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YEARS

ACBAR 30 Years Coordination
Effective NGOs, Stronger Communities

Anniversary Reports

2018

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30 Years of Coordination – Effective NGOs, Stronger Communities



It is a great privilege to be part of ACBAR during this year of 2018 which marks 30 years of existence of the organization. When ACBAR started as a coordination body in 1988 in Peshawar, the NGO founders probably did not envisage that this coordination body would carry on for so long and continue to be so relevant to the needs of its members 30 years later. In my opinion there are three key elements which have contributed to the success of

ACBAR. First, the structure and governing Statutes of the organization were very well designed at the beginning of ACBAR. Since then the Statutes have continued to govern the organization with relatively minor changes over the years. A General Assembly of all NGO members elects a Steering Committee of NGO Directors and a Chairperson every year, responsible to oversee the work of the Director and Secretariat on a voluntary basis. The structure of ACBAR is democratic and dynamic – encouraging participation from all members and representation on behalf of all members through the Steering Committee. If there is a weak Steering Committee this can be counterbalanced by an active Secretariat and if there is a weak Secretariat, the Steering Committee can provide leadership and support.

The second element is that ACBAR has gradually changed from being a forum representing only international NGOs to a forum representing both national and international NGOs. This is due to the development of experienced national NGOs who have realized the value of being part of ACBAR. The voice of national NGOs is also reflected in the members of Steering Committee and by the Chairperson, traditionally elected from a national NGO.

A third element is the importance of the good reputation that ACBAR has built up over the years. All NGO members are required to sign a Code of Conduct when they join as members committing their organisation to certain principles. ACBAR is also considered to be a reliable, independent body by Government, UN, donors and other stakeholders and appreciated not only for information sharing and advocacy services that it provides but also for its contribution to Government policy development and its capacity building programmes for the wider NGO community.

The NGO members of ACBAR have continued to provide assistance and support in many different sectors to people in need over the last 30 years. What has been the impact on local communities? During 2018 ACBAR will plan different events round the country to mark the achievements of NGOs over the last 30 years and to identify what more can be done. Join with us in these discussions and celebrations!

Fiona Gall, Director

Interview with Mr. Hashim Mayar – “ACBAR Sahib”



Mr. Hashim Mayar had a long history with ACBAR and with NGOs. He was initially Chairman of ACBAR's Wardak working group in Wardak in the second half 1990s, when he worked for Solidarity International, a French NGO, and he was also member of the Steering Committee of ACBAR in Kabul in 2002. Subsequently Mr. Mayar joined ACBAR in Kabul in 2003 and worked as programme coordinator and then Deputy Director and Special Advisor until 2012.

One of the most important achievements of ACBAR, during Mr. Mayar's time, was the drafting of the NGO Law and the NGO Code of Conduct. Mr. Mayar was member of the group that worked on the regulation of NGOs which resulted in the NGO Law in 2005. ACBAR wanted the Code of Conduct to be part of the NGO Law which Mr. Mayar fought for: "We achieved some major things, but the Code of Conduct was really a pathway for NGOs. We wanted every NGO to follow the Code of Conduct. Even the UN Special Envoy said at the launch of the Code of Conduct in 2006, that the UN should also get one." There were also some less appealing responsibilities, such as the time when the Ministry of Finance sent a 19 page tax return form to be filled in by NGO and on ACBAR's initiative Mr. Mayar recalls, they reduced the form to 4 pages free of charge for the Ministry.

There were achievements but also challenges. ACBAR was obliged to leave Kabul on some occasions, for example 1989 by the Afghan Government and sometimes even resulting in loss of funds. Mr. Mayar says, "After ACBAR published a paper about the declining funds from the international community; the European Commission wanted to stop funding ACBAR because, according to them, there was seemingly no need for ACBAR. We objected to this simple conclusion. Then they hired two persons to evaluate us. When the auditing started we told them, ask the Government bodies, NGOs in the provinces and NGOs in Kabul if they need ACBAR. If they do not feel the need of ACBAR, we will absolutely close." Mayar continues, "During another occasion the Taliban said to us in 1998 that all NGOs should move to the Kabul Polytechnic building and ACBAR rejected that. As a result ACBAR left Kabul. After that, international NGOs that remained in Kabul created the so called 'NGO Forum'. ACBAR's main Office and other offices returned to Kabul in 2002 and there was no need for the NGO Forum".

ACBAR's solidarity with the Afghan people was known, even in the areas under control of the Taliban. Mayar remembers "When I was Chairman of the Wardak working group, the Director of ACBAR, Charles MacFadden, came to a meeting in Wardak province and three female NGO directors from Kabul accompanied him to attend this meeting. The Taliban said that the women could not be present at the meeting. We told them that it was not their meeting, but ACBAR's meeting. If the Taliban could not accept ACBAR guests then they should not attend. So they accepted and stayed. At the end of the meeting, the Taliban took pictures with the group including female Directors."

A new era began at the end of 2001 for Afghanistan with the establishment of the new government of President Karzai. Even though ACBAR was active in the NGO community for the

aim of the Afghan people, there was some aversion from the new rulers because ACBAR got media attention. Mayar remembers: “They tried to discredit NGOs. The Minister of Planning accused NGOs to be 99% guilty of fraud and corruption. On a radio panel where he and I were guests, the first question I asked was how he got that concrete number. Because the discussion was too critical, it was not broadcast.”

ACBAR always believed that “together we are stronger” and also invested in having relations with other coordination bodies like SWABAC, ANCB, AWN, BAAG, ENA, Interaction US and ICVA. Mayar explains “We helped each other and learned from each other because Afghanistan needed us.” He also remembers that during the Taliban rule, they had joint meetings with United Nations (UN) under the chairmanship of OCHA, and then OCHA left Afghanistan. The Special Representative brought OCHA back. After that, ACBAR had weekly humanitarian meetings also with UNAMA.

At the end of the interview, we asked Mayar about his nickname “ACBAR Sahib”. “Well, whenever there was an issue, the first point for information was ACBAR and the one who created a solution was also ACBAR. So media found their way to us. We were reliable for the people. Also our members were of great support for our work. And one thing led to another and people start calling me ACBAR Sahib.”

Mr. Hashim Mayar is a graduate of the College of Agriculture, Kabul University; prior to that he studied agriculture in USA. He graduated from the Vocational Agriculture College in Kabul. Prior to ACBAR he has worked for Solidarity International in different capacities as Agronomist and Administrator for Maidan Agricultural Center. Later as head of Kabul Office and assistant head of mission. He has worked for the Ministry of Agriculture at various capacities as a technician, Manager of Poultry section and Manager of Livestock Improvement Section. Before that he has worked for the Herat Livestock Development Corporation at different capacities as livestock technician, Livestock Officer, Credit Officer and Aboitir Manager. Mr. Mayar has started his first career as an assistant teacher, then as teacher and Assistant Principal at Vocational Agriculture School.

Interview with Sultan Aziz - “A good opportunity to be part of history”



Sultan Aziz was chairman of ACBAR from 1989-1991 while he was Director of Save the Children, based in Islamabad, Pakistan. Sultan Aziz had joined Save the Children in 1988 having initially come to Afghanistan as a volunteer to help a cousin treat wounded patients. “During 1982-1984 I came for 3 or 4 months of the year from the United States with my cousin who was a surgeon and we travelled to different parts of Afghanistan under Soviet occupation, to villages where people had been bombed, to provide

medical assistance. I would go back to the US and try to gather money and supplies and then come back again. As a result of this work I saw an opportunity for me to work with Save the Children and do much more”.

Sultan Aziz was interested to become Chairman of ACBAR having previously helped set up the coordination body, SWABAC, for NGOs working in Quetta. "Working with NGOs I understood the broader picture of what NGOs could contribute during the war years in Afghanistan. We were involved in cross-border operations, we knew what the conditions were inside Afghanistan and the creation of ACBAR represented a big step forward in being able to organize NGOs and create capacity. It was a good opportunity to be part of history."

"At the time I was Chairman the Russian troops withdrew from Afghanistan (December 1989), the UN had arrived to help and the regime of Dr. Najibullah was in control in the main cities in Afghanistan. The mujahedeen were fighting against the government and the people of Afghanistan were the victim of an international conflict. Our focus as NGOs was how to ease the suffering and pain with emergency relief."

There were also development issues. Sometimes we would receive delegations of farmers who were being asked to help blow up infrastructure like dams by the resistance. The farmers were concerned about their lands downstream as losing dams would not only cause floods but also have long term impact on the irrigation of their crops. We tried to approach different donors to explain these issues although at the time the US was essentially only listening to Pakistan. We found some money in one case so that the farmers could hire guards and ensure that nobody sabotaged the dam.

It was an interesting time, because there were a lot of developmental challenges and ACBAR was increasingly seen as an institution to which people turned for information. At that time ACBAR had to respond to increasing demands from communities and of course ACBAR did not have the required resources, so ACBAR became by default a clearing house to refer people to the right resources and provide information. For example, if somebody came with particular medical issue, ACBAR was not in a position to do anything, so we would say why you don't go to talk with the Red Cross or others operating in Peshawar. So we became the clearing house and the first stop if you needed information. Most of the secretariat members were Afghans and on the Steering Committee we were both Afghans and internationals.

I think ACBAR provided many useful services and at the same time ACBAR developed capacities that did not exist. We had NGOs coming and looking for funding but they had no experience implementing projects. I remember spending days teaching people how to write projects documents and how to do the monitoring and evaluation that was required, because ultimately the donors would expect reports. ACBAR also provided courses on basic accounting, bookkeeping and English for NGO members.

Every Monday I used to attend at ACBAR meetings and I used to drive down from Islamabad to Peshawar and back and during the rest of the time the operational work was done by the Director. I was not involved with the operational work, I chaired the SC meetings where we helped with fund raising for ACBAR and looked to continue or discontinue some programs or increasing programs and policy orientation. We also promoted the work of NGO members - I went to Canada, USA, Denmark, UK, Germany, Switzerland and other countries to explain the situation in Afghanistan.

When ACBAR was created with support of Donors and UN – the Pakistan government was not in a position to close it but they were not particularly welcoming. Later on ACBAR was supporting

NGOs to work for the refugees and partner with UNHCR. Afghan NGOs were trained through ACBAR support and the Pakistanis realized that this helped the management of the refugee camps. The introduction of Afghan NGOs into the process helped to stabilize and build relations between refugees and government of Pakistan.

Today I can see that ACBAR has become an advocacy platform on behalf of civil society organizations. ACBAR has credibility with international donors and Embassies. If there are issues with the Government, you will go directly to the international community and say you need to look at this, so when there is a JCMB meeting or other related donor meetings in Kabul as part of Tokyo or London processes, ACBAR is invited. I think that is a great development. ACBAR has managed to evolve and change focus from exclusively dealing with NGOs to more formal work in policy and development issues.

I think that advocacy work is the most important responsibility of ACBAR and providing protection to NGOs and CSOs in an indirect way. It is not always a given that Government accepts criticism and when Government doesn't like criticism, this can create a lot of problems. ACBAR can do a lot in this area to become a voice for protecting CSO and NGOs.

The future of Afghanistan depends on a number of things. One of the issues in Afghanistan is the absence of justice; "justice delayed is justice denied". We need justice and peace in this country but the first requirement is justice. When I worked as a senior advisor for Mr. Lakshar Brahimi (UN Special Representative for Afghanistan 97-99) his argument was that he said you cannot have peace and justice at the same time. For a Muslim country and for Afghans in particular, our cultural tradition demands to pay equal attention to both justice and peace.

Today I see NGOs as being an important element of civil society and in helping people to raise their voices. ACBAR can be a very important catalyst to encourage these voices. At the moment there is a lot of talk about justice but implementation of justice across the country is hampered by inadequate capacity and chronic corruption in the justice sector.

The role of NGOs has changed - efforts spent in creating capacity, has to be sustainable and relevant. Afghans are committed to change, as witnessed by the changes that have already taken place in the country. One hopes that change so far in the country is irreversible and the contribution of NGOs and CSOs is key to that process.

Sultan Aziz, born in Czech Republic, worked for Save the Children (4 years), the UN (20 years) and most recently as Advisor to the Minister of Agriculture (3 years). He is currently working as a consultant on a range of development issues in Afghanistan. He was Chairman of ACBAR between 1989 -1991.

Interview with Mr. Hakim Gul – "A friend in need is a friend indeed"



Engineer Hakim Gul has many memories of ACBAR as member of Steering Committee and Vice Chair in the 1990s. "Working with ACBAR itself is a memory, it was an honor for me, through ACBAR we helped very needy people, who were leaving Afghanistan and migrating to

Pakistan in the 70s and 80s due to the Soviet invasion.”

During the war, beside other things, schools were also destroyed. Hakim Gul remembers building a school from which he graduated in his own village in the Wardak province. “When I came to my village, the school was burned by militants, in 1990 I wrote a proposal with the help of UNESCO, then I got funds to build a school, which is still a place for children to study, it has graduated many engineers, doctors and others with various professions. When I see this school and the kids attending the school I feel proud and very happy.”

ACBAR NGO members had programs for supporting refugees in Pakistan and working on cross border activities. In order to coordinate better, NGOs were sharing the information through ACBAR and coordinating services in those areas. Regular meetings were held in ACBAR, than later other coordinating bodies like ANCB and SWABAC also started working.

We asked Hakim Gul about the achievements of ACBAR at that time, he replied: “The Afghanistan Resource and Information Centre (ARIC) was a big achievement of ACBAR. It is now a worldwide center for anyone who wants to research about Afghanistan and is based at Kabul University under the name ACKU. Nancy Dupree was responsible for this.”

Engineer Hakim Gul says as the situation is changing so the role of ACBAR also must change. “At that time when ACBAR started there were refugees and emergencies and we were trying to save the lives of people. Now there is an established government, ACBAR must change its mission and focus on capacity building to provide knowledge and tools to NGO staff. Also play an advocacy role on behalf of its members and the Afghan civil society. ACBAR must ensure transparency and accountability through effective and efficient utilization of resources to the best satisfaction of the government, donors and responsive to the needs of the people and improve coordination among its members and all stakeholders.”

The strongest thing for ACBAR has always been its members. ACBAR coordinates all issues with member organizations, thus the voice of ACBAR is in reality the voice of its members who are represented by ACBAR. Sometimes NGOs are doing many activities but there is less publicity. Hakim Gul’s recommendation to NGOs is to publicize better what is being done. Show to the people what you do through the media. NGOs should work together to show the results of their activities to the people and to the government so that they will know the importance of NGOs work and will be satisfied with the essential value of NGOs.

Hakim Gul was Steering committee member of ACBAR in 1991 to 1993, 1996 -1997 and Vice Chair in 1993-1994. He is currently advisor for the Ministry of Economy, NGO Department.

Interview with Mr. Fazel Rabi Haqbeen - “Serving the needs of the people of Afghanistan”



In 2001 I worked for ACBAR as a regional manager for Kabul during the Taliban time. The office had been closed by Taliban in 1996, but the Steering Committee was able to renegotiate the opening of the ACBAR office in 2000. Thomas Mueller was the program

manager of ACBAR and was providing oversight in Kabul at the time. Then I left ACBAR and joined other member NGOs and subsequently was elected as a member of the Steering Committee. I was also elected as a Chairman 3 times (the last time was 2012 - 2013) and I am still a member of the Steering Committee.

One of the most difficult times the Steering Committee faced in ACBAR was in 2012 when there was a management crisis and Steering Committee members had to intervene and take over the management of the organization directly in order to prevent it closing. Due to our work we were able to resume and maintain ACBAR and appoint a new Director and identify new funding. This was a significant achievement.

During Taliban time, Taliban thought that NGOs needed to be brought under their control and that controlling ACBAR, as the “mother of NGOs”, would mean controlling all NGOs. So the Taliban tried to introduce a representative to each NGO to work in the organization to obtain information on activities. Someone was introduced to ACBAR. We gave him some responsibilities (conducting prayer five times a day), made him sign the attendance sheet and after three days he left for his own province and let us carry on our work without his close supervision. He trusted us and he seldom visited ACBAR to sign his attendance sheet.

Generally the Taliban were suspicious of NGOs and did not understand what they did and what our objectives were. They suspected some NGOs of proselytization. They wanted to control NGOs more closely. An example was detention of the Director of an International NGO, but ACBAR intervened and we were able to release her from detention of Taliban. When they understood our work better then trust was built. This happened when they saw that NGOs were really serving the needs of the people of Afghanistan. I was a regional manager for AREA in Herat when the Taliban arrived in 1996. Initially we had a lot of difficulties but when they saw our work then the Taliban authorities let us carry on. Even now today in rural areas the community can be suspicious about the work of NGOs – they think NGOs are bringing different ideas and a different culture so we always need to build up relationships and trust.

I have always believed in ACBAR, I see it has an important role to advocate on a collective basis on behalf of the wider group of NGOs, to share information and bring various actors such as government institutions, donors, private sector and civil society together. Through ACBAR we were able to influence different Government Ministries and sectors and different national and international stakeholders. I was able to attend 3 conferences on Afghanistan as a member of ACBAR - the second Bonn conference, the Tokyo conference and the first London conference as the Chairman of ACBAR. At these conferences we were able to advocate for different issues as members of civil society on the importance of education, health, women’s rights, human rights and the role of civil society.

As NGOs we do have some challenges, we face competition between ourselves for funding so we do not always coordinate and share information with each other. We do need a common platform to build up trust in each other. I do see positive changes in our work but we still need to improve.

There have been improvements in Afghanistan throughout the last 30 years with the assistance of NGOs – for example in health, education, water and sanitation. NGOs can reach all corners of the country and bring rapid assistance, but there are huge challenges in the country – high

unemployment of youth in particular, insecurity, drug addiction, criminality, poverty - which impact our work and make it less visible. Opportunities for women are available but education and professional skills among women are still lacking so we need to work more on this to ensure progress. The voices of women in rural areas and in villages are not yet sufficiently heard. We also need to raise women Islamic scholars to be able to speak to the Islamic scholars in order to find their role in society.

Mr. Fazel Rabi Haqbeen, Director of Tashabos, Former Regional Manager and was Chairman of ACBAR. Currently also Steering Committee member

Interview with Mr. Aziz Rafiee – “Afghans need a just society”



I remember before ACBAR was established, coordination among the donors and different actors was very difficult, but due to the proposal of Louis Dupree and Agha Khan, the Salam operation for Afghanistan was established to coordinate aid more effectively and NGOs decided to launch their own coordination mechanism in 1987. Then the official launch of ACBAR happened in 1988 as a membership forum for aid deliverers to provide effective assistance to the Afghan population inside the

country and to support the 3-4 million refugees in Pakistan.

NGOs were working in Pakistan with the refugees and some were working in Afghanistan in areas outside the coverage of the government - providing services like health, education, agriculture, livestock, and more, particularly in emergency, providing assistance for families affected by earth quakes, landslides, floods and conflicts related emergencies such as assistance to families affected by bombing and fighting. These issues were approached on relatively ad-hoc basis.

The decision to set up a more coordinated approach in 1988 was extremely important. It was the start of a new era of assistance. In the last years of the 1980s many local NGOs were set up to channel UN funds and some international NGOs created national NGOs to take over their work. During the civil war in the 1990s, NGOs were key players on the ground for providing support and assistance to the Afghan people. Until 1996 the prestige of the NGOs was very strong and in comparison local civil society organizations were very small.

During the time of the Taliban (1998-2001), NGOs still had a very strong role and the coordination was needed. After the fall of the Taliban at the end of 2001 and the new era brought in under President Karzai, there has been space made for civil society and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) which include NGOs. Civil society as a whole has played an important role in development of society since 2002 with the development of the media and increased education.

Unfortunately the dominance of the international military forces and the military approach to development resulted in the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) policy; this was a big mistake

made by the international community. The strategy of quick impact projects of the PRTs was counter-productive and created corruption and misuse of money at local levels. It was supposed to empower local authorities but it actually empowered local militia, local commanders and warlords. At the same time there was no good plan inside the government to utilize the money coming into the country. The money was available, but the government did not have the capacity to deliver this assistance.

From 1986 to 1999 the main agenda for NGOs were aid delivery and assistance and some development; the theme was rehabilitation and reconstruction. After 2002 the focus changed to the social approach; how we can better socially develop Afghanistan. I think if CSOs and NGOs had not been here we would have lost even more during the years of war and conflict. NGOs have been successful in providing hope to the people and providing their needs. Today we are still in this process. I think the hope is always here; we still have the people of Afghanistan, our home land and the international community with us. We are still shaping ourselves in a broader partnership. I think one of the things we have not succeeded in, is better regional partnership and coordination. This is starting now with economic projects like TAPI and others. The results will benefit the next generation.

NGOs and CSOs are a part of the structure of this society at this moment. In modern society, you cannot exclude civil society; it is part of the structure. We may change the work and the shape of the civil society, but we can't omit or remove it from the structure. We have the State, civil society and the private sector; these are the three important actors of a liberal society.

I am still very engaged as a civil society advocate in what is happening in Afghanistan right now, including human rights issues. We have achieved a lot in bringing people to work on values and principles. Part of this advocacy has been to work on new policies, including the disability law, the NGO law, the media law and the environment law. These are major achievements of civil society in Afghanistan. As NGOs and CSOs we are actually contributing to the development of the country, especially to the principles.

I think the issue that motivates us in our work in civil society is the need of Afghans to have a just society. This is something which motivates us to continue our work; there a lot of priorities and important things which we have not yet achieved. The rule of law, good governance, transparency and accountability are still the most important priorities for civil society and of course for development we need peace and a security process - so peace and security are very important for us.

I think ACBAR and other coordination bodies need to work in close cooperation, we need to complement each other's work, prevent any duplication, and work with full trust and loyalty to our goals and objectives and also to our values and principles. One of the biggest things which we have achieved with ACBAR is the NGO Code of Conduct established in 2005 by five coordination bodies. It is one of our major achievements and it is a very important to commit ourselves to the principles of impartiality, humanity and do no harm.

Mr. Aziz Rafiee is currently Director of Afghan Civil Society Forum Organization (ACSFo). He worked for more than seven years with ACBAR from 1996 to 2002 in Kabul and Peshawar as office manager, programme officer, program manager, and Afghanistan coordinator. He has

also worked as researcher in ARIC (ACBAR Resource and Information Center) before officially joining the agency.

Interview with Mr. Amanullah Jawad -“NGOs should have their own role in Afghanistan”

Looking Back



After the collapse of Communist regime and establishment of the Mujahedeen government and then during the Taliban regime there were no Government agencies to provide proper services for the people and affected community in Afghanistan. This is the right occasion to mention that NGOs and ACBAR members were there to provide the required services for the people even in very remote areas of the country.

Initially NGOs started their work with Afghan refugees in Peshawar, Pakistan. After the collapse of communist regime and during Mujahedin government the NGOs expanded their service inside Afghanistan. After 2001 and the start of the Karzai government the numbers of NGOs increased up to 3,000 registered with Ministry of Economy and among these unfortunately were NGOs that did not have a clear and specific scope and commitment to the people of Afghanistan. Therefore, we need to distinguish these NGOs. Currently we see that the Government criticizes the work of NGOs and say that the NGOs are corrupt. This is not accurate and there are NGOs who have a specific commitment towards the people of Afghanistan since they have started working in Pakistan. Sadly there are others who think only of their pockets. That is why the reputation of NGOs is bad.

Concerning gender and women's rights I remember one incident in 1997 when we went to do a survey with an expatriate colleague in Logar province to assess the effects of floods on the farmers. My colleague requested to meet the Taliban district governor and the meeting was arranged. The district governor asked my colleague: Why does your Government does not recognize the Taliban Government? He responded that one of the reasons might be that the Taliban government did not respect the rights of women. The governor replied: “When you travel from Gardez city to Logar, how many check points do you see? Were they men or women?” He replied, “All were men.” The Governor continued: “Those people holding rockets on their shoulders that destroyed the villages and cities, how many of them were men and how many women?” Again my colleague replied: “They were all men.” The Governor said: “When you go back to Gardez city, on the way the thieves that steal all your stuff, how many of them are men and how many women?” My colleague replied “Probably all men.” The Governor concluded “So you can see that we have problems with our men, not our women, and still you are raising concerns about the rights of women and their problems!”

When the Soviet Union left Afghanistan, one of the main reasons that Afghans left the country was that the entire infrastructure such as factories, clinics, water irrigation canals and schools were destroyed. In Such a conflict situation which there was no central government and rule of law, we were working for the survival of the people. Due to lack of labor and work opportunity, the people were lived in a dreadful condition.

Work with ACBAR

In terms of achievements during my time as a member of Steering Committee and Chairman of ACBAR, I think we worked very closely as a team with national and international representatives on the Steering Committee. Amongst other things we looked at improving the capacity of national NGOs regarding proposal writing and receiving funds from international donors. In recent years, with the collaboration of ACBAR's training and Twinning programmes the capacity of National NGOs significantly has been improved and now they are able to apply, receive funds and implement different projects in a high level which is one of the significant achievements of last few years. Also we saw an increase in the gender balance in ACBAR and now a number of qualified and experienced female employees are working which is a positive achievement. Another achievement was creating good coordination with Government Ministries which is one of the main activities of ACBAR; for example advocating on tax and reporting issues on behalf of NGOs under Article 24 of the Brussels SMAF commitments.

Two challenges I see are firstly, the continued lack of coordination: there are a lot of coordination bodies such as AWN, ACBAR, ANCB and SWABAC and ACBAR has worked hard to collaborate with all of them and provide support and advice. The second challenge is still distinguishing between good NGOs and bad NGOs. We need to cooperate with government to distinguish between NGOs and identify those NGOs who are not reporting and complying with the NGO Law. Those NGOs that are corrupt and implementing weak projects should be dissolved by Ministry of Economy immediately. Those NGOs who are reporting on time, who are not corrupt and can demonstrate the quality of their work need to be encouraged by the Government and the International community.

Future Role of NGOs

NGOs should have their own role in Afghanistan. The Government is responsible to provide services for the people and community. NGOs need to monitor the policies made by government and assess if they are based on needs of the people and observe whether the policies are being implemented by government or not. NGOs should influence policy makers to ensure the needs of the people are included. Currently ACBAR has started a working group to look at the Citizen's Charter program. ACBAR is monitoring that if the Citizen Charter is meeting its objectives or not. This watchdog role is important.

Finally I think ACBAR has an important advocacy role to continue to raise problems and issues with the Government on behalf of and NGOs and help to solve them. As we see, in the past people had little trust in NGOs and they did not believe in activities of NGOs but ACBAR has efficiently solved these issues through printing of booklets and campaigns to promote the creditability of NGOs.

Mr. Amanullah Jawad, Deputy Director of RRAA (Rural Rehabilitation Association for Afghanistan), a national NGO member of ACBAR, was member of ACBAR Steering Committee from 2006 - 2017 and Chairman of ACBAR Steering Committee for 2 years from 2014 until 2016.

Interview with Mr. Abdul Raziq Samadi – “NGOs need to be inclusive, active and transparent”



Since its establishment in August 1988, the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief & Development (ACBAR) has played an integral role in bridging the gap between non-government organizations (NGOs), the Afghan government, and the Afghan population. ACBAR is an independent body that provides a unique platform for information-sharing and networking for national and international NGOs in Afghanistan.

The 1980s and 1990s were times of great economic hardship for Afghans. There were many displaced Afghan families and refugees in Pakistan and across the border of Afghanistan. Afghans in urban areas faced greater challenges due to ongoing conflicts in their communities and many struggled to provide for their families. Unemployment rates, in particular, were higher in these communities. Afghans in rural areas had relatively better living standards as they continued to engage in subsistence farming. ACBAR was established to coordinate assistance and deliver services to Afghans suffering from conflicts, unemployment and general loss.

One of the core challenges facing ACBAR during its work in the 1980s and 1990s was its outreach efforts. Given Afghanistan's poor infrastructure, ACBAR's goal in delivering services was hindered by a severe lack of transportation, communication, and electricity services. Relief assistance and medical aid had to be transported via local mechanisms, particularly in rural areas. The medical and relief assistance to very remote communities would take weeks to arrive, which often rendered their use obsolete by the time local communities could take advantage of these services. This meant that project timelines were very much extended. However, NGOs continued to maintain good relations with donors and trusted that their efforts would be met with persistent support.

During my time as Chairman of ACBAR, we faced financial difficulties and were asked to downsize. Fortunately, as a result of good relations with NGOs, some members were able to provide short-term funding to ACBAR in support of our efforts. We then managed to raise more funds from donors who were committed to our goal of providing assistance to Afghans in need.

Soon, ACBAR was able to stand back on its feet and build relations with the Afghan government, having then reached the new phase led by President Hamid Karzai. Our initiatives and efforts thus continued to expand in response to the support we received. Not only were we backed by donors, but local communities also developed a sense of trust and respect for our efforts. Even during times of sudden emergencies such as floods, earthquakes and outbreaks of diseases within communities, NGOs were able to rapidly provide assistance.

Today, the circumstances are very different. While we may have better transportation systems and more telecommunication services than our past, there is still very much a role, and certainly a need, for NGOs to work together with the government and for donors to continue to provide support. Afghan families are still displaced and unemployment remains a concern.

NGOs today have to be inclusive, active, and transparent. They also need to advocate for the rights of people, for quality services, and for sound legal and judicial systems. If NGOs play a strong role, they will have legitimacy amongst civil society and other stakeholders. ACBAR needs to continue to work impartially and coordinate NGO advocacy with the government to demonstrate NGO activities and capacities. I believe that NGOs must work harder to enhance their capacities and be transparent and inclusive in providing services for the poor and needy. I hope that the international community will continue to support Afghanistan as they have done for so many years. Eventually, Afghanistan will be a more developed nation. The hope is that one day, in return, Afghanistan would provide support to other nations and vulnerable communities.

Abdul Razique Samadi was the Managing Director of Afghan Development Association (ADA) from 1988 - 2003 and elected Chairman of ACBAR from 1999 until 2003.

Letter from Charles Mac Fadden – “Extraordinary times, ACBAR in the nineties”



I congratulate ACBAR on reaching its 30th birthday, now actually based in Kabul and still being extremely relevant. I believe that it does play an important role for Afghanistan – a country and people that have suffered so much. A significant achievement and I am very pleased to have been part of its history. I landed in Islamabad in September 1992. My base was Peshawar in Pakistan; a city then home to millions of Afghan refugees. Whilst my predecessor Jon Bennett had briefed me

in the United Kingdom, this was a new experience in a part of the world that I knew less about and a conflict that I only really knew about from the press.

My Steering Committee Chairman was Dr. Azam Gul, a well-respected agriculturalist with the Swedish Committee. It was a well-balanced and supportive Committee. It proved a little unnerving to attend my first Steering Committee meeting and also my first General Assembly at the PC Hotel! Azam Gul, Shakir (Programmes) and Aneela (Finance) guided me through my early days; as did the other ACBAR staff and Nancy Dupree and Fahim (ARIC). I had to learn fast, especially as I became more aware of ACBAR's role and particularly how it impacted the aid community and Afghanistan. I remember being given an official welcome at the PC Hotel by Rustam Shah, Commissioner for Afghan Refugees – I liked working with him.

ACBAR's reputation seemed very good and accepted by, inter alia, the Pakistani authorities, the national and international NGOs, the Afghan community, the donors and the UN agencies. And when I made various visits into Afghanistan we were always given great respect. Everywhere there was always a green tea and very generous hospitality.

As I saw it ACBAR membership had to have a value - and that would be by ensuring agencies had a forum that encouraged - strong participation in regional and sectoral coordination; the development of standard modus operandi; and dissemination of up to date information. It was also extremely important to develop and maintain advocacy with the various authorities and to seek to ensure strong accountability and transparency within the aid community. Funding ACBAR's activities was an issue every year but generally the main sources of funding proved secure and generous. The membership seemed quite well-balanced with a reasonable number of both international and Afghan agencies. An important issue was that of ACBAR representing, in general terms, the NGO community in various forums as a whole.

During my time ACBAR expanded its activities and staff numbers. ACBAR took over the SCA Agricultural Survey Unit (1994), later the IRC Printing Press and HERC (screen printing). As to the Survey Unit I remember an interesting discussion with the Taliban in Kandahar about their providing the team (or not) with AK 47s for their security in Helmand Province for a survey. The Printing Press produced large quantities of text books for the SCA education programme. Screen printing was largely for developing training materials for various programmes. And on top of that there were offices in Afghanistan: Kabul (1996), Herat, and Jalalabad. Working with the various units was always different but interesting.

Throughout my time I found that meeting the various directors and senior agency staff and discussing the key issues proved very interesting even if views often conflicted and were confusing. I also often met the other Coordinating bodies – ANCB, ICC in Peshawar and SWABAC in Quetta. We clearly needed to develop a good relationship and work towards more effective coordination.

My early visit to Afghanistan was for a meeting in Jalalabad and to meet the Governor. I was somewhat overawed by the welcome from everyone and the lunch, and learnt quickly the importance of food and particularly that meat was a basic necessity!! As a vegetarian there would always be Nan and vegetables. Later in 1993 I went by road to Kabul with Shaker – and met Ministry officials, the ICRC, NGOs and others to see the situation first hand. We even planned an ACBAR office in Kabul. However, 1994 proved a bad year with a massive increase in hostilities between the various factions particularly in Kabul. There was a large increase in numbers of displaced in Nangarhar and refugees to Pakistan.

The killing of UN staff at Hisar Shahi (1993) – between Jalalabad and the Pakistani border – had a massive impact on the aid community. A General Assembly meeting to discuss 'what to do' made it clear there was no easy answer. There was a significant difference of opinions between agencies and it was apparent that any decisions made in this environment in the future would need to be very carefully thought through, a useful lesson.

The sad untimely death of Shaker (PM), drowned in the Indus at Attock shook us all badly – he was a friend and when in ACBAR had been someone who always gave serious and sensible advice. He had joined the UN by that time but we always thought that he might re-join ACBAR. In Kabul he had taken me on very early morning walks through the fruit and meat bazaars as well as going to the underground bazaar at Landi Kotal on one of our crossings of the tribal territory.

The arrival on the scene of the Taliban in late 1994 – when an 'unknown' group seized Kandahar city – caused serious concern. Then in September 1996 first the fall of Jalalabad followed by the

taking of Kabul a few weeks later changed everything in Afghanistan and, also has impacted on the future of the whole world! Initially the various edicts issued caused much concern and there were numerous meetings to discuss how the aid community and donors would work with the Taliban and so on. Over the next three years these discussions became more and more important as the Taliban varied their rules and regulations for the people and the aid community – particularly in relation to Afghan girls and women with regard to education and health. Days were spent on 'Principled Common Programming'. Many international meetings also took place – in New York, Ashkabad, Stockholm and Tokyo. There was further disruption when the Taliban decided in July 1998 that the NGOs should all be rehoused into the Kabul Polytechnic University building. One sunny morning the Taliban arrived and asked me to leave the compound. They then closed and sealed ACBAR Kabul and also tried to close WFP at the same time considering it as an international NGO.

It was a quite extraordinary position to hold; it proved quite tough but I now look back and feel very privileged to have had such an opportunity and the opportunity to meet many of the Afghans, Pakistanis and others that I met with over the years; and the chance to see so much of both countries. Overall there were good times – and not so good times – such as when a bomb was dropped close to the Shahre Naw office – taking out most of the windows. I was a member of the team that first met Mullah Ghayas, the Taliban Foreign Minister on the Kabul takeover and I had a fascinating unplanned meeting with Hekmatyar in Laghman. I made two visits to Iran to meet with Government officials there; I drove by myself from Peshawar to Kabul, and back, arriving at night when there was no electricity. Life was easier in that I was able also to regularly use the UN and ICRC flights and had first-hand view of the damage sadly caused by a major earthquake in Badakhshan.

Peshawar provided a good environment for us as a family to live in, and the American Club proved a good place to relax and to catch up with the latest news or to have informal meetings and for lunch during Ramazan!

It was really nice that when in Peshawar in 2010 with the Danish Refugee Council for six months there were many who remembered me and I had much help from Eng. Jawed (HAFO). I have also met others from this time in other countries. One can only hope that there is a better future for the country and its people.

Charles Mac Fadden was the Executive Director ACBAR from September 1992 until November 1999.

Letter from Ms. Anja de Beer – “ACBAR's resilience”



I arrived in Afghanistan in June 2000 to work with the ICRC. After the events of 9/11, I was evacuated for a short period and returned to Afghanistan towards the end of 2001 to work with the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. When my mission ended in the summer of 2003, I did not want to leave Afghanistan. The mood among Afghans and foreigners was full of hope

and everyone was determined not to make the same mistakes as in the past. This time around the international community would not desert Afghanistan and the Afghans would overcome their differences and unify for peace.

ACBAR was around that time looking for a new director and to my luck I got the job and started August 2003. What I loved about my work with ACBAR was the diversity: working with the national and International NGOs that were ACBAR members, contacts with Afghan government, donors, the military and of course the contact with the Afghan in the rural communities ACBAR's members were working for.

I had a wonderful team to work with and ACBAR's steering committee was always a great support for our work. And I had the great pleasure to work with Mr. Mayar who joined ACBAR as deputy director shortly after I arrived. He was my rock during the six years I was the country director.

The NGOs went through some tough times, especially when Mr. Bashar Doust became Minister of Planning (later of Economy). For some reason he made NGOs his target. In one of his first public speeches he stated that NGOs did the same damage to the country as warlords were doing. His criticism was unrelenting, and the worst thing was that he refused any dialogue with NGO community on this. He also proposed an NGO law that would have made work for NGOs working in Afghanistan very difficult. Luckily joint advocacy of ACBAR, UNAMA and the other NGO coordinating bodies resulted in a more workable law. ACBAR was also successful in giving NGOs a voice in the discussions around aid effectiveness, corruption, transparency and accountability where the NGO community also had a hard look at its own practices and developed a Code of Conduct for NGOs working in Afghanistan

Sad enough NGO staff also became increasingly victims of Taliban and other armed groups that saw NGOs as legitimate soft targets. Many NGO workers lost their lives while working for the Afghan rural communities.

I consider the years I worked with ACBAR as the best years of my professional life, in spite of the fact that some of the hopes and expectations of those early days after the fall the Taliban were shattered. It taught me so much and I made friends for life. One of the most important things I taught me is the resilience of the Afghan people. They do not just survive difficulties, after each and every set back they rise up with their perseverance and humanity intact.

It is my opinion that ACBAR has the same resilience. Over the past 30 years it has its ups and downs but ACBAR manages to adapt and rise up to meet the new challenges of an ever changing environment.

Letter from Mr. Anders Fänge – “The beginnings of ACBAR”



How ACBAR began

It is difficult to remember the exact dates for events that took place 30 years ago, but checking my diary for 1988, I find the first note

mentioning ACBAR on the 11th of August. The writing says “09.30, ACBAR Steering Committee/IRC”, which reasonably must mean four things: One, that a Steering Committee meeting took place at the office of the International Rescue Committee in Peshawar; second, that a General Assembly meeting had occurred earlier where, three, a decision had been taken that the name of the organisation should be “Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief” and, four, a Steering Committee had been elected.

I have only vague memories of the election of the Steering Committee, in spite of the fact that I became the vice chairman. The memory of the name is clearer. The General Assembly meeting was in the dining hall at Dean’s Hotel in Saddar Bazaar, Peshawar, and the proposal that the name should be ACBAR was forwarded by a member of the French NGO, Guide du Raid (later “Solidarity International, Afghanistan”) and was quickly accepted by a great majority. I actually don’t remember if anyone voted against.

If the recollections of the exact events are rather diffuse, my memory of the overall situation and the events that led to the establishment of ACBAR is more distinct.

When multitudes of Afghan refugees arrived in Pakistan 1979 and the following years due to the war in Afghanistan, UN agencies and NGOs became engaged in humanitarian assistance works. The majority of the NGOs worked with the refugees while a handful started cross-border work from Pakistan in the rural areas of Afghanistan which were more or less under the control of the Mujahideen, the resistance movement against the Soviet invasion forces and the Kabul government. UN had a marginal presence in Afghanistan, mainly limited to Kabul and a few other bigger cities and was not involved in the cross-border work.

In April 1988 the Geneva Accords was agreed upon in which it was stipulated that the Soviet military forces should have left Afghanistan by the 15th of February 1989. Although the war, as we sadly know, didn’t end, the Accords nevertheless brought hopes of peace, and the international donor community showed a considerably increased willingness to fund humanitarian and rehabilitation work in Afghanistan.

The Geneva Accords included an agreement that under UN auspices, the international community should undertake a substantial programme of relief and rehabilitation in all areas of Afghanistan. The immediate result became the creation of the UN Office of the Coordinator for Afghanistan (UNOCA) under the leadership of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, and the different UN agencies started to make plans on how to start up programmes in Afghanistan.

Also for the NGO community the Accords signified changes. For those that so far had worked exclusively with refugees, the doors to Afghanistan had opened,

where the needs after ten years of war were enormous. Many begun to explore the possibilities of starting projects in Afghanistan, and meetings and discussions took place between them and the cross-border NGOs that already had experience of working in Afghanistan. And the other way around, refugee NGOs were familiar with UN Agencies; a know-how which their cross-border colleagues most often did not have. There were several coordination attempts among the NGOs prior to ACBAR but they were either too specialized, like covering only one sector, or too informal, like only providing an opportunity to meet and discuss.

The events that led to the creation of ACBAR were, above all, the NGOs' relation with UNOCA. The need for improved coordination between the NGOs themselves and between UN and the NGOs was generally recognized. Within the cross-border NGO group, there was also a broadly held view that UNOCA and the UN agencies could learn from the experience of NGOs in cross-border programmes and not the least benefit from their extensive networks in the rural areas. While UN agencies usually worked in support of and through central governments, operating in the Mujahideen-held areas would involve dealing with hundreds of local counterparts in the fragmented resistance movement.

During the UN Coordinator's, Sadruddin Aga Khan, first visit to Peshawar, he was several hours late to a meeting with a big number of NGO representatives at Dean's Hotel and then he, when he finally arrived, merely informed the NGOs on the grand plans being prepared within the UN system. A few questions were allowed but no time for discussion, and the impression was created that UNOCA had little interest in learning from their experience, and that NGOs would have little opportunity to contribute to or even comment upon the ambitious relief and repatriation plans being coordinated by UNOCA.

Shortly after the Coordinator's visit, it became known that UNOCA had requested the International Council of Voluntary Agencies in Geneva to take on the responsibility of coordinating the NGOs. Since the NGOs had not been consulted, this caused considerable resentment. It was perceived as another example of UN arrogance vis-à-vis the NGOs, and at meetings in Peshawar, many NGO representatives voiced the opinion that "if anyone should coordinate us, it should be ourselves". Or in other words, among the NGOs there was a clear preference for a 'home grown' approach to coordination rather than an externally forced solution. This led to the holding of more preparatory meetings and finally to the establishment of ACBAR.

In the following years up to 2001, ACBAR's relation with the UN became better, mainly because it was realised that the NGOs and thus ACBAR were central to the humanitarian assistance work in Afghanistan. The political movements and factions that formed the different Afghan governments were mainly occupied by warfare and had little, if any, time and resources to care for the Afghan people with the result that NGOs were the principal actors in providing social and other services to the Afghan people. The ACBAR secretariat and sub-committees were busy with coordinating projects in Afghanistan and setting standards in the different sectors. ACBAR was represented in different coordination bodies like the Afghanistan Support Group and the Afghanistan Programming Body together with donors and UN. It published reports and participated as an important actor in international conferences. The Afghanistan Resource and Information Center (from 2005 the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University) under the leadership of the late Nancy Dupree was created within the ACBAR framework and became a principal collection of information, reports and surveys generated by NGOs, bilateral humanitarian organizations, researchers and UN agencies.

To go back to my personal recollections, there are of course a lot from the years in the 1980s and 90s. The discussions and sometimes stormy debates at Steering Committee and General Assembly meetings and at different conferences; the first UN conference on assistance to Afghanistan in Geneva in the autumn of 1988; the six-weeks journey to 13 different countries that Sultan Aziz and I undertook in 1990 advocating for continued funding of the humanitarian work in Afghanistan; negotiations with the Taliban government; ups and downs, successes and both

internal and external problems and difficulties and, not the least many good memories of colleagues and friends in the different Steering Committees and among the NGOs.

The events in the autumn of 2001 brought a radical change to Afghanistan – not only in the political domain but also in the fields of humanitarian and development support. For the first time in more than 20 years, Afghanistan had a government which was recognized and supported by the international community, and which had the expressed ambition to build a modern state. Kabul saw a huge influx of embassies, UN Agencies as well as other bi- and multilateral donor and development institutions. Also the NGOs and ACBAR moved their central offices to Kabul and had now to face the new situation. As someone said, in the 1980s and 90s, NGOs had been on the first row when it came to questions about assistance to Afghanistan, but after 2001 they, and thus ACBAR, were demoted to the third, since the principal chairs were now occupied by the Afghan government and the international donor community.

Consequently ACBAR had to adapt and that process took the organisation from only dealing with coordination of NGOs to work in the broader context of advocacy, policy and development issues. ACBAR's achievements with regard to the NGO law, the Code of Conduct and papers like the "Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan" from 2008 are undoubtedly highlights in this work.

Anders Fänge was the Country Director of the Swedish Committee in different periods between 1983 and 2011. He is a "founding father" of ACBAR and has been a member of the ACBAR Steering Committee 1988 to 1990, 1998 to 2001 and 2007 to 2011.

Letter from Ms. Lisa Laumann – "Memories of challenging and rewarding times"



I have many fond thoughts and also some memories of challenging times at ACBAR. Representing Save the Children in ACBAR was a great experience for me, personally and professionally. When I joined Save the Children as Deputy Country Director in 2000, it was wonderful to reconnect with colleagues I had known earlier while working with IRC in 1991-93 and so interesting to see how their organizations, particularly the Afghan NGOs, had developed in the years since and how the

NGO community in general had evolved. I felt, and still feel, that I learned so much from all the membership, and especially from the members of the Steering Committees and working groups on which I sat. I have, on more than one occasion, shared the ACBAR statutes with people engaged in NGO coordination in other countries. And occasionally I visit the ACBAR website to see what's going on.

I distinctly remember getting into the back seat of the car in Islamabad with a pile of work, and working all the way along the Grand Trunk Road to Peshawar. This happened on a regular basis during the no-Executive Director period at ACBAR in 2001. I was the Treasurer but I had to have a proxy signing checks since I wasn't based in Peshawar. ACBAR members paid membership

fees, but other funding sources had dried up, so the Steering Committee members divided up the Executive Coordinator functions. I also remember Ian Purves, whom Oxfam had hired as post-9/11 communications/advocacy coordinator on behalf of ACBAR, telling us that our familiar NGO world was about to change more than we were possibly prepared for - and it did.

I recall receiving a harsh verbal set-down from an important Afghan minister during a public meeting when I tried to counter his very critical comments about NGOs with my own about NGO professionalism and good work. And I remember so many meetings and workshops aimed at pulling together thoughts and ideas about how NGOs in Afghanistan should move forward.

I eventually stepped down from the Steering Committee to encourage new faces, but I continued to participate in ACBAR itself. When I left Afghanistan for Indonesia in mid-2005, I made an effort to clean out my computer, sort through my electronic documents and keep ones that I wanted to look at again, think about and refer back to (and maybe keep forever!). This included an ACBAR folder.

Here's what I saved on July 7, 2005, and still have:

1. An Advocacy folder that contains drafts of statements, speeches, and position papers—what are NGOs (we are not money grubbers!)? What should PRTs do (no harm? Focus on security!)? How can we/should we coordinate nationally and regionally with government and how can we obtain project approval? What should the government do about housing costs and salaries?

2. A folder on ANSO (now INSO)

3. A folder on Code of Conduct with a draft of a document section trying to capture some of the history of NGO activity in Afghanistan (with the editorial notation “HELP” scattered throughout), some code of conduct examples and a document password-encoded by Paul Barker of CARE for which I no longer have the password.

4. A folder on Executive Coordinator—SCF hosted Executive Coordinator contracts for two Executive Coordinators during my tenure.

5. A folder on NGO legislation with commentary from ICNL and notes for use in discussion addressing particular clauses, concerns about them and recommendations.

6. The text of the NGO statement at the IG meeting on October 13, 2012

7. A folder with small group discussion plans for a meeting with government and drafts of NGO-legislation-related speeches by Raziq Samadi, Chair of ACBAR, and Asila Wardak, Chair of ANCB.

8. A folder on Statutes of Operation—of course! And Roberts Rules of Order.

9. A folder with TORs for working groups, a memo from Acting Chair Fiona Gall apologizing for the short notice for a Steering Committee meeting and transmitting the minutes, in which two absent people, including me, were nominated for SC jobs—a sneaky, but effective strategy—and which discussed the unending topic of office space and rent, among other topics a contact list.

I may purge some of those documents, but I'll keep most of them. More than one has been a reference in subsequent years. They transport me back to important people and events. They're

also a good reminder of why we, as NGO workers, choose to do what we do, why and how organizations set and maintain standards, why we are willing to put effort into coordination and what that work actually looks like.

Lisa Laumann was Steering Committee Member and Treasurer from 2000 until 2004.

Letter from Ms. Barbara J. Stapleton – “Establishing Afghan ownership to development projects is pivotal”



I flew into Kabul in early September 2002, on the same flight as Muhammad Ali no less, and started a direct engagement in Afghanistan that was to last until I finally left Kabul in 2011.

I had come out to conduct field research for the (then) British Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG) on rumoured extensions by international forces in civil military activities there. During my stay I was approached by the new director of ACBAR, Rafael Robillard, on a position just funded by OSI for an international coordinator of

advocacy and policy. The funding for this position - I learnt later - had been won by ACBAR's current director, Fiona Gall.

I returned to London in October and my husband - who had worked extensively on training programmes for Afghan female refugees in Peshawar from the mid-1980s - encouraged me to go ahead. My paper, the first extensive research into what became known as PRTs (Provincial Reconstruction Teams), was published in January 2003 and shortly afterwards I returned to Kabul and ACBAR. See attached link for PRT article: <http://www.acbar.org/upload/1539584287597.doc>

It was an exciting time to be representing and shaping the policy of the 90+ international and national non-profit NGOs that made up ACBAR. There were immediate and significant challenges including developing an NGO code of practice and assisting the Afghan government on the development of a legal framework for NGOs. In these endeavours the guidance and experience of ACBAR's deputy director, Mr Mayar, was invaluable, as was the input of Afghan and international NGO staff.

Many NGOs represented by ACBAR had decades of experience working throughout Afghanistan yet their hard-won perspectives on sustainable development there, garnered through trial and error over time, had little impact on international development approaches during the crucial early years of the US-led intervention. Central messages on the time involved, that establishing Afghan ownership to development projects is pivotal and that effective monitoring and evaluation is mandatory, were in practice largely ignored or marginalised as the deteriorating security situation militated against such niceties, combined with an intensifying international demand for immediate results on the ground.

The development side of the intervention was significantly under-funded during the period I worked for ACBAR (2003-2005). Afghanistan received one-fifth of the equivalent funding per capita for post-conflict reconstruction than had been the case for post-conflict reconstruction in Bosnia. A fact that ACBAR and its member agencies amplified at the time. We also questioned from the outset the validity of the international community's assertion that Afghanistan was in a post-conflict phase.

By 2003 international NGO staff was already being pulled out of the south-west of the country. Early hopes that 'needs based' development approaches could be enabled by the regional expansion of UN- mandated international peace-keeping forces while professional Afghan security forces were built up, (as envisaged in the Bonn Agreement), withered. Instead, a gradual roll out of Provincial Reconstruction Teams became the channel for internationally funded development beyond Kabul controversially bypassing the Afghan government and setting up a parallel development process. This was much criticised at the time by the current President, Ashraf Ghani.

The PRT plan was promoted both in the capitals of NATO member states and in Afghanistan as critical to facilitating tangible results in reconstruction and development and in so doing, stabilising the country. Unsurprisingly, given the steadily worsening security situation inside Afghanistan and pressure for results from leading donors, international aid (with some notable exceptions) became increasingly tied to the political and military objectives of the US-led intervention. The assumed linkage between development and security would only be rigorously challenged years later.

The roll out of the PRT plan placed Afghanistan at the forefront of an increasing securitisation of aid that flew in the face of the core humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. As the PRT plan was going to go ahead with or without them, some NGOs decided to engage in policy discussions in an attempt to influence PRT approaches. This process was led in Kabul by ACBAR with the objectives of limiting effects viewed as harmful to NGO security and to the future operational capacity of NGOs, given the uncertainty of Afghanistan's political future.

I left ACBAR in December 2005, returning to Afghanistan the following May to join the small political office of the EU Special Representative, Francesc Vendrell. My three years with ACBAR stand out for the issues covered, the challenges faced and being the beneficiary of informed perspectives from Afghan and international colleagues, but most of all for the sense of hope we all shared for a brighter future.

Barbara J. Stapleton was the Advocacy Manager from 2003 until 2005.

Anniversary NGO Seminar 24 September 2018



On Monday 24 September ACBAR commemorate 30 years of existence as a coordinating body with NGO colleagues and university students at Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (ACKU). Fiona Gall, Director of ACBAR, welcomed the participants and then two panels of invited speakers presented lively views on the past, present and future on the role of NGOs in Afghanistan.

Looking back – the work of NGOs in the last 30 years



The first panel looked back on the assistance NGOs had provided for the Afghan people to overcome suffering from conflict and disasters. Chair of ACBAR, Ms. Palwasha Hassan said that Afghans had been seriously affected by the conflict in the last four decades and this had especially impacted on the youth in Afghanistan resulting in lack of opportunities. NGOs had made efforts to mitigate the effects of war by working structurally for example by working in remote areas and by developing the leadership of

women. Mr. Amanullah Jawad, Deputy Director of RRAA, highlighted the active role of NGOs in humanitarian and development sectors in capacity building of local communities and delivering vital services. NGOs were also an important link between the UN agencies and Afghan government to make policy and implementation solutions. Mr. Raz Mohammad Dalili, Director of SDO, emphasized that the characteristics of NGOs are non-profit, Non-Government and non-political. He urged the students to be innovative and establish their own NGOs within the NGO Law. Transparency and accountability are the core building blocks of NGOs; they are essential for NGOs to achieve principled work. Mr. Fazel Rabi Haqbeen, Director of TEO, noted that while insecurity continued to be an increasing problem, NGOs had an advantage as they were able to access areas where Government could not go to respond to the needs of the people. Challenges faced by NGOs included increased bureaucracy; while the Government was engaged in state-building and increased control, this also caused impediments to efficient delivery of NGO activities.

Looking forward – the role of NGOs in the future



The second panel focused on the future and was introduced by Mr. Tamim Sabri, Deputy Director of ACBAR. Ms. Najiba Sangar, SCA Takhar Regional Manager, had a clear message on how the role of NGOs should be empowered and to focus on developing Afghanistan in an integrated

manner instead of working within humanitarian and development silos. There is a need for strategic coordination between the Afghan government, UN agencies, donor states and NGOs. For example, an integrated approach of services should be delivered in each area with an analysis of the challenges there and the tangible solutions. Ms. Mahpekay, Deputy Director of KOO, stated that there were not enough facilities for people with disabilities to give everyone an opportunity in life. She was personally inspired by NGOs to work hard after she became disabled by the conflict, and to completed her higher education and got a Master's degree. Now, she is passing her knowledge and skills to empower those affected by the conflict and hardships of life in order to work towards a more equal society. Mr. Javid Mousavi, NAC, talked about the lack of employment opportunities for the youth, when they graduate from universities, there are no jobs. There was a need for long term and short term programs to build their capacities, also scholarships were a tool to educate young people. He mentioned that including young people in higher-level decision making processes was crucial because it was the future of youth that was at stake. Ms. Mina Safi, NAC, continued the message that there was a great lack of involvement of youth in general policy and decision-making processes. There was also a lack of quality in the education sector and inequality in society that affected everybody. She noted that poverty was one of the root causes that made the youth stay illiterate and that there should be more effective programs for the youth to empower their capacities and skills so that they could create the lives that they deserved.

Speech Anniversary Seminar 24 September 2018

ACBAR 30 Years Anniversary, Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU)



I would like to welcome all our guests today to this 30th anniversary – NGO friends and colleagues, students and teachers from the University. It is very fitting that we are holding this event in ACKU which was founded by Mrs. Nancy Hatch Dupree who sadly died just over one year ago. Nancy was responsible for setting up and directing the ACBAR Resource and Information Centre (ARIC) in our office in Peshawar in Pakistan. The Information Centre separated from ACBAR in 2005 and is now ACKU and has become this important research

library and conference centre in the University of Kabul today.

Agency Coordination Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR) was created by a group of NGOs in Peshawar, Pakistan in August 1988 to provide better coordination among NGOs for the humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan and in the refugee camps in Pakistan. By the end of 1989 we had 58 NGO members – international and national. Regular meetings were held to have better information on activities in each province in Afghanistan and also meetings by sector – to ensure there were similar standards of work.

ACBAR was set up as a membership organisation with a democratic structure – we have annual elections among the members to appoint a Chairperson and Steering Committee who advise and

monitor the staff working in the secretariat and report to the General Assembly of all members held twice a year. NGOs can become members once they have completed the application process and are voted in by a majority of members in the General Assembly. We ask all our NGO members to sign a Code of Conduct which includes principles of accountability and transparency to donors and Government as well as our beneficiaries.

Today we have 146 NGO members (76 national and 70 international). Our members work in 350 out of 420 districts in all 34 provinces and in 13 different sectors including education, health, emergency relief, women and gender, livelihoods, disability, environment, wash, nutrition and rights, peace and governance. The total number of staff employed by ACBAR NGO members is 38,656 (71% men and 29% women).

ACBAR's website provides information on ACBAR and its members and related stakeholders as well as a job page which is very well known in Afghanistan.

The objective of our meeting today is to review some of the achievements of NGOs as party of civil society in the last 30 years – what have we done, what do we represent and what have been our challenges. This will be discussed by our first panel of guest speakers. The second panel will look to the future and give us their ideas of what can be the role of NGOs as Afghanistan moves forward in the next 30 years. Today we have many difficulties to face in Afghanistan – the war continues, poverty is increasing and climate change is affecting the country as in many parts of the world. On the positive side, however, we have a young and more educated population emerging; so we need to see as NGOs, how we can contribute to the future development of the country.

Thank you to all of our NGO members for their continued support over the years and of course to all our donors.

ACBAR Commemoration Events in the Provinces

As part of ACBAR's anniversary, three round tables were held in the regional offices of Herat, Mazar-i-Sherif and Kunduz during September 2018. Achievements and challenges were highlighted, also the potential future role of NGOs in Afghanistan. Each gathering ended with a small celebration.

Anniversary Round Table in Herat



On 4 September 2018 there was a vivid discussion among NGOs. The long, rich history of NGOs in Afghanistan was highlighted by Eng. Abdul Raziq Kiani, Regional Director of DACAAR. He noted that NGOs had played a critical and historical role in providing humanitarian and development services for the Afghan people. NGOs did most of the work because there was no functioning government before 2001 and implemented programs on

health, education and humanitarian needs. After the fall of the Taliban, NGOs exceedingly added value in implementing governmental programs such as Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS) in the health sector with the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH). Despite more insecurity, weak governance structure and corruption, NGOs did make a change in bringing health services to the rural areas, investing in teachers capacity, making society aware of the status of women and the benefits of empowering women and developing Afghan civil society as well as more recently lessening the negative effects of crisis like returnees and drought.

Mr. Said Wase Sayedi, Director of WASSA, stated that the future of the NGOs depends on NGOs becoming more financially self-reliant and to act more like social entrepreneurs instead of being dependent on external funding. This is a large challenge that needs multiple networking and other creative ideas. The linkage between humanitarian and development programs is also crucial in this, added Eng. Abdul Raziq Kiani. Ms. Zahra Hamnabard, Head of WAW, said that the inclusion of youth, women via the UN resolution 1325 and persons with disabilities is fundamental for NGOs to develop Afghanistan as a better society. NGOs should still focus on providing facilities for marginalized groups by ensuring for example by hiring at least 3% persons with disabilities to give people a professional chance.

Anniversary Round Table in Mazar-i-Sherif



On 5th September 2018 ACBAR members, CSOs, professors, students and Government officers had a debate on the role of NGOs. ACBAR's regional manager Mr. Eng. Abdul Rauf Qaderi gave background on the establishment of ACBAR in the eighties.

Ms. Hafiza Merzaye, Chair of ACBAR's Advisory Board, said that NGOs had played an important role to provide services in hard-to-reach areas in order to save lives of thousands of deprived people. NGOs were flexible and impartial and also driven to fulfill the needs of people and support the development of Afghanistan. NGOs had created a lot of job opportunities which was appreciated. Now the cooperation between the Afghan Government and NGOs was becoming more and more constructive and accountability and transparency were part of the governance culture. Mr. Najibullah Yazdanpanah, Regional Director of SCA, highlighted the important responsibility of NGOs to include marginalized groups in all projects and in Afghan society. SCA was proud that more persons with disabilities and women have been empowered to participate in the labor market.

Eng. Sharafat, Director of Economy Department of Balkh province, stated that ACBAR had played a central role to advocate for governance issues and also to advertise jobs through their popular job vacancy website. He also gives the advice that NGOs should focus on primary needs of people and design their projects based on the need of people and suggested that ACBAR should celebrate the anniversary every year to have a societal discussion on the role of NGOs

Anniversary Round Table in Kunduz City



On 23 September 2018 a round table was held in Kunduz to discuss the role of NGOs in Afghanistan. Mr. Mohammad Tahir Rozzi, Kunduz Economy Directorate, noted that during the period of the Soviet aggression and Taliban many NGOs were based in Pakistan and provided support to the people within the country. He identified one of the biggest achievements of NGOs was in the Education sector and in bringing education opportunities to the rural areas.

Mr. Engineer Shafiq Imran, Regional Director of ACTED, stated that NGOs and Governmental offices were two faces of the same coin; both hope for transparency and accountability from each other. In times of conflict, the role of NGOs in humanitarian sectors is crucial to deliver emergency services to people in need. The situation is not getting better with lack of security and natural disasters like drought combined with displacement. Therefore there should be effective coordination between development and humanitarian programs. For example, when agriculture programs are implemented, they should also integrate the role of IDPs to provide them livelihoods.

There was also consensus that youth, women and people with disabilities can play a significant role in the rehabilitation and development of Afghanistan. Fortunately, there are now more opportunities for women, not only as potential employees but also in special programs for the empowerment of women.

ACBAR Members 2018

Humanitarian, Development and Peacebuilding Activities



ACBAR has 146 National and International NGO members: 141 members reported at the beginning of 2018, that they are working in 11 sectors in 34 provinces and 350 out of 378 districts. In total: 38,656 individuals are working in 141 NGOs of which 27,652 are men and 10,604 are women staff.