

Humanitarian Engagement with Armed Non-State Actor

Practical Experience and Lessons Learned – the Taleban

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The Context: Taleban emerged in early 1994 as a result of an organic frustration among the populous from the lawlessness and harassment by some resistance commanders who fought the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. General lawlessness, corruption, the establishment of checkpoints on roads taxing vehicles, goods and passengers; and confiscation of land, property etc. drove the general population to the edge. This frustration spilled over into the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, and a grassroots movement formed to combat these developments. The Taleban vocalized commonly held local complaints and demonstrated what many felt were constructive actions against lawlessness. In addition, their emphasis on justice and fairness attracted grassroots support among a war exhausted society. Despite criticism regarding their interpretation of Islam, the Taleban demonstrated one of the fastest tracks to power in any postwar situation. By 2006 Taleban managed to capture Kabul establish their rule over Afghanistan in all but two of the 31 provinces, in the North East. They were locked in a guerilla war with the Northern Alliance, a loose group comprised of a number of former resistance commanders.

The Afghan Campaign to Ban Landmines was launched in 1994, prior to the rule of Taleban, to convince all warring functions to stop using landmines in a country already infested with millions of landmines. Part of that campaign involved successful dialogue with the Taleban, to ban anti personal landmines. The process of successfully engaging the Taleban was very complex that cannot be detailed in just 10 minutes. This paper, however, summarizes key principles and lessons learned of the experience.

The Challenge: In 2004 in the midst of civil war between more than ten warring factions, the Mine Action Programme was operating all over Afghanistan.

Cross line operations: As competing warring factions were controlling various parts of the country, it was extremely dangerous for humanitarian aid organizations to operate cross lines. Most NGOs based their operations in specific areas minimizing need for cross line operations. However, mine action was of a nature that had to work in various areas mainly due to geographic and seasonal reasons as well as requirement of specialist expertise that was hard to develop for specific areas.

Unclear agenda: Competing priorities among various groups was another major challenge. Some had very local agendas centered around community related issues while other groups had regional or national agendas for power and control.

Everything is fair in war: Need for any weapon use to defeat your enemy, particularly by groups that were not aware of or deemed not to be bound by international laws and obligations posed significant challenges.

Lack of unity of command: Both at national and local levels there was no sense of central command and control prior to Taleban rule. While some groups were more organized, others operated as a loose gathering of people who shared similar values and objectives. This, among other issues, made dialogue and concluding agreements very challenging.

Foreign agents: While most warring factions themselves are accused of promoting agendas of other countries, NGOs and aid organizations were generally seen as working for foreign countries to promote their political, economic or religious agendas.

Empowering the other side: Clearing roads that your enemy can access or even agricultural land for productive use was seen as empowering the other side. Suspicion of providing information/intelligence to the other side and foreigners was probably the most difficult problem of all.

The Response:

Dialogue is Key: The Afghan Campaign to Ban Landmines experience and that of the Mine Action Programme in General underlines that engaging with NSAs, in order to reach humanitarian and development objectives, is a must. It helps them understand better what your goals of the aid workers and why they are there. It also helps the aid community to better understand NSAs perspectives, agendas and priorities. Aid organizations can then develop better approaches that facilitate and not hinder humanitarian work and protection of civilians. NSAs often have local knowledge, and are best able to form local relationships that can be useful for aid and development work.

Dialogue is not a process of agreeing or disagreeing and giving and taking. It is a process of unfolding hearts and minds to better understand each other and create mutual trust. Without necessary dialogue skills and an engagement agenda, it will be close to impossible to operate in areas controlled by non-state armed actors and large segment of civilians will be left at the mercy of NSAs and dependent on them.

Building trust: There is no single formula for gaining trust and confidence of NSAs. However, understanding them better through a dialogue process will provide clear opportunities to create an enabling environment for humanitarian and development work. In the case of Taleban for example we used staff from their areas -Kandahar, Helmand and Zabul provinces - to act as go in between and be present in most of our meetings. This helped significantly as some staff personally knew NSA commanders or staff and the Taleban had acquaintances in common. The important thing was to create an environment of ease and water down suspicions.

Risk taking: Engaging with NSAs, if not well managed, can be risky. However, this alone should not be the reason not to engage. Humanitarians and development workers have to take a reasonable level of calculated risk in order to operate. Not only physical security risks, the risk of upsetting your donors by providing legitimacy or engaging with groups that are under sanctions etc. can hinder humanitarian work and as consequences protection of civilians. In order to help affected population, calculated risks have to be taken. When results are demonstrated donors and other political reservations may relax.

What is in it for me: Another important aspect to have in mind is that NSAs may care less about how good you are what an excellent job you do, your track record elsewhere, international conventions, and so on. While it is important to explain your aims, objectives, and values, they are more interested what is in it for them to help you (or at least let you) do your job. We have to explain international norms and obligations in their context and language. For example, in the case of having Mullah Omer to issue a decree banning anti-personal mines, I had to explain how it is in line with his declared values and norms and why should he issue this decree. I also was very well aware that they were extremely keen to show to the international community that they could be a responsible actor. Using these two interests, we presented a strong case in front of him. A paper was prepared by a respected religious figure arguing how landmines were against the principles of Islam. Using one of our staff from the area who had lost his leg and an eye while with the Mujahedeen, and going step by step initially through a low ranking Taleban, then the influential governor of Kandahar and finally Mullah Omer himself. It was a slow process of building a larger relationship. In summary, the NSAs must feel they gain something tangible in the process, and that it is in their best interest to participate.

As it can be evident from the Taleban decree banning landmines, they were aiming to address both national and international agendas. While their message to local population was that we care for your needs and concerns, they were trying to tell the international community that they can work with the international community in the framework of international law and should be dealt with as a responsible actor.

Their decree on landmine ban was in fact put to action as there was no documented evidence of use of landmines by the Taleban until they were in power. More recently, various groups associated with the Taleban have used roadside bombs.

There was no formal monitoring mechanism put in place to document violations either by the Taleban themselves or the aid organizations. There were however, more than 7,000 UN mine action personal operating across Afghanistan at the time of Taleban rule and they had not documented any use of AP mines. There were a few alleged cases but not documented. The Taleban were confident that none of their personal will violate any decree issued by their leader Mullah Omer.

Lessons Learned:

Neutrality in action not words. The organization and, more importantly, individuals dealing with NSAs must establish their neutrality as having a purely humanitarian or development mission. There should be no actual or perceived impression of having other agendas, particularly association with the military and in the case of Taleban any other religious agendas.

Local Staff: Impartial local staff that have good understanding of the NSAs including cultural sensitivities play an important role. For the purpose of dialogue, just any local staff will not be effective. For example staff who have lived outside the country for a long time or in big cities within the country with no good knowledge of the rural areas may be a liability rather than an asset for dialogue.

Cultural/Religious arguments: Some arguments may seem very rational to the aid workers. Those, however, may not work in contexts that NSAs operate. Therefore, advance homework regarding cultural and religious arguments is a must. For instance in the case of Taleban we used strong religious arguments including quotes for the Holy Quran to convince them to ban landmines.

NOT As Seen on TV: While some NSAs are indeed outlaws with inhumane methods of operations, it will be a mistake to put all NSAs in one jacket. Most of them fight for a cause that has broad grass roots support. Some of the former NSAs are now governments. Therefore, dialogue or lack of it based on media claims or how dominant powers paint them will not serve humanitarian and development cause.

It is important to note that during dialogue with NSAs, we don't have to agree or disagree with their cause. We must remain focused on our aim of serving the population living in areas of their control, without debating NSAs cause. In fact, it is essential to remove one's perspective from how NSAs may be portrayed in Western media.

Remain Focused on well Defined Results: Remain focused on objective limited to your operations. It will not serve humanitarian cause to debate broader agendas with NSAs. For instance we remained focused on landmine ban while there were temptations to bring in women, education and other issues on the table. While those in their own rights were significantly important issues, it would have taken us nowhere to package those in the landmine ban dialogue agenda. Despite this there were modest achievements in those areas as well. For instance the Mine Action Programme managed to employ female staff and have Mine Risk Education training for women during the Taleban rule.

Sustained Engagement: Dialogue is a process and not an event. There has to be continuous engagement with NSAs and not just around events and when we need them. We have to remind ourselves that no matter if we like or dislike them, we are there to serve the population in need. Therefore, people must remain in the center of what we do and who we engage with, not if we like or dislike certain groups. We must accept the reality that they are there and we have to deal with them. Politics must be removed from humanitarian engagement.

I would like to conclude with what I said earlier that dialogue is a process of unfolding minds and hearts to understand and work together for a common cause without necessarily endorsing each other's cause. So it is essential to find common grounds and in most cases the common ground is the people and civilians in need of humanitarian and development assistance to be free from dependencies.
