic and at other times they may not even be made consciously.

As the potential recipients of aid, prospective beneficiaries face the strongest incentives of all to adopt a strategic approach to information transfers. Some interviewees commented that beneficiaries have rapidly adapted to the new context of the aid world, adopting the language of international aid and learning

how to comply with the expectations of international actors. More particularly, for certain types of aid, for instance when prioritised on the basis of status, beneficiaries may face the situation that, as one donor pointed out “If you say one thing you get assistance, if you say something else you don’t”<sup>69</sup>. Thus numerous interviewees noted the tendency for community representatives to exaggerate numbers and for individuals to try to portray themselves as belonging to prioritised groups. Hence, for instance, these interviewees mentioned that the numbers of IDPs reported almost always tends to be exaggerated and are generally revised downwards following assessments. One interviewee also mentioned that there are suspicions in parts of the aid community that some beneficiaries are particularly media savvy and have learnt how to portray information to parts of the media in order to increase the quantity and quality of support that they receive<sup>70</sup>. As Monsutti (2012) has pointed out “After more than thirty years of regular interaction with UN agencies and NGOs, Afghans have learned to strategically adjust their behaviors and discourse to match what they believe humanitarian and development actors expect to see and hear.”

At the other extreme of the chain one could expect communication within donor agencies, from field level to headquarters, to be relatively un-biased by vested interests. After all, donors do not personally benefit from aid as beneficiaries do, nor does their agency, at a macro level, benefit from what is an essentially internal redistribution of finances. However, as noted in the previous section donors, like other actors, at an individual level tend to be committed to their own programmes,

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<sup>69</sup> Interview, Donor 12

<sup>70</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 10’

through formatting, exposure on a day to day basis, and, perhaps, self-interest, and thus often promote their own issues and programmes internally. In interviews, some donors admitted that this affected the way that they communicate information to their headquarters. In one humanitarian donor agency, for instance, country-based funding is allocated following the review of needs assessments filled in by the various country offices around the globe. This represents a more transparent and less obviously politicized system than in most donor agencies as the process seeks to be based, to some extent at least, on objective criteria. However, it is nevertheless open to influence depending on the information the country office chooses to include and the way they present it to their headquarters. As one Afghanistan-based representative of the agency noted:

“At the end of the day this business is like any other business and that also applies to us, to donors and to [donor agency]. How much is allocated to Afghanistan has zero to do with that stupid form they make us fill in. So it’s a little bit difficult to criticize. I mean, it’s wrong. We shouldn’t be doing it like that. We should be doing it on a needs basis.”<sup>71</sup>

Thus, at least for some, there is not only awareness of how dynamics of competition may affect information transfers, including their own, but also regret that this should be the case. Information transfers are not a ‘one-shot game’, in game theory terms, but a continuous process in which actors learn from previous interactions and adapt their behaviour accordingly. To illustrate this process through a relevant personal anecdote, while working for the EU in Afghanistan I

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<sup>71</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 12’

was tasked with the preparation of sectoral programmes for approval by headquarters. The first programme I prepared was, I felt, far from ideal (due to the complex context and lack of government ownership) but I was nevertheless convinced that it was ultimately worthy of funding. I provided to headquarters what I believed to be a balanced review of the planned programme, laying out in great detail the programme's many weaknesses, as well as its strengths. Following review the programme was not approved and the funding was reallocated elsewhere. In all subsequent occasions on which I took part in this process I provided headquarters with more positive evaluations, alluding only briefly if at all to negative aspects, and thus the future projects that I proposed were approved. From conversations with other donor staff this seems to be a standard, rather than isolated, experience.

NGOs and UN agencies occupy a middle ground between donors and beneficiaries, both in the marketplace and in terms of the strength of incentives to promote their own interests or the issues that they work on. The strength of competing narratives over which needs are greatest and decisions regarding the responses that are most needed may mean the difference between success or failure in terms of securing funding. Aside from promoting specific projects both UN agencies and NGOs have advocacy functions that cover various issues but to a large extent focus on highlighting particular needs that are under-prioritised, and urging greater attention to be paid to these issues. Hence there may be a considerable overlap between fundraising and advocacy functions, at least in the view of interviewed donors. As one donor maintained "Almost by definition it's always the case that

the advocacy arms of organisations are self-serving”<sup>72</sup>. However he added that “it’s not necessarily thought through as a strategy though, it just happens by default” due to the way that UN agencies function and the people that work there become formatted to think in a certain way. Another donor complained that large agencies “leverage their advocacy role to dominate the market”<sup>73</sup>.

In bilateral communications to donors, agencies often base their requests for funding on what are in theory independent and impartial needs assessments. However to a certain extent these processes may be influenced by various factors in the design and implementation of the surveys and the analysis and presentation of the results. For instance, strategic choices may be made about the questions that are included, whether and how cross comparisons to other groups are made, or the descriptive language used to present the findings. One interviewee noted that the results of surveys tended to be predictable and to support doing more of what the agency is already engaged in<sup>74</sup>. Another linked the process of needs assessments even more closely to the dynamics produced by the aid marketplace, saying that one of the primary functions of such assessments was to lend weight to fundraising<sup>75</sup>.

Some interviewees noted that fundraising to donors on the basis of needs assessments often relied more on emotions than technical underpinnings. This was seen to prioritise certain types of topics that could be easily rendered into a compelling narrative. Additionally it may give an advantage to larger agencies

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<sup>72</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 18’

<sup>73</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 15’

<sup>74</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 10’

<sup>75</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 1’

with more developed marketing support machinery. One former head of a UN agency in Afghanistan lamented both the lack of a strong lobby from his own headquarters and a marketable narrative that would be easy to sell to donors. In comparison he was “always very jealous about the marketing machinery of UNICEF exploiting always the poor children in the slums and blablabla. So they are very good at it and I quite respect them from a marketing point of view”<sup>76</sup>.

Even defining a specific intervention or situation as ‘humanitarian’ or ‘development’-oriented is to a certain extent a question of how information is presented, which may in turn be influenced by incentives in the marketplace. Interviewees with longer experience in the aid world sometimes commented that the ‘humanitarian’ and ‘development’ labels could be strategically applied to different effect. For instance humanitarian projects may be viewed as more “pristine”<sup>77</sup>, urgent and essential. They are also subject to less scrutiny (Harrell Bond 1986). On the other hand labelling activities as development may give access to much larger funding pots. One NGO interviewee commented that in his view:

“I think it’s a flexible concept which they use in each country depending on levels of funding, depending on where you are in terms of the life cycle of the crisis, and these different things. It’s a political tool and one that you can use flexibly rather than an actual defined development principle.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 7’

<sup>77</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 4’

<sup>78</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 1’

Another interviewee recounted how, outside Afghanistan, his UN agency had ‘sold’ identical projects to humanitarian and development donors changing only the framing and vocabulary. It was, he noted, “literally the same activities, just framed differently, so you’d change your discourse.”<sup>79</sup> This entailed, for instance, renaming staff positions from ‘capacity building advisor’ to ‘monitoring support officer’ for the identical role, or making somewhat arbitrary distinctions on the basis of apparently random criteria (e.g. “For instance one community has 8 checkpoints so it’s humanitarian, this one only has 2 so it’s development.”)

Access to the different funding pots may therefore require, to a certain extent, different approaches to narrative creation that are rooted more in strategic considerations than substantive differences on the ground. An important distinction between the two realms appears to be a greater focus on outputs in humanitarian narratives, and on impact in development ones, at least in the view of some, such as the following UN interviewee: “It seems humanitarian funding is much quicker and more responsive, more quantitative [while] development funding is more about putting together a narrative about how you’re going to solve all the problems.”<sup>80</sup>

In terms of the responses proposed to meet identified needs, various interviewees mentioned that this is often influenced by factors unconnected to prospects for success. For instance organisational mandates were mentioned by many as strongly limiting what agencies are able to recommend. Certain interventions are

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<sup>79</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 9’

<sup>80</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 4’

seen as easier to sell to donors than others, according to UN and NGO interviewees. Both government and donor interviewees noted a tendency for organisations to stay within their comfort zone by replicating interventions that have been conducted elsewhere. In the words of one donor this is because “There’s also path dependency. Organisations tend to do things the way they are used to doing them and define target groups the way they are used to.”<sup>81</sup> There may also be a less altruistic dimension to this dynamic, as explained by the following NGO interviewee:

“There’s also the self interest. Staff want to keep their jobs and they can only do that if the programme is somewhat similar to what’s been done in the past. So it’s a question of job security.”<sup>82</sup>

In addition, while needs analysis may, at least in some cases, be based on an impartial, pre-determined methodology, there is generally less rigour with regard to determining the appropriate responses to meet the identified needs. Very rarely will proposals explain, in anything approaching scientific detail, why a given response is more effective than another approach. Rather the focus tends to be on presenting a clear, concise and compelling narrative that focuses on the scale and urgency of the needs to be addressed. In the words of one interviewee, describing the consolidated appeals process, (which is examined in more detail below):

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<sup>81</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 15’

<sup>82</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 10’

“So your response analysis does not have to be highly sophisticated. You don’t have to explain why a given problem requires a specific type of approach and solution. You just need to identify a problem. Everybody can understand that. I can tell my brother who’s a scientist that someone is starving and he understands what that concept means. But response analysis, there’s not the same level of demand in the sector to present good response analysis. Especially when the consolidated appeals document has to be easy to read and presentable to others.”<sup>83</sup>

One of the most controversial elements of needs analysis is quantifying the necessary responses in financial terms. Such a process is inevitably somewhat subjective as what is ‘needed’ depends to a large extent on levels of ambition for what humanitarian aid should be able to achieve. It is above all a pragmatic calculation based on multiple factors such as the level of available funding, the situation of the wider population, the number and strength of alternative claims on funding, and, importantly, the perceived impact of how the calculation will be received by the actors responsible for making future funding decisions. With many agencies creating separate appeals based on their own assessments there may be a tendency towards budget inflation, which was remarked upon by several donors, as actors perceive that in an environment of numerous competing claims only the highest ranked needs (in budgetary terms) will be taken seriously. One interviewee, for instance, recounted his participation in the UNDAF process<sup>84</sup> in another country prior to arriving in Afghanistan. After participating in the needs

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<sup>83</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 1’

<sup>84</sup> The United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) is the strategic whole-of-UN framework for addressing development needs in individual countries

assessment and negotiating the budgets with other agencies he took the results to the head of his agency, “who looked at the figure and said ‘no, [name], this needs to be ten times higher.’ He thought as a UN agency they only take you seriously if you ask for 50 million dollars rather than five million.”<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless both donor and UN interviewees noted that overly-inflated budgets may serve to decrease the agency’s credibility and this is thus likely to act as a significant restraining factor in the marketplace (the often-overlooked political dimension of needs assessments, and their dual function as marketing tools, will be discussed in more detail in later chapters with regard to UNHCR). Despite all of these dynamics, however, donors are to a large extent dependent on lower level actors to provide the information on which they make funding decisions.

In conclusion, the aid world may also be viewed as “a knowledge industry” (Matturi 2016) in which action is perceived by many as being strongly influenced by strategic concerns. Though incentives may be strongest at the lower levels of the aid chain, a calculated approach nevertheless permeates the actions of all actors (driven by a mix of mercenary and missionary motivations). Needs assessments are seen as supporting fundraising goals and being bolstered by emotional narratives. Proposed responses are in turn viewed as being heavily influenced by considerations linked to organisational mandates and individual skill-sets, as well as strategic calculations regarding the use of the ‘humanitarian’ and ‘development’ labels, and the quantifying of needs in financial terms. Nevertheless, as the next section suggests, donors have little choice but to rely on these assessments.

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<sup>85</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 10’

### 4.3 Donor Reliance on Intermediary Actors

*“They look to us to tell them what the needs are. They really appreciate having that service”<sup>86</sup>*

Donors in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) suffer from significant information constraints that hamper their ability to collect, process and retain first-hand information, which makes them reliant on others to provide relevant information. Multiple donors commented during interviews on the extent to which they depend on outside actors, particularly specialist UN agencies and the cluster system, to provide them information and analysis regarding humanitarian needs on which funding decisions could be based. This was echoed by UN interviewees (for instance in the quote above) and another interviewee, in the NGO sector, expressed surprise, on meeting with donors, the extent to which “they were really looking at us to tell them what was going on.”<sup>87</sup>

As detailed above, the environment in which claims of comparative needs are made is, on occasion, highly competitive, and very often the stakes depending on such judgements are high, or at least are perceived as such by the relevant actors. Consequently donors may be faced with information presented in emotive ways that serve to highlight the importance of favouring one sector over another. As one donor commented: “Some people really dramatise. It’s all ‘people are going to

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<sup>86</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 8’

<sup>87</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 9’

die if you don't fund us'. ... They use such dramatic language around the needs. It's almost visual language."<sup>88</sup>

In such a context, what is needed from the donor side, in the words of one donor, are "donor staff who are experts, who can see through the bullshit."<sup>89</sup>

Nevertheless this may not always be the case. One NGO interviewee noted for instance that his key counterpart in a donor agency was a civil servant previously working in an auditing department who, from a technical perspective, lacked the capacity to make critical judgments about project performance or relative levels of need. Such situations may facilitate the work of the implementing agency by effectively removing a layer of accountability. As this interviewee stated: "Let's be honest, there's a professional function to make money and it's easier to do where people aren't as good at their job."<sup>90</sup> While a few donor agencies were perceived by interviewees as possessing technical staff with detailed knowledge of project implementation, the majority were not seen in such terms. Even where donor staff do have previous experience there are still likely to be large gaps in their knowledge, ranging from conditions in the precise local area, to cross-market comparisons of unit costs when no two interventions are identical and thus directly comparable. Beyond issues of donor capacity, there are also questions of data scarcity and questionable credibility of existing data. As one commentator has written, in Afghanistan "often the central problem is not that donors lack enough information — it is that they lack holistic, synthesized, and verified information" (Brown 2014).

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<sup>88</sup> Interview, 'Donor 4'

<sup>89</sup> Interview, 'Donor 16'

<sup>90</sup> Interview, 'NGO 1'

Even on the basis of imperfect information donors need to take decisions regarding how to spend their money and in this respect they are likely to be looking to others to facilitate their work. In the words of one donor, they like to be “given a flashy document that you can show HQ and told where to put your money.”<sup>91</sup>

While interviewed donors tend to recognise some of the benefits of competition in terms of efficiency, they still require a clear and objective view of the needs. Hence many appreciate the involvement of intermediary arbiters to judge the competing claims regarding needs. In the humanitarian field they primarily do this through reliance on either coordination processes that bring together various actors with the required expertise and experience to assess needs and propose responses, in particular the cluster system and its Consolidated Appeals Process, or on specialist UN agencies tasked with evaluating the needs that they are specifically mandated to cover. The two options are examined below.

#### **4.3.1 The Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP)**

Within the humanitarian sector the most authoritative process of defining and ranking needs is the consolidated appeals process developed through the cluster system (though some agencies also release their own appeals). The cluster system brings together NGOs, UN agencies and, to a certain extent, the Afghan government, to discuss and define humanitarian needs. A Common Humanitarian

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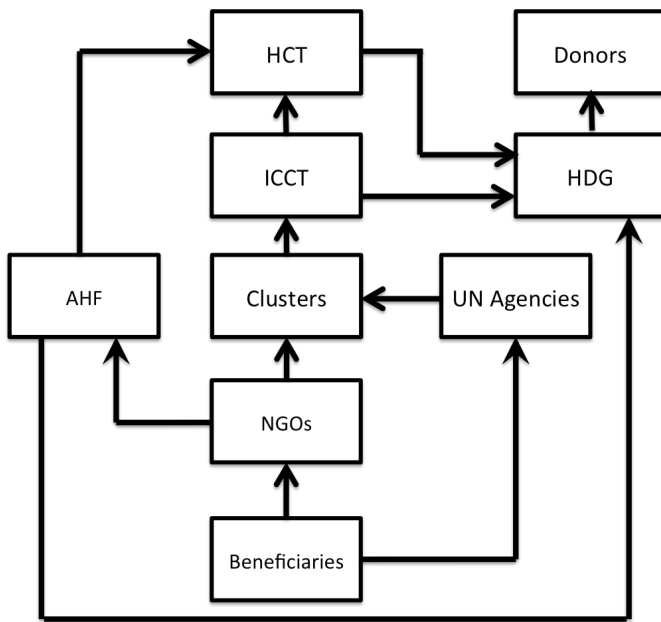
<sup>91</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 12’

Action Plan (CHAP; sometimes shortened to HAP) is developed, on which the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) is based; though more recently this terminology has been replaced by the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) leading to a Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and a Strategic Response Plan (SRP).

The humanitarian architecture surrounding the cluster system is itself fairly complex and rife with acronyms. NGOs and UN agencies participate directly in six thematic clusters<sup>92</sup> (some with additional working bodies; the Protection cluster includes 5 sub-clusters for instance) and this is where most substantive discussions take place regarding specific humanitarian issues, including assessing needs and creating appeals. These clusters then feed into the Inter-Cluster Coordination Team (ICCT), which in turn reports to the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) led by the Humanitarian Coordinator. Somewhat separate from, yet complementary to, the clusters, is the NGO coordination grouping, the Afghan Humanitarian Forum (AHF), which also provides information to the HCT. Donors meanwhile come together in the Humanitarian Donor Group (HDG), which constitutes the principal interface with the cluster system on humanitarian issues (additional donor forums exist for development issues). The ICCT, HCT and AHF all provide information to donors via the HDG.

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<sup>92</sup> These cover: 1. Emergency Shelter and Non Food Items (ESNFI); 2. Food Security and Agriculture (FSAC); 3. Health; 4. Nutrition; 5. Protection; and 6. Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). In addition there is a Refugee and Returnee Response grouping led by UNHCR, which for political reasons examined in later chapters is not officially a “cluster”.



**Figure 7: Information flows and participation in the cluster system**

While certain aspects of the needs assessment process are quite technical (beyond keeping track of the various acronyms!), others are much more political. In particular the final product, the consolidated appeal document, is likely to strongly influence the distribution of not only pooled funds but also bilateral donations from donors. Notably the system relies on consensus and so all cluster leads, which include many UN agencies, need to be in agreement. The result is that agencies may attempt to influence the information flow to promote their own interests and that negotiation may influence, or replace, technical assessment. In contrast to the development sector in which the Afghan government plays a leading role, the humanitarian-oriented CAP tends to result in Afghanistan in hundreds of fragmented projects operating outside of government structures (Lockhart 2007).

According to one donor, while they recognise that “there are competing demands and it’s a political process”<sup>93</sup>, they nevertheless prefer to get involved “upstream” when the needs have been negotiated and agreed, and have “a tremendous amount of respect for the inclusivity of the process”. Other donors echoed the sentiment that they value the process greatly, in particular its ability to mediate the competing interests in a way that makes the job of donors easier. All humanitarian donors therefore take the process into account and most attempt to align their humanitarian funding behind it.

Generating agreement between so many actors is a complicated process and various interviewees noted that interactions within the cluster could become heated. As a former NGO co-cluster lead outlined:

“The coordination, it’s an absolute nightmare. It’s an absolute nightmare and it’s very, very easy to be sat on the other side of the fence and to be an NGO and to simply criticize the process, as everybody I know does. ... NGOs do not have a common position on any of the major policy issues or analysis issues and so you are just bound to have enemies whatever conclusion you draw. And donors’ position is that there should be a conclusion. You need to have common analysis, common identification of needs, common response plan etc.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 4’

<sup>94</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 1’

Meetings on technical issues with low financial consequences tend to be sparsely attended by low-ranking personnel, while on issues that have more direct consequences for fundraising, meetings are generally packed with high-ranking staff. One such issue is the needs ranking of provinces. Unlike other aspects of the CAP, needs ranking is a zero-sum game (higher ranked provinces can be expected to attract funding away from lower ranked provinces). In a system based on consensus where donors expect an unbiased assessment to guide their action this poses significant problems for those who seek to negotiate agreement in a highly politicised context, in what is presented to the outside world as a technical process. Predictably this aspect of the CAP is also one of the most controversial. According to a UN interviewee:

“It’s hotly contested by NGOs because of course if the province they’re working in comes at the bottom they find it very difficult to get funding and of course then there may be all sorts of levels of vulnerability there.”<sup>95</sup>

Perhaps even more contested than the needs analysis is the common response plan. OCHA and the cluster leads are under pressure from donors to present a unified, reliable, and comprehensive analysis, but equally need to achieve consensus in a highly competitive and potentially high-stakes environment. One donor referred to OCHA’s role as having a “challenge function”<sup>96</sup>, and cited a recent occasion in which one cluster had been successfully persuaded to dramatically decrease their budget in order to be more in line with the other clusters. However,

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<sup>95</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 5’

<sup>96</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 4’

according to another donor (and former cluster participant in a previous role) the process does not always work in this way:

“In theory the cluster lead is meant to review the projects but usually it’s not so straightforward. It’s unclear where there are overlaps and usually the cluster lead is not strong enough to resist so it just ends up like a shopping basket.”<sup>97</sup>

As a result, the outcome is often, according to this interviewee, that “everyone says what they want, it’s all added up and that’s how much they appeal for.” In terms of the proposed methods for addressing the identified needs, agencies negotiating within the cluster process are also highly constrained by their organisational mandates, which leads them to advocate only for certain types of responses that it is within their mandate to provide. As one cluster participant put it:

“In terms of the response analysis this is where I think consolidated appeals processes are quite weak and, from my experience of leading it, and then also participating in it later at [NGO], the ability to identify ‘here is a problem and this is programmatically the best way to address it’ is where agencies can’t show the same flexibility because of the competitiveness that you’re talking about. WFP cannot concede, like fundamentally cannot concede that the best way to deal with a problem must be cash. It’s just not within their modus operandi to do that. Or ACF can never say that the best

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<sup>97</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 12’

way to deal with a food security problem is actually to focus on food availability, rather than nutrition and utilization because it fundamentally goes against their mandate.”<sup>98</sup>

These organisational constraints are then reflected in the final document, following an approval process at a higher political level, in which institutional interests are accommodated to ensure buy-in from the whole HCT, according to the same interviewee:

“The final editing, the final say on some key issues will always come down to that final political jostling. So they’ll find a way to make sure that they identify a situation where food assistance is still more needed than cash, they’ll find a way to define some of the livelihoods work that FAO does as emergency, so that it’s emergency livelihood recovery to make sure that they get a proportion of the CHAP, they’ll find a way to make sure they justify and define the overall objectives of the CHAP to include dignity so that UNHCR’s overall protection portfolio remains. You know all of those final things will be done to make sure that overall it’s all encompassing.”<sup>99</sup>

On top of the institutional interests influencing the outcome of the CAP there are also some suspicions among interviewees that the process may be influenced by political pressure from the Afghan government, which is perceived to be aggravated by the humanitarian coordinator having a political role as Deputy to

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<sup>98</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 1’

<sup>99</sup> Ibid

the SRSG. This has led, according to one interviewee, to OCHA having little choice but to push for the nationalisation of clusters with the justification that Afghanistan was in a post-conflict situation despite evidence to the contrary<sup>100</sup>; and, according to another, to a shift to focus on the more visible manifestations of poverty and conflict that are the priorities of the current government, in particular the Kabul Informal Settlements (KIS).<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, OCHA also received praise for pushing for a more coherent CAP in recent years and attempting, against some resistance, to impose a more objective methodology on the process. On issues that are purely technical and less likely to impact on institutional interests, there was also a feeling that the analysis conducted through the cluster system was valuable, even if meetings to discuss such technical issues were likely to be sparsely attended.

Once priorities have been negotiated, cluster leads will often approach donors directly to make the case for why their sector should be prioritised. Many donors seem to recognise that the process is, at least in part, driven by organisational agendas. As one commented “the agencies have their own fundraising needs, which leads to inflated CAPs. The donors say they need to be more realistic”<sup>102</sup>. Some interviewees stated that the CAP could also serve, and is indeed intended to serve, more as an advocacy tool, to demonstrate the scale of needs and thus to promote, or attract, higher aid budgets, than a programmatic one.<sup>103</sup> Meanwhile, at least one donor, felt that the conflicting claims from cluster leads served to

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid

<sup>101</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 12’

<sup>102</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 11’

<sup>103</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 9’

obscure, rather than clarify, what should be prioritized.<sup>104</sup> As one NGO interviewee put it:

“At the end of the day, the overall entity, the final overall decisions will always be, there’ll be some political input, it’s completely unavoidable. So to call it a purely humanitarian-driven needs process is obviously just false.”<sup>105</sup>

Hence, despite being presented externally as an informed and objective needs assessment, it would appear that the CAP is heavily influenced by dynamics of competition that operate beneath the surface and heavily influence the way that both needs and responses are defined in the final product.

#### 4.3.2 UN Agencies

The alternative authoritative mechanism for determining humanitarian needs is through relying on the analysis of specialist UN agencies. The UN dominates the marketplace as it is specifically mandated by member states to lead particular sectors and is vested with high levels of trust and authority by them to fulfil these tasks. Therefore alongside the complex cluster process described above, donors also rely heavily on specialist UN agencies on a bilateral basis. Market concentration in a single actor provides some benefits in terms of bringing all stakeholders together and providing a platform for coordinated action.

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<sup>104</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 4’

<sup>105</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 1’

Consequently, as one donor mentioned, “It’s also a good thing that we all work with the same organisations because if we were to choose NGOs we’d all choose different NGOs. So even if their performance is not so good they still have that advantage, and it’s a big advantage.”<sup>106</sup> Thus the UN agency mandated to address a specific issue represents, to a certain extent, the natural option for donors interested in funding that issue. Trust in the UN is also based partly on the higher cost of failure in terms of relationships. As an interviewed donor put it, “It’s a lot more ‘headlines’ if the [donor] government falls out with UNICEF than a small local NGO.”<sup>107</sup>

The results of this are, according to interviews, that UN budgets are less scrutinised by donors than those of NGOs; the UN is more likely to receive core funding, with greater flexibility and higher amounts; and notably donors feel more able to rely on their figures and analysis. This last aspect is regarded as a useful service that donors would not necessarily want to usurp; in the words of one donor, “Donors cannot compete with their capacities and wouldn’t want to.”<sup>108</sup>

Multiple donors stated that they trust UN agencies and rely heavily on their figures and needs analysis. This was also recognised from the UN side. In terms of how this is manifested, many donors enjoy privileged relations with the UN that explicitly weaken the donor’s influence. The EU and UN for instance have signed the Financial and Administrative Framework Agreement (FAFA), which limits the information that the EU can demand from the UN. Notably though, some felt that

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<sup>106</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 7’

<sup>107</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 4’

<sup>108</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 16’

the trust invested in UN agencies was not given blindly and rather needed to be earned and built up over time, while many people noted that trust could also be lost or damaged in various ways. Trust is also clearly not absolute and some felt that it was often lacking from donors who had a sense that appeals may be inflated and had unanswered questions about how the UN spends the funds allocated to it.

While the UN may be the authoritative global actor tasked with assessing the scale of needs for given development and humanitarian issues and communicating these to donors and global publics more widely, at the same time, as noted above, individual UN agencies also have their own programmes to promote and, due to the way their mandates are structured, are incentivised to view issues from narrow, non-holistic perspectives. There is thus a potential conflict of interest in terms of these two functions. This means that some donors felt that the privileged position of UN agencies allowed them to use their needs assessment functions to promote their own programmes, and to avoid providing sufficiently detailed budgets, thereby giving them an advantage in the marketplace compared to NGOs. One donor for instance gave his opinion that “They should be accountable in the same way and budget in the same way. Not leverage their advocacy role to dominate the market.”<sup>109</sup> A further example of the strength of the UN brand is that some of those interviewed felt that IOM was disadvantaged, in terms of its perceived credibility, by its (at the time) non-UN status.

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<sup>109</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 15’

#### 4.4 Project Performance and Impact

*“I don’t know how we can draw a line to say where the marketing of our products, of the projects that we are doing, should stop, and where the very honest evaluation should start. Obviously when we were struggling for additional funding in Afghanistan. .... We also are obliged to find ways to somehow sell what we do. It’s a little bit of a tricky one, a difficult one.”<sup>110</sup>*

Following needs assessment, budgets are allocated, calls for proposal are made, and contracts are signed. Rather than the conclusion of the information marketplace though it is merely the start of a new chapter. Donors still require information from others, that they cannot adequately collect themselves, regarding the performance of implementers and the impact of their aid, which also serves to influence their future programming.

As noted donors have no formal relations with beneficiaries and so are exceptionally reliant on implementers to tell them whether projects have succeeded or not. Unsurprisingly though there are few incentives for implementers to report negative findings. In the words of one NGO interviewee: “There’s definitely a conflict of interest. ... It’s in nobody’s interest to report failure, right? Especially if it could potentially compromise your future opportunities.”<sup>111</sup> The dilemma implementers face is that the information they provide is likely to impact significantly on their future prospects. As another NGO

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<sup>110</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 4’

<sup>111</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 1’

interviewee put it, “of course if you go back to the donor with nothing achieved, not really being able to measure the impact, yes there is a backlash, there is an issue there.”<sup>112</sup>

Implementers therefore need to balance the competing pressures of providing unbiased analysis of their programmes and the promotion of them. Many interviewees acknowledged this conflict and some noted that reconciling the tensions between the two positions was a constant struggle both in pragmatic and ethical terms. The position is further complicated by the belief, seemingly held by many, that attracting funding to Afghanistan is, in itself, a moral good, which could be impacted by an overly negative appraisal. Thus reporting on project performance and impact may pose moral dilemmas for individuals caught between the necessity to attract funding and the desire to offer unbiased information.

The problem is not merely that implementers want to present a positive image to their donors; generally they also believe in the programmes that they are implementing and hence when evaluations fail to show impact they may be more likely to question the method of evaluation, or the lack of follow-on investment, than the basis of their intervention. For instance, a large number of livelihoods projects in Afghanistan focus on vocational training because “the easiest thing is to train people,”<sup>113</sup> according to one interviewee, and “because it’s something that we know how to do as a humanitarian community”<sup>114</sup> according to another. However one interviewee mentioned that an internal evaluation of a long-running

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<sup>112</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 4’

<sup>113</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 6’

<sup>114</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 4’

vocational training his organisation had been undertaking had difficulty in showing any impact at all; yet the intrinsic problem in his view was that the project was too limited and needed to be expanded further<sup>115</sup>. Another interviewee had faced a similar evaluation of an extensive and long running vocational training programme in a non-Afghan context that similarly failed to show any long term impact, but abandoning the project, or portraying it externally as a failure was never in question, because the programme was “so easy to sell to donors.”<sup>116</sup>

In terms of the ways that implementers promote their programmes there has been significant investment in recent years in informational roles. Implementers need to maintain good relations with their donors and have thus created posts specialised in managing donor relations. These individuals provide an interface to donors and to a large extent control the information flow to them, while they also attempt to develop friendly personal relations. As one NGO interviewee noted this can limit donors’ access to potentially critical information:

“One of the other problems is NGOs like to have a face; someone who’s good at handling, at managing donors. ... Because it’s not that all organisations, and every person within each organization, wants to hide everything. It’s just that organisations have programme development departments, or grant liaison positions, and that’s all you meet as a donor, so that’s often more of a problem.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid

<sup>116</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 9’

<sup>117</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 1’

Multiple other factors make it more complicated for donors, and sometimes even implementers, to know the impact of their programmes. Many projects in Afghanistan lack reliable baseline data and the vast majority do not feature control groups. Implementers generally choose their own indicators and targets, against which the progress of their project is measured and while some indicators are fairly robust, others are seen as “easier to fudge a little bit.”<sup>118</sup> Project visits by donors are rare, and those interviewed felt that external evaluations when they occurred were generally very weak. The use of beneficiary feedback mechanisms is increasing but any information resulting from that process is mediated by the implementer before being transferred to the donor. The combination of these factors led one donor to comment that it is “very difficult if not impossible to measure impact.”<sup>119</sup> In addition, donors may trust implementers and have been shown in the past to have little inclination in Afghanistan to investigate performance (Brinkley, 2013)

In terms of core government services, such as the health or education sectors, the Afghan government plays a role in assessing performance and, to an extent at least, impact. However, for humanitarian or unaligned activities, such as the majority of those undertaken by NGOs and UN agencies, government oversight, at least at the central level, is almost non-existent in practice. Line ministries in theory play a coordinating role for these activities but generally lack the resources at provincial level to ensure much of an oversight role in terms of judging performance, and even less so regarding impact. Occasionally NGOs or UN agencies will provide top-

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid

<sup>119</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 10’

ups to civil servants to ensure government involvement and buy-in to their projects, which in theory may include a monitoring role. However, in cases where the individual is receiving salary inducements from the agency they are overseeing the incentive to be critical is greatly reduced.

UN agencies may also have limited capacity themselves to oversee the work of all their partners in a deep or meaningful sense. The UN is more limited in Afghanistan than NGOs in terms of the geographical areas it can access and in any case its personnel are stretched thinly, often covering multiple projects in various sectors, including sectors in which they personally may have limited knowledge or experience. Thus the UN is also reliant on partners for much of its information on performance. Particularly in the humanitarian sector, some UN agencies have adopted annual budgeting in order to maximise their flexibility to respond to emerging needs, meaning that individual projects are contracted for a maximum period of 12 months. This however makes it particularly hard to judge impact, which may only be evident several months, or years, after the project has ended. In a fast-paced environment, when needs are high and resources are stretched, there is likely to be less of a focus on assessing the impact of closed projects, compared to those that are currently on-going or planned in the near future, particularly if there is low external pressure to do so. However it does mean that information regarding impact is likely to be limited, even for the UN agency.

There is thus a high reliance on implementers to assess their own performance and impact and, as noted above, strong incentives to do this in a favourable manner. Nevertheless there are also mitigating factors that also incentivise

honesty in reporting. For one thing implementers presumably care about Afghanistan's development and few would consciously seek to perpetuate inefficient interventions, or at least admit to doing so. Secondly, due to the overwhelming importance of trust in the aid marketplace, implementers are keen to avoid any actions that would serve to damage their credibility. Throughout all interviews not a single person ever mentioned instances, or even suspicions, of implementers telling outright lies that they knew to be false, or going as far as to commit fraud in terms of manipulation of data. Rather, these dynamics were seen to play out largely in terms of how information is presented, but not in terms of its fabrication. Thirdly, incentives at the individual level are not necessarily aligned with those of their organisations and there is great variety in the inclination and practice of individuals in terms of being critical about their own organisations (something which certainly came through in interviews). In the words of one interviewee therefore:

“Yes they have the organizational interest in looking good but you also have your personal, professional reputation at stake as well. So if I'm dealing directly with ECHO and I'm lying and manipulating I'm compromising my own reputation, my own personal growth as well. So it's not a simple matter whereby you put everything on the line for your organization. If something isn't working and you are being spoken to directly by a donor agency then that's quite a powerful tool and one that I think is

underestimated. I'm not going to go to all lengths to lie and protect [NGO] regardless of my own moral integrity and professional development."<sup>120</sup>

Noting that implementers face an incentive to present information in the most favourable light is hardly a new observation. Indeed many have commented upon it (Werker and Ahmed 2008; Birdsall 2004; Wallace, Bornstein and Chapman 2007; Mosse 2005). What is interesting however is that these same incentives are replicated at every level of the information management chain. This is because at each level of the chain actors are seen as responsible for the funding committed to actors beneath them.

UN agencies for instance sub-contract much, if not most, of the funding they receive to implementing partners to implement specific projects. The agency then assesses the work of these partners and reports back to donors. However, to a large extent the responsible actor is still viewed as the UN agency, which is judged on the impact achieved by these third parties. Thus UN agencies face a strong incentive to focus more on positive aspects of projects than negatives in their reporting to donors, even though they have not implemented them directly. Often, in publicly available material produced by UN agencies, it is not even possible to discern which activities were carried out by the agency itself and which by sub-contracted implementing partners.

Donors need to convince their general publics that their tax dollars are not being wasted and, as noted above, are in competition with other sectors of the civil

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<sup>120</sup> Interview, 'NGO 1'

service for funding. The effect of this dynamic may be that donors also have an incentive for the projects they fund to be viewed positively. For instance, many donors post case studies on their websites, showcasing work in Afghanistan and commonly these posts describe both a problem and how it has been overcome through the activities funded by the donor in what is, in essence, a purely promotional marketing exercise. Thus implementers and donors may perceive a shared interest in presenting an image of success in the endeavour that they are both, in different ways, held accountable for, and even donors may find negative feedback regarding impact, or lack thereof, problematic. This dynamic is not entirely lost on actors lower in the chain: As one NGO interviewee acknowledged, in written communication to donors, including report and proposals, there was “a tendency to put things rosily, to paint in the best possible light. As the sad thing is that donors want to hear things in the best possible light.”<sup>121</sup> Commentators in Afghanistan have noted the tendency for donors to occasionally be too upbeat in their reporting on Afghanistan and too quick to celebrate success, for instance Burke (2014) has criticised the EU for the positive tone of its reporting occasionally “bordering on the delusional”.

It would nevertheless be a misrepresentation to state that donors are only interested in presenting programmes in a positive light, and indeed they often play a very critical role in relation to implementers, something that was highlighted in many interviews. Some of those interviewed on the other side felt that donors could be a “pest”<sup>122</sup> or that their interference was more negative than beneficial.

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<sup>121</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 9’

<sup>122</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 1’

However, it should also be noted that active monitoring by donors is indicative of, at the very least, a level of interest in the project. A donor that dedicates no efforts to monitoring is signalling to the partner that either they trust them, or that it is a low priority for the agency, or both. Thus several UN interviewees regretted low levels of monitoring from donors and would have preferred greater engagement in oversight functions as this would have implied a higher level of commitment from donors.

Most of the time, in the absence of rigorous evaluation, or evidence to the contrary, and particularly in low priority areas, donors are likely to take implementers at their word. According to one donor, this may be aggravated by a lack of qualified donor staff, in which case “in the sectors that are not sexy they’ll just say ‘yeah, yeah, [UN Agency] you’re doing a good job’”<sup>123</sup> and continue funding. The consequence of this was, he continued, that this approach effectively “leaves implementing partners to do what they want, for good or for bad”<sup>124</sup>.

Additionally the field level donor responsible for monitoring the implementer may in practice have little flexibility to make changes to long-term funding commitments. This is particularly the case when the level of the donor agency that makes funding decisions is not the same as the level responsible for managing those commitments. For instance, as one UN interviewee recounted, “The embassies cannot say we have a very poor experience with UNDP so let’s report back to [donor capital] to say we should not spend the money there. It’s all already

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<sup>123</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 16’

<sup>124</sup> Ibid

allocated. ... Bad experience or not the deals are already made in [donor capital].”<sup>125</sup>

The one exception that tends to instantly raise an issue on a donor’s agenda and to increase their resolve to conduct more intrusive monitoring is allegations of corruption or other public scandals, particularly those that receive wide coverage in the media. Several interviewees noted this tendency and the extreme sensitivity of donors, UN agencies and NGOs to react promptly to negative publicity. In addition to a more critical approach to project implementation, allegations that agencies are not doing enough to meet certain needs could also bring such topics to the forefront of aid workers’ attention. One donor commented for instance that humanitarian issues, and the reintegration of returnees, were, for the most part, “a low priority for most donors except when it hits the newspapers.”<sup>126</sup> Within the context of their project implementation functions many interviewed donors appeared to expect UN agencies to play a ‘watchdog’ role, in particular in regards to funding transferred to government agencies. However interviewees from both line ministries and central government also see it as their own role to manage or regulate UN agencies. If UN agencies allow their relations with government to deteriorate they may face obstacles to their work or, in extreme cases, be prevented from operating in Afghanistan. This may sometimes put these agencies in a complicated position in terms of balancing the interests of both sets of principals. A result of this, according to one donor, is that “Generally the UN system is not very forthcoming in calling out corruption in the government.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 7’

<sup>126</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 18’

<sup>127</sup> Ibid

The combination of many of the above issues means that generally donors tend to take a relatively hands off approach to project implementation, at least when there are no suspicions of corruption or wrongdoing. Many donors commented that they leave the majority of field-related decisions to their partners whom they trust and whom they felt were in a better position to be able to make necessary judgements. While a small minority complained about overly intrusive donors, there were some who felt the balance between trust and oversight had gone too far towards the former, although in both cases this depended very heavily on which particular donor was being discussed. According to a former head of a UN agency in Afghanistan the problem was rather that some donors tended to take an overly lax approach:

“There are many donors saying ok we get an allocation, like [donor agency]... They hardly care anything. I mean they have just made at the highest level a promise from [donor capital] to Afghanistan and we have to spend it and it’s the pot of money, and make sure you spend it without problems. If you have an impact it doesn’t matter. Make sure there’s no corruption. Make sure there are no scandals. Impact to the Afghan people? I mean they can’t care less.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 7’

## 4.5 Chapter Conclusions

***“There’s a lot of squawking from each cluster lead as to why their sector is the most important. It’s money and it’s lives. People may live or die. And also it’s jobs for these staff. There’s so, so much politicking in these groups. As donors it’s harder for us to know what the actual needs are.”<sup>129</sup>***

The above quote succinctly summarises many of the key issues of this chapter: The competition and high stakes involved; the combination of missionary (saving lives) and mercenary (jobs) objectives motivating aid workers; the tendency of individuals to align themselves to the particular sectors they work in and to craft messages on the basis of this affiliation; the emotive nature of these messages; and the information imbalance that this creates for actors higher in the financial chain.

Information deficits permeate the aid marketplace creating opportunities for strategic behaviour. Trust plays an important, and under-studied, role in the aid world and lower levels of knowledge necessarily imply higher levels of trust, while those who have higher levels of knowledge may be more willing to assert influence. All actors may be susceptible to the influence of powerful narratives, particularly those that reinforce their already-held opinions, or their interests in the marketplace.

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<sup>129</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 4’

Donors themselves may adopt a strategic approach to information management internally and to their general publics, while in turn relying on partners to provide them unbiased information regarding the problems that they need to address through their aid. Due to the proliferation of competing claims there is particular dependence on intermediary actors or processes to assess this information and to help guide action. Measuring impact poses similar problems while there is a focus on visible factors, such as narrative reporting, and a necessarily high degree of trust in implementers to measure their own performance in a context of weak ability to monitor aid delivery.

The advocacy and fundraising functions of implementing agencies are likely to overlap and reinforce each other, as much as a result of formatting as self-interested behaviour. All agencies may also operate strategically in terms of information management, particularly regarding needs analysis and portraying the impact of their interventions in positive terms. Politics may enter into these processes in ways that are not necessarily evident to the outside world, particularly in zero-sum games based on consensus. Monitoring may be shirked, but also welcomed in so far as it represents a sign of commitment and buy-in from donors. The UN in particular enjoys a monopoly on certain types of authority and thus it has a branding advantage that, along with other factors, makes it an important player in the marketplace.

Importantly it is worth noting that strategic behaviour does not necessarily imply 'mercenary' behaviour. Actors may be just as likely to act strategically to advance 'missionary' goals. Indeed the findings of this thesis are that, while it is impossible

to entirely separate interests-based and altruistic-based objectives, those acting to promote certain positions report feeling primarily motivated by the latter.

Finally, a wider impact of competition within the aid marketplace may be its impact on credibility. While most interviewees had generally high levels of trust in the system as it stands this trust is nevertheless undermined to a certain extent by awareness of the contextual dynamics that encourage actors to 'sell' their projects and sectors in order to be awarded funding. Despite the mitigating features of the system this may nevertheless result in a certain amount of scepticism. One NGO interviewee, for instance, maintained that "I've been working in development for 4, 5 years and to be honest I wouldn't trust a report from a UN agency, at least not a specialised UN agency."<sup>130</sup> Another donor said that he was left with the impression that "Everyone's a salesman. I haven't met a single UN person, inside the cluster system or outside, who's not a salesman."<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Interview, 'NGO 10'

<sup>131</sup> Interview, 'Donor 4'

## 5. UNHCR in Afghanistan: Mercenary, missionary AND misfit

### 5.1 Chapter Overview

While the two previous chapters have aimed to provide a contextual overview of the workings of the aid world in Afghanistan, I turn now to examine in more depth the situation of one particular actor operating within that marketplace: UNHCR, the world's premier refugee agency.

The following chapters provide a short history of UNHCR's operations in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2015. During that period UNHCR managed the largest-ever assisted refugee returns process in history and in the process came in for both much praise and much criticism. For academics this has largely focussed on the experiences of the returnees, the voluntariness of their return and UNHCR's public positioning in regards to Iran and Pakistan<sup>132</sup>. However, within Afghanistan, UNHCR has also had to operate within a competitive marketplace, negotiate relations with the government, and persuade donors of the value of promoting the objectives that it deems to be important. How it has approached these tasks, and the extent to which it has been able to achieve its aims, are no less deserving of study.

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<sup>132</sup> See for example Schmeidl and Maley 2008; Bialczyk 2008; Hammersted 2014; Turton and Marsden 2002; Blitz, Sales and Marzano 2005; Kuschminder, Siegel and Majidi 2014; MacLeod 2008 ; Monsutti 2008; 2010a; Scalettaris 2009; Samuel Hall 2015

In the remaining chapters of the thesis, through the perspective of UNHCR's operations in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2015, I aim to shed light on my research questions regarding how the various pressures inherent in the aid marketplace impact on relationships between 'sellers' and their 'buyers' and 'competitors'. Specifically, in the current chapter I provide an overview of the motivations and pressures that guide the work of UNHCR staff in Afghanistan. I also provide a general summary of UNHCR's relations with its donors in Afghanistan and, in particular, the donor reliance on UNHCR in terms of authoritative information regarding the needs of currently and formerly displaced people. In chapter 6, through a detailed history of UNHCR's involvement in reintegration in the country, I outline the dynamics that have influenced when the agency has been able to successfully achieve its aims and when it has struggled to do so. In chapter 7 I then show how these dynamics have been reflected in UNHCR's approach to information transfers, specifically its discourse on returnee vulnerability. Then finally in chapter 8 I explain how UNHCR's conception of its own mandate and role has led to very different forms of participation in the marketplace with regard to different types of people: Specifically IDPs, refugees and undocumented returnees in Afghanistan.

While my thesis seeks to explore the pressures inherent to the aid marketplace in a general sense, the following chapters could also be read as an implicit critique of the status-based approach to providing aid (i.e. the inference of relative needs on the basis of affiliation to a particular group). The contention is that basing organisational mandates (and therefore both mercenary and missionary motivations) on status leads to competitive dynamics that undermine a

vulnerability-based approach, with the result that it is not necessarily the most needy people who receive the most attention, but rather the people whose interests are promoted by the most powerful actor. Notably though, for the people engaged in promoting the needs of the specific people for whom they have responsibility, the driving motivation is likely to be altruistic, or at least to be perceived by themselves in such terms.

Multiple motivations and pressures have driven the actions of UNHCR over the past decade and a half in Afghanistan. There are numerous examples of UNHCR promoting its organisational interests during this period, but what is interesting is that, due to the way its mandate is structured, UNHCR seems to have been predominantly influenced by its internal hierarchy of missionary objectives; and more specifically a hierarchy of beneficiaries. This hierarchy has been internalised by UNHCR staff and is sustained by a bureaucratic machinery that promotes adherence to certain defined standards of behaviour and patterns of thought. It has then in turn informed and influenced all of UNHCR's interventions in Afghanistan over this period, as detailed in these chapters.

## **5.2 Interests and Motivations**

How UNHCR views itself and how it defines its mandate has consequences for how it operates in the aid marketplace. As argued in Chapter 2, organisational interests are not externally given but are created through a process of interpretation by the members of the organisation. This process is heavily influenced by individual

preferences, organisational culture, and shared conceptions of the organisation's mandate, identity and purpose. It can therefore be assumed that the interpretation of these factors will affect how the organisation chooses to approach specific issues and how aggressively it will pursue different interests in the marketplace.

As Betts (2008) has written, "one cannot fully understand UNHCR without understanding its organisational culture". UNHCR's organisational culture in turn depends on how it understands its own role. UNHCR interviewees variously describe it as a 'refugee' organisation, a 'humanitarian' organisation, and a 'protection' organisation. To an extent these identities are complementary, but they also contain inherent contradictions. On the one hand there are tensions between the status-based approach prescribed by the 'refugee' identity, and the vulnerability-based approach implied by a 'humanitarian' identity. Additionally there are open questions regarding the extent to which UNHCR seeks to involve itself in longer term development processes, or to restrict itself to a humanitarian role, including adhering strictly to the humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence. The first set of tensions defines the focus of UNHCR's energies, resulting in a hierarchy of beneficiaries, and the second set of tensions defines the extent of UNHCR's ambitions and its methods of achieving them.

### 5.2.1 Mercenary

***"UNHCR has pursued an aggressive and competitive public information strategy in the Afghan crisis, which has proved highly successful in***

*terms of visibility and international media coverage. ... More than in any other recent emergency, UNHCR has also linked its media relations strategy to its fund-raising efforts, especially those relating to the private sector and general public.” (UNHCR 2001b)*

Many scholars have noted the inclination for UNHCR to defend its organisational interests and its preoccupation with its own self-preservation, something which is often manifested through its perceived desire to remain ‘relevant’ to states (Wigley 2005, Betts 2013; Loescher 2001; Hammersted 2014). Indeed UNHCR’s financial capital depends almost exclusively on states, and its social capital (prestige, authority, reputation etc) is also largely conferred by states.

Thus one would expect UNHCR to tailor its responses in Afghanistan to meet the perceived desires of its state backers. To an extent, as shown in this chapter, this has been the case. UNHCR’s record of facilitating returns to Afghanistan, for instance, has clearly furthered the interests of some of its most powerful state backers and at times it has tailored or curtailed its interventions in response to donor requests. This sensitivity to donor expectations is sometimes perceived as the organisation being accountable to its donors, and sometimes as opportunism to further its position. As one interviewee from a rival UN agency, taking the latter view, stated “UNHCR, like most people in the UN, they’re like prostitutes”<sup>133</sup>.

However the history of UNHCR’s experience in Afghanistan in the post 9/11 period shows that the picture is much more nuanced.

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<sup>133</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 4’

UNHCR clearly cannot ignore entirely the desires of its donors, but on the ground in Afghanistan it has demonstrated far more independence than it would be credited for by those academics that see IOs as mere vehicles for states' ambitions. As one donor commented "Like any UN entity, the donors have their interests, but the bureaucracy also has its own momentum and interests"<sup>134</sup>. That momentum and those interests may occasionally, and often do, align with those of donors, but UNHCR has actively pursued a policy in Afghanistan of trying to shape donor preferences, rather than simply responding to them. As the following chapters will show, UNHCR has thus exerted much energy, often successfully, in influencing its donors, the Afghan state, and other organisations to care about the issues it deems are important and, not incidentally, to raise its own profile. UNHCR has also been willing on multiple occasions to pursue positions that are unpopular with its donors.

In Afghanistan, Geneva, Brussels and elsewhere, UNHCR has been able to bring to bear a large and focussed machinery to pursue its objectives and organisational interests. This gives the organisation an advantage that some other, smaller, UN agencies lack and makes it much more powerful than most NGOs. At times this arouses jealousies, as well as suspicions that UNHCR's high profile shields it from criticism. As one former head of a UN agency commented, compared with his own agency, "UNHCR operates in a very different way. They have all one objective, very strategic and very strong lobbying. We don't have that. ... I have my doubts that

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<sup>134</sup> Interview, 'Donor 1'

the donors are not more critical. But it is the lobby I think. The strong lobby of UNHCR and other large agencies that have this access to the highest levels”<sup>135</sup>.

So to what ends has UNHCR used this influence in Afghanistan? On the one hand, it has at times, clearly defended its privileged institutional position. Promoting the organisation is seen by some in UNHCR as a shared responsibility that is incumbent on all staff. As one interviewee commented for instance “Everybody has to go out and do their bit and look for funding”<sup>136</sup>. On the other hand UNHCR has consistently pushed for greater attention to be paid to its mandated populations, sometimes while boosting its own role in the process, and sometimes not. To an extent the interests of UNHCR and its mandate are complementary as the former may be best served by successfully delivering on the latter, making the two inextricably linked. In the words of a senior UNHCR figure, for instance, “The upside of a competitive environment is that everyone here is well aware of the need to perform, as if they don’t perform the money will not come”<sup>137</sup>. Equally the opposite is true, as strengthening the organisation makes it more able to deliver on its altruistic goals. Thus, according to another senior UNHCR interviewee, promoting the organisation in Afghanistan “was a mutually supportive narrative”<sup>138</sup> for both UNHCR as an organisation and for returning refugees.

The competition for funding, control and prestige pits UNHCR against other UN agencies and, to a lesser extent, NGOs. Interviews revealed varying degrees of recognition among UNHCR staff of these dynamics and context. A few admit to

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<sup>135</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 7’

<sup>136</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 6’

<sup>137</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 11’

<sup>138</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 2’

actually enjoying the competition. As one commented, in a more competitive atmosphere you get “disproportionate pleasure from small victories”<sup>139</sup>. The agency has also engaged in turf battles, notably with OCHA regarding the refugee response in the Afghan provinces of Khost and Paktika (covered in section 8.3).

Nevertheless it is likely that many do not always fully comprehend the extent to which they are involved in competition in the aid marketplace. Specifically, in seeking to promote certain issues, those involved are likely to pay less attention to the simple but often neglected observation that, if successful, this would necessarily result in the de-prioritisation of other issues. Equally, those applying for funding tend to concentrate on the positive benefits that could be achieved by securing that funding, rather than the positive benefits that would have been achieved (and are now lost) in the counter-factual situation of another actor gaining the funding. These dynamics are of course much wider than UNHCR.

Individual interests also play a role in guiding UNHCR’s actions. Several interviewees commented on internal power games within the organisation and a need to “play the game”<sup>140</sup> in order to progress up the career ladder. Promoting UNHCR’s interests externally is an important part of this process. This may incentivise staff to exaggerate needs or the benefits of certain courses of action, downplay risks, or otherwise adopt strategies that lead to increased attention and funding. As one donor commented, referring to UNHCR’s approach to information and advocacy, “It’s the way people in the organisation are rewarded for raising

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<sup>139</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 3’

<sup>140</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 14’

funds. The bigger the better. It's a big career boost for those involved"<sup>141</sup>. Thus among at least some external observers there is a certain degree of scepticism of these dynamics and in particular the impact that they may have on information creation and transfer.

Individuals are also interested in accumulating social capital, particularly in terms of occupying influential positions. As with the wider organisation this is not purely for self-interested reasons but also because, according to one UNHCR interviewee, it can be very gratifying to wield influence and see results, while individuals tend to enjoy much higher levels of authority in field positions than back home<sup>142</sup>.

Likewise, according to another interviewee, this affects their career choices, with the result that "Colleagues choose to go to ops with high funding. From a personal and professional point of view you can actually achieve things"<sup>143</sup>. Afghanistan, as a well-funded and "sexy" operation, consistently attracted high numbers of staff throughout the 2000s, until falling out of the limelight and being overshadowed by the Syria crisis in more recent years. Additionally, some UNHCR staff suspected that some of their colleagues were attracted to work in Afghanistan for more purely mercenary reasons, such as the higher level hardship pay and Rest and Relaxation (R&R) allowances. Notably though many UNHCR staff live and work in Afghanistan in difficult circumstances, are often in genuine danger, and undertake sacrifices for their organisation and its mandate that cannot be explained in purely mercenary terms.

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<sup>141</sup> Interview, 'Donor 15'

<sup>142</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 22'

<sup>143</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 6'

## 5.2.2 Missionary

***“One must also take this opportunity to pay tribute to UNHCR staff (both national and international) in the Pakistan and Afghanistan offices, many of whom have been very working long hours in difficult and often dangerous circumstances.”*** (UNHCR 2001c)

If one was so inclined, and less willing to take interviewees at their word, it would not be difficult to craft a narrative of UNHCR in Afghanistan acting solely in pursuit of its organisational interest, as conceived of by its various staff. However, that would to a large extent be misleading, as would any analysis that does not take sufficient account of what Wigley (2005) refers to as “The deep level of commitment to the cause and the mandate of the organization”, which was evident in all interviews, and was recognised by the vast majority of external commentators. Indeed, some donors even felt that the commitment of UNHCR’s staff in Afghanistan to their mandate was *too* strong. As one commented, “you can sense the dedication, and the passion, and the belief, and the ‘*this* is what we have to do’, and to a point that, sometimes, it gets a bit religious maybe”<sup>144</sup>. Arguably it is this sense of commitment to a set of very specific goals that has been the driving force behind much of UNHCR’s action.

For this reason many, both within and outside the organisation, were defensive in interviews at suggestions of non-altruistic motivations. There were also concerns that an overly critical account would be both unfair, and counter-productive, by

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<sup>144</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 3’

reflecting unduly negatively on the organisation and the sector as a whole or undermining the good work done by UNHCR. One interviewed donor for instance gave his opinion that:

“I know and I’ve seen among others and also in Afghanistan that there’s very dedicated people working in UNHCR and they do a lot of good work and do a lot of work for people that are falling through the cracks. And I think even if we’re critical, and we should be because this is a lot of money, but what the organization does, we should not make that criticism like the first thing about the organization.”<sup>145</sup>

Likewise, UNHCR interviewees were keen to point out that the driving motivation for them was not organisational or personal interest. One, for instance, said, with feeling, “There’s something I want you to be very clear about: For me what counted was not the money to UNHCR. My responsibility is to Mohamed<sup>146</sup>, I don’t give a damn about the donors.”<sup>147</sup> While this may be true, it is nevertheless coupled with a realisation that UNHCR cannot operate without its donors and hence accommodations between the two sets of interests need to be made.

While, at an individual and organisational level, UNHCR may be driven by altruistic motivations, those motivations are themselves shaped by UNHCR’s mandate and its operating context. Most specifically UNHCR has an (unofficial) hierarchy of altruistic interests, which very clearly reflects its mandate and self-perception as a

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<sup>145</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 8’

<sup>146</sup> The name ‘Mohamed’ in this case being used as a synonym for beneficiaries of UNHCR’s assistance.

<sup>147</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 2’

refugee agency. It also reflects how its staff view the world and form judgements about it. More particularly, as Krause (2014) has noted, “The perception of needs is filtered through an agency’s understanding of its mandate.” The specific prism of this semi-official hierarchy of missionary objectives is transferred to UNHCR staff through the mechanism of formatting/socialisation.

The process of socialisation within UNHCR is strong, as recognised by both insiders and outsiders, and serves to ensure a certain level of unity of purpose and common ways of thinking. As one UNHCR interviewee noted, in the field “UNHCR is almost like your family”<sup>148</sup> and there is a need to trust it completely to look after you, and to have faith that it is doing the right thing. Those who do not agree with the organisation’s goals or ways of operating tend to leave, while those who remain serve to promote and replicate particular approaches.

UNHCR could be said to have three identities as a ‘refugee’, a ‘humanitarian’ and a ‘protection’ organisation, which it struggles to balance. The refugee identity is arguably strongest, as indeed reflected in UNHCR’s name. According to one interviewee “No other agency has such a defined mandate as UNHCR”<sup>149</sup>. UNHCR interviewees see their responsibility to refugees as both a legal and a moral imperative; as well as a question of organisational interest in the sense that refugee protection is the principal issue on which UNHCR is ultimately held accountable.

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<sup>148</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 14’

<sup>149</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 9’

However, UNHCR has progressively taken on responsibility for other 'People of Concern', including returning refugees (returnees) once back in their homeland, IDPs, and host populations. While the organisation has considerable flexibility to determine who to help, and how much help to extend, it has a clear internal preference for assisting refugees. This is accompanied by a very strong defence of UNHCR's own leading role in refugee protection. The extent to which UNHCR helps its other 'Populations of Concern' and promotes a leading role for itself, depends on external circumstances and internal questions of identity.

This approach poses the first challenge for UNHCR's 'humanitarian' identity. There is no single accepted definition of what 'humanitarian' means, but probably the most authoritative reference is adherence to the ICRC's core humanitarian principles, including humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. UNHCR professes to adhere to these principles but the extent to which it does so is questionable. For one thing, the degree to which it cooperates with the Afghan government and donor states that are at the same time party to the conflict, would, for many, put it on the wrong side of the neutrality and independence requisites.

More fundamentally, many interviewees believe that UNHCR's status-based approach, in which it explicitly or implicitly favours certain types of people, clashes with a vulnerability approach that, in their view, is required by the principle of humanity and the humanitarian imperative. Beyond UNHCR, this divide was clearly noticeable in interviews between those working for organisations with vulnerability-based mandates and those with status-based mandates. The former group tended in interviews to be highly critical of UNHCR's approach, seeing it as

both arbitrary and serving to undermine the delivery of assistance to those who most need it.

In contrast UNHCR staff are highly defensive of their particular status-based mandate and role. As one senior UNHCR interviewee acknowledged “There’s a lot of debate about status versus vulnerability. A lot of our sister agencies are uncomprehending about UNHCR’s approach.”<sup>150</sup> While recognising that some of these concerns were valid he felt that integration of the needs of UNHCR’s mandated populations alongside the needs of others, would “dilute the line of accountability”, leading to a situation in which it would be less easy to hold actors to account for specific results. Thus, although, or perhaps because, in his view there is “an inherent contradiction between the universalist approach and the mandate-based approach”, UNHCR regards itself as “an integral yet distinct part of the overall humanitarian system”. This distinctiveness was a recurrent theme in interviews and contributes to a culture of independence (some say arrogance) that sets UNHCR apart from other humanitarian actors and processes.

The view that the needs of UNHCR’s mandated populations must be treated separately outside the structures of the wider humanitarian system, was justified on organisational grounds (the simple response of “that’s our mandate” being the most common one), practical grounds (for instance the perceived need to uphold and recognise arbitrary classifications of refugee status in order to maintain asylum space in Iran and Pakistan), and on grounds of vulnerability (with UNHCR’s population being assumed to automatically be among the most needy). According

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<sup>150</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 18’

to a senior UNHCR interviewee, “It’s not just a question of vulnerability”<sup>151</sup>, and ‘status’ is equally important, if not more so. Thus, whatever the intentions of UNHCR’s founders and funders, the organisation has embraced the hierarchy of beneficiaries implicit in its mandate and is willing to pursue these objectives, even to the extent that its actions may ultimately undermine an even more overarching goal: that of combatting vulnerability.

Nevertheless views on this topic differed slightly depending on the individual and the role they occupied. Within UNHCR Afghanistan for instance some interviewees noted a divide between the protection and programme teams. The former unit works more closely on IDP issues and was thus more sympathetic to a humanitarian, vulnerability-based approach, while the latter unit sought to defend UNHCR’s traditional refugee-focussed status-based role. Both approaches could potentially be expansionist but in very different directions: Either in terms of expanding ‘humanitarian’ activities to cover more types of people; or expanding ‘development’ activities to cover more needs of refugees/returnees. Although this debate has played out in UNHCR Afghanistan it has largely been conducted behind closed doors and out of sight of donors or most other interlocutors. Though it may have implications for organisational interests this is at least equally a competition between missionary objectives. It does mean though, that to at least a certain extent, the position of individuals within the organisation is likely to shape their views.

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid

Another notable observation, in terms of how the positions of individuals are influenced by the specific roles that they occupy, is the divide between the 'field' and headquarters. This mirrors to a certain extent the divide between the protection and programme teams. On numerous occasions noted in the following chapters field-based staff have been open to adopting a more pragmatic (and vulnerability-based) approach, while headquarters has focussed more, and more strictly, on wider organisational interests and the future impact of specific decisions. As one UNHCR interviewee commented: "At HQ level we're always worried about precedents being set."<sup>152</sup> Between Headquarters and the field is the country desk, which is "an advocate for the operation. It's also the entry point for the field to the HQ"<sup>153</sup>, and thus needs to balance the positions of both sides; lobbying for the country operation in HQ, and for HQ in the country operation.

Among non-UNHCR interviewees, opinions seemed to vary depending on how the mandates of their organisations were articulated, and specifically whether this was on the basis of status or vulnerability, regardless of whether the interviewee represented a donor, a UN agency, or an NGO. In many cases the interviewee was strongly convinced of the righteousness of their own approach, and critical of others. Thus, having internalised the approach of their agency, they were driven to promote it, not for organisational interest reasons, but because they felt it was the best, most effective approach.

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<sup>152</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 18'

<sup>153</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 19'

UNHCR's humanitarian self-view is also somewhat at odds with the extent of its ambitions. Not just in Afghanistan but more globally the organisation has gradually expanded its remit beyond life-saving activities to more development-oriented programmes; partly out of necessity in the case of long term care and maintenance of refugee populations caught in limbo, and partly out of a desire to address an ever greater range of underlying problems. Arguably, it is for this reason that UNHCR invented its 'protection' identity.

According to one senior UNHCR interviewee, "UNHCR is a protection agency more than a humanitarian agency. Whole swathes of what we do are not humanitarian."<sup>154</sup> However, the concept of protection is, perhaps deliberately, rather vague. Another senior interviewee proclaimed that even after almost three decades at UNHCR he still did not know what it meant (while noting that there is jealousy within UNHCR if other organisations claim to work on it)<sup>155</sup>. Equally this lack of clarity on the precise meaning and extent of the term seemed to be shared by other agencies in Afghanistan. According to one NGO interviewee for instance, "We all talked about protection but I don't think there was a clear idea what protection means in Afghanistan"<sup>156</sup>. More generally, Barnett and Weiss (2008) note that "The ICRC's definition of "protection" is wide enough to encompass all of humanitarianism." That protection as a concept has remained ill-defined leaves a large margin of flexibility of interpretation open to UNHCR, which is arguably an example of what Loescher (2001) has termed the organisation's "humanitarian pragmatism".

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<sup>154</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 18'

<sup>155</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 3'

<sup>156</sup> Interview, 'NGO 4'

In Afghanistan UNHCR's work has been concentrated in what one interviewee described as the "light grey area"<sup>157</sup> between humanitarian and development work. However, while seeking to address long-term problems the methods employed have been short-term projects with little consistency, visibility or impact monitoring from one year to the next, in line with UNHCR's humanitarian operating style. Equally, there is no clear limit to where UNHCR's work should end and beyond which it should let others take over. As one UNHCR interviewee commented "There is no red line that you say 'ah, now you've crossed it'. There is no such thing. Or I don't know if there is such a thing. I've never come across the one project that you really cannot do because that's now crossing the line. Because we build houses, is that not crossing the line?"<sup>158</sup>

Thus UNHCR's status-based mandate has led it to develop a hierarchy of beneficiaries, in which staff feel officially and morally obligated to promote the needs of some people more than others, and its quasi-humanitarian/quasi-protection identity has left it with ample flexibility for interpretation as to the limits of its role into the realm of development. As it is difficult to pursue both of these aims simultaneously (expansion of humanitarian services to IDPs, or expansion of development services to returnees), UNHCR has had to consistently make choices as to which missionary objective it deems most important at given junctures in the organisation's history in Afghanistan. These decisions have thus

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<sup>157</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 15'

<sup>158</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 1'

largely been influenced by both the visions of particular individuals and external context.

### 5.2.3 Misfit

***“A pickle factory near the Jalalabad sub-office, which was constructed by an implementing partner, had not been operational since its construction in 2011. This was due to an incorrect needs assessment, poor planning and ineffective monitoring. UNHCR did not derive value for money from this project and potential beneficiaries were deprived of employment opportunities. ... Since UNHCR did not undertake regular monitoring, these shortcomings were not corrected in a timely manner.”***

(OIOS 2014)

In his review of UNHCR’s global involvement in the humanitarian marketplace Gottwald (2010) suggests a profile of UNHCR staff that corresponds closely to the more traditional concept of ‘misfit’ as it is used in the original saying applied to aid workers. He claims that many UNHCR personnel are seeking to escape difficult backgrounds and trying hard to succeed in order to gain a sense of identity and purpose and so that the organisation “will love them back and protect them”. However, while there may be an element of this (though not necessarily more within UNHCR than in any other organisation), this is not how I apply the term misfit in the current thesis. Rather, I use the term to refer to the bureaucratic dynamics that are involved in translating interests into action, and which are

either disconnected from those wider interests or which produce interests of their own.

One reason that organisations may be described as ‘misfits’ is that they are staffed by individuals, an inherently unpredictable variable, which to some extent limits the validity of any theory regarding how that organisation will behave. As noted in the previous section the position that individuals occupy to some extent influences their viewpoints. But there are limits to this dynamic. The large degree of variation in approach to certain issues that reflects the key role played by certain individuals in powerful positions is made clear in the following chapters, in particular in regards to UNHCR’s promotion of its Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR).

Bureaucratic cultures also impact the work of organisations and, in particular, the way that objectives are transformed into action. UNHCR remains one of the most prominent and well-regarded actors in the UN system. One interviewee recounted that when he joined UNHCR almost 30 years ago it was “the undisputed king”<sup>159</sup> of the humanitarian system. This position of status and power, enabled by large financial reserves of un-earmarked funding, has led to a culture of independence and of action. Less charitably it is described by some as a culture of arrogance or a sense of superiority. According to one interviewee for instance “UNHCR is far too arrogant to be a humanitarian actor. ... [They] confuse coordination with subordination.”<sup>160</sup> Even some interviewees within UNHCR accept this. As one

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<sup>159</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 3’

<sup>160</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 1’

commented: “UNHCR has always been very arrogant. That’s been recognized and we admit it. We’re working to overcome it and we were really in our ivory tower.”<sup>161</sup> External commentators have also noted that UNHCR’s focus on presenting a good external image, its defensiveness towards criticism, and its desire to resist outside efforts to hold it accountable, has had repercussions for the organisation’s development (Loescher 2001; Wigley 2005).

This culture of independence has had an impact on the power balance between UNHCR and its donors. With a tradition of taking independent action, ample freedom to choose how to allocate financial reserves, and a recognition of its own status at a global level, UNHCR staff may feel less pressure to please individual donors on specific matters and are likely to be more confident in pursuing certain courses of action even in the face of counter-pressure, provided they have the weight of the organisation behind them. One UNHCR interviewee noted for instance that UNHCR is “not like an NGO that will not implement if they do not get the money, so there’s a different relationship”<sup>162</sup> with donors. The upshot of this was, in his view, that individual donors had much less ability to influence the course of UNHCR’s actions than they did over other actors because UNHCR could, in most cases, simply allocate core funding to cover individual projects regardless of the actions of a particular donor.

Nevertheless these dynamics may be changing to a certain extent as the humanitarian world becomes more competitive and the number of actors within it

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<sup>161</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 20’

<sup>162</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 22’

continues to multiply. Reforms to the humanitarian system (in particular the ‘Transformative Agenda’ and the introduction of the cluster system) over the past decade have threatened UNHCR’s prestigious position and, in some cases (as shown in later chapters), have led to it taking a highly defensive posture with regard to the preservation of certain of its privileges. Again though, the experience of individuals means that these responses are not uniform and those who joined UNHCR more recently, particularly from other agencies or NGOs, are likely to have a different approach from those who were used to the old system. As one interviewee put it, “The veterans of UNHCR are nostalgic but the younger generation is falling into line with the cluster system. The older generation think they’re something very special.”<sup>163</sup>

According to interviews UNHCR as an organisation has an ability to inspire a large degree of loyalty from its staff, some of whom admitted to getting upset when it is criticised by outsiders<sup>164</sup>. One outsider noted that within the NGO that he led in Afghanistan UNHCR personnel were referred to as “the cult”. They were seen as conforming to a certain profile, being hyper-sensitive to criticism of the organisation, and having a tendency to view all issues through a UNHCR-inspired lens<sup>165</sup>.

The principal preoccupation of most UNHCR staff though, like all actors in the aid marketplace, is simply getting through the daily process of attempting to simply do their job, as defined by their job descriptions and the expectations of their

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<sup>163</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 9’

<sup>164</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 3’

<sup>165</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 12’

managers, in difficult circumstances. In her review of UNHCR's organisational culture Wigley (2005) noted that "UNHCR has a tendency to behave as though its primary purpose is, for example, to create reports, arrange staff movements and keep itself funded, rather than that these are all activities that occur only as a background and a support to the achievement of the actual primary purpose of protecting and assisting refugees." The dynamic of treating rules as ends in themselves, rather than means to an end, is common within all bureaucracies and is an example of what Barnett and Finnemore (2004) have termed a 'pathology'.

Nevertheless, taking a more charitable view, much of what UNHCR Afghanistan staff have to deal with on a day to day basis consists of endless crisis management, and attempting to meet a never-ending series of acute needs. This in turn gives the perception of facing an overwhelming challenge that outstrips the ability to meet it. Thus, as one put it, "on a day to day basis it feels like we're completely understaffed."<sup>166</sup> Such a focus on fulfilling the operational tasks specific to the individual and organisation is likely to dominate the views of those involved and to lead them to feel that their sector must be under-prioritised in the wider scheme of things.

In common with other organisations there is also a certain path dependency in how UNHCR approaches its tasks. The tools which UNHCR can draw upon to address the challenges it faces are limited by its mandate, past experience, established practice and questions of efficiency in service delivery. These tools, defined by what the organisation is best placed to provide rather than what its

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<sup>166</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 9'

beneficiaries most need, may not always be optimum for the task in hand. One example is that UNHCR has traditionally found it easier to address the needs of refugees in camp settings, where they are concentrated in a single geographic area, rather than in urban areas where they may become indistinguishable from the urban poor (Crisp 2017). One result of this has been that “in Afghanistan, UNHCR tends to look at Afghans through a rural prism, and plans assistance on the basis of a rural paradigm” (UNHCR 2002a). Though UNHCR noted early on that it “cannot, and should not, attempt to stop urbanization” (Ibid) it has only very recently begun addressing the problems of returnees in urban areas who had been largely absent from UNHCR programming for most of the past fifteen years. Another example of the organisation’s skillsets being inadequate for the task at hand is that as a humanitarian organisation which puts a premium on reactivity and flexibility, UNHCR has been much more focussed in Afghanistan on providing timely inputs, than in the long-term measurement of impact.. Audits in 2004 and 2014 revealed that numerous projects had had little to no impact and that UNHCR had failed to properly monitor them.

Several commentators have noted that UNHCR is a very hierarchical organisation (Loescher, Betts and Milner 2008). However this was disputed by some<sup>167</sup>, with one referring to “a strange combination of hierarchy and anarchism”<sup>168</sup>. Thus there is the space and the ability to debate and disagree with key policies within UNHCR (as outlined in the following chapter). Nevertheless such debates tend to take place behind closed doors and are not necessarily evident to outside

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<sup>167</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 7’

<sup>168</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 3’

observers. On the other hand outsiders may sometimes be drawn into internal policy debates, even unwittingly. On occasion in Afghanistan that even went as far as UNHCR staff feeding NGOs talking points that they wanted raised in order to convince other parts of the UNHCR bureaucracy<sup>169</sup>, and Scalettari (2013) recounts a similar dynamic in which donors fed back UNHCR Afghanistan positions to UNHCR's Geneva HQ. In terms of how UNHCR staff have adapted to changes in direction from leadership, one interviewee commented that there was, at the same time, both an expectation of change and willingness to accommodate it from some within UNHCR; as well as resistance to it from others, particularly those used to working in specific ways over long periods<sup>170</sup>. In any case as an organisation with long-established procedures and toolboxes there is a limited amount of innovation that is possible, and all decisions must be taken within such confines. Thus, as with all bureaucracies, the ability to 'think outside the box' is highly constrained.

All of these factors related to UNHCR's bureaucratic culture, and going beyond the simple interpretation of its mercenary and missionary goals, are likely to impact the way UNHCR approaches its tasks in Afghanistan. In the words of one interviewee "A sense of superiority and specialness are definitely part of UNHCR's organisational culture."<sup>171</sup> Understanding this organisational self-perception, among the other factors covered here, is an important element in analysing the history of UNHCR's interventions in Afghanistan in the post 9/11 world.

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<sup>169</sup> Interview, 'NGO 12'

<sup>170</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 7'

<sup>171</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 3'

Finally, there is another misfit dynamic to consider, the extent to which interests are translated along the 'aid chain' from donors to UNHCR. For this transfer of interests to occur obviously depends in turn on the assumption that donors themselves are able to define and articulate specific desires with regard to the activities of UNHCR in Afghanistan. One would thus expect donors to set limitations and curtail the activities of UNHCR and to an extent this has been the case. However, the default approach of most donors in Afghanistan has been to adopt a hands-off approach. Those that provide project-based funding tend to be more engaged (on the details of their own specific projects) than those that provide core funding (even if earmarked at the country level). But few donors have the time, capacity or inclination to dig deeply into the finer details of UNHCR's programming. Donors have exerted influence on different occasions to avoid undermining the development of Afghanistan's national development strategy through parallel programming; to push for a greater focus on the needs of IDPs; and to urge greater cooperation between OCHA and UNHCR in addressing the needs of refugees. On each occasion UNHCR has, to an extent, taken on board the suggestions of donors and has proactively sought to assuage their concerns. But the overall direction of its policy has generally not changed substantially. On other issues that donors deem less important, they have done little to pressure UNHCR to modify its behaviour, leaving it essentially a free hand to design and implement its programming in Afghanistan. Its 'humanitarian' identity shields UNHCR to an extent from the necessity to align its programming to national development priorities, while its 'protection' identity gives it ample leeway to extend this programming as far into the development sphere as its funding allows. One reason that donors have done relatively little (beyond questions of staffing, capacity and

prioritisation within donor agencies) is the high level of reliance that donors have on UNHCR for their own information regarding the organisation's activities, its successes and its failures.

### 5.3 Information Transfers and Donor Reliance on UNHCR

***“We leave it to UNHCR to tell us what the needs are”<sup>172</sup>***

***“We know fuck all about IDPs and refugees. We rely completely on UNHCR and their figures.”<sup>173</sup>***

From the point of view of donors, misfit dynamics also apply in terms of their ability to use UNHCR as a vehicle for their own objectives. These consist primarily of their own information deficits and consequent reliance on UNHCR, and their desire to pursue the path of least resistance in fulfilling the tasks which they themselves have had conferred on them.

While donors source information from multiple partners in order to assess displacement-related needs, UNHCR undoubtedly occupies a privileged position. Even in an ever more competitive marketplace its unique global status, mandate and level of authority in its sector, are unparalleled. Indeed it is, almost unquestionably, “the world’s foremost expert on refugees and displaced peoples” (Barnett 2001). Thus, as one UNHCR interviewee put it “Donors recognize the

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<sup>172</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 4’

<sup>173</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 16’

value and role of UNHCR and the fact that we are the refugee mandated agency has never been questioned by donors.”<sup>174</sup> All interviewed donors not only appreciate the information service that UNHCR provides to them regarding the needs of displaced people but also, to a large extent, rely on it to inform their programming. One example, for instance, is that the US government states that it relies on the information of UNHCR’s global appeals “to prepare its annual policy paper on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. These policy papers help inform funding recommendations to support refugees and returnees in the Southwest Asia region, which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran” (SIGAR 2015; the document goes on to state the US “has a limited ability to independently verify UNHCR information related to Afghan refugees”). In turn this gives UNHCR a large amount of power to influence donor agendas and to define who is vulnerable and deserving of support. The information that UNHCR provides in the form of updates, reports, press releases, media briefings and other formats heavily influences donor programme design, funding allocation and political prioritisation of issues.

Giulia Scalettaris worked as a Donor Liaison Officer for UNHCR Afghanistan between 2006 and 2008 and later wrote a ‘bureaography’ (2013) of UNHCR’s operations in the region during her time there. In terms of UNHCR’s relations with its donors she notes:

“The dependence is reciprocal: The donors also need UNHCR. And this is above all to follow the evolution of Afghan migration. They needed analysis,

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<sup>174</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 20’

reports, and basic data to orient their own analysis, decisions and positions, and which only UNHCR was in the position to produce.”<sup>175</sup>

Crucially, she adds that donor strategies tended to be largely based on those elaborated by UNHCR, and that while donors may have questioned the information they were provided, they were not in a position to contradict it. This gives UNHCR the power to dictate the terms on which donors judge its success and, importantly, is probably not unconnected to her observation that donors supported UNHCR’s programmes in Afghanistan “almost unconditionally.”

The observation that UNHCR’s privileged position in terms of defining needs arguably translates into a market advantage in terms of addressing those needs, was born out by interviews. UNHCR’s respected role in needs assessment, it would seem, confers it an advantage not only in respect of seeing the issues it deems to be important more highly prioritised, but also in serving its own institutional interests. This is because in effect UNHCR is seen by most donors as the default option to meet the needs that it identifies. This is partly due to a belief on the part of some donors that “there are specific needs in these communities that UNHCR is best placed to respond to”<sup>176</sup> but it is also, to a certain extent, a question of convenience. UNHCR is an obvious and well respected option, with demonstrated expertise, and it operates in an environment in which information on future performance is any case likely to be largely supplied by the implementer, thereby putting a premium on credibility and reputation. Hence, as one interviewee put it,

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<sup>175</sup> Own translation from the original French

<sup>176</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 4’

“Donors that have less capacity to follow up find it easier to give to UNHCR.”<sup>177</sup>

Most humanitarian donors in Afghanistan do tend to have mixed portfolios including various different implementers, but UNHCR is almost always one of those and, where displaced people are concerned, it very often receives the lion’s share of the funding. As one donor recounted:

“All donors contribute to UNHCR because it’s the easiest thing to do. It’s the most natural thing ...They are *the* agency for refugees so it’s obvious they’ll get money. If UNHABITAT comes and wants to work with returnees they need to justify more why they should get money ... That’s why giving to UNHCR is the most normal thing. They don’t even go and see who else could do the job.”<sup>178</sup>

In addition, the general practice of funding UNHCR to address displacement-related needs translates into an expectation of future support to the extent that *not* providing support may in itself be construed as a statement of donor discontent that could harm relations between the two entities. According to one donor therefore, “there’s a certain amount of pressure to support the mandated organisations for certain crises” and thus, due to this pressure from his headquarters, his agency was “funding UNHCR here basically because we have to.”<sup>179</sup>

In terms of how that funding is managed, several embassies in Afghanistan, mentioned that relations with UNHCR are handled predominantly by their capitals.

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<sup>177</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 11’

<sup>178</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 14’

<sup>179</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 12’

One interviewee reported that he had been informed that Afghanistan was not a priority for the headquarters team responsible for managing relations with UNHCR; a second said that as UNHCR relations were managed by his headquarters he had no information on their views of the organisation; and a third noted that not only were UNHCR reports on their Afghan operations now no longer received in Afghanistan, and instead sent directly to headquarters, but that the lack of ability to visit projects meant that in practice this made relatively little difference, as levels of information were not necessarily higher in country. Thus the picture that emerges is of a relatively hands-off style of grant management based on, usually, high levels of trust. A donor interviewee for instance stated that as a general rule his country “tends not to dictate”<sup>180</sup> to UNHCR regarding programmatic issues, appreciating that UNHCR was in a better position to make these judgements than the donor agency.

Non-donor interviewees often confirmed this hands-off approach, stating for instance that even when donors expressed unhappiness with UNHCR’s approach on certain topics, their levels of interest and commitment were generally not sufficiently high for them to use their influence to force a change of stance. Rather, as a UNHCR interviewee reported:

“Most of the donors, like [country] and all the others, they just give core contributions and once a year we send them the annual report and they’re happy with that.”<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 4’

<sup>181</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 22’

Another UNHCR interviewee, referring to smaller donors (though his comment is arguably equally applicable even to larger donors in Afghanistan), said “if they want to investigate it’s almost impossible for them so of course they need to have trust in you.”<sup>182</sup> This is perhaps exacerbated by UNHCR’s tendency, in the words of one interviewee there, to provide information in “large brush strokes that don’t give information on what actually happens.”<sup>183</sup>

A few donors expressed frustration at the level of opacity in UNHCR’s communications, but on the rare occasions when donors were perceived as pursuing a more active, or critical, role in their dealings with UNHCR, they were then perceived by UNHCR interviewees as, variously, “a pest”<sup>184</sup>, a cause of “frustration”<sup>185</sup>, or, by juxtaposing the perceived political agenda of donors with the perceived needs-driven one of UNHCR, as an obstacle to addressing real needs<sup>186</sup>.

It is worth noting also that the parts of donor agencies that interact most closely with UNHCR may also be those most sympathetic to its positions. Partly this may be a case of exposure breeding understanding, as well as the two sides sharing many of the same programmatic objectives, but institutional interests may also play a role. Most donor officials in Afghanistan dealing with UNHCR also handle multiple other portfolios, particularly wider humanitarian issues, but often

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<sup>182</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 12’

<sup>183</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 9’

<sup>184</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 1’

<sup>185</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 22’

<sup>186</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 20’

development-oriented portfolios as well. One donor agency however, the US State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM) has a narrow remit that closely mirrors that of UNHCR. Thus, many interviewees saw the fates of UNHCR and this donor agency as being closely intertwined, with the budget and level of prioritisation accorded to UNHCR also impacting BPRM's own relative position in the US federal government system. For instance, BPRM is seen by some as tending to favour UNHCR in clashes with OCHA, while its sister agency, USAID (with a mandate closer to OCHA's), takes the opposite approach. According to one UNHCR interviewee, BPRM employees "are all mega fans of UNHCR ... [with] a vested interest in talking each other up ... [as] if they said UNHCR's not doing a great job they'd be shooting themselves in the foot."<sup>187</sup> A former BPRM Afghanistan employee noted that at the time when she worked there, BPRM staff were "big supporters of UNHCR's programmes"<sup>188</sup> in Afghanistan, and that, due to the closely intertwined interests, they were highly unlikely "to trash talk UNHCR in public," though she stressed that this did not stop BPRM from applying pressure on UNHCR in private. Even current BPRM interviewees described their role as both "a critic *and an advocate*"<sup>189</sup> of UNHCR.

As BPRM funds a percentage of UNHCR's global projected budget (i.e. what UNHCR expects or hopes to spend, rather than what they actually spend), this was seen by some as incentivizing UNHCR to adopt larger budgets. Indeed the lack of transparency regarding how budgets are devised was a common complaint among

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<sup>187</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 3'

<sup>188</sup> Interview, 'NGO 6'

<sup>189</sup> Interview, 'Donor 2'

many donors. UNHCR's global budgets are approved by its Executive Committee (ExComm) but the details of its country level budgets are particularly opaque.

In 2008 UNHCR adopted a new form of budgeting, the Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA). This marked a shift from UNHCR proposing a budget based on what it expected to receive, to one ostensibly based on what the needs merited. The inherent problem of such an approach is that "need" is an intrinsically subjective concept.

Many donors see the CNAs predominantly as an advocacy tool and as a way for UNHCR to demonstrate the scale of the needs that it believes it is facing. UNHCR interviewees also view it in similar terms, calling it "an incentive to donors also to show them, like this is what is really needed and this is what we think we're going to get, maybe you should step up your assistance a bit."<sup>190</sup> As a marketing instrument the CNA approach not only puts public pressure on donors to increase their funding but also provides a handy excuse to UNHCR for future implementation failures. One interviewed donor saw the CNA as:

"A fantastic tool if you want to do fundraising and indeed get your levels up. You don't budget for what you think people are willing to give you but you just put together all the needs that are out there within, or on the fringes of, your mandate and you put a number on that. And then you can say well we were only funded 60%. So you know already beforehand you're never going to be fully funded. You put out a big number so people understand the urgency and

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<sup>190</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 22'

are willing to contribute more and that's what you see with, in general, all the funding going up and at the same time you have also the perfect excuse for not delivering a hundred percent because you were only funded 60%.”<sup>191</sup>

Additionally, according to some, the higher budgets are encouraged by UNHCR's internal culture, and there are evident incentives to present ever higher figures in the CNAs. There is also a risk of this becoming a vicious cycle. In line with Akerlof's (1970) assumption that 'buyers' automatically adjust their behaviour to factor in 'sellers' perceived dishonesty, if donors perceive that UNHCR is exaggerating needs to increase its funding they would then likely factor this in to their financial allocations. In turn UNHCR would then need to present an even higher figure in the next allocation cycle in order to achieve its desired contribution. In the words of one interviewee, “I would assume that if you were a country manager and your appeal was 30% funded you wouldn't want to lower the appeal next year as your funding would shrink even further.”<sup>192</sup>

On the other hand this dynamic is to an extent mitigated by the need to retain credibility, an essential form of social capital in the competitive aid marketplace. Multiple interviewees mentioned that for UNHCR to request budgets that are perceived as inflated or unrealistic would be counterproductive. For instance, when participating in Afghanistan's consolidated cluster appeals (see section 4.3.1) UNHCR moderates the amounts it requests as they are “smart enough not to shoot themselves totally in the foot”<sup>193</sup>, according to one donor. On the other hand

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<sup>191</sup> Interview, 'Donor 8'

<sup>192</sup> Interview, 'Donor 22'

<sup>193</sup> Interview, 'Donor 12'

this calculation (between maximising funding and maximising credibility) does not always achieve the desired result. For some, already, “the CNAs have become a joke as no-one takes it seriously any more.”<sup>194</sup> One donor lamented that “there’s no connection between the budget and needs”<sup>195</sup> and contrasted UNHCR’s approach with that of ICRC, which was deemed to be more credible in terms of its needs assessment.

UNHCR is aware of this risk and its headquarters plays a moderating role in ensuring a certain amount of restraint and consistency between country operations. As one UNHCR interviewee noted “very often headquarters says ok you have the right to dream, but not too far, so please even your wish list, your Comprehensive Needs Assessment, reduce it because it’s definitely not credible.”<sup>196</sup>

Donors have nevertheless witnessed an increasing divide between UNHCR’s approved budget, based on its CNAs, and the budget that it actually spends, which is based on its received contributions. For many donors this gap is “worrisome because it just keeps growing and growing”<sup>197</sup> and serves to obscure what the organisation is in reality planning to do, and thereby lessens the ability of donors to influence this planning process. UNHCR does create, predominantly for its own internal planning, a ‘prioritised’ budget, that reflects more closely what it actually expects to be able to fund. However, UNHCR shares this prioritised budget only with certain donors (those who are aware of it and who specifically request it), but

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<sup>194</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 9’

<sup>195</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 13’

<sup>196</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 16’

<sup>197</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 3’

even for these donors it is not always clear how the prioritisation is done, nor the criteria on which it is based.

Thus, in summary, donors readily admit to relying heavily on UNHCR for information regarding the needs of displaced people in Afghanistan. UNHCR's privileged position as an authoritative arbiter of knowledge also puts it in an advantageous position in terms of its implementation role. Donors generally adopt a hands-off approach to grant management, largely trusting UNHCR to use the funding where it is most needed. And while there are large incentives to present high 'needs', quantified in the form of budgetary appeals (incentives which are shared by some donors with similarly aligned mandates), these are mitigated by a certain extent by the need to retain credibility.

#### **5.4 Chapter Conclusions**

UNHCR in Afghanistan has certainly demonstrated mercenary characteristics. On occasion it has been keen to win the approval of its state backers, but it has also demonstrated agency and it has used this as much to persuade donor states as to please them. It has brought to bear a strong and effective machinery to lobby for its objectives, which have included the promotion of its own organisational interests. Meanwhile UNHCR staff also seek to advance their own interests, including the accumulation of social capital.

Nevertheless, as a missionary organisation UNHCR staff have demonstrated strong commitment to goals that they perceive of in altruistic terms. These goals are internalised by staff through an effective mechanism of socialisation. In determining which goals to promote as an organisation UNHCR has struggled to balance its 'refugee' and 'humanitarian' identities (while conflicts between these visions are to a certain extent concealed beneath a, perhaps deliberately, vague 'protection' identity). Different sections of the agency promote, or at least are more sympathetic towards, different goals; and fault lines are particularly evident between the protection and programme teams, and between the field and headquarters. Regardless of these differences, almost all staff have internalised UNHCR's implicit and semi-official hierarchy of beneficiaries, and see the promotion of highly ranked groups within this hierarchy as an important task incumbent upon them that is not only in UNHCR's interests but is in itself a moral good worth promoting.

UNHCR is also a misfit in certain respects, including the fact that it is staffed by varied and unpredictable individuals, despite the homogenising impact of socialisation. Due to its traditionally privileged place within the aid system it has developed a culture of both independence and arrogance that impacts its actions. It has fostered a strong degree of loyalty from among its staff, and this in turn is characterised by a certain degree of defensiveness towards criticism. Most of the time however, UNHCR staff are consumed by the challenges of simply implementing mundane tasks, albeit in difficult circumstances, and their scope of action is duly curtailed by the limited toolkits at their disposal; which in turn privileges certain courses of action above others.

Albeit in a very different sense, donors are also misfits in respect of their relations with UNHCR. The bureaucratic environment in which they operate imposes certain limitations on them that directly impacts on their ability to use their aid to promote their own goals. Specifically, donors have an exceptionally high reliance on UNHCR in relation to the provision of information regarding displacement-related needs. This opens the door to UNHCR using needs assessment essentially as advocacy, though its interest in engaging in this is nevertheless mitigated by a need to retain credibility. In turn, the authoritative position of UNHCR translates into a market advantage for the agency, which is seen by donors as a default option, and the path of least resistance, in addressing the needs that the agency has identified. These donors meanwhile, excepting situations in which causes for concern are brought to their attention, demonstrate a predominantly hands-off approach to grant management, which is based largely on trust, but also possibly low levels of prioritisation among donors. Some donors, focussing specifically on the same topics and objectives as UNHCR, have also developed dynamics of co-dependence.

All of these factors have impacted how UNHCR has approached its operations in Afghanistan, its involvement in the aid marketplace, and the activities that are examined in the following chapters.

## 6. Marketplace success and failure: UNHCR's reintegration assistance to Afghan returnees 2001-15

### 6.1 Chapter Overview

As outlined in the previous chapter, UNHCR has a specific status-based mandate that informs the way in which it interprets its role and how it prioritises its (missionary and mercenary) objectives. The agency is, to a certain extent, obliged to care about some people more than others (i.e. those who are or have been displaced). Yet it cannot assume that others will share these objectives. In Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries in the world, there are many competing claims on resources, and, in a competitive marketplace, many actors seeking to champion those claims.

In this chapter I look not so much at *why* UNHCR has acted as it has (the subject of the previous chapter), but *how* it has sought to promote its primary objective in Afghanistan of attracting greater attention to the needs of returning refugees. What are the tactics that it has employed and to what extent have these been successful? More particularly, how has the role of different individuals in positions of power influenced UNHCR's actions; to what extent has UNHCR managed to retain the confidence of its key interlocutors; and how successful has it been in attempting to convince potential allies that UNHCR's objectives were aligned with their own? The experience of UNHCR in each of these areas provides important

insights into how the aid marketplace functions, the constraints faced by those operating within it, and the factors that ultimately ensure success or failure.

This chapter provides a short history of two distinct periods in UNHCR's operations in Afghanistan: The period 2001-7 in which UNHCR struggled to manage its largest ever returns programme, and in the process claimed success for its operational achievements in a complicated operating context; and the period 2008-15 during which UNHCR, in the face of diminishing returns numbers and reduced interest from donors, resorted to ever more elaborate means to keep donor attention focussed on the situation of returnees, culminating ultimately in the development of a controversial Solutions Strategy for Afghan Returnees that, despite auspicious beginnings, managed to alienate many donors, UN agencies, NGOs, government counterparts, and even staff within UNHCR.

This chapter is thus the story of initial (albeit limited) success, and latter (albeit limited) failure, in the aid marketplace. How and why did UNHCR fail to capitalise on its earlier successes in promoting its Solutions Strategy to the extent that it would have liked? The answer lies predominantly in issues of social capital (specifically, a loss of trust from key interlocutors); the role of specific individuals; and a clash of competing, and ever-more diverging, visions from different actors all seeking to promote very different issues in the marketplace.

Though the following chapter could be interpreted through a purely mercenary lens as a history of various organisations defending their organisational interests, as they see them, it is a crucial finding that almost never did any actor involved in

these negotiations and disputes, explain their own actions in these terms. Rather it seems more likely that it is the advancement of narrowly-defined missionary goals, which in turn are shaped by organisational context, that provide the underlying motor for this competition.

Through the medium of a detailed case study over several years it is possible to examine in detail the evolution of UNHCR's strategies within Afghanistan and, crucially, its success in persuading other actors to support these strategies and the wider organisation. While my aim is to tell the story of how UNHCR has navigated the Afghan aid marketplace there are, notably, two topics that I do not cover in depth. These are, firstly, the regional politics of the Afghan PRS, and more specifically the role of Pakistan and Iran. This has been extensively covered by many authors and my contribution to this dimension would thus be limited<sup>198</sup>. Secondly, I do not seek to relate, from an ethnographic perspective, the experience of the refugees and returnees themselves<sup>199</sup>. I do touch to a certain extent on this in chapter 8 but only in respect of highlighting how UNHCR's narrative has differed from the available data sources rather than providing a detailed portrayal of the situation of returnees from their own perspectives. The choice to exclude these accounts from my analysis is partly driven by space constraints, and partly by the need to maintain a focussed and coherent narrative.

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<sup>198</sup> For an overview of the role and politics of Iran and Pakistan in the Afghan PRS see for example: MacLeod 2008; Schmeidl and Maley 2008; Turton and Marsden 2002; Blitz, Sales and Marzano 2005; Benelli, Donini and Niland 2012; MacDonald 2011; Bialczyk 2008; Long 2009; Hammersted 2014; Scalettari 2009; 2013

<sup>199</sup> For anthropological studies of Afghan refugees and returnees see: Kamal 2010; Hoodfar 2010; Monsutti 2010; Koepke 2011; Saito 2009; and from a rights-based perspective: AI 2001; HRW 2013; ICG 2009; Samuel Hall 2015

For similar reasons, while recounting the history of UNHCR's interventions in Afghanistan I have deliberately limited my references to wider theory. As any story-teller it is necessary to balance the need to maintain a clear, readable and engaging narrative against other considerations. In this case highlighting all relevant 'mercenary', 'missionary' and 'misfit' dynamics and constantly relating them back to my theory would inevitably kill the flow of the narrative and reduce its interest for the reader. A discussion of implications for theory is nevertheless included in the conclusion section at the end of the chapter.

## 6.2 2001-2007: Over-burdened

***"Our figures have been turned on their heads. It's quite overwhelming, but it's a pleasant surprise," says Yusuf Hassan, the UNHCR spokesman in Kabul. "There is an atmosphere of hope in the air, at least in Kabul."***

(Sydney Morning Herald 2002)

***"Although the long-term reintegration of Afghan refugees is largely out of UNHCR's hands, the organization has a key role to play in providing a 'cushion' for returnees, and a subsequent stepping stone in the direction of self-reliance."*** (UNHCR 2002a)

In late 2001, at the time of the 9/11 attacks against the US, the situation in Afghanistan was bleak. The country was still suffering from the effects of the "worst drought in 30 years" (Schmeidl, Mundt and Miszak 2010) and a related

famine that had displaced almost half a million people. Fighting between the Northern Alliance and Taliban continued in some parts of the country while the Taliban were imposing an iron grip over most of the country. At the same time the presence of the UN and aid agencies was exceptionally limited and under-funded, the UN having evacuated entirely for half a year prior to March 1999. New refugees were entering Pakistan, despite it having closed its border in November 2000, while Iran was exerting pressure on UNHCR to facilitate the arguably forced return of more than 100,000 refugees.

The hastily organised NATO invasion following the events of September 11 held out the promise of radically changing the situation of the country, but in the immediate short term its impact appeared likely to make a bad situation worse. When the bombing of Afghanistan commenced all of Afghanistan's neighbours that had not already done so closed their borders and UNHCR took the controversial choice of supporting IDP camps inside the country, a move criticised by some as legitimating the border closures (Long 2010). The fall of the Taliban regime nevertheless occurred more rapidly than many had expected and the return of large numbers of Afghan refugees seemed more likely than ever.

In the wake of the US invasion powerful Afghan and international players gathered in Bonn in Germany in December 2001 to discuss governance arrangements for post-Taliban Afghanistan. A framework for an Interim Authority was developed (the Bonn Agreement) and Hamid Karzai was selected to lead it. As one of his first acts a Presidential Decree on Dignified Return was issued on 22 December 2001, committing the new government to welcome back refugees, extending an amnesty

to returnees (except for war crimes), and including provisions on protection from discrimination and assistance to recover property. Responsibility for overseeing the strategy was given to the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR), which would become UNHCR's closest partner in the government. Major donor conferences were organised in Washington DC in November 2001 and Tokyo in January 2002, accompanied by pledges of \$4.5 billion in assistance over the following five years. To coordinate reconstruction efforts and international assistance the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was established by Security Council Resolution in March 2002.

The rapid collapse of the Taliban authority and the perceived new commitment of the international community to Afghanistan seemed to herald a brighter future for the country and high levels of returns were expected. Nevertheless the massive scale of the return movement that followed "took everyone by surprise" (UNHCR 2002b) and far exceeded expectations.

Both in anticipation, and in the wake of, these returns UNHCR appealed for significant funding to allow it to significantly scale up its operations. The organisation originally planned for returns of only around 400,000 people cautioning that many observers believed it would not be attained (UNHCR 2002a). This was later doubled to 800,000 but UNHCR was nevertheless caught off guard when, by the end of 2002, almost 1.8 million Afghans had returned to the country (40% of them to Kabul alone). Donors were also slow to realise the enormity of the challenge facing them and the initial donor response was much lower than needed to facilitate the return of such unexpectedly large numbers of people. By

May 2002 IOM suspended its own repatriation programme due to lack of funding and UNHCR, which had by this point received two thirds of the money it had appealed for (based on lower returns figures), announced it would run out of funds the following month. In anticipation UNHCR launched “an aggressive and competitive public information strategy in the Afghan crisis, which ... proved highly successful in terms of visibility and international media coverage” (UNHCR 2001b).

The effect on funding contributions was significant. UNHCR announced multiple times throughout the year that it was on the point of suspending operations due to lack of money. But the very public appeals bore fruit and by the end of 2002 the organisation had spent more than ten times its 2001 budget, which in turn had doubled from 2000. Indeed globally nearly half of all humanitarian funding in 2002 had been directed to the UN’s 25 separate appeals for the country (Barnett and Weiss 2008). However at the same time the sheer numbers of returnees meant that the majority of that funding needed to be spent on emergency assistance and immediate return needs rather than long term reintegration (Turton and Marsden 2002). UNHCR hence decided to concentrate on a limited range of pressing needs (primarily focussing on the logistics of return, including grants for returnee families, and a large shelter programme), announcing that it would leave other actors to take on the bulk of reintegration activities. Even so UNHCR’s ambitions were perhaps less modest than its rhetoric suggested and donors complained that UNHCR “was overreaching itself by getting involved in ‘development’ rather than ‘relief’” (Turton and Marsden 2002). For instance, although UNHCR said in its 2002 Global Report that it had not planned

interventions in health, education or agriculture on account of its decision “not to intervene in sectors where other agencies were planning to take action, and where others possessed more relevant expertise”, it had nevertheless rehabilitated 11 schools, 11 health centres and funded Income Generating Activities in areas such as carpentry, tailoring, poultry-rearing, stove production and quilt making, among others.

The reconstruction process initially proceeded quickly and levels of insecurity were, in comparison to both earlier and later periods, exceptionally low. In the summer of 2002 the Afghan Transitional Authority was established through a Loya Jirga (grand assembly), by which time UNHCR was describing the conditions in Afghanistan as “generally conducive to the safe return of a broad spectrum of Afghans” (UNHCR 2002c). Nevertheless the challenges were daunting. As Turton and Marsden (2002) point out:

“The refugees were returning to a country where there was, effectively, no functioning state; where the worst drought in 150 years was entering its fourth year and showing no signs of abating over large areas of the country; where there was continuing military activity by Coalition forces and between rival local power holders; where ethnic violence (particularly directed against Pashtuns in areas of northern Afghanistan dominated by Uzbeks and Tajiks), had contributed to the internal displacement of hundreds of thousands of people; where institutions of law and order were either non-existent or highly rudimentary; and where the provision of basic

services, such as drinking water, health and education was, to say the least, rudimentary and seriously under-resourced.”

In light of this situation UNHCR was keen to point out that it was “facilitating” rather than “promoting” return but the difference between the two stances may ultimately not have been that great, as pointed out by many observers (Schmeidl and Maley 2008; Bialczyk 2008; Hammersted 2014; Turton and Marsden 2002). Both Iran and Pakistan began to step up pressure on resident Afghans to return home. Levels of harassment increased, greater restrictions were imposed on Afghans in Iran, and Pakistan announced its intention to close certain refugee camps (Schmeidl and Maley 2008; Hoodfar 2010; Turton and Marsden 2002). In this context UNHCR came in for criticism by both academics and human rights groups for facilitating what was seen by many as a non-voluntary returns process (Schmeidl, Mundt and Miszak 2010; Schmeidl and Maley 2008; AI 2003). At the same time UNHCR lobbied hard with both Pakistan and Iran to dampen their expectations in terms of returns figures and timetables<sup>200</sup>, and openly criticised some of their policies.

Overall however the general perception of the returns operation was one of success. By returning in such large numbers, exiled Afghans had “expressed their confidence in the post-Taliban political order” (ICG 2009). This sent a powerful signal of faith in the future of the country and reflected positively on the government, the donors engaged in the invasion, and UNHCR. Particularly for the latter it “emphatically demonstrated its ‘relevance’ to the international

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<sup>200</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 2’

community” (Turton and Marsden 2002). UNHCR had been “in need of an operational success story after years of criticism” (Hammerstad 2014) and was eager to exploit the opportunity provided, though at that particular point in time, it remained initially wary to avoid the “general accusations of having stretched itself too far and overstepped its mandate” (Ibid) that had previously dogged the agency.

Nevertheless questions of absorption capacity quickly began to surface and fears began to increase regarding the strain on land and shelter, labour markets and social services from such large influxes of people.

Following the immediate post-invasion period UNHCR began to broaden its support to reintegration activities. Already by the end of 2002 it was appealing for funding to “pav(e) the way from repatriation and reintegration to rehabilitation and reconstruction” (Global Appeal 2003). However, many of the Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) that UNHCR funded were not as successful as had been hoped. For instance, a 2004 audit of UNHCR operations revealed it had spent \$600,000 on a peanut factory for returnees that sold no peanut oil, \$500,000 for a wool spinning project that sold no spun wool, and other projects that were either deemed not to be economical or were not properly monitored (OIOS 2004). Part of the reason for this may be that UNHCR support was provided, in line with its humanitarian mode of operation, outside of the broader development structures and on an annual funding timescale meaning that prospects for sustainability were limited<sup>201</sup>.

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<sup>201</sup> These issues have contributed to the failure of QIPs in other countries (see e.g. Ghani and Lockhart 2009; Crisp 2002; Loescher 2001; Chimni 2004)

Alongside its direct programming UNHCR pushed strongly for the inclusion of returnees, and areas of high return, in national programmes. In addition to MoRR, UNHCR also seconded personnel to the Ministry of Reconstruction and Rural Development (MRRD) and areas of high return were duly prioritised in its flagship National Solidarity Programme (NSP), an initiative to channel funding directly to local communities who would then choose how the money should be spent with the assistance of NGO partners facilitating the process.

Aside from the management of its returns programme and somewhat ad hoc reintegration support, UNHCR also felt, following the initial wave of returns, that it needed a coherent and longer-term strategy to guide its engagement in the wider region. For this reason UNHCR hired or seconded staff with regional expertise to set up the Afghanistan Comprehensive Solutions Unit (ACSU) in Geneva in 2003. After a period of study ACSU proposed what they felt was a novel approach to the Afghan Protracted Refugee Situation (PRS). This was based on a number of conclusions about the nature of the Afghan context and the desirability of different outcomes from the perspective of both the refugees and the Afghan state. What ACSU felt were the salient points were that, firstly, despite massive returns, a sizeable percentage of the Afghan population in exile was unlikely to opt for voluntary return in the near future. Secondly, that even if this were to occur, and particularly if such returns were forced and non-voluntary, it would have a negative impact both on the returning populations and the wider stability of Afghanistan. Further, cross-border mobility had always been a way of life for many Afghans and the diaspora population abroad provided both a critical social safety net for many families in Afghanistan and an important source of income for

the Afghan economy as a whole (Monsutti 2010a). Finally, the blanket refugee designation that gave long-staying Afghans the right to live abroad would become ever harder to sustain, and ever less connected to the reality of (what was expected to be) a post-conflict Afghan context. The combination of these conclusions led UNHCR to the decision that what was needed, ultimately, was not the complete return of all refugees but rather a gradual transition to a legal migration regime for those Afghans abroad who were not in need of international protection and yet unwilling to return. In short refugees would be transformed into legal migrants and the PRS would thus be 'solved'.

Those involved in the development of the new strategy saw it as a “futuristic vision”<sup>202</sup>, and one that attracted both the interest and support of donors. External commentators have also noted that the creation of an entire (albeit small) unit focussed on a specific PRS was pioneering for UNHCR (Loescher, Betts and Milner 2008). Within UNHCR though the strategy was not without its detractors. Many saw it as overly intellectual, idealistic and unlikely to realise its goals (Scalettari 2013). Several interviewees reported that even today it is hard for many in UNHCR to fully embrace the approach underpinning the strategy due to the difficulties that it poses for the organisation’s mandate and the need to flexibly redefine how Afghan populations with refugee status are conceived of and the international protection regime that should apply to them.

The major problem with the new strategy however was not conceptual; rather it was that, ultimately, it depended on the cooperation of Iran and Pakistan, and for

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<sup>202</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 2'

various, and predictable, reasons this was not forthcoming. Both countries continued to insist publicly that the vast majority of Afghans would need to return home, and this remains their official position today (if anything their position on this subject has become ever more firm). In the absence of their acceptance to regularise the status of parts of the refugee population, UNHCR was left with little choice but to continue its previous strategy of care and maintenance for refugees in exile, and facilitating return and reintegration for returnees in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, this does not mean, in the view of those who created the strategy, that it has been a failure. According to one of the people most implicated in its drafting it should be seen in a long-term context as it may take at least another generation for the Afghan presence abroad to be fully regularised<sup>203</sup>. Further, UNHCR has had some small successes in terms of moving the Afghan populations to firmer legal foundations, such as the registration processes conducted in Iran and Pakistan (resulting in the distribution of 'Amayesh' cards in 2003 and 'Proof of Registration' – PoR – cards in 2005/6 in Iran and Pakistan respectively). More recently Iran has started to introduce work visas for Afghans, which has been cautiously welcomed by some, though with a certain amount of understandable suspicion that Iran may be using the process simply "as a covert means of increasing the rate of return" (Long 2009) through encouraging the renouncement of international protection status as a prelude to forced return.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, despite the hailing of a new and supposedly revolutionary new strategy, very little changed on the ground in terms of UNHCR's

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid

overall operations. In the absence of a long-term solution for the Afghan population abroad it continued to conduct its traditional roles of facilitating return, providing limited reintegration support, and lobbying for the inclusion of returnees in national programmes.

Overall, UNHCR was also enjoying a welcome period of perceived success and was credited positively for its effectiveness in helping the mass repatriation to go smoothly. Afghanistan, as one of UNHCR's largest global missions, was a flagship operation not only in terms of finances, but also in terms of human resources<sup>204</sup>. According to interviews many people were attracted to work in the Afghan operation due to its high profile status, and the perceived ability to achieve results. Until around 2008 the level of returns was high, UNHCR was able to secure large amounts of funding, the strategies of UNHCR and its donors were closely aligned and relations were warm, and UNHCR had no major competitors in country (OCHA, for instance, had not yet established an Afghan presence).

However this did not mean that it was entirely plain sailing for UNHCR. After a brief lull following the US invasion, security began to worsen in the years following 2001. In 2003 Bettina Goislard, a UNHCR employee, became the first international UN staff member to be killed by the Taliban since the change of regime. In the wake of growing insecurity UN agencies began to curtail their presence in the country. By the end of 2005 UNHCR, like the rest of the UN, had access to less than half of the districts in the country (UNHCR 2005a). On occasion UNHCR found itself having to turn down funding offered from donors for particular areas (in

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<sup>204</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 12'

which they led the PRT) as security problems would have made them impossible to monitor. On the other hand, turning down funding and adopting an approach seen as non-opportunistic, may inadvertently have helped UNHCR in terms of its reputation with these counterparts. As a senior UNHCR interviewee involved in these discussions commented “The donors seemed to think it was a sign of maturity in a way”<sup>205</sup>.

Beyond the difficulties of insecurity and lack of access (and the remote management of projects that it implied), another of the most challenging aspects of operating in Afghanistan was working with the newly created MoRR, and particularly collaborating with it on the management of the Land Allocation Scheme (LAS).

In the wake of such large returns attention had begun to focus on where the huge numbers of returnees were going to live. Most had been out of the country for many years. Around half had been born abroad (Long 2009). Many had seen their homes confiscated in their absence, or simply found them too small to accommodate family growth in exile. Landlessness of returnees was increasingly being pointed to as a growing problem. One solution, supported by UNHCR, was legal assistance for land claims and efforts to formalise and reform Afghanistan’s system of land registration. These initiatives however frequently faced the almost insurmountable problems of clashing with entrenched and powerful interests in an extremely fragile rule of law context (meaning that even in the rare cases that

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<sup>205</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 11’

legal judgments were made in favour of claimants they were often not enforced).

Another solution envisaged was the distribution of land to returnees.

In 2005 the president signed into law Presidential Decree 104, which created the LAS. Essentially it consisted of a plan to provide plots of unoccupied land to landless returnees holding VRF cards (and IDPs, though in practice very few IDPs managed to gain access to the scheme) under the management of MoRR. From the beginning the scheme was plagued with problems. One high-ranking UNHCR interviewee described it, with emotion, as “the most appalling thing”<sup>206</sup>.

50 LAS sites were originally identified and 15 of those had been developed by 2009 (ICG 2009). The land provided was generally both unfit for farming and far from urban centres. Consequently the sites almost completely lacked opportunities for livelihoods, public services, and often even water (ICG 2009; AI 2012; MacDonald 2011; Koser and Martin 2011). In addition there were both confusion over eligibility and allegations of massive corruption regarding the distribution of land plots. According to an unpublished report, quoted in MacDonald (2011):

“Approximately 270,000 families have been registered for consideration under the LAS, 65,413 have been selected, 41,127 have paid for their plots, 31,000 plots have been distributed, but only 10,684 families have moved into house on sites. These figures indicate that only 24 percent of applicants received plots, and only 25 percent of those who paid for plots live on them.

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid

The rate of departure of residents has been as high as 80 percent on some LAS, due to lack of livelihoods and inadequate basic services.”

Other reports put occupancy rates as low as 15% (ICG 2009). In 2012 I visited the LAS sites of Aliceghan and Barikab outside Kabul and witnessed, in Aliceghan, row upon row of unoccupied houses (built at great cost to the international community), and, in Barikab hundreds of empty marked parcels of land, denoting plots that people had taken ownership of but not developed beyond delineating the boundaries of their property. People I spoke to in both locations told me that large numbers had left to Kabul, preferring to live there under plastic sheeting in squatter camps where they at least stood the chance of occasional work and thus the ability to feed their families. Reports of the survey teams that I managed in late 2014 suggested that the situation had not improved in either of those sites, nor in the LAS sites outside Herat, such as Saodat, which were equally deserted.

In its 2008 submission to Afghanistan’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, UNHCR noted “unrealistic expectations, an excessive number of proposed sites, poor site planning, deteriorating security conditions and problems with beneficiary selection” regarding the LAS. When the scheme was under discussion in the early years following the invasion there was a lively debate within UNHCR with some suggesting the agency should not get involved at all<sup>207</sup>. It was clear to many in UNHCR that the sites were problematic and that MoRR lacked capacity to manage the scheme but the overall opinion was that UNHCR had no option but to engage with it (Scalettaris 2009; 2013). The decision was therefore taken for

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid

UNHCR to assist the process by seconding personnel to a Programme Implementation Unit (PIU) and implementing its own projects in many of the LAS sites. UNHCR recommended limiting the number of LAS sites and locating them in more sustainable areas, as well as attempting to limit the potential for corruption by improving capacity on targeting<sup>208</sup>. The LAS was also seen however, and welcomed, as giving “the opportunity for UNHCR to assist a distinct vulnerable segment of the returnee population” (UNHCR 2007a). Equally, by grouping returnees in specified bordered areas the task of providing services to this segment of the population was made easier. As such UNHCR was both critical of aspects of the management of the LAS, but also supportive of it, and it diverted (and sought to attract) funding for projects in LAS sites. UNHCR also attempted to exercise control over aspects of the scheme, while always presenting MoRR externally as the lead agency and the ‘owner’ of all initiatives; a fiction “upheld in relations with all interlocutors, so that in all public settings the appearance of subordination replaced the UNHCR’s paternalistic guidance and control” (Scalettaris 2009).

Part of the failure of the LAS was simply the location of the sites. On the one hand they were, as noted, “in the middle of nowhere”<sup>209</sup>, in the words of one senior UN interviewee, and far from jobs and services. On the other hand even if infrastructure and services had been available and the land was worth cultivating, the fact would still remain that their location in rural areas would likely have made them unattractive to many returnees, the vast majority of whom had been living in

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<sup>208</sup> Interviews ‘UNHCR 11, 22’

<sup>209</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 2’, ‘UN Agency 7’

urban areas in exile and had skillsets to match. Hence many were uninterested in moving to rural zones in which lifestyles were very different from what they had previously known. This was not entirely unplanned, as one of the unstated, and unrealised, goals of the LAS was to relieve pressure on the rapid growth of Afghanistan's cities. But, as a donor interviewee put it "people don't go where the planners, the bureaucrats, want them to go. They go where they feel safe and can get a job."<sup>210</sup>

A second major problem was that the LAS presented opportunities for corruption on a staggering scale. A US review found "bribery, forgery, nepotism, embezzlement, and poor customer service" to be major problems with the LAS (SIGAR 2015). Even before the LAS was initiated problems with MoRR had begun to surface: Cash instalments from UNHCR were kept at private houses and MoRR could not provide supporting documentation for most expenditures (OIOS 2004). A former high-ranking official at MoRR summed up the situation there by saying "The entire ministry is corrupt. It could not be worse. There's corruption in all meanings, all types of corruption. Administrative, financial, nepotism, moral, all types."<sup>211</sup> This view was shared by almost all interviewees who had had any contact with MoRR.

A key aim of UNHCR had been to ensure a certain level of oversight of the scheme. Yet in the words of a senior UNHCR interviewee "UNHCR tried to bring bureaucratic pressure to bear on MoRR and failed miserably"<sup>212</sup>. For several years

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<sup>210</sup> Interview, 'Donor 1'

<sup>211</sup> Interview, 'Government 2'

<sup>212</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 11'

UNHCR continued to “actively support” (UNHCR 2007a) the management of the LAS but, according to another UNHCR interviewee, “stopped at a certain moment because it was difficult to be heard, capacity in MoRR was really difficult, ministers were weak, capacity was weak.”<sup>213</sup> From 2012 to 2014 IOM also undertook a project to build MoRR’s capacity but likewise had limited success due to an “extremely challenging” working relationship with MoRR (SIGAR 2015).

While UNHCR tried hard to exert pressure on MoRR bilaterally it refrained from openly voicing its concerns externally. This was largely due to its reliance on MoRR and its desire to maintain good working relations. In the words of one UN interviewee the fact that MoRR was a government ministry, “doesn’t mean we don’t push but of course we do it in private.”<sup>214</sup> A former MoRR interviewee felt there was likely to also be a certain degree of self-preservation instinct at an individual level in UNHCR’s decision not to create waves and thus, in his view, to protect the reputation of MoRR. He went on to note that a backlash from criticising MoRR could have had negative implications for the careers of those involved at UNHCR and hence “they didn’t say anything bad about MoRR. No-one wants to lose their jobs and their salaries, and they have good salaries.”<sup>215</sup>

When problems later came to light in a series of corruption investigations (covered below), some donors felt UNHCR could have done more, earlier, to shine a light on the corruption and mismanagement within MoRR. In the words of a senior donor interviewee:

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<sup>213</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 22’

<sup>214</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 9’

<sup>215</sup> Interview, ‘Government 2’

“UNHCR has done as much as it could not to publicise the problems of the LAS. It's responsible for perpetuating this situation for quite a long time. I wonder if it doesn't have some kind of watchdog function that it chose not to fulfil. I've never heard UNHCR criticising the government.”<sup>216</sup>

Equally, the former head of a UN agency in Afghanistan was also critical of UNHCR's role, saying “I think they've been very silent about the failure of the Land Allocation Scheme until very recently. ... For years they have been silent on it and there has been money put in, EU money, all the donor money has gone to areas that are not viable. So I think they should have been much more strong saying this is the wrong approach.”<sup>217</sup>

These criticisms were accepted by some at UNHCR, with at least one former Country Director fully agreeing that UNHCR did not do enough in its watchdog role<sup>218</sup>. But UNHCR was also keen to underline, in the words of another interviewee, that “It was not a UNHCR program, it was supported by us but it was a government program, and donors tend to forget that, overstating the role of UNHCR or the influence that we had.”<sup>219</sup>

Nevertheless despite these issues (which mostly came to light later) UNHCR could still be said to have enjoyed a period of relative success during these years. It had appealed for, and received, large amounts of funding, was praised for its

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<sup>216</sup> Interview, 'Donor 18'

<sup>217</sup> Interview, 'UN Agency 7'

<sup>218</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 17'

<sup>219</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 22'

operational achievements, and the issue that it cared most about, the reintegration of returnees, remained a high priority for donors. UNHCR staff also enjoyed warm and friendly relations with donors during these years, who in return strongly supported the agency's strategies, even going on occasion as far as advocating in UNHCR's Geneva HQ on behalf of its Afghanistan-based team (Scalettaris 2013). An interviewee who then worked with a prominent donor agency and later joined UNHCR also commented on how close UNHCR and its donors had been at the time, and how parallel were their interests and strategies<sup>220</sup>. In the following years however this began to change as UNHCR and donor strategies began to diverge, new actors entered the marketplace, and, eventually, relations with donors started to suffer.

### 6.3 2008-2015: Over-reaching

*"The head of the UN refugee programme in Afghanistan on Tuesday described its strategy in the war-wracked country since 2002 as the "biggest mistake UNHCR ever made". (Express Tribune 2011)*

*"Implementation of the Solutions Strategy will cost an estimated US\$1.9 billion, and while the meeting in Geneva was not a donor conference, support from donors will nonetheless be key to realizing it." (UNHCR 2012e)*

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid

Over the period 2008-2015 UNHCR made repeated efforts to ‘sell’ the issue of reintegration of returnees to donors but found this an ever more difficult challenge. UNHCR put into service a strong discourse-creating machinery to stress the comparative vulnerability levels of returnees (the subject of the next chapter) and lobbied strongly with regional governments, UN agencies, NGOs and donors to ensure that returnees remained a high priority of both the humanitarian and development marketplaces. This renewed high level push to promote both the organisation and the issues it cared about happened arguably not in response to rising needs but, as discussed in the next chapter, despite falling needs. Ultimately though UNHCR failed in its ambitions not because of this but due to a failure to build trust from external actors (including strong suspicions of ‘mercenary’ motivations from some), the rise of competitor agencies (OCHA) and competitor beneficiaries (IDPs), and divided visions within the agency regarding its own role and how the situation of returnees should be addressed.

Alongside the saga of the LAS process, discussions on Afghanistan’s overarching strategy for reconstruction were continuing. In 2008 these resulted in the approval of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), which was to act as Afghanistan’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and the overarching reference document for the period 2008-13. The ANDS contained a dedicated refugee chapter which acknowledged that, “so far the return of more than 5 million persons from Pakistan and Iran has been accomplished with few major concerns.” But it also noted that while substantial Afghan populations continued to remain in exile, it was nevertheless “very probable that high levels of mass and voluntary return are over”. Eager to avoid forced and unsustainable

returns, yet conscious that pressure from Iran and Pakistan was liable to rise, the ANDS argued that taking visible efforts to maintain high levels of returns would “certainly assist in reducing bilateral tensions on this issue with neighbours.”

Indeed the ANDS had been prescient in noting that returns were likely to drop off and numbers continued to steadily decrease. After the record high of almost two million returnees in 2003, between 2004 and 2009 the number of Afghans returning to Afghanistan averaged around 420,000 people per year. In contrast, the following five years from 2010 to 2014 saw only a sixth of this figure returning, an average of just over 70,000 per year. Meanwhile internal displacement was on the rise. As the conflict intensified the numbers of people displaced within Afghanistan, which had until then been gradually decreasing, rose swiftly each year from 2007 onwards. In 2009 for the first time, and every year since, there were more new IDPs than returnees.

UNHCR’s messaging also began to change around this point and, contrary to its previous position in which it had underlined the successful nature of the repatriation, it started instead to highlight the specific needs of returnees relative to the wider Afghan population and to argue that they were a comparatively disadvantaged group. Thus, despite arguably diminishing needs of returnees (in comparison to the wider population), UNHCR, unable to rely on sheer numbers to support its funding requests, promoted progressively more strongly an image of an ever more needy and vulnerable population. This evolution in narrative is the focus of the following chapter.

The changing migration trends heralded the start of a divergence between UNHCR and some of its donors. Many humanitarian donors began to shift their focus to internal displacement (see section 8.2) while development donors were ever less accepting of ad hoc programming outside of wider development frameworks, and less inclined to see the diminishing numbers of returnees as a major issue to be addressed.

While the ANDS remained the overall framework for development assistance to Afghanistan it proved to be an insufficiently detailed document to guide sectoral programming. For this reason it was announced in the London Conference of 2010 that the Afghan government would create 22 detailed National Priority Programmes (NPPs) to provide a more detailed guide to funding Afghanistan's development. In return for increased alignment of aid the Afghan government would take action on corruption and make progress within a range of other areas of concern to the international community. This broad agreement was termed the 'Kabul Process'. Not all topics or ministries were chosen to be prioritised within the NPPs however. Some of the weaker ministries and topics deemed to be of less pressing importance were neglected. Notably there was no NPP for refugee reintegration or for MoRR more generally.

By the end of the first decade of the post-Taliban regime, according to a senior UNHCR interviewee, "UNHCR was facing difficulties in delivery, funding was reducing, security deteriorating, and there was a clear intention on the part of

donors to set timelines for phasing out. It all pointed in one direction. We were back where we were before the invasion, looking for solutions in Iran and Pakistan.”<sup>221</sup>

In 2011 a new Country Director (CD) took over as the head of UNHCR Afghanistan and set about radically changing UNHCR’s policy in the country. This CD was described by both UNHCR insiders and outsiders as “quite a character”<sup>222</sup>. He was someone with a forceful (some said “intimidating”<sup>223</sup>) character, “a bit of a bulldog”<sup>224</sup> in the words of more than one interviewee, and a person with a clear vision of what he thought needed to be achieved. Together with another senior manager based in Geneva (also described as “instrumental in the strategy, and very much a force”<sup>225</sup> by an interviewee based there), these two set about pursuing a new approach to the Afghan PRS. In particular the Afghanistan CD was responsible for reigniting interest in refugee reintegration, and had a large impact in the country as “a strong person who pushed his agenda and brought the Solutions Strategy to life.”<sup>226</sup>

My own first interaction with the CD was not entirely positive. Shortly after I arrived in Afghanistan and took over the management of the EU’s development funding for displacement in Afghanistan an article appeared online in which UNHCR criticised the inflexibility of the EU funding. Specifically the article recounted the CD’s complaint that:

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<sup>221</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 11’

<sup>222</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 2, 9’

<sup>223</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 21’

<sup>224</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 6, 21’

<sup>225</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 2’

<sup>226</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 15’

“What some major partners in Afghanistan reconstruction don’t comprehend, said [UNHCR CD], is that their very efforts to help can be counterproductive. The most irksome example for him is that the European Union will not allow its funds to be used for anything other than building houses. “I don’t want to sound ungrateful,” he said, “but I think it’s wrong. Europeans have proven very inflexible. I cannot use their money to help the people with other things – water intervention, income-generating intervention.” In contrast, [UNHCR CD] explained, the U.S. State Department allows his office to direct its funds where UNHCR believes they are most needed.” (Global Post 2011)

This very public complaint was curious as the EU grant had been designed entirely by UNHCR, with no restrictions imposed by the EU, and UNHCR had not requested any amendments since. Senior staff at the Delegation were furious and the CD was called in for a meeting (where I met him for the first time) at which he apologised and relations were somewhat patched up.

However, it was a quote of his in an article later that year, which would cause the biggest waves (both within UNHCR and externally):

“UNHCR’s representative in Afghanistan [...] said the international community had failed to help returnees find a means of earning a living and, therefore, reintegrating into society. “We thought if we gave humanitarian assistance, macro development would kick in.” He added, “We made a big mistake, the biggest mistake UNHCR ever made”. (Express Tribune 2011)

Referring to UNHCR's policy in Afghanistan as "the biggest mistake UNHCR ever made" may have made for good publicity for a new approach but it was also resented by some former staff in the Afghan country operation. This admission of UNHCR's culpability in adopting, what the CD saw as a modest set of objectives in terms of reintegration was described as "undiplomatic honesty" by Hammerstad (2014). Arguably though the implication that UNHCR needed to play a far greater role in development and reintegration could be described as more opportunistic than honest. In contrast to previous approaches a new strategy was envisioned, known as the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), that would cover Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran and aimed to raise significant funding for return and reintegration in Afghanistan and burden sharing in the other two countries.

When initially floated, the idea of the SSAR received a generally positive reception among almost all key counterparts. However within a few months criticism began to mount, the momentum turned against UNHCR and its role in Afghanistan came under question. Though not sufficient to kill off the strategy (and most external actors retained an interest in it being seen as a success, even while limiting their own involvement in it) this change of perception resulted in a more controversial strategy that failed to win support from many quarters, including within the agency. What was the process that led to this marketplace failure?

The basic underlying assumption of the Afghan component of the SSAR was that returnees were a neglected, underprivileged group, excluded from economic development and services and therefore in need of high levels of targeted support

from the international community. Additionally there was a general feeling among many in UNHCR that urbanisation continued to pose a threat to Afghanistan and that it could be alleviated through incentives to settle permanently in rural areas. Consequently the model proposed as the solution to Afghanistan's PRS was very similar to the heavily criticised LAS initiative. UNHCR planned to identify a number of High Return Areas (HRAs), though in contrast to the earlier LAS, it would invest very heavily in these sites with "multi-sectoral, community-level programming" (UNHCR 2012d). In theory this would then turn them into "thriving economic centres"<sup>227</sup> according to one UNHCR interviewee, who saw strong parallels with the LAS concept.

The plan was a simple one: UNHCR would "showcase what would happen if there was a lot of investment in one place"<sup>228</sup>, as one UNHCR interviewee put it. This in turn was expected to kick start local level economic development and reduce incentives for onward movement. Investment in services was also foreseen and UNHCR laid out plans to implement projects from "healthcare to education to water and sanitation for people living in these communities that they were setting up for both the returnees and host communities"<sup>229</sup>, according to one donor.

Indeed one UN staff member involved in the strategy's development described it as aiming to cover "almost every single thing you could think of."<sup>230</sup> UNHCR also set out to collect data in the selected areas with the specific intention of using it to "pitch for projects in areas of high return"<sup>231</sup>.

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<sup>227</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 1'

<sup>228</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 15'

<sup>229</sup> Interview, 'Donor 3'

<sup>230</sup> Interview, 'UN Agency 10'

<sup>231</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 21'

Additionally there was a strong regional angle to the strategy. It was thought that the influx of funding into the HRAs would create incentives for return for those in exile. UNHCR would also fundraise for burden-sharing projects in Iran and Pakistan to alleviate the cost on those countries of hosting refugees and demonstrate international solidarity. In turn, with returns rising and costs of hosting refugees decreasing, both countries would be less likely to conduct forced returns and more inclined to protect asylum space for the Afghan refugee populations living there. At least such was the assumption.

The new strategy would prove to be controversial with donors but also within UNHCR. As one donor commented, “at the beginning it was very woolly, almost utopian, not really taking into account reality.”<sup>232</sup> The strategy rested on a large number of arguably shaky assumptions: That UNHCR would be able to attract sufficient funding; that it would be able to use this funding to transform the selected HRAs into economically attractive centres; that refugees in Iran and Pakistan would be sufficiently enthused by these developments to return to Afghanistan and would choose to migrate to the HRAs rather than urban centres; and that Iran and Pakistan would be sufficiently satisfied by the return trends that they would see no need to conduct expulsions or otherwise reduce protection for Afghan refugees. In addition the strategy was underpinned by a second set of assumptions regarding the vulnerability of returnees. Specifically that they were more vulnerable than average Afghans, had failed to economically integrate and were less able to access public services, and that hence even if the first set of

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<sup>232</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 11’

assumptions proved to be false, the relative vulnerability of returnees made them in any case a suitable target for large-scale targeted expenditure.

When asked which parts of the strategy were contentious within UNHCR one interviewee replied “all of it.” She continued:

“For many of us, or for many people I should say, including very high senior people, this was not going to work from the get go but it was something that nobody had proof that it wasn’t going to work so they needed to try it.”<sup>233</sup>

Notably however the concerns of UNHCR interviewees were more connected to the first set of assumptions, regarding the efficacy of the strategy, rather than the second set, regarding the justification of increasing support to returnees in comparison to the rest of the Afghan population. There was also a feeling that UNHCR had a duty to take action, even if that action was ineffective. Another UNHCR interviewee, for instance, for whom the principal objective of the strategy was to encourage migration to rural areas in order to stem the tide of urbanisation, echoed the reasoning of the interviewee above:

“I was sceptical that we would succeed. But we could not not do anything about it. We needed to do something to facilitate, encourage the return of returnees to their areas of origin. Otherwise the situation in the urban centres would be untenable.”<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 1’

<sup>234</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 21’

Another issue of concern for some within UNHCR was the timing of the strategy, with a few interviewees commenting that while it may have had more success in the early post-Taliban years the external context had changed dramatically since then. Returns were at all time lows, UNHCR's ability to influence migration trends or even less the actions of Pakistan and Iran was marginal, and hence it should be thinking about decreasing its presence rather than increasing. As one interviewee put it:

“It was already apparent the situation was deteriorating, the prospects for return were low. Whatever UNHCR could do would not be enough to trigger return, let alone discourage departure. So the fundamentals of the equation, which for a short period were there, were no longer there.”<sup>235</sup>

Importantly there was also a divide within the agency between the programme and protection teams in Afghanistan. The latter, who focussed more heavily in their day to day work, on the problems of IDPs, saw the strategy as diverting from both this group of people and UNHCR's traditional role as an emergency life-saving relief agency. Some within the protection team were even described as “deeply unhappy [and] bitterly upset”<sup>236</sup> by the direction of the strategy.

Needless to say the internal doubts regarding the prospects for success were not communicated at the time to donors or external participants and the team leading

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<sup>235</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 11'

<sup>236</sup> Interview, 'NGO 12'

the promotion of the strategy were those most convinced of its merits. In any case the advocates of the strategy, who included the Afghanistan Country Director and senior staff in Geneva, were convinced that a new approach was needed and saw the SSAR as the best hope of unlocking the Afghan PRS (as well as, as some more cynically suggested, ensuring a central role for UNHCR in the region and significantly boosting its funding).

UNHCR's first outreach was to approach the governments of the three countries concerned in order to get them on board. As UNHCR was essentially offering all three a way to increase both their revenues and the recognition that they received from the international community for dealing with the displaced Afghan populations living in their borders it was not that difficult to secure this political level buy-in. Crucially, however, the unwritten assumption of the SSAR, that in exchange for increased funding Iran and Pakistan would continue to guarantee asylum space for their registered refugee populations, was never formalised in an official commitment. As Benelli, Donini and Niland (2012) noted, the strategy did not explicitly extend the Tripartite Agreement that fixed the legal stay of refugees in Pakistan and Iran. Though often mentioned by UNHCR interlocutors to donors as an intrinsic part of the strategy (and probably its major selling points from the point of view of donors) it was highly unclear that any such commitment existed even informally. Both countries continued to state publicly that all refugees would eventually need to return home. Indeed one UNHCR interviewee suggested that "It was sold to the Pakistani and Iranian government under the guise of repatriation,

and you'll get rid of all refugees basically off the books"<sup>237</sup>. In fact, it took less than a month after the eventual adoption of the strategy before Pakistani authorities very publicly claimed that they would not extend the deadline for the return of all Afghan refugees even beyond the end of the year (and while they did eventually agree to an extension of the PoR cards, it is doubted even among some in UNHCR that this has anything to do with the adoption of the Solutions Strategy).

Meanwhile the messaging to the Afghan government was, according to this interviewee, that "it was an opportunity to see parts of their country developed and flourish and people coming back."<sup>238</sup>

After getting a green light to proceed, UNHCR then set about engaging the respective line ministries in each country (MoRR in the case of Afghanistan; the Ministry of States and Frontier Regions - SAFRON - in Pakistan; and the Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs - BAFIA - in Iran) to develop plans for each country component. Specialist UNHCR staff were brought in from other operations around the world to assist in this process.

While UNHCR presented the Afghanistan chapter of the Solutions Strategy externally as an Afghan-owned document, the Afghan government's involvement in the design of the strategy was actually rather minimal. According to an interviewee who worked at MoRR very few people, beside himself, were involved in the ministry in the development of the strategy, and UNHCR stayed very much in the lead on the drafting. In terms of the 48 reintegration sites, for instance, UNHCR

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<sup>237</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 1'

<sup>238</sup> Ibid

supposedly came with a pre-prepared list, providing MoRR only the option of choosing which sites on the list to prioritise (with certain restrictions). Further, following discussions, “many things were changed in the strategy cleverly by UNHCR at the last minute”<sup>239</sup> according to this interviewee. Thus the predominant view in the ministry was that the process had been “hijacked by UNHCR”<sup>240</sup>. Meanwhile UNHCR staff bristled when external interlocutors referred to “UNHCR’s strategy”, insisting that the agency was playing a merely facilitative role and that the strategy was wholly ‘owned’ by the three governments. This was consistent with UNHCR’s earlier involvement in the LAS when the agency had done everything it could to sustain the outward appearance of MoRR’s ownership of the scheme, including presenting the ministry publicly as the author of documents that UNHCR had written (Scalettaris 2009).

Despite this, MoRR hoped that the Solutions Strategy would lead to greater amounts of funding for its own programming and that it would improve the status of the ministry. There was also a strong perception within MoRR that UNHCR had similarly mercenary goals for itself. According to this interviewee MoRR suggested associating IOM closely to the strategy but UNHCR was not favourable to this idea. Rather, “UNHCR said ‘no IOM hasn’t done anything. We don’t want to do fundraising for IOM.’ So it was very obvious for us”<sup>241</sup> that UNHCR was using the strategy as a means of promoting its own role and institutional interests. On the other hand this was not necessarily perceived negatively. As he put it all parties were likely to be doing the same: “Of course it’s a tool for fundraising. They had

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<sup>239</sup> Interview, ‘Government 2’

<sup>240</sup> Ibid

<sup>241</sup> Ibid

this hidden aim, we had our hidden aim, and Iran and Pakistan had their own hidden aims.” In terms of MoRR’s “hidden aim” it may not have been that different from the one that they assumed that UNHCR had. A UNHCR interviewee recounts for instance that when MoRR did get involved their interest was primarily in terms of the funding that could be attracted and so almost inevitably, as the price for a higher level of government buy-in and ownership of the process, “ultimately the price tag goes up”<sup>242</sup>.

UNHCR’s next step was to engage potential implementing partners: UN agencies and NGOs. The most important target, as the UN’s pre-eminent development agency, was UNDP. UNDP agreed early on to be associated to the strategy but beyond that their engagement was limited. Part of the problem was that allegations of widespread fraud concerning a major UNDP-managed trust fund in Afghanistan began to come to light in late 2011, causing it “a major credibility problem”, according to the Wall Street Journal (2011), and leading to a more cautious approach to undertaking further large, and potentially risky, projects. One UNHCR interviewee described UNDP as being at the time in the midst of “an unfortunate down spiral”<sup>243</sup>. However, according to another UNHCR interviewee the lack of engagement was not only due to this context. Rather, it was mostly because UNDP’s senior management did not fully believe in the strategy, lacked interest in it, were uncomfortable with the way it had been designed (in a much more rushed process than a typical large UNDP programme) and thus decided to adopt a “wait-and-see” attitude. This interviewee continued:

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<sup>242</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 5’

<sup>243</sup> Ibid

UNDP “was actually a little bit remiss because they were not as present as one would hope, they were not really fully on board in terms of interest. It almost felt as if they were not at meetings, and they kind of forgot about other ones. That’s how it felt all the time, and they were not available. It wasn’t really a full-on engagement as one would expect from a sister agency.”<sup>244</sup>

Within UNDP the strategy was entrusted to a single relatively junior employee who was almost entirely focussed on other programmes. An interviewee at the agency confirmed that it was seen as a low priority (partly due to the lack of funding attached), which enjoyed little support from management, and which staff “at some point gave up investing too much time on” as they decided it was “a dead horse.”<sup>245</sup> Further, the concern was raised internally that the numbers of new returnees did not justify a programme of such large scale, an issue that notably did not seem to bother UNHCR. Meanwhile, a UNHCR interviewee noted that UNDP’s visible absence from the strategy not only set back its development considerably but also hindered UNHCR at a later stage in persuading donors to buy-in to the strategy and consider it seriously<sup>246</sup>.

Despite limited engagement from UNDP, UNHCR pressed on with the strategy and sought to engage more actors. ILO was contracted to survey the selected HRAs to assess livelihood opportunities, while UNOPS was contracted for a baseline

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<sup>244</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 1’

<sup>245</sup> Interview, UN Agency 10’

<sup>246</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 5’

mapping exercise. Other UN agencies and NGOs were also approached to secure their buy-in to the strategy and to determine what role they could play in its implementation. According to the former head of a UN agency, these agencies (apart from UNDP) were not seen as equal partners. Rather, in his view, they were brought on board, in a process seen as “opportunistic”<sup>247</sup>, in order to boost legitimacy and donor support for the strategy. UNHCR essentially promised the agencies that if the strategy was successful the agencies would receive a certain percentage of the funding. Genuine discussions ensued with each agency lobbying for their particular sectors to feature more prominently, and UNHCR appeared keen to take on board at least some of the input of all partners. Outreach took place both bilaterally and through a two-day workshop at a central hotel, while many NGOs were initially excited as they were encouraged by UNHCR to think that a new funding stream was opening up<sup>248</sup>.

Nevertheless not all agencies believed in the future effectiveness strategy, nor in its ability to attract funding. According to one interviewee: “We realized after a whole bundle of meetings that basically we were wasting our time.”<sup>249</sup> Due to limited buy in from other agencies, and from UNDP in particular, the strategy ended up being “conceived by UNHCR almost in isolation”<sup>250</sup>, according to a UNHCR interviewee involved in its drafting.

UNHCR then began approaching its donors, initially bilaterally. Some of the more humanitarian donors had strong concerns from the beginning that the strategy

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<sup>247</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 7’

<sup>248</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 12’

<sup>249</sup> Ibid

<sup>250</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 1’

was “not really thought through on a humanitarian level”<sup>251</sup>, and, more fundamentally, that it sought to focus attention on returnees, when in their view IDPs were the more pressing issue. This led to a significant difference of opinion between UNHCR and some donors (see section 8.2). On the other hand a majority of donors were initially quite open, or at least not openly opposed, to UNHCR attempting to reinvigorate the topic of refugee return and reintegration and the reception was thus a generally positive one. Some development donors welcomed the approach of centralising all funding for returnees in a single trust fund managed by UNHCR as a means of rationalising reintegration funding. Overall the initial response was fairly positive. Nevertheless some doubts were expressed. At a humanitarian donor workshop in late 2011, the strategy was met with a degree of cynicism. One donor at that meeting felt that, while there was support in principle for finding solutions, the concept being proposed was unrealistic and unsustainable, especially in the context of declining funding for the country and an increased willingness to align development funding within the ‘Kabul Process’ with the NPPs.

This last issue, combined with the huge budget that UNHCR proposed for the strategy, was the factor that eventually brought development agencies to take it seriously. The figure presented by UNHCR as necessary for the first phase of the Afghan component was \$862 million, which would be administered through a Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF). This put the SSAR budget in the range of around a fifth of Afghanistan’s entire development budget for the foreseen period: An amount that would be directed at only 48 communities, thereby reaching only a

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<sup>251</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 13’

tiny percentage of even the returnee community (spread as it was among the many thousands of Afghan villages not included in the strategy and, in particular, concentrated in Afghanistan's cities). Until that point most development donors were either not aware of UNHCR's strategy, had welcomed it in vague terms without delving into the details, or had seen it as "a side issue for humanitarians"<sup>252</sup>, according to one donor who recalled that the strategy had not made it onto the agenda of any of the development coordination meetings. But the scale of ambition that UNHCR had for the programme made it clear that, were it to go ahead as planned, it could significantly impact the country's overall development strategy and, as such, caused the larger development donors to take notice.

This process did not happen spontaneously but rather was triggered by a proactive approach from both the development and humanitarian arms of the EU (Devco and ECHO respectively). These two donors took the lead among other donors and in March 2012 jointly prepared a note (drafted by the current author) making explicit their concern that the SSAR, though welcome at a political level, stood the risk of undermining the Kabul Process. The note also pointed out that almost all of the sectors to be prioritised under the SSAR were already the subject of dedicated NPPs (and thus support to these sectors should ideally be provided within this framework), that MoRR lacked capacity to oversee such a large programme, and that returnees were just one among other categories of vulnerable people in need of assistance in Afghanistan. It concluded by suggesting that UNHCR limit its involvement in the development dimension of reintegration to coordination and

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<sup>252</sup> Interview, 'Donor 18'

advocacy (notably abandoning the idea of a new trust fund), while continuing to directly address the humanitarian dimension through implementation. The note was shared widely among the embassies as well as being forwarded to hierarchies in capitals. It was also shared, indirectly, with UNHCR.

The note had a major impact on the overall approach of donors to the SSAR and caused many to take a keener, and more critical, interest. Humanitarian donors mobilised and sought to inform their capitals about the rushed nature of the strategy and its impact in shifting the discussion away from IDPs, while development donors became more concerned about its impact on long-term development planning. As a development donor involved in the process commented, “the interest in not derailing the NPPs was strong”<sup>253</sup>, and even a few embassies that were not at all involved in refugee reintegration sought to make clear their desire that the SSAR should not undermine Afghanistan’s wider development agenda. In the words of one UNHCR interviewee, “It seemed at one point nobody was in favour, whereas shortly before everyone seemed to agree that it was a necessity and a potential way forward ... A little bit of time there where it got quite tense.”<sup>254</sup>.

A perception emerged among some donors that UNHCR was using the strategy, in purely mercenary terms, as a way of expanding its mandate and role<sup>255</sup>. According to a UNHCR interviewee “Some donors were very clearly very unhappy.”<sup>256</sup>

Donors had multiple questions about the design, viability and sustainability of the

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<sup>253</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 15’

<sup>254</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 1’

<sup>255</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 11’

<sup>256</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 9’

strategy but the most pressing concern, other than the undermining of the NPPs, was the issue of whether UNHCR was leveraging its advocacy role to expand its profile and involvement in development issues that would be better addressed by other actors and within the confines of national programmes.

While some in UNHCR accepted that many of the donors' criticisms were quite valid, others resented the donor pushback. Senior management intervened at headquarters level in Brussels to complain about the joint note and a meeting took place between UNHCR, ECHO and Devco to improve relations. From UNHCR's perspective the development dimension of reintegration support was clearly within its competence and hence:

“Within UNHCR we were quite pissed with that because it showed a lack of understanding. We understood that from a donor perspective maybe we should put the emphasis more on humanitarian needs but we are a mandated agency and [reintegration] is within our mandate.”<sup>257</sup>

Some in UNHCR also resented what they perceived as a lack of more constructive engagement from the side of donors. No donors visited the selected sites to make their own independent assessments, coordination between them seemed to be lacking, alternative suggestions on what could be done were not forthcoming, and according to one UNHCR interviewee, the overall perception was that they “really didn't want to do the dirty work at all.”<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 22'

<sup>258</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 1'

In response to the critiques however UNHCR took a more proactive approach to engage donors and to assuage their concerns. The concept of the trust fund, the principal bone of contention with donors, was abandoned, thereby decreasing the likelihood that significant funding for returnees would flow outside of the established channels. UNHCR also attempted to engage more closely with the NPP drafting process, something that until that point it had mostly neglected. The messaging began to change and UNHCR claimed vigorously that most activities would be implemented within the context of existing national programmes (though supplying few details on how this would be achieved). Additionally a regular donor liaison forum was set up in Geneva, optimistically (given the context) named “the Friends of the Solutions Strategy”.

The Friends Group was primarily “created for fund-raising purposes”<sup>259</sup>, according to a UNHCR interviewee, and brought together UNHCR’s principal donors based in Geneva to discuss the strategy; though as these were mostly humanitarian and the strategy was development-oriented there was a limit to how far discussions could go. Predominantly it served as a forum for information transfer (interviewees described it variously as “just a talkshop”<sup>260</sup> or “almost like a newsletter”<sup>261</sup>) but UNHCR also used it to try to generate support for its strategy. In addition it served a political function of demonstrating international community support to Iran and Pakistan, and was also to a limited extent an advocacy body, with donors pushing for certain changes to UNHCR’s strategy, and UNHCR in turn pushing donors to

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<sup>259</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR?’

<sup>260</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 14’

<sup>261</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 9’

prioritise returnees in high-level policy forums (in later years for instance UNHCR used the forum to push for particular wording on returnees in the communiqués of large donor conferences on Afghanistan).

Nevertheless not all donors were convinced. Despite efforts on UNHCR's side relations deteriorated in Kabul with some donors. Efforts to engage donors at multiple levels (desk officers, heads of development section, ambassadors) were construed, rightly or wrongly, as attempts to circumvent resistance. UNHCR's assurances to take on board donor suggestions were not always accepted at face value. According to one donor:

“UNHCR would say one thing and do another. They'd say they were in full understanding and agreement. ... UNHCR no doubt knew exactly what we wanted and did everything not to listen to us. ... You can hardly say it was not a deliberate way of manipulating donors.”<sup>262</sup>

Another donor felt that the problem was essentially a loss of credibility from UNHCR's side, particularly in regards to the management team in Afghanistan at that time. She commented that:

“The trust was not there and the information we were given was not helpful or sometimes not true. And it's a very exceptional case because I have dealt

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<sup>262</sup> Interview, 'Donor 15'

with many organisations and many agencies over the years and it was just in that specific case where they outright lied to us at some points.”<sup>263</sup>

The more sceptical approach of donors that emerged is evident from documents produced at the time. An analysis of the SSAR by the Humanitarian Donor Group (HDG) in February 2012, for instance, criticised UNHCR’s approach of ‘reinventing the wheel’ by creating parallel structures, rather than building on existing national programmes. It was equally critical of the concept of focussing on the identified HRAs, rather than targeting support based on vulnerability, and the assumption that UNHCR either could or should attempt to anchor returnee populations in those areas, seeing a blurring of the lines between military stabilisation rhetoric and the more humanitarian approach that the HDG felt UNHCR should be taking.

In the absence of trust donors became more focussed on the specifics of the strategy, pressing UNHCR harder to flesh out the implementation modalities and adopting a more sceptical approach. Criticism was directed particularly at the lack of detail regarding operational aspects, division of responsibilities, and budgeting processes, and even UNHCR interviewees acknowledged that communication could have been improved. Notably though, not all donors took this approach and many, indeed perhaps the majority, were happy to continue with a hands-off approach.

While UNHCR actively attempted to assuage donor concerns (with limited success) its approach to criticism from the NGO sector was more blunt. One NGO that had

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<sup>263</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 3’

complained about many aspects of the strategy, seeing it as poorly designed and an untested model, found themselves called in to UNHCR for multiple late night meetings to go through the strategy line by line. In these meetings the approach from UNHCR was “slightly intimidating ... We were told in no uncertain terms to be quiet and not oppose the strategy. ... It was quite aggressive.”<sup>264</sup>

Despite donor dissatisfaction with certain elements of the strategy UNHCR decided to push forward with a large high profile international conference in May 2012 at which the strategy would be formally adopted. UNHCR stressed repeatedly that the aim of the conference was to provide a political impetus to the regional refugee situation and that it was categorically not a pledging conference. Nevertheless some donors suspected that UNHCR would later use their public endorsement of the strategy as a means of exerting leverage to extract greater funding. But in any case not attending the conference, and not endorsing the communiqué welcoming it, was not an option for any donor. That donors felt this way underlines both the independent agency of UNHCR, and its ability to use its authority to influence states. By the time of the conference, as one donor put it, “the international community could do little to stop it, except fund it or not fund it.”<sup>265</sup> In his view, “it seemed awkward, no not awkward, extremely manipulative.”<sup>266</sup> Though it is important to note, again, that not all donors felt this way.

The conference took place on 2-3 May in Geneva and was attended by representatives of 47 governments and 30 intergovernmental organizations,

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<sup>264</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 12’

<sup>265</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 15’

<sup>266</sup> Ibid

including UN agencies and NGOs. It was introduced by high-level speakers such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, and former UN grandee Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi. According to the official report of the conference, the participants “welcomed the multi-year, Solutions Strategy for Afghan refugees as a timely and useful roadmap that sought to address protection and durable solutions for Afghan refugees through regional and international cooperation, in a spirit of burden-sharing.” However in private conversations with delegates at the conference, for many the welcome was lukewarm. On the other hand many people, probably the majority, attending the conference were only loosely connected with Afghanistan, being based instead at their capitals or embassies in Geneva, and hence had a low level of knowledge of the specific details of the Strategy or awareness that parts of it had been in any way controversial. In their formal speeches at the conference donors warmly welcomed the strategy but raised three main points: the necessity to align the strategy with the NPPs; to ensure asylum space was respected and that returns continued to be voluntary; and to pay greater attention to the needs of other vulnerable populations, in particular IDPs, in the context of the SSAR.

Following the conference UNHCR spent the next months developing more detailed project implementation plans for the three countries. Staff were seconded from headquarters to the field to assist in drafting a ‘portfolio of projects’ and a ‘joint resource mobilization framework’. While the latter was negotiated between the three states, a consultation was conducted through NGOs to input into the portfolio of projects. Essentially this involved collecting information from agencies on the projects that they would be able and willing to conduct in the identified HRAs. Not

all donors were satisfied with the way the process was conducted, nor with the resulting document, which was released in September 2012. One commented: “It’s just like a wish list. The budgets are huge. They’re really impossible.”<sup>267</sup> One NGO interviewee who had been involved in the process said that those agencies that were invited by UNHCR to participate (which excluded most NGOs) were told to provide information on any and all potential activities that could conceivably be sold under the reintegration umbrella, and that these were all then included in the portfolio as a means to “whet donor appetites”.<sup>268</sup>

The initial donor response in terms of funding was, perhaps predictably, not as positive as UNHCR would have liked. Many donors were content to give their political backing to the strategy but were less keen to support it financially. As one donor commented, her agency had been supportive of the political engagement at regional level to unlock solutions but in terms of further commitment there was less enthusiasm. As she noted, “if you look at the funding I think that speaks language of its own.”<sup>269</sup> On the other hand the high-level push did reap some dividends and boosted support from certain donors. In the words of a UNHCR interviewee: “The fact remains there was no decrease in donor support. There was an increase in donor support, but not to the level we would have hoped for. ... It was successful in that sense. There were a lot of projects carried out in the 48 sites. A lot of projects.”<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 14’

<sup>268</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 12’

<sup>269</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 3’

<sup>270</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 21’

At the end of 2012 the UNHCR Afghanistan CD retired and the incoming CD adopted a very different approach to his predecessor. The differences between the two were quite stark. The new CD was, according to one UNHCR interviewee, “more quiet, he’s more engaging, he’s more towards inter-agency collaboration, cooperation, ... Whereas [the former CD] was, we used to call him the pit-bull. Because basically he’s gung ho, he focuses on something and that’s it he goes there.”<sup>271</sup> But also, more fundamentally, the new CD had a very different conception of UNHCR’s role, feeling that UNHCR should limit its involvement in the development dimension of reintegration more strictly to a purely “catalytic role”<sup>272</sup>. The change in approach was recognised by all those interviewed who had known both individuals. It entailed a dramatic decrease in UNHCR’s ambitions, at least in terms of the rhetoric, and donors welcomed the reduced “need for UNHCR to be sitting on all the money”<sup>273</sup>, as one donor put it. Relations with donors, as well as other agencies, improved markedly.

In addition to a more modest role for UNHCR the central concept of the Solutions Strategy, the focus on the 48 HRAs, was quietly dropped. Instead of the previous approach of “monetising return into given areas”<sup>274</sup>, in the words of one UNHCR interviewee, it was felt that funding should now follow the flow of people, rather than, as had previously been the case, assuming that the flow of people would follow the funding. Though not abandoned completely the focus on purely rural areas was weakened and UNHCR became more open to programming in urban areas.

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid

<sup>272</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 11’

<sup>273</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 12’

<sup>274</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 17’

While ostensibly standing by the strategy in public pronouncements (and taking great care to portray all activities as fully in line with both the strategy *and* the NPPs), in private UNHCR staff made fewer efforts to promote it and even attempted to reframe it as primarily a political document and a basis for regional negotiation, rather than one with any programmatic implications<sup>275</sup>. NGOs began to lose interest and to perceive it as an internal UNHCR issue, UNDP quietly “parked”<sup>276</sup> their involvement, and many donors also spurned the strategy, according to multiple interviews.

The new CD also took a more pragmatic approach than had previously been the case to the categorisation of people, being more willing to see beyond rigid distinctions between refugees and international migrants in Pakistan and Iran; between IDPs and rural-to-urban migrants in Afghanistan; and more open to a vulnerability-based approach in which returnees were seen first and foremost as Afghan citizens in their own country, rather than holders of a special status entitling them to support. Nevertheless all of these views were tempered by the organisational constraints of UNHCR’s mandate, which limited the ability to diverge from orthodox conceptions and approaches, and were not necessarily shared by other UNHCR staff.

Meanwhile the difference in approach fed into a wider internal debate within UNHCR in general, and its Afghan office in particular. The organisation was

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<sup>275</sup> Interview, ‘NGO 12’

<sup>276</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 10’

struggling with “an ongoing conversation in UNHCR about what we can do as a humanitarian agency”<sup>277</sup> according to a UNHCR interviewee. While some found it easy to adapt to a more modest conception of UNHCR’s role, for others the idea that UNHCR should scale back in some areas was harder to accept. Nevertheless, despite a shift in rhetoric, the extent of changes on the ground should perhaps not be overstated. Some interviewees noted that even almost two years after the change in leadership the activities of their sub-office had not substantially changed in any way. This suggests that the distinction between rhetoric and practice may be significant and that there is thus a danger of focussing too keenly on the former at the expense of the latter.

At the Geneva level UNHCR also began around this time to lobby less strongly through the Friends group, which became more of a policy discussion forum than a programmatic one geared towards raising support. As a donor interviewee based there recounted: “UNHCR tried to use it for fundraising but in the end kind of gave up. The early discussions were about money but later it was more about the political strategy. Gradually the discussion became more frank. At the beginning it was them very much indeed asking for more funding.”<sup>278</sup> In part the change in approach was likely due to lack of traction, as well as changes in leadership at country level and the ensuing different conceptions of UNHCR’s role in Afghanistan, but it possibly also reflected a wider change in context at the global level.

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<sup>277</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 9’

<sup>278</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 11’

In 2011 when the Solutions Strategy was first mooted there was a general feeling among interviewed donors that UNHCR was looking for opportunities for expansion. The global numbers of refugees were reducing and, according to one donor, “you definitely had the sense that UNHCR was on the search for new grazing areas.”<sup>279</sup> Beyond Afghanistan this manifested itself in proposals such as the Nansen Initiative on climate-induced displacement, an area that one UNHCR staff member I interviewed had earlier described in an interview in the LA Times in decidedly mercenary terms by saying: “If we were a corporation, climate change is what you might call a 'growth area'.” According to a senior UNHCR interviewee back in 2011 UNHCR’s major concern was working out how to spend all of the budget that it had been allocated.

By 2013 the global situation had decisively changed. New refugee crises had broken out, or were on the horizon, in Central African Republic, South Sudan, Iraq and Ukraine and by 2015 Nepal and Burundi were added to the list. All of these were however dwarfed by the massive refugee exodus from Syria into the surrounding countries. By January 2015 Syrian refugees overtook Afghans, who had held the position for 30 years, as the world’s largest refugee population under the mandate of UNHCR<sup>280</sup>.

Multiple donors credited this changing situation with influencing UNHCR Afghanistan to adopt a more modest approach to its role. In the years following the adoption of the Solutions Strategy the situation was seen, according to one

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<sup>279</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 22’

<sup>280</sup> UNHCR’s mandate does not include Palestinian refugees who fall under the responsibility of UNRWA

donor, as having “changed dramatically, now they’re barely able to keep their head above water.”<sup>281</sup> Donors referred to a more focused approach on UNHCR’s core tasks, a willingness to let others take the lead in diverse areas, and a reduced inclination to take on new responsibilities and explore opportunities for expansion. From UNHCR’s side, according to interviews, the Afghan operation was no longer seen as “sexy”<sup>282</sup> or a “flagship operation”<sup>283</sup> as the focus of the organisation moved to the Middle East.

Additionally, developments within Afghanistan may have led UNHCR to adopt a more low key and less visible role. In 2013 corruption allegations concerning UNHCR and MoRR surfaced following an investigation by the Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (MEC); a joint national and international corruption watchdog. The allegations claimed that UNHCR had made payments to MoRR to cover the rental of private residences belonging to high government officials, that MoRR was receiving funding through a separate bank account in contravention of national laws, and that UNHCR had engaged in “the double payment of salaries, ghost workers and other fraudulent human resources practices”. The report went on to criticise the un-transparent environment between the two organisations that enabled corrupt practices, and the lack of coordination between them, “resulting in ineffective implementation and possible misuse of aid.”

These revelations were picked up by the international press (WSJ 2012, 2013) and caused a stir among the donor community. Donors that until that point had

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<sup>281</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 22’

<sup>282</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 13’

<sup>283</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 12’

adopted a passive attitude to grant management became more active; hierarchies were alerted, and senior staff became involved. The UNHCR Country Director was urgently summoned to the offices of various donors and asked to provide explanations, and assurances that their funding was not affected. UNHCR also called a wider meeting of its donors to provide information on the situation. According to one donor at that meeting the UNHCR Country Director was exceptionally open and transparent, acknowledging that mistakes had been made and that they were now being addressed, as well as being quick to point out that international staff had not been involved. This in turn bolstered confidence in UNHCR as his openness at the meeting was viewed, according to this donor, as “something people remember”<sup>284</sup>. On the other hand another donor commented that by that stage UNHCR effectively had no other choice than to adopt a transparent attitude to information sharing as “when they do that it’s so huge that it will impact negatively on their reputation”<sup>285</sup> were they to be perceived as attempting to conceal information.

UNHCR also took steps to address the corruption allegations. An independent audit was put in process by the independent UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) and many payments to MoRR were halted, including all payments to its regional offices; something which risked causing operational bottlenecks as the alternative system of transferring money from MoRR to the provinces was itself highly dysfunctional and liable to corruption. According to one UNHCR interviewee the MEC report also enabled UNHCR to take a tougher line with MoRR,

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<sup>284</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 12’

<sup>285</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 11’

something that it had effectively been unable to do, due to its dependence on the ministry for its work in country:

“Even before the MEC report there were a number of audits that we did, but we were walking softly, we were treading carefully. But when the MEC report came out that’s when we went in full force, that’s when we had the basis to go in. Look, it’s like this, when you deal with the government it’s very difficult to have a confrontational kind of approach, so we were very careful with the approach that we had.”<sup>286</sup>

Several donors added UNHCR to their list of implementers to be audited by their own auditing services but in light of the steps taken by the organisation the spotlight moved away from UNHCR. For at least one donor interviewed, the MEC scandal “kind of died away”<sup>287</sup> after confidence was restored that problems were being addressed and, especially, after they had received strong reassurances that their funding was not involved (though he noted that long term damage may have been done to UNHCR’s credibility in country due to its links to MoRR). However, details of unsatisfactory performance continued to come to light.

The OIOS audit was apparently concluded in November 2013, according to a follow-up MEC report, which criticised that it had not been made available to the public. The audit was eventually released in May 2014 but donors interviewed more than half a year after that were not aware that it had been released and

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<sup>286</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 21’

<sup>287</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 16’

several were surprised to learn that it had. One complained that UNHCR “definitely don’t make an effort to go and send these things to donors. Donors aren’t checking the UNHCR website regularly.”<sup>288</sup>

Perhaps understandably UNHCR had not rushed to publicise the OIOS audit report to its donors as it gave an “unsatisfactory” rating to the organisation’s Afghan operations, strongly criticising UNHCR’s inability to monitor its sub-projects. But the audit did not suggest that any UNHCR staff were themselves likely to be implicated in corruption or criminal activities. In September 2014 though MEC released another report, which complained that UNHCR had unearthed evidence of such corruption among its own staff and was still refusing to share this information. In its most recent report in 2015 MEC took the unusual step of specifying that both a former UNHCR Country Director and Assistant Representative had allegedly engaged in fraudulent activity; that this had been confirmed by UNHCR; and that UNHCR had not taken any further action. Consequently MEC announced its intention to refer the issue to the Austrian prosecutor (as both men were Austrian citizens) and was confident that there was sufficient evidence for a prosecution. The report also states “when MEC asked UNHCR representatives why they did not refer the cases to the appropriate legal authorities, UNHCR representatives stated that it was not their responsibility to determine the guilt or innocence of the accused parties.” Surprisingly, and luckily for UNHCR, this rather damning indictment seems so far not to have been picked up by the international press.

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<sup>288</sup> Interview, ‘Donor 14’

## 6.4 Chapter Conclusions

Since 2001, and even before, UNHCR has consistently advocated for its primary missionary goal in Afghanistan; that greater attention be paid to the needs of returnees, compared to other sections of the Afghan population. At the same time, from a more mercenary perspective, it has promoted its own role in providing ever more comprehensive reintegration support to these returnees. Primarily the model for providing such support under the aegis of UNHCR has been area-based assistance to rural locations that are deemed to be actual, or potential, areas of high return. At least in all of these respects, in the words of a senior interviewee from an inter-governmental organisation, there is “absolutely nothing different in the Solutions Strategy to what we were talking about, even during the Taliban times.”<sup>289</sup>

UNHCR launched its first comprehensive regional strategy in the post-Taliban era in 2003 after creating ACSU, which it promoted at the time, both internally and externally, as innovative and farsighted. But its reliance on Iran and Pakistan to adopt a more flexible attitude to local integration and labour mobility meant its impact was ultimately highly limited. Meanwhile UNHCR closely supported in Afghanistan a highly dysfunctional ministry and its roll out of its flagship reintegration programme, the LAS. In doing so UNHCR refrained, to a large extent, from publicly criticising MoRR, in a way that was seen by donors, and some UNHCR insiders, as ultimately harming UNHCR’s own credibility.

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<sup>289</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 2’

This credibility was again on the line when UNHCR sought to dramatically increase support for reintegration through the Solutions Strategy. Due to the promise of increased funding UNHCR was able to attract a broad coalition of interested parties, including MoRR, UN agencies and NGOs, to nominally lend their support to the strategy. The fact that the strategy was based on the upgrading of a concept that was seen by most as having already dramatically failed in Afghanistan was not a major hurdle. Neither, generally speaking, was the relative vulnerability level of returnees brought into question. Nevertheless the involvement of these supporting actors was limited as UNHCR controlled the drafting process and the principal actor that they had hoped would be involved, UNDP, was largely absent due partly to internal setbacks linked to very public failures in another sectoral area. Other actors also later scaled back their involvement as they realised that the prospects of the increased funding that UNHCR had promised were unlikely to materialise.

Initially the strategy gained a generally positive, though somewhat disinterested, reception from donors, who only adopted a more attentive, and more critical, approach once fears of undermining the NPPs (an issue area that in their eyes held much more importance than refugee reintegration) were raised. Ultimately the size of UNHCR's ambitions probably had the opposite effect to that intended, by harming donor trust and arousing suspicions of 'mercenary' intentions. The donor pushback against the strategy succeeded in persuading UNHCR to drop the concept of a trust fund but donors were unable to prevent the strategy being adopted and felt constrained to publicly welcome it, regardless of any private doubts they may have harboured regarding its prospects for success.

Following a change of leadership at the country level UNHCR Afghanistan's country team adopted a new approach that was seen as more modest, more pragmatic, and more cooperative. The Solutions Strategy remained, in the words of one UNHCR interviewee, the "holy bible"<sup>290</sup> of UNHCR's work in the wider region, but the meaning attributed to it subtly changed. Specifically it came to be seen more as a political agreement between the three countries than a programmatic document that pointed to a specific operational model and role for UNHCR in Afghanistan (even though many of the processes started under the previous management, such as development and promotion of the portfolio of projects, continued). In some ways this less ambitious approach paid dividends for UNHCR, at least in terms of donor relations, with multiple donors noting that relations had improved and that trust in UNHCR was restored.

So what were the motivations driving the development of the Solutions Strategy? Certainly among some even in UNHCR it was viewed as misguided. One senior UNHCR interviewee expressed his view that in the context of low returns and diminishing funding the organisation would have been better placed to reduce its ambitions in Afghanistan, saying:

"The UN is like an accordion and shrinks when the demand is not there. It didn't make sense to expand the vision of the operation at a point when the

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<sup>290</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 13'

demand was decreasing. ... I don't know what the motivations were, suddenly deciding we could go on this expansionist kick".<sup>291</sup>

For many of those interviewed outside UNHCR, there was a high degree of suspicion that motivations behind the strategy were ultimately mercenary in nature and linked to UNHCR's organisational interests, or the personal interests of staff working there. There is some evidence this may be the case. For instance, one UNHCR interviewee noted that a prominent individual closely associated to the development of the strategy used the prospect of likely funding from a particular source to demand a promotion for himself (though neither the funding nor the promotion eventually materialised)<sup>292</sup>. More generally there seemed to be a high degree of consensus that the strategy, if successful, would ultimately benefit not only the returnees but also UNHCR and this is likely to have played at least some role in increasing internal support for it.

On the other hand many UNHCR interviewees explicitly rejected the suggestion that, at least for them, individual or institutional interests were the driving motivation. One, for instance, said that while, "of course it would be lovely if they could credit UNHCR with the return and the development of Afghanistan"<sup>293</sup>, the ultimate ambition from her point of view was not for UNHCR to be seen as the "Sultans of Afghanistan" but rather that there was a necessity incumbent on UNHCR to attempt to do something, even if ultimately unsuccessful, to unlock the PRS that had existed for three decades. Thus missionary motivations are likely to

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<sup>291</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 11'

<sup>292</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 21'

<sup>293</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 1'

have been at least as important, if not more so, than any interest-based objectives in terms of the driving motivation of UNHCR in pushing the strategy.

Bureaucratic dynamics unrelated to interests or values (which I categorise under the heading 'misfit') also played a role. For instance, one possible explanation for the different approaches adopted by UNHCR Afghanistan at different times is simply the very different characters of its various Country Directors. This would suggest an element of randomness in organisational behaviour, limiting predictive claims at a macro level. Alternatively, explanations for the decision to step up involvement in Afghanistan and seek to play a more active role may also be found in UNHCR's culture of action and of independence. In the words of one senior interviewee, "UNHCR's instinct is if it's not getting done, let's just do it ourselves. It's a response born of frustration, but it can be a mistake."<sup>294</sup> This mindset meant that the organisation was both able and willing to push through a strategy that lacked donor support (at least from some quarters) with the aim of attempting to carve out a larger role for itself in Afghanistan. Due to the large amounts of un-earmarked funding that UNHCR receives it was also able to devote considerable amounts of its own finances to kick-starting the programme, funding both preparatory activities (such as surveys, baselines and consultations) and following that to provide significant investment in the identified areas; notably without needing any specific agreement from donors.

Equally the external context probably played a very large role in prompting UNHCR to attempt to publicise and promote a high profile intervention. With

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<sup>294</sup> Interview, 'UNHCR 18'

sheer numbers of returnees falling, aid to the country decreasing and internal displacement on the rise, it seemed likely that, without a new approach, UNHCR would be forced to downscale the levels of its ambitions for returnees, as, in the words of a senior UNHCR interviewee, “UNHCR was used to enjoying a certain level of funding in Afghanistan but eventually the game runs its course”<sup>295</sup>.

Just as Allison (1972) applied three different lenses to examine, and explain, different dimensions of US decision-making during the Cuban missile crisis, UNHCR’s creation and promotion of its Solutions Strategy could equally be explained through either a mercenary, missionary or misfit lens.

A mercenary explanation would highlight that UNHCR may have felt its own position from around 2008 onwards to be threatened by the lower prioritisation of refugee reintegration, following the fall in returns numbers and the growth of competitor agencies. It would note that the tactics employed to attract allies to the Solutions Strategy essentially consisted of promising to further their own interests, notably in terms of increased funding for MoRR, UN agencies, NGOs and the three concerned countries (while support from these actors dropped off when many of them concluded that the Solutions Strategy was unlikely to deliver the financial rewards that UNHCR had promised). Instances of UNHCR asserting itself to control the drafting process, to exclude IOM, to circumnavigate resistance by approaching different principals, and its willingness to use its powerful bureaucratic machinery to push through an approach that more or less compelled donors to publically espouse their support despite misgivings, would equally be

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<sup>295</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 11’

central to this narrative. At a more micro level key individuals involved in the strategy probably felt their own positions would be boosted through supporting their agency to secure a more prominent role.

In contrast a missionary explanation would focus on the deep motivation of UNHCR staff who were genuinely concerned about the plight of refugee returnees and the diminishing prospects for 'solving' the Afghan PRS. For almost all of those interviewed from the agency, UNHCR's interests were a far distant second to those of returnees. Most were convinced (rightly or wrongly) that returnees were a comparatively neglected population who deserved greater attention than they were currently receiving. From this perspective the outreach to attract allies by offering them funding was not a cynical ploy, but rather proof that UNHCR had no wish to dominate all the funding itself and was merely playing a 'facilitative' role to increase the involvement of others. Equally, the fact that UNHCR continued with an approach that met resistance could be seen not so much as a determined effort to compel donors to increase their support, but as a principled agency standing up for its populations in need.

Finally, a misfit perspective would stress the bureaucratic dimensions of the process. The different approaches of the various Afghanistan Country Directors could be explained simply by reference to their very different characters and world views, rather than as part of a wider evolving policy. Additionally, when UNHCR had decided that 'something' needed to be done, to a certain extent the process took on a life of its own. The organisation reverted to the toolboxes it had used in the past (multi-dimensional area-based support) and sought to scale these up,

even if previous results had been less than encouraging. Specialised staff were seconded to the programme to develop various dimensions of the strategy and for these staff pushing through the strategy represented the entire purpose of their role which, as good bureaucrats, they achieved to the best of their ability. The independent, action-oriented culture of the agency meant that UNHCR was more able, and more likely, to push through a controversial strategy than a less self-confident organisation, which might have taken a more cautious approach. The fact that UNHCR often dealt with donor staff who were themselves misfits, often far removed from the Afghan context and, crucially, reliant on UNHCR for situational analysis, inadvertently helped UNHCR in their objectives.

Ultimately, a full picture only emerges when all of these aspects are combined. Additionally, the experience of UNHCR in Afghanistan also possibly reveals evidence of a natural cycle of expansion and contraction. UNHCR entered Afghanistan facing accusations of having over-extended itself in earlier operations in Yugoslavia. The agency hence initially adopted a limited role for itself in Afghanistan (though even this stretched it to its limit due to the scale of the returns). Partly as a result of this limited vision UNHCR enjoyed close, trusting relations with its donors. Yet as government and donor attention later began to shift elsewhere, UNHCR staff chafed at their own restrictive approach and felt they both could and should do more for returnees. A new ambitious maximalist approach then succeeded in gaining donor attention, but at the cost of harming the agency's credibility in country. To regain donor trust UNHCR quietly returned to a more limited role, satisfying donors that mercenary ambitions were not part of UNHCR's objectives. Such a cycle (which incidentally was mirrored by UNDP in the

above example) of (1) expansion-oriented behaviour (2) perceived over-extension and censure, and (3) contraction to minimise risk, may well be more generalizable among IOs.

Importantly it is worth noting that adopting a more ambitious vision regarding the reintegration of returnees is not the only option that UNHCR could have pursued in terms of expanding its operations and championing the needs of displaced people. Alternatively UNHCR could perhaps have adopted another approach, geared towards maintaining a large presence in Afghanistan, by acceding to pressure from some donors to redirect its support to another group of people: IDPs. However, due to its internal hierarchy of People of Concern, UNHCR has largely pushed back against such pressures and, arguably, this has motivated it to be even more outspoken in support of returnees as the danger arose that they might be eclipsed in terms of donor interest. Chapter 8 outlines UNHCR's approach towards IDPs (and other 'People of Concern'), an approach that has been almost diametrically opposed to that adopted for returnees.

## 7. Information transfers and strategic discourse: UNHCR's portrayal of returnee vulnerability

### 7.1 Chapter Overview

In the previous chapter I outlined how, in relation to returning refugees, UNHCR has pursued its own values and interests over a decade and a half in Afghanistan. The principal justification for its activities throughout that time has been an underlying assumption about the relative vulnerability of Afghan returnees. These assumptions were in turn, rather successfully, underpinned by a strong, coherent and strategic UNHCR narrative aimed at promoting a particular vision of Afghan returnees to its donors and the wider world.

As noted in section 5.3, interviewed donors report relying heavily on UNHCR for information regarding displacement needs in Afghanistan. Hence how UNHCR frames the issues that donors care about, or may be induced to care about, carries weight. As Stoddard (2006) has written, the situational analysis provided by NGOs (and, by extension, UN agencies) is a key factor in donor decision-making. Even when taken with a pinch of salt, it is often all donors have to go on. The information is interpreted by the agency providing it through an operational action-oriented prism that may be “neither strategic, nor in some cases entirely conscious” but which nevertheless supports certain courses of action more than others. Implicit in the description of needs is the expectation of a response and the ability to influence the framing of messages is a powerful tool. It includes “The use

of key terms, implicit moral judgements, interpretations of causality, and – once the paradigm is accepted- the unwitting practice of ‘gatekeeping’, that is, not reporting that which does not fit the paradigm”. All of these are present within UNHCR’s discourse on Afghan returnees.

This is not the first examination of UNHCR’s discourse regarding specifically its Afghan operations. Both Hammerstad (2014) and Scalettaris (2013) have written extensively on the topic. Hammerstad focuses on the extent to which UNHCR ‘securitised’ its portrayal of its actions and its role as a way of justifying the relevance of its own role to its donors, while Scalettaris concentrates on how UNHCR reproduced a vision of Afghan migration that was rooted in, and restricted by, national territorial boundaries; a vision that in turn served in some ways to complicate rather than resolve the problems of refugees. While neither author sought to question UNHCR’s portrayal of the needs of its target populations, nor how its internal hierarchy of beneficiaries influenced its actions and interpretations of the context, both agreed on the power of UNHCR to influence more powerful actors, in particular its donors. For Hammerstad UNHCR’s power “derives from its ability to influence the perceptions and beliefs of the other actors in the international refugee regime.” Scalettaris meanwhile argues that “expert discourse is the principal weapon of UNHCR”, and as such it has served to be a powerful tool in the Afghan context, which “influences how donors view reality”.

As a former reporting officer in UNHCR Afghanistan Scalettaris is particularly well placed to provide insights, not only on what UNHCR said and did, but also how that information was produced. While she cautions that there is a risk of attributing

too much coherence to organisational communication than actually exists (due to the 'misfit' dynamic of multiple people pushing multiple points of view) she nevertheless notes that UNHCR's external communication in the region was highly strategic. As a reporting officer her task was to assemble data and give meaning to it in line with the narrative that the agency wanted to promote. In the context of creating a coherent external narrative, information, studies and data were all brought into service to pressure donors, to support the work that UNHCR was doing, to demonstrate the organisation's success, and to promote a particular view of what needed to be done to meet the problems identified by UNHCR.

In the following section I trace the evolution of UNHCR's discourse regarding the comparative vulnerability of returnees to demonstrate how it has evolved in parallel to the fate of the agency over the decade and a half covered in the previous chapter. In particular the central contention is that the portrayal of returnees' needs has been more closely linked to the relative level of prioritisation of this topic in the wider aid context than objective measurement. Indeed as returnee needs arguably diminished, and dropped down the agenda of both humanitarian and development donors, UNHCR portrayed these needs ever more strongly in absolutist and comparative terms in ways that did not match the available evidence.

## 7.2 Establishing exceptionality

***“In a country like Afghanistan it’s difficult to exaggerate the needs.”***<sup>296</sup>

As Green (2011) has written, a first step to defining needs is to delimit them and underline their exceptionality. This involves defining who is included in the particular category to be targeted, linking apparent needs to the cause in question (or to membership of the targeted group), and making claims regarding the exceptional scale of these needs. Krause (2014) goes further and argues that beneficiaries are in fact “part of the product being packaged and sold by relief organisations.”

UNHCR is not the only organisation in Afghanistan to engage in this activity. Indeed all organisations working in Afghanistan tend to attempt to draw attention to both the *general* level of needs in the country and, within this larger context, why the *specific* needs that they are targeting are particularly pressing. For many organisations, particularly those with restrictive mandates based on status, this includes making claims that particular types of people are especially deserving of support. Compare for instance the opening sentences on the websites of three large international NGOs working in Afghanistan with mandates directed at serving the needs of, respectively, women, children and the disabled:

“More than 20 years of conflict have left Afghanistan devastated and communities broken, making it one of the poorest countries in the world.

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<sup>296</sup> Interview, ‘UNHCR 22’

The deteriorating security situation has resulted in the Afghan population, *especially women*, living without access to basic services.” (Womankind Worldwide)

“For almost 30 years *Afghan children* have been affected by conflict. Afghanistan children face one of the worst chances of survival of anywhere in the world.” (Save the Children)

“Afghanistan has been in a near constant state of conflict and war since the late 1970s and is one of the poorest countries in the world. A large proportion of the population continues to suffer from severe insecurity, poor housing, and limited access to drinking water, electricity, medical care, and employment. Under these difficult circumstances, *disabilities* resulting from war or conflict, or endemic poverty, are extremely common.”

(Handicap International)

The generic framing above (‘Afghanistan has suffered from decades of war. People x are the most vulnerable’) is in fact fairly ubiquitous on both NGO websites and proposals to donors. NGOs that are not restricted by their mandates in terms of whom they choose to help also make claims that the needs of the groups that they are working with are the most pressing. For instance, on their webpages, Worldvision and Cordaid both note that Afghanistan has suffered from decades of war then go on to state respectively that the most vulnerable people resulting from this situation are women and children; and farmers and women. NGOs such as the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Danish Refugee Council (DRC) focussing,

like UNHCR, on displaced people, likewise make the argument that their populations are the most in need. The wider the mandate however the less meaningful the statement becomes. DRC's statement on its website, for instance, seemingly covers almost the entire Afghan population (excepting only the few remote – and therefore likely vulnerable - communities that do not host any returnees or IDPs and are hence beyond DRC's mandate):

“Returnees and deportees from Pakistan and Iran, IDPs and host communities remain among the most vulnerable population groups in Afghanistan.” (DRC)

This, in essence, is also the claim that has underpinned UNHCR's discourse over the period studied. However, due to its internal hierarchy of populations of concern UNHCR has focussed far more strongly on the needs of returnees than IDPs or host populations. As will be examined in the following segment UNHCR's statement of returnee needs has also evolved over the period 2001-15, starting from a relatively balanced assessment of returnee needs (at a period of high returns and high funding) and, as return numbers and funding have risked gradually dropping off, it has progressively portrayed an ever more dire picture of returnee needs, not only in absolute terms but also as compared to the Afghan average. However, the available data suggests that the reality is in fact the opposite: That returnees may have started from a comparatively disadvantaged position but are now, at an aggregate level, either on a par with, or in a slightly better position than, average Afghans.

### 7.3 UNHCR's portrayal of comparative returnee vulnerability

*“Returnees were considered to be living in significantly worse conditions than other community members in terms of basic services, livelihoods, protection and access to land and shelter” (UNHCR 2011b)*

*“The living conditions of persons and households that returned from displacement seem to be somewhat better than those of non-returnees. Literacy among returnees is significantly higher, as is the proportion with completed secondary and tertiary education. Also labour force participation is higher among returnees, although the rate of returnee women that is gainfully employed is somewhat lower. Housing quality and access to improved water and sanitation is also better for returnee households than for non-returnee households” (NRVA/ALCS 2013/14)*

The above statements on relative vulnerability levels of returnees, the first from UNHCR's 2011 Global Report and the second from the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA), the largest national survey of the Afghan population, though only two years apart, appear to be diametrically opposed. As this chapter will argue UNHCR's particular assessment of relative levels of returnee vulnerability, far from being a dispassionate, objective process, has evolved over the past decade and a half in a highly strategic manner, which ultimately has lent weight to its lobbying efforts and its objective of ensuring that returnees remain highly prioritised within national development processes. Even more interestingly this narrative has closely followed the evolution of UNHCR's

wider strategic interactions with its donors and other partners covered in the previous chapter as the agency has found it increasingly more necessary to rely on such an evaluation to promote reintegration within Afghanistan.

In the immediate aftermath of the US invasion UNHCR did not have to work hard to highlight the difficult situation facing returnees. With global attention focussed on Afghanistan many media organisations reported on the challenges of managing such a large-scale return operation to a desperately poor ‘failed’ state. In 2002 newspapers reported that returnees, “often poor and jobless, return to a bleak picture” (Boston Globe 2002), in which they struggled to “rebuild their lives in a country devastated by years of conflict and drought” (Xinhua 2002), and faced “economic prospects near zero” (Washington Post 2002) as well “a vicious cycle of endless needs” (Foreign Affairs 2002). Moreover, the “cold welcome” (Dow Jones 2002) that they received was viewed in part as a failing of the international community, as the returnees “hit the wall of foreign donors’ broken promises” (Guardian 2002) leading to “a crisis of unmanageable proportions” (The Age 2002).

In this context UNHCR could afford to paint a nuanced picture of refugees’ return. UNHCR’s narrative sought to draw attention to the devastation in Afghanistan and the huge challenges posed by mass returns (not least in funding terms, which at certain points in 2002 stretched the organisation to the limit). But overall it welcomed the mass returns as an overwhelmingly positive development. Echoing the dominant narrative of the time UNHCR representatives stated that it was a “major vote of confidence” by the returnees in the new government (AFP 2002).

Eager for a success story, UNHCR was keen to prove its relevance to its donors and to maintain good relations with Iran and Pakistan with a view to maintaining the purely voluntary nature of return.

The High Commissioner conducted multiple visits to Afghanistan and its neighbours. On one occasion, standing at the Afghan-Iran border watching refugees return, he announced that he was now “the High Commissioner for Returnees”, calling it a “A happy and proud day for the UNHCR” (Reuters 2002). Early on, UNHCR had deployed a strong team of public information specialists to Pakistan to cover the return operation and, pursuing “a very active media relations strategy”, had managed to achieve an “unusually high degree of international visibility” (UNHCR 2001c).

Moreover large-scale return itself promised to have a positive impact on the country. Returnees were portrayed in statements to the media as “valuable resources” (Xinhua 2003), bringing skills and capital. While educated returnees would contribute to the civil service and economy, farmers would eventually “feed not only themselves but places such as Kabul” (AFP 2002). Using a form of issue-linkage UNHCR tied return not only to macro-economic development but also to peace-building, noting on multiple occasions the strong linkages to this issue. Indeed UNHCR even felt it necessary to tone down its rhetoric in the immediate post-return period as it worried about creating expectations it could not meet.

At the same time UNHCR also warned that this “golden opportunity” (AFP 2002) for the world, could turn into a humanitarian crisis if not properly managed and

funded. Return was portrayed as an altruistic act by ordinary Afghans with “a strong sense of obligation to be part of that reconstruction” (UNHCR 2006b). This in turn, in the view of UNHCR, implied similar obligations on behalf of the international community. As the organisation put it “Millions of Afghans have come back to help rebuild their country and we must continue to help them help themselves” (UNHCR 2005c).

Meanwhile UNHCR also sought to draw attention to the vulnerability of the returnees. From the very beginning the organisation pointed out the hardships involved in ‘returning’ to a country in which many had never set foot; noted the incredible poverty of most returnees; and called attention to the strain that returns would put on resources, livelihoods and public services in a country struggling to recover from war. While in some ways remaining remarkably stable, in other ways this discourse has evolved over the 15 years studied. In particular this evolution revolves around the extent to which UNHCR has depicted returnee needs as exceptional, and returnees as comparatively worse off than other Afghans. From 2001-7 UNHCR drew attention to the problems facing returnees without claiming that they were comparatively worse off than non-returnees (though arguably to an extent this was nevertheless somewhat implicit in their framing); while from 2008-15 UNHCR made positive claims that returnees were a comparatively disadvantaged group. As noted in the previous section these two periods correspond to different stages in UNHCR’s relations with its donors. From 2001-7 there were high returns, low levels of internal displacement and reintegration was a major policy issue; UNHCR had no major competitor in country (OCHA had not been established); and overall UNHCR enjoyed very positive relations, and its

strategies were very complementary, with donors. From 2008-15 internal displacement overtook return as the major policy focus for most humanitarian donors, while returns slipped off the agenda for development donors; UNHCR needed to compete with OCHA for attention; and relations with donors became increasingly strained.

UNHCR has consistently underlined the difficult situation facing returnees to Afghanistan. However in the early years of mass return it contextualised these problems and made no specific claims that they were *comparatively* worse off than average Afghans who had not left Afghanistan. A report summarising the conclusions of returnee monitoring in 2003 is replete with statements such as:

“Post-conflict recovery presents challenges that are shared equally by returnees and settled members of communities. It is noteworthy that these concerns do not apply exclusively to one particular ethnic group over another, *nor do they generally affect returnees more than the local population.*” (UNHCR 2003a)

Importantly, the survey found no evidence of discrimination on the basis of returnee status. Further, it found that protection and human rights concerns “equally affect the local population and returnees”; that “there are no indications that land disputes affect returnees more than the rest of the population”; and that “the deficit [of social services] acknowledged by returnees is experienced equally by resident community members”. Nevertheless it is worth noting that despite finding little difference between the situation of returnees and non-returnees, the

recommendations of the report were all aimed at advocating for, and supporting, other actors to reinforce returnee-specific protection.

To a certain extent the view of returnees as a population suffering on an equal level as other Afghans was reflected in UNHCR's public discourse (which is somewhat distinct from its writing in technical reports, such as the above, aimed at a restricted audience). In the period 2001-7 UNHCR did, albeit occasionally, acknowledge that non-returnees also face difficult circumstances; for instance, stating:

“For many Afghans, *local and returnee alike*, a basic livelihood cannot be assured.” (UNHCR 2003b)

“Issues like land, water and livelihood are problems *not just for returnees, but for the large majority of Afghans*. Only long-term national development can solve these problems.” (UNHCR 2006a)

“While there have been difficulties for some, the majority of returnees have responded successfully and resiliently to the *same challenges and opportunities faced by all Afghans*,” (UNHCR 2006c)

These statements do not downplay the problems facing returnees yet they do contextualise them by acknowledging the enormous difficulties faced by the wider community. Returnee monitoring in 2005 continued to show “that returnees and the communities to which they return *largely face similar problems*, including

human rights violations and abuses” (UNHCR 2005b), supported by evidence that, for instance, 94% of returnee women did not consider themselves different from other women in the community (Ibid).

However such framing of returnees’ problems is rare, even in the early years, and did not form an integral part of UNHCR’s messaging. While UNHCR did not claim during this period that returnees were a specifically disadvantaged group, such a conclusion was arguably nevertheless somewhat implicit in much of UNHCR’s public discourse, which remained focussed on presenting the needs of returnees in absolute rather than comparative terms. For instance assertions such as the following make up the bulk of UNHCR’s statements:

“Many Afghans returning to their homeland face a number of major challenges, including a lack of employment, health care, education and housing, according to an assessment carried out with the support of the United Nations refugee agency.” (UNHCR 2007b)

These conclusions are difficult to refute. Indeed few, if any, would deny that returning Afghans were, and continue to be, confronted by all of these problems and more. Yet, by simply outlining the challenges facing returnees without noting that these problems may be equally shared by others the impression that is created is of a comparatively disadvantaged group.

The above quote is taken from a UN press release reporting findings from a report by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) that was funded,

and jointly conducted, by UNHCR. Partnerships in Afghanistan and elsewhere have been an important tool for UNHCR to further its influence among actors that may otherwise have had less of a focus on UNHCR's target populations. Through these partnerships UNHCR has been able to promote attention to returnees, and, crucially, a particular perception of their comparative vulnerability, among a broader range of interlocutors. On announcing a partnership between UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) for instance, the WFP Afghanistan director was quoted in a UNHCR press release as saying ““Millions of Afghans live in poverty. *In particular, returnees* who, after many years, arrive home needing everything: food, shelter and a future” (UNHCR 2008b).

The partnership with AIHRC referenced above and dating from 2005 has similarly resulted in an increased focus on returnees from this national watchdog. The report funded by UNHCR quoted above, actually covers all economic and social rights in Afghanistan and, though a slight majority of survey respondents were returnees, it provides little in the way of objective detail on the problems specifically affecting this particular group beyond some migration-related information including perceptions of return (which were generally positive). Yet UNHCR's press release reporting the study may be read to implicitly suggest otherwise:

“In particular, the study found chronic food shortages among those interviewed, and more than half said they did not have access to safe drinking water, while 60 per cent were living on less than \$1 a day. One third of respondents said their children were not attending school, with

distance and security concerns cited for girls and the need to work for boys.” (UNHCR 2007b)

The excerpt above does not state that these issues affect returnees more than other populations, yet by including these findings in a press release specifically on the problems facing returnees, and without providing further clarification, this is certainly the impression that is given. This impression is further backed up by the later statement that “In response to the findings, the AIHRC is urging the Afghan Government to focus more on the situation of vulnerable groups, including returnees who have to rebuild their lives after spending years in exile.” (Ibid)

Thus, by partnering with AIHRC, WFP and others UNHCR is not only fulfilling a monitoring obligation, but also attracting wider attention to its target group. Future reports by AIHRC funded by UNHCR also focussed on returnees as a particularly vulnerable group and claimed (though without presenting data to back up the assertion) that they were disproportionately affected by the main issues that hinder reaching an adequate standard of living (AIHRC 2008).

The way in which the findings of technical reports are summarised and presented for a wider public, through press releases and other UNHCR documentation, is in itself interesting to study. Often there appears to be a tendency to focus on specific findings that highlight the problems facing returnees, without including information that might undermine advocacy dedicated to promoting greater investment in reintegration. Nuances, contextualisation, and intra-group differentiation tend to disappear in such writing destined for external audiences.

This is partly due of course to the space constraints imposed by far shorter formats, but it is also worth noting that the process of selective reduction of messages may also play a role in supporting advocacy goals.

For instance, a UNHCR press release (UNHCR 2006c) regarding a study it had contracted from the consultancy company Altai (2006) on the 'Integration of returnees in the Afghan labor market', noted that 53% of returnees felt that they were economically less well off than their neighbours who had not left the country. In contrast the corollary finding of the report, based on objective comparison rather than perceptions, that the average incomes of the surveyed returnees were "far higher than the national average occupational income", and that urban returnees "are in a better financial situation than average Afghans living in Afghan urban areas" was not reported in the press release. Even so, this particular UNHCR press release is relatively balanced, noting that most returnees felt optimistic about the future and most had responded "successfully and resiliently" to the challenges facing them.

Indeed, until 2008 UNHCR's messaging was fairly measured. It highlighted the needs of returnees but also underlined reintegration successes. As noted, UNHCR occasionally drew attention to the fact that other communities had equally pressing problems and UNHCR often played down expectations regarding the role that it could fulfil. From around 2008 this messaging started to change and UNHCR began not only to highlight the needs of returnees more actively, but also to explicitly present these needs as comparatively more pressing than those of non-returnees. For instance:

“The main needs, as expressed by returnees, are land, shelter and water as well as livelihood opportunities, access to education and health facilities.

*These issues are disproportionately affecting returnees and IDPs acting as an impediment to the return of the refugees.”* (UNHCR 2008a)

One catalyst for this change in messaging may have been an active public relations strategy surrounding the release by the Afghan government in 2008 of its first comprehensive development plan, the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), which contained a chapter on returning refugees. The document itself adopted a nuanced approach to the vulnerability of returnees, noting that “All returnees are not of equal economic status. The Government’s focus will be primarily on the poor and vulnerable.” And, further, that “Extensive monitoring of the return and reintegration process to date has not revealed any systematic pattern of discrimination. As referred to earlier, returnees largely face the same economic and social challenges as other Afghans.” The ANDS did however propose action to further target the needs of returnees and as such UNHCR was keen to attract support for this chapter of the strategy (despite the ANDS vision of returnee vulnerability arguably contradicting its own).

UNHCR thus organised an international conference in 2008 in order to bolster support for the reintegration chapter of the ANDS and in the run-up to the conference sought to generate wider attention to the plight of returnees. In late 2007 and early 2008 it organised visits by author Khaled Hosseini and actor

Angelina Jolie<sup>297</sup> to returnee communities in Afghanistan. Hosseini was quoted in a UNHCR press release as saying that returnees “desperately need help to rebuild their lives and are counting on the West” (Reuters 2007), while Jolie’s visit, accompanied by similar statements, was acknowledged by UNHCR to be “aimed at raising awareness of the refugee issue ahead of an international conference on return and reintegration” (UNHCR 2008c). (Both Jolie and Hosseini returned to Afghanistan on future UNHCR organised visits, helping each time to publicise the needs of returnees, while Jolie also personally funded the creation of a school for Afghan returnees). In the month before the conference “leading musical stars” joined in a memorial concert for the opera singer Pavarotti to raise awareness of the needs of Afghan refugees (UNHCR 2008b).

Additionally this increased attention to highlighting returnee needs was reflected in UNHCR’s public pronouncements in the run-up to the conference. The month before, AFP (2007) reported UNHCR as saying “The destitute country is struggling to absorb the massive numbers with many returnees unable to access work, land, shelter and other basic services”, and in UNHCR’s own press release the day preceding the conference, returnees are quoted as telling the High Commissioner “about their immense needs. ‘For the time being, our needs are great,’ said Malik Nawab, an Afghan elder at the settlement. ‘We need shelter, food, schools, and we’re asking UNHCR not to forget us.’” (UNHCR 2008d). Reporters from Reuters, the New York Times, and Afghan publications, also accompanied the High Commissioner and filed stories highlighting the plight of these returnees.

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<sup>297</sup> Jolie was said by one UNHCR interviewee to be “the big secret weapon of UNHCR”

In 2009 the number of new returnees hit an all time low and for the first time since 2001 there were more new IDPs than returnees. Yet if anything this prompted UNHCR to highlight ever more strongly the needs of returnees and, after several years of gradually decreasing budget appeals, it requested a higher amount than the previous year. In 2010 UNHCR adopted the Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA) methodology and its budget appeal increased massively, almost doubling from what it had previously requested (almost all of which, 86%, was dedicated to returnees rather than the growing numbers of IDPs).

In 2011 UNHCR undertook a 'Snapshot Survey' of the results of reintegration through conducting interviews with community representatives in 1,500 locations where 260,000 returnee families were estimated to live. The initial report of the survey released in September 2011 reported that 40% of returnees had "not reintegrated at all", while the final report, released in January 2012, stated that "60% of community representative groups considered that returnees lived in worse conditions than their local counterparts." The results of this survey were widely publicised by UNHCR and formed the basis of their discourse on the comparative vulnerability of returnees over the next years.

These findings, on the surface, appear to validate UNHCR's claim that returnees are a comparatively disadvantaged population. Indeed, if accurate, the results would more than justify UNHCR's advocacy efforts to focus a greater share of resources on meeting the needs of returnees, as compared to other Afghans. However a closer look at UNHCR's methodology reveals that the insights of the Snapshot Survey should not necessarily be taken at face value. In fact the vast majority of

questions (on services and livelihoods) focussed on the absolute, rather than comparative, level of needs of returnees. Only a single question, the final one in the survey, asked respondents to judge the position of returnees in comparison to other community members. For this reason, the final report of the survey itself conceded that faced with the question “To what extent are returnees integrated into their communities, compared to their locally settled counterparts? ... It is hard to answer this question without direct measurement and comparison between both populations”.

A single footnote in a document reporting the findings of the Snapshot Survey from the Protection Cluster, and hence drafted jointly with other agencies, notes that the survey’s reliance on perceptions meant that its findings “may not totally reflect the security situation”. But the many UNHCR press releases, reports and public comments by its staff to the media referencing the survey contained no such caveat. Instead the ‘fact’ that returnees are a comparatively disadvantaged group was accepted unquestioningly and the Snapshot Survey was used repeatedly to backup this assertion.

Meanwhile, a survey commissioned by BPRM (2012), released only three months after the UNHCR Snapshot Survey, refuted many of the earlier study’s conclusions. By interviewing not only returnees but also non-returnees, and comparing objective measurements rather than perceptions, the BPRM survey was, in contrast to the UNHCR survey, in a position to make concrete comparisons between the two communities. Further, the report of the BPRM survey is far more detailed and contains much richer analysis of the data. Indeed the BPRM survey

devotes 8 of its 141 pages to understanding differences in the findings between the two surveys, yet just these 8 pages contain more words than the entire final report of UNHCR's Snapshot Survey. In stark contrast to UNHCR's earlier findings, the conclusions of the BPRM survey are that:

“The welfare levels are nearly identical for returnee and non-returnee households: Returnees are within 1.5 percent of the welfare level of non-returnees. This implies that returnee households are no better or worse off than non-returnee households.”

The report did note some geographical variations (with some areas where returnees appear to be marginally more privileged, and others where they appear to be marginally more disadvantaged), as well as the existence of a small welfare gap among returnees immediately following return (which disappears completely after 7-9 years), but its overwhelming conclusion was that, in the aggregate, there were almost identical welfare distributions between the two groups. Delving further into UNHCR's own data, the study's authors revealed some inconsistencies in the earlier study, for instance in the correlation between the two elements composing UNHCR's 'reintegration score' (i.e. questions regarding absolute welfare and the single last question regarding comparative levels between returnees and non-returnees) which were found to be completely unrelated (correlated at a level of 0.000) meaning “the respondents' opinions on who is better or worse off in their community do not agree with all the other facts, numbers and ratings that provide for the bulk of the overall Reintegration Score.” Additionally, some communities were surveyed by both UNHCR and the team

funded by BPRM. In these communities, the latter study found that welfare levels were objectively fairly similar between returnees and non-returnees, despite large differences reported in the same communities in UNHCR's perception-based study.

The writers of the BPRM report reveal other differences between their approach and UNHCR's. In particular, unlike UNHCR's apparent position, the BPRM survey starts from the assumption that reintegration does not necessarily entail bringing returnees up to a decent standard of living, or making them feel "safe and comfortable" in Afghanistan, but rather it is solely about achieving parity with other community members (i.e. displaying a similar welfare distribution curve). Further, in terms of recommendations, they are keen to stress that the needs of non-returnees are equally pressing, cautioning for instance that "the nationwide job creation programs should be realistically factored in the reintegration agenda but not appropriated by it in ways that would discriminate against the rest of the job-seeking population". This consideration for the needs of non-returnees is largely lacking from UNHCR's discourse.

Though the BPRM-funded survey could have provided a useful counterpoint to UNHCR's claims of returnee vulnerability it received remarkably little traction. Even BPRM may not have had a great interest in publicizing the findings of its own contractor due to its closely related interests and shared mandate with UNHCR (see section 5.3). In contrast, the UNHCR report had a large, motivated machinery pushing its findings (or at least the headlines version of them) and thus the vision of returnees as a comparatively vulnerable group became received wisdom, at least in UNHCR. Interviewed UNHCR personnel who brought up the Snapshot

Survey were not even aware that the BPRM report contained different findings.

When the incoming UNHCR Afghanistan Country Director gave his widely reported interview criticising previous policy as “the biggest mistake UNHCR ever made” he painted a particularly vivid picture of returnees as significantly more economically bereft and excluded from national programmes than other Afghans:

“It's the income that counts, the livelihood. In very simple terms we need to find jobs for the people coming back,” [UNHCR CD] said. “You can build five roads to a village and the farmers will benefit because they can go to the next town to sell their vegetables. “But the returnee doesn't benefit at all. He has nothing to sell at the market.” (Express Tribune 2011)

With UNHCR seeking to mobilise support for its new Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), it again (as with the 2008 conference) embarked upon an intensive public relations strategy to promote its vision of returnees as particularly in need of dedicated support. Several articles and press releases in the run-up to the conference noted statements from UNHCR that many returnees “are homeless or live in slums under tarpaulin” (AFP 2012); “often live in extremely bad conditions in isolated communities” (UNHCR 2012b); and have not “reached parity with other members of the communities in which they are living”. (IRIN 2013) A few days before the conference UNHCR published an interview it had conducted with a recent returnee who “request[ed] the people at this conference to please help Afghan refugees who have returned from Pakistan and Iran so that they are not compelled to go back” (UNHCR 2012c).

The SSAR document itself, produced for approval at the international conference in 2013, provides a useful portrait of returnee vulnerability as a summary for the assembled delegates and the wider world. The document was written by UNHCR though, as noted in the previous section, it attempted to present it as a strategy wholly ‘owned’ by the three governments<sup>298</sup>. There is much to critique in the SSAR strategy document in terms of its design, prospects for success and the assumptions on which it is based, some elements of which are covered in the previous chapter, but the objective here is to focus specifically on the image of comparative returnee vulnerability projected by UNHCR. In this sense it is perhaps unsurprising that returnees are depicted throughout as a particularly disadvantaged section of the Afghan population. The (questionable) finding of the Snapshot Survey that 60% of returnees “live in worse conditions than their local non-returnee counterparts” is repeated three times within the document. Though UNHCR’s language is, as a rule, dry, precise and technical, the document occasionally, and unusually, adopts a more emotive tone; as with its assertion that the strategy “bears the aspirations of those who have been affected by decades of human tragedy in the region. In particular, it embodies the hope that the international community will stand by its commitment to support the future of Afghanistan throughout the coming years.”

Arguably, the most concrete representation of the relative vulnerability of returnees is provided by the following table, which features on page 22 of the

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<sup>298</sup> While the SSAR also covers support to Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan those sections are beyond the scope of the current work

strategy. In the table the two populations (returnee and local population) are juxtaposed with information provided on their relative access to livelihoods and basic services and amenities.

**Comparison of Local Population and Assisted Returnees**

	Local population*	Returned Refugees
Owning livestock	68%	40%
Access to land [Local Population] Current livelihood as landowners (Returned Refugees)	55%	20%
Employment / livelihood (regular employment)	M:80% F: 43%	M: 17% F: 20%
Road access	51%	45%
Electricity	20%	16%
Basic Health services	85%	24%
Clean drinking water	27%	19%

\* Based on National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2007-2008<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 8: Comparison of Local Population and Assisted Returnees**

The table’s purpose is to demonstrate objectively the large disadvantages facing returnees compared to the wider Afghan population. Indeed the differences are sizeable and, on the surface, worrisome. However, the two data sources used to construct the table are not necessarily comparable. While it is noted in the footnote below the table above, UNHCR does not draw further attention in the

accompanying text to the fact that it is two separate sources of data that are being directly compared, each with its own distinct biases, scope and methodology.

While the information on returnees is provided by the focus group interviews of the Snapshot Survey, the information on the wider Afghan society comes from the household surveys of the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) 2007/8. The NRVA represents probably the most comprehensive and authoritative survey of the Afghan people. The 2007/8 version, from which the figures in the above table have been drawn, does itself include data on the returnee status of respondents (though a comparison of these differences is not covered in the report of the survey; suggesting its authors did not see this as a pressing issue at the time). This does mean though it is possible to make inter-group comparisons using the NRVA dataset, which represents a far more accurate method than comparing the two unrelated data sources. If UNHCR had engaged in this exercise however the results would not have fitted so neatly into the narrative that they were attempting to promote. For instance, in terms of access to electricity (in which returnees are shown to be at a disadvantage above) an analysis of the NRVA dataset suggests that in fact 28% of surveyed returnees had access to mains electricity compared to 19% of non-returnees! On certain other metrics that it is possible to compare, returnees do appear to be at a slight disadvantage compared to non-returnees (though nowhere near as high as the above table suggests) but even these results are likely to be misleading if taken at face value. For instance, in terms of livestock ownership, the NRVA data show that slightly fewer returnees owned some livestock than non-returnees (though the divide was nowhere near as high as that suggested by UNHCR's table above), but

livestock ownership is predominantly a rural phenomenon, and all the evidence shows that returnees are around twice as likely to be urban residents than the Afghan average (equally this may also explain the difference in access to electricity).

Following the SSAR conference, UNHCR contracted both ILO and UNOPS to conduct baseline surveys in the 22 'High Return Areas' (HRAs) that were selected to pilot-test the multi-sectoral investment approach that forms the core of the strategy. Though the ILO survey did not make cross-group comparisons in the surveyed sites (as it focussed on livelihood opportunities rather than household status) the UNOPS one did (though it has not been publicly released). Overall it found that returnees were on average slightly worse off than local community members (albeit in these locations specifically chosen by UNHCR for their high levels of returnee vulnerability) but both returnees and local community groups were significantly better off than internal migrants/IDPs living in the sites. Further, the survey clarified its findings thus:

“However, the presumption that returnee households are considerably worse off than households that never left Afghanistan has only partially been borne out by the survey. In fact, as the key findings and full report that follow will demonstrate, disparities between the three groups of concern undoubtedly do exist but depend greatly upon both their location and the indicator in question. In short, the survey revealed that different community groups are faring better than others in some areas, but faring worse in others.” (UNOPS 2013)

Needless to say these nuances were not reflected in UNHCR's public communication, which continued to focus on presenting returnees as a homogenous group with needs that were comparatively, and significantly, worse than those of other Afghans.

Nevertheless UNHCR only sought to portray returnees as relatively homogeneous in terms of their level of exclusion and suffering compared to other Afghans.

Increasingly UNHCR is using case studies (either as the prime focus of press releases or as illustrative vignettes within them) to highlight certain aspects of the lives of ordinary displaced Afghans<sup>299</sup>, and in this medium individual diversity of experience and character is, to an extent, acknowledged. The case study method has multiple uses. It is one of the principal means for UNHCR to advertise its impact (as in almost every case an Afghan describes both a problem and how UNHCR has helped solve it). It is a way to convey advocacy messages (the desires of featured Afghans, as selectively showcased by UNHCR, almost always feed into a wider narrative). And it is a means for UNHCR to draw attention to the plight of its target population in a process that humanises them and serves to evoke sympathy. As others have noted, such depictions of beneficiaries can be a powerful tool in the aid marketplace (Rieff 2003; Barnett and Weiss 2008). The Afghans featured have a wide variety of experiences but also some commonalities. For instance, most are grateful; to UNHCR, to Pakistan and Iran, and to the host communities in which they are living. Almost all have benefited in some way from UNHCR's services.

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<sup>299</sup> 26 articles from this period include the stories of individual Afghans. 19 feature Afghan refugees abroad: 8 in Iran, 7 in Pakistan, 1 in India, 3 in European countries. 5 articles focus on Afghans in Afghanistan (3 returnees, 2 IDPs). 2 articles focus on non-Afghans (1 Iranian host family, 1 Pakistani refugee in Afghanistan)

And most (including all of those featuring returnees, IDPs and refugees in Afghanistan) face great hardships.

In more general terms UNHCR's framing of returnees' needs, from around 2008 onwards, is characterised by blunt assertions that returnees are a comparatively disadvantaged group, due specifically to their returnee status, and without seeking to draw attention to either inter-group diversity or the needs of other groups that in aggregate relative terms may be even worse.

However, as noted, there are reasons to doubt this assessment, particularly as there seem to be large discrepancies between this vision of returnees and other data sources. The NRVA 2013/14<sup>300</sup> for instance paints a very different picture of returnee needs. Notably, this study was the first version of the NRVA to include a detailed cross-group comparison of the welfare levels of returnees and non-returnees in its analysis. As by far the largest, most comprehensive survey of the Afghan population each version of the NRVA is "the major single source of socio-economic statistics of the country" (NRVA 2012/13). Consequently, its findings on the situation of returnees are for that reason arguably the most authoritative to date. It is therefore of note that the 2013/14 issue found that "although more advanced analysis is in order, the ALCS 2013-14 suggests that in many aspects – literacy, attained education, labour force participation, housing quality and access to improved water and sanitation – returnees are better situated than non-returnees."

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<sup>300</sup> This version of the NRVA is also known by another title; the Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (ALCS) 2013/14

Equally, a household survey of over 2,000 households conducted by Maastricht University in 2011 found similar results to the NRVA. Writing about the results in *Forced Migration Review*, Kuschminder, Siegel and Majidi (2014) report that “Contrary to expectations, returning refugee households are more likely to be better off than returning labour migrant households”. As a result they conclude that “Clearly, there are vulnerable refugee returnee households and individuals in Afghanistan but being a returnee does not automatically mean that one is worse off or more vulnerable than others”. This vision of comparative levels of returnee vulnerability is notably in stark contrast to the one promoted by UNHCR.

UNHCR has also claimed, since even prior to 2001, that it is not only individuals but also areas of high return that are vulnerable and deserving of targeted support. This has been a mainstay of UNHCR’s messaging; advocating with some success<sup>301</sup> for donors and ministries to focus specifically on these areas. The reasoning of UNHCR is obvious; that a large influx of vulnerable people puts strain on resources, public services, community cohesion and livelihoods. While there is obviously much merit in this argument it is worth also considering a counter-narrative; that those opting to return to Afghanistan are arguably more likely to move to areas that are safer and have more economic opportunities and hence these areas may in fact on average be *less* vulnerable than others. While UNHCR has argued consistently for a decade and a half that areas where large numbers of returnees live are more needy than others it has never supplied any data to back up this

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<sup>301</sup> For instance the largest aid programme, the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), was, among other programmes, designed to award higher block grants to communities in areas of high return

claim (beyond its anecdotal accounts and the Snapshot Survey, which focuses more on the situation of individual returnees than the areas in which they live). Without disaggregated community level data it is difficult to either prove or disprove UNHCR's assertions in this respect. But at least at the provincial level there seems to be no connection between numbers of returnees and vulnerability levels:

Correlating data on returnee numbers – both UNHCR's data on aggregate totals, and NRVA 2012/13 data on returnees as a percentage of the provincial population – with vulnerability data from the Common Humanitarian Action Plan 2014, the National Nutrition Survey 2013, and World Bank provincial briefs 2012/13, shows almost no relationship between the two sets of variables<sup>302</sup>. Thus the question as to whether individual communities with high numbers of returnees are on average relatively privileged or disadvantaged continues to be an open one. Yet by founding its advocacy on this basis UNHCR has indirectly managed to influence the situational knowledge on which policy makers have designed their interventions.

UNHCR has also made several claims regarding the numerical size of their target population of returnees. For many years UNHCR claimed that returnees amounted to around 20% of the total population of Afghanistan, based on external estimates of the Afghan population and the organisation's own estimates of the numbers that had returned. In 2011 however, in the run-up to the Solutions Strategy, UNHCR

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<sup>302</sup> In terms of returnees as a percentage of the provincial population (as per the NRVA 2007/8) there is a very weak (<0.2) negative correlation to the provincial needs rankings of the 2014 Humanitarian Needs Overview, the malnutrition rankings of the National Nutrition Survey, and the employment rankings of the World Bank Provincial Briefs. In terms of absolute numbers of returnees (as per UNHCR returns data) there is also a weak negative correlation to needs but a moderate positive correlation to insecurity rankings (as per the CHAP 2014), though when comparing relative returnee numbers this correlation is insignificant. The only strong correlations at the provincial level (for both relative and absolute numbers) are regarding provincial population sizes and numbers living in urban and rural locations, with returnees having moved significantly more to provinces that are both more populous and more urban.

mysteriously began to refer to returnees as amounting to 25% of the population, though it is not clear on what basis this new calculation was made. In the words of the UNHCR Country Director at the time:

"In Afghanistan a quarter of the population are returnees," said [UNHCR CD]. "This is what the donor community constantly forgets. This has been overlooked and it's still overlooked. Nobody has taken this seriously. It's a tragedy." (Express Tribune 2011)

Notably though, there are also reasons to doubt this assessment of the scale of returnees as a percentage of the Afghan population. For one thing there was a great deal of 'recycling' that probably inflated returns figures in 2001-3 before iris scanning was introduced. Prior to this, considering the high numbers that were rejected (400,000 in 2001 alone; UNHCR 2002e) through imprecise means (such as judging the amount of luggage each family was carrying) it is reasonable to suspect that many more managed to pass through the system multiple times (for instance one woman quoted in a UNHCR press release on the new iris screening technology had already been through the process with her children eight times; Ibid). Attempted recycling dropped off dramatically after the introduction of iris testing (only about 0.5% of applicants were rejected) but loopholes may nevertheless still have been exploited (for instance iris screening did not apply to children under 12 and there were reports of some children being used multiple times for claims). Secondly, there have been a large number of re-migrations abroad; with some reports of up to 20% of returnees leaving again for Iran or Pakistan. And thirdly there is a very high birth rate in Afghanistan with almost half

the population being under 15 years of age (NRVA/ALCS 2013/14), meaning that even among families that returned from abroad, many younger family members would likely never have set foot outside Afghanistan, making it difficult to label them also as returnees. Perhaps for a combination of these reasons therefore the NRVA 2012 found that returnees since 2001 comprised 13% of the population, while the NRVA/ALCS 2013/14 stated that “Nationally, the stock of immigrants that has arrived is estimated at 5 percent of the total resident population.” Thus, there are some discrepancies regarding the total number of returnees in Afghanistan but the numbers are unlikely to be as high as UNHCR claims. One interviewee working for a rival agency stated “I have a real problem with [these figures]. ... No-one’s really called them to account on these numbers”<sup>303</sup>.

Another innovation in UNHCR’s rhetoric, and one that has gone largely uncommented upon, has been to stretch the language of internal displacement to fulfil their policy goal of focussing more attention on returnees. Officially, according to the national IDP policy, returnees who are unable to return to their place of origin due to insecurity<sup>304</sup> are deemed to be IDPs. However in practice UNHCR has used the term much more widely with regard to its application to returnees and has in recent years consistently counted as “in displacement” all returnees who are “unable to return to their places of origin for security reasons, landlessness, or lack of basic services or work opportunities” (UNHCR 2008a).

Though there is remarkably little consistency in how the IDP label is applied in

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<sup>303</sup> Interview, ‘UN Agency 2’

<sup>304</sup> The precise wording is “Returnees (returning refugees and migrants deported back to Afghanistan) who are unable to settle in their homes and/or places of origin because of insecurity resulting from armed conflict, generalized violence or violations of human rights, landmines or ERW contamination on their land, land disputes or tribal disputes.” (National IDP Policy)

Afghanistan (Willner-Reid 2016), there is general agreement that the key distinction between economic internal migrants and IDPs is that insecurity is at least a constituent factor in the decision to move. Yet the broad use of the IDP term to cover returnees moving to other areas than their previously defined home for reasons connected to landlessness, lack of basic services or work opportunities has led to inconsistent practice among NGOs (ibid), arguably inflated the number of IDPs, and created a double standard between returnees and Afghans who have never left the country, and thus would not be deemed to be IDPs were they to leave their homes for any of these reasons. More importantly, from UNHCR's point of view, it has served to securitise the migration trends of returnees and thus focus donor attention on the need to 'anchor' these populations in their (rural) areas of origin: In other words to underline the importance of funding reintegration programming for returnees. Despite the findings of certain researchers on the normality of continued migratory strategies, and its benefits as a positive coping resource (Monsutti 2004), UNHCR has traditionally insisted on perceiving any further movement within the Afghan context as negative (Scalettari 2009; 2013).

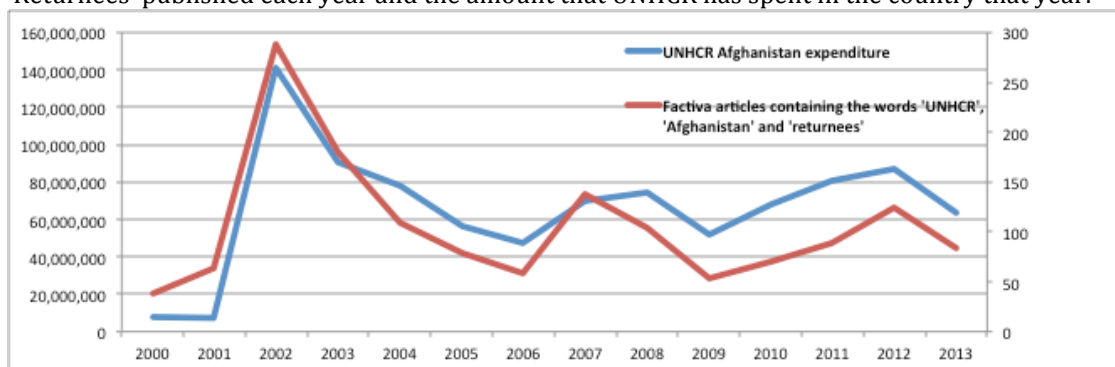
Since 2008 there has been an almost inverse relationship between the number of new returnees and the level of their needs as quantified by UNHCR in its annual appeals. This may be for many reasons not necessarily connected to organisational interests, such as a worry that pull factors are insufficiently high to attract new returns and therefore a view that there is a need to increase the desirability of return through increased investment. But even if this is the case it is clear that within Afghanistan UNHCR's justification for funding has been based to a large extent on a discourse that increasingly stresses the comparatively

disadvantaged situation of those who have already returned (and the risks of not addressing their problems). Further, most of the time, that narrative has, in socio-economic terms, sought to portray returnees as a homogeneous group, generally failing to convey the huge socio-economic variation at the individual level that exists between the large numbers of returnees in Afghanistan.

While there have been some peaks in the intensity of UNHCR’s public media campaigns (for instance around the major returnee conferences of 2008 and, particularly, 2013) the progression in terms of portraying returnee needs as exceptional has arguably been a continuous gradual process since 2001. To an extent, this can be evidenced by looking at the media coverage of the situation of returnees during this time, which has closely mirrored UNHCR’s discourse.

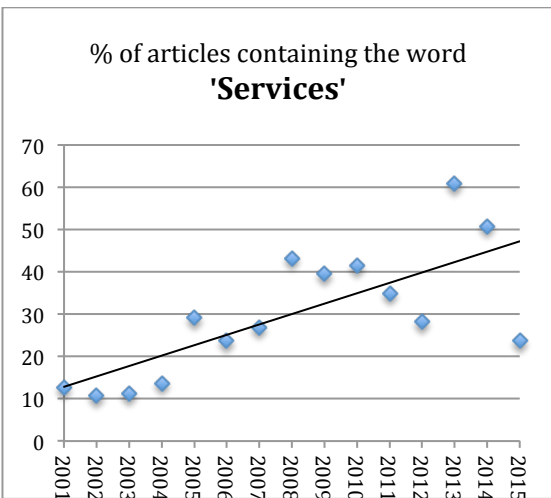
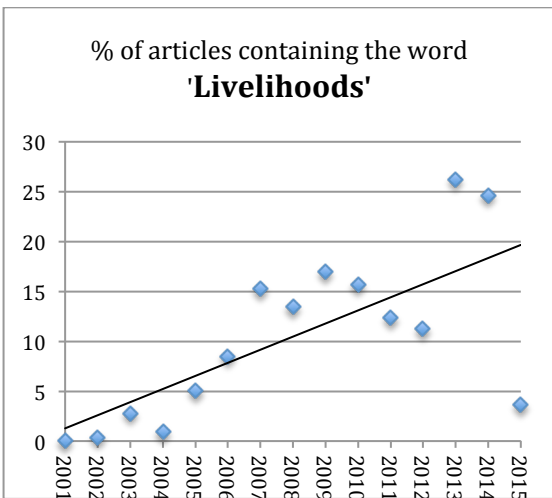
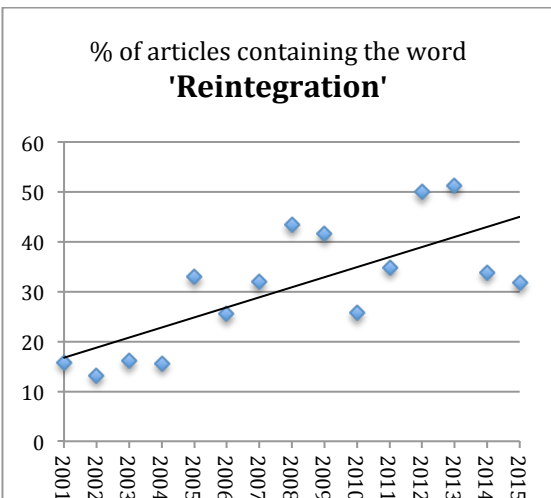
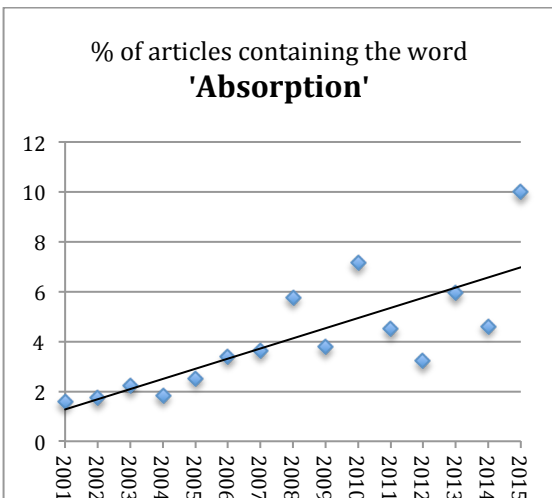
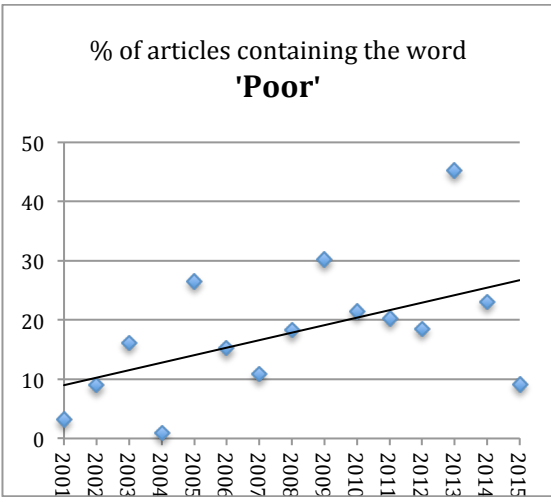
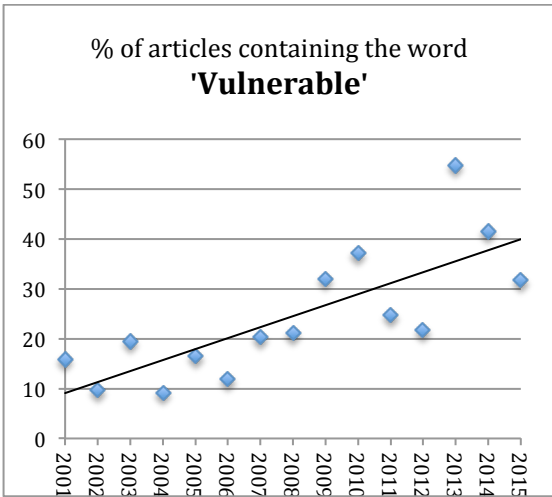
1,669 articles containing the words ‘UNHCR’, ‘Afghanistan’, and ‘returnees’ were published between 2001 and 2005 according to the media documentation website Factiva<sup>305</sup>. This includes many UNHCR press releases, but even articles published by news organisations tend to include quotes by UNHCR staff, references to UNHCR reports, or even, particularly for local Afghan or Pakistani media, to be

<sup>305</sup> Incidentally, there is also a surprising, though perhaps entirely coincidental, correlation ( $r=0.85$ ) between the number of articles containing the words ‘UNHCR’, ‘Afghanistan’ and ‘Returnees’ published each year and the amount that UNHCR has spent in the country that year:



actual re-workings of articles originally published by UNHCR. Moreover, like donors, journalists also rely on UNHCR to a large extent for authoritative assessments of the needs of the populations the organisation is primarily responsible for. As one senior UNHCR interviewee noted “UNHCR always wants a new headline figure”, and once it has one, “journalists swallow it whole”. Thus, while the media undoubtedly has its own independent and distinct voices there has nevertheless been considerable overlap between the portrayal of returnee vulnerability in newspaper articles and by UNHCR.

Figure 9 shows the percentage each year of the 1,669 ‘UNHCR-Afghanistan-Returnees’ articles in Factiva containing certain words. Since 2001 returnees have been progressively labelled as ever more ‘poor’ and ‘vulnerable’. The ability of Afghanistan to ‘absorb’ and ‘reintegrate’ returnees has been increasingly questioned. And the extent to which returnees are able to access ‘services’ and establish ‘livelihoods’ has become more of a focus.



**Figure 9: Word frequency graphs**

To what extent is this framing valid? Undoubtedly there is a very large number of exceptionally vulnerable returnees in Afghanistan, many of whom who would be justified in attributing their vulnerability to their forced migration history. However there are also a great many Afghans who are extremely vulnerable and yet have never left the country.

In contrast to the narrative promoted by UNHCR (underpinned by its Comprehensive Needs Assessments), the actual situation of returnees, in comparison to the situation of the wider Afghan population, has, in aggregate terms, probably improved over this period. The NRVA 2003 found that returnees constituted around 10% of the population in all income brackets but were slightly more represented in the lowest income bracket; while by 2013 it reported returnees to be in a marginally more privileged position, suggesting a degree of 'catching up' in the interim. This would also be in line with the findings of the BPRM-funded study that found that an initial reintegration gap was overcome entirely (and even surpassed) in 7-9 years, as well as the Altai survey (2006) that reported 80% of returnees felt they had better future prospects than their non-returnee neighbours (despite many considering themselves to currently be in a worse situation), and the findings of the Maastricht University survey (Kuschminder, Siegel and Majidi 2014). In the early post-2001 period surveys found that the return of refugees was both a commonly reported 'shock' (NRVA 2003) and a cause for optimism about the future of the country (Asia Foundation 2004). In later years, following the drop in return numbers, respondents failed to

cite refugee return either positively or negatively, suggesting it had become less of an issue for the Afghan general public.

To what extent has the evolution of UNHCR's narrative represented a conscientious strategy? To a certain extent it is somewhat difficult to make this claim as its development has been driven by large numbers of people in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Geneva who may not all see issues in the same way. Even some of those responsible for creating and sustaining UNHCR's narrative have doubts regarding the extent to which it is a conscious process. But there are also reasons to believe that this narrative is linked to a certain extent to the aid marketplace. Indeed UNHCR has even stated as much in its 2003 evaluation of its performance to date:

“According to UNHCR's public information specialists, high visibility is a prerequisite for organizational survival in the competitive humanitarian marketplace that has evolved over the past decade. And visibility does not just happen: information has to be carefully prepared and packaged; the media has to be cultivated; photo opportunities have to be created; and the organization's logo has to be prominently displayed. In each of these respects, UNHCR's performance scores very high marks.” (UNHCR 2001c)

While the review also notes that many staff at UNHCR felt conflicted about this high-profile focus on visibility, feeling instead that the organisation “should be judged by the quality of its programmes and not by the frequency with which it appears on CNN”, these pressures are undoubtedly present and have an

undeniable impact on all high-profile aid organisations regarding how they present the needs they are working on and their impact in assessing those needs. Internally within UNHCR some interviewees noted the “rise and rise of branding and comms”; an increasing amount of resources being spent on these sectors, an increasing influence of PR people on the organisation’s statistics; and a tendency for “column inches and photos [to be] seen as a measure of success.”<sup>306</sup>

The fundamental contradiction at the heart of this situation is that for UNHCR to remain credible it must present an unbiased assessment of needs, while for it to remain successful it must make the case that the needs it is addressing are particularly pressing. While UNHCR is overall one of the most credible actors in the aid system, this conundrum inevitably results in trade-offs, which may in turn lead the more cynical donors to question the organisation’s good will. As one donor commented for instance, “It’s interesting in itself that no proper needs assessment has been done by UNHCR. Maybe that’s because it’s not in their interest. It might show things they know but that aren’t helpful to them”<sup>307</sup>

#### 7.4 Chapter Conclusions

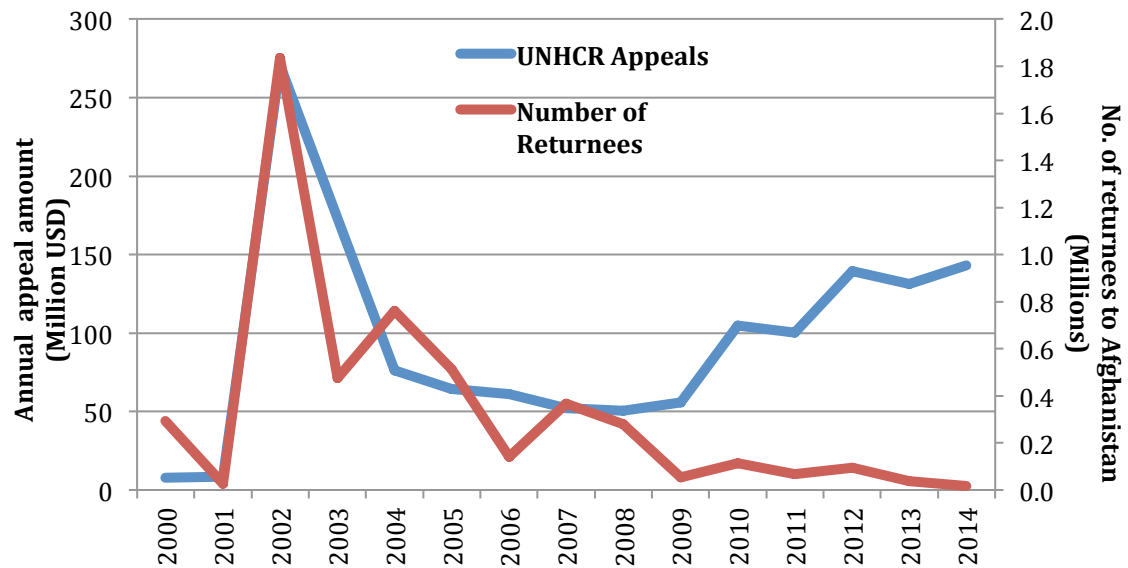
Perhaps the clearest visualisation of how UNHCR’s narrative on returnee vulnerability has evolved during the two successive periods under review is the juxtaposition of the numbers of new returnees per year with the amount that UNHCR has annually appealed for as necessary to meet reintegration needs in the

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<sup>306</sup> Interview, UNHCR 3

<sup>307</sup> Interview Donor 18

country. From 2001 to 2009 UNHCR requested annually around \$200 per new returnee to Afghanistan, remaining fairly consistent in terms of the relationship of funding to aggregate returns numbers. In 2010 this rose to \$1,000. By 2015 it was more than \$8,000.



**Figure 10: UNHCR Appeals v. No. of Returnees**

UNHCR is not the only UN agency that has, arguably, engaged in a strategic approach to donor appeals that is linked more closely to available amounts and to advocacy for the issues it cares about, than accurately and objectively reflecting changes on the ground. UNICEF for instance appealed for just under \$16 million in 2007, which by 2011 had risen to \$30 million, and by 2015 had become \$51 million (UNICEF 2007-15). Meanwhile almost all objective indicators related to child welfare in Afghanistan improved dramatically during that time according to both successive NRVA reports and UNICEF’s own MICS assessments (CSO 2004; 2009; 2012; 2014; UNICEF 2000; 2003; 2010). Likewise, WFP appealed for \$185.5

million in 2007, an amount that rose every year until 2011 (the only years for which I have figures) to \$385 million (WFP 2012). During that period malnutrition levels fell by a third across the country (continuing a long-term trend) (FAO 2015).

In Quillard's (2015) review of the Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) sector in the Democratic Republic of Congo she reports that once a particular narrative had been produced surrounding the nature and level of certain specific needs, all actors involved in addressing those needs developed a vested interest in reproducing that narrative, fitting available facts within it, and cherry picking the information that is reported. Stoddard (2006) has also written about the way that humanitarian agencies frame information to fit within particular discourses and paradigms that have been accepted and internalised by the staff responsible for communications to donors.

In 2009 the International Crisis Group (ICG) wrote:

“Distinguishing between returning Afghans and the rest of the population is not only close to impossible but counter-productive. Almost every Afghan has either been displaced or migrated. Since returning experiences mirror those of the rest of the population. Targeting of returnees and IDPs reinforces resentment and thus hinders reintegration.”

This has notably not been the approach of UNHCR, which has rather sought to distinguish and stress the exceptional needs of returnees. If their needs were instead to be assessed and addressed purely on the basis of vulnerability, rather

than returnee status, then there would be no need for the involvement of a refugee organisation. On the other hand, as covered earlier, this has also been largely driven by a sincere belief on the part of UNHCR staff in the specific, pressing and unique needs of the populations that they seek to address. For many in UNHCR the exceptional nature of the needs of refugees and returnees is an article of faith. As one interviewee commented, UNHCR's instinctive dislike of a vulnerability-based approach is "because we consider refugees as the most dispossessed among the dispossessed. Donors have been pushed by OCHA to focus on vulnerability. UNHCR rejects this."<sup>308</sup> In such a situation the challenge becomes to demonstrate those exceptional needs, rather than to question the extent to which they exist.

Giulia Scalettari, (2013) as a reporting officer in UNHCR Afghanistan, has written extensively about how the organisation used information strategically to support its objectives (though she did not address the way this discourse was used to promote a specific vision of the relative needs of returnees). She contends nevertheless that data were created for, and used as, advocacy; 'updates' were intended to promote a specific view of reality that conceptualised and defined phenomena while either directly or indirectly suggesting particular courses of action; politics were concealed behind 'objective' documentation; received wisdom and preconceptions were bolstered; and knowledge was self-legitimising in that it was presented in such a way that it suggested further reading or research that would further support action of the type that UNHCR was proposing.

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<sup>308</sup> Interview, UNHCR 20

Whatever the motivations, whether mercenary, missionary or misfit (and all are likely to apply to a certain extent) it is clear that UNHCR's narrative on the relative needs of returnees has not been entirely non-strategic. The reliance by donors on UNHCR for this information has meant that it has been a powerful tool at UNHCR's service. Indeed some donors, as covered in section 5.3, probably have themselves little interest in second-guessing UNHCR's narrative when it supports their own particular orientation towards refugees and returnees. The dilemma nevertheless exists for UNHCR that, as chapter 6 has shown, when it loses credibility it loses its ability to be successful in the aid marketplace. Thus, the need to balance this concern must constantly be weighed against the desire to promote particular action-oriented narratives.

## 8. UNHCR's other Populations of (Varying) Concern

### 8.1 Chapter Overview

In the last two chapters we have seen how UNHCR has negotiated the Afghan aid marketplace on behalf of returnees, and constructed a specific discourse regarding their needs. But what of the other populations in Afghanistan for which UNHCR has at least nominally some responsibility, those people that it terms 'populations of concern'? Has it similarly advocated for them in the aid marketplace, or has it rather seen them as threat, taking attention away from its principal target of support (returnees), or merely a subject of relative disinterest to be addressed by other agencies?

The answer is a combination of all three approaches. As the rest of this chapter will argue the agency has approached the needs of IDPs defensively, eager to ensure that they do not eclipse returnees in the national discourse or funding allocations. This has on occasion put it at odds with some of its donors, who have at times urged the organisation to focus more on IDPs, and less on returnees; a move which UNHCR has consistently resisted. It has aggressively monopolised the response for Pakistani refugees in Afghanistan in Khost and Paktika in 2014 and 2015. Not content to ensure that the needs of refugees were addressed, the organisation actively defended its right to ensure that it alone was the leading actor in that process, leading to clashes with OCHA and arguably damaging the reputations of both agencies. Finally, UNHCR has paid limited attention to

returnees who did not have refugee status in exile (despite their being numerically far superior to refugee returnees in recent years and, according to most sources, more vulnerable), leading to a lower prioritisation of the needs of these people in national development processes.

Though not covered here, but also worth mentioning, populations who have not been displaced in any form, nor host displaced people, are seen as the least deserving of support by UNHCR, with the result that it effectively argues for the de-prioritisation of these populations in various policy and budgeting processes regardless of their comparative levels of vulnerability.

Addressing any of these people on the basis of their migration status is in itself not self-evident. The distinctions between populations are often much clearer on paper than in reality. As multiple authors have written, the boundaries between different types of migrants and non-migrants in Afghanistan are not airtight and are subject to numerous caveats, differences in understanding, and distinctions based on questionable assumptions (Willner-Reid 2016; Monsutti 2010a; ICG 2009; Long 2010b; Scalettari 2013). Nevertheless the labelling of people in need as a precursor to addressing those needs, is an integral, though reductive, component of all bureaucratic assistance schemes (Brun 2003; Zetter 1991; Wood 1985). When organisational mandates are founded on the basis of those labels it becomes almost inevitable that this then affects how people in these organisations both view, and interact with, these populations. This is not merely a 'mercenary' dynamic. Principally it is driven by 'missionary' conviction; that the people with whom one is most intimately connected have particular needs and are deserving of

most support. Additionally there is a 'misfit' dimension to consider in that people are employed to fulfil specific functions and, excluding exceptional circumstances, are largely unlikely to question either their role or the assumption that in some small way those that designed it are contributing to the greater good and the wider objectives of the broader aid community.

The objective of this chapter is also to show that how an aid organisation internally prioritises its missionary goals plays an important role in impacting its behaviour in a competitive marketplace. UNHCR has adopted very different approaches to different types of people in Afghanistan, and these differences can only be adequately explained by reference to UNHCR's internal hierarchy of people deemed to be deserving of its support. If one looked simply at donor preferences and opportunities for expansion (unmet needs that UNHCR would be well positioned to meet) then a different approach from UNHCR might have been expected that placed a lower premium on status and a higher premium on need. ,Partly for these reasons I pay particular attention to the justifications given by actors at each stage regarding the reasoning underpinning their actions.

## **8.2 IDPs: Reluctant engagement**

Afghanistan has a long history of internal displacement and, according to some sources, up to two thirds of all Afghans may have been displaced at some point in their lives (Schmeidl and Maley 2008). Currently, based predominantly on figures collected by the national IDP task force, the Internal Displacement Monitoring

Centre (IDMC) estimates there to be 948,000 IDPs in Afghanistan (IDMC 2015). Rather than being in a situation of sudden mass displacement, since 2001 Afghanistan has been subject to what many interviewees termed a process of “creeping displacement”, characterised by numerous low-level displacement events and pressures, culminating in the large numbers cited above.

From the Afghan government’s side the response to internal displacement has, until relatively recently, largely been characterised by neglect, according to various commentators (AI 2012, AAN 2013). A number of reasons account for this attitude. On the one hand the growing number of IDPs has posed problems for actors eager to portray a more rosy security situation that reflects positively on the post-Taliban government. Perhaps more fundamentally though, attitudes towards IDPs, in particular regarding their motivations for moving and, crucially, whether they should be encouraged to return to where they came from or allowed to stay where they are, tend to be fairly mixed among the wider Afghan population, according to interviews. While some population movements have attracted suspicion from local populations who perceive the moves to be politically motivated, more generally IDPs, who often move to cities, tend to be seen within the wider context of rural-to-urban migration. The dynamic of poor individuals and communities moving to cities, whether due to insecurity, economic factors or a combination, is contributing in Afghanistan to a process of rapid urbanisation. This is evidently part of a wider phenomenon occurring throughout the world, though in Afghanistan the process has been exceptionally rapid and, according to many, unsustainable. Both IDP communities and the poorest rural-to-urban migrants are therefore often seen negatively by settled populations, in particular,

they are not infrequently linked to the insurgency or to a rise in petty crime, are seen to be depressing wages and increasing competition for jobs; illegally occupying land and restraining the development of cities; contributing to the spread of illness and congestion; and having little to offer in the way of marketable skills and higher education (Samuel Hall 2015). On the other hand such attitudes do tend to be tempered by a strong sense of charity and hospitality towards vulnerable people who are clearly in need of assistance.

Due to many of the above reasons local municipalities have traditionally stuck to the line that IDPs, in particular those illegally occupying land or housed in camps, will eventually have to return to their areas of origin. One notorious example was a letter circulated to all UN agencies and NGOs in 2011 by the then-governor of Herat province instructing them to refrain from assisting IDPs (notably, although the governor and policy have since changed, the letter has never been officially countermanded, leading one interviewee to state that his organisation working in Herat regarded it as still valid<sup>309</sup>).

According to some however, IDPs have been unfairly treated not only by the government, but also by the humanitarian community. In the view of the Afghan Analysts Network (AAN) this is because IDPs fall through the cracks, with no single organisation assuming responsibility for their welfare:

“The neglect is also because IDPs are not directly part of any international agency’s mandate. The so-called cluster system of the humanitarian

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<sup>309</sup> Interview, NGO 5

community in Afghanistan divides responsibilities among UN agencies, governmental agencies and NGOs into certain fields: education, health care, protection and so on. IDPs as such are not a category of their own – instead, they fall into all of them at once.” (AAN 2013)

IDPs have not always been a shared responsibility, however, and for a long time they were assisted primarily by UNHCR. In the late 1990s UNHCR had been gearing up for a large-scale returnee operation, the prospect of which attracted some staff to transfer to Afghanistan<sup>310</sup>, but instead the security situation continued to deteriorate and UNHCR was left providing support predominantly to IDPs. At that time, operations were, according to interviews, conducted more flexibly, with UNHCR negotiating ad hoc and localised agreements with other actors in place on the ground to address the needs of particular groups of IDPs (in contrast such agreements were seen as likely to be impossible to do in current circumstances without involving headquarters and without much greater fears of precedents, and jealousies of mandate protection, being aroused). Nevertheless, even at this time, the support of IDPs remained a secondary goal for the organisation. The country operations plan for 2002 (written prior to September 11th, in August 2001) foresaw UNHCR’s primary role as being the return and reintegration of refugees, while “in addition” it would “support joint efforts” to “provide limited assistance to IDPs”. This followed a decision in July 2001 by the High Commissioner to take on a more active role in delivery of assistance to IDPs in Afghanistan, as well as to refugees in neighbouring countries.

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<sup>310</sup> Interview, UNHCR 18

When the US invasion occurred, internal displacement originally rose quickly, exacerbated by the decision of all of Afghanistan's neighbours to close their borders, thus precluding the option of flight abroad (though this was somewhat mitigated by Pakistan's inability to police its border). The policy of border closures was supported by the US and was not opposed by NGOs, who sought instead to raise funding to support the IDPs in situ (Long 2010), though some camps were run by the Taliban which attracted international criticism (Ferris 2008). UNHCR itself struggled with the decision to provide support to IDPs, not only because it could be seen to be enabling the border closures (which was a pressing concern for the organisation), but also because, according to a later internal review of UNHCR's response to the border closure: "Unlike NGOs, UNHCR has a legal mandate to protect refugees. It is not simply a humanitarian aid organization" (Long 2010). Eventually though it took the pragmatic decision that withholding support would ultimately be more detrimental than helpful for the people whom it sought to help.

Following the invasion, in the early reconstruction period it was originally somewhat unclear which agency would have overall responsibility for coordinating support to IDPs. In late 2001 UNAMA was established and a new assistance coordination structure was drawn up which foresaw UN agencies leading 'secretariats' designed to support newly created, or recently re-invigorated, line ministries. Within this framework UNHCR agreed to take on the secretariat for the Returnee and IDP programme group, signing a Memorandum of Understanding with UNAMA and the Afghan Government in May 2002, and was thus asked to take over the coordination of IDP activities. According to UNHCR's

2002 Global Report “This significantly increased the organisation’s responsibilities for the internally displaced.” As the lead of the programme group, UNHCR declared in July 2002 that “Assistance to returning IDPs should be as similar as possible to that provided to returning refugees” (UNHCR 2002d).

Nevertheless UNHCR did not take over IDP-related tasks without a certain degree of unwillingness. A series of real time evaluations of UNHCR’s Afghan operations were conducted between November 2001 and May 2002 and provide a rare, and highly informative, glance behind the scenes at the concerns of UNHCR staff and decision-making during the operation. In May 2002 the evaluation team outlined the risks of taking on such a role:

“Given the difficulties in discharging [refugee reintegration] functions, it is not responsible for UNHCR to assert an additional protection role in respect of internally displaced persons (IDPs) without first securing adequate, long-term resources with which to effect this role properly. ... Asserting such a role without a proper plan and with limited staff is a disingenuous stance that will leave the internally displaced unprotected, and UNHCR open to charges of opportunism. ... If it is to request additional resources to handle the problem of internal displacement in Herat, then it must do so on the basis of a firm policy and long-term commitment. Two years from now, when Afghanistan is off the television screens and UNHCR is finds itself in another financial squeeze, IDP programmes will be the first in line for reductions. If the organization is to assert a role with IDPs in Herat today,

only to abandon them tomorrow, then it will have done no one a favour, least of all the displaced people themselves.” (UNHCR 2002a)

The above excerpt is revealing in a number of ways. Firstly it shows that UNHCR staff were concerned that a failure to adequately discharge IDP responsibilities, if taken on, would impact negatively on the organisation’s reputation. Secondly it makes no secret of the internal hierarchy of beneficiaries, in which IDPs, regardless of levels of comparative vulnerability, occupy a low rung and would be the first to suffer in the event of budget cuts. Thirdly, it makes the argument that UNHCR engagement would ultimately not be in the interests of IDPs if the organisation were to find itself unable to continue its engagement beyond a certain point. This last argument is particularly interesting as it assumes that it is preferable to offer no support at all, than to offer support with no guarantees of continuation – a position that UNHCR would be unlikely to take for refugees.

In the early reconstruction years IDPs do not feature highly in UNHCR’s planning or reporting documents. Rather they tend to be referred to as an adjunct to the more prominent category of returnees and are rarely mentioned as a freestanding category. Nevertheless UNHCR did provide some support to IDPs during this time, largely in the context of its wider programming for returnees.

In 2008, as the conflict entered a new and more deadly phase and internal displacement began to increase, OCHA was re-established in Afghanistan and the Cluster System introduced. The Protection Cluster was established under the lead

of UNHCR and the cluster officially took over the responsibility of coordinating action for IDPs.

This was also the time when UNHCR and donor priorities began to diverge. A UNHCR interviewee who worked in UNHCR between 2005-8 commented that UNHCR and its donors were very much on the same line during that period and senior staff from both sides enjoyed close relations<sup>311</sup>. Refugee return numbers were high, UNHCR had no clear competitors, and internal displacement was low<sup>312</sup>. Another interviewee who had previously worked for a donor in Afghanistan before moving over to UNHCR agreed, saying that common interests and strategy were “for a very long time ... very parallel”<sup>313</sup>. But as insecurity worsened, and internal displacement consequently began to increase, humanitarian actors began to shift their focus to what they saw as the more pressing problem of IDPs, and some humanitarian donors began to push UNHCR to do likewise<sup>314</sup>. UNHCR made some allowance for this pressure but mostly resisted it, wary of losing the focus on return and reintegration that they were trying to promote.

These tensions came to the fore and escalated in 2011 during the discussions on the Solutions Strategy. A major fear of some of UNHCR’s donors surrounding the Solutions Strategy was that it would, as UNHCR intended, ensure that donor and government attention remained focussed on returnees, rather than the internally displaced, regardless of relative vulnerability levels. In some meetings between UNHCR and its donors disagreement over this issue became heated with tempers

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<sup>311</sup> Interview, UNHCR 22

<sup>312</sup> Interview, UNHCR 14

<sup>313</sup> Interview, UNHCR 22

<sup>314</sup> Ibid

flaring on both sides. On a few occasions, with one donor in particular, headquarters on both sides even intervened to attempt to defuse tensions and patch up relations. While differences in personalities undoubtedly played a role in some of these clashes, humanitarian donors argued strongly that UNHCR, as a humanitarian organisation, had a responsibility to focus its efforts where the needs were greatest. UNHCR replied that it was a mandated organisation with a defined, specific and focussed role. In the words of one UNHCR staff member who was involved in these discussions:

“We have an international mandate to look after refugees, including refugees who have returned, to find durable solutions for refugees and one of the durable solutions is reintegration. So that is our mandate. That’s what at the end of the day the high commissioner will be accountable for towards the general assembly. So that is our number one priority.”<sup>315</sup>

Humanitarian donors were not entirely convinced. In their view the ‘humanitarian imperative’ should have taken precedence over all other considerations<sup>316</sup>. And in any case if the organisation’s main concern was being judged negatively by its donors, should it not make more efforts to accommodate them at field level?

Meanwhile, for very different reasons the Afghan government from its side had also not originally been keen to raise the issue of mounting levels of displacement, or even largely to admit that the problem existed. According to one UNHCR

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid

<sup>316</sup> Interview, Donor 13

interviewee this attitude was dominant in the Afghan government until around 2009 because it went against the state-building narrative<sup>317</sup>. As displacement levels grew too large to ignore some attitudes slowly began to shift, though by 2012, according to Amnesty International, the overall approach from the Afghan government was still one of “callous indifference” leading to “a de facto policy of denial”, whereby authorities tended to reclassify IDPs as economic migrants, downplay numbers, and on occasion obstruct assistance to them (AI 2012). Despite being officially eligible for land allocation IDPs tended in practice to be excluded from the LAS (Ibid).

In Kabul the most visible manifestations of the displacement crisis affecting the country are the Kabul Informal Settlements (KIS); IDP camps to some, urban slums to others. In 2012 these areas attracted significant attention following a spate of cold-related deaths and a prominent and highly publicised article in the New York Times, which asked, “After 10 years of a large international presence, comprising about 2,000 aid groups, at least \$3.5 billion of humanitarian aid and \$58 billion of development assistance, how could children be dying of something as predictable — and manageable — as the cold?”

According to a follow up article in the New York Times the original article “caused an outpouring of public reaction, both in Afghanistan and internationally” (NYT 2012). Indeed it was much talked about among aid agencies in Kabul and led to renewed efforts to provide support to the displaced populations of the KIS. The

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<sup>317</sup> Interview, UNHCR 4

risk of being criticised in the media for neglect of these areas continued to motivate NGOs and UN agencies even several years afterwards<sup>318</sup>.

The article also reached the then Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, who was spurred to action and set up a task force including MoRR and the Afghanistan Natural Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA), which in turn engaged an external IDP expert to develop an IDP policy following the visit of the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of IDPs in July 2012. A central objective for many involved in the development of the policy was to counter the perception that the return of IDP communities was inevitable, or even likely, and to start a wider national conversation regarding durable solutions. Consultative workshops took place throughout the summer in both Kabul and the provinces, and, in anticipation of the departure of the original expert, UNHCR requested the transfer of a senior consultant<sup>319</sup> to continue the process. Although this consultant was officially 'seconded' to MoRR, in practice her office was at UNHCR and it was difficult to see her as anything other than a UNHCR staff member during her stay in country. A number of rounds of consultation were held but the consultant has written in Forced Migration Review of her difficulties in generating sufficient engagement in the policy from beyond any individuals with specific responsibilities for displacement topics (thus excluding the vast majority of government, donor and UN staff and agencies). Attempts to reach out to the actual IDP beneficiaries also foundered as "the discussions rarely went beyond the specific concrete needs of a

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<sup>318</sup> Interview, NGO 10

<sup>319</sup> Drawn from the Protection Standby Capacity Project (ProCap) reserve of senior personnel ready to be deployed to UN agencies with protection responsibilities

particular group, such as water, food, health care, education and jobs” (Wiseberg 2014).

I witnessed a good example of this dynamic at a high level consultative meeting that I attended on behalf of the EU in 2013 to review and comment on the draft IDP strategy, which by this point had been prepared. The meeting was well attended and, unusually, a group of IDP representatives had been invited to participate (something which in itself was notable: During my whole time in Kabul this was the only policy meeting that I attended to which beneficiaries were also invited). During the course of the meeting it became clear that the international and national officials and the IDPs had very different expectations of the meeting. The men (and they were all elderly men, dressed traditionally) had obviously been tasked by their communities to raise specific problems troubling the groups that they represented. On various occasions they would request the floor and address the room, pausing for interpretation to take place for the benefit of those of us who did not speak Dari – ie the entire foreign presence. Their introductions were invariably long-winded and they were routinely cut off by the chair, who prompted them to, in so many words, ‘get to the point’. In turn it became clear that the point that they wanted to get to generally referred to a very specific, yet to them evidently highly important, issue, affecting their particular community, yet which would have little to no impact on the text of the IDP strategy. The chair, conscious of the limited time of the meeting and the necessity to reach a conclusion on the text, would then cut them off and ask only for interventions relevant to the text under discussion (which it is unlikely that many, if any, of the IDP representatives had read). Frustrations visibly mounted on both sides.

Following the meeting few changes were made to the IDP strategy. It was clear that the main body of the text was not up for discussion; many substantive points made during the meeting were not taken on board with little or no explanation given as to why. Ultimately it seemed that the point of the meeting had been to approve and lend legitimacy to the IDP strategy, rather than to change it in any substantial way. The IDP strategy was then submitted to the long, slow chain of approval within the Afghan government at both ministerial and cabinet level.

During this time discussions on UNHCR's role with regard to IDPs were taking place within the organization. Some of UNHCR's sub-offices within the country had become more focused on IDPs due to a diminished returnee caseload and increased numbers of IDPs and there were questions about how to allocate budgets between the various offices. Many humanitarian focussed donors were still very actively pushing UNHCR to shift its focus to IDPs. According to one UNHCR interviewee however there was considerable pressure from Geneva headquarters in early 2013, to continue to focus support on returnees<sup>320</sup>, on the incoming Afghanistan country director, who was more open than the previous country director to a vulnerability based approach and hence to increasing IDP assistance (though nevertheless "not at the expense of returnees"<sup>321</sup>).

At a planning meeting that I attended at UNHCR's offices in Kabul in early 2013, UNHCR ran through its implementation strategy for the following year. An

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<sup>320</sup> Interview, UNHCR 7

<sup>321</sup> Interview, UNHCR 17

independent review of UNHCR's shelter programme was presented, which included some criticism and recommendations for improvement but ultimately concluded that the programme was highly beneficial and should be bolstered. But the most striking point of the meeting came at the budgeting stage when the UNHCR Country Director laid out the planned support for returnees and IDPs. Unsurprisingly the major share would go to returnees. But he announced that even the small funding set aside for IDPs would be entirely conditional on UNHCR receiving all the funding that it was currently asking for on the returnee side. Given that the funding request for returnees was ambitious it seemed unlikely that much would be left over for IDP operations. In effect the donors in the room were being told that if they wanted UNHCR to help IDPs there was a price to be paid, namely that they would have to ensure that UNHCR received all of the funding requested for returnee operations.

Nevertheless within UNHCR internal discussions on this approach continued regarding the extent to which the organisation could or should address IDP needs. For instance, later that year, in the summer of 2013 the debate re-emerged for instance and there was again a "decision from HQ to focus more on the refugees and returnees and not on the IDPs, also in terms of budget distribution."<sup>322</sup>.

The IDP policy was eventually adopted after approval by the president in November 2013 and launched in February 2014. According to Amnesty International "it is widely considered to be one of the most comprehensive policies on internal displacement in the world" (AI 2016). The policy reproduces the

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<sup>322</sup> Interview, UNHCR 7

definition of IDPs included in the Guiding Principles (with the specific inclusion of returning refugees unable to return to their place of origin and those displaced by development projects; thereby, in the former case, as outlined in the previous chapter, transforming part of UNHCR's returnee caseload into IDPs, making them doubly eligible for assistance). While it details a number of responsibilities of line ministries and regional governors towards IDPs, it does not provide a specific legal status to IDPs, nor does it provide for a general registration (registration is the primary responsibility of MoRR, assisted by the humanitarian community, in particular provincial IDP Task Forces). Despite the achievement in producing the policy however, it is still not particularly well known and most interviewees openly doubted that many government employees had heard of it, let alone read it (even a few interviewees working specifically on displacement issues admitted to not having read the policy in its entirety). One interviewee described it as having been "prepared by internationals for internationals"<sup>323</sup>.

Following the approval of the policy many donors, keen to fund support to IDPs, approached UNHCR. However UNHCR, while happy to accept providing a certain amount of assistance to IDPs, remained very keen to see that this did not detract from their reintegration focus. Views in the organisation seemed to be somewhat mixed. On the one hand one of UNHCR's IDP specialists felt that "the focus is changing, wouldn't like to say shifting, more opening up to IDPs"<sup>324</sup>. Another interviewee, in a provincial field office, echoed these words almost exactly, saying that UNHCR in Afghanistan was in the process of "expanding to include IDPs,

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<sup>323</sup> Interview, 'UN Agency 11'

<sup>324</sup> Interview, UNHCR 8

rather than shifting"<sup>325</sup> its focus. But these views were not shared by all. Some, it was clear, felt that UNHCR's involvement in the development of the IDP strategy should not imply any move to broaden the operational focus to IDPs. For instance, one interviewee involved in developing UNHCR's overall Afghan policy maintained:

"UNHCR were the last people who wanted any funding whatsoever for the IDP policy but yet no donor would go and fund the ministry. Specifically, people came to UNHCR to ask to fund, we said no this is IDPs, this has got nothing to do with us. ... I mean IDPs are obviously not in UNHCR's mandate so it's an entirely different argument, that's the last thing we wanted."<sup>326</sup>

In April 2014 presidential elections took place and President Ghani replaced President Karzai. Indicating a willingness to break with past policies and to continue the momentum created by the IDP Policy, President Ghani had made the situation of IDPs a central aspect of his election campaign, including canvassing in IDP camps and publicly promising to end all displacement within five years. It was also well known that his wife, the first lady, was passionate about the IDP issue. In his inaugural address President Ghani promised to "remove the term 'IDPs' from our national glossary" (Ghani 2014) and has since has since outlined his desire that there should be no more IDPs in the country within five years (Pahjwok 2015). Following his election President Ghani continued to highlight the issue, though it appeared to be considerably less of a priority in 2015 than the previous year and

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<sup>325</sup> Interview, UNHCR 15

<sup>326</sup> Interview, UNHCR 5

some interviewees expressed concerns that the issue was now once again in danger of being neglected (Willner-Reid 2016).

The focus on IDPs boded well for the roll-out of the IDP strategy but early hopes in this respect have not materialised. Both MoRR and, to a lesser extent UNHCR (considering its approach to IDPs) were perceived as adopting a somewhat possessive approach to the rollout of the IDP policy (for instance originally opposing widening the membership of the IDP strategy working group to bring in certain other ministries). The fragmentation of the Afghan government and competition for resources covered in the previous chapter is arguably largely to blame. According to an interviewee from another UN agency involved in the IDP strategy implementation:

“MoRR and UNHCR are perceived a bit as ‘this is my IDP policy’ and the idea you’d have other ministries involved is almost incomprehensible for MoRR. MoRR thinks that if the Ministry of Education builds a school for IDPs they’ll get all the money and all the glory.”<sup>327</sup>

Beyond the usual competition for financial and symbolic capital, part of the issue was that the presidential transition period was a particularly trying time for many ministries. Overall funding to the country began to decrease in 2013 and following the presidential elections in 2014 it seemed likely that a ministerial re-organisation may take place. In that context several interviewees suspected that MoRR, as one of the undeniably weakest ministries in government, might be

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<sup>327</sup> Interview, UN Agency 6

abolished altogether, with its tasks absorbed by other, more competent, ministries. Consequently, according to one UNHCR interviewee who followed the IDP strategy closely, it was “a very difficult time and every ministry [was] searching for a *raison d’être* to survive.” She continued:

“So you would have ministries like MoRR jumping on any possible initiative that gives them a leadership role but not necessarily having the capacity to do so. And for maybe the IDP policy, the huge responsibility and leadership that was put on MoRR, it’s striking. They don’t have the capacity to be the catalyst to have synergies with the other ministries, to support from the centre to the provinces, to have the roll-out. This has been I think the biggest challenge.”<sup>328</sup>

Generally the perception that MoRR lacked the capacity to steer the implementation of the IDP policy (either in terms of coordinating with other ministries or implementing projects by itself) was commonly held by almost all those interviewed, many of whom doubted that many MoRR staff had even read it. An interview with the head of a provincial Department of Returnees and Refugees (DoRR – one of the regional offices of MoRR) seemed to confirm these suspicions. According to this interviewee, the IDP strategy, though welcome in his view, had not changed anything substantive on the ground. Further, he stated that, according to the policy, IDPs were permitted to stay for 6 months in the area but should then return to where they had come from, which is unsurprisingly something that the policy most definitely does not say, considering that a large

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<sup>328</sup> Interview, UNHCR 12

part of the motivation of the international actors behind its drafting had been to encourage regional authorities to move away from their policy of pushing for the return of displaced communities and rather to open the door to local integration.

From a policy perspective UNHCR was happy to help shepherd the roll-out of the IDP strategy, without devoting too much of their own resources or implementation capacity to its realisation. Thus, they aimed to organise regional workshops with a view to developing regional action plans that could be implemented at provincial level. After an initial workshop in the eastern region, plans for further workshops were put on hold. IDMC (2014) put the blame at MoRR's door, reporting that "implementation of the IDP Policy has stalled due to lack of political will and capacity" on their part. Amnesty International (2016) took a similar position, though it was also critical of other ministries for failing to contribute to solutions for IDPs.

In 2015 internal displacement continued to rise but UNHCR Afghanistan found itself pressed for funding in competition with other global crises (and, internally, with the refugee influx into Khost and Paktika) and in a context of decreasing amounts being made available for Afghanistan. Unsurprisingly funding for IDPs was most heavily hit, and the organisation's attention was focussed on "firefighting"<sup>329</sup>, instead of the more systemic discussions that the IDP policy rollout would have entailed. Equally several interviewees (from UNHCR, NGOs and other UN agencies) commented that the IDP strategy was an unwieldy document,

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid

irreproachable from a protection point of view, but unsuited to implementation in a context like Afghanistan.

Most recently UNHCR entered into negotiations with OCHA in 2015 to progressively handover the overall coordination of IDPs in the country. According to UNHCR this constitutes “Handing over the overall coordination role to the agency where we would say it belongs”<sup>330</sup>, as, from UNHCR’s perspective, “We can’t do everything and we need to pick our battles.”<sup>331</sup>

Interviews revealed a correlation between the proximity of individuals in UNHCR to IDPs and their willingness to focus exclusively, or predominantly, on returnees. These differences should not be overstated, as not a single UNHCR interviewee openly criticised the overall policy of focussing primarily on returnees, but rather there was a certain amount of unease expressed at the restrictions imposed by the context and a recognition of differences of opinion within the organisation. In particular this was evident in terms of tensions between headquarters and the field, with multiple interviewees noting that headquarters consistently applied pressure on the Afghan operation to maintain its focus on returnees. The concern of headquarters, beyond simple adherence to the agreed policy line, was seemingly also the fear of creating a precedent that could negatively impact UNHCR elsewhere. Field staff meanwhile were more likely to take a more pragmatic and flexible approach to UNHCR’s support to IDPs based on the situation on the ground. As one UNHCR interviewee in Afghanistan commented: “Here, because

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid

<sup>331</sup> Ibid

you're confronted with the issue on a day to day basis, it's more difficult"<sup>332</sup>. In addition those staff tasked to work specifically on IDP issues, perhaps unsurprisingly, were in some cases more sympathetic to their plight than the policy of the wider organisation would suggest, though nevertheless there still tended to be a strong sympathy for the concerns of UNHCR as a refugee-mandated organisation. In the words of one UNHCR interviewee for instance, "I'm dealing chiefly with IDPs so you can imagine where my heart lies. But I would say as a protection agency we can't ignore certain elements that are part of the mandate."<sup>333</sup> Hence, despite differences of opinion, there was nevertheless a fairly high degree of convergence noted in interviews.

Equally, diversity between individuals at the country leadership level in UNHCR may account for some differences. For instance one interviewee expressed surprise at the transfer of IDP responsibility from UNHCR to OCHA saying that under the previous leadership it would have been almost inconceivable as UNHCR was at that time much more possessive (even regarding IDPs) and would have resisted any enlarged mandate for OCHA<sup>334</sup>. He added that in a previous role co-chairing the Protection Cluster in Afghanistan managing UNHCR's territorial concerns, even regarding IDPs, had been particularly difficult to negotiate.

A senior staff member based in Afghanistan commented that it had now been recognised in the organisation that "Fundraising for Afghan solutions should not

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<sup>332</sup> Interview, UNHCR 9

<sup>333</sup> Interview, UNHCR 12

<sup>334</sup> Interview, Dan Tyler

be diverted to displacement issues”<sup>335</sup> (ie. to IDPs), yet he felt that even more important than what was done on the ground was the issue of perceptions. From this point of view it was crucial for UNHCR not only to continue to be actively engaged in return and repatriation, but to be seen to be doing so and to be perceived as prioritising this task over and above its other tasks.

### 8.2.1 Summary

The approach of UNHCR to IDPs in Afghanistan has been markedly different from the way it has approached returnees. Rather than seeing IDPs as vulnerable people in need of a higher level of prioritisation, or as an opportunity for UNHCR to expand its remit of activities (which would likely have been welcomed by donors), the prevailing view seems to have been more to view them as a threat to UNHCR’s core goal of supporting returnees. Consequently, while UNHCR has taken on board requests to support IDPs, and even led IDP protection efforts for many years, it has never embraced the task in the same way that it has done with the needs of returnees.

The Afghan government’s approach to IDPs was for many years one of neglect, albeit for very different reasons. This changed somewhat following a media outcry over deaths in the KIS (which also prompted UNHCR, OCHA and NGOs to pay greater attention to these areas) and attention increased again on the back of campaign promises made by the incoming president. MoRR meanwhile, at a time

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<sup>335</sup> Interview, UNHCR 17

of high inter-ministerial competition and uncertainty, adopted a possessive attitude to the IDP policy, arguably ultimately undermining its effectiveness, while UNHCR also declined to expand its role in the roll-out of the policy beyond a policy level.

Views on the need to expand support to IDPs seemed to differ between UNHCR headquarters, which consistently pressed for a focus on returnees, at least partly in the fear of creating uncomfortable precedents, the Afghan country team in the middle, and field level IDP specialists at the other end, who were most inclined to a pragmatic interpretation of UNHCR's mandate that included a higher level of IDP support.

The willingness of UNHCR to transfer its responsibility for IDPs to OCHA also contrasts sharply with the dynamics that existed between the two agencies during the refugee influx of 2014-15 covered below. While the coordination of refugee response activities is a core competence of UNHCR that it guards jealously, the protection of IDPs is a competence that UNHCR may seek to capitalise upon in some circumstances, but which is clearly a secondary priority in cases where there is a risk of conflict with its higher-level priority groups.

### **8.3 Refugees: Aggressive engagement**

In the summer of 2014 around 13,000 Pakistani families crossed Afghanistan's eastern border into the provinces of Khost and Paktika, fleeing fighting between

the Pakistani government and armed insurgents in North Waziristan (UNHCR 2014). By the end of the year an estimated 35,000 families had arrived; amounting to almost a quarter of a million people in total (UNHCR 2015a). Despite the flow traditionally being overwhelmingly in the other direction, refugees had crossed from Pakistan to Afghanistan before, but never in large numbers. Even referring to these people as refugees proved to be sensitive. The Pakistani government was loath to admit that its actions were causing its own citizens to flee across its borders and it bristled at the insinuation. According to one interviewee the perception from the Pakistani government side was that those leaving were somehow aligned with the armed groups that they saw as terrorists, rather than mere civilians caught up in armed violence. In previous years UNHCR had avoided publicly addressing the issue of people fleeing across the border from the Pakistani province of Baluchistan due to such sensitivities from the Pakistani government. According to one former head of UNHCR in Afghanistan doing so would have been “like poking a lion in the eye”<sup>336</sup> and would have proved unhelpful for the displaced people, for UNHCR, and for the resident caseload of Afghan refugees still in Pakistan. However, the scale of the influx into Khost and Paktika was too high not to acknowledge publicly and hence an emergency response was warranted.

A couple of months earlier, in April 2014, UNHCR and OCHA had, at headquarters level, jointly signed a note on coordination responsibilities in ‘mixed situations’ in which both IDPs and refugees are present (UNHCR-OCHA 2014). Such situations had proved problematic in the past and had led to what had been perceived as turf wars between the two agencies as each fought to establish a dominant position.

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<sup>336</sup> Interview, UNHCR 11

The joint note aimed to clarify leadership and coordination arrangements in these situations and “to ensure that coordination is streamlined, complementary and mutually reinforcing, and to avoid duplication at the delivery level.” The refugee influx into Afghanistan was to prove the first test of the new framework.

From the beginning it did not go well. Though few agencies were active in the Khost and Paktika area, the cluster coordination structure was already in place and those operational partners that were working there originally turned to the cluster, and to OCHA, for guidance and coordination. UNHCR moved quickly to bolster its presence in the area and sought to establish its leadership role, but OCHA argued that setting up an alternative coordination mechanism “made no sense”<sup>337</sup>, according to one interviewee. This individual, who had been involved in the negotiations between the two agencies, felt strongly that UNHCR “should have integrated refugees into the existing structure. Why develop a new coordination structure when there’s one already in place? OCHA would have had no problems letting UNHCR lead it”. Nevertheless, from the perspective of UNHCR, the objective of the note, and UNHCR’s longstanding ambition, had been to clarify its own ultimate responsibility for *all* refugees, even those mixed in with IDPs and others, and hence using the cluster system, even under its own control, was simply not an option. As noted below UNHCR staff tend to have strong views about the role of OCHA in general, and about what they refer to as the ‘clusterisation’ of refugees in particular. Consequently UNHCR insisted on setting up a task force outside the cluster system and under its own management, and OCHA, somewhat reluctantly, stood down, putting off organising provincial coordination meetings for a few

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<sup>337</sup> Interview, UN Agency 5

months in order to avoid duplication, and only restarting them with the onset of winter. Meanwhile UNHCR established a refugee camp ('Gulan' camp), undertook assessments, and began distributions. It also coordinated the activities of at least 6 UN and international organisations and 15 national and international NGOs in 10 different sectoral areas (UNHCR 2015a), as well as providing regular updates to the Humanitarian Donor Group (HDG) on the evolving situation<sup>338</sup>. However coordination responsibilities outside the camp, where individual refugees and IDPs were mixed together with the wider host population, continued to remain somewhat blurred, according to OCHA<sup>339</sup>; though this was disputed somewhat by UNHCR interviewees who maintained that on the ground coordination was working smoothly and cooperatively<sup>340</sup>.

However, the friction between the two agencies was not confined to implementation; it also covered the design and ownership of the document used to publicise the crisis to donors. OCHA argued that rather than publish an individual appeal, which had led in the past to multiple and uncoordinated UN agency responses, UNHCR should rather contribute to the comprehensive 2015 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). According to one donor UNHCR did not appreciate the suggestion that it should limit its issuing of independent appeals outside wider coordination structures, and consequently it quietly published its own appeal document on its own website<sup>341</sup>. Nevertheless UNHCR did agree for this appeal to, additionally, be included in the HRP. The HRP therefore featured, alongside the chapter for the Protection Cluster (led by UNHCR), an additional

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<sup>338</sup> Interview, Donor 14

<sup>339</sup> Interview, UN Agency 5

<sup>340</sup> Interview, UNHCR 5

<sup>341</sup> Interview, Donor 12

Refugee and Returnee chapter, predominantly to focus on the Pakistani refugees but also including returnees (both official and, under the responsibility of IOM, undocumented). As noted above, the Protection Cluster is responsible for coordinating IDP responses and UNHCR has been happy to co-lead this forum under the overall aegis of OCHA, but returnees, and most particularly refugees, are another matter. Hence the inclusion of a separate chapter in which responsibilities are not shared but are UNHCR's alone (and IOM's in the case of undocumented returnees), and in which it is made clear that the process of coordination is distinct from the cluster system. This was the first time that such a refugee chapter had been included in the inter-agency strategic response plan<sup>342</sup> and, according to OCHA, coordinating with UNHCR on the drafting of this chapter was not easy. An OCHA interviewee noted her frustration at what she perceived as UNHCR's strong desire to avoid giving even the appearance of being under OCHA's coordination:

“Anything we edited they tried to reverse. Their numbers make no sense. We said to them you need to justify these numbers... It was really stupid, just kind of petty. ... They wanted their section not to look like a cluster. They needed to differentiate in any way. To me that's petty and minor. We in OCHA don't give a shit about the layout of a document. ... We're not going to step on their mandate. We just want to get stuff done. How a document looks is not important.”<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Interview, UNHCR 19

<sup>343</sup> Interview, UN Agency 5

Meanwhile from UNHCR's point of view OCHA was pushing its coordination role too far and infringing on UNHCR's sphere of authority. OCHA had originally tried to title the section the Refugee Cluster, which was an absolute non-starter from UNHCR's perspective<sup>344</sup>. OCHA eventually persuaded UNHCR to remove all non-humanitarian funding requests<sup>345</sup>, though according to a donor who was closely involved in the process, the method of calculating the cost that was appealed for, was "done according to the old methodology, just adding up all projects"<sup>346</sup>, rather than the more objective methodology that OCHA had insisted on in the other cluster sections of the HRP. Nevertheless, the eventual document does retain the visual coherence that OCHA had been pushing for, and any differences would be difficult to spot for someone unaware of the context and not sensitive to the politics of language that existed between the two organisations. But the disagreement is symptomatic of a fundamental difference in the way that UNHCR has addressed refugees in Afghanistan, as compared to its other populations of concern.

One of the major impediments to a more cooperative and pragmatic approach to the refugee crisis between OCHA and UNHCR was, according to some, the fear of creating a precedent. For this reason the headquarters of the two organisations became involved and tensions escalated. Some interviewees at UNHCR headquarters were critical of their field office for having reached some understandings perceived not to be in line with the note<sup>347</sup>. An Afghanistan-based UNHCR interviewee, who had been involved in the elaboration of the response

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<sup>344</sup> Interview, UNHCR 5

<sup>345</sup> Interview, UN Agency 5

<sup>346</sup> Interview, Donor 12

<sup>347</sup> Interview, UNHCR 18

document and who felt that disagreement over its presentation “was a bit silly at the time”, commented that:

“Unfortunately hands were tied in country. We have no say. It comes down to the Refugee Coordination Model that had just been released months before. So that’s what we had to stick to. And actually we didn’t call the shots in country at all. That all goes back to headquarters and it had to be discussed and negotiated between OCHA and UNHCR headquarters. So we very much on the ground tried to steer clear of it. ... Afghanistan came at the prime time to test the field and try and figure out what to do, which was unfortunate in a way because it did delay the official release of this document. ... We in the field just let the headquarters go round in circles to discuss.”<sup>348</sup>

Another high ranking UNHCR interviewee agreed that the major fear from Geneva headquarters had been anxiety over setting a precedent, which impeded the agencies on the ground from taking the more pragmatic approach that they otherwise would have done<sup>349</sup>. He himself, having previously worked for OCHA, felt somewhat conflicted; he was able to see both sides of the argument, and yet, or perhaps because of this, both sides perceived him as being too close to the position of the other.

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<sup>348</sup> Interview, UNHCR 5

<sup>349</sup> Interview, UNHCR 17

An interviewee from UNHCR's Geneva headquarters was originally somewhat reluctant to talk about the process, saying "I don't want to discuss that as I'll have sleepless nights"<sup>350</sup> when the topic was first raised, but then opened up and was strongly defensive of UNHCR's role. She maintained that UNHCR had been justified in resisting any (real or perceived) attempts to clusterise refugees, and that while UNHCR could work with the clusters and take advantage of their expertise, as "a unique organization with a unique mandate" it nevertheless needed to remain distinct from the wider UN system. She echoed the fears of others about creating a precedent saying "For us it was very clear we were doing the right thing. ... We need to look at the global perspective and about what precedents are set." In addition she felt that "In the note it's black and white" regarding divisions of responsibilities on the ground, in contrast to an OCHA interviewee who described the note as "very confusing" and bringing "no clarity"<sup>351</sup>.

Perhaps more than any other topic encountered during fieldwork the clash over this one particular issue, the refugee presence in Khost and Paktika, elicited exceptionally strong reactions from both sides, as well as from neutral observers. This is possibly because the topic was relatively fresh when most interviews were taking place, but more particularly it seemed like in UNHCR a sensitive nerve had been touched by arousing the perception that the organisation's refugee coordination role was being brought into question. This is the core competency of UNHCR and closely linked to its identity and self-perception. Interviewees hence tended to feel strongly about the issue and to resent what they saw as an

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<sup>350</sup> Interview, UNHCR 19

<sup>351</sup> Interview, UN Agency 5

attempted power maximizing approach from OCHA, such as the following interviewee from UNHCR headquarters:

“I actually don’t see a question at all because our name is very clear United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and that group of people that crossed the border into Afghanistan in your definition, in my definition, is refugees. ... From my understanding of the situation OCHA wanted to have a more prominent role in Afghanistan. By all means I tip my hat to them, go ahead do whatever you have to. But the issue of assistance to refugees is clearly a mandated issue for UNHCR.”<sup>352</sup>

The disagreements were eventually resolved through negotiation (although open questions remained at the time of interviews regarding whether the clusters would eventually take over some responsibilities in Khost and Paktika) but the clash was widely noted by other aid workers in Afghanistan, who tended to feel that it reflected negatively on both agencies. One donor described the competition between OCHA and UNHCR over the Khost and Paktika refugees in rather coarse terms and added that “If there’s an altruistic element to the discussion I don’t know what it is”<sup>353</sup>.

At a more global level wider competition between OCHA and UNHCR has been playing out for several years. Ever since the cluster system was established in 2005, and the previous lead agency model was abandoned, UNHCR has been on the

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<sup>352</sup> Interview, UNHCR 21

<sup>353</sup> Interview, Donor 12

back foot trying to defend its unique mandate and unchallenged refugee coordination role. While many interviewees noted that UNHCR and OCHA worked well together in Afghanistan when dealing with IDPs, tensions were much more evident in addressing refugees.

The differences between the two organisations on how to approach support to refugees boil down to a number of key issues. Primarily there is the underlying difference of opinion regarding whether assistance should be delivered on the basis of status or vulnerability. As this thesis aims to show, UNHCR clearly divides its beneficiaries on the basis of their group status and approaches the needs of each group in very different ways; something which is not always understood or supported by those donors, NGOs and UN agencies whose mandates are defined in non-status based ways.

Beyond this conceptual difference UNHCR staff sought in interviews to defend the positions of their organisation regarding its protectiveness over its role in the Khost and Paktika refugee situation in at least four distinct ways. Firstly, from UNHCR's point of view the accountability implied by its mandate created a *legal* obligation for it to retain sole responsibility for refugee assistance. For instance, the view of the following interviewee was fairly common: "Refugees cannot be in a cluster type situation as UNHCR's mandate cannot be diluted. The legal responsibility falls on UNHCR's shoulders. ... UNHCR will not hand over its coordination role to anyone"<sup>354</sup>.

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<sup>354</sup> Interview, UNHCR 20

Needless to say this was not always accepted by outsiders, many of whom felt, as this donor, that “Coordination is not about mandates, it’s about being effective. UNHCR wouldn’t lose their mandate”<sup>355</sup> by participating in wider coordination forums. Even UNHCR interviewees admitted that “People get tired of us saying mandate, mandate all the time”<sup>356</sup>, while an OCHA interviewee meanwhile expressed more than a touch of frustration with what she saw as UNHCR’s overly legalistic, and in her view misplaced, approach, saying “They treat it like a legal issue and they have so many lawyers in Geneva who’ll blablabla you to death on these issues.”<sup>357</sup>

Secondly, the obligation was also sometimes expressed in quasi-*moral* terms (e.g. “You cannot put refugees in the clusters. It’s wrong. It’s wrong.”<sup>358</sup>) in which any sharing of responsibility with other actors was viewed as almost a moral transgression. The dynamic of rules being seen not in the consequentialist terms of what they achieve, but as moral precepts to be adhered to in and of themselves, is arguably not uncommon in the aid world.

Thirdly, it was explained in *pragmatic* terms, specifically that were UNHCR to share refugee coordination responsibilities with others the refugees would suffer. For instance a senior official at Geneva headquarters noted that while UNHCR was under pressure to integrate more closely into the UN system, were it to do so

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<sup>355</sup> Interview, Donor 13

<sup>356</sup> Interview, UNHCR 18

<sup>357</sup> Interview, UN Agency 5

<sup>358</sup> Interview, UNHCR 19

refugee protection issues would inevitably “be diluted due to competing priorities”<sup>359</sup>.

Fourthly, UNHCR argued that the issue should be seen in *competency* terms. Specifically, many UNHCR interviewees felt that the primary strength of UNHCR over OCHA was that as an operational organisation it had both a better understanding of needs on the ground and was better placed to meet them. Being ‘operational’ is thus, according to UNHCR, an asset that it has and which OCHA lacks. According to one senior UNHCR interviewee the effect of this is that “OCHA’s very insecure because we have a way of delivering. To my mind coordinating without delivering represents a distinct lack of accountability.”<sup>360</sup> On the other hand, UNHCR’s self perception possibly overstates its own role in delivering support and understates its own dependence on partners. Even UNHCR’s Afghan sub-offices almost entirely supervise and coordinate action by implementing partners, rather than actually implementing projects themselves (Scalettaris 2013). Thus, according to OCHA, “UNHCR is not unlike ourselves, they’re coordinators.”<sup>361</sup> (Interestingly, in the unconnected competitive dynamics between IOM and UNHCR, the same line of argument was also used by IOM interviewees comparing their own “hyper-operational”<sup>362</sup>, organisation to a UNHCR full of lawyers and grant managers who mistook grant management for being operational).

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<sup>359</sup> Interview, UNHCR 18

<sup>360</sup> Ibid

<sup>361</sup> Interview, UN Agency 4

<sup>362</sup> Interview, UN Agency 1

However, what was notable, was that UNHCR's role and actions were almost never explained in *interest*-based terms by UNHCR staff (except of course when referring to, and contrasting with, OCHA's motivations; for instance, according to one interviewee, "We understand OCHA's position because of course they need to find their place and they are a coordination agency so they're like Pavlov's dog and they start salivating. But for us we are a refugee agency so we cannot dilute our mandate."<sup>363</sup>).

In contrast there is a very strong body of opinion among external observers who tend to see the conflict as essentially "just a competition issue, political dynamics between two big agencies that should be working better together"<sup>364</sup>, in the words of one NGO interviewee. From outside UNHCR and OCHA the overwhelming opinion seems to be that organisational interests are the driving motivation hindering the two agencies from cooperating together more closely. Further, there is a view that the level of debate has not reflected well on either side. As one donor commented: "The 'he said, she said' approach is not constructive. It's not good for us and it's not good for them. This is my personal opinion but I think it's getting petty."<sup>365</sup> Moreover there was a strong view that ultimately it was the affected populations who stood to suffer most from the clash of organisational interests and that "time discussing mandate issues is time off from delivering to the affected population"<sup>366</sup>.

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<sup>363</sup> Interview, UNHCR 20

<sup>364</sup> Interview, NGO 4

<sup>365</sup> Interview, Donor 2

<sup>366</sup> Interview, Donor 6

Lastly, there is a final dimension to the OCHA-UNHCR clash over coordination responsibilities that was raised in multiple interviews: the question of *neutrality*. This argument, dismissed by one UNHCR interviewee as “absolute nonsense”<sup>367</sup>, is that UNHCR has a vested interest in promoting both its own programmes, and its own beneficiaries, and that this in turn affects its ability to play an independent role as coordinator. In contrast, according to an OCHA interviewee, “The positive value of OCHA is that it’s not operational so we don’t have a horse in the race. It’s easier to coordinate when you don’t have a stake in the game.”<sup>368</sup> The position is best summed up by this NGO interviewee with experience of participating in both OCHA and UNHCR-run coordination forums:

“From OCHA’s position they also try to argue that they don’t have this mandate to try to protect their organisation in terms of their responses. They don’t need to defend food assistance, they don’t need to defend maternal or child health, as UNICEF do, they don’t need to defend these concepts and so they can be better at doing their job. So I think in general having an independent, non-response based organization leading a humanitarian coordination system is fundamental. ... When the main donor and the main coordinating body are the same, how can you possibly trust the rigour and the independence of something like a consolidated appeal document or needs analysis? I think having that independent body is crucial.”<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Interview, UNHCR 18

<sup>368</sup> Interview, UN Agency 5

<sup>369</sup> Interview, NGO 1

### 8.3.1 Summary

The refugee influx of 2014-15 brought to the fore multiple tensions between UNHCR and OCHA. While the two organisations cooperate well while dealing with IDPs, UNHCR immediately asserted its right to a controlling role in dealing with refugees, despite this entailing setting up new, and in some ways parallel, coordination structures. It also led to many individuals from both sides spending much time debating responsibilities, leading to delays in the release of appeals documents, and detracting from other work that they could have been doing.

As with previous sections, UNHCR's headquarters adopted a more hard-line approach than its Afghanistan country office, which was more inclined to compromise and reach ad hoc solutions. Pragmatism at the field level thus again appeared to conflict with the fear of creating precedents at headquarters level and the desire to adhere more strictly to agreed policy approaches.

Interestingly the competitive dynamics unleashed between the two agencies were not constrained to coordination responsibilities, but also concerned how information was created and presented. Notably there was a need from UNHCR's side to not only retain its independence with regard to refugees, but to give the appearance of doing so, even to the extent of differentiating project documents. Also interesting to note is that important differences in issues such as how budgets were calculated were obscured in the consolidated appeal and invisible to casual readers, even though very different methodologies were apparently used.

UNHCR defended its monopolising approach to refugee protection in Khost and Paktika with (missionary) legal, moral, pragmatic and competency-based arguments, though never on the basis of its own (mercenary) organisational interest. However within UNHCR there was a very strong consensus rejecting the argument put forward by some that an operational organisation may be less qualified to lead coordination processes due to the inevitable bias to which it may be subject with regard to defending its own programmes and, crucially, its own high priority beneficiaries. Nevertheless the evidence of this chapter does seem to suggest that the question of vested interests is likely to have substantial impact on organisations' activities in the 'aid marketplace'.

To external observers the dispute between OCHA and UNHCR reflected negatively on both, though there were tendencies for some actors to take sides. Notably this often seemed to reflect the mandates of the organisations concerned and whether they shared OCHA's vulnerability-based approach, or UNHCR's refugee/status-based approach. But in any case there were strong suspicions, though denied strongly by both UNHCR and OCHA, that the inability to coordinate closely was more linked to organisational rivalry than anything else.

For these reasons UNHCR's approach to refugees in Afghanistan has been much more aggressive than the way it has dealt with any other of its populations of concern, even returnees. As one NGO interviewee commented it has been much more difficult for NGOs to work on refugee issues in Afghanistan, compared to, for instance, IDPs, as the space to engage in coordination is limited and under the

control of UNHCR who “very much see it as their turf and get put out if other organisations are seen to encroach on that.”<sup>370</sup>

#### 8.4 Undocumented returnees and deportees: Disinterested engagement

Though people have been fleeing Afghanistan to Iran and Pakistan for over three decades the extent to which such people have received official refugee status has varied considerably. Both countries were initially very open to welcoming refugees fleeing the Soviet-backed communist regime, yet opinions hardened in the 1990s, and turned even more strongly to asylum fatigue and a desire for return in the 2000s. As a consequence it has become ever more difficult for Afghans in either country to achieve refugee status. For instance, according to a UNHCR interviewee based in Iran, since a mass registration exercise in 2001 fewer than 100 individuals have been registered in the intervening years<sup>371</sup>. Thus for most of those who have crossed the border in the past 15 years deportation from Iran is “almost an occupational hazard” (Schuster and Majidi 2013). Conditions in Pakistan are not much better in terms of the possibilities to acquire official status and the advantages that it brings, though the porous border with Afghanistan makes deportations both less likely (at least until recently) and less effective.

Officially-registered refugees opting for facilitated return are all provided with VRF cards in exchange for surrendering their Amayesh cards and PoR cards in Iran and Pakistan respectively (and thus their right to reside legally in those countries).

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<sup>370</sup> Interview, NGO 12

<sup>371</sup> Interview, UNHCR ?

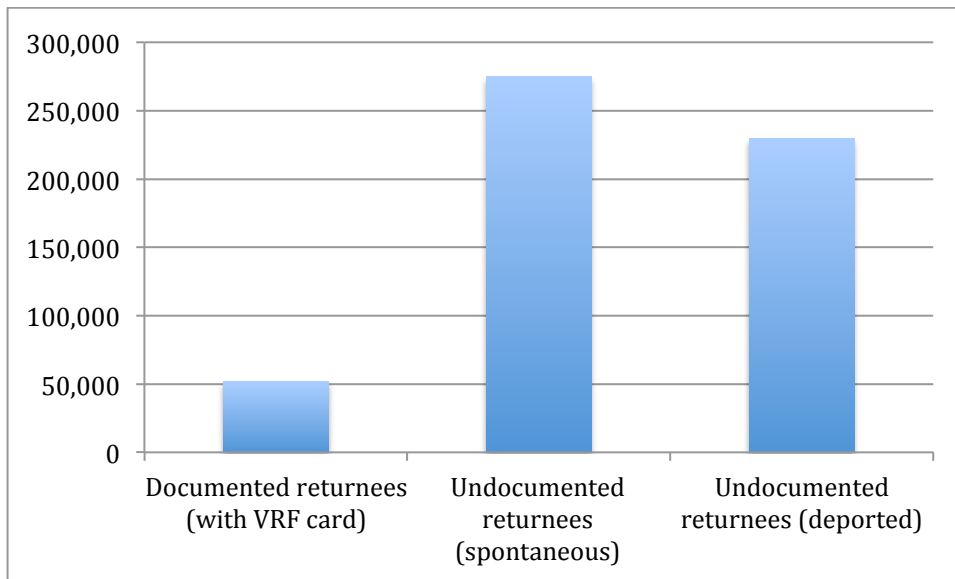
The VRF card not only gives returnees access to return grants and logistical support from UNHCR but also makes them eligible for reintegration support once back in Afghanistan. According to UNHCR interviewees, for UNHCR the definition of being a returnee is having a VRF<sup>372</sup> and support has been mostly provided on this basis<sup>373</sup>. Most of those who do not have official refugee status in exile and choose to return must generally do so without support, as well as enjoying fewer protections abroad.

As they are unable to deport registered Afghans without arousing unwanted negative attention from UNHCR and the international community, Iran and Pakistan have instead turned to the unprotected unregistered Afghan populations residing within their borders, whom they have been free to deport without fear of sanction. Between 2007 and 2015 around 200,000-300,000 Afghans were deported annually from Iran and Pakistan (UNHCR 2015b). In comparison this was around four times higher than the average number of registered refugees that chose to return each year between 2009 and 2014 (UNHCR Global Reports). In recent years the disparity has become even greater. Figure 11 compares the numbers of registered and unregistered returnees over the period 2012-15 (the years for which IOM has collected detailed data on unregistered returnees):

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<sup>372</sup> Interview, UNHCR 8

<sup>373</sup> Interview, UNHCR 7



**Figure 11: Average numbers of returnees per year (2012-15)<sup>374</sup>**

With numbers of unregistered refugees far surpassing the registered refugee returnees one may expect them to have become the prime focus for support from the international community in recent years. However, noticeably this has not happened. Rather, the focus has remained resolutely on registered returnees. From the beginning, for many programmes targeting returnees the VRF card became the passport to admission (though some NGOs have since relaxed their eligibility requirements). For instance, those without VRF cards are officially excluded from the LAS under Presidential Decree 104, depriving them of access to land allocation. While all registered returnees are entitled to return grants from UNHCR, since 2012, IOM has provided assistance each year to between 30,000 and 40,000 of the most vulnerable undocumented returnees who crossed at three specific border crossings (UNHCR 2015b), amounting to less than a tenth of the

<sup>374</sup> Source : IOM 2016 ; UNHCR Global Reports

total. Yet undocumented returnees have also been less able to access support from other actors.

According to the survey project of 870 returnees and IDPs that I managed in 2014/15, possessing a VRF card significantly increased the likelihood of accessing support for returnees. Three quarters of returnees without a VRF card had received no assistance at all since returning, compared to only around 15% of those that had VRF cards. Possessing a VRF card not only increased the likelihood of receiving assistance from UNHCR (55% of VRF holders claimed to have been assisted by UNHCR compared to only 6.5% of non-VRF returnees), but also NGOs, which were more than twice as likely to support returnees that hold VRF cards (37% to 17% respectively) (Samuel Hall 2015).

Why is this the case? Part of the reason is likely to be the division of responsibilities at the organizational level and UNHCR's hierarchy of beneficiaries. Officially, undocumented returnees fall under the coordination of IOM. With UNHCR dominating both the funding, and donor attention, for vulnerable people moving across the Afghan border, the implications for relative levels of support have been clear. In the words of a senior IOM interviewee "the frustrating thing is it's very difficult to get funding for non-refugee returnees as the focus is so much on refugees"<sup>375</sup>. This interviewee felt that non-refugee returnees tended to get lost in the discourse, despite the fact that in terms of relative vulnerability levels, there were likely to be many more extremely vulnerable unregistered returnees in absolute terms than those with VRF cards. He noted that between the different

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<sup>375</sup> Interview, UN Agency 2

categories of potential beneficiaries a certain amount of competition existed between the various agencies in terms of highlighting the needs of particular groups, attracting support for them, and raising their issues higher on international agendas. In terms of how this had played out for undocumented returnees, the relatively lower level of awareness, support and prioritisation of the needs of undocumented returnees reflected a failing of IOM in his view, commenting that: “I’m not sure we’ve done a good job so far. IOM is very much to blame for not highlighting better the needs of non-refugee returnees.”

For UNHCR the flexibility to focus on unregistered returnees is complicated by their need to maintain asylum space in Pakistan and Iran. Thus, the organization has “no other choice”<sup>376</sup>, according to a senior staff member, but to focus only on those with VRF cards, as calling into question the official designation could cause problems with Iran and Pakistan and endanger the status of officially registered refugees in either country. For this reason UNHCR has “had to maintain the fiction that the difference between registered refugees and other Afghans in exile was meaningful from a protection point of view – a formalistic position that made for easier relations with host countries and relatively good protection standards for those Afghans who were registered as refugees” (Hammerstad 2014). As a UNHCR interviewee based in Iran commented, being officially registered is essentially “a matter of being in the right place at the right time”<sup>377</sup>; though within Iran he also noted that UNHCR “have our hands tied somehow”, requiring them to focus almost exclusively on registered refugee populations. This is despite a context in which

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<sup>376</sup> Interview, UNHCR 17

<sup>377</sup> Interview, UNHCR 13

“Afghans arriving in Iran today have virtually no opportunity to lodge refugee claims” (Human Rights Watch 2013) and a similar situation prevails in Pakistan.

However, beyond the not insignificant concern of maintaining asylum space for registered refugees abroad, UNHCR staff also sought to justify their focus on only those with VRF cards in Afghanistan in other ways. For instance some felt that those with VRF cards were less likely to be rotating migrants as they had voluntarily chosen to give up their residency status abroad and thus had most probably made a conscious decision to settle permanently in Afghanistan<sup>378</sup>. Perhaps more controversially some also tended to reject any assertion that undocumented returnees may be equally or more vulnerable (One UNHCR interviewee reacted for instance to the insinuation that this might be the case saying: “I’m sorry I disagree with IOM, I disagree with IOM in that sense completely”<sup>379</sup>). Some also expressed the view that all those without VRF cards were economic migrants, otherwise they would have received asylum status in Iran and Pakistan<sup>380</sup>, though such a view clearly downplays the very real problems in both countries’ Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedures, which are far from ideal. Hammerstad (2014) has written for instance that Afghans with and without refugee status abroad probably migrated for similar reasons and that in private UNHCR staff “quietly acknowledged that it could be a matter of chance whether a particular Afghan became registered as a refugee or declared an illegal immigrant.” Finally, the view was also expressed that, even if unfair, limitations needed to be made on who could access support as, according to one UNHCR

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<sup>378</sup> Interview, UNHCR 17

<sup>379</sup> Interview, UNHCR 21

<sup>380</sup> Interview, UNHCR 15

interviewee, “In an imperfect situation the only way you can manage the situation is to draw a line.”<sup>381</sup> Thus multiple explanations were produced to justify UNHCR’s programmatic focus on registered refugee returnees beyond the simple need to maintain asylum space in Iran and Pakistan. Nevertheless, some UNHCR employees, though somewhat restricted in terms of how the topic is presented externally, did feel that in practice in the field the distinction between refugee and non-refugee returnees was difficult either to establish, or to defend (Scalettaris 2013).

In terms of other humanitarian and development actors, most donors do not have clear positions on providing support to registered or unregistered returnees, preferring instead to leave such decisions to their partners. However, the one donor in the Afghan context that does have a specifically defined role for refugee support, restricts its funding, like UNHCR, only to returnees with VRF cards. According to an interviewee there, unregistered refugees “are not in our mandate”<sup>382</sup>, though he conceded that “allowing some fudge room is ok”. For NGOs however, most of those interviewed tended not to draw a sharp distinction between registered and unregistered returnees; in one case because they have difficulty finding sufficient numbers of people with VRF cards for their programmes, and in other cases seemingly on the principled basis that the distinction is a somewhat arbitrary one that has little impact on relative vulnerability levels. They thus tend to use the term ‘returnee’ broadly. Though

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<sup>381</sup> Interview, UNHCR 21

<sup>382</sup> Interview, Donor 1

considering the huge discrepancy in support provided to those with and without VRF cards this may be a more recent evolution.

Beyond the question of much larger numbers of undocumented than documented returnees, there is also evidence that the former are on average more vulnerable than the latter. For instance, according to findings of the survey I managed in 2014/15 over a third of assisted returnees were found to be literate (which is above the national average), compared to only a quarter of non-registered returnees, and these figures differ remarkably little between returnees from Iran and Pakistan. This is likely to be linked to greater access to education for registered refugees in exile and suggests that, as a group, returnees who did not enjoy formal status in exile may face greater difficulties integrating into the labour market on return.

Yet despite increased vulnerability and larger numbers, undocumented returnees remain a much lower priority in Afghanistan than their relatively privileged documented counterparts, and, at least in the view of some, this is due to UNHCR's selective engagement (or rather disengagement) on their behalf. One NGO interviewee lamented UNHCR's "hands off" approach to this target group, feeling that in his view UNHCR were neglecting a responsibility that should have been incumbent upon them, at the very least in terms of a more proactive advocacy for undocumented returnees<sup>383</sup>.

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<sup>383</sup> Interview, NGO 12

Beyond those leaving or being deported from Iran and Pakistan, is another group of unregistered returnees: Those returning to Afghanistan after having been refused asylum in other countries, most often in Europe. These represent far smaller numbers, yet they are in some ways one of the most high profile groups, at least for Western donors.

Beyond Iran and Pakistan, tripartite returns agreements were signed between Afghanistan and several other countries including Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Norway, the UK, Sweden and Switzerland (ANDS 2008), while yet more countries set about negotiating them (for instance concluding a returns agreement for Afghanistan was deemed to be a priority for Belgium; Belgian Parliament 2011).

Statistical data on voluntary and forced returns to Afghanistan from the EU are lacking (Eurostat data conflate forced and voluntary returns following failed asylum attempts). However, during the first half of 2014, of the 21 EU countries providing statistical information<sup>384</sup> (European Migration Network 2014), 13 carried out forced returns to Afghanistan. In total there were 227 voluntary, and 326 forced, returns to Afghanistan during this period from these countries; more than three quarters of both categories coming from just three countries: Sweden, the UK and Norway. In practice the difference between forced and voluntary returns is likely to be not that great, as according to UNHCR, the term 'voluntary assisted return',

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<sup>384</sup> This information was provided in response to an ad hoc request from the Slovak government

“generally concerns Afghans who are complying with orders to leave the country after a negative decision has been taken on their asylum applications. As a result, the [return agreements] now primarily serve to facilitate the compulsory return to Afghanistan of persons who have been found not to need international protection” (UNHCR 2013).

In absolute terms the numbers returning from the EU are tiny compared to the returns figures from Iran and Pakistan (during the same period as the figures above – the first 6 months of 2014 – around 200,000 Afghans spontaneously left or were deported from Iran alone; 400 times more than the total number of those returning – either forced or voluntarily - from Europe; IOM 2016). Yet unsurprisingly these returnees represent a particular focus of attention for European states. Increased deportations have also led, in some countries, to the formation of active anti-deportation movements on behalf of failed Afghan asylum seekers, some of which have received international media attention (Willner-Reid 2015).

From a donor perspective, a few interviewees reported that one of the motivations of their own support to wider displacement issues (i.e. beyond targeted programmes for reintegration of deportees) in Afghanistan was a desire from their capitals to limit, or reduce the desire for onward migration to Europe. Generally this support was not limited, in terms of how it was implemented, to deportees, but while covering displacement for the EU Delegation I was approached on one occasion by the representatives of one Member State eager to enquire if we were

able to support (and thus facilitate) the return and reintegration of Afghan deportees from their country (something unsurprisingly we were unable to do).

Although UNHCR's role is generally defined in the trilateral returns agreements as "assisting, facilitating, and monitoring" voluntary repatriation, in practice it has chosen to limit its involvement in the actual return of failed asylum seekers, something which some UNHCR staff presented in interviews as being a moral position of which they were proud, but which, it should also be noted, has a less altruistic dimension: Namely involvement in returns programmes would inevitably tarnish the UNHCR brand of compassionate support to vulnerable people. Thus IOM has also taken on this role<sup>385</sup>, in a manner that is seen by some in UNHCR as opportunistic. The phrase "glorified travel agency"<sup>386</sup> was sometimes used by UNHCR insiders to describe IOM; while IOM staff in contrast complained that UNHCR was able to strategically "hide behind its protection mandate"<sup>387</sup> and turn down requests from states that would negatively impact its own reputation.

As numbers of Afghan refugees in Europe have grown IOM has noted a significantly increased interest from donors in its activities in the region, according to interviews. The relocation packages it offers vary significantly between sending countries, with some countries being markedly less generous than others. Support to Afghans deported from Europe is criticised by many as insufficient (Schuster and Majidi 2013; Gladwell and Elwyn 2012). Deportees face cultural barriers to reintegration, excessive debts that they are unable to pay off, shame and the

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<sup>385</sup> Previously a German NGO, AGEF, was contracted to help resettle failed asylum seekers until it ceased operating in 2011 amid fraud allegations : <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-15376506>

<sup>386</sup> Interview, UNHCR 3

<sup>387</sup> Interview, UN Agency 1

psychological problems of coping with failure, and, as other Afghans, financial and economic hardships (Ibid). But however meager the support that these deportees receive, it is considerably greater than that provided to other Afghans on the move, due to the desire of Western states to facilitate their own returns processes. On the other hand the growing prominence of Afghan refugee flows to Europe has resulted in increased funding for *all* types of displaced people in Afghanistan as donor governments, eager to ‘do something’ and, perhaps more importantly, be seen to be doing something, redirect funding in the hope that it will reduce the desire to move onwards to Europe.

#### 8.4.1 Summary

Undocumented returnees are a numerically superior group to registered returnees and a comparatively more disadvantaged group. However they have received less reintegration support and are much less of a focus of the international community.

The division of responsibilities at the international level seems again at least partly to blame for this state of affairs, with IOM lacking the global weight and ability to promote its caseload as effectively as UNHCR. Again, though, UNHCR interviewees advanced multiple reasons, unconnected to organisational mandates, to support their position of focusing entirely on officially-recognised refugee returnees.

Potentially some of these reasons may be related to an internalising of UNHCR’s hierarchy of beneficiaries and a willingness to defend the policies of their organisation.

Meanwhile, despite being a proportionally tiny group in purely statistical terms, deportees from Europe have, perhaps unsurprisingly, received disproportionate levels of interest from Europe-based donors. This has led to higher levels of interest in all migration dynamics in the region, and, according to interviews with some donors, the presence of Afghan refugees in their countries has played at least some role in the decision to fund displacement assistance in Afghanistan (even if the direct connection between the two issues may be weak).

## 8.5 Chapter Conclusions

In her book *The Good Project*, Krause (2014) notes that beneficiaries are both part of the product sold to donors, and that some beneficiaries “are easier to sell than others, which leads to inequities in the allocation of aid”. While this is undoubtedly true, in the case of the populations covered in this chapter it has generally not been the reception by donors that has served to privilege or exclude these populations, but rather a hierarchy of people that is internal to UNHCR and which operates largely independently of the external pressures of the marketplace.

The way in which UNHCR has approached the needs of returnees, IDPs, refugees and those who did not have refugee status in exile has been markedly different in each case. This difference in approach is arguably far more closely related to UNHCR’s perception of its mandate than any considerations of relative vulnerability levels. Despite this, and while organisational interests have

undoubtedly played some role, the justifications provided by individuals were almost always presented in missionary terms. The actors involved have all taken action that they saw as justified and appropriate, rather than self-serving.

Externally though, that action has not always been perceived in such terms.

Again, various different explanations may be presented to explain the actions of UNHCR. Those inclined to perceive a mercenary approach would note the way UNHCR's own interests are wrapped up with those of the populations it serves. If refugees and returnees are highly prioritised then so too is the agency. If on the other hand attention shifts to populations for which UNHCR plays only a supporting role then it in turn loses prestige. Likewise, while refugees may, arguably, be better served through a more cooperative approach, if that entails UNHCR ceding its privileged position to OCHA and becoming simply just another humanitarian actor among others, it is likely to firmly oppose such a shift. In more missionary terms, while other populations may be provided for by other actors, UNHCR would argue that it alone is the provider of last resort for refugees and thus it is incumbent on them to do everything possible to protect and promote these people. Broadening UNHCR's mandate to include IDPs and non-refugee returnees could leave registered refugees and returnees defenceless and under-assisted and thus must be resisted for altruistic reasons. Finally, in terms of misfit dynamics, the system of accountability devised by donors may in this case be self-defeating if donors later wish the organisation to adopt a more pragmatic approach that is less constrained by the peculiarities of its mandate.

Indeed, the low level of priority that relative vulnerability levels has played in any of these topics arguably calls into question, at least to some extent, the approach of founding organisational mandates on the basis of belonging to particular status groups. Though there are countless arguments to support this approach (that have been covered above) there are equally strong counter-arguments (also covered) that are perhaps even more convincing. What is interesting in the case of documented and undocumented returnees, natural disaster and conflict IDPs, and economic internal migrants, is that in each case what is relevant is the past history of the individual or family in question. It is the particular circumstances of their departure which is relevant to the question of which organisation is responsible for their needs. Their current situation is, almost, entirely irrelevant to that determination.

Despite some convergence in views there have also been differences of opinion within the organisation. Notably, headquarters has strongly pushed an adherence to UNHCR's refugee core mandate and identity, while the field has shown itself to be more open to pragmatic solutions, and those working specifically with IDPs have been the most keen to adopt a more humanitarian vulnerability-based approach in which status is afforded less weight. This likely reflects a wider tendency in which the attractiveness of adhering to abstract rules diminishes with greater proximity to specific issues.

As Rubenstein (2008) has written "sentiment biases aid distribution towards those to whom aid workers already have some (perhaps subconscious) connection or attraction." The danger of founding organisational mandates on the basis of

migration status means that those particular sentimental connections may trump wider priorities, such as a more pragmatic, needs-based approach. The risk in that case is pointed to by Barnett (2008) when he asks, “What happens when the rules themselves become a source of ethical guidance?”

## 9. Conclusion

Through examining the actions, subjective perceptions, and discourses, of actors in the Afghan aid marketplace, this thesis has attempted to shed light on the following broad research questions:

*What are the pressures that serve to exacerbate or mitigate competition between and within actors in the aid marketplace, how is this competition manifested, and what impact does it have on the process of assessing and communicating humanitarian needs?*

*How do the pressures that serve to exacerbate or mitigate competition impact relations between and within different actors in the aid marketplace?*

*What impact do these pressures have on the process of discourse creation and information transfer between actors, in particular in terms of situational and needs analysis?*

This thesis is clearly not the first to examine such questions, and nor will it be the last. The extent to which dynamics of competition are an intrinsic, and arguably inevitable, aspect of any aid system will continue to disappoint and frustrate aid workers and academics alike. There will be those who seek explanations grounded in interests, those who perceive rather a clash of values-based objectives, and those who point to system design, bureaucratic dynamics and the

role of individuals in exacerbating or mitigating these trends. The starting point of this thesis has been that all are relevant, inter-related and often mutually supporting.

I have aimed in this thesis to make both a contribution to theory, and an empirical contribution to knowledge on the history of Afghanistan, UNHCR and returnees. In particular this is the first time that the history of the development of UNHCR's Solutions Strategy has been told in detail, which may provide lessons for future policy makers. In terms of wider theory and empirical findings my conclusions are summarised below.

### **9.1 Mercenaries, Missionaries and Misfits**

The first point to note is that UNHCR, like other international organisations, undoubtedly has agency: It is not simply a vessel for the interests of states and has made independent decisions in regards to all of its activities in Afghanistan. The second finding is that the way that it has used that agency is influenced by mercenary, missionary and misfit dynamics.

The aid sector is a competitive arena, which in many ways resembles a traditional market for services. Funding, authority and prestige are fleeting and need to be constantly replenished from a finite pool. The capacity to adapt to changing contexts and sectors is not only a useful ability, which may offer large rewards when successful, it is often a necessary condition for organisational survival. The

horizontal management structures of the aid world, based on consensus, enable opportunistic behaviour and make fragmentation more likely, thereby weakening collective action towards more over-arching goals. Nevertheless the need to retain credibility restrains overtly mercenary tendencies, and incentives at an individual level may also lead to more cooperative behaviour.

In the views of many, UNHCR has defended its organisational interests in Afghanistan. It has brought to bear a large powerful machinery in the service of its goals, and has consistently fended off potential competitors (such as OCHA and IOM). In relation to the Solutions Strategy it pursued an aggressive media strategy that put the role of the agency front and centre, bringing it a large amount of mostly positive coverage. It has also engaged in many negotiating practices that were perceived as manipulative by some donors. These included approaching multiple principals to circumvent resistance (both in Kabul and, through the mechanism of the 'Friends' group, in Geneva); publicly criticising the role of the international community as a means to exert pressure on it; externally publicising the ownership of MoRR of the drafting process for key documents, while actually exerting full control behind the scenes; adopting an intimidating approach to critical NGO partners; and collecting data from implementation areas with the express intention of using it, not to test hypotheses, but to fundraise. Any internal doubts regarding the strategy, of which there were many, were not shared with outsiders and a united front in favour of the strategy was presented.

Yet, as this thesis has hopefully shown, while it is possible to construct a narrative of an aid marketplace driven by purely mercenary incentives, such a narrative is

largely misleading. The aid world is not only a marketplace, it is above all a social space governed by shared notions of acceptable behaviour. *All* of those interviewed for this thesis made reference to missionary goals – altruistic objectives unconnected to personal interests – and many went out of their way to state explicitly that these were of much greater importance for them than any other considerations. Commitment and dedication are powerful forces in the aid world, and this is widely recognised even by most of those who are critical of the sector. Notably this commitment is strongest when applied to narrow sector-specific goals, which tend to be closely linked to organisational mandates (though the mechanism through which these objectives are internalised is only loosely connected to interests and arguably has much more to do with exposure to particular needs and points of view). The advancement of such specific missionary objectives tends to trump more over-arching collective action goals, and to create dynamics of competition of its own as organisations and individuals may act aggressively and strategically in pursuit of these goals. Importantly, in many cases individuals will continue to push for certain positions once internalised even if they no longer support organisational interests.

Within UNHCR dedication to the needs of certain displaced people has been strong. Indeed, some donors worried that it was *too* strong – and that an overly zealous approach was neither realistic nor constructive. Nevertheless acknowledgement of this commitment has contributed to an almost universal respect and recognition of the value of the agency. UNHCR's missionary goals are shaped by its mandate but internalised through a strong process of socialisation. Yet internal divisions

exist between what Barnett (2001) has termed UNHCR's "pragmatists" and "fundamentalists" with regard to the interpretation of those goals.

However, mercenary and missionary goals may be closely related and mutually supporting. The need to retain credibility means that actors hoping to advance their own agendas may often find it beneficial to act in altruistically-perceived ways. Likewise, to advance altruistic goals, actors need to be both strategic and to accumulate symbolic and financial capital. In UNHCR there is recognition of these dynamics, including an understanding that the shared responsibility to promote the agency externally in turn makes it possible to deliver more for displaced people. Meanwhile some missionary guises may have helpful mercenary side-effects: For instance UNHCR's humanitarian identity shields it to a certain extent from the necessity of aligning its policies to national development priorities, while its protection identity gives it ample leeway to expand into the development sphere of activities.

But acknowledging a range of differing objectives is not sufficient for understanding organisational behaviour in the aid marketplace. Aid agencies are also misfits; driven by bureaucratic logics and as unpredictable as the natural diversity of the staff that work in them. This latter factor limits generalisations based on theory, as the particular characters of individuals, and relationships between them, are more influential than many scholars would admit. More generally, there is a high degree of path dependency in how organisations and individuals approach tasks, as well as obstacles towards changing course once a certain course of action has been decided upon. Accountability structures are

designed by principals to ensure adherence to certain objectives and standards of behaviour, but they also play a role of downgrading other objectives of otherwise higher importance and thus acting against collective action goals. Both donors and aid agencies resort to what Simon (1956) refers to as 'satisficing'; adopting the simplest course of action to meet immediate needs, rather than necessarily the optimum approach. This includes adopting a textbook approach to grant management in which the focus is on fulfilling bureaucratic requirements and, often, leaving a wide degree of latitude to implementers (who in any case are presumed to 'know best' how to approach their own interventions). It may also favour certain approaches that benefit both donors and implementers, such as for instance conceiving of the NGO sector as endowed with the legitimacy that comes with being the principal representative of civil society; this approach obviously benefits NGOs, but also makes the job of donors easier by providing them with an accessible entry point for their mandated role of dialogue and consultation.

UNHCR is also influenced by various factors unrelated to interests. Its culture of independence, born of its action-oriented humanitarian mind-set combined with awareness of its own pre-eminence, make it liable to pursue certain courses of action that would likely be approached in a more cautious and consensus-building fashion by less self-confident organisations. Its fast-paced humanitarian orientation likewise ensures that it focuses more on outputs, than long-term impact, which may be relatively neglected. And the system of accountability which donors have devised in relation to refugees means it is less willing to flexibly consider the needs of other people who may be more deserving of support.

In his book *Essence of Decision* (1972) Allison argued that three distinct models could be applied to explain governmental decision-making in crisis situations, depending on the aspects of the decision on which scholars choose to focus. Likewise most organisational activity within the aid marketplace may be understood as either the result of mercenary, missionary or misfit dynamics. However for a more comprehensive understanding of behaviour it is helpful to consider all three elements of this triptych as potential explanatory variables operating both separately and in conjunction with each other.

## 9.2 Information Transfers and Strategic Discourse

One area in which mercenary, missionary and misfit objectives combine is in the creation of strategic discourses regarding needs and project performance. Whether to advance organisational interests, altruistic objectives, or simply to comply with the job description requirements of particular posts, all organisations have an interest in depicting reality in particular ways in order to influence the behaviour of more powerful actors. They are aided in this endeavour by a particular quirk of the aid marketplace: that donors are heavily reliant on implementers for information. In addition donors have vague, wide-ranging objectives, which they transform into specific goals on the basis of this information and through the medium of interaction with other actors. This means that, in contrast to some marketplaces, implementers not only respond to buyers' preferences, but also play a large role in shaping them.

Actors learn quickly, and even subconsciously, the benefits of shaping information (even internally within their wider organisation) to achieve particular goals; which generally involve promoting the specific sectors in which they happen to work. In the humanitarian sector donors rely predominantly on two distinct mechanisms for their information: The cluster system and the analysis of specialised UN agencies. Both present the information they provide as objective and unimpeachable. In neither case is this true. Actors within the cluster system jostle to promote particular positions and the end result is always a negotiated process, though one which enjoys a particularly high level of external legitimacy. The gloss of technicality serves to obscure the strategic behaviour that is not apparent to casual outside observers, while the horizontal management process ensures that all interests are to a certain extent represented. Nevertheless the process is highly appreciated by donors, even those aware of the politics involved, perhaps precisely because it absolves them of an otherwise complicated task and means that future decisions they take on the basis of the cluster documents will be viewed as uncontroversial by the participants in the process.

Although never presented as such, needs assessments are essentially advocacy documents and serve a powerful role in influencing donor preferences. While high needs, or high appeal amounts, are useful in attracting attention, if the credibility of these is later called into question the exercise may in the long-run serve to be self-defeating. The need to retain credibility plays a powerful mitigating role that should not be underestimated.

Similar dynamics apply within UN agencies. These agencies are endowed with high levels of trust from donors on the basis of the shared knowledge that the costs of abusing that trust would be particularly high (while this trust is given willingly, it is not given blindly). As acknowledged by all interviewees, UNHCR enjoys a privileged position in terms of assessing the needs of displaced people in Afghanistan. The record of how its narrative on the needs of returnees has developed, however, shows that it has used the information available to it with the specific intention of portraying a particular vision of returnee vulnerability that furthers its own goals. This has only been possible through ignoring large amounts of data, and portraying other data in simplistic ways shorn of nuance or contextualisation, which could prove to be counter productive to the narrative that UNHCR hoped to create. Additionally there is strong evidence that the development of this discourse has been influenced by the wider fate of the agency in Afghanistan. Rather than more strenuously promoting reintegration on the basis of increasing needs, it has been done precisely *because* of falling needs, as the only way to focus attention on a topic which would otherwise enjoy a diminished level of donor interest.

Thus, while credibility and the need to retain expert and moral authority may significantly restrain dynamics of competition, there is nevertheless a need to look beyond the statements of these agencies and to examine the dynamics behind the scenes that have produced them. We should not, in other words, take aid agencies simply at their word.

### 9.3 Status versus vulnerability

Beyond the motivations of aid workers and agencies, and the ways in which these influence depictions of need, the third strand of enquiry running through this thesis has been regarding the impact of founding organisational mandates on the basis of serving the needs of particular groups holding a certain status. The obvious risk, which this thesis has highlighted, is that an unfortunate by-product of this system is that, in the context of a competitive aid market and a politicised approach to needs assessment, is that the groups that receive the most support are not necessarily the most vulnerable, but rather those whose interests are championed by the most powerful actor.

Whether for mercenary, missionary or misfit reasons, all actors try to promote their own objectives. When such objectives concern promotion of the needs of particular types of people the situation becomes complicated; particularly as this almost inevitably serves to pit the needs of one group against those of others, even if the actors involved do not realise it.

UNHCR has acted very differently in the marketplace in relation to its various different 'populations of concern'. This suggests that how it has internalised its mandate, and how it perceives its own role and identity, have a potentially stronger impact on its organisational behaviour than would be expected from a purely 'rational' analysis of market-based incentives. The agency has acted at times as possessive, threatened, or simply indifferent when faced with different classes of people and at different times. In no case however was the prime

determinant of this behaviour related to either relative vulnerability levels, or the desires of its donors.

A recurrent sub-text of this thesis has thus been an implicit critique of status-based mandates for organisations. The point is not that such mandates should necessarily be avoided or rewritten, but rather that there is a need to be aware of the negative implications that these mandates can have, particularly in terms of undermining a needs-based approach to aid.

#### 9.4 Conclusion

UNHCR is a valuable and valued member of the international community. Its staff works tirelessly to make life better for some of the most vulnerable people on earth. It has even been willing on occasion to make itself unpopular with some of its most powerful backers in the service of this noble objective. It is, quite rightly, widely respected by governments and global publics alike as a good and moral actor. But it is not immune from organisational politics; is predisposed to see its own objectives as more important and pressing than those of other actors; and it is liable to use its various types of authority to promote discourses that may, ultimately, undermine a needs-based approach to aid.

This thesis has aimed to contribute to wider theory in terms of, firstly, promoting a holistic approach to understanding the motivations of aid actors, and secondly to providing particular insights from the specific case study of Afghanistan. In addition it represents an empirical contribution in terms of the history of UNHCR

in the country, providing new detail on the various inter-agency negotiations in which UNHCR has been involved in relation to documented and undocumented returnees, refugees, and IDPs.

In terms of avenues for future research two options appear apparent. Firstly, through my mercenary, missionary and misfit taxonomy I have provided a loose framework for understanding organisational behaviour. This could easily be broken down further into various sub-categories; for instance distinguishing between financial and different types of social capital; between general altruistic goals, field-specific goals (eg those relevant to the whole aid sector, such as, for instance, adherence to humanitarian principles), and narrow sector-specific goals; between organisational and individual incentives; and so on. Bringing in a wider range of theory to break down this taxonomy into constituent parts could yield interesting insights into not only the aid marketplace but also other social sectors reliant on public funding.

The second option is to apply a similar approach to that taken in this thesis to different contexts. How have particular types of actors promoted their goals in other crisis zones around the world? To what extent are the observations made here in relation to UNHCR and Afghanistan generalizable? And where different approaches have been adopted what have been the reasons? For instance in some contexts UNHCR has been much more open to meeting the needs of IDPs and to seeing them not so much as a threat, but as an opportunity. What were the salient factors that made such an approach possible? Likewise what narratives have

actors used to promote particular positions in those on-going debates in the aid world that are indirectly connected to organisational mandates?

In any case, the aid world is likely to only increase in academic interest as a subject of empirical and theoretical enquiry. To date global aid budgets have been steadily increasing for several decades. The new isolationist approach proposed by US President Trump may well reverse this trend. How aid agencies will negotiate an aid world that for the first time is shrinking in size, and in which securing funding becomes more than ever a question of organisational survival, will be a topic of keen interest for academics, practitioners and potential beneficiaries alike.

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