PRINCIPLES CLASH IN AFGHANISTAN

All assumptions about how the international community should relate to countries in crisis are currently being tested, some to breaking point, in Afghanistan. At the time of writing, the UN is assembling a team of negotiators to meet the Taliban to determine whether a minimum basis can be found on which international assistance to the country can continue. If these negotiations fail, the prospect is the suspension of all but essential life-saving aid. This could have dire consequences for the population which has become increasingly reliant upon the western world’s willingness to fund rehabilitation and basic social services.

Michael Keating

The problem is the deep incompatibility between Afghan presumptive authorities’ policies and principles and those of the international assistance community. The Taliban, themselves the product of eighteen years of war, many if not most originating from refugee communities in Pakistan, consider themselves to be fighting for a “pure” and principled Islamic society.

Their initial military incursion inside Afghanistan was provoked by disaster at the expenses of the mujahideen who, for years, tyrannised and terrorised the population around Kunduz. The Taliban’s initial success in sweeping away warlords proved to be enormously popular, particularly in largely Pashtun areas of the country, the tribe from which the Taliban themselves spring. Their advance brought personal security and stable conditions for small entrepreneurs and traders.

But the way in which they have chosen to translate their principles into policy and practice has become increasingly controversial among Afghans, and unacceptable to the international community, Muslim scholars and their interpretation of the Holy Book, the Koran, into law and their imposition of Shariah discipline.

Such restrictions, on personal appearance, dress codes, entertainment and everyday habits are enforced by the religious police with arbitrary and often violent fines, particularly in Kabul, where citizens are least amenable to compliance.

Tens, if not hundreds of thousands of Afghan women have suffered most – economically, socially and psychologically – as the Taliban, in their pursuit of a “Islamic” society in which the dignity of women is fully respected, have banned women from working outside the home, denied them access to education and, in many cases...

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The convergence of health facilities, prevented equal access with man to what party medical services are still functioning.

**AGONISE OVER AND OVER**

While this has been taking place in Afghanistan over the last few years, the international community has been reassessing the whole basis upon which aid is provided. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a growing awareness by aid practitioners of the motives and impact of assistance. These have concerned the lack of legitimacy, the professionalism — or lack of it — with which it is provided, the cost benefits, both to recipients and to Western taxpayers, and above all, the principles which should underpin it.

The experience of the aid community in Kandahar after the Gulf War in Somalia during and after the recent famine, in Bosnia and, above all, in Rwanda after the genocide, have intensified this reassessment and broadened the circle of actors. The military, the media, the private sector, human rights activists, politicians and aid workers now meet regularly in conferences and in the minds of critics. There is a growing body of shared experience.

This reassessment is taking place in the Afghan context of 1995 and is long overdue. In the 1980s, aid was largely driven by the determination to get the Soviets out of the country and when they left, to remove the communist regime they had supported. When the mujahideen finally took control of the whole country, they followed years of internecine fighting between mujahideen factions of various ideological and tribal bases. This was punctuated by the near-total destruction of Kabul, the wholesale looting of what remained of the country’s infrastructure, the looting of property, schools, clinics and other public services, and increasing, rather than less, hardship for millions of people.

Distracted by pressing crises elsewhere and dissuaded by the behaviour of the former ‘assistance clients’, western donors countries largely lost interest in Afghanistan. It is only recently in the media, as well as in brief reports of yet another interstate battle, or in features on the misery endured by a long-suffering population.

**BACK ON THE AGENDA**

But the Taliban’s rise to power has been growing international interest in finding solutions to seemingly intractable complex emergencies. One symptom of the latter was the UN’s decision in April last year to choose a couple of countries in which the international community should test a new approach to such crises.

This followed a review of the post Cold War scene and the incapacity of the UN and its partners, including donors, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, the World Bank and other international financial institutions, to work with affected populations in finding sustainable solutions to crises.

Afghanistan was one of the countries chosen largely on the grounds, according to some experts, that it is one of the longest running crises, that it has the biggest refugee caseload in the world, rather than the Pakistanis, and that it offered an alternative testing ground to Africa, which is host to more humanitarian disasters than any other continent and whose, many assume, most emergencies are likely to occur.

As it happens, the other country chosen by the UN as a test case, Mozambique, was subsequently dropped and its decision has left the UN looking for other partners on which country should replace it.

It remains to be seen whether the choice of Afghanistan was wise in the light of what is now emerging — a clash of principles and every prospect of more fighting. But it was certainly a provocative decision and it adds another layer to the growing international interest being accorded to the country.

The new approach includes a concerted effort to involve all assistance actors in analysing the future of the country and to get at this with political efforts to achieve peace. It involves explicit recognition of the responsibilities of the actors, and developing a mechanism to realise them. It includes the definition of principles, operational norms and policies to underpin the international community’s activities.

For assistance actors, one goal is to improve the overall impact of aid both for the beneficiaries and so that aid dollars are used more efficiently. This requires a mechanism for assistance actors to agree priorities and how they can complement each other in sound and principled programming. This must allow discussion, decisions and assessments of how principles are put into practice, and provide arbitration in new areas of interpretation, whether in relations with national authorities, communities or neighbouring states.

A small team of representatives from the UN department of Political Affairs, UN aid agencies, the World Bank and the NGO community, is preparing a document which will make proposals as to how this can be done. These will be submitted to all international actors for approval.

Early May, the Secretary General issued his new Deputy, Louise Frechette, with overall responsibility for the effort. These developments bode well for the chance of success.