

The Case of Afghanistan

Prepared for Groupe URD by

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Commissioned by ALNAP

Active Learning Network for Accountability and
Performance in Humanitarian Action

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FOREWORD

Since its foundation in 1997, the Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) has consistently highlighted the relationship between humanitarian agencies and affected populations as critical to the accountability and performance of the Humanitarian Sector, and the active participation of affected populations as fundamental to their self-determination and dignity.

Although ALNAP member agencies share an understanding of the right of affected people to have a say in actions affecting their lives, given the difficulties in the midst of an emergency, many questions remain as to how, when and with whom. The debate on participation in humanitarian action, albeit well intentioned, has been characterised by assumption and expectation, with too little supporting evidence and too little participation by members of the affected populations.

The global study on the consultation with and participation by affected populations in humanitarian action is the first major effort to seek answers and increase understanding through a direct focus on current practice in the field – eg, how do agencies and affected populations interact? what are the opportunities for participation? why are such opportunities lost? – combining researcher, practitioner, national and international perspectives in each of the study teams. However, participation is not a simple matter of methodology, it requires a willingness to share power, to recognise and respond to the rights of affected populations and to support self-determination proactively.

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While not expecting simple answers, the Steering Group has high expectations of the Global Study, which aims to provide humanitarian agencies and their personnel with guidance, insights and reference points to help determine, in dialogue with affected populations, how to maximise participation in a given situation.

The Afghan study is one of a series of six country studies and resulting monographs that, together with an extensive literature review, provide the basis for a Practitioner Handbook and Overview Book.

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ACRONYMS

ACTED	Aide à la Coopération Technique Et au Développement
ACF	Anaba Community Forum
ADA	Afghan Development Association
AIA	Afghan Interim Authority
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (in humanitarian action)
CB	Consultative Board (of the Community Forums)
CF	Community Forums
CFDO	Community Forum Development Organisation
CFW	Cash-for-Work
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Office
FoodAC	Food for Asset Creation
FFW	Food-for-Work
Groupe URD	Groupe Urgence–Réhabilitation–Développement (Emergency–Rehabilitation–Development)
Habitat (UNCHS)	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IOM	International Office for Migration
MADERA	Mission d’Aide au Développement des Economies Rurales Afghanes
MOH	Ministry of Health
MRRD	Ministry of Rehabilitation and Rural Development
MSF-B	Médecins Sans Frontières – Belgique
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation

NSP	National Solidarity Programme
SCA	Swedish Committee for Afghanistan
SCF-US	Save the Children Foundation – USA
SFC	Supplementary Feeding Centre
SFL	Shelter For Life
TBA	Traditional Birth Attendant
TFC	Therapeutic Feeding Centre
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation

AFGHANISTAN



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Part 1

INTRODUCTION

The Global Study on Consultation with and Participation by Beneficiaries and Affected Populations in the Process of Planning, Managing, Monitoring and Evaluating Humanitarian Action encompasses six country case studies. The country case studies, their related monographs and an extensive literature review, provide the basis for two further Global Study outputs: a *Practitioner Handbook* and an *Overview Book*.

The March 2002 earthquakes in Nahrin, Baghlan Province, provide the focus for the Afghanistan study, making it the first of the case studies to look at participation in the context of a rapid-onset natural disaster.

The fieldwork took place in August 2002, in parallel with a Quality Project mission¹ undertaken by an extended Groupe URD team. This allowed the Nahrin findings to be interpreted in the light of broader observation of consultation and participation in other regions of Afghanistan, highlighting in particular issues relating to sectoral interventions (food security, nutrition, health, shelter). A follow-up mission took place in January 2003.

The general hypothesis being explored by the Global Study is that the active consultation and participation of crisis-affected populations in measures to assist them is both feasible and beneficial. The study aims to

identify current practice on participation and consultation, the associated benefits and risks, and to understand factors that constrain or facilitate the practice of participation.

In the Afghan case study, participation in humanitarian action is understood to be the active involvement of beneficiaries and affected populations in the various phases of the project cycle. Consultation is considered to be one type of participation.

Part 2

CONTEXT

Afghanistan has seen diverse humanitarian interventions over the past years, but never on the scale that followed September 11. The fall of the Taliban, and the process of political stabilisation that ensued, mobilised a great number of international and local humanitarian actors, fostering (to some extent) a climate of competition between agencies for visibility and funds. This was reflected in the speed and scale of the response to the earthquakes in Nahrin.

Nahrin, an area already affected by years of war and drought, was struck by two earthquakes in late March 2002. Within 24 hours, and over the following two weeks, emergency clinics, tents, food distributions, etc. were set up by a variety of humanitarian actors to respond to the needs of the affected population. At the time of the study (four months later), only a handful of aid agencies remained. Housing reconstruction was both their main priority and the local population's.

Of particular interest, are the *shuras* (community assemblies), a traditional process of consultation and participation that is inherent to social organisation in Afghanistan. However, 20 years of war and humanitarian crises (drought, earthquakes, etc) has led to widespread destitution and massive population displacements, affecting the social fabric of the country.

Part 3

FINDINGS

Informants (community members, Afghan and international aid workers, and government representatives) were asked what their understanding of participation and consultation was, as well as what types of participatory approaches had been put in place as part of the aid programmes. The two most common answers, and most common types of participation observed by the team, were the consultation of beneficiaries and beneficiary contributions in labour or materials.

Some Afghan aid workers and Afghan NGOs placed greater emphasis on the need to 'help people become more organised in order to participate in decisions that affect their lives and in the reconstruction of the country'. Approaches looking to build the capacity of local communities and beneficiaries to implement their own initiatives were, nevertheless, rare among international programmes. One of the few examples seen in Afghanistan was that of the Community Forums, created by Habitat in 1995.

The study also revealed that community members and beneficiaries have little understanding of how the international aid system works, so that it is difficult for them to engage proactively with it. At the same time, it is common for international aid agencies to remain unaware of local initiatives or local potential for collaborative action. When affected populations are consulted or involved, there is rarely the opportunity to take part in decision making. As for participation in acute emergencies such as the Nahrin earthquakes, many informants (both international and Afghan aid workers) considered that the need to respond quickly and the severity of the impact on the local populations, made it difficult to engage in consultation and/or participation. In fact, no examples of participation and consultation during the immediate earthquake response were identified.

Part 3 also reviews the nature of participation in relation to the various stages of the project cycle, with an analysis of the benefits and constraints

of each. In line with the Nahrin study, findings from the parallel Quality Project mission also illustrate how enhanced participation and consultation can improve the relevance and quality of aid operations in all sectors of intervention. Examples are provided for the nutrition, health, food security and shelter sectors. The research carried out in Nahrin was enriched by insights provided by other programmes throughout Afghanistan.

Part 4

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight a number of benefits associated with participation and consultation of affected populations, which include ensuring actions are more responsive, appropriate and effective in addressing affected people's priority needs. Strong collaboration and relationships of mutual trust can facilitate access to various population groups and increase the safety of aid workers. Building local capacity and devolving responsibility also allows the implementation of activities where access is restricted or the NGO absent. The genuine involvement of local populations in humanitarian action not only enhances sustainability but also empowers people to build on interventions in the future. Equally importantly, the participation and consultation of populations – which even in its most minimal form, that of keeping affected populations informed, is not always done – demonstrates respect and accountability towards recipients of aid.

Nevertheless, participation may entail risks for the affected population and may not always be feasible, so that it is important to be aware of the factors that constrain it. Contextual factors include access difficulties (due to security, geography, social characteristics); the nature and impact of the crisis; and, the number of aid actors present. Social/cultural factors including local power structures and decision-making processes (which can often exclude the most vulnerable sections of the population); previous exposure to aid (which can bias attitudes towards assistance); the capacity to participate (for example, availability of time and labour); and,

gender segregation. Aid agency-related factors include mandates (for example, emergency versus development); institutional culture (which often determines the type of human resources required); staff turnover; duration and existing presence of a project in a region; and, nature of relations with the affected populations.

Some of the study's findings suggest or support the idea that participation and consultation of affected populations in acute emergencies is not always possible due to time restrictions and the impact of the crisis on the population. However, in most emergencies, aid agencies do not arrive until a few days after the disaster, while the local population organises itself in the immediate aftermath to assist those most affected. This was the case in Nahrin where people immediately mobilised to check on neighbouring villages, as well as to help rescue people trapped under the rubble and bury the dead. However, given the political and humanitarian context the humanitarian response was rapid and left little space in which local initiatives could develop. It is often the case that aid agencies arrive with 'ready-made' interventions that are applied with very little consultation and participation and ignore local initiatives.

This section raises questions about whether aid agencies can work towards recognising local initiatives, even in acute emergencies, so as to support or complement them by filling the gaps that local initiatives are unable to cover.

Part 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

In Afghanistan, the political and humanitarian situation over the past 20 years has been such that provision of aid has been mainly relief programming, delivered as top-down, blueprint operations, with little participation and consultation of affected populations. Afghanistan is now on the road to political stability. This is engendering a common desire and will among humanitarian actors (Afghan communities, local aid agencies,

government institutions, and international aid agencies) to work together towards the reconstruction of the country.

Recommendations highlight actions that those engaged in humanitarian action (including donors) should consider when seeking to adopt, or develop, more participatory approaches in Afghanistan.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

The participation and consultation of affected populations and beneficiaries in humanitarian action now seem widely accepted as crucial to effective social targeting, resource utilisation, accountability, sustainability and impact. Beyond operational considerations, for some, participation is a fundamental right of citizenship, essential to survival, self-protection and self-actualisation, in humanitarian emergencies. It is also a means through which humanitarian actors can demonstrate their respect for disaster-affected populations. As such, the participation of affected populations has become a central tenet of policy for a number of humanitarian agencies.

Despite policy-level commitments, there remains wide variation in practice. It is against this background that ALNAP commissioned the Global Study on Consultation with and Participation by Affected Populations in the Planning, Managing, Monitoring and Evaluation of Humanitarian Action, with the core objectives of:

- assessing current consultation and participation practice in a range of emergency contexts;
- identifying examples of good practice;
- identifying gaps or inadequacies in current practice and contributing factors; and
- improving understanding of participation and consultation practice.

A series of six country case studies tests the hypothesis that active consultation with, and participation by, crisis-affected populations in measures to assist them is both feasible and beneficial. It also provides the empirical field data for the global project, seeking to reveal the mechanisms through which the voice of affected populations can be enhanced within the humanitarian system, while remaining alert to the difficulties of engaging in such processes in emergency contexts.

The trend towards increased participation is underpinned by growing recognition that beneficiaries are not just passive recipients of humanitarian aid, but social actors with insights into their situation, and competencies, energy and ideas that can be harnessed to improve their circumstances. As the primary stakeholders in humanitarian action, affected populations are situated at the centre of the Global Study, which attempts to understand how they perceive and interact with the myriad of governmental, international, national, local and other institutions that manage, regulate, control and influence the delivery of humanitarian assistance and protection. Wherever possible, successful consultative and participatory mechanisms and initiatives are identified and promoted.

In addition to the six country monographs and a *Practitioner Handbook*, the wider issues revealed by the case studies, for example inherent challenges and contradictions that exist in attempts to engage in participative approaches, are discussed in an *Overview Book*, where the results of the theoretical and field research and analysis are compiled.

The selection of the case studies has sought to capture a broad diversity of characteristics associated with emergency contexts.

This Afghanistan Monograph is organised into four parts. The first provides an introduction to the case study and methodology used; the second gives a brief description of the historical, geographical and social context of Afghanistan and Nahrin in particular; the third presents the findings of the study and analyses the benefits and constraints associated with participatory approaches in humanitarian action. Part 4 concludes

this analysis by reviewing the factors that affect participation and consultation, while Part 5 provides recommendations that aid agencies can consider when seeking to engage in more participatory approaches to humanitarian action in Afghanistan and comparable contexts.

1.2 THE AFGHANISTAN CASE STUDY

1.2.1 The Selection of Nahrin (Afghanistan)

The Afghanistan case study's focus on the earthquakes that shook Nahrin (Baghlan Province) in March 2002 provides the Global Study with its first insights into participation and consultation in humanitarian action within the context of a sudden-onset natural disaster, albeit in a country emerging from twenty years of conflict.

The field research in Nahrin took place in August 2002, just four months after the earthquakes, and in parallel with a Groupe URD/Quality Project mission² looking at technical sectors in other regions of Afghanistan. Two members³ of the overall five-member team (specialists in health, nutrition, food security and shelter) and an Afghan research assistant undertook the Nahrin study. Although the other specialists had a sectoral remit, they were also mandated to look at crosscutting issues, and in particular that of participation in humanitarian action, providing additional material on which the Nahrin study could draw and build.

The characteristics particular to the Nahrin study are those of a natural disaster within the context of a complex post-crisis situation that triggered a major international emergency response (international NGOs, bi- and multi-lateral donors and UN agencies). It was undertaken within a timeframe that was short enough to enable a retrospective analysis of the initial response to the earthquakes, while being long enough to allow a review of what remained of these interventions and any more recent

programmes. The study introduces a sectoral slant on participatory approaches highlighting specific issues arising. Finally, it benefited from the ability to review the Nahrin findings in the light of those of the parallel Quality Project mission looking at, among other things, participation in other regions and contexts within Afghanistan

1.2.2 Conceptual Issues

In the present case study, participation in humanitarian action is understood to be the involvement of beneficiaries and affected populations (see definitions of these terms in section 1.2.3 below) in the various phases of the project cycle, including assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Consultation is considered to be one type of participation.

The following classification, adapted from a 'typology of participation for development projects'⁴, has been used to identify and order the various types and levels of participation encountered during the research.

- i. **Passive participation** people are informed of what is going to occur or what has occurred. Although informing people of measures concerning them can be seen as an essential sign of respect, it is not always done, and when information is shared, it is often incomplete.
- ii. **Participation through the supply of information** people reply to questions, but are not able to influence the process that follows.
- iii. **Participation by consultation** people are asked to give their point of view on a given subject, but informants do not have a decision-making role, and the interviewers do not have an obligation to take into consideration informants' points of view.
- iv. **Participation through the supply of materials** beneficiaries or local populations supply part of the materials needed for implementation.
- v. **Participation through the supply of labour** beneficiaries or local populations supply all or part of the labour needed for programme. This can be in exchange for a contribution in cash or kind from the aid agency.
- vi. **Interactive participation** the beneficiaries and local populations

participate in the analysis of needs and programme conception. They have a decision-making power.

- vii. **Local initiatives** the local populations take initiatives in terms of action, independently of outside agencies or institutions. They can call upon such institutions to support their initiatives, but the project is initiated and run by the community.

These various types of participation will be referred to in Part 3.

1.2.3 Methodological Issues

The Afghan population has, as the recipient of international aid for two decades, seen numerous interventions implemented by various agencies using a diversity of approach. This is an important factor in seeking to understand the situation in Nahrin.

The following questions were raised specifically in the context of Nahrin:

- How do different stakeholders (for example, aid recipients, affected populations and aid workers) perceive and/or define participation in humanitarian action, in response to a rapid-onset natural disaster?
- What types of participatory processes were put in place following the earthquake?
- What factors facilitated or constrained putting participatory approaches into practice?
- What are the benefits–risks associated with participatory approaches in this type of emergency?
- How did the wider context of the event (a major international aid mobilisation in a complex post-crisis situation, including actors with little previous experience of Afghanistan) affect the response, in terms of participation and consultation?

Data collection methods

To facilitate data collection and analysis, the following typology of stakeholders involved in humanitarian aid was developed:

Table 1 Typology of Stakeholders in the Afghan Context

Local Population	Afghan Aid Workers	International Aid Workers	The Afghan Interim Authority
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Community members ■ <i>Shura</i>⁵ members ■ Leaders (elders, commanders ...) ■ Affected population ■ Beneficiaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Local NGOs staff ■ Afghan staff of international NGOs and UN agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ INGO staff ■ UN agency staff ■ Donor representatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Government representatives (governor, etc.) ■ Representatives of line ministries

The groupings listed in the ‘Local Population’ column are by no means discrete, with members of the local population often belonging to two or more of the groupings simultaneously. In Nahrin, for example, nearly all of the local population was affected by the earthquake, albeit to varying degrees. So, the community members, *shura* members and leaders met by the research team were all part of the ‘affected population’, and many, though not all, were beneficiaries of some kind of assistance.

In this study, ‘community members’ refers to the population of a given area (village or *manteqa*). It includes *shura* members (see section 2.1.2) and community ‘leaders’, the men that wield primary influence (as recognised by the local population), and who are generally key members of the *shura*.

The following data collection methods were used:

- **Interviews with key informants** local and international NGO staff involved in the emergency response (some of those who had left by the time of the study were interviewed in Kabul or Mazar-I-Sharif); local and international NGO staff working on new initiatives at the time of the study; local inhabitants and aid recipients; Afghanistan specialist academics; aid actors who had worked in other regions of Afghanistan, with a good knowledge of the wider context;

- formal and informal focus group discussions, including two shuras in earthquake-affected villages;
- visits to earthquake-affected sites and projects;
- participation in meetings between an agency and local community representatives; and,
- review of secondary sources (for example, assessment reports, evaluation of emergency intervention, texts on the Afghan context).

A second visit to Afghanistan in January/February 2003 (on behalf of the Quality Project mission) allowed for feedback from agencies, following the dissemination of an early draft of this monograph, and an update of findings on the basis of more recent developments.

1.2.4 Scope and Limits of the Study

Although the Afghan study focuses on the response to the Nahrin earthquakes, the findings presented in this monograph also provide insights into participatory processes in other regions of Afghanistan, visited by the Quality Project team. A review of mission and project reports, linked to programmes implemented in-country in the past few years, complemented the field data.

Given the specificities of any context, careful analysis is required in trying to extrapolate the Nahrin findings to seemingly comparable situations: that is, a humanitarian response to a natural disaster in the context of a complex post-crisis situation to which there has been a major international response.

The limits and constraints that weighed on the research as a whole were:

- the time needed for transport and difficulty accessing certain regions, most notably because of landmines;
- the difficulty of finding a female translator;
- the difficulty of accessing women, which prevented in-depth discussion with female members of the community in Nahrin;

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- the high turnover of agency staff, and the departure of most of the agencies that had responded to the Nahrin earthquakes requiring many actors to be traced, which was not always possible.

The constraints faced by the researchers are the same constraints that affect practitioners' ability to engage in participation and consultation in humanitarian action. It was therefore important for the research team to experience those difficulties first hand, as a key consideration in the development of the *Practitioner Handbook*.

2

CONTEXT

Part 2 presents a historical and social context. The first section describes geographic and social organisation (key factors affecting aid interventions and the relationship between aid agencies and local populations) and provides an overview of the twenty years of conflict and humanitarian response. The second section presents the social and humanitarian situation specific to Nahrin.

2.1 AN INTRODUCTION TO AFGHANISTAN

2.1.1 A Land of Mountains

The mountain ranges of Afghanistan are the backbone around which the country was gradually defined throughout its troubled history. The geography of the country is harsh: peaks in the Hindu Kush and Central Highlands often reach 6,000m, while passes rarely lie below 3,000m. The high passes and the impenetrable valleys have continually limited the influence of Kabul governments and kept mountain peoples in a state of isolation. In these areas, rural livelihoods are based on irrigated agriculture and herding. Many peoples lead a semi-nomadic existence, leaving their villages for summer grazing areas (*aylakh*) at higher altitudes.

A large part of Afghanistan's economic activity and infrastructure is concentrated in the plains around the mountain ranges and where the main cities lie (Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat, Mazar, Faizabad). Most of

the country is arid, especially the southern deserts and northern steppes. The exceptions are the irrigated valleys and plains benefiting from the spring thaw, such as that around Jalalabad in the east, and around Pul-e-Khumri in the north. Elsewhere, the arid climate exposes the population to regular droughts, most recently the one it has been experiencing since 1999.

The geography and ecology of the country have contributed to the shaping of the social and political reality in Afghanistan, a country of great ethnic diversity and fiercely independent peoples that have been isolated from much of the economic development of the twentieth century. These features have also impacted on the nature of the conflict and the humanitarian response that came in its wake.

2.1.2 An Introduction to Afghan Social Organisation

Ethnicity, land, and religion: Afghan identities

An Afghan will first identify himself according to his ethnic group and the wider Islamic community (the *umma*). Islam is a fundamental aspect of the cultural and social foundation of Afghan communities. Most Afghans are Sunni Muslims, except for the Hazaras and a minority of Tajiks near the Iranian border that are Shiite, and a small population of Ismaelis in Badakshan. The main ethnic groups are the Pashtun (40 per cent), Tajik (30 per cent), Uzbek (10 per cent), Hazara (8 per cent), Turkmen and Baluch⁶, with a degree of segregation between them. The Pashtun have tended to dominate the Afghan political scene, whereas the Hazaras have tended to be marginalised.

The way ethnicity is defined is complex and dynamic. Membership of an ethnic group can rest on kinship (for example, Pashtuns, for whom membership of a clan or tribe is transmitted through the male lineage), territorial origin (for example, Hazaras, Nuristanis), language (Tajik), and/or religion (for example, Hazaras, Ismaelis). Furthermore, for the Pashtun, being Pashtu is not simply determined by clan membership or language,

but requires one to follow the *Pashtunwali* (the way of the Pashtun), an oral code of values and behaviours that regulates the Pashtu way of life. ‘Is Pashtu not one who speaks Pashtu, but one who behaves as a Pashtu.’⁷

Accordingly, units of social organisation and political structures will vary locally. They can be defined according to filial ties (the tribe or clan), or to the area of residence or origin (the village, or the *manteqa* – a group of villages, usually in a geographically coherent area, as defined by the local population)⁸. Key elements of social organisation are common to peoples throughout the country, but the social situation varies in time and place, both within and between ethnic groups.

Local leaders

Before the war, local leaders (*maleks* or *khans*) tended to be relatively wealthy community members (for example, large landowners), heads of influential families and/or respected elders (‘white beards’: *rish-safed*). *Khans* or *maleks* are at the head of a *qowm*, or ‘solidarity network’, which can have a tribal or a territorial base. The *qowm* can exist at different levels: from the village or mosque, to the tribe or even an entire ethnic group. It is based on three notions: identity, trust, and solidarity⁹.

Leaders obtain their legitimacy through their capacity to access and redistribute resources (land, cash, food, etc) and to defend and promote the interests of their *qowm*, so that the power structure is dynamic and variable. Power relations tend to be defined along patron-client lines, and anyone who is in a position to mediate between the group (clients) and a source of power or resources, will see his prestige increased. Before the war, government officials were placed at the provincial (*wali*), district (*woloswal*) and sub-district (*alaqadar*) levels, but had no real authority within communities. *Maleks* would generally act as intermediaries between their *qowm* and the government via these officials.

The war has inevitably changed local power dynamics, and the influence of armed, often young, commanders increased at the expense of their elders. These young commanders obtained their legitimacy in the

resistance to the Soviet invasion, by representing their *qowm* in the Mujahiddin parties based in Peshawar from which they obtained financial support and weapons.

The humanitarian situation and the presence of aid agencies, as providers of resources, have also affected local power relations: where to act as an intermediary between the provider and community is a way to acquire considerable influence. For example, in the camps in Pakistan, individuals who could play the role of intermediary between camp populations and Pakistani authorities and aid agencies, saw their prestige and influence enhanced.

Traditional regulation and consultation mechanisms

In the absence of a national legal system, traditional regulation mechanisms have remained key to maintaining the local order. They are based on Islamic law (Sharia) and traditional and moral values such as those enshrined in the *Pashtunwali*, a fundamental aspect of Pashtun culture. Similar codes are found in other groups.

The key values of the *Pashtunwali* are personal pride, honour and courage, as well as the notion of service, protection and hospitality. For a Pashtu, the most precious assets to defend are the trilogy: *zan* (woman), *zar* (gold), *zamin* (land/property). Where the *Pashtunwali* is in contradiction with Sharia¹⁰, it tends to supersede. The *Pashtunwali* sets out rules for compensation and vengeance, often leading to vendettas, but also promotes moderation and arbitration. These last require mediation, mostly done through *jirgas* ('circle' in Pashtu), where male community members, and in particular elders, determine the outcome of a dispute.

These informal assemblies (*jirgas*, or *shura* in Persian) are consultative decision-making processes inherent to Afghan social organisation. Any decision concerning the community is made via these assemblies where discussion continues until all are in agreement. A *shura* or *jirga* is not a fixed entity, but convened as and when required, for a given reason or issue. Any male community member may attend¹¹. The representative nature of these

consultative processes in respect of the whole community varies according to the influence and power of local leaders and influential community members (*maleks*, commanders, etc). It is common for a vocal minority to wield disproportionate influence.

The war has also had an impact on these traditional mechanisms. The increase in violence and banditry, and the loss of legitimacy of *white beards* to commanders has limited the space for consultation through *jirgas* and *shuras*. Population movements, by separating communities, have also dismantled many village assemblies. However, Pierre and Micheline Centlivres¹² suggest that, since the 1980s, the presence of NGOs has contributed to formalising the *shura* and the role it currently fulfils, as intermediary between agencies and communities.

The role of religious leaders

There are several religious figures in Afghan society: the *mullah*, or village preacher; the *maolawi*, or scholar of Islam; *sayyed*, a laymen proclaimed to be a descendant of the Prophet; *pir*, a charismatic figure sometimes at the head of a *sufi* community; and Islamic fundamentalists, concerned with political Islam.¹³

According to some,¹⁴ there is no truly structured religious authority in Afghanistan, or if it exists, it is very rare. The war has led to the disappearance of most religious figures (for example, the great *sufi* spiritual leaders). In villages, the religious representative is the *mullah*, who is not a clergyman but a community member chosen by the community because of his faith or wisdom and who has not necessarily been to a *madrassa* (Islamic school). He is consulted on issues of morality and custom, but does not normally have a political or economic role, which lie with the *maleks* or commanders.

The position of women

The position of women in Afghanistan is traditionally marginalised. According to the *Pashtunwali*, and in most Afghan communities, the

honour of the family is tied to women's purity. Women are not therefore allowed any contact with men outside their family and are mostly confined to their homes with little participation in the public political life of their community.

Women do however (especially in rural areas) have their own close hierarchical networks, a source of support and solidarity¹⁵. They play a very important role in the domestic sphere and household economy. The alienation of women is most strongly felt in urban areas, where the pressure to be veiled (for example, with the *tchadri*) or to stay at home is greater due to the wider exposure to strangers.

In the 1950s women in the urban intelligentsia in Kabul, Mazar or Herat were becoming more emancipated as they gained access to education and employment. In the 1970s (although still shocking to most Afghans) one might see unveiled young women in mini-skirts in the streets of Kabul. However, many of the elite, which included these emancipated women, fled the war to Europe, the US, or Australia.

The Taliban regime reinforced and institutionalised traditional practices of gender segregation, making women's employment illegal and depriving them of education. Women were obliged to wear the *tchadri*, and could not travel without a male member of their family (*mahram*), and the reinforcement of segregation between men and women greatly reduced their access to healthcare. Although some of these practices were current prior to the Taliban regime (and are still seen today), many urban women suffered greatly from these measures, which also impacted on aid agencies' access to women.

To gain access to women, agencies needed to hire female staff, but even where they succeeded, they faced difficulties working with male colleagues (for example, separate offices for men and women) or in travelling for their work. The absence of education for women also made it more difficult to find qualified female staff, a constraint still felt today.

Though the situation has improved with the departure of the Taliban, cultural sensitivity around gender issues remains high and agency access to women for aid projects is still difficult.

2.1.3 History of the Conflict and Humanitarian Response

In more than twenty years of war in Afghanistan, the stakes, dynamics, and parties to the conflict have continually evolved. Initially one of the theatres of the Cold War, following the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan descended into internal conflict grounded in tribal and ethnic oppositions and fuelled by the geopolitical strategies of neighbouring powers (Pakistan, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia). The situation is further complicated by more recent external interests (the fight against Al Qaida and opium production), and the UN's efforts towards the political and humanitarian rehabilitation of the country.

The situation continues to be tragic, due to the severity of the ongoing drought, the forced repatriation of refugees from Iran and Pakistan, and ongoing hostilities in certain areas (around Mazar, Kunar, etc). The events following 11 September 2001 changed the course of history in Afghanistan, with the country, within a few months, engaged on what may prove to be the road towards peace. The challenges however are great and the political and humanitarian situation uncertain and precarious at the time of the study.

A history of the conflict and the humanitarian response is presented in Box 1.

2.1.4 The Effects of War

The war has had devastating effects on the country. Afghanistan has one of the lowest human development indicators in the world. The economy, traditionally based on agriculture, has been equally affected with a large part of cultivable land inaccessible due to landmines, despite huge efforts in demining activities. Health and education services, as well as the banking

Box 1 The Various Stages of the Afghan Conflict, and the Humanitarian Response

The Soviet invasion (1979–88) In 1973, a socialist coup d'état put an end to the monarchy. The modernist reforms of the new regime gave rise to discontent and increasing instability in rural areas, throughout 1978 and 1979, by tackling land tenure issues too abruptly and challenging traditional social relations. The Kabul regime appealed to the Soviet Union for assistance. Attracted by Afghanistan's strategic position in terms of access to the southern seas and oil, the Soviets deployed the Red Army in full force. Afghanistan became a key stake in the Cold War, with Western countries supporting the Mujahiddin resistance. This phase marked the beginnings of humanitarian aid as we know it today. It was the period of the 'French doctors' in their purest form: crossing of mountain passes at night, illegal convoys and primarily medical interventions. It also saw the beginning of large operations in the management of refugee camps, which served as a base for guerrillas. *Perestroika* and the ensuing 'détente' brought about the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1988 giving rise to a period of relative stability between 1988 and 92.

Operation Salam (1988) Operation Salam, to prepare the return of refugees, paved the way for the first large involvement of the UN and its agencies in rural areas. However, weakened by the lack of means, poor knowledge of conditions prevailing inside the country and a lack of operational partners in the field, Operation Salam has had a rather limited impact. During this phase, the network of Afghan NGOs and the culture of 'sub-contracting' were born, encouraged by the Operation Salam team.

The Civil War (1992–96) Fighting broke out again in the early 1990s between Mujahiddin factions, along ethnic lines. This war essentially took place around Kabul, which suffered massive destruction. The economy was devastated, security conditions continued to deteriorate and the targeting of civilians increased. The sense of exasperation that developed among the population paved the way for the Taliban movement, born in the *madrassas* in Pakistan.

Box 1 Continued

During this period, large relief programmes were implemented by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and by the World Food Programme (WFP) via NGOs. Though some areas remained difficult to access due to logistics and continued conflict (for example, the Central Highlands) or banditry, the political situation was relatively stable in most rural areas. In these regions, NGOs, the ICRC, and UN agencies implemented more development-oriented activities, as opposed to relief interventions. Most UN and donor agencies settled in Islamabad, while most NGOs kept their bases in Peshawar, from where they carried out assistance programmes in the camps and 'cross-border' operations, mostly on the Peshawar–Jalalabad axis.

The Taliban war (1996–2001) The Taliban movement was based primarily among Pashtun groups in the south and south-east of the country. Supported by Pakistan, and at least initially by the United States (which sought to clear an access to Central Asia), they gained control over most of the country and imposed a regime of political and religious repression.

Taliban policies gave rise to strong tensions with humanitarian organisations, sometimes leading to the temporary eviction of all NGOs based in Kabul and other permanent evictions, as well as to serious security concerns for UN personnel. The sanctions applied by the UN and the budgetary restrictions of the European Commission (for example, ECHO) did not facilitate the provision of assistance to a population that continued to suffer from the conflict and was entering one of the harshest droughts in the century.

The American intervention September 11, and the implication of Osama Bin Laden therein, led to the rapid evacuation of the expatriate teams, while the majority of their Afghan colleagues stayed behind to run ongoing programmes as best they could. The intervention of the Coalition forces, under the leadership of the US government and through the provision of support to the Northern Alliance, led to the collapse of the Taliban regime in November 2001.

Box 1 Continued

During the intervention, an impressive international mobilisation took place around the country in the expectation of a mass exodus of refugees, which did not occur. Inside the country, the Coalition forces air-dropped food rations alongside bombing raids, a practice heavily criticised. The confusion between humanitarian and military operations has been reinforced as part of a strategy to 'win hearts and minds' and fulfil the political objective of strengthening the central government.

The humanitarian intervention (2001–02) The period between November 2001 and April 2002 will probably be remembered as one of confusion, during which access to donor funds and agency visibility were among the strongest driving forces in the deployment of aid. There was a rush of hundreds of agencies in the country, some of which had no previous experience of Afghanistan. While many NGOs concentrated in the major cities and zones of high visibility (for example, Bamian, Shamali), many rural areas remained underserved. The Afghan government, faced with this wave of organisations, over-equipped in land-cruisers and modern communication systems, had an understandable reaction of rejection. The situation is calming down, though NGOs still have to prove their ability to respond to the huge needs of the population.

Political stabilisation and current issues A complex process of political reconstruction is being put in place, under the auspices of the UN. It aims to strengthen the capacity and legitimacy of the central government based in Kabul, a government that is still trying to make its mark in rural areas, in a context of growing insecurity. New questions are being raised regarding the practices of aid agencies: what kind of post-crisis strategies should they adopt? how should control be devolved to Afghan institutions? with what local human resources? with what kind of relationship between the central government in Kabul and the local power structures in the provinces?

In this context the new Afghan government is attempting, through its own means and with support from the international community, to put in place frameworks and procedures for the reconstruction and development of the country.

system, are virtually non-existent, or reduced to simple and degraded infrastructures. The drought affecting the region since 1999 (in particular the Central Highlands, the Northern Region and Southern Belt), has further contributed to the devastation of the country, leading thousands of families to sell their assets, become deeply indebted and even abandon their homes. The drastic lack of financial and human resources in the new administration leaves the population in complete destitution. In such a context, opium represents the most profitable crop and a unique source of cash for farmers, while drug trafficking provides warlords with large revenues.

The years of war made the Afghan refugee population the largest in the world, at one stage exceeding 4 million, the majority having fled to camps in Iran or Pakistan. At the time of the study, the refugee population was estimated at 2.6 million. The civil war and drought contributed to a slowing down of the return process, and led to massive internal displacements. Since the fall of the Taliban and the deployment of international assistance, there have been large-scale returns, no doubt also prompted by the economic recession being experienced by their host countries. In just a few months, a high proportion of the refugees have returned both to urban centres and rural areas of origin, but the country's capacity to absorb these returnees remains limited. It is feared that the current refugees, IDPs and recent returnees have not seen the last of their travels.

2.2 AN INTRODUCTION TO NAHRIN

2.2.1 Geography and Social Context

Nahrin is situated in the Baghlan Province of Northern Afghanistan. It is a mountainous and arid area, strategically positioned in the highlands above Pul-e-Khumri (provincial capital), between the Salang Pass, the road to Mazar and access roads to remote provinces in the North East. Several

livelihoods are found in the region: rainfed agriculture (mostly wheat); herding (nomads and semi-nomads); and some irrigated agriculture and orchards (pistachios, raisins, etc). Nahrin's position on strategic routes (for example, the connection between Pul-e-Khumri and North Eastern provinces) also favours trade activities.

The northern region of Afghanistan is largely populated by Turkish peoples (who settled in the region in the eleventh century and today include Uzbeks and Turkmens) and Pashtuns (who settled there following Emir Abdur Rahman's 'pashtunisation' campaigns to strengthen state control in non-Pashtun areas). The north-eastern mountains are largely populated by Tajik, Persian-speaking peoples. The population of Baghlan province, which lies at the crossroads of these regions, is ethnically diverse, consisting mainly of Pashtun, Uzbeks and Tajiks.

The nature of local leaders and modes of social regulation vary according to each village or *manteqa*. In some villages there is strong cohesion around the 'white beards' (elders), while in others local commanders have more influence. In the urban centre of Nahrin itself (Markaz Nahrin), there seems to be less social cohesion. This may be due to the higher level of heterogeneity in the social setting as a result of the bazaar and Markaz Nahrin's 'district-town' status. In the villages, however, the *shura* or *jirga* are still the key forum for discussion and decision making on issues concerning the community and, notably, used by some NGOs to communicate and consult with the local population.

2.2.2 The Conflict and Humanitarian Situation

As with most areas of Afghanistan, Nahrin has also been affected by the conflicts that have plagued the country. During the civil war between the Taliban and Northern Alliance, the Nahrin area remained under the Alliance's control until a strong Taliban offensive in late 2000. During the recent American military intervention, fighting in the region was quite intense and Nahrin only came under Northern Alliance control just weeks before the fall of the Taliban regime in November 2001.

Many of the inhabitants of Nahrin also fled the fighting, mainly to the refugee camps in Pakistan. Quite apart from the direct effects of the fighting (destruction, loss of life, etc), landmines left by the various factions still threaten the population, reducing access to cultivable land and threatening loss of life and injury.

Nahrin has also been affected by the drought, which has led to loss of livestock, sale of assets, mortgaging of land, indebtedness, although the rainfall has improved this year allowing some rain-fed wheat to be cultivated¹⁶. Refugees from the area have started returning from Pakistan, but face considerable challenges, including those of rebuilding homes and cultivating mined and dried lands.

As with many rural and isolated areas, Nahrin has tended to be underserved by aid agencies, although the attention paid to the region has increased since before the earthquakes. At that time, only two NGOs were present in the region: ACTED, distributing wheat for WFP in response to the drought, and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) managing a clinic.

2.2.3 The Earthquakes and Humanitarian Response

On the evening of 25 March 2002, an earthquake hit the Nahrin district, registering 6.2 on the Richter scale. The epicentre of the earthquake was located in Markaz Nahrin, one of the six *mantegas* in the district, and the destruction caused by the earthquake was concentrated in a 15km radius around Markaz Nahrin. The latter was completely destroyed, while three other areas also suffered damage: Sujaan, Kohgadai, and Djelga. A few days later, on 12 April, a second earthquake hit the area, damaging villages unaffected by the first earthquake and causing further devastated in already affected areas. It is estimated that the number of casualties was between 300 and 500. ACTED estimated that 7,000 families lost their homes as a result of the earthquakes¹⁷.

The first response of the local inhabitants was to help rescue victims from the rubble, bury the dead and care for the wounded. The word spread throughout the vicinity with inhabitants from neighbouring areas coming to assist affected villagers with the clearing of bodies.

The wider response was also extremely rapid. The Kabul Government immediately sent officials to evaluate the damage and demonstrate its support – for example, Ministry of Public Health staff to set up temporary clinics. Medical NGOs were the first to respond, with Médecins Sans Frontières–Belgium (MSF–B) deploying its emergency medical team and setting up mobile clinics and a referral system to Pul-e-Khumri hospital, within a day. The SCA staff was also active, despite the destruction of their clinic in the earthquake. The UN responded within 48 hours with the distribution of food (WFP) and tents (UNHCR). These first were followed by dozens of NGOs, but, within a couple of weeks of the emergency being over, most had left.

Both humanitarian and political stakes played a key role in determining the speed and scale of the response. For the government, a presence was central to the building of its national legitimacy. For agencies, visibility in a highly competitive funding environment was also an important driving force.

While the speed and scale of the external response can be seen as positive, it left very little space for local responses to be developed.

2.2.4 The Situation in August 2002

At the time of the Nahrin study, few NGOs remained in the region. Of those that did, the largest were shelter reconstruction programmes being implemented by ACTED and Shelter for Life. Medical programmes were also being run: SCA (clinic in Markaz Nahrin) and Ibn Sina (mobile clinics), with other medical agencies considering opening new health centres, and a WHO health education programme in the process of being launched. ‘Food-Ac’ (Food for Asset Creation) programmes, such as road

rehabilitation, as well as water, sanitation, and irrigation projects were also being implemented.

In local areas not affected by the earthquake, medical and/or rehabilitation programmes were being run in response to the chronic needs of the population and those of returnees. Though the level of humanitarian activity was not on a large scale compared to some 'popular sites' (for example, Bamian), it would appear that the temporary spotlight on the area following the earthquakes favoured the longer-term settlement of some NGOs in the area.

Attention in Nahrin at that time focused primarily on reconstruction programmes aiming to provide housing using earthquake mitigation techniques to prevent loss of life and limit damage in case of future earthquakes. However, the techniques were new to most villagers, which did not facilitate rapid implementation, and not all families in the region were beneficiaries, so that many feared still being without shelter by the arrival of winter (nights are already very cold by October). Furthermore, the precarious situation of villagers in terms of food and economic security put considerable stress on households trying to meet their basic needs.

The Global Study research team arrived in Nahrin having crossed most of the Central and Northern regions by road and traced aid workers that had been present during the earthquake response, in Kabul and Mazar. By visiting sites, talking to villagers and aid workers, and engaging in *shuras*, the team attempted to gain first-hand experience of the consultation and participation practices and mechanisms being used in the context of Nahrin.

3

FINDINGS

This chapter is organised into three sections. In the first, various stakeholders' perceptions and approaches to participation are described. The second section presents the types of participation seen in each phase of the project cycle, and the benefits and constraints associated with each of them. The third section highlights issues related to participation and consultation in four sectors of intervention: food security, nutrition, health and shelter.

3.1 STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON PARTICIPATION AND CONSULTATION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

The definitions of participation and consultation, and what these entail, vary according to the stakeholder (see Table 1, section 1.2.3). The following presents the points of view of the Afghan population (*shura* members, beneficiaries, etc), Afghan aid workers, international aid workers, and a new actor on the Afghan humanitarian scene: the Afghan government.

3.1.1 The Afghan Population's Perspective

As noted in section 1.2.3, the terms 'Local' and here 'Afghan' population, encompass various groupings: beneficiaries, affected population, *shura* members, etc, that are not in themselves discrete. Indeed, most Afghans

have been affected by conflict, drought or earthquakes, or, as in the case of the Nahrin population, all three, so that these groups are dealt with collectively in the following section.

When investigating perspectives on participation in humanitarian action within the Afghan population (in Nahrin and elsewhere), the researchers found that informants tended to recount what had actually happened in the programmes/projects in which they had been involved, rather than provide a more expanded conceptual notion of their understanding of participation and consultation.

Limited understanding of the international humanitarian system and how it functions is clearly a major factor impacting on the perceptions and expectations of Afghans in respect of humanitarian aid and how they engage with it. However, though all too rarely recognised or supported by international aid agencies, the researchers observed several examples of local initiatives (some of which are described below) that marry with level vii 'Local initiatives' in the typology of participation (see section 1.2.2).

Participation and consultation in international humanitarian action

When people in Nahrin were asked how the community had reacted and participated in response to the earthquakes, most told us of how villagers from the area had mobilised to help the families of victims clear the rubble to find their relatives, bury the dead and take the wounded to the medical posts.

*‘ The people were lost, they did not know what to do. ’
Local inhabitant, Nahrin.*

The nature of their engagement in the response to the disaster changed after the arrival of external aid agencies. Community members referred essentially to two types of participation in the aid programmes being implemented in Nahrin at the time of the research (somewhere within levels ii. and v. in the typology of participation).

- **Consultation on the nature of the needs in the community** One example provided by *shura* members in Nahrin was of a consultation process, led by an NGO, through which they had the opportunity to point to water as one of their priority needs (along with a school and clinic). The intervention delivered was the rehabilitation of a canal.
- **Contribution in labour** On a road between Nahrin and Burkha, being rehabilitated under a Food for Asset Creation programme, one worker remarked 'I am happy to participate in the reconstruction of the country.'

Such responses reflect the importance of consultation in Afghan communities (as described in section 2.1.2) and of involvement in collective maintenance and construction tasks.

Many of the examples of participation observed or discussed in other regions of Afghanistan also involved these two forms of participation.

The local population's perception of the international aid system

The rather narrow perspectives on participation in humanitarian action recounted by the Afghan population in dialogue with the researchers may reflect the fact that few *shura* and community members have a clear understanding of how the aid system works. This lack of understanding became evident in *shuras* and discussions, and in particular those in Nahrin, whose population witnessed a massive influx of aid agencies following the earthquakes.

The local population rarely differentiates between NGOs, donors, UN agencies and other foreign actors, who are all grouped together under the term NGO. In some respects, affected people appear to be spectators of aid, unsure how to engage proactively with the aid community. *Shura* members in Nahrin, although regularly consulted by NGOs, admitted they did not know how NGOs worked, where they got their funds, why they couldn't respond to all their demands, etc.¹⁸

‘ After the earthquake many NGOs came, we don’t know all their names. Many people came, asked us questions, took pictures, and left. ’ Shura, *Doabi*.

One result is that when community members have a request or complaint to address to an agency, they do not know who to address it to. This gives them a sense of powerlessness with regards to the aid system.

‘ People were very unhappy [about the way aid was distributed], but we thought if we go somewhere to complain, they will not listen to us. ’ Shura member, *Nahrin, concerning the food and tent distribution after the earthquake*.

An Afghan aid worker emphasized how the relationship between the Afghan population and the international aid community had changed since the post-September 11 influx of aid. NGOs benefited from a certain ‘credit’ or gratitude for simply being there. The nature and scale of the present intervention has seen Afghan beneficiaries become more demanding: ‘Afghans are now in a client/shopkeeper relationship with the aid community’. They now appear more inclined to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the presence of international aid, particularly since the highly visible running costs of the international aid community (radios, land-cruisers, computers, satellite phones, etc) have created much frustration among the Afghan population, who would prefer to see those funds spent directly on local investments. While, at the same time, another aid worker commented: ‘Afghans are not in a position to refuse whatever aid is given to them.’

Beyond participation: local initiatives

It would be inappropriate to think that the Afghan population remains passive or powerless when faced with the international aid system, or that its participation in humanitarian action is limited to consultation or contributions in labour or kind. The research team identified examples of strong local initiatives, that are often not recognised or considered by

international aid agencies, but that witness the population's own humanitarian response to the hardships it faces.

As noted above, the main local initiative during the Nahrin emergency was the mobilisation of the local population, but it seems that the speed and scale of the external response was such that there may have been little space for greater development of local initiatives.

However, in other regions of Afghanistan, interesting examples of local initiatives were encountered, such as the Anaba Community Forum, at the mouth of the Panjsher Valley (see Box 2); the repair of the *kandas*, large water reservoirs, a project designed by the community which then asked the ICRC to provide the cement needed; and a case in Balghab, where the ICRC was planning a food distribution in an inaccessible area, and the community responded by proposing to rehabilitate the road (without assistance) so as to make the food delivery possible. Such local initiatives are rarer where populations have been more exposed to relief aid.

3.1.2 Afghan Aid Worker Perspectives

Afghan aid workers who worked in the Nahrin emergency response, emphasised that after the earthquake, many people in the area were themselves 'victims' and not in a position to participate, at least, not in aid organisations' operations.

‘ Ninety percent of the people were victims. In some families, all members were wounded. The people are busy with themselves, I don't know if they can do something. They are Muslim, they do what they should do: search for bodies and bury the dead¹⁹ ’ *Afghan doctor.*

However, responses were very different concerning other types of interventions, in particular in rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes, throughout the country. The desire to engage actively in the reconstruction of their country is a key element that came out again and

again. For example, one Afghan aid worker, when asked to define participation thought of ‘participation in development’, which to him meant ‘that nobody is jobless, that they can solve problems and take part in decision-making and contribute to future planning’.

Participation and consultation are often considered in the context of community assemblies and mobilisation. The local NGO, Afghan Development Association, emphasises in its annual report that: ‘It is necessary to help people become more organised in order to participate in decisions that affect their lives.’ A pillar of their action is the revival of local *jirgas*, dismantled as a result of the years of war and consequent population movements.

3.1.3 International Aid Worker Perspectives

In the case of the acute emergency response, interviewed aid workers tended to believe that participation and consultation would be difficult to implement²⁰. The main reason stated being the need to respond quickly to life-threatening risks. In fact, no examples of participation and consultation in the Nahrin emergency response were provided.

‘ We have to measure the time and energy required for participation versus its impact. In an acute crisis I imagine participation and consultation would be very different. ’ *Aid worker, Habitat, Kabul.*

In the case of humanitarian aid projects carried out in non-acute emergency contexts, most agencies have a discourse on participation and consultation, as seen in their policy documents or project proposals. However, how they are applied in projects is not clear. The definitions of participation and consultation given by international agency staff were often personal interpretations, reflecting their experience of a particular project, rather than a clear agency policy.

‘ Consultation is asking for an input from village elders or conducting an assessment with potential beneficiaries, prior to

Box 2 The Anaba Community Forum (ACF)

On the road between Charikar and Rokha, at the South of the Panjsheer Valley, one could easily drive past Mr Halimi's pharmacy without noticing the large board next to it, saying: 'ACF, Anaba Community Forum'. Intrigued, the research team stopped by. Three white-bearded men joined us in Mr Halimi's pharmacy and recounted the history of the ACF:

'Three years ago, there was war, economic problems and water problems. People decided to leave. We decided to create the ACF to solve the difficulties of the people and encourage them to stay. We gathered all the people in the area, chose 1 representative for 20 to 30 families. The representatives held a shura and chose one raïs (chief), one administrator and one finance officer.

'We created a community savings box, by collecting money from the people, who contributed what they could. Some of it, we lent to the poorest people (according to the shura's decision), some is saved, and some is spent on the projects.

'We had different ideas of projects. After discussion in the shura on the people's difficulties, we chose a water project (the building of a canal for irrigation) and an electricity project. [...] To build the canal, half of the workers were poorer community members, including refugees, whom we employed for a salary. The other half, members of better-off families, contributed their time for free. [...] We also have a health education commission with five members who go in villages and disseminate messages against the use of drugs, on how to be clean...'

The ACF members had attempted to gather support from international NGOs who were in the region, but with little success. At the time of the team's first visit (August 2002) the only agency to have responded was Habitat, with financial and technical support.

In January 2003, the research team returned to Anaba to find that ACF had also initiated contacts with the World Food Programme, the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Rural Development, and the International Office for Migration, and were awaiting responses. The Ministry of Water and Power had provided the ACF with technical assistance to do a survey for the tracing of a second canal. The ACF was also planning for a food security survey in the valley, and carrying out a census and assessment of the community's needs, information to be made available to agencies interested in intervening in the region.

us making a decision. We will not necessarily do what they say, but we will hear them. Participation is when the agency acts as a facilitator and the people decide what to do. ’ *Aid worker, Shelter for Life, Nahrin.*

At the time of the research in Nahrin, shelter reconstruction projects mobilised most of the community’s attention. Informants working on these projects mentioned two aspects of their relationship with the community as an indication of participation: the consultation of village elders through the organisation of *shuras*, and the regular monitoring by Afghan field supervisors, who checked the construction work done by villagers, gave them technical advice, and ensured information sharing between the NGO and beneficiaries.

‘ The supervisors make a lot of decisions. They go around and talk to people, see mistakes, give advice. They are what make things happen. ’ *Aid worker, Shelter for Life, Nahrin.*

In general, informants tended to emphasise consultative aspects of participation, for needs assessment and project design for example, but remarked that where a community was consulted it did not mean that its views would be reflected in the programme.

Participation in actual decision making by community members was mentioned as something that agencies should tend towards, progressively and realistically, but was not mentioned as something that could be done presently. Informants also emphasised the constraints on participation and consultation, in terms of the capacity of community members to participate. Among other factors, they stressed: the time investment needed; the difficulty of reaching consensus within a community; the need to reconcile a community’s requests with donor requirements and agency capacity and mandate; the exposure to ongoing demands.

For many agencies, community participation also entails a labour or in-kind contribution to a project. For the Nahrin shelter programmes,

beneficiaries were asked to build their houses and provide part of the construction materials.

The reasons behind such strategies are varied. For some they are a way to reduce aid dependency, especially in areas where certain activities are traditionally carried out by local inhabitants. Others emphasise the notion of partnership between the agency and the community, the transfer of new techniques or a means of ensuring maintenance following completion, while for others it is simply a way to reduce project costs. In a project document, for example, the cleaning of latrines in an IDP camp was mentioned under the chapter heading 'Community Involvement'.

Throughout Afghanistan, examples of international agencies working towards empowering local communities were rare, the main example being provided by the Habitat (UNCHS) Community Forums, created in 1995 to facilitate and support indigenous processes of urban repair and recovery (see Box 3).

The Community Forums, a type of community-based organisation, rely on a continuous process of consultation, defined as 'arriving at a consensus about the truth of a given situation and the wisest choice of action among the options open at any given moment'²¹.

In the present context of transition between emergency and development, there is much concern about 'capacity-building'. For some agencies, it is part of, or closely related to, participation. Different agencies will emphasise different areas of capacity building:

- at the NGO level: training and increased responsibilities given to Afghan staff in the NGO;
- at the community level: capacity-building of community-based organisations, *shuras*, etc;
- at the government level: training and support to government bodies and staff.

3.1.4 The Afghan Government: Aid Recipient and Aid Provider

At the time of the research, the Afghan government was trying to define its role between international aid agencies and Afghan citizens. In the current political context, it is both a recipient of aid and technical support (from international donors and international NGOs) as well as a provider of aid, since it is gradually attempting to build its role as a service provider for the country. This raises two levels of questions where participation is concerned:

- How is the government being consulted and integrated in the international aid effort?
- How does the government consult or involve local communities where it is attempting to provide assistance or build its capacity to intervene?

The response to the earthquake in Nahrin provided some insight into the government's participation in an acute emergency: including how political factors can drive the need for the presence and visibility in respect to the response, despite the government's extremely weak response capacity.

Within hours of the earthquake, government officials came from Kabul to show their support to the population. The Ministry of Health (MOH) dispatched staff and opened a temporary clinic. Mr Karzai, President of the Interim Government, also came and promised cash to families whose members were wounded or killed. However, this promised money was never delivered on, and there was much anger and speculation as to what had become of the money: 'Mr Karzai did not get this money from his pocket, but other countries'; 'Maybe he kept it, or the governor took it'. 'Why didn't NGOs get the money from Mr Karzai?' asked one *shura* member.

The Government's main concern was to be seen to be actively participating in the relief effort in Nahrin, an important gesture to gain legitimacy among the population of Baghlan province, Afghanistan in

Box 3 A Community-Development Approach: The Habitat Community Forums

The Habitat Community Forums were created in 1995 by UNCHS (Habitat) in Mazar, and are now active in all districts of the major Afghan cities and Bamyan. Their purpose is to provide a 'viable matrix for community-led development and self-governance'²². They were created in response to three inter-related problems²³:

- the need to integrate the different sectors of human settlement;
- the need to develop partnerships with other assistance agencies;
- the need to facilitate and support indigenous processes of urban repair and recovery.

In each Community Forum (CF), community members meet through three-weekly meetings to discuss their concerns (all are welcome). The opinions and ideas expressed in these meetings are used by the Consultative Board (CB), a panel of between nine and twelve elected volunteers, including women) to formulate the CF's policies and plans of action. Each CF runs a variety of income-generation activities, education courses, health posts, and public services (for example, tree planting, sports for boys, etc). In each city, a Community Forum Development Organisation coordinates the activities of all the forums. Habitat has also engaged in relief activities (activities which entail a distribution of food or relief items, such as women's bakeries, and pasta production and distribution) through the Community Forums.

The emphasis is on the *process* of urban rehabilitation rather than the products. As such, social recovery is as important as the physical projects, and the community plans its own activities, with the underlying principle that the system as a whole has to be viable.

At the moment, Habitat is carrying out an evaluation to examine whether and how the CFs and CBs are functioning. Questions are raised such as: Do they compete with traditional decision-making structures? Are CBs and CFs truly representative of the community?

These questions are particularly relevant now. Though it was pertinent to establish new community boards in urban areas when social organisation had been disrupted by war and displacement, and in the absence of government structures, is the model still valid at a time when government institutions are being rebuilt?

general, and the international community. In practice, though, the promise of government aid contributed to the confusion that reigned around the various relief distributions, and to the resulting frustration among the population.

The government is in the difficult position of being an intermediary between the Afghan people and the international aid community, while the latter also interacts directly with the population. At the same time, it faces the difficulty of finding appropriate intermediaries through which to engage with the local populations (with risks of nepotism by governors, corruption, political affiliations, etc). These problems raise wider questions concerning the future political organisation of the country, which cannot be addressed here.

3.2 PARTICIPATION AND CONSULTATION IN THE PROJECT CYCLE

In the following chapter, examples of participation and consultation are presented for each phase of the project cycle. In each section, the types of participation witnessed are presented, and their benefits and constraints discussed.

3.2.1 Baseline Needs Assessments

Types of participation

The emergency response in Nahrin The key to success in the emergency responses following the Nahrin earthquakes was considered to be speed. Needs assessments consisted of gross estimates of affected families, undertaken through site visits, helicopter flights, interviews with local leaders, etc, and on the basis of which the number of rations and tents to be distributed was calculated. Some agencies had pre-prepared standard

emergency kits (for example, medical kits) developed on the basis of technical standards and previous experience of acute emergency responses. The implication is that there was very little consultation and participation of local populations for the immediate earthquake response.

Reconstruction/rehabilitation programmes in Nahrin The situation is different for the reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes that followed the acute emergency, since these call for at least basic baseline assessments. However, the depth of the assessments and whether they involved some form of participation, varied according to the agency and the type of programme. When local populations were involved in the needs-assessment phase, the main type of participation was usually ‘participation through the supply of information’ or ‘consultation’ through village *shuras* or with local leaders.

Where agencies tend to implement ‘blueprint’ (standard) programmes and have a technical approach to assistance, this leaves little space for the involvement of the population in the needs-assessment or design phases. For example, some donors defined a standard house design and reconstruction kit for Afghanistan, leaving little room for beneficiary perceptions of a house they considered adapted to their family’s needs. One NGO, however, refused to settle for the standard kit; and carried out an in-depth assessment of local housing designs and traditional construction modes in Nahrin in collaboration with an Afghan sociologist, and with much discussion with local *shuras* (see Box 4, below). The agreed design was then presented to and approved by the donor approached.

Needs assessments in other areas of Afghanistan The tendency to take little time to conduct in-depth needs assessments and implement blue-print programmes is seen in many regions of Afghanistan, even in non-acute emergencies. The mass influx of aid agencies in the aftermath of September 11 created a climate of confusion and competition for funds and visibility. Furthermore, the ongoing drought, the return of refugees, and the scale of rehabilitation and reconstruction needs generated a sense of urgency, reinforced by the short budget timeframes imposed by donors. When time is taken to conduct assessments, these tend to be done using a

technical approach with a focus on quantitative data (for example, malnutrition rates, number of drought-affected families and so on), while qualitative information is often neglected. If the population is consulted, it is usually through questionnaires (participation through the supply of information). Such approaches limit the space to engage in an open dialogue and debate with local populations during needs assessments.

‘ We don’t need to consult people in needs assessment! We have pre-designed, standard programmes. ’ *Aid worker, Kabul.*

Constraints and benefits

‘ Many people come and ask us a lot of questions. ’
‘ Many people came to take pictures and left. ’ *Shura, Nahrin*

‘ We saw an NGO who came and asked us what we needed, it built a house for itself and then disappeared. ’ *Women, Bamian Province.*

The remarks made during the *shuras* in Nahrin were also heard in Bamian, Shamali, and other regions that have seen major arrivals of aid agencies. The fact that many organisations conducted assessments without implementing projects later, and without giving feedback to communities after the assessments, contributed to the growing resentment against the international community.

This can be seen as a constraint to, or risk of, consulting people on their needs before a programme is confirmed and funded. Even a brief visit to a region with visible financial resources (for example, a 4x4 vehicle and radios) greatly raises the population’s expectations, and, where needs are discussed, can be interpreted by the population as a promise to respond to those needs. This underlines the importance of continuous explanation and transparency on behalf of aid agencies towards members of the affected population.

‘ Consulting people is difficult. People have different moods,

ideas, living conditions, and different ways of being confronted with aid, such that they have different expectations. ’ *Aid worker, Nahrin.*

Another difficulty of consultation is that individual members of the affected population may have differing views as to a community’s priority needs. Also, because of other factors (an agency’s limited capacity or donor requirements), the ideas of local populations may not be reflected in the programme design, leading to frustration or even anger, and tense relations between the community and NGOs that can result in security incidents.

Another further factor is the time involved in undertaking consultation and in-depth assessments, which may not be seen as appropriate for some interventions (for example, acute emergencies).

On the other hand, it seems that consulting potential beneficiaries on their needs is crucial to ensuring a programme that responds to their needs. More frustration and anger may be generated where resources are seen as ‘wasted’ on programmes that the population considers inappropriate (see Box 4). Engaging with local communities, through *shuras* or via their leaders at the outset of a programme is also an essential sign of respect, necessary to initiating good agency and community relations. This is particularly important if community members are expected to participate in the later stages of a programme (for example, shelter construction).

‘ It is not important that you came and asked us what we need. It is not important that you cannot solve our problems. Just we are happy that you came to discuss with us. ’ *Shura, Nahrin.*

3.2.2 Planning and Programme Design

Types of participation

Many of the findings described in section 3.2.1 apply to the design phase since needs assessment and design phases are intrinsically linked. If an

agency uses a pre-designed, or blueprint programme, it is unlikely the population will be involved in either the needs-assessment or the design phase. Vice versa, if little time is spent conducting a needs assessment, or if the population is not consulted on its needs, this may prompt an agency to have recourse to blueprint programmes that it is familiar with.

There is, however, a difference between the needs-assessment and design phase in that, whereas during an assessment the population is involved essentially through consultation, in the design phase, it can potentially have a decision-making role. This was rarely seen to be the case in Nahrin or elsewhere in the country, though there were some processes of negotiation.

If we take the example mentioned in Box 4, we can see that, following the needs assessments, a process of discussion and negotiation took place between the NGOs and the community, and between the NGOs and their respective donors. In this case, the community was not in a position to decide what the final arrangements would be (the final decision-making power being in the hands of the donor), but it had a say in the definition of some arrangements and the NGO was in position to arbitrate between diverging requests within the community, and between the community and the donors.

Constraints and benefits

The constraints associated with participation or consultation in the design phase are similar to those presented for the needs assessments (section 3.2.1). To these must be added other factors that weigh on the programme-design process, such as donor pressure. NGOs dependent on institutional funding are often compelled to comply with donor requirements, even when those differ from the priorities expressed by the affected population. The mandate, expertise and interest of aid agencies also have a great influence on the choices made. Finally, the balance of power between local communities and the aid system are such that the former will most likely have little weight in the final decisions that are taken.

‘ How can the community be interested in the programme if it is excluded at the beginning, and integrated only in the later stages of the programme? ’ *Aid worker, Kabul.*

It appears essential, though, to consult and involve the community in negotiations concerning the programme design, to facilitate project implementation, in particular when the population is expected to contribute to further stages of the programme. The earlier a population is involved, the greater the sense of programme ownership. This was rarely seen to be the case where, in many instances, populations were poorly informed as to the purpose and modalities of the project.

3.2.3 Targeting/Selection of Beneficiaries

Targeting is part of both the planning and implementation stages, but is treated separately here because it involves very specific constraints and difficulties. The selection of beneficiaries can be a source of tension and/or resentment against the aid agency.

Types of participation

In most cases (except where the selection is done on physical criteria, such as in supplementary feeding centres for malnourished children) the agency needs to go through an intermediary to select beneficiaries (local leader, *shura*, local NGO etc). How this is done, and with what degree of participation, varies according to the agencies and the programmes.

During the emergency earthquake response in Nahrin, tents and food rations were distributed. The agencies asked the local governor to select a representative for each community, who then made a list of families that had been affected by the earthquake in his village. In all focus groups and *shuras* in Nahrin, community members complained there had been nepotism in the selection of representatives and in the making of lists. This was a great source of discontent and tension.

Box 4 An Example of Negotiation: House Design in Nahrin Shelter Projects

Shelter reconstruction programmes in Nahrin had two objectives: to provide affected households with houses before winter, and to increase their resistance to earthquakes. One of the challenges was the need to reconcile these two objectives.

Earthquake mitigation requires a simple design (one room) and small doors and windows to ensure wall solidity. However, consultation with local communities showed that people needed at least two rooms due to family size and the need to separate men and women. They also insisted on having a corridor between the two rooms and large windows, to ensure maximum light during the winter.

The two agencies implementing the shelter projects used different approaches to design the houses: one called on HQ architects, who designed a model focusing on earthquake mitigation without considering local housing characteristics. The other did an in-depth assessment of local housing designs and techniques with an Afghan sociologist, and in consultation with local *shuras*. An expatriate architect then elaborated earthquake mitigation factors locally.

When they came to the implementation phase, beneficiaries of the first agency's shelter programme refused the planned design (because of the absence of corridor, etc). Following negotiations, the agency had to adapt its initial design, involving changes that, after logistic and financial arrangements have been made, are complications and time consuming.

Both agencies were also involved in long negotiations concerning the selection of construction sites and beneficiaries, further complicated by the fact that each agency proposed a different package (for example, one provided a latrine, the other not), and had different beneficiary selection criteria.

Furthermore, during the implementation phase, beneficiaries were facing difficulties providing the necessary materials (bricks and stones) and building their homes according to earthquake mitigation techniques. They feared being without shelters by the winter and tension rose. While donors' and agencies' priority was to provide earthquake-resistant shelters (a feature community leaders had welcomed during the project planning

Box 4 Continued

phase in the spring), by August, beneficiaries' main concern was to be protected from the cold and finish their shelter:

'If an earthquake comes and our houses fall, it is Allah's will, and your techniques can do nothing for that; we want to build our houses in *paghsa*²⁴ as we always have, before winter comes.'

This put the agencies in a difficult position throughout the implementation and monitoring phase, but as difficult as it was, the problems could only be resolved through continuous discussion, negotiation, and continuous technical support.

An additional factor is the flexibility of donors (another stakeholder) with regards to design features, logistical and financial inputs, timeframes, etc, which can also vary.

‘ The governor selected a representative and the representative made a list: he made it with people he knows and who are his relatives. ’ *Shura members, Nahrin.*

In another region, an international NGO carrying out a seed and complementary food distribution established a partnership with a local NGO, which provided a list of beneficiaries. The list was supposed to target vulnerable families, but when the international NGO carried out a cross check, it found that many beneficiaries were 'far from vulnerable', while very poor households had not been included in the distribution.

Another way to involve the community in the targeting of beneficiaries, while avoiding the risks of nepotism and misappropriation of aid as seen above, is the use of social control mechanisms (see Box 5). The process relies on information sharing and transparency at all levels, and is particularly effective when there is a risk of sanction in response to abuses. ICRC, for example, had announced during a food distribution where beneficiaries had been selected by village representatives according to set criteria, that a cross check of beneficiaries would be done, and that if anyone in a village was found to be cheating, the whole village would be

Box 5 An Example of Social Control in Beneficiary Selection

Solidarités Guidelines on the selection of beneficiaries for FFW and CFW programmes²⁵

‘The lists of beneficiaries must be compiled with the help of communities. Without them nothing is possible. The hours of discussion spent with their representatives should lead to the drawing up of lists of beneficiaries that are commonly accepted. The Solidarités teams will monitor these lists in order to prevent potential abuses. The lists will be posted in public places to ensure transparency, as will the names of one or several Solidarités supervisors who will be responsible for registering complaints.

‘This work with the community is essential. It must also serve to validate the vulnerability criteria, by order of priority, and thereby clarify the beneficiary selection process.

‘Contracts can be signed with the community to define programme implementation and assign tasks to beneficiaries, according to the number of man/days required.’

sanctioned. The social pressure within villages was strong enough to prevent abuses.

In the examples above (Box 5), the agency retains a degree of control over the selection of beneficiaries, by defining the vulnerability criteria (after discussion with community members or not), or carrying out a cross check and reserving the right to apply sanctions. Habitat, for a relief project, attempted to completely devolve the beneficiary selection process to the community itself, through the Community Forums (CF). The experience was rich in terms of lessons learnt (see Box 6).

The constraints and benefits

The examples provided above highlight the risks and difficulties involved in the participation of local populations in the beneficiary selection process. There is a risk of nepotism or misappropriation of funds, entailed

by going through certain intermediaries (local leaders or commanders, local NGOs). Even when one goes through local *shuras*, the power dynamics within them are difficult for outsiders to decipher, and one is uncertain as to how the aid will be used in the end. By bringing in resources, an aid agency necessarily becomes part of local political stakes, and the choices it makes (choice of intermediaries, mode of information sharing) are never neutral politically or socially.

The examples of the tent and food distribution in Nahrin and of the Habitat pasta project, show that completely devolving beneficiary selection to members of the community due to receive assistance is not a solution, since it can either exacerbate or create tensions and conflicts within the community. This may indicate that an aid provider, as an outsider, has a responsibility to arbitrate the process of aid distribution.

This is not to say that there should not be any consultation and participation of affected populations in the targeting process. On the contrary, it is the only way targeting can be done in accordance with a community's priorities and socio-economic situation. In some cases, it can also be more time and cost-effective, compared to carrying out a beneficiary survey, since the community is best informed of its members' situation. One of the challenges involved is possibly the need to identify who, the affected population or potential local partners, is best positioned to assist in the targeting. The examples above suggest that transparency, information-sharing and respecting set procedures are key elements in the success of targeting processes.

3.2.4 Implementation

Types of participation

In Nahrin In the case of the acute emergency response, most informants claimed that the capacity of affected populations to participate actively was limited by the fact that most were themselves victims, though members of neighbouring villages, less affected by the earthquake, mobilised to help clear rubble and care for the wounded.

The situation was different for shelter reconstruction projects, in that beneficiaries were asked to supply labour and part of the materials (see Box 4). This strategy was adopted for several reasons: for example Afghans traditionally build their house (or, where possible, pay masons to do so); agencies preferred to avoid creating aid dependency where there was none; beneficiary contributions enabled agencies to increase their coverage, by saving labour costs and time. These projects were conceived (by the agency) as a partnership between the agency and local community, with each contributing inputs for joint implementation. However, beneficiaries faced problems both in the provision of materials (especially households without able-bodied men) and in the construction process.

‘ If you come here to do aid, please start your aid. If you’re not going to help us, don’t waste our time and let us build in paghsa. ’ *Member of the shura, Doabi, Nahrin.*

In Afghanistan in general Interestingly, aid workers and beneficiaries gave examples of participation in the implementation of projects that were not initially thought of as such by the Global Study team. In particular, these were cases where the Afghans concerned received remuneration from an agency to carry out given tasks.

For example, community health educators, who were trained by WHO received a small remuneration for their attendance, felt their participation in the programme was a way to help ‘solve the problems of the village’. Whether these feelings were genuine, or were meant to impress the interviewers cannot be verified, but the fact that such arguments came up several times suggests that individual contributions to the community’s wellbeing are valued in the society.

‘ When we go back to our village, we don’t expect money from our people, we want to help our people. Just WHO gave us some money. ’ *Community health educator, Nahrin.*

A similar example is that of a beneficiary working on a Food AC (Food for Asset Creation) road rehabilitation programme, who considered his

Box 6 Habitat's Pasta Project, Implemented Through the Community Forums (CF), Mazar

Though Habitat focuses on community development activities, in 2000 it was concerned that the drought was affecting the food security of vulnerable households and the fact that no programmes specifically targeted women. They therefore engaged in a relief project that targeted vulnerable women in several ways: women able to work were employed in a food-for-work scheme to produce pasta, while women unable to work received pasta as food relief.

The consultative board of the CF (see Box 3) was put in charge of selecting the most vulnerable women in their community, putting considerable pressure on board members, and leading to arguments and fighting between women in the community over who was the most vulnerable.

Board members were accused by other community members of favouring relatives, while the latter accused board members of excluding them from the selection process to avoid accusations of nepotism. Habitat found that placing the responsibility of selecting beneficiaries within the community actually undermined their community development objective, the central goal of the CF programme.

This first attempt having failed, Habitat devised a lottery system to select beneficiaries with maximum transparency and cross checks, but it took three months to identify beneficiaries. Habitat then decided to avoid further relief activities through the CF, as they found it conflicted with their objective of sustainable community development.

work as 'participation in the reconstruction of the country'. In the case of Food AC programmes in particular, part of the food (10 per cent) is given directly to the community to redistribute to the most vulnerable households. Workers may then see themselves as assisting their community in two ways: by rehabilitating an important infrastructure and by sharing the food received with more vulnerable families. Cash- or food-for-work programmes are clearly considered by some as examples of participation in the implementation of aid projects.

The question is also relevant in cases where agencies intervene in tasks traditionally carried out by community members. A medical coordinator, when asked about the participation of local populations, mentioned their efforts to work with traditional birth attendants (*dahia*), by training them and encouraging them to refer at-risk pregnancies. She explained that the agency does not want to provide these traditional birth attendants with financial incentives, since they are traditionally paid in kind by mothers. This problem is discussed below.

‘ We do not want to undermine what systems already exist. ’ *Expatriate medical coordinator.*

Constraints and benefits

A key question that is raised concerning the participation of beneficiaries and affected populations is: ‘Do they have the capacity to participate?’ The answer is made more difficult by the fact that the capacity to participate within a community is heterogeneous. Furthermore, if too much is asked of the community, programme objectives risk not being reached, or tension and anger may build-up within the community against the agency.

On the other hand, many tasks are traditionally carried out by community members and the risk, when an agency intervenes in such processes, is that they undermine local initiatives or create aid dependency. Cases are now reported of communities no longer carrying out regular maintenance work (for example maintenance of irrigation networks, rehabilitation of *karezze*²⁶), as they wait for agencies to propose cash- or food-for-work to undertake these activities.

The advantages and benefits of the participation of local populations in the implementation of projects nevertheless point to its importance. On a purely pragmatic level, they ease project implementation by reducing costs and labour requirements. But mainly, if done appropriately, participation in the implementation can be a key to mobilise the community and create a sense of programme ownership. The project can also be a vector for knowledge transmission and the introduction of new techniques, thereby

building local capacity (though this needs to be made explicit and stated as one of the project activities).

The mobilisation of the local population for programme implementation is difficult to achieve, especially if it was not involved in the needs assessment and programme design, or if the programme's objectives do not correspond to people's priorities and needs. In such cases, programme ownership by the community may be impossible to establish. As long as the project is perceived as the agencies' project, and not the people's, the motivation to participate actively in implementation is likely to remain low.

3.2.5 Programme Monitoring and Evaluation

The types of participation

The main type of participation used in the monitoring and evaluation phases, where it occurs, is the consultation of beneficiaries. This can take various forms, from *shuras*, to supervision visits and informal discussions with beneficiaries on project sites. But, as was discussed in respect of the programme-design phase, there were no examples where local populations were in a position to take decisions concerning potential changes in the programme. This is particularly the case where blueprint or standard programmes are applied, and when monitoring and evaluation are done using quantitative information.

In Nahrin At the time of the mission, no evaluations had been carried out on the programmes that were running and, as a result, the findings below focus mainly on monitoring. The monitoring of reconstruction programmes involved two tasks: technical supervision to ensure earthquake mitigation techniques were being successfully applied, and social monitoring, where complaints could be voiced and discussed. The former was essentially done through field visits by Afghan supervisors, but the latter, especially in case of complaints, necessitated more official gatherings, such as *shuras*, and the implication of senior staff (expatriate or Afghan), since a degree of mediation and negotiation is often involved.

In other areas of Afghanistan The use of consultation in monitoring was rarely seen throughout the country. Where it was done, it was rather informal and did not necessarily impact on the way a programme was run. Even less attention is paid to consultation when programmes are pre-designed, or lack flexibility in implementation due to logistics, donor requirements, or timeframes, etc, which appears to be the case for most programmes established since the beginning of 2002.

‘ Because our programmes are standard, there is no space for those in charge to adapt it. And we don’t have time to think of what changes would be appropriate, since we have to do our statistical reports for donors! ’ *Aid worker in charge of a nutrition programme.*

The lack of downward accountability in programmes was also noted. One aid worker mentioned how international aid agencies do not share information with Afghan institutions (for example, government representatives and/or local partners), let alone beneficiaries and affected communities. When information is shared, it is most often in a format that is inaccessible (for example in English, with considerable use of technical terms). Another mentioned that when changes in programmes are made (for example, a distribution does not take place although it was announced), the population is not always informed. ‘It is shameful!’ said the aid worker.

The constraints and benefits

‘ Consultation is harder to do in the implementation phase. You need a plan you need to do, you cannot discuss it all the time. Often people want somebody who says: “this is how it’s going to be”. ’ *Aid worker, Nahrin.*

The difficulties of consultation that were mentioned in section 3.2.1 (needs assessments) also apply to consultation in the monitoring phase: the time taken; the diversity of requests and complaints within a single

community; the impossibility of responding to all of these; the need to reconcile donor requirements with the population's requests. The time involved is also a constraint for aid recipients, who complained of 'too much talking'.

‘ A long time we are sitting in discussion and winter is coming, and time is lost. If you are coming for humanitarian aid, please bring your aid. ’ *Shura member, Markaz Nahrin.*

It is further complicated when the population's opinion changes between the design and implementation phases. In Nahrin, community leaders had agreed earthquake mitigation was an essential objective of the programme: 'If the shelters you are planning to design for us are the same as we have always built, we don't need you, we can do it ourselves. What we are expecting from you is a design that will resist the next earthquake.' As implementation became difficult, people changed their minds (see Box 4), and requested a speedy and easy construction process.

The voicing of constant constraints is also a great source of psychological stress for aid workers, both expatriate and Afghan, who may feel harassed or discouraged to see their efforts rewarded only with negative feedback. For example, in the Pul-e-Khumri IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camp, the expatriate and Afghan supervisors were constantly approached by hoards of people with complaints and requests. The dire situation in the camps, and the population concentration, made such situations practically unavoidable, and particularly difficult for the aid workers since they were powerless to respond to all the needs and requests that were voiced.

‘ We surveyed 7,000 families, and then 10,000 families, and we distributed as much as we could. And at the end, the only thing we got is complaints (...) When we have a lot of complaints, we gather everybody at the mosque. Everybody talks and, at the end, they control themselves. There are always people who complain and others who are happy. ’ *Afghan project supervisor, Nahrin.*

Again, despite the difficulties they entail, consultation and involvement of the community are essential for project realisation if an agency wishes to respond to the population's needs and adapt the programme according to changing circumstance. It is also a way to maintain a relationship of trust and respect between the agency and community, in which it is crucial to be fully transparent on all decisions taken and engage in a continuous process of information sharing and discussion.

When difficulties are faced during consultation processes, as was the case in Nahrin, it is important not to confuse the source of these problems (that is, the logistical constraints, the challenges of implementing a programme on a large scale while respecting the housing needs of each household, the introduction of new techniques, the reliance on beneficiary contribution when many are under stress and food insecure) with the means by which they are voiced (that is, consultation through *shuras*).

3.3 PARTICIPATION OF POPULATIONS BY SECTOR OF INTERVENTION

As noted in Part 1, the Global Study research in Afghanistan was conducted in parallel with Groupe URD's Quality Project mission, providing the opportunity to highlight complementary findings between the two studies. Quality Project's August mission focused on four key sectors: health, nutrition, food security, and shelter²⁷. The programmes visited ranged from relief through to development. It was found that right across this spectrum the involvement of affected populations in aid programmes through consultation and/or participation was rare, and that the findings presented in section 3.2 applied to all four sectors. It was also found that most of the problems and difficulties encountered in each area of intervention could be, at least partly, avoided or limited through increased participation and consultation of local populations in the various phases of the project cycle. In the following section, examples are given to

illustrate how programmes in all four sectors could be improved, through an enhanced involvement of affected populations.

3.3.1 The Health Sector

The main difficulty observed in the health sector was the inadequacy of health service provision (often based on standard packages) relative to the populations' health-seeking behaviours. Aid agencies working in the health sector in Afghanistan have little knowledge of people's health-seeking behaviours and health beliefs. The lack of qualitative information on these issues, in particular in needs assessment, often leads to the design of standard interventions that may not respond to people's perceptions of their health needs. In some areas, well equipped and well staffed clinics remain underused by local inhabitants, who prefer to rely on private health services (for example private doctors, pharmacies in the bazaar) and self-medication. This results in significant financial, logistical and human resources being allocated to programmes that have very limited impact on community health. This imbalance would indicate that a considerable investment and effort needs to be made in dialogue, consultation, and the general engagement of community members (from heads of families and patients to health providers).

With inappropriate use of drugs being part of the problem, agencies carry out regular training for health staff. Some also attempt to sensitise patients to appropriate use through health education sessions in clinics, bazaars, etc. Such approaches are, however, generally insufficient to overcome behaviour that appears deeply engrained in people's beliefs. Even trained doctors are under pressure from patients to prescribe certain types of drugs for fear of losing them as clients. Health education messages, especially when disseminated by foreign NGOs in a top-down fashion, can be considered with suspicion or lack of interest, resulting in limited impact on behaviour.

An Afghan doctor, who had worked with Save the Children Foundation (SC-US), described his experience of awareness raising on drug use

among refugees in Pakistani camps. The focus was on reducing the use of injections, especially among children, working simultaneously to improve the practice of doctors and train community health workers (one male per 30 families and one female per 15–20 families). The health workers conducted intensive work within the community, using examples of individuals who had had recourse to improper treatment and lost relatives as a result, and examples of successful treatments. ‘We had good results. The number of prescribed injections went from 1,000 to 10 per month.’ This doctor recognised, though, that the project was facilitated by the fact that the refugee population ‘was living in a cluster’, aiding access. ‘One of the difficulties in Afghanistan is access to the community,’ he said.

‘ We should talk with the community from the beginning; we should share the plan with the community. During the programme, we get feedback through the staff and community and with it we adapt the future plan. ’ *SC-US community health worker project supervisor.*

3.3.2 The Nutrition Sector

In the nutrition sector, it was observed that there tended to be blueprint technical programmes, reflecting a top-down approach that leaves little room for the consultation and participation of beneficiaries and, in particular, mothers. Needs assessments are conducted in the form of nutritional surveys, emphasising quantitative data gathering (anthropometric measurements), and involving practices that may seem strange to local populations (nutritional surveys involve much crying among children!). The application of these techniques makes it difficult to engage in a dialogue with mothers that makes sense to them and generates the necessary trust to address issues at the heart of a family’s intimacy (sharing and preparing food within the household, breastfeeding, child and maternal health, etc). We know very little about what foods are available to mothers, how they distribute food within the household, how they cope in times of need (malnutrition rates are surprisingly low given the high levels of food insecurity).

Assistance in many cases is the opening of supplementary feeding centres (SFC) where mothers are given a ration (calculated to be nutritionally balanced) when their child's body measurements correspond to certain criteria (weight-for-height under 80 per cent of the median²⁸). Such criteria are most probably unclear to mothers, where when a child is borderline it is often difficult to see the difference between a malnourished and a non-malnourished child. In many cases, beneficiaries have little interest in the ration being given, especially in rural areas where beneficiaries have to walk long distances to obtain it. These factors may explain the frequently poor results of such programmes (high defaulter rates, low weight gains, etc).

‘ The people have a very negative idea of the SFC. They think it is a waste of time. They say: “why doesn't the agency give us oil, rather than put it in the ration where we cannot use it?” ’ *Nutrition programmes supervisor.*

The Afghan context also involves severe constraints on the implementation of therapeutic feeding centres (TFCs) for the treatment of severe acute malnutrition: for example logistical difficulties (remoteness for agencies, distance for beneficiaries, the difficulty of finding qualified staff, the difficulty of leaving home for several days). These elements point to the need to develop home-based approaches to the treatment of severe acute malnutrition. Ready-to-use products have been developed for home use, and research is currently being carried out in other countries on appropriate protocols. The Afghan Ministry of Health plans to introduce such approaches gradually. Indeed, in addition to distributing ready-to-use therapeutic foods, home-based treatments will involve community mobilisation, education, and close engagement with mothers to ensure that severely malnourished children receive optimal care at home.

The nutrition education messages disseminated are often irrelevant to local conditions. Mothers are told they should provide a diverse diet, including meat, vegetables, fruits, milk, when these foods are rarely available. A health worker in the Northern region spoke of her initiative to make a list of

available foods so as to adapt the nutrition education messages. Other health workers emphasised the need to involve the father or mother-in-law, as key decision makers in terms of family caring practices. Education sessions can also be conceived in a more participatory way, for example, as group exchanges and discussions animated by local women rather than as lectures given by a nurse from an urban background, who may not share local women's preoccupations. Nutrition interventions could also be conceived so as to reach the heart of communities, integrating food security with nutrition education in tune with the local reality and in a way that mobilises community members. This could be done by working through women's networks, involving local community members in the preparation of education messages, etc.

It seems that much more consultation and involvement of affected populations, in particular mothers and mothers-in-law, is needed in all stages of the project cycle, to increase the relevance, and therefore effectiveness, of nutrition interventions.

‘ We have to bring nutrition interventions to the people, in their households, rather than focus on getting people into feeding centres. ’ *Aid worker, Kabul.*

3.3.3 The Food-Security Sector

The main constraint observed in the food-security and agricultural sector was agencies' lack of understanding of the complex social and livelihoods systems in Afghanistan. Little is known about seed management, pastoral livelihoods, rain-fed agricultural systems, land and water management systems, the risk factors affecting livelihoods, the complex strategies farmers put in place (for example combination of various crops and production activities), agricultural calendars, food security in urban contexts, etc.

When assessments are made, they tend to focus on quantitative information (size of food stocks per household, average yields, for instance) but little qualitative information is collected.

This makes it difficult for agencies to intervene appropriately and in a timely way. Filling these knowledge gaps would necessarily entail greater consultation of local populations, as well as increased participation by beneficiaries in the planning, implementation and monitoring of food security interventions. Nobody is likely to know better than Afghan farmers and producers, or shopkeepers and traders, what constraints they face and what strategies they put in place to cope with them. An agency may be able to bring new ideas and techniques that may strengthen local coping strategies and agricultural and economic opportunities, but, the evidence suggests that these cannot be introduced effectively without the genuine involvement of the populations concerned.

‘ Afghans often take on initiatives that they find interesting. There is a contamination effect. If something works in a village, the neighbouring village will hear about it and will want the same thing [...] Rather than intervening where we see the greatest needs, it is important to note where there are local capacities and an interest in the intervention. ’ *O. Roy, researcher, specialising in politics and religion in central Asia.*

3.3.4 The Shelter Sector

In the shelter sector, the two following problems/constraints were found to limit the quality of aid interventions:

- the use of pre-designed construction kits (roof beams, window and door frames, and sometimes latrines) which, developed by donors or agencies, limit house design and adaptability to local needs;
- the tendency to approach shelter issues from an architectural perspective, omitting consideration of wider issues in the construction of human settlements (for example access to water, to health care, to markets).

With regard to the first problem, examples were seen in the shelter programmes in Nahrin (see Box 4), where assessment work done by one NGO in consultation with communities enabled it to develop an adapted

design and convince donors to implement the programme in a way that was more in tune with local conditions. In other instances, however, the kits designed were so inappropriate as to be unusable by beneficiaries. One agency, concerned by the risk of deforestation, chose to make cement beams rather than the traditionally used poplar beams. The cement beams were too heavy to be carried to building sites and too heavy to be supported by mud walls, so that hundreds were abandoned by the roadside. In other cases, beneficiaries set up the small window frames provided in the kit, but left a large hole next to it in the wall until they could enlarge the window properly. Such incidents may have been avoided through a greater involvement of beneficiaries in the design phase.

As for the second problem, it reflects the tendency of aid agencies to approach problems from a sectoral and technical perspective. The lack of integration of sectors was one of the factors that prompted Habitat to engage in a community-based approach (see Box 3). Unlike aid providers, affected communities naturally perceive their needs in holistic way. Designing reconstruction projects at the community level may be a way of ensuring that they encompass the wider issues of human settlements, which can only be done by engaging the community in all phases of the project cycle.

4

CONCLUSION

The previous chapters provide examples and analysis of current practice in the consultation and participation of beneficiaries and affected populations in humanitarian action in the context of the acute emergency in Nahrin, complemented with examples of practice in non-acute interventions in other regions of Afghanistan. The associated benefits and risks revealed are summed up in the first section of this chapter, which aims to increase understanding of the factors that shape and constrain the practice of participation. These factors are discussed in depth in section 4.2 (drawing on the analysis of the Nahrin case study and the additional insights provided by other programmes in Afghanistan); and the constraints and potential for enhanced participation of affected populations in acute emergencies discussed in section 4.3.

First, however, it is important to highlight what is probably the most simple, yet fundamental, conclusion of this case study. It is the importance of the mindset adopted by those within the humanitarian system towards those that they seek to assist and the notion of participation and consultation of affected populations in measures concerning them as a right, and an essential sign of respect.

Though in certain situations (as discussed below), certain types of participation may be not be possible, it remains true that involving members of the affected population, if only by sharing information on measures that affect them, and pro-actively seeking to identify or create opportunities to hear and engage, can go a long way to improving accountability and performance in humanitarian action.

‘ Community involvement is essentially about freedom of assembly and freedom of participation. These are not luxuries but are fundamental human rights.’ *UNCHS Habitat*.

4.1 THE BENEFITS AND RISKS OF PARTICIPATION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

The research conducted for the Global Study in Afghanistan suggests that enhanced participation and consultation of affected populations can contribute to improving the quality of humanitarian aid interventions by making them more adapted and appropriate to needs, and therefore effective and efficient. If the population is involved from the outset, it may be more willing to contribute to making the intervention work, helping to strengthen the project’s connectedness and/or sustainability, and providing opportunities to build local capacity. Such close collaboration can also be critical to ensuring agency staff’s safety, where relationships of trust can ensure access to important security information. Delegating or engaging in partnerships with local actors may also be a way of gaining access to affected populations or groups that are inaccessible to foreign agencies.

However, the participation of beneficiaries and affected populations in humanitarian action also entails risks and constraints. The case of the Nahrin earthquakes where the speed of the emergency response was essential, particularly in the case of medical care for the wounded, and where affected people’s capacity to participate was severely impeded by the impact of the earthquakes, illustrates how the participation of the affected population at certain stages of an emergency, or the project cycle, may not always be possible (see section 4.3). In other contexts, participation may also put the affected population at risk.

This points to the fact that, although there can be real benefits, participation will always be constrained by certain factors which it is important to be aware of. Indeed, the question to ask may not be so much

'Should beneficiaries and affected population be consulted or participate in humanitarian action?' as '*How* should the affected population be involved in humanitarian action?' The answer will invariably depend on each situation, as well as agency mandates and modes of operation, and require considerable understanding of the context and the affected population. These are discussed in the following section.

4.2 FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PARTICIPATION OF AFFECTED POPULATIONS

The factors that influence whether and how participatory processes can be put into practice in a given context can be divided into three categories: factors pertaining to the context; factors pertaining to the population; and factors pertaining to the aid agency. Summarised in Table 2 below, each category is presented in further detail in the following sections.

4.2.1 Factors Pertaining to the Context

The example of Nahrin showed how the impact of a crisis (for example family members wounded or killed, trauma after the earthquake) is key in determining whether the affected population is in a position to participate in aid operations and if yes, how. It also illustrated how the time constraints and logistics involved in providing emergency care can limit opportunities for consultation and participation.

In other areas of Afghanistan, many informants also insisted on the fact that participatory processes require time, for the agency to know the region and people well, and to establish a relationship of trust. Examples from throughout the country also highlighted how this time factor was constrained by the difficulty agencies have remaining in a region and ensuring continuity in their programmes, because of access difficulties. Remote mountain regions are cut off by snow part of the year, while

access to other areas is closed due to insecurity (fighting, mines). The difficulty of keeping agency staff (expatriate and Afghan) in these areas limits the possibilities of establishing working relationships with communities. Participation in aid projects in certain contexts may also entail security risks for beneficiaries and national staff (for example women working for NGOs under the Taliban).

Finally, when many actors are present in one area – especially when they have diverging operational strategies – it is difficult for each agency to build a relationship of trust with the population. An agency's ability to engage beneficiaries actively in aid projects and build local capacities (for example, training, cost recovery) is severely constrained, if another is providing the same assistance without requiring beneficiary contributions. This highlights the importance of coordination between agencies, in terms of avoiding duplication, as well as ensuring coherence in the modes of implementation. Furthermore, a large presence of actors (as was seen with the arrival of numerous agencies after the Nahrin earthquakes) may change a population's perception of the humanitarian aid system, generating mistrust or fostering business-type relationships between aid providers and recipients. In the latter case, recipients may potentially 'shop around', seeking to maximise their own interests with a minimum commitment, while the former compete for visibility and funds.

4.2.2 Factors Pertaining to the Population

As already noted, the case of Nahrin illustrated how the population may be affected by a crisis to the extent that its capacity to participate in, or initiate, aid projects is limited. Examples from other areas of Afghanistan show how a diversity of factors can affect this capacity. These can be social (for example, social fragmentation resulting from the war or displacements); physical (people are wounded, disabled); material (for example, individuals are not able to build their house as they first need to feed their family); or psychological (too much exposure to suffering has limited their sense of purpose and will).

A population's willingness to participate will also depend on the level of interest they place in the aid intervention. If it is seen as a foreign intervention that does not correspond to their priorities and needs, motivation to engage is likely to be low.

Where populations have been exposed repeatedly to aid, they may have developed a passive attitude as aid recipients, or they may also become experts in manipulating the aid system. Some communities, for example, no longer carry out traditional maintenance and rehabilitation work, but wait for an agency to initiate a cash- or food-for-work project. Consultation processes may also be biased by previous aid exposure, with respondents telling agencies what they think the agency is able or willing to provide. On the other hand, where communities are newly exposed to an aid agency, or when no agencies are present, they are more likely to initiate projects locally.

Certain elements of the culture also affect how participatory processes can be put in place. The difficulty of accessing women in a traditional Muslim culture is one example, and great care must be applied when dealing with gender issues, as they are highly sensitive. On the other hand, Afghan women are often very active and strong-willed, and when provided with the space to speak out and act, in a culturally sensitive way, they can play a leading role in community development initiatives.

Finally, it was emphasised, in previous sections of this monograph, that processes of consultation and participation are inherent to the traditional decision-making systems in Afghanistan. However, especially where commanders have confiscated the local power, or when rich landowners and merchants exert a degree of control over community members (as creditors, as managers of water networks, etc), it may be difficult for all to voice their concerns, in particular for the most vulnerable. Consultation through traditional routes may lead to the omission from a programme of individuals who most need it, and even demobilise the community as a whole.

‘ The *shura* is two guys speaking, the others being too shy to talk. There is a vocal minority with a lot of power. ’ *Aid worker, Nahrin.*

4.2.3 Factors Pertaining to the Aid Agency

Between the drought alleviation, earthquake response and shelter reconstruction projects, the population of Nahrin has been in contact with a wide variety of humanitarian agencies, each of which engaged with the inhabitants in some way.

Table 2 Factors Influencing the Level and Type of Participation	
The Context	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ access (social and geographic) ■ political and security situation ■ nature and impact of the crisis ■ number of actors present 	
The Population	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ local power structure and decision-making processes ■ influence/control of local leaders and commanders ■ previous exposure to and experience of aid interventions ■ capacity to participate (availability of labour, minimum of resources, etc) ■ culture: access to certain groups (notably women) 	
The Aid Agency	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ mandate (emergency/development) ■ sector of intervention ■ agency culture ■ capacity (including human resources) ■ duration and flexibility of the project ■ donor pressure and requirements ■ knowledge of the context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ duration of presence in the region ■ nature of the relationship with the population ■ internal organisation ■ transparency and consistency ■ training and experience of expatriate staff.

‘ After the earthquake, many NGOs came and distributed few goods and left. But we are happy of Acted, because they gave us a lot of aid before, during, and after the earthquake. ’
Shura, *Nahrin*.

The mandate of the agency (for example, emergency/development), its sector of intervention, and, above all, its institutional culture, will indeed affect how it approaches the community. Some agencies have clearly defined their mandate as responding to emergencies, and focus on the technical quality of their interventions in saving lives during acute crises, but are not concerned with longer-term issues. These tend to rely essentially on expatriate staff, devolve few responsibilities to national staff, and rarely engage in partnerships with local partners. Others, which tend to focus ‘development’ objectives, tend to work in specific areas where they stay over time. They tend to give more responsibilities to national staff, and expatriate staff is asked to commit to longer contract periods. These strategies facilitate participatory processes.

The notion of process suggests that a project must be flexible and adaptable according to the changing environment, to the evolution in the population’s needs, and to the lessons learned during project implementation. However, time and flexibility are often limited by the short funding timeframes characteristic of emergency assistance, by donor requirements, and by the logistics involved in project implementation. When the scale of a project is large (for example, thousands of shelters), it is even more difficult to monitor and adapt the project in each site.

This raises the question of an agency’s capacity to implement a particular project. In addition to time and financial resources, participatory processes require human resources with expertise in social sciences, group dynamics, communication skills, and a good knowledge of the context. Maturity and experience of humanitarian situations are also needed, given the high amount of pressure aid workers are subject to, when engaged in consultation and participation activities. Unfortunately, many agencies have difficulty recruiting and keeping staff, in particular given the present

competition between agencies in Afghanistan. As a result, many aid workers are young and on their first humanitarian mission.

Internal management and monitoring procedures, as well as dependence on donors, may also limit agency staff's availability to engage with local populations. Many aid workers mentioned that the time taken to write donor reports or compile project statistics restricted the time they had to visit project sites, and talk to beneficiaries and neighbouring populations. This may also reflect a certain frame of mind that can prevail among agency staff, who may live in an 'expatriate' environment without being open to exchange with local populations beyond their work commitments.

In many cases, there seems to be a climate of suspicion, if not a lack of interest, within international agencies towards potential local partners. It is not rare for interesting local initiatives to be going on where aid agencies have been running programmes for years, and without them being aware of such activities.

Transparency and consistency are also important factors. This entails doing what one says one will do, or explaining why commitments could not be fulfilled. It also entails maintaining a certain logic in interventions. For example, in Nahrin, one NGO had similar projects (shelter reconstruction) in two neighbouring districts, but with different modalities, in terms of beneficiary selection (for example, returnees versus earthquake affected households) and contributions. This led to confusion and additional complaints, which constrained the smooth running of the programme and undermined the trust between the agency and community.

4.3 PARTICIPATION IN ACUTE EMERGENCIES: BEYOND THE 'IMPOSSIBLE'

Some of the findings presented above may suggest or support the idea that participation and consultation of affected populations and beneficiaries in acute emergencies is not possible. Informants, both foreign and Afghan, evoked the fact that the people, being 'victims' of the earthquake, did not have the capacity to participate in the emergency response. Agencies gave priority to the speed of the response, and did not have – or take – the time to engage in dialogue with the 'victims'.

While these factors cannot be denied or minimised, it must be emphasised that the case of Nahrin was specific in that the political and humanitarian context was such that the response was particularly rapid (see section 2.2.3). In most 'acute emergency responses' it is very rare for aid agencies, in particular, international agencies, to arrive within 24 hours; the delay is more like 3 to 5 days, if not more. The peak of the emergency, however, is within these first days, and in that time, people generally do not wait around passively for external assistance. Rather, they organise themselves to provide assistance to the most affected people, but it is quite common for aid agencies to ignore such activities. Evidence of this is also provided in the Global Study Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and Colombia monographs, and even in Nahrin, where, within a few hours, people in earthquake-affected areas went to other villages to check how their neighbours were, and immediately started to clear people out of the rubble. Had the aid community's response been slower, and on a smaller scale, more of these initiatives might have been seen.

The idea that participation in acute emergencies is not possible may indeed reflect the fact that external aid agencies do not necessarily *see* what local activities are taking place, or the potential to work with the population in the response. The use of 'pre-prepared' interventions can also limit agencies' attention to opportunities to support local initiatives and build on what is already taking place. The usefulness and importance of

emergency kits is not denied – they are necessary to facilitate the logistics of operations – but this does not mean that interventions should necessarily be carried out without looking out for what is already being done locally, and for the potential to involve local inhabitants.

Some of the factors highlighted in section 4.2 that constrain participation, such as difficult access, security risks and regular evacuations, low local capacity, etc, paradoxically also point to the importance of involving affected populations and beneficiaries in aid operations. In most cases, acute emergencies indeed take place when and where agencies are absent. This highlights the importance of recognising and supporting local initiatives and local potential for aid activities when agencies happen to be present.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

This monograph has attempted to present the aid interventions in Nahrin, within the wider framework of aid in Afghanistan, and the types of participation seen throughout the project cycle and in various sectors of intervention. From these, lessons were drawn concerning the benefits and advantages of participation, as well as constraints and risks. These lessons are brought together in the following, as elements aid practitioners (including donors, HQ staff, and others involved in the provision of humanitarian aid) may wish to consider when engaging in participatory processes in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has been in a situation of political instability and crisis for the past two decades, so that the majority of aid interventions over that period have tended towards relief activities, implemented with a sense of urgency and limited timeframes and budgets, in a context where access to the field was often restricted by security and logistical constraints.

The needs in many regions of the country, however, lie more on the side of development, requiring more long-term commitments from aid agencies and a closer collaboration with local communities. Recent changes in the political situation are favouring a shift towards development-oriented strategies, and although this will not happen automatically, it provides new opportunities for aid agencies and Afghan communities and institutions to engage in, and be more open to, new and more participatory modes of assistance.

As well as the recommendations relating to participation in humanitarian action, given the changing situation in Afghanistan, the opportunity has

also been taken to provide recommendations relevant to mid- to long-term rehabilitation and development activities. These may also prove of interest to humanitarian actors, who are often brought to repeatedly implement short-term interventions in the same contexts and over time.

The final section provides suggestions on how some recommendations can be considered in the context of an acute emergency.

5.1 TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST

A fundamental ingredient for successful participatory processes is mutual trust between the agency and affected population. This requires transparency from both sides, and information sharing and explanation on all decisions that concern the community and agency.

5.2 IDENTIFYING KEY COUNTERPARTS WITHIN THE 'COMMUNITY'

It is common for outsiders to idealise the 'community', as if it were a homogeneous assembly of people ready to work together for the development of their 'community'. This is rarely the case, and not all community members are likely to be equally or similarly interested by an intervention or project, even if it is a local initiative. It is therefore important for the agency to identify from the outset: who it will work with, which sub-groups are ready to be involved, and which individuals are able to take on and support the project.

5.3 INVOLVING COMMUNITY MEMBERS FROM THE OUTSET OF A PROGRAMME

Affected populations and beneficiaries will participate in a programme if they see the interest in doing so. To ensure the programme corresponds to their interests they need to be involved from the outset and in all the stages of the project cycle and should ideally have the ability to influence decisions that are taken.

5.4 GOOD KNOWLEDGE OF THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT²⁹

It is necessary to have a considerable understanding of the context, in terms of the social organisation, conflict potential, impact of the crisis, economic situation of families, etc. It is particularly important to decipher the local political structure: is there an uncontested leader? who are the influential community members (*kalan nafar*)? which social networks (*qowm*) exist? what is the unit of social organisation (village, *manteqa*)?

Social and political analysis of the local context is important because, as a resource provider, as soon as an NGO sets foot into a region it automatically becomes part of local politics. If the approach is flawed at the outset (for example, failure to speak to a key local official) the next stages are made more difficult, although there is a large margin to rectify initial *faux pas* in the course of a programme.

An agency can position itself as a mediator on issues concerning assistance. (as Olivier Roy says: 'Afghans are always looking for a mediator') If it does so, agency staff must be in a position to be respected by local leaders and able to master tense situations.

In acute emergencies, when it is not possible to do an in-depth analysis of the social structure, the agency can, through a national staff member or local informant, monitor reactions, listen to affected populations, hear complaints, etc. Such social monitoring does not require much time but can yield very useful information on how a community is reacting to an intervention.

5.5 APPROPRIATE HUMAN RESOURCES

The skills required to carry out participatory work include familiarity with the social sciences, good communication skills, and experience of group dynamics. Maturity and experience are also necessary to cope with the psychological pressure that one is exposed to during consultation and participatory work, especially in contexts of intense human suffering. This is true for both expatriate and national staff.

An expatriate, who will have the advantage of being outside local power dynamics, and thus have a degree of objectivity and impartiality, can mediate between an agency and the affected population. The profile of the person must be adapted to the situation. When dealing with a *shura* or local leaders, it is preferable the person be an experienced man. If the programme involves working with women, the expatriate should obviously be an experienced woman.

Afghan agency staff can also act as mediators, but need sufficient experience to know how to position themselves with community representatives, so as to remain impartial. Certain agencies deliberately employ a 'white-beard' (*rish-safed*) whose age immediately confers respect on him. Other factors should be taken into consideration, such as ethnic and tribal identity, education, urban versus rural origin, staff attitudes, etc.

The relative status of agency staff and community members will affect the relationships between them, and, again, the appropriate profile will depend

on the situation and type of programme, and it may also be useful to train teams of national staff on group dynamics and participatory approaches.

5.6 DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS

‘There are always complaints’ and there always will be. Olivier Roy cautions that complaints can be used as a stratagem in local politics, for example, to destabilise certain community members and prevent them from receiving aid. In the present political situation in Afghanistan, some parties may have an interest in discouraging the presence of international actors in certain regions, and play on community frustrations to foster complaints and even generate security incidents. It can also be difficult for an agency to manage situations in which many, and often diverging, complaints arise from various stakeholders. It is important therefore to understand what lies behind the complaints and to wait until they can be structured and discussed constructively.

In some cases, it can be useful to use written agreements or contracts, to which both the agency and the community can refer.

5.7 WORKING WITH WOMEN

Great care is needed for any programme involving women’s participation, whether as direct beneficiaries or agency employees. Cultural sensitivity around the position of women in society has always been very high. Cultural *faux pas* concerning women may not only create tension between community members and the agency, but may also create problems for the women involved. The advice of local men and women may be sought on culturally appropriate ways to work with women. Preparatory work with key community members, in particular

mullahs, should be carried out to gain their support and avoid problems later on.

5.8 COORDINATION BETWEEN AGENCIES AND PROGRAMMES

To facilitate transparency and trust between agencies and populations, it is also necessary for such relationships to exist between agencies that are present in the same region. It is important that their goals and modes of project implementation do not compete or conflict with each other. The same applies in the case of different projects being implemented by one agency. The building of trust requires agencies to be coherent and consistent in their actions.

5.9 INCREASED FLEXIBILITY AND LONGER TIMEFRAMES

Donors have a clear role to play in the promotion of participatory processes. While many demand that programmes involve the participation of beneficiaries and that local populations be integrated, other requirements and limited funding timeframes can restrict the flexibility and space needed to put effective participatory processes/practices into place. It is recommended that funding institutions review their procedures so as to facilitate participatory approaches.

5.10 FOCUSING ON CAPACITY BUILDING

The ultimate level of participation is where the community is in a position to develop and carry initiatives forward. Aid interventions should include measures to build local capacities, both on a technical and a psychological level. Developing the self-esteem and self-confidence of individuals and communities is an essential part of capacity building. This entails helping to build an institutional framework that enables community members to organise themselves.

5.11 SHIFTING THE BALANCE OF POWER

Many constraints on the participation of local populations and their empowerment have to do with the balance of power between aid agencies and local communities, and attitudes. Beneficiaries and affected populations are rarely in a position to refuse aid or lay down conditions, let alone to express their concerns or ideas. There is a need to shift the balance of power at several levels: between the agency and the community, between the expatriate staff and the national staff within the agency, and between national staff and community members.

While the power will almost always lie in the hands of those with resources (that is donors and aid agencies), several measures can be taken to increase local populations' capacity to act on and work actively with the aid system.

- increased information and explanation about *how* the aid system works, and *who* they can address themselves to (for example, translation of documents into local languages or dialects – in Afghanistan dari and pahstu – communication to the press, community meetings);

- greater availability of agency staff for communication with local populations;
- greater training of national staff, to include training on community work and communication skills;
- increased responsibilities for national staff;
- reduced dependence on expatriate staff;
- increased decision-making powers for local communities, through increased flexibility in programme planning;
- sensitisation of expatriate staff on culturally sensitive behaviours and relations with national staff and local populations.

5.12 APPLYING THESE RECOMMENDATIONS IN ACUTE EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

Several of the above recommendations do not lend themselves to the context of an acute emergency, such as that in Nahrin. However, steps can be taken to optimise participation in such contexts, where appropriate.

Though it is impossible to carry out an in-depth assessment of the social and political situation at the outset of an acute crisis, there are often opportunities to gather key information through local and international agencies with an existing presence in the area, or those who have worked in the affected area before. In the case of Afghanistan, many agencies have been there long enough for a consistent body of knowledge to exist³⁰. Afghan informants with specific knowledge of the region can also provide key insights. These sources can provide sufficient information to enable identification of key counterparts that should be engaged with and how they should be approached. Sending staff (expatriate or Afghan) that have previous experience of the region or similar regions (though it may not be easy to find) is also a good way to speed up the process of gathering information and understanding the context, and can be important to

ensuring that personnel engage with the affected population in culturally appropriate ways.

Where aid agencies are present over a long time in a country or region, and when a region is known to be prone to natural disasters (as is the north of Afghanistan), investments in disaster preparedness can be made which should include the capacity building of local staff³¹ to respond to such emergencies, and sensitisation on participative approaches.

Finally, in the absence of time, the attitude of agency staff and the way emergency interventions are implemented will be fundamental to establishing trust and mutual respect. In addition to culturally and socially appropriate behaviour, agency staff need to identify local initiatives in response to the crisis, be willing to listen to members of the affected population and open to suggestions and comments. Though seemingly simple, taking the time to listen and hear the affected population is probably the most important recommendation and yet would appear to be the most difficult to apply, particularly in the context of acute emergency.

Enhancing the participation and consultation of beneficiaries and affected populations cannot be limited to a few technical guidelines. It brings into question entire modes of operation, from the wider political and cultural system, which determines relationships between aid workers and affected populations, to the personal behaviour and ethics of individuals. Rather than being limited to a list of good intentions, it is hoped that the findings, ideas and debate engendered by the Global Study will contribute to highlight concrete, realistic and constructive steps through which constraints can be tackled.

Notes

- ¹ The Quality Project (QP) is an operational research programme, implemented by Groupe URD in partnership with several humanitarian NGOs. It aims to improve the service provided to aid beneficiaries by developing a self-evaluation and self-learning tool for aid workers in the field. The development of this tool is based on a collective learning and capitalisation process in a variety of contexts (Central America, Afghanistan, West Africa, etc). Groupe URD visits each site several times, to monitor the evolution of the situation and programmes. In August 2002, the multi-disciplinary team visited Kabul, the Shamali Plain, the southern Panjshir Valley, Bamian, Ruy Doab, Mazar-I-Sharif, Kandahar, Nahrin, Pul-e-Khumri, sites chosen to encompass three levels of diversity: ethnic diversity (Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek); humanitarian situations (for instance, drought, conflict-affected, displaced populations); degrees of aid-actor presence. A second QP mission to Afghanistan took place in January/February 2003.
- ² *ibid*
- ³ Francois Grunewald (team leader) and Charlotte Dufour (assistant researcher)
- ⁴ *Les enquêtes participatives en débat*, Editions Karthala – ICRA – GRET, Paris 2000. p38–39.
- ⁵ *Shura* is an assembly, where male community members discuss a given issue.
- ⁶ These are estimates as there has not been any census since the 1970s. See G. Etienne, *Imprévisible Afghanistan*, Presse de Sciences Po, 2002.
- ⁷ Kieffer, 1972, in Xavier de Planbol, 'L'afghanistan ou l'anti-nation', *Les Nations du Prophète*, 1993.
- ⁸ See Roussel, F and M.P. Caley, *Les Mantegs : le puzzle souterrain de l'Afghanistan*, Peshawar, 1994.

- ⁹ P. and M. Centlivres (ethnologists specialising in Afghanistan), interview with Stéphan Magnaldi (Groupe URD), Kabul, 17 December 2002.
- ¹⁰ For example, according to the *pashtunwali*, women cannot inherit and divorce is unknown, unlike in the *Sharia*.
- ¹¹ 'La société afghane: structure et valeurs' in *Afghanistan, la colonisation impossible*, P. and M. Centlivres *et al*, 1984.
- ¹² Ethnologists at the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland), specialising in Afghanistan. Interview with S. Magnaldi (Groupe URD), Kabul, 17 December 2002.
- ¹³ O. Roy, 'L'Islam en Afghanistan' in *Afghanistan, la colonisation impossible*, 1984.
- ¹⁴ O. Roy (CNRS Director of Research, specialising in Central Asia and Islam), personal communication, 17 September 2002.
- ¹⁵ 'La société afghane: structure et valeurs' in *Afghanistan, la colonisation impossible*, P. and M. Centlivres *et al*, 1984.
- ¹⁶ ACTED report on shelter in Nahrin.
- ¹⁷ ACTED, 'Nahrin post-earthquake emergency shelter rehabilitation project: short-term mission, field diagnostic, shelter design and technical recommendations for earthquake resistance', by C. Moyal, May 2002.
- ¹⁸ The Centlivres even suggest many Afghans are unsure as to *why* agencies help them, and what their interests are in doing so, especially when agencies are not affiliated politically or religiously (interview with S. Magnaldi)
- ¹⁹ According to the Koran, the dead should be buried on the day they died, before dawn.
- ²⁰ Interestingly, the timeframe of an acute emergency was not mentioned by informants. In the case of Nahrin, the emergency response took place over two weeks.
- ²¹ B.J. Rodey, *A Socioeconomic Evaluation of the Community Forum Programme*, February 2000, UNCHS Habitat.

- ²² B.J. Rodey, *idem*.
- ²³ From: S. Reynolds, 'Rebuilding Communities in the Urban Areas of Afghanistan', Fukuoka, Japan, Symposium and Round Table on Operational Activities, June 1999.
- ²⁴ *Paghsa* is the traditional building material, a kind of mud, used to make walls. It is very easily destroyed during earthquakes. Consequently, agencies insisted on using bricks, with wooden support structures.
- ²⁵ From: 'Les programmes Cash for Work et Food for Work en Afghanistan, éléments méthodologiques pour un impact maximal au bénéfice des familles les plus vulnérables' Julien Bartoletti, Solidarités, November 2001.
- ²⁶ *Karezze*: underground water channels, dug in mountainsides, to bring mountain waters to irrigation networks.
- ²⁷ See: 'The Quality Project in Afghanistan: Mission 1, 20 July 2002 – 24 August 2002: Mission report', by Groupe URD, November 2002.
- ²⁸ Some readers may not be familiar with, or may not understand, what this means, but it is questionable whether many health workers and mothers who are confronted with it on a daily basis do either! These criteria are internationally recognised, and their use recommended in MSF's and Action Contre la Faim's nutrition guidelines.
- ²⁹ Several of the recommendations were suggested by Olivier Roy, personal communication, 17 September 2002.
- ³⁰ Information is available through organisations such as ACBAR and AREU.
- ³¹ For example, the MSF–Belgium emergency team that intervened in Nahrin was led by an Afghan doctor and composed of Afghan staff.

Glossary of Afghan Terms

Alaqadar (Dari): government representative at the sub-district (*alaqadari*) level.

Aylakh (Dari): pastures at high altitude where pastoralists take their livestock to graze in the summertime.

Dahia (Dari): traditional birth attendant.

Dari: Persian language spoken in Afghanistan.

Jihad (Arabic): Jihad is often defined, too simplistically, as ‘holy war’. But Muslims make the distinction between the ‘lesser jihad’, which entails the defence of the Islamic world from invasion by non-Islamic forces, and the ‘greater jihad’, which is the believer’s inner struggle against his own weaknesses and his efforts to follow the way of God.

Jirga (Pashtu): literally means ‘circle’; designates an assembly where all male community members discuss issues concerning the community or area. The *Lloya Jirga* (the Great Assembly) is the gathering of community representatives from around the country.

Kalan nafar (Dari): literally means ‘big people’, and refers to influential persons in a community.

Kandas (Arabic): water reservoirs dug into the ground at the bottom of a hill.

Kareze (Dari): underground water channels, dug in mountainsides, to bring mountain waters down to irrigation networks.

Khan (Dari): tribal chief, influential person.

Kuchi (Dari): Nomad.

Mahram (Dari): male relative who accompanies an Afghan woman whenever she leaves her home.

Malek (Dari): local chief.

Mudjahidin (Dari, Arabic): fighter of the Jihad (holy war), and, more specifically in the Afghan context, fighter in the resistance against the Red Army during the war between the Soviets and Afghans.

Madrassa (Arabic): religious school of Islam.

Manteqa (Dari): a group of villages, usually in a geographically coherent area, which is defined by the local population.

Maolawi (Dari; Arabic: *âlem*, pl. *Ulema*): scholar of Islam.

Mullah (Arabic): village preacher (layman from the village, chosen for his faith and wisdom).

Paghsa (Dari): traditional building material, a kind of mud made of earth mixed with straw, used to make walls.

Pashtunwali (Pashtu): an oral code of honour, values and behaviour that is used as customary law, central to Pashtu culture and social organisation.

Pir (Persian, Arabic): religious master, at the head of a Sufi community (see Sufism, below).

Qowm (Dari): network of social ties and solidarity, with a territorial or kinship basis, with varying exist at different levels: from the village or mosque, to the tribe or even an entire ethnic group

Rish-safed (Dari): literally means “White-beard”, and designates respected elders from the community.

Sayyed (Arabic): Person descending from, or thought to descend from the Prophet Muhammad.

Sharia (Arabic): Islamic Law

Shura (Dari): assembly, where male community members discuss a given issue.

Sufism (Persian, Arabic): the esoteric, mystical, or psycho-spiritual dimension of Islam. Sufism was very much entrenched in Afghan society before the war, as in much of the Persian world (many of the great Persian poets were Sufis), notably among intellectuals and urban middle class, around Kabul, in the North of the country in the province of Herat. (*Sufi* is either the adjective that characterises elements associated with Sufism, or the noun that designates persons that follow the Sufi path to God.)

Taleb (Arabic; pl: *Taliban*): student of religion

Tchadri (Dari): large veil worn by women which completely covers the body (down to the heel in the back, and down to the waist at the front) and leaves only a small netted screen for women to see and breathe. The word *burka* (urdu) is also sometimes used to designate this veil, notably in Pakistan.

Umma (Arabic): the community of Muslim believers

Wali (Dari): government representative at the province (*wilayat*) level.

Woloswal (Dari): government representative at the district (*woloswali*) level

Zamin (Pashtu): land/property

Zan (Pashtu): woman

Zar (Pashtu): gold

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Epilogue

THE ROAD FROM EMERGENCY TO DEVELOPMENT

The research team's return to Afghanistan in January 2003, following the initial drafting of this monograph, provided an interesting opportunity to follow up on the August 2002 research findings. While in August 2002 agencies were still running essentially short-term, relief-oriented programmes initiated at the end of 2001 and in early 2002, by January, many agencies were looking to the future and starting to formulate mid-to long-term strategies.

Some agencies were talking of handing-over to Afghan institutions, whether government or NGOs, so that considerable attention was being paid to capacity building. However, many agency staff, especially among NGOs that usually focus on relief activities, recognised their lack of expertise and skills in this area. Agencies were also engaging in participatory programmes in which they planned to devolve much of the decision-making, in terms of choice of activities and modes of implementation, to community members. But again: "We haven't run programmes like this before; we are learning as we go". In fact, participatory programmes are currently being institutionalised through the National Solidarity Programme, implemented by the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Rural Development (MRRD, guided by the World Bank). The programme's approach, and NGOs related concerns with regard to its implementation, are described in Box 7.

Box 7 The National Solidarity Programme

“The NSP aims to develop the ability of communities to plan, manage, finance, and monitor their own development activities. This primary aim will be achieved by through the establishment of self-governing Community Institutions that will enable men and women to regularly consult among themselves and with their own representative councils, manage their own resources, and interface with and coordinate the activities of outside agencies.”^a

The task of implementing partners (mostly NGOs) will be to: 1) establish contact with community members and train local facilitators; 2) establish a community development council; 3) help the newly elected council to design and cost a project; and 4) mobilise resources, establish a community treasurer and prepare a local project proposal. These steps are to be carried out in *4 months*. Proposals will be submitted for approval to an external consultant and, if accepted, the community, assisted by a facilitator, will be in charge of the implementation. The NSP is to be carried out in the country’s 32 provinces, starting with 3 districts/province, and 72 villages/district.

NGOs expressed serious concerns regarding this programme. Besides the financial risks involved for them (very little provision for delivery costs) and the lack of clarity on certain issues (definition of “community”, gender issues, provision of training etc), they highlighted how unrealistic the time-frame was and the political and security risks involved: how sensitive is it to establish ‘elected’ community councils in view of existing power structures, especially in a post-conflict context? how will the community react if proposed projects are turned down? are quantitative objectives (coverage, time-frame, and fund disbursement) not prioritised at the expense of qualitative objectives (community development, gender, etc)?

NGOs have been granted greater flexibility in establishing community development councils, but many of their concerns remain, and although the programme’s aims are stated to be participatory community

Box 7 Continued

development, it seems that the underlying objectives are political (strengthening the government's legitimacy in rural areas) and financial (disbursing funds that are available now, not later); the latter possibly in contradiction with the former. Furthermore, to what extent is the NSP imposing a foreign vision of social organisation within a timeframe that makes programme ownership practically impossible?

Afghanistan has been in receipt of humanitarian aid for twenty years, yet some aid workers now question what is left. Today, issues of capacity building and community participation are being addressed with a sense of urgency typical of emergency situations. One question that can be raised is: why were these issues not addressed more before?

Note

^a National Solidarity Programme, Draft Operational Manual, January 2003

