Mercenaries, missionaries and misfits:
Competition in the aid marketplace in Afghanistan

1. Competition in the Afghan Aid Marketplace

1.2 Overview

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

Aid agencies, common to other bureaucracies, are subject to a certain level of what I term 'mercenary' pressures. In other words they have a vested interest in increasing their budgets and influence and in any case are heavily incentivised to act in a self-interested manner simply by virtue of operating in a competitive context in which others may be expected to pursue their own interests (Gibson et al 2005; Cooley and Ron 2002; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Brehm and Gates 1999; Downs 1967). Equally, such pressures are just as likely to apply internally as individuals and sub-units within aid agencies may be expected to seek to advance their own positions (Brehm and Gates 1999; Allison 1972; Ghani and Lockhart 2009; Bouchikhi 1998; Hanreider 2015). Though not the focus of the current paper (which concentrates more on motivations than the means through which these objectives are achieved) aid agencies may develop various strategies to increase their autonomy or influence (Oestreich 2012; Hawkins and Jacoby 2006; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Brehm and Gates 1997; Hawkins et al 2006; Martin 2006; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Mahoney and Thelen 2010). Crucially though, financial capital is not their only aim and increasing social capital (in the form of reputations, authority and influence) is of at least equal importance (Barnett 2013; Hardt 2014; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Barnett and Weiss 2008). Due in particular to the nature of the aid marketplace, trust and credibility are likely to play a particularly important role (Hardt 2014; Arrow 1963; Meyer 1999; Werker and Ahmed 2008) and thus the need to retain this form of social capital may serve to restrain some more overtly mercenary tendencies.

The second set of pressures impacting aid agencies are those that I term 'missionary', recognising that many of the aims of aid agencies, and the motivations of staff working within them, are altruistic in nature (Reiff 1993; Lumsdaine 1993; Gibson et al 2005; Andreoni 1990; Barnett 2013; Niland et al 2015; Stirrat 2008; Werker and Ahmed 2008; Meyer 1995; 1999; Weiss 2013; De Waal 1997). Beyond self-selection, aid agency staff members are formatted to think in certain ways and are influenced in their actions by the wider culture of their organisation (Weaver and Leiteritz 2005; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Brehm and Gates 1999; Bouchkkhi 1998; Checkel 2005; Rajak and Stirrat 2011; Downs 1967). This may result in a strong commitment to certain narrowly defined, ostensibly altruistic objectives, which agencies and individuals may feel driven to promote (Rubenstein 2008; Kissinger 1995; Reiff 2003; Feinstein International Famine Centre 2004; Stirrat 2008; Downs 1967). In turn, this may create another form of competition regarding the advancement of specific non-interest based agendas.

Finally, the aid world is subject to a third set of pressures, which I term 'misfit', related to the complex bureaucratic environment in which objectives are imperfectly translated into action in often unpredictable ways. This body of theory recognises that organisations are complex places; individuals are inherently diverse; and outcomes depend heavily on specific contexts (Oestreich 2012; Brehm and Gates 1999; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Bouchikhi 1998; Mosse 2005; Hardt 2014). Moreover, bureaucracies' tendencies to focus on process over outcome, to treat rules as ends in themselves, to lack flexibility in adaptation, and to draw upon a limited set of defined responses, may trump, and undermine, more overarching goals (Ferguson 1994; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Wigley 2005; Mosse 2005; Allison 1972). Thus objectives and their implementation are not always closely correlated and the inherent complexity and diversity of the system means that the extent to which trends can be generalised is limited.

In the below analysis I seek to explore some of these trends and the extent to which they serve to increase or limit the potential for competition in the aid world in Afghanistan. The purpose of this paper is to provide merely an overview of the dynamics that interviewees noted as being important as serving to either increase or decrease the potential for competition. I aim to provide a broad snapshot of the aid marketplace in Afghanistan; the players that are involved; the institutional environment in which they operate; the agendas they seek to promote; and their perceptions of both the motivations of other actors and the positive and negative impacts of dynamics of competition. In the following section I look at how these motivations are translated into action in regards to information creation and transmission, in particular in regards to needs assessment.

The below analysis is based on in depth interviews with over 70 people connected to the Afghan aid marketplace, including donors, government, UN agencies and NGOs. Where relevant I also draw on my own experience of working in Afghanistan. The purpose is to focus specifically on subjective perceptions and to highlight how actors within this environment think about the context, the motivations driving their own actions, and those that they attribute to others. The opinions expressed may in many cases be limited to the individual expressing them and no claims are made regarding generalizability. However at a collective level, the opinions expressed and reproduced here do serve, it is hoped, to paint a nuanced and textured picture of the social space that is the Afghan aid world.

1.3 The Afghan Aid Marketplace

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

Figure one: Official Development Assistance to Afghanistan
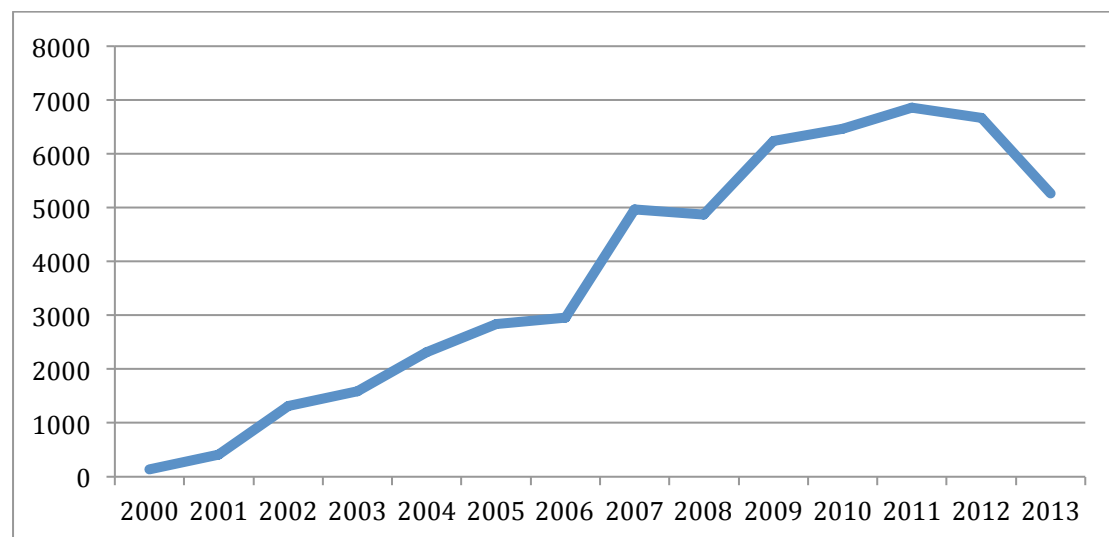
Source: OECD DAC Financial Tracking Service

The rapid influx of such large quantities of aid has had significant benefits for Afghanistan. Economic growth averaged 9.4% per year between 2003-2012 (World Bank 2014). Health indicators have risen steadily year on year (NRVA 2011/12). Illiteracy has fallen while school attendance has risen dramatically (Ibid). However aid has also had negative impacts. Notably it has helped fuel massive corruption, pushing the country near to the top of global corruption rankings (Transparency International 2015). There is also evidence that aid has fuelled conflict by providing income to insurgent groups and criminal gangs (SIGAR 2013).

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

In terms of the sectors that donors are involved in in Afghanistan this is to a large extent the result of path dependency and bureaucratic inertia. Sectors of intervention were defined as part of the "Geneva raffle" (Burke 2014) in 2002, in which responsibilities were divided between donors without much reference to capacity or expertise (Ibid). Path dependency and the creation of bureaucratic interests then sustained those choices. Each donor built up relationships with particular ministries (Ghani and Lockhart 2009), made long-term funding commitments, hired or seconded staff with relevant expertise to manage allocated funding, and built up expectations from both other donors and line ministries regarding future support. As a result donors in Afghanistan may find that the sectors they are addressing are set in stone for historical reasons unconnected to need, or even wider interests, and that external efforts to realign support may meet with stiff resistance, according to both government and donor interviewees.

While donors nominally provide funding for the Afghan people it passes through a series of intermediary actors before it reaches the final beneficiaries. With very few exceptions donors do not implement projects directly but rely on others, from whom they contract implementation-related services. Thus donors have little direct contact with the final recipients of their aid. In the words of one NGO interviewee, while there are some opportunities for beneficiaries to provide input into projects, "they are not clients, to say I don't like your products I'm going to go to another shop" (NGO 4). Rather, in some ways, it is the donors themselves who are the clients in this marketplace. Often their funding is channelled to lower level actors through UN agencies or Pooled Funds (similarly this occurs on a smaller scale regarding sub-contracting to national NGOs through international NGOs). Donors could of course provide this funding directly but, aside from concerns that they may have less capacity to direct the funding to where it is needed, this would involve either substantially increasing the donor's own administrative costs to oversee the contracts, or accepting a very low standard of oversight of those contracts, neither of which may be acceptable to their general publics. By outsourcing these functions, for instance to the UN, the donor can sidestep the issue by presenting a low administration-to-implementation ratio (with all the UN overheads costs reported as implementation) while trusting that oversight functions will still be exercised. As one UN interviewee noted, "it's easier to give money to one organization than to hundreds" (Donor 11).

Along with high volumes of aid, there is a great plurality of actors operating in the aid marketplace in Afghanistan. As noted, 27 states (and other actors) provide humanitarian aid, while even more provide development assistance. The Afghan government is composed of 25 ministries, parliament, the presidency, executive agencies and sub-national governance bodies. 24 agencies make up the UN country team (including some that are not technically part of the UN), while multiple governance bodies (including the UN secretariat, General Assembly, and the management structures of individual agency) exert influence over these actors. In addition to many private companies, implementing agencies that are currently registered include 269 international NGOs and 1,675 national NGOs. Further, within every single organisation noted above are diverse individuals who all have different backgrounds, characters, interests and motivations, and who collectively make up the aid world.

Views about the marketplace are many and varied. On the one hand there are those who feel, like one senior UN staff member, that "the marketplace is fun" (UNHCR 3) and that competition within it is lively, healthy and invigorating. But there are many more who are uncomfortable perceiving of it in such terms, likely seeing the analogy as a veiled insult that demeans the collective aid endeavour they are engaged in and a part of. As one donor commented for instance "The competitive thing is a bit of a cynical title. I like to think of it more as comparative

strengths" (Donor 2). Another interviewee gave a similar opinion saying "I don't like the word competition. What matters is that the children get something. I'd prefer that they got it from us, but I don't mind if it's from UNHCR or WFP" (UN Agency 8).

Generally though there is recognition of the dynamics of competition that are the inevitable result of the way the system is designed. These dynamics are expressed in multiple different ways, explored below, and they are experienced differently by different individuals and organisations. Some recognise the positive aspects of the marketplace, for instance noting that it puts emphasis on projects to be credible, while others tend to focus on the negatives (for instance one interviewee commented that the trend of flooding intervention sites with banners and logos, even before delivering any services, "makes you realize it's a multi-million dollar business and not a charity"; UN Agency 1). Notably though such views are not mutually exclusive. Many studies have attempted to address the inherent problems of competition, primarily in regards to their negative impact on coordination (Ramalingam and Barnett 2010; Steinwand 2015; Ghani and Lockheart 2009; Atmar and Goodhand 2002; Wilkens 2012), however innovations to date have had only limited success. In any case squaring this circle may be impossible. In the words of one interviewee, "How do you incentivize collaboration when the whole enterprise is based on competition? Every agency is fighting for its life" (NGO 6).

The humanitarian and development worlds are generally viewed as entirely separate institutions, relying on different actors, funding streams, and coordination structures. Generally there is much criticism that the two worlds are too far apart and this is normally accompanied by regular calls for greater coherence, dialogue and joint planning between the two. The discussion in this paper is primarily based on perceptions of the 'humanitarian marketplace' yet it is worth noting that in many ways the division between what is humanitarian and what is development is much more complex in practice than it may appear in theory. The line between the two worlds is becoming increasingly blurred (Stoddard 2006). Occasionally it is almost invisible.

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

According to one UN agency interviewee "Humanitarian funding is seen as more pristine because it's lifesaving" (UN Agency 4), yet a very large proportion of humanitarian funding and activities in Afghanistan go beyond attempting to save lives and instead aims to reduce vulnerability and, often, to have a long term impact on the 'resilience' of the affected populations. For this reason the Afghan government has not yet succeeded in producing a policy distinguishing between the two although at a certain point it had planned to. As a government interviewee commented:

> "The line between these activities is also quite blurred. We have humanitarian activities that have a development sort of impact but then you also do some development work on a short term in the realm of sort of humanitarian activities. We haven't been successful in that to be honest." (Government 3)

In any case, regardless of whether the difference between many self-styled humanitarian and development projects is substantive or strategic, the established humanitarian and development marketplaces are at least in some ways nevertheless quite distinct. In the development marketplace the Afghan government is the pre-eminent actor and establishes priorities based on factors internal to the government and through negotiation with donors. For the humanitarian world however, in the words of one UN interviewee, "The approach has been the international community is not contributing, it's substituting" (UNHCR 12). Afghan government involvement is hence limited and priorities are largely determined through consensus by the relevant, mostly

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

1.3.1 Donors

Donors in Afghanistan need to balance multiple interests including many (not always complementary) long-term strategic objectives and more immediate process-related goals. According to multiple interviewees donors seek, through their aid, to maintain influence with the Afghan government (through funding), the Afghan people (through visibility requirements in aid programmes), and with other donors (through conforming to norms defining how a 'responsible' donor should behave, including abiding by international commitments). In terms of 'mercenary' interests, donors, including purely humanitarian ones, admitted that politics affects their funding commitments, not only in addressing issues closest to the donors own interests, but also in maintaining relationships with important actors in the humanitarian or development world. Further, some donors also promote their compatriot NGOs or companies; which some attribute to strong domestic lobbies, and others to proximity bred from socializing in a confined and limited context. An obvious added complication in Afghanistan is that almost all donors are belligerents in the ongoing conflict. This has led to large amount of criticism of politicization of aid and particularly the subjugation of humanitarian and development aims to military strategy (Waisova 2008; Waldman 2008; Donini 2010; Howell and Lind 2009). It also means that belligerent donors have a reputational stake in Afghanistan's reconstruction being, and being seen to be, a success. Finally some donors referenced domestic politics impacting the direction of their programmes in other ways. For instance, some European donors noted that a push from their capitals to focus on displacement issues was fed by a desire to reduce onward migration to Europe.

One result of this multiplicity of interests within donor agencies is that their motivations are occasionally perceived with suspicion by several of those interviewed, who tended to juxtapose the need-based approach of their own organization against what they saw as the politically-driven agendas of donors. However interviews with donors reveal a more mixed picture. From both formal interviews and informal conversations with numerous donor staff it is clear that at the individual level, their dedication goes beyond a sense of professionalism and pride in their work and, in almost all cases, reflects a genuine commitment to improving life for ordinary Afghans. Political interests were acknowledged as an inevitable feature of the system, but donors themselves saw, or at least reported seeing, their own role much more in terms of the stated goals of aid: primarily reducing vulnerability and poverty. More often than not this altruistic dimension of aid in general, and of donor staff in particular, was recognized also by implementers.

The current research does not address the question of whether foreign aid is provided by governments for altruistic reasons, as argued by some (Lumsdaine 1993; Gibson et al 2005; Andreoni 1990) or self interested motivations as argued by others (Alesina and Dollar 2000; Schraeder, Hook and Taylor, 1998). However it does shed light on the way that those who manage aid understand its purposes. Where specific interests have been directly communicated to them (for instance as with the example of linking displacement aid to onward migration) they are likely to take these objectives into account. But where development objectives are framed in terms of the altruistic goals of aid interviewees seemed willing to take them at face value.

These observations correspond with my own experience in a donor agency in Afghanaistan, where colleagues were hard-working, dedicated and committed to the stated altruistic goals of aid, particularly those pertaining to the sectors they managed. As the EU, a transnational organisation, we, in theory at least, represented the interests of 28 EU member states in Afghanistan. However debates about aid were almost always approached from a technical, rather than an interest-based, perspective. When interests were invoked it was generally in terms of the interests of the development bureaucracy (ie the EU Delegation) rather than the political entity, or entities, behind that bureaucracy.

Competition between and within donors is somewhat more limited than other sectors of the marketplace as, in the conventional sense, donors are not seeking to attract funding but to spend it. Nevertheless they do compete in other ways. For one thing, donors do compete internally for funding with other departments of the civil service that they are part of, and with their other country operations. As one donor commented, for instance, "Colleagues fight for more funding for their own programmes. In that sense [donor agency] is no different than any other department" (Donor 11). This dynamic is not necessarily seen negatively. For instance one senior manager in a donor agency felt on balance it was much better for people to be engaged and enthusiastic about their work and thus "Ideally people *should* be advocates for their sectors" (Donor 16). Notably the driving motivation behind people promoting their own sectors was seen as primarily driven by personal commitment to those issue areas and a belief that they were important, rather than naked self interest. However the same donor also recognised that sometimes, though not always, there was a tendency "to measure your own importance in terms of how much funding you manage" (Ibid) and that such considerations may also play a, less positive, role in attempting to influence funding decisions.

Aside from internal competition for funding, donors compete externally primarily for symbolic capital. Ghani and Lockhart (2009) for instance have written about how competition between donors to promote their own programmes in Afghanistan undermines collective action goals, for instance by weakening the civil service through the poaching of higher capacity staff. From discussions with donors in Afghanistan some clearly see the value of 'flagship' programmes that will increase the prestige of their agency and make them stand out from others.

Competition, in a non-hierarchical relationship between donors, may also undermine coordination between them. Wilkens (2012) has written how concerns of national prestige effectively undermined efforts to coordinate Nordic countries input into the main donor coordination forum (the Joint Coordination Monitoring Board – JCMB) as each country's representative was more concerned about the image of their country than in providing efficient and coordinated input. These dynamics appear from interviews to be pervasive. One donor for instance described UNAMA's attempt to coordinate donors as akin to "herding a flea circus" (Donor 16). Another mentioned that donors' commitment to their own priorities supersedes their commitment to a collective agenda, noting that "everyone speaks about government-owned until the moment it touches their own programmes" (Donor 15). Such observations are in line with those of Ramalingam and Barnett 2010; Steinwand 2015; Ghani and Lockheart 2009; Atmar and Goodhand 2002 and others that a focus on narrow organisational goals tends to undermine donor coordination to achieve collective action goals.

Donors also have mixed views about the dynamics of competition created between actors vying for their funding. On the one hand there is some suspicion, at times even cynicism, regarding motivations. Many donors roundly criticised, in particular UN agencies, for, as they saw it, seeking to expand their mandates, letting institutional interests become the over-riding factor in questions of coordination, linking advocacy too closely to their programmatic functions, and attempting to "leverage the UN brand" (Donor 15) to promote their position vis-à-vis other actors. One donor, referring to both UN agencies and NGOs, commented that he believed the competitive context of the aid marketplace meant that "All these things work like businesses, non-profit businesses. They're self-propelling machines" (Donor 18). On the other hand however there was some recognition that competition also has its advantages. Some donors even lamented a lack of competition between certain actors, feeling that it would produce efficiency gains and make those agencies strive to produce better programmes (Donor 7). Provided donors have a clear idea of the needs they want to address then they may welcome organisations seeking to fill the market openings that they create. As one donor put it: "Agencies want to consolidate their market share. If they fulfill a need we would say why not?" (Donor 11). On the other hand if the agency's objectives do not correspond with the donor then this also is not necessarily problematic as the donor is not obliged to provide support. As another donor commented; "Agencies run around and try to sell you stuff, but you're not interested because they're selling a solution to a problem that you don't have" (Donor 16).

1.3.2 The Afghan government

The Afghan government is in constant competition with other actors, particularly donors, to be able to retain control over the aid agenda in Afghanistan. Primarily the government is seeking to increase the amount of aid funding that they control (termed 'on budget' aid) or which, failing that, is designated to be 'aligned', meaning it falls within nationally-defined priorities. However there is also a significant amount of differentiation and competition between the many constituent elements of the Afghan government. Some interviewees noted large differences in positions between central and regional government and between individuals in both. Rather than being a purely technical process, policies and priorities often emerge as the result of power games between, and within, Afghan ministries (Monsutti 2012; Ghani and Lockhart 2009). In particular, individual ministries depend heavily on their ability to convince either central government or donors, of the importance of the issues that they work on and to attract funding towards them. The inevitable risk is that this competition, often aggravated by donors, serves to undermine unified government strategy. Line ministries need funding not only to fulfil their objectives and to boost their prestige and that of their minister, but also for some ministries, in a period of declining aid revenues, to justify their very existence, according to multiple interviewees. Thus they are very unlikely to ever turn down funding that fits within their own agenda (even if they lack the capacity to properly oversee its implementation) but which does not necessarily comply with the wider strategic priorities defined by central government and the ministry of finance. Some interviewees noted a tendency for line ministries to act possessively regarding the implementation of policies ascribed to them as a way of monopolising "all the money and all the glory" (UN Agency 6) associated with successful implementation. As a senior government representative explained, this fragmentation serves to undermine a unitary, holistic approach to budgeting:

> "There is certainly competition among the ministries, who gets how much money. … But donors are also manipulating this situation. So if I have a project, let's say in the agriculture sector, and what I do is, I don't approach the ministry of finance directly, because then I will be told that either they don't need it or it's not a good project etc. So what they do is that they approach the line ministry exploiting this competition that exists. And they say 'if you don't get this money it will go to someone else'. And then they put their stamp on this project and they say 'well we want this funding'. Even if we say no and it's not in line with what the thinking is, they're like 'oh this is what's happening'. So that marketplace is there of course." (Government 3)

In terms of external actors, the government is also increasingly seeing the UN also in competitive terms as it has noticed the tendency for agencies to become implementing partners, straying in their view from original mandates, and it is thus pushing them to return to an advisory and capacity building role, according to interviews. Equally this applies to NGOs, which may also be seen as competing with the government to be awarded scarce aid resources and to influence dominant narratives. Waisova (2008) maintains that, while NGOs and the government generally enjoy close collaborative relationships in Afghanistan, competition between them is growing, while others have noted that reliance on the NGO sector for service delivery risks undermining the Afghan state (McKechnie 2002; Ghani and Lockhart 2009; Lockhart 2007). From the Afghan government's viewpoint, according to an interviewee, if donors are working with NGOs "then they are following the lead of others. So if we don't lead someone else will lead. I think that's the overall perception now" (Government 3).

1.3.3 UN Agencies

There is a huge amount of diversity among UN agencies in terms of the extent of their presence in Afghanistan and the issues that they deal with. Some enjoy considerable support from their headquarters, in terms of both powerful lobbies for their interests and significant fundraising machinery, while others are entirely dependent on sourcing funding in country. Some agencies focus on particular types of people such as children (UNICEF), women (UNWOMEN) or displaced people (UNHCR), while others deal with particular issues in Afghanistan such as landmines (UNMACCA) or drug cultivation (UNODC). Some are purely development-oriented (e.g. UNDP)

and others purely humanitarian (e.g. UNOCHA) but a large number span the humanitarian-development divide enabling them to source funding from both humanitarian and development donors. The much commented issue of overlapping UN mandates applies as much in Afghanistan as it does elsewhere. A sickly, malnourished refugee child living in an urban slum for instance is potentially of direct concern to UNHCR, WFP, WHO, UNICEF and UNHABITAT, among other agencies. Where one agency's mandate ends and another begins depends primarily on inter-agency negotiation, the availability of funding, and global policies developed by the agencies' hierarchies and management boards. As one UN Agency interviewee commented, if an agency has an interest in expanding into any specific sector then "You will find entry points" (UN Agency 3). The dynamics of competition that result from this situation are apparent to most donors. In the view of one, "Setting up a raft of UN agencies that are all self-funding, it's a bit perverse" (Donor 18).

Competition between UN agencies in Afghanistan is not a new phenomenon. Rashid (2001) for instance details how competition between UN agencies in the 1990s undermined negotiations with the Taliban as each agency was more interested in implementing their individual projects than strengthening their collective bargaining positions, thus creating an opportunity for the Taliban to play one agency off against another. These dynamics are aggravated by the loose governance structure in which the agencies operate. All UN agencies are hierarchically responsible to their own headquarters rather than the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and hence coordination functions are based primarily on persuasion and moral authority to ensure commitment to shared objectives. The SRSG has few mechanisms available to exert control over the work of individual agencies and so UN coordination at the country level tends to be a negotiated process based on consensus. This is seen by many as incentivising competition. According to one donor in Afghanistan, as UN governance is "bottom up rather than top down, so each agency seeks to maximize its role" (Donor 15). In addition to inclusive leadership some also made reference to traditions of independence in the humanitarian world, while noting a growing willingness to at least attempt to work in a more coordinated fashion. There have been multiple efforts to bolster coherence at the UN level, most notably through the One UN initiative. However, though it has been promoted by UNAMA, it has had limited success to date, according to one interviewee expressing a widely held opinion, "because the interests are too strong" (Donor 16). On the other hand multiple interviewees noted the tendency of UN agencies to attempt, particularly in formal settings, to portray a united face to the external world, though divisions were said to be much more notable in informal bilateral meetings.

Few within the UN would call One UN a resounding success in Afghanistan. However, while a certain amount of frustration was common, the level of discontent apparent in interviews was generally not as high as that expressed by this former head of a UN agency in Afghanistan:

> "This whole UN should basically kill all agencies or integrate them in one agency, call it UN Development, otherwise call it UN Humanitarian, and forget all this competition. It is competition, a competitive environment that you're talking about. Agencies doing dirty games. I mean fighting themselves out. ... They're fighting all for the same money. I think this competition among UN agencies is not doing any good. ... Sometimes I think let them all go into one single agency. I think the games that we see between the agencies, and the competition, and the politics, either they should give up a lot of these development projects or they should basically integrate them. Because One UN is not happening in Afghanistan" (UN Agency 7).

Meanwhile UN agencies have adapted their strategies to be able to survive in this fragmented, and therefore competitive, environment. As one UN staffer put it "The UN is getting more corporate and realistic" (UNHCR 6). Some commented that UN staff are particularly susceptible to formatting and that one outcome of that process is to encourage an aggressive approach to fundraising. For instance one donor, talking about the UN, spoke of "the way people in the organisation are rewarded for raising funds. The bigger the better. It's a big career boost for those involved" (Donor 15).

Some interviewees felt that the size of the UN agency was likely to be a major factor in its success in the aid marketplace, with those with large support structures able to apply pressure on donors

thereby giving them a significant advantage against the smaller agencies. Evidence for this was found also among donor respondents, for instance in terms of susceptibility to the public pressure that could be unleashed by large UN agencies. As one donor commented, "The difficulty we face is obviously the UN can scream very loudly" (Donor 10). In addition, the bigger the agency and its public profile, the higher donors seemed to value their relationship with it and thus presumably the less likely they would be to endanger it.

Notably, there was also evidence of principles trumping interests on occasion, as well as non-uniform behaviour across agencies. For instance, UNHCR turned down funding to assist in the deportation of failed asylum seekers to Afghanistan while IOM accepted (UNHCR 21). Similarly UNHABITAT chose not to be involved in the development of the poorly-designed Land Allocation Scheme site Aliceghan, while UNDP took it on (UN Agency 7). Ostensibly, according to both interviewees this was due to a matter of principle but the extent to which these decisions could have tarnished the agency's reputation probably also entered into play. For instance, in another example, neither UNDP nor UNOPS were initially keen to take on the development of national identity cards, a project eventually taken on by IOM, due to caution related to the risk to the reputation of their agencies in the event of failure of the project.

1.3.4 NGOs

In parallel with the increase in humanitarian and development funding the number of both international and national NGOs has increased sharply in recent years. With the influx in funding international NGOs reportedly increased from 350 in 1999 to what some sources estimated to be around 2,000 in 2003 (Johnson and Leslie 2004). The passing of an NGO Act in 2005, which required the official registering of NGOs, then reduced the total number of all NGOs (national and international) to around 1,100 (USIG 2007). Since that period, according to the Ministry of Economy's records (where all NGOs are now required to register), the number of international NGOs has almost doubled from 146 registered in 2005 to 269 in 2014 (Ministry of Economy 2014). However when compared to national NGOs this increase seems exceptionally modest. The number of Afghan NGOs has risen from 219 in 2005 to 1,598 in 2014, representing a seven-fold increase over 10 years, as illustrated by the below graph (2015 is not included as only partial data exists for the year but the total number of registered national NGOs is now 1,675). The ratio of international to national NGOs meanwhile has changed from 1:1.5 in 2005, to 1:5.9 in 2014.

Figure four: NGOs in Afghanistan
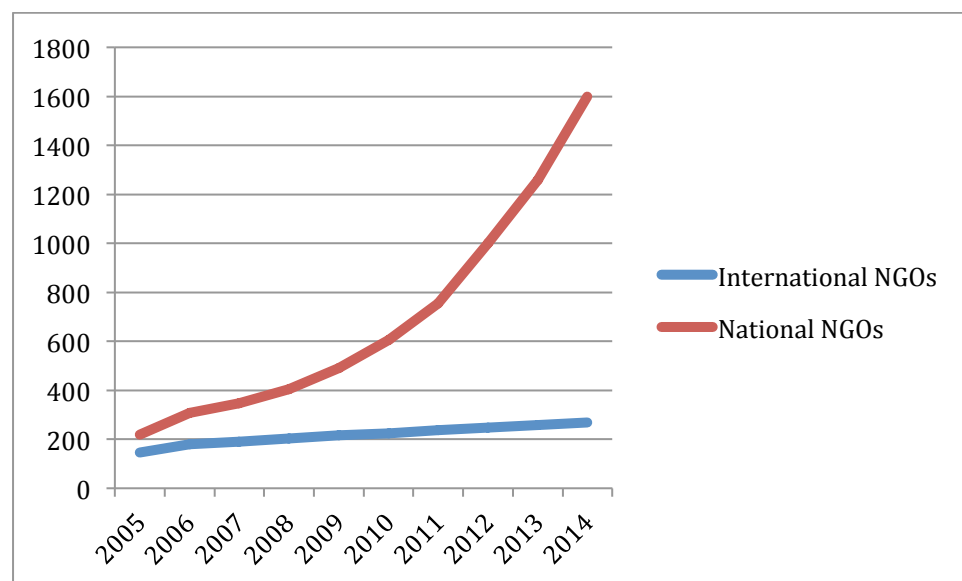
Source: Data from the Ministry of Economy

What do these NGOs do? An analysis of the names of the 1,675 national NGOs currently registered at the Ministry of Economy provides some insights and suggests that overwhelmingly

these are organisations providing development services. Indeed (besides 'Afghan', 'Afghanistan' and 'organization') 'development' and 'services' are the two of the most commonly occurring words in the names of Afghan NGOs (they occur in the names of 449 and 205 NGOs respectively; representing 27% and 12% of the total). According to the information provided by their names, Afghan NGOs work in key social services such as education (194) or health (81). Large numbers are engaged in providing vocational or training services (70), research (50) or other types of social welfare services (269 for 'social', 64 for 'welfare'). Target beneficiaries are women (255), children (51) and, more generally, communities (50). Many are present in the humanitarian (36) sector, working on rehabilitation (154), relief (34) and reconstruction (21). It is worth noting that these are all terms common to the aid industry. Indeed Afghan NGOs appear to have embraced many of the "buzz words" used by this community. Afghan NGOs thus work on capacity building (49), empowerment (44), sustainability (24) and awareness (11) among others. In other words the Afghan NGO sector seems to be remarkably attuned to the priorities of the international community and the issues that this latter is keen to fund. While it is not impossible that these priorities could have emerged organically without the availability of external funding, it seems somewhat unlikely. Indeed for a deeply religious country it may be surprising that the word 'Islamic' occurs only once. While there is a ministry devoted partially to the needs of 'martyrs' (the Ministry of Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled) and the word is commonly used to refer to war-wounded veterans who are a major focus of sympathy and support throughout the country, only one NGO includes the word 'martyrs' in its title, and not a single NGO contains the name of any of the major ethnic groups despite Afghan society being organised on largely ethnic lines.

These results would seem to suggest that national NGOs are predominantly service providers relying on international funding rather than autonomously-occurring citizens' initiatives. Indeed in purely economic terms it would be fully rational for local actors to take advantage of the market opportunity provided by the sudden availability of large aid resources and to create organisations able to respond to the demand (from donors) for services. Notably pay structures even in national NGOs are generally higher than in local businesses making NGO formation an attractive market proposition. Of course this does not negate other reasons for working in the local NGO sector (and there are indeed a great many dedicated and committed individuals working in it), but as with all actors in the humanitarian marketplace both self-interest and principled motivations may exist concurrently and, to an extent, be mutually reinforcing.

A more 'missionary' view of the marketplace tends to perceive national NGOs as autonomous manifestations of local civil society, with a resulting legitimacy that neither local companies nor international NGOs are seen as having (Stewart 1997). Indeed it is also convenient for donors to view local NGOs and civil society as synonymous as it provides an expedient entry point for supporting the latter (Mercer 2002). NGOs in Afghanistan are thus "the part of civil society most visible to donors and most bureaucratically amenable" (Howell and Lind 2009). Likewise, according to an interviewee from a consortium of NGOs operating in Afghanistan, donors are keen to support NGOs' claim to representative legitimacy as it facilitates the donors' role of consulting with civil society; even if this is sometimes conducted in a manner viewed by this interviewee as tokenistic (NGO 6). A further claim often made on behalf of national NGOs is that they are, by virtue of their grounding in local civil society, more sustainable than international NGOs. For instance the former interviewee felt that a strong, and common, argument in favour of national NGOs receiving more support was that, in contrast to international NGOs, they "are there before, during and after an emergency" (Ibid). However, the figures from the Ministry of Economy appear to challenge this assertion. In addition to lists of active NGOs, the Ministry also publishes the names of dissolved NGOs. To date 1,890 national NGOs have been dissolved, compared to 147 international NGOs. In other words, of all national NGOs that have been created in Afghanistan more than half (55%) are no longer operating, while just over a third (35%) of international NGOs have been dissolved (though some of these international NGOs may only have been dissolved as part of the process of nationalisation of their Afghan operations and may still be operating as national NGOs). Thus, based purely on this evidence, international NGOs would appear to be more sustainable than national ones (as presumably might be the case if comparing national and transnational companies). Partly this is likely to be due to features of the aid marketplace in Afghanistan favouring international NGOs. For instance, concerns about fraud limit local NGOs' access to funding (NGO 6), providing another

example of the importance of symbolic capital (reputations and trust) in this marketplace. But it is also likely to be because international NGOs may have attributes that their local counterparts may lack, such as the ability to draw on reserves of capital to tide them over periods of low funding, larger reserves of human resources and expertise, and, perhaps most crucially of all, are likely to be more skilled in the areas that ensure success in the aid marketplace: Specifically the creation of project proposals and maintaining relations with international donors.

International NGOs meanwhile flooded into Afghanistan in the early post-2001 era. One interviewee spoke of "an ambulance chase feel" (NGO 9) during this time as NGOs scrambled to establish themselves and secure contracts in the context of high levels of aid availability. The inflow of aid also brought changes to the sector. As budgets increased and experienced aid workers replaced or began to outnumber volunteers many organisations already in Afghanistan began to professionalise their operations. One interviewee described how his own NGO transformed relatively quickly, dropping its original religious volunteer ethos to a large extent, and shifting into a higher gear "when money started to flow" (Ibid).

NGOs operate in a highly precarious business environment. Grants vary in length between a few months and a few years, but are seldom longer and there are never any guarantees about receiving follow-up funding. Staff are often employed on short-term contracts and are highly conscious that their position, or the project they are working on, may not be renewed. Unsurprisingly therefore, despite the high amount of funding currently available in Afghanistan, in the words of one NGO staff member, "competition for funding between NGOs can be quite ruthless" (NGO 8). As failure to secure funding poses significant threats to an organisation's survival, the capacity to adapt to changing market conditions is fundamental. As a UN interviewee commented "It's a survival mechanism. If the money is in [Sexual or Gender Based Violence], that's what NGOs become an expert in. So you need to be able to reinvent yourself" (UNHCR 20).

Nevertheless, while NGOs evidently respond to marketplace dynamics and the availability of funding (at least according to the perceptions of interviewees), it is also clear from interviews that this is not their only, or even principle, preoccupation. NGO interviewees, like others, appeared dedicated first and foremost to the altruistic goals of their organisations. Further, even from a rational self-interested perspective there may be good reasons for NGOs to refrain from pursuing a strategy of expansion and attempting to secure an ever-larger market share. For instance according to one interviewee, smaller technical NGOs often try to maintain a narrow focus on goals that they are confident in being able to achieve:

> "They try to stay within their parameters. Because for them, organizational management-wise, it's actually within their interest. It's not a simple game of bigger is better, get as big as you possibly can, for all agencies. A lot of them it's about what can we manage, what's within our mandate and within our scope to handle, so that also holds back agencies and stops them just pushing for everything." (NGO 1).

Thus, there are reasons to doubt the assertion that expansion is a constant goal of all NGOs at all times. Further, of all the actors in the marketplace (with the notable exception of course of beneficiaries), NGOs are in the least strong position to influence the macro-level trajectories of aid. One of the most effective ways in which they can do so is through their creation and transmission of knowledge, in particular inputting into needs assessment processes, something that is covered in the next section of this paper.

1.4 Dynamics of competition

The above overview has shown that there are a number of commonalities between donors, UN agencies, the Afghan government and NGOs; most particularly that dynamics of competition are present between and within all types of actors. But what further generalizable comments can be made about how these dynamics are perceived and serve to operate?

A number of for-profit companies operate in Afghanistan and, in the words of a senior government interviewee, "make tons of money here" (Government 3). However, they are not the subject of the current analysis. While companies may naturally be expected to be driven by a profit motive and thus to act as rational power maximisers the same may not necessarily be expected of UN agencies and NGOs. The observation that they often do act in similar ways may be explained by reference to various aspects of the incentive system inherent to the aid world. Indeed most interviewees seemed to feel that the design of the aid system (particularly limited funding based on competitive tenders) made a certain level of opportunism inevitable.

The easiest conclusion to draw from a macro-level examination of the aid world would be that organisations, and the individuals working within them, act primarily to promote their own interests within the aid marketplace. Indeed, interviews uncovered ample evidence for this thesis. Interviewees from both UN agencies and NGOs openly admitted that they saw it as their role to promote their organisation, and its programmes, externally. Powerful organisations within the aid world were seen by both insiders and outsiders as vigorously seeking to defend their privileged positions. 'Turf wars' were often explained by reference to institutional interests. As a senior UN staff member commented "all bureaucracies fear loss of power and influence" (UNHCR 11), and in this sense the Afghan aid world appears to be no exception.

Equally, similar dynamics were observed at an individual level, with several interviewees making reference to the personal or career gains connected, generally, to furthering organisational interests. This took the form of securing funding, either for one's own agency or under one's own management within the agency, avoiding upsetting relationships with powerful actors, or proposing responses that fit within an individual's existing experience or skillset so as to ensure continued employment and funding. Individual and organisational interests were generally perceived as being closely aligned but interviewees also made reference to the high levels of mobility within the aid world meaning that one's professional development may not always be best served by being perceived as overly partisan. Hence, at a personal level, individuals may have higher motivation than their institutional context might suggest to compromise, to maintain good relations beyond their NGO, or to develop a reputation for honesty, meaning that individual and organisational interests may not always be in alignment. Further, significant amounts of competition were noted *within* agencies, both between individuals, and between departments or units.

Crucially however the promotion of organisational and individual interests is only part of the story. As noted earlier, interviewees all gave the impression of being primarily motivated by the altruistic elements of their job. Many interviewees were uncomfortable even conceiving of the aid world in marketplace terms or talking of competition rather than collaboration. No interviewee admitted ever actively seeking to privilege their individual or organisational interest over and above that of the beneficiaries they aim to help, and probably never would. Any questions perceived as leading in that direction were vigorously denied. While aspects of competition were generally recognised, it was rather taken as a given that the primary underlying motivation of all actors, or at least all reputable actors, was altruistic. Those who spoke specifically of their individual motivations similarly tended not to do so in self-interested terms. One, for instance, spoke of "the philosophy I was brought up with" (UNHCR 2) as being antithetical to promoting organisational interest at the expense of beneficiaries. Another interviewee spoke of his religious convictions as being a driving factor behind his decision to work in Afghanistan and his impression that it was "a privilege" (NGO 9) to have the opportunity to, as he saw it, represent his country abroad. Others stressed that achieving humanitarian goals was more important to them than the benefits for particular agencies. Hence any analysis of the Afghan aid marketplace focussed only on interests is likely to be limited at best.

However an interesting finding is that the specific altruistic goals that individuals care about appear to also be shaped by organisational context. The aid world in Afghanistan, as elsewhere, is above all a social space in which individual behaviour is regulated by norms of social acceptability, and in which individuals' outlooks are likely to be heavily influenced by both their particular experiences and responsibilities, and of those around them. This serves to ensure that at least to a certain extent individuals working in the same organisation or context tend to have similar views about particular issues. All interviewees from donors, UN agencies, and NGOs

expressed strong attachment to the particular issues that their agency specifically addresses. Some acknowledged that there was a tendency for people to be biased towards their own particular areas, or to see issues through the prisms that they were used to employing in daily working life. But even among those that did not specifically reference this dynamic there was a significantly high level of conformity in terms of the positions taken between those working in particular positions, with particular types of beneficiaries, or on particular types of programmes. While some self-selection may take place regarding those who applied for these jobs, it seems more likely that it is proximity to specific issues and an obligation to focus on these at a professional level that leads to a concurrent attachment at a personal level. Proximity also, it was noted by some, breeds greater understanding. Hence some interviewees noted that people often advocate for certain predictable positions not through any preconceived design or strategy but rather as a result of formatting. Socialisation therefore serves to determine how individuals understand interests and define altruistic goals. Generally the outcome of formatting is to strengthen organisational unity but occasionally this has led to interviewees questioning, or attempting to change, organisational policy when the area that they specifically work on is not highly prioritised within the wider structure.

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

The topic of whether aid should be provided on the basis of status (i.e. belonging to a specific group[1]) or on the basis of vulnerability criteria that is disconnected from wider group status, constitutes an exceptionally animated, and at times heated, debate among aid workers in Afghanistan. In particular, UNHCR, as a refugee-mandated organisation, has adopted a very different position on this issue to its competitors in the aid world, notably OCHA (with donor interviewees seemingly divided largely on the basis of how their own agencies' mandates are articulated). At this juncture however, it is not necessary to delve into the arguments on either side of the debate and the ways in which both sides seek to support their claims through both moral and consequentialist arguments (though notably supporting arguments were never founded on the basis of organisational interest). Rather, it is important to note only two aspects. Firstly, the way that organisational mandates are designed means a great many aid organisations are bound to provide aid on the basis of status. These organisations are restricted to greater or lesser degrees to condition their support, and thus to limit their interventions, on the basis of status. Other organisations that are not designed to deliver support to particular types of people tend to use different measures (for instance vulnerability rankings or area-based approaches) to determine whom to target. Thus the question of whether aid should be delivered on the basis of status or vulnerability is one in which significant organisational interests are at play because conclusions from that debate are likely to shape the direction of aid resources. If donors prefer to target aid based on status then it makes sense to make use of the organisations set up for this purpose. If on the other hand they adopt a vulnerability-based approach this effectively excludes those organisations that lack the flexibility to target aid on that basis.

The second observation to make is that differences of opinion on this issue were very closely correlated to organisational affiliation. In almost all cases those criticising a status-based approach belonged to organisations with non-status based mandates, and those defending it were from organisations that had a status-based approach. Proponents on either side of the debate were equally passionate. There was little reason to believe that interviewees were adopting a strategic approach to their participation in the interviews (though of course this could have been the case), but rather that they were openly sharing their honestly-held opinions. In

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[1] Most notably refugees or IDPs, but also children, women, disabled people, nomadic 'kuchi' people and so on.

other words they appeared to have moved to what Checkel (2005) terms Type II socialisation and thus to have internalised their positions (even if that position may externally be seen as a rational calculation).

In contrast the issue of urbanisation was another topic on which strong divides of opinion were noted in interviews but, crucially, in which organisational interests are less implicated. The question of whether urbanisation has more positive or negative impacts is less likely to impact the direction of aid resources, or at least less directly. In theory at least it could impact the fortunes of organisations working in urban or rural locations but organisations generally enjoy greater flexibility on such issues than, for instance, in the status-versus-vulnerability debate, and secondly the outcome of whether urbanisation is seen as 'good' or 'bad' could play either way in aid debates (for instance if it is seen negatively then that may imply more aid for urban areas to offset the negative impacts there, or for rural areas to avoid incentivising further rural-to-urban migration). Consequently on this topic organisational affiliation had less of an impact and rather, it was nationality that seemed to be more of a determining factor in how individuals assessed the topic. Specifically, markedly different views tended to be espoused by internationals and Afghan nationals, regardless of the organisation. International aid workers, whether working for donors, UN agencies or NGOs, tended to stress the positive benefits of urbanisation. They would typically view it is a natural process through which all societies would pass at some point or another, and thus an inevitable side effect of development, with concurrent advantages that were likely to outweigh the costs. They would mention that it has the potential to deliver improved quality of life for those moving to cities by giving them greater access to public services and enhancing their economic opportunities, as well as serving a social engineering function of softening tribal identities. They also tended to see urbanisation as a motor for job creation and economic growth on a more macro level, as a way of enabling more cost-efficient service provision, and as a means for reducing pressure on scarce rural land resources, while also creating new markets for agricultural products. In contrast Afghan respondents saw the process much more negatively. For them it was intimately connected with the insecurity in the country, and thus would slow down, stop or even be reversed were peace to come to the country. They also saw the impacts of urbanisation in terms of a strain on government services, exceeding the absorption capacity of cities and leading to unplanned urban growth not in conformity with city master plans. Continued rural to urban migration was blamed for an increase in crime, insecurity and disease. It was also believed to increase competition for jobs, depress wages, increase prices for houses and other commodities, and lead to other negative outcomes, such as traffic congestion, all of which it was felt made life harder for the resident urban population.[2]

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

The contrast between the positions taken in these two debates (though many other examples could likely have been used) suggests that organisational incentives are likely to play an important role in socialising opinions, but if such interests are not implicated then other factors may be likely to have a greater influence. Linked to this is the suggestion that the 'missionary' goals of actors in the aid marketplace are likely to be shaped (often subconsciously) by the 'mercenary' goals of their positions: In other words, what people feel is 'right' is likely to be the influenced what they feel is useful. Equally, while organisational incentives may impact how

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[2] Much of this paragraph originally appeared in Samuel Hall (2014) and, like the majority of the rest of the report, was drafted by the author of the current work

individuals form judgements about the world, the opposite is also likely to be true and these judgements are likely to influence individual interpretations of organisational interests.

One important method for aligning 'mercenary' and 'missionary' objectives in the aid marketplace is the creation of accountability structures focussed on the latter. Accountability is generally perceived as positive, and the word was always used in such terms in interviews. However it is notable in Afghanistan the extent to which perceptions of accountability impact on individual and organisational behaviour, particularly in terms of prioritising certain outcomes over others. In my experience of working in the aid marketplace, donors, UN agencies, and NGOs were all likely to prioritise those tasks that they felt they would be judged on over issues that, while important, were less likely to be seen as their particular responsibility. Numerous examples in Afghanistan include the prioritising of particular types of beneficiaries, particular geographical regions, or closely monitored process-related indicators over less-monitored impact related indicators, even when the former may actually undermine the latter, in order to fulfil perceived accountability requirements. Hence, although accountability serves to ensure that organisations take certain objectives seriously, the corollary finding, that it incentivises the downgrading of objectives of otherwise higher importance, seems to be less recognised and was certainly less referred to in interviews.

A notable example in Afghanistan of how accountability structures can create incentives for actors (in this case donors) to prioritise particular responsibilities pertaining to them specifically over collective action goals is provided by the no longer operating system of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). PRTs operated until 2014 and were based on the premise that lead donors were given responsibility for coordinating all activities (civilian and military) in their particular province. PRTs have been much criticised for blurring the line between humanitarian and military goals (Donini 2010; Waisova 2008; Waldman 2009; Perito 2005; Howell and Lind 2009), but they also led to donors prioritising provincial development, for which they would be judged, over national-level outcomes. UNHCR, for instance, was encouraged to accept funding in specific provinces where the donor led the PRT, even though they preferred to use the funding elsewhere, according to a UNHCR interviewee (UNHCR 11). While the PRT system was in operation donors would often allocate sectoral funding within their specific province and resist pressure from the Afghan government and other donors to re-allocate it beyond the province to areas where it was most needed; a process that I observed on several occasions. In this case the incentive structure had the effect of "punishing" or "rewarding" effort towards certain specific individualized objectives more than to wider public goods objectives; as failure in the PRT province would imply reputational risks that did not apply to the same extent in provinces where the donor agency was less implicated. Alternatively this dynamic may be viewed as an example of bureaucratic dysfunction, in which rules were designed narrowly and left little flexibility for re-interpretation even in the event that they proved to be self-defeating in terms of wider objectives.

Another factor potentially impacting competition is, according to interviews, the extent to which coordination or decision-making structures are hierarchical or based on consensus (while this point was noted in the above sections on donors, UN agencies, and, in respect of the inability of central government to impose its will on the various ministries, the Afghan government, it is of equal, if not more relevance, also in regards to NGOs). In particular the exceptionally horizontal nature of the aid world allows agencies to successfully resist moves that would weaken their autonomy. Whether in donor, UN agency or NGO coordination forums, decisions are taken by consensus. Many interviewees complained of devoting too much time to consensus building, which was seen as having become an end in itself, and some bemoaned the lack of an actor able to take decisions that could override organisational interests (though a cynical observation is that often this was in the context of suggesting that their organisation should be invested with such authority).

A number of interviewees noted that professionalisation, both of the aid world both generally and in specific cases (e.g. of individual organisations), was another factor that tended to lead to increased competition. Professionalisation of the aid world, as it occurred particularly during the 90s, was seen as having led to the rise of dedicated, and more efficient, fundraising and communications roles, replacing earlier perceivedly amateurish attempts, and putting pressure

on other organisations to follow suit. At a more micro level some interviewees recounted witnessing this change occurring rapidly in their own organisations as they scaled up and hired experienced professional staff, including in fundraising departments, in the process replacing volunteers, changing the ethos of the organisation and making it more competitive.

The wider context, including the level of availability of funding, the perceived level of needs, and the number of other actors occupying the aid world are all likely to have impacts on levels of competition. Unsurprisingly interviewees felt that competition increased when funding was high (for instance citing greater competition for large development budgets than for smaller humanitarian ones), when needs are perceived to be lower and less pressing, and when more actors were vying for funding. Because of changes in these variables, and the others listed here, many felt that it was hard to make generalisations about the nature of competition in the aid marketplace, noting large variation in the level of competition they had witnessed in different times and places depending on the wider context.

Finally, a very large number of respondents commented on the key role that individuals play within the system in either aggravating, or lessening, competition. Relations between organisations were seen as above all dependent on relations between individuals. Individuals could become an obstacle to working together, with a common perception being that "a lot of turf wars are based on personalities rather than who's best placed to serve. … Egos get in the way" (UN Agency 4). Alternatively inter-personal bonds could work in the opposite direction, serving to break down barriers between organisations. As one interviewee commented "affinity with individuals counts for a lot. The human bond goes beyond the frameworks of agencies. It makes it enjoyable" (UN Agency 8). There was therefore wide agreement that much of how the aid system works "comes down to people and personalities. If you like people at other agencies you tend to work well with them" (UN Agency 6). This holds true for information transfers with one interviewee commenting that "sharing information between NGOs depends on the relation between the two people in touch with each other. It's really person dependent" (NGO 8). Likewise the likelihood of negotiation succeeding was seen as "always to do with personalities" (Donor 13) and, in particular, that it "depends on the readiness of individuals to compromise" (UNHCR 11). The consequence of this is that, as suggested by the theory, trends are likely to be generalizable only to a very limited degree considering both the inherent variability of individuals and the perceived importance of this variable in terms of the workings of the aid marketplace.

In a marketplace in which information is scarce credibility plays a very significant role. Numerous interviewees made reference to the need to retain credibility among donors and their peers, and there was a strong perception that any activities serving to undermine trust would ultimately hurt their own organisational interests. This consideration therefore likely serves to significantly limit, at least overt, competition, as well as information manipulation and exaggeration, within the Afghan aid world. Making unsubstantiated claims was, for instance, referenced by multiple interviewees as having a serious negative impact on organisational credibility. Conversely, organisations acting in ways perceived to be non-self interested, for instance by turning down funding, were thought to gain a credibility boost that ultimately improved their position in the marketplace. The need to be perceived as acting in non-self interested ways in order to retain credibility and trust is, in particular, likely to play an important role in the creation and transmission of information in the aid marketplace; the subject of the next section of this paper.

1.5 Conclusions

The interpretative analysis in this paper has dealt primarily with the subjective perceptions of those involved in the aid marketplace in Afghanistan. It is by no means comprehensive and nor does it necessarily reflect the opinions of all those that work in that sector in the country, let alone more widely in the world. Notably, the important role and influence of individuals in the system, including the nature of inter-personal relations between them, make many trends generalizable only to a limited extent, as each individual is inherently unique and thus as much of a misfit as a rational, predictable actor, whether mercenary or missionary. However,

notwithstanding the inherent limitations of any analysis relying on subjective perceptions, and the difficulties of generalisations in an area that is as much a social field as a marketplace, a certain number of trends may nevertheless be identified.

While individuals working in the aid sector generally perceive their role in altruistic terms, or at least present it as such, a number of incentives apply that tend to condition their actions to a certain extent. While aid agencies may not have official hierarchies of goals (Martens et al 2003) individuals are nevertheless likely to be formatted, or socialised, to perceive the issues that they are professionally dedicated to, and to which they have most exposure, as important, and to advocate for them in the wider marketplace. They are also likely to prioritise those issues that they perceive they will be judged on. Self-interested and altruistic objectives may coalesce around narrowly defined objectives and thus be mutually reinforcing, while those who act in objectively rational ways may not perceive, or self-justify, their actions in such terms.

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

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

2. Information Transfers in the Afghan Aid Marketplace

2.1 Overview

In the last section I sought to show how dynamics of competition permeate the Afghan aid marketplace. In this section I seek to provide an outline of how those dynamics impact information creation and transfer, particularly in regards to the process of needs assessment and project performance. Again the objective is to provide a contextual overview of the relevant factors based on the subjective perceptions of the actual participants in the aid marketplace.

Informational asymmetries are common in any marketplace, including the aid world, and in this case the old adage that "information is power" holds much truth (Moe 2005; Ostrom 2002; Gibson et al 2005; Hardt 2014). Nevertheless this information does not exist as an objective quantity per se but rather needs to be created by actors who make subjective judgments about which elements are relevant and how they should be portrayed, and in turn have a stake in the outcome of how the information will then be used. There thus exist ample incentives to adopt a strategic approach to information transfer. More specifically, this is likely to involve depicting problems in technical and depoliticised terms and in ways that suggest that problems are amenable to be solved by the type of interventions that humanitarian or development agencies are able to offer (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Stoddard 2006; Green 2011; Li 2011; Lewis 1998; Mosse 2005). Moreover analysis may overstate the extent of certain needs or may seek to trigger an emotional response designed to maximise funding (Mosse 2005; Barnett and Weiss 2008; Reiff 2003). Once such funding is allocated, the incentives to portray project performance and impact in positive lights are, if anything, even stronger, and may also be replicated upwards in the aid chain (Werker and Ahmed 2008; Birdsall 2004; Wallace, Bornstein and Chapman 2007; Mosse 2005).

2.1 Defining needs and responses

How do donors define and prioritise need in circumstances of exceptionally high levels of poverty and weak state services such as in Afghanistan?   As one interviewee, working at a high level in a donor agency, put it "there is no scientific formula" (Donor 10). Despite the established interests and limitations mentioned above, within their particular portfolios the donors interviewed generally did not tend to have clearly defined objectives and rather appeared to be motivated by the somewhat vague objective of addressing vulnerability. However on questions of how to differentiate and prioritise types of vulnerability, how to respond to these, and how to measure progress, there was in almost all cases a high reliance on their partners. For instance while almost all donors interviewed were interested in using the humanitarian portfolio to assist the poor and vulnerable they overwhelmingly look to their partners to define who specifically should be prioritised within programmes. All donors interviewed therefore agreed that, to a large extent, in determining where and how to invest humanitarian funding in order to meet the most acute needs or to achieve the greatest impact, they look to actors lower in the chain to provide information derived from their experience that will assist them in planning funding priorities. This means that implementing actors may thus be under less pressure to attempt to *offer* what donors want, than to attempt to *influence* what donors want.

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

As the potential recipients of aid, prospective beneficiaries face the strongest incentives of all to adopt a strategic approach to information transfers. Some interviewees commented that

beneficiaries have rapidly adapted to the new context of the aid world, adopting the language of international aid and learning how to comply with the expectations of international actors. More particularly, for certain types of aid, for instance when prioritised on the basis of status, beneficiaries may face the situation that, as one donor pointed out "If you say one thing you get assistance, if you say something else you don't" (Donor 12). Thus numerous interviewees noted the tendency for community representatives to exaggerate numbers and for individuals to try to portray themselves as belonging to prioritised groups. Hence, for instance, these interviewees mentioned that the numbers of IDPs reported almost always tends to be exaggerated and are generally revised downwards following assessments. One interviewee also mentioned that there are suspicions in parts of the aid community that some beneficiaries are particularly media savvy and have learnt how to portray information to parts of the media in order to increase the quantity and quality of support that they receive (NGO 10).

At the other extreme of the chain one could expect communication within donor agencies, from field level to headquarters, to be relatively un-biased by vested interests. After all, donors do not personally benefit from aid as beneficiaries do, nor does their agency, at a macro level, benefit from what is an essentially internal redistribution of finances. However, as noted in the previous section donors, like other actors, at an individual level tend to be committed to their own programmes, through formatting, exposure on a day to day basis, and, perhaps, self interest, and thus often, though not always, promote their own issues and programmes internally. In interviews, some, though not all, donors, admitted that this affected the way that they communicate information to their headquarters. In one humanitarian donor agency, for instance, country-based funding is allocated following the review of needs assessments filled in by the various country offices around the globe. This represents a more transparent and less obviously politicized system than in most donor agencies as the process seeks to be based, to some extent at least, on objective criteria. However, it is nevertheless open to influence depending on the information the country office chooses to include and the way they present it. As one Afghanistan-based representative of the agency noted:

> "At the end of the day this business is like any other business and that also applies to us, to donors and to [donor agency]. How much is allocated to Afghanistan has zero to do with that stupid form they make us fill in. So it's a little bit difficult to criticize. I mean, it's wrong. We shouldn't be doing it like that. We should be doing it on a needs basis." (Donor 12)

Thus, at least for some, there is not only awareness of how dynamics of competition may affect information transfers, including their own, but also regret that this should be the case. Information transfers are not a 'one-shot game', in game theory terms, but a continuous process in which actors learn from previous interactions and adapt their behaviour accordingly. To illustrate this process through a relevant personal anecdote, while working for the EU in Afghanistan I was tasked with the preparation of sectoral programmes for approval by headquarters. The first programme I prepared was, I felt, far from ideal (due to the complex context and lack of government ownership) but I was nevertheless convinced that it was ultimately worthy of funding. I provided to headquarters what I believed to be a balanced review of the planned programme, laying out in great detail the programme's many weaknesses, as well as its strengths. Following review the programme was not approved and the funding was reallocated elsewhere. In all subsequent occasions on which I took part in this process I provided headquarters with more positive evaluations, alluding only briefly if at all to negative aspects, and thus the future projects that I proposed were approved. From conversations with other donor staff this seems to be a standard, rather than isolated, experience.

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

advocacy functions, at least in the view of interviewed donors. As one donor maintained "Almost by definition it's always the case that the advocacy arms of organisations are self-serving" (Donor 18). However he added that "it's not necessarily thought through as a strategy though, it just happens by default" due to the way that UN agencies function and the people that work there become formatted to think in a certain way. Another donor complained that large agencies "leverage their advocacy role to dominate the market" (Donor 15).

Both the UN and NGOs also communicate directly towards donor publics, using their own websites and promotional resources for fundraising, to encourage public pressure for continued institutional aid flows, and to highlight their achievements and their essential role in future processes. Many have large global machineries dedicated to advocacy and awareness raising on their mandated topic, and this capacity to reach donor publics directly may serve to enhance the status of the organisation. Typically each agency makes a claim that their target beneficiaries are particularly vulnerable and deserving of support. Donor publics are even less likely than donor agencies to have detailed knowledge of needs and generally have high trust in UN bodies and well known NGOs. They are thus susceptible to be influenced by the narratives promoted by large, trusted agencies, with the consequence that they either donate individually, or pressure their government to allocate funding.

As noted above, at a personal level, individuals appear to care more deeply about the issues that they work on than the fates of their agencies, yet the two are often closely connected. Several of those interviewed bemoaned the low level of priority given to the issues that they work on and saw it as, to a certain extent, a failure of their agency in competing in the information marketplace, for instance in terms of the level of prioritisation given to certain geographical areas or types of people. They believed these issues should receive more attention, not because they were the issues that they happened to work on but because they deemed them to be important. Notably though no interviewees ever claimed that their particular topics should be de-prioritised, and few advocated for increased attention to issues beyond their own mandates.

In bilateral communications to donors agencies often base their requests for funding on what are in theory independent and impartial needs assessments. However to a certain extent these processes may be influenced by various factors in the design and implementation of the survey and the analysis and presentation of the results. For instance, strategic choices may be made about the questions that are included, whether and how cross comparisons to other groups are made, or the descriptive language used to present the findings. One interviewee noted that the results of surveys tended to be predictable and to support doing more of what the agency is already engaged in (NGO 10). Another linked the process of needs assessments even more closely to the dynamics produced by the aid marketplace, saying that "We're very good at writing assessments, because assessments are the foundations of any proposals so therefore we have got good at it as a sector because it usually leads to money" (NGO 1).

Some interviewees noted that fundraising to donors on the basis of needs assessments often relied more on emotions than technical underpinnings. This was seen to preference certain types of topics that could be easily rendered into a compelling narrative. Additionally it may give an advantage to larger agencies with more developed marketing support machinery. One former head of a UN agency in Afghanistan lamented both the lack of a strong lobby from his own headquarters and a marketable narrative that would be easy to sell to donors. In comparison he was "always very jealous about the marketing machinery of UNICEF exploiting always the poor children in the slums and blablabla. So they are very good at it and I quite respect them from a marketing point of view" (UN Agency 7).

Even defining a specific intervention or situation as 'humanitarian' or 'development'-oriented is to a certain extent a question of how information is presented, which may in turn be influenced by incentives in the marketplace. Interviewees with longer experience in the aid world sometimes commented that the 'humanitarian' and 'development' labels could be strategically applied to different effect. For instance humanitarian projects may be viewed as more "pristine" (UN Agency 4), urgent and essential. On the other hand labelling activities as development may give access to much larger funding pots. One NGO interviewee commented that in his view:

> "I think it's a flexible concept which they use in each country depending on levels of funding, depending on where you are in terms of the life cycle of the crisis, and these different things. It's a political tool and one that you can use flexibly rather than an actual defined development principle" (NGO 1).

Another interviewee recounted how, outside Afghanistan, his UN agency had 'sold' identical projects to humanitarian and development donors changing only the framing and vocabulary. It was, he noted, "literally the same activities, just framed differently, so you'd change your discourse" (UN Agency 9). This entailed, for instance, renaming staff positions from 'capacity building advisor' to 'monitoring support officer' for the identical role, or making somewhat arbitrary distinctions on the basis of apparently random criteria (e.g. "For instance one community has 8 checkpoints so it's humanitarian, this one only has 2 so it's development.").

Access to the different funding pots may therefore require, to a certain extent, different approaches to narrative creation that are rooted more in strategic considerations than substantive differences on the ground. An important distinction between the two realms appears to be a greater focus on outputs in humanitarian narratives, and on impact in development ones, at least in the view of some, such as the following UN interviewee: "It seems humanitarian funding is much quicker and more responsive, more quantitative [while] development funding is more about putting together a narrative about how you're going to solve all the problems" (NGO 4).

In terms of the responses proposed to meet identified needs, various interviewees mentioned that this is often influenced by factors unconnected to prospects for success. For instance organisational mandates were mentioned by many as strongly limiting what agencies are able to recommend. Certain interventions are seen as easier to sell to donors than others, according to UN and NGO interviewees. Both government and donor interviewees noted a tendency for organisations to stay within their comfort zone by replicating interventions that have been conducted elsewhere. In the words of one donor this is because "There's also path dependency. Organisations tend to do things the way they are used to doing them and define target groups the way they are used to" (Donor 15). There may also be a less altruistic dimension to this dynamic, as explained by the following NGO interviewee:

> "There's also the self interest. Staff want to keep their jobs and they can only do that if the programme is somewhat similar to what's been done in the past. So it's a question of job security." (NGO 10)

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

> "So your response analysis does not have to be highly sophisticated. You don't have to explain why a given problem requires a specific type of approach and solution. You just need to identify a problem. Everybody can understand that. I can tell my brother who's a scientist that someone is starving and he understands what that concept means. But response analysis, there's not the same level of demand in the sector to present good response analysis. Especially when the consolidated appeals document has to be easy to read and presentable to others." (NGO 1)

One of the most controversial elements of needs analysis is quantifying the necessary responses in financial terms. Such a process is inevitably somewhat subjective as what is 'needed' depends to a large extent on levels of ambition for what humanitarian aid should be able to achieve. It is above all a pragmatic calculation based on multiple factors such as the level of available funding, the situation of the wider population, the number and strength of alternative claims on funding, and, importantly, the perceived impact of how the calculation will be received by the actors

responsible for making future funding decisions. With many agencies creating separate appeals based on their own assessments there may be a tendency towards budget inflation, which was remarked upon by several donors, as actors perceive that in an environment of numerous competing claims only the highest ranked needs (in budgetary terms) will be taken seriously. One interviewee, for instance, recounted his participation in the UNDAF process in another country prior to arriving in Afghanistan. After participating in the needs assessment and negotiating the budgets with other agencies he took the results to the head of his agency, "who looked at the figure and said 'no, [name], this needs to be ten times higher.' He thought as a UN agency they only take you seriously if you ask for 50 million dollars rather than five million" (NGO 10). Nevertheless both donor and UN interviewees noted that overly-inflated budgets may serve to decrease the agency's credibility and this is thus likely to act as a significant restraining factor in the marketplace. Despite all of these dynamics, however, donors are to a large extent dependent on lower level actors to provide the information on which they make funding decisions.

2.3 Donor Reliance on Intermediary Actors

Donors in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) suffer from significant information constraints that hamper their ability to collect, process and retain first-hand information, which makes them reliant on others to provide relevant information. Multiple donors commented during interviews on the extent to which they depend on outside actors, particularly specialist UN agencies and the cluster system, to provide them information and analysis regarding humanitarian needs on which funding decisions could be based. As one UN interviewee put it "They look to us to tell them what the needs are. They really appreciate having that service" (UN Agency 8). Another interviewee, in the NGO sector, expressed surprise, on meeting with donors, the extent to which "they were really looking at us to tell them what was going on" (NGO 9).

As detailed above, the environment in which claims of comparative needs are made is, on occasion, highly competitive, and very often the stakes depending on such judgements are high, or at least are perceived as such by the relevant actors. Consequently donors may be faced with information presented in emotive ways that serve to highlight the importance of favouring one sector over another. As one donor commented: "Some people really dramatise. It's all 'people are going to die if you don't fund us'. … They use such dramatic language around the needs. It's almost visual language" (Donor 4).

In such a context, what is needed from the donor side, in the words of one donor, are "donor staff who are experts, who can see through the bullshit" (Donor 16). Nevertheless this may not always be the case. One NGO interviewee noted for instance that his key counterpart in a donor agency was a civil servant previously working in an auditing department who, from a technical perspective, lacked the capacity to make critical judgments about project performance or relative levels of need. Such situations may facilitate the work of the implementing agency by effectively removing a layer of accountability. As this interviewee stated: "Let's be honest, there's a professional function to make money and it's easier to do where people aren't as good at their job" (NGO 1). While a few donor agencies were perceived by interviewees as possessing technical staff with detailed knowledge of project implementation, the majority were not seen in such terms. Even where donor staff do have previous experience there are still likely to be large gaps in their knowledge, ranging from conditions in the precise local area, to cross-market comparisons of unit costs when no two interventions are identical and thus directly comparable. Beyond issues of donor capacity, there are also questions of data scarcity and questionable credibility of existing data. As one commentator has written, in Afghanistan "often the central problem is not that donors lack enough information — it is that they lack holistic, synthesized, and verified information" (Brown 2014).

Even on the basis of imperfect information donors need to take decisions regarding how to spend their money and in this respect they are likely to be looking to others to facilitate their work. In the words of one donor, they like to be "given a flashy document that you can show HQ and told where to put your money" (Donor 12).

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

2.3.1 The Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP)

Within the humanitarian sector the most authoritative process of defining and ranking needs is the consolidated appeals developed through the cluster system (though some agencies also release their own appeals). The cluster system brings together NGOs, UN agencies and, to a certain extent, the Afghan government, to discuss and define humanitarian needs. A Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP; sometimes shortened to HAP) is developed, on which the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) is based; though more recently this terminology has been replaced by the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) leading to a Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and a Strategic Response Plan (SRP). While certain aspects of the process are quite technical (beyond keeping up with the various acronyms!), others are much more political. In particular the final product is likely to strongly influence the distribution of not only pooled funds but also bilateral donations from donors. Notably the system relies on consensus and so all cluster leads, which includes many UN agencies, need to be in agreement. The result is that agencies may attempt to influence the information flow to promote their own interests and that negotiation may influence, or replace, technical assessment. In contrast to the development sector in which the Afghan government plays a leading role, the humanitarian-oriented CAP tends to result in Afghanistan in hundreds of fragmented projects operating outside of government structures (Lockhart 2007).

According to one donor, while they recognise that "there are competing demands and it's a political process" (Donor 4), they nevertheless prefer to get involved "upstream" when the needs have been negotiated and agreed, and have "a tremendous amount of respect for the inclusivity of the process". Other donors echoed the sentiment that they value the process greatly, in particular its ability to mediate the competing interests in a way that makes the job of donors easier. All humanitarian donors therefore take it into account and most attempt to align their humanitarian funding behind it.

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

> "The coordination, it's an absolute nightmare. It's an absolute nightmare and it's very, very easy to be sat on the other side of the fence and to be an NGO and to simply criticize the process, as everybody I know does. ... NGOs do not have a common position on any of the major policy issues or analysis issues and so you are just bound to have enemies whatever conclusion you draw. And donors' position is that there should be a conclusion. You need to have common analysis, common identification of needs, common response plan etc." (NGO 1)

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

> "It's hotly contested by NGOs because of course if the province they're working in comes at the bottom they find it very difficult to get funding and of course then there may be all sorts of levels of vulnerability there." (UNHCR 5)

Perhaps even more contested than the needs analysis is the common response plan. OCHA and the cluster leads are under pressure from donors to present a unified, reliable, and comprehensive analysis, but equally need to achieve consensus in a highly competitive and potentially high-stakes environment. One donor referred to OCHA's role as having a "challenge function" (Donor 4), and cited a recent occasion in which one cluster had been successfully persuaded to dramatically decrease their budget in order to be more in line with the other clusters. However, according to another donor (and former cluster participant in a previous role) the process does not always work in this way:

> "In theory the cluster lead is meant to review the projects but usually it's not so straightforward. It's unclear where there are overlaps and usually the cluster lead is not strong enough to resist so it just ends up like a shopping basket." (Donor 12)

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

> "In terms of the response analysis this is where I think consolidated appeals processes are quite weak and, from my experience of leading it, and then also participating in it later at [NGO], the ability to identify 'here is a problem and this is programmatically the best way to address it' is where agencies can't show the same flexibility because of the competitiveness that you're talking about. WFP cannot concede, like fundamentally cannot concede that the best way to deal with a problem must be cash. It's just not within their modus operandi to do that. Or ACF can never say that the best way to deal with a food security problem is actually to focus on food availability, rather than nutrition and utilization because it fundamentally goes against their mandate." (NGO 1)

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

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

On top of the institutional interests influencing the outcome of the CAP there are also some suspicions among interviewees that the process may be influenced by political pressure from the Afghan government, which is perceived to be aggravated by the humanitarian coordinator having a political role as Deputy to the SRSG. This has led, according to one interviewee, to OCHA having little choice but to push for the nationalisation of clusters with the justification that Afghanistan was in a post-conflict situation despite evidence to the contrary (NGO 1); and, according to another, to a shift to focus on the more visible manifestations of poverty and conflict that are the priorities of the current government, in particular the Kabul Informal Settlements (KIS) (Donor 12).

Nevertheless, OCHA also received praise for pushing for a more coherent CAP in recent years and attempting, against some resistance, to impose a more objective methodology on the process. On

issues that are purely technical and less likely to impact on institutional interests, there was also a feeling that the analysis conducted through the cluster system was valuable, even if meetings to discuss such technical issues were likely to be sparsely attended.

Once priorities have been negotiated, cluster leads will often approach donors directly to make the case for why their sector should be prioritised. Many donors seem to recognise that the process is, at least in part, driven by organisational agendas. As one commented "the agencies have their own fundraising needs, which leads to inflated CAPs. The donors say they need to be more realistic" (Donor 11). Some interviewees stated that the CAP could also serve, and is indeed intended to serve, more as an advocacy tool, to demonstrate the scale of needs and thus to promote, or attract, higher aid budgets, than a programmatic one (UN Agency 9). Meanwhile, at least one donor, felt that the conflicting claims from cluster leads served to obscure, rather than clarify, what should be prioritised (Donor 4). As one NGO interviewee put it:

> "At the end of the day, the overall entity, the final overall decisions will always be, there'll be some political input, it's completely unavoidable. So to call it a purely humanitarian-driven needs process is obviously just false." (NGO 1)

2.3.2 UN Agencies

The alternative authoritative mechanism for determining humanitarian needs is through relying on the analysis of specialist UN agencies. The UN dominates the marketplace as it is specifically mandated by member states to lead particular sectors and is vested with high levels of trust and authority by them to fulfil these tasks. Market concentration in a single actor provides some benefits in terms of bringing all stakeholders together and providing a platform for coordinated action. Consequently, as one donor mentioned, "It's also a good thing that we all work with the same organisations because if we were to choose NGOs we'd all choose different NGOs. So even if their performance is not so good they still have that advantage, and it's a big advantage" (Donor 7). Thus the UN agency mandated to address a specific issue represents, to a certain extent, the natural option for donors interested in funding that issue. Trust in the UN is also based partly on the higher cost of failure in terms of relationships. As an interviewed donor put it, "It's a lot more 'headlines' if the [donor] government falls out with UNICEF than a small local NGO" (Donor 4).

The results of this are, according to interviews, that UN budgets are less scrutinised by donors than those of NGOs; the UN is more likely to receive core funding, with greater flexibility and higher amounts; and notably donors feel more able to rely on their figures and analysis. This last aspect is regarded as a useful service that donors would not necessarily want to usurp; in the words of one donor, "Donors cannot compete with their capacities and wouldn't want to" (Donor 16).

Multiple donors stated that they trust UN agencies and rely heavily on their figures and needs analysis. This was also recognised from the UN side. In terms of how this is manifested, many donors enjoy privileged relations with the UN that explicitly weaken the donor's influence. The EU and UN for instance have signed the Financial and Administrative Framework Agreement (FAFA), which limits the information that the EU can demand from the UN. Notably though, some felt that the trust invested in UN agencies was not given blindly and rather needed to be earned and built up over time, while a great many people noted that trust could also be lost or damaged in various ways. Trust is also clearly not absolute and some felt that it was often lacking from donors who had a sense that appeals may be inflated and had unanswered questions about how the UN spends the funds allocated to it.

While the UN may be the authoritative global actor tasked with assessing the scale of needs for given development and humanitarian issues and communicating these to donors and global publics more widely, at the same time, as noted above, individual UN agencies also have their own programmes to promote and, due to the way their mandates are structured, are incentivised to view issues from narrow, non-holistic perspectives. There is thus a potential conflict of interest in terms of these two functions. This means that some donors felt that the privileged position of UN agencies allowed them to use their needs assessment functions to promote their

own programmes, and to avoid providing sufficiently detailed budgets, thereby giving them an advantage in the marketplace compared to NGOs. One donor for instance gave his opinion that "They should be accountable in the same way and budget in the same way. Not leverage their advocacy role to dominate the market" (Donor 15). A further example of the strength of the UN brand is that some of those interviewed felt that IOM was disadvantaged, in terms of its perceived credibility, by its current non-UN status.

2.4 Project Performance and Impact

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

As noted donors have no formal relations with beneficiaries and so are exceptionally reliant on implementers to tell them whether projects have succeeded or not. Unsurprisingly though there are few incentives for implementers to report negative findings. In the words of one NGO interviewee: "There's definitely a conflict of interest. … It's in nobody's interest to report failure, right? Especially if it could potentially compromise your future opportunities" (NGO 1). The dilemma implementers face is that the information they provide is likely to impact significantly on their future prospects. As another NGO interviewee put it, "of course if you go back to the donor with nothing achieved, not really being able to measure the impact, yes there is a backlash, there is an issue there" (NGO 4).

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

> "I don't know how we can draw a line to say where the marketing of our products, of the projects that we are doing, should stop, and where the very honest evaluation should start. Obviously when we were struggling for additional funding in Afghanistan. …. We also are obliged to find ways to somehow sell what we do. It's a little bit of a tricky one, a difficult one." (NGO 4)

The problem is not merely that implementers want to present a positive image to their donors, generally they also believe in the programmes that they are implementing and hence when evaluations fail to show impact they may be more likely to question the method of evaluation, or the lack of follow-on investment, than the basis of their intervention. For instance, a large number of livelihoods projects in Afghanistan focus on vocational training because "the easiest thing is to train people" (NGO 6), according to one interviewee, and "because it's something that we know how to do as a humanitarian community" (NGO 4) according to another. However one interviewee mentioned that an internal evaluation of a long-running vocational training his organisation had been undertaking had difficulty in showing any impact at all; yet the intrinsic problem in his view was that the project was too limited and needed to be expanded further (Ibid). Another interviewee had faced a similar evaluation of an extensive and long running vocational training programme in a non-Afghan context that similarly failed to show any long term impact, but abandoning the project, or portraying it externally as a failure was never in question, because the programme was "so easy to sell to donors" (UN Agency 9).

In terms of the ways that implementers promote their programmes there has been significant investment in recent years in informational roles. Implementers need to maintain good relations

with their donors and have thus created posts specialised in managing donor relations. These individuals provide an interface to donors and to a large extent control the information flow to them, while they also attempt to develop friendly personal relations. As one NGO interviewee noted this can limit donors' access to potentially critical information:

> "One of the other problems is NGOs like to have a face; someone who's good at handling, at managing donors. … Because it's not that all organisations, and every person within each organization, wants to hide everything. It's just that organisations have programme development departments, or grant liaison positions, and that's all you meet as a donor, so that's often more of a problem." (NGO 1)

Multiple other factors make it more complicated for donors, and sometimes even implementers, to know the impact of their programmes. Many projects in Afghanistan lack reliable baseline data and the vast majority do not feature control groups. Implementers generally choose their own indicators and targets, against which the progress of their project is measured and while some indicators are fairly robust, others are seen as "easier to fudge a little bit" (NGO 1). Project visits by donors are rare, and those interviewed felt that external evaluations when they occurred were generally very weak. The use of beneficiary feedback mechanisms is increasing but any information resulting from that process is mediated by the implementer before being transferred to the donor. The combination of these factors led one donor to comment that it is "very difficult if not impossible to measure impact" (Donor 10). In addition, donors may trust implementers and have been shown in the past to have little inclination in Afghanistan to investigate performance (Brinkley, 2013)

In terms of core government services, such as the health or education sectors, the Afghan government plays a role in assessing performance and, to an extent at least, impact. However, for humanitarian or unaligned activities, such as the majority of those undertaken by NGOs and UN agencies, government oversight, at least at the central level, is almost non-existent in practice. Line ministries in theory play a coordinating role for these activities but generally lack the resources at provincial level to ensure much of an oversight role in terms of judging performance, and even less so regarding impact. Occasionally NGOs or UN agencies will provide top-ups to civil servants to ensure government involvement and buy-in to their projects, which in theory may include a monitoring role. However, in cases where the individual is receiving salary inducements from the agency they are over-seeing the incentive to be critical is greatly reduced.

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

There is thus a high reliance on the implementer to assess their own performance and impact and, as noted above, strong incentives to do this in a favourable manner. Nevertheless there are also mitigating factors that also incentivise honesty in reporting. For one thing implementers presumably care about Afghanistan's development and few would consciously seek to perpetuate inefficient interventions, or at least admit doing so. Secondly, due to the overwhelming importance of trust in the aid marketplace, implementers are keen to avoid any actions that would serve to damage their credibility. Throughout all interviews not a single person ever mentioned instances, or even suspicions, of implementers telling outright lies that they knew to be false, or going as far as to commit fraud in terms of manipulation of data. Rather, these

dynamics were seen to play out largely in terms of how information is presented, but not in terms of its fabrication. Thirdly, incentives at the individual level are not necessarily aligned with those of their organisations and there is great variety in the inclination and practice of individuals in terms of being critical about their own organisations (something which certainly came through in interviews). In the words of one interviewee therefore:

> "Yes they have the organizational interest in looking good but you also have your personal, professional reputation at stake as well. So if I'm dealing directly with ECHO and I'm lying and manipulating I'm compromising my own reputation, my own personal growth as well. So it's not a simple matter whereby you put everything on the line for your organization. If something isn't working and you are being spoken to directly by a donor agency then that's quite a powerful tool and one that I think is underestimated. I'm not going to go to all lengths to lie and protect [NGO] regardless of my own moral integrity and professional development." (NGO 1)

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

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

Donors need to convince their general publics that their tax dollars are not being wasted and, as noted above, are in competition with other sectors of the civil service for funding. The effect of this dynamic may be that donors also have an incentive for the projects they fund to be viewed positively. For instance, many donors post case studies on their websites, showcasing work in Afghanistan and commonly these posts describe both a problem and how it has been overcome through the activities funded by the donor in what is, in essence, a purely promotional marketing exercise. Thus implementers and donors may perceive a shared interest in presenting an image of success in the endeavour that they are both, in different ways, held accountable for, and even donors may find negative feedback regarding impact, or lack thereof, problematic. This dynamic is not entirely lost on actors lower in the chain: As one NGO interviewee acknowledged, in written communication to donors, including report and proposals, there was "a tendency to put things rosily, to paint in the best possible light. As the sad thing is that donors want to hear things in the best possible light" (NGO 9). Commentators in Afghanistan have noted the tendency for donors to occasionally be too upbeat in their reporting on Afghanistan and too quick to celebrate success, for instance Burke (2014) has criticised the EU for the positive tone of its reporting occasionally "bordering on the delusional".

It would nevertheless be a misrepresentation to state that donors are only interested in presenting programmes in a positive light, and indeed they often play a very critical role in relation to implementers, something that was highlighted in many interviews. Some of those interviewed on the other side felt that donors could be a "pest" (UNHCR 1) or that their interference was more negative than beneficial. However, it should also be noted that active monitoring by donors is indicative of, at the very least, a level of interest in the project. A donor that dedicates no efforts to monitoring is signalling to the partner that either they trust them, or that it is a low priority for the agency, or both. Thus several UN interviewees regretted low levels of monitoring from donors and would have preferred greater engagement in oversight functions as this would have implied a higher level of commitment from donors.

Most of the time, in the absence of rigorous evaluation, or evidence to the contrary, and particularly in low priority areas, donors are likely to take implementers at their word. According to one donor, this may be aggravated by a lack of qualified donor staff , in which case "in the sectors that are not sexy they'll just say 'yeah, yeah, [UN Agency] you're doing a good job'" (Donor 16) and continue funding. The consequence of this was, he continued, that this approach effectively "leaves implementing partners to do what they want, for good or for bad".

Additionally the field level donor responsible for monitoring the implementer may in practice have little flexibility to make changes to long-term funding commitments. This is particularly the case when the level of the donor agency that makes funding decisions is not the same as the level responsible for managing those commitments. For instance, as one UN interviewee recounted, - "The embassies cannot say we have a very poor experience with UNDP so let's report back to [donor capital] to say we should not spend the money there. It's all already allocated. ... Bad experience or not the deals are already made in [donor capital]" (UN Agency 7).

The one exception that tends to instantly raise an issue on a donor's agenda and to increase their resolve to conduct more intrusive monitoring is allegations of corruption or other public scandals, particularly those that receive wide coverage in the media. Several interviewees noted this tendency and the extreme sensitivity of donors, UN agencies and NGOs to react promptly to negative publicity. In addition to a more critical approach to project implementation, allegations that agencies are not doing enough to meet certain needs could also bring such topics to the forefront of aid workers' attention. One donor commented for instance that humanitarian issues, and the reintegration of returnees, were, for the most part, "a low priority for most donors except when it hits the newspapers" (Donor 18). Within the context of their project implementation functions many interviewed donors appeared to expect UN agencies to play a 'watchdog' role, in particular in regards to funding transferred to government agencies. However interviewees from both line ministries and central government also see it as their own role to manage or regulate UN agencies. If UN agencies allow their relations with government to deteriorate they may face obstacles to their work or, in extreme cases, be prevented from operating in Afghanistan. This may sometimes put these agencies in a complicated position in terms of balancing the interests of both sets of principals. A result of this, according to one donor, is that "Generally the UN system is not very forthcoming in calling out corruption in the government" (Donor 18).

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

> "There are many donors saying ok we get an allocation, like [donor agency]... They hardly care anything. I mean they have just made at the highest level a promise from [donor capital] to Afghanistan and we have to spend it and it's the pot of money, and make sure you spend it without problems. If you have an impact it doesn't matter. Make sure there's no corruption. Make sure there are no scandals. Impact to the Afghan people? I mean they can't care less." (UN Agency 7)

2.5 Conclusion

> "There's a lot of squawking from each cluster lead as to why their sector is the most important. It's money and it's lives. People may live or die. And also it's jobs for these staff. There's so, so much politicking in these groups. As donors it's harder for us to know what the actual needs are." (Donor 4)

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

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

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

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

Finally, a wider impact of competition within the aid marketplace may be its impact on credibility. While most interviewees had generally high levels of trust in the system as it stands this trust is nevertheless undermined to a certain extent by awareness of the contextual dynamics that encourage actors to 'sell' their projects and sectors in order to be awarded funding. Despite the mitigating features of the system this may nevertheless result in a certain amount of scepticism. One NGO interviewee, for instance, maintained that "I've been working in development for 4, 5 years and to be honest I wouldn't trust a report from a UN agency, at least not a specialized UN agency" (NGO 10). Another donor said that he was left with the impression that "Everyone's a salesman. I haven't met a single UN person, inside the cluster system or outside, who's not a salesman." (Donor 4).

31

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