

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Speech of the Special Representative
of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan**

**Opening of 55th Annual DPI/NGO conference
Rebuilding Societies Emerging from Conflict: A Shared Responsibility**

New York, 9 September 2002

It is a pleasure to be with you today, and to join the many distinguished speakers who will be addressing you over the next few days.

The theme of this year's DPI/NGO conference -- the proposition that the United Nations must work together with civil society and governments to support societies emerging from conflict -- is a view that is widely shared by all those who have participated in humanitarian assistance or other post-conflict activities. Quite simply, our work would be impossible in the absence of such partnerships.

As far as the relationship between the United Nations and NGOs is concerned, our experiences in every corner of the world have shown that it is essential that we work in partnership -- whether in our efforts to enhance global security and protect human rights, or to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development. And whether in conflict zones, post-conflict situations or in developing countries, NGOs often bring real expertise, experience and commitment to some of the greatest challenges facing the international community today.

Indeed, policy-making in today's world is a multi-faceted process, and through their hard work, effective advocacy and measurable results on the ground, NGOs – and civil society more generally – have come to play a crucial role alongside governments and multilateral organizations in this process.

In Afghanistan, this partnership dates back many years. Indeed, during the worst years of the Afghan conflict, when the country was virtually forgotten by the international community at large, NGOs – both Afghan and international – and the United Nations, worked together to keep at least a trickle of humanitarian assistance coming to the Afghan people. Far from international headlines, these dedicated aid workers persisted in their efforts, despite poor funding, a lack of real interest on the part of the outside world and – at times – at some personal risk. We must not forget their hard work and sacrifices during this period.

In the absence of governmental institutions, NGOs in Afghanistan filled the void as well as they could, essentially providing the services that a government would normally provide. It is not surprising, therefore, that several prominent Afghan members of NGOs, who had gained impressive practical, managerial and leadership skills rare in a war-torn society, have now been appointed to ministerial posts.

As the UN and NGOs continue – and I hope improve – their partnership throughout the world, we must bear in mind two points, which are important to remember in post-conflict situations.

First, the respective roles of the UN and NGOs are complementary, not identical. While we frequently share the same objectives, we generally have different mandates, rules and procedures. There are many things that NGOs can do which the United Nations cannot do, but which support and reinforce the UN's efforts. And the reverse is equally true.

Second, we must all recognize that the international community's role is often dramatically transformed in the post-conflict stage, and this requires that we change the manner in which we do business. In Afghanistan, for instance, there is now a government in place, and we no longer need to fill the void. Our role now should be to provide the government with support and assistance – not to seek to govern in its place, or impose upon it our own goals and aspirations.

This means that we must ensure, first and foremost, that our activities strengthen national capacities – not our own institutional capabilities; and, second, that we are responsive to the priorities articulated by the Government – and not to our own agendas or priorities.

In the recovery and reconstruction context, for example, the Government of Afghanistan has set out a “National Development Framework”, and we are working hard to ensure that all of the UN's activities, and therefore the activities of our NGO implementing partners as well, are consistent with the Government's strategic direction.

Tied to this is a simple philosophy that has become one of the defining principles of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, or UNAMA. This is the goal of having what we call a “light expatriate footprint”.

Essentially, this requires that we strive to build Afghan capacities – not only in Kabul, but also in the regional, provincial and district administrations – so that Afghans can take over as many of the functions that international staff are now performing, as soon as possible. Our goal, individually and collectively, should be to work ourselves out of a job as quickly as possible. The ultimate success for each and every one of us will be achieved the day we are no longer needed in Afghanistan.

Our UN and NGO colleagues in the field of mine action have done this with great success in Afghanistan, and we can all learn a great deal from their experience. I believe that there are fewer than a dozen expatriates still working in demining in Afghanistan today, while the number of Afghans is approaching 7,000. The entire operation is ready to be handed over to the Afghan authorities the moment they are ready to assume the responsibility.

On the NGO side, another inspiring example is that of the Swedish Committee. This NGO, which was once called the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan, employs some 7,000 to 8,000 Afghans – mainly teachers – but it is also active in health, agriculture, rural development and other humanitarian and recovery activities. The

organisation never had more than 30 expatriates, and that number went down to 20 last year, and 15 this year.

What does the light footprint mean, in practice? It means that, in every sector in which the UN or NGOs get involved, in every project that we initiate and for every international staff person whom we send to the field, we need to ask ourselves hard questions about why we are really there.

First, we must ensure that this is an activity that is really needed, and that the country cannot do on its own.

Second, we must be certain that we have a comparative advantage *vis-à-vis* other institutions or organizations, especially ones that are located in the region and may offer linguistic, cost or other advantages.

Just because we have done something in dozens of other countries does not necessarily mean that it is needed or appropriate in that country, and even if it is, we may not necessarily be the best ones to rush in to do it. Indeed, providing effective assistance requires not only an understanding of the local needs and context, but also a recognition of one's own limitations.

And third, assuming that all of the above conditions have been satisfied, then we should strive, from day one, to do everything possible to enable nationals to take over from us whatever it is that we had come to that country to do.

Now – does the United Nations have a light footprint in Afghanistan at the present time? No, not yet. Do NGOs have a light footprint in Afghanistan? I do not know for sure, but my impression is that they do not. Will we succeed fully, or even partially, in implementing these principles in the future? This remains to be seen.

But I do feel that the very fact that these objectives have been set will progressively ease the way toward making peacebuilding and reconstruction in Afghanistan an Afghan-led process. The Afghans themselves, both in government and in civil society, are now demanding this, with growing insistence – not to say impatience.

And if there is one lesson that years of experience in peacekeeping and peacebuilding have taught us, it is that a peace and reconstruction process stands a far better chance of success when it is nationally owned, rather than led by external actors.

I am sometimes told that this philosophy runs counter to the culture of the United Nations, and that of many NGOs as well. I fail to see why, or frankly how, any other approach can be justified.

Afghanistan, like other post-conflict societies, is just emerging from a bitter conflict – in this case, one that lasted almost a quarter of a century. There is still a deep humanitarian crisis, which is likely to persist for some time. The country remains divided and destroyed. Clearly, the UN and NGOs still have a critical role to play, and will for some time to come. The issue, at this stage, is not whether we have a role, but the importance of defining and implementing it with care.

As I have mentioned, the precarious humanitarian situation in the country will continue to require our attention for some time to come. And since most of the international assistance entering the country is going toward humanitarian efforts, we must ensure that reconstruction and rehabilitation are not neglected, and push for faster and more visible progress in vital sectors such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, agriculture and trade.

A number of other issues will take on increasing significance over the next 6 to 12 months. The Judicial and Human Rights Commissions set up under the Bonn Agreement are now ^{almost} operational, and will be critical to restoring accountability and the rule of law in Afghanistan. Elections are scheduled to take place in less than two years – an extremely tight timeframe that will pose logistical and other difficulties.

To meet these challenges, the Transitional Authority must put in place strong measures to promote good governance, transparency, the rule of law, and the participation of women. Clearly, the international community will have to provide

significant assistance – both financial and technical – in these difficult and sensitive tasks. But our guiding principle should be to assist in creating the conditions that will allow Afghans themselves to take full charge of these issues.

Against this backdrop of needs and imperatives lies the issue of security, which continues to loom large in Afghanistan. It is a prerequisite to the implementation of the peace process, and will have a profound impact on the credibility of the Transitional Authority. Yet, security remains precarious in much of the country, and many Afghans still feel that they are at the mercy of local commanders or armed groups.

We remain seriously concerned about the safety of humanitarian workers, particular in the Northern region of the country, where over 70 attacks have taken place this year, including the tragic gang rape of a female aid worker a few months ago. I have raised this issue with the Commanders in the North, as well as the authorities in Kabul, and have made it clear that they bear the ultimate responsibility for bringing criminals and human rights violators to justice.

We are also discussing with leaders in the North, as well as with the Central Government, the painful and sensitive issue of mass graves, about which there has been much publicity in the past few weeks.

It may be too soon to speak with any authority about the lessons learned from Afghanistan, but one thing is clear. Throughout years of conflict, the international

community virtually abandoned Afghanistan to its suffering. Now that the political climate has changed and a peace process is in place, the world is showing renewed interest.

Afghans recognize that they need external assistance in order to consolidate the peace, and have, therefore, invited us into their country. But with this invitation comes great responsibility. If we – the United Nations and NGOs – exercise it wisely, our partnership could bring untold benefits to the people of Afghanistan, and help them get back on the road to a peaceful, stable and prosperous future.

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