Risk transfer through hardening mentalities?   **26.11.2009**

In his **Remarks to the General Assembly on Staff Security**[1], the Secretary-General articulated his response to the terrorist attack on the UN guesthouse in Kabul on 28 October, during which five staff members were killed and nine wounded. He also addressed the general trend towards targeted attacks on UN facilities and personnel, exemplified by the recent assault on WFP's Islamabad offices.

In the wake of the Kabul attack, an urgent review of security measures and "overall exposure" is underway, which has led to the temporary removal of all non-essential UN staff from Afghanistan. The Secretary-General has laid out a comprehensive approach involving closer cooperation with military actors to enhance the security of staff whilst maintaining access to beneficiaries; firmer pressure on UN member states and host nations to provide the protection and space UN staff require to carry out their duties; supported by measures designed to harden the target. This includes the introduction of additional security units to guard UN facilities and guest houses.

The Secretary-General is asking for a surge in resources for security management, including a $25m emergency fund to help UNDSS "meet new demands in an increasingly dangerous world".

Increased protection and deterrence measures seem to be necessary steps for the UN. Yet there are unintended consequences, which could result in a transfer and concentration of risk for NGOs.
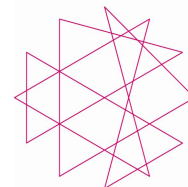
Towards protective mindsets?
The South Korean government recently announced plans to bolster its PRT in Afghanistan with over 100 extra aid workers, protected by 200-300 Korean troops and police officers.[2] This decision coincides with the Secretary-General's call for the international community to fulfil their legal and moral duty to protect citizens carrying out the UN's mandate and programmes.

Together with the UN's planned resource surge for protection measures, such approaches create a very real scenario for the significant transfer of risk to NGOs. In West Darfur, protective measures such as armed guards have already provoked debate over risk deflection from UN agencies to NGOs. In Chad, UN agencies have reacted to the persistent threat of armed banditry with higher protection levels and tighter controls on movement, again inevitably transferring risk to NGOs. UNHCR hopes to go

[1] Available at http://www.un.org/apps/sg/sgstats.asp?nid=4201.
[2] See http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/SKEA-7XBC69.

some way to mitigating this risk by requiring partner organisations to make use of armed escorts.[3] Recent kidnappings affecting ICRC and NGO staff will fuel this debate.

Some NGOs will oppose the UN's move, yet others might respond favourably, embracing a mentality of "hardening" in insecure environments. In highly criminalized environments there is little choice other than increased protection, and as a last resort deterrence through armed guards and armed escorts.

The quick and tangible path to security through protection and deterrence is undoubtedly seductive. With adequate resources targets can be bolstered and firm restrictions imposed on movement outside walled and fenced compounds. This "fortress mentality" may be especially attractive when the potential legal consequences of neglect to provide adequate staff protection begin to override the raison d'être of providing assistance to those most in need.

In environments considered hostile, NGOs have sought to protect staff whilst maintaining a high degree of acceptance. However, if ever harder protection and deterrence measures are pursued, this must be combined with an equal increase in resources for acceptance approaches, to facilitate access and security in the long-term within changing political environments.

Ultimately, the right approach to security rests not only on the balance between acceptance, protection and deterrence, but on approaches that enable humanitarian assistance to be delivered in an impartial way to those populations most affected and most vulnerable during conflict and crisis. NGO and UN agencies implementing programmes through local and international NGOs can only continue to do so if they are accepted by every group carrying arms and controlling violence.

During the "**Saving Lives Together" Conference held on 29-30 October in Geneva,** security managers from UN and NGOs examined their collective responsibility to improve the security of aid workers, and how this obligation could be translated into practice more effectively.

The SLT Framework holds potential for influencing mechanisms for the distribution of much-needed resources to NGOs for security management, which will be vital in mitigating the effects of risk transfer. Since NGOs are responsible for implementing many UN-led programmes, and comprise the greatest presence in insecure areas, it is vital that arrangements for resource transfer are institutionalised. Currently some NGOs criticise the UN because funding mechanisms are too slow and too UN-centric.

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[3] See for example http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/SNAA-7X992M.

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Established SLT platforms at a headquarter level and in-country could facilitate much-needed communication between UN agencies and NGOs, to raise awareness of the different threat profiles affecting agencies operating in the same environment. Recognition and understanding of the varying exposure and risk carried by each actor would aid the mitigation of unintentional risk transfer. Potentially, these mechanisms could provide a platform for acknowledging the high level of exposure experienced by aid workers from national organisations, for whom security incidents, including fatalities, still pass largely unrecognised.

What implications of coordination?
The sharing of security-related information is a positive step, which has long been neglected by all actors. But what will joint analysis and resource sharing imply for NGOs if the UN's primary security strategy is to strengthen protection and deterrence? The SLT's focus on practical rather than principled collaboration could lead to a convergence in strategy, at the same time as diversity in mandate and modus operandi is increasingly emphasised.

Will greater access to resources and support through the SLT, and more determined participation by UN and humanitarian agencies, be enough to mitigate unintentional risk transfer from the resource rich to the resource poor? More, will it overcome the fear that may lead NGOs to neglect the acceptance strategies and close interaction with their environments that have been central to their identity and programme goals? And will the UN share resources predominantly for protection mechanisms, or will sufficient funds be channelled into acceptance approaches by all humanitarian agencies? Acceptance approaches remain relatively undefined, but must be part of a more long-term, sustainable solution.

The UN acknowledges its multilateral make-up, and the clear perception by some local actors that it is a political actor.[4] Heavy involvement in democratisation in Afghanistan underlines this. Together with uncertainty surrounding SLT implementation, the UN's special status may actually compel (some) NGOs to maintain greater distance, rather than collaborate closely in the spirit of SLT.

The threat of direct attacks against UN and NGO staff in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere poses a dilemma for many humanitarian NGOs who favour locally-defined acceptance approaches, but fear the effects of internationally-inspired targeting and exposure to escalating risk. NGOs will need to develop a consistent approach in order to

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[4] See the 2008 "Brahimi Report" on creating a culture of security and accountability, available at http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/terrorism/PanelOnSafetyReport.pdf).

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reconcile collaboration through a joint framework with distance from political actors carrying out humanitarian activities, and to find the balance between acceptance, protection and deterrence that enables them to reach all victims safely.

As a final note: in his speech, the Secretary-General proposes a $10m fund for the support of victims and their families. This is laudable, but in the spirit of SLT revamped the pool should be made available to all aid workers, in particular those working for local organisations. These humanitarians bear the brunt of insecurity, yet generally have no access to substantial, flexible funds for victim support.

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