Perception Change of NGOs in Afghanistan: The Next Step
By Kenji Saito (First Secretary of the Embassy of Japan in Afghanistan)

Foreword

Ironically, a mass sacrifice in the United States on September 11, 2001 had to take place for Afghanistan to attract the attention of the international community. Four years have passed. New Afghanistan has launched its steady voyage under President Hamid Karzai's administration with a favorable wind of international assistance.

Given the need for complete reconstruction, the country has made remarkable progress in establishing a new society, a new economy, and new policies in just four years. National leaders and the international community now share the recognition that Afghanistan has overcome the initial phase of tackling immediate humanitarian needs. Nevertheless, as it was ranked 173rd out of 178 nations in the Humanitarian Development Index 2004 of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Afghan government still has a long journey ahead to realize sustainable development.

In addition to the progress occurring in different sectors, the attitude of the Afghan people has evolved. In this article, I will focus on the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) sector, which has played a vital role in the initial reconstruction of Afghanistan to date. I will try to analyze how the Afghan perceive these NGOs’ activities and determine why there has been change so we may better understand their influence on Afghanistan’s future.

There is no one agreed definition of NGO. I will hereby use the word to signify a non-governmental, non-political, and non-profit organization which aims to pursue social welfare based on its own charter. I will begin with a brief history of NGO enrollment in the Afghan community and the development of NGO laws. Based on these, I will then examine the Afghan perceptions of NGOs and causes for their change. In conclusion, with reference to Japanese aid policies, I will show the lessons learned for a better future for the NGO sector, the Afghan government, and the donor communities.

The content of this article is based on the personal opinion of the author, who has been serving as First Secretary of the Embassy of Japan in Afghanistan since late 2001. It does not represent the official viewpoint of the Japanese government.

NGO Enrollment in Afghan Development

It was after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when many people poured into neighboring countries as refugees, that the name NGO was popularized among the Afghan people. Protection efforts taken by these countries were generally limited because those Afghan people were not recognized as genuine refugees according to international law. It was only the NGO sector which could extend
supplemental assistance to them. Initially, there were only international NGOs which were active in the camps. Gradually, those Afghans who learned to speak English joined the international NGOs and came to understand the NGO function, which provided a variety of public services on behalf of the government.

The 1989 Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was indeed impressive. Regrettably, the attention of the international community, with the exception of the NGOs, did not extend beyond this historic moment. Several years of internal conflict ensued among the local warlords who had once fought together against the Soviets. Many Afghan NGOs were barely established in the refugee camps. Yet they also began to extend relief activities and social services in areas within Afghanistan where local governments were unable. More than 200 international and Afghan NGOs were reported to be active by 1992.

Even under the Taliban regime which began in 1994, the NGOs were the reliable aid providers. However, with an increasing tendency towards Islamic extremism, the Taliban government's impression of the NGOs changed: they were now perceived to be spies of the West. In 1998 the government began expelling international aid agencies, including the United Nations (UN), from Afghanistan.

The demise of the Taliban regime in late 2001 attracted the international community's attention again. Many existing and newly created NGOs rushed into Afghanistan with huge donor funds. By the end of 2004, more than 1,900 NGOs were officially registered. Of these, according to a World Bank report, there are currently about 40 sizable NGOs whose annual spending exceeds $1 million each.

According to the Afghan transitional government’s 2003 report, NGOs handled 63.4% of the total grants received by the government between January 2002 and March 2003. By initiating a variety of activities from emergency to early reconstruction, the NGO sector has flourished as a gigantic industry unto itself in Afghanistan.

2. The Process to Establish the New NGO Law

The regulation of NGO activities has at least 10 years of history in Afghanistan, including the Taliban government’s June 2000 revision. Although the regulation should have been rendered invalid with the collapse of the Taliban regime, all NGOs were expected to continue to respect it under the new era. The Ministry of Planning, which had survived from the Taliban period, continued to serve as the responsible ministry for NGO issues.

The Afghan transitional government established a committee in 2002, which consisted of the Ministers of Planning, Justice, Foreign Affairs, and Rural Rehabilitation and Development and ordered
the NGO regulation to be revised. The draft was made and submitted to the cabinet. However, it was never approved. Some NGO people say that it was because they could not agree which ministry would take responsibility for the NGOs and enjoy the numerous bribes from what was a lucrative industry.

In March 2004, Dr. Ramazan Bashardoust took over the post of Minister of Planning. He was very worried about relying on NGOs which he believed were misusing donor funds to rebuild the country. He was the first politician who officially revealed a negative attitude against the NGOs. He described the work of the NGOs in Afghanistan as ‘economic terrorism’ and said they were not helping the reconstruction efforts. In December 2004, he suddenly attempted to cancel all of the 1,935 NGO registrations. This proposal was rejected by President Karzai and Minister Bashardoust was obliged to resign from his post. Soon after his resignation, the Ministry of Planning was integrated into the newly established Ministry of Economy. Mr. Mir Mohammad Amin Farhang was appointed as the Minister.

Dr. Bashardoust has been the leader of a massive anti-NGO propaganda effort since then. His negative campaign has been delivered through the media repeatedly. Research published by the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) in December 2004 revealed a trend in Afghanistan: positive opinions about NGOs were shared among the illiterate and poor populations and a negative image was popular among the educated and informed populations. However, since then, the negative perception against NGOs has steadily spread among the entire Afghan public.

As the situation became worse, President Karzai had to take the initiative in addressing counter-measures against the NGOs. He officially expressed his concern about the collapse of the NGOs at a meeting with the donor communities in April 2005, saying “the Afghan government is basically against NGO.” He subsequently announced an action plan for establishing a new NGO law and called for major donor representatives to assist him by participating in an advisory group.

The donor advisory group met several times between April and May 2005. The main dispute was Clause 8 of Article 8, which would regulate NGOs’ participation in construction works. It was originally drafted as “an NGO shall not participate in bidding.” The idea behind this Article is that competition between NGOs and private companies is unjust because NGOs are exempt from tax and customs duties. Eventually, the Law of Local and International Non-Governmental Organization came into effect in June 2005 and the final version of the above mentioned clause was as follows: “(One of the illegal activities of a NGO is) to participate in construction contracts. In exceptional cases, the Minister of Economy may issue permission based on a request from the diplomatic mission chief of the donor country.”

The Afghan media, in general, has reported the establishment of the new NGO law favorably. For example, Anis Daily Newspaper (in Dari) carried the following article on August 17, 2005:

“By prohibiting NGOs’ participation in construction work, it will eliminate problems of
joblessness, poverty, homelessness and other social, health, education problems as well as prevent the misuse of funds and their transfers to foreign banks. (Author’s Note: This newspaper simply lays the blame on the NGOs for all troubles without ground.) It will also prevent national and international NGOs from paying (inappropriately) high salaries to local and foreign workers. It is a good step to improve transparency and purge the distrust surrounding NGO affairs. We hope that the regulation will override inappropriate personal relationships like corruption and nepotism.”

3. Analysis of the Perception Change among the Afghan People

It is not an exaggeration to say that, without the help of NGOs, the current reconstruction of Afghanistan would not have been achieved politically, socially, or economically. Many Afghan youths with English and computer capabilities joined international NGOs and UN agencies and their accumulated career skills contributed to rebuilding their devastated country. Given the limited capacity and capability of both the central and local governments, NGOs have been the valuable bodies available to practically provide the necessary services as the implementing partner of donors.

Though everyone admits the fact that the NGOs have played an essential role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, the perception of the Afghan people about NGOs has changed. I would like to point out four reasons.

The first issue addresses the improvement of the physical and democratic circumstances surrounding the Afghan people. At the International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan, which was held in Tokyo in January 2002, the donor community pledged $4.5 billion to address the immediate needs of Afghanistan. In those days, there were huge demands for emergency and humanitarian aid throughout the country. Due to the initial intensive assistance, both the donor community and the Afghan government came to believe the emergency phase was over. At the Afghanistan Development Forum in April 2005, Professor M. Ishaq Nadiri, Senior Economic Advisor to the President, said “in the early years of our reconstruction effort, we have been preoccupied with emergency response and capacity subsistence. We must make the transition to long-term development thinking.” The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data shows that 3 million refugees returned to Afghanistan between March 2002 and March 2005. As people emerged from a crisis of basic substance to an atmosphere of peace and democracy, they have grown to be able to think and speak freely about their society and the government. The media is one of the sectors most affected by the democratization process. When negative opinions against the NGOs appeared in the media, I often heard positive comments from some NGO representatives, saying “this is a good example that Afghan people have come to understand what democracy is.” I see that many Afghan people, after hearing the words of Dr. Bashardoust, have come to think “what used to be a feeling is now a certainty” and speak out without any fear of repercussions.
The second point is that four years of reconstruction efforts have not been visible enough for the Afghan people, particularly in the rural areas, to believe progress is being made. Large amounts of assistance have been distributed to invisible and non-sustainable sectors, including humanitarian aid, government operations, and support for political and security reforms. The Afghan government insisted in the Securing Afghanistan Future, a strategic document published in March 2004, that more than 50% of the development budget should go towards infrastructure. President Karzai has also constantly emphasized the need for road construction as a top priority since he took the national initiative in late 2001. However, as of September 2005, even the rehabilitation of the 2,300 km long super corridor, the major transportation route for the country, has been only half completed. While many schools, clinics and irrigation systems have been constructed, there has been no systematic plan, so the local population remains uneasy. They have become suspicious about how such a huge pledge amount from the international community was spent. NGO personnel who travel around with new land cruisers and hold high salaried positions only exacerbated the distrust.

Thirdly, there have been many examples of poor construction quality. The media reports that government ministers, upon visiting school or road construction sites, have ordered some projects stopped because of their poor building standards. I am not sure if the works were actually implemented under the supervision of NGOs, private companies, or the local governments. In fact, the inability to distinguish between NGOs and private companies is as confusing for the government officials as it is for the local people. I suspect it is because the NGOs have played such an essential role in delivering social services for so long that many people have come to presume all service providers are NGOs. Therefore, while I often hear complaints of poor construction quality by NGOs, the truth of the matter is there has been no effort to determine whether the quality of work done by the private sector or local government is any better than the NGOs.

My fourth point stresses the recent change of the Afghan government’s development strategy. The goal of the current Afghan government is private-sector led economic growth. To achieve this, it focuses on the rehabilitation of the infrastructure and the development of human and institutional capability. The new regulation to prohibit NGO enrollment in construction works can be argued as in line with this strategy. The government officials firmly believe that the private sector is the engine for sustainable economic growth. In spite of the shared opinions among the donor communities that the limited ability of the government institutions and the fragile economic infrastructure are more serious than the inefficiency of NGO activities, the government dared to pull the NGOs away from the mainstream of future reconstruction activities. Throughout the movement, I can see a strong determination of the Afghan government to shift its driving force from ‘reliance on others’ to a ‘self reliance’ approach.

4. Lessons Learned for an Improved Future
Here are the lessons learned from the experience of Afghanistan.

i) For the donor communities

It is interesting to see the situation of Afghanistan from a Japanese viewpoint. The Japanese approach to foreign development assistance is based on a firm belief, from its own experience after World War II, that development assistance should support the self-help effort of developing countries. This uniqueness will explain the fact that, compared to the Western countries, the loan component share is much larger in the total Official Development Assistance (ODA). This philosophy is also consistent with the grant assistance through NGOs. A typical scheme is the Grant Assistance for Grassroots Project (GAGP). GAGP does not support the costs for administration and contingencies. It is required that some burden should be borne by the recipient side (NGO or local community) so that it can understand the project belongs to itself and thereby develop a sense of ownership. This idea has so far been effective even in Afghanistan. GAGP has earned a high reputation from the local communities, NGOs, and the Afghan government for its quality and quick impact. As of September 2005, according to the Embassy of Japan in Afghanistan, 451 projects, including the construction of schools, clinics, irrigation systems, and protection walls as well as the provision of equipment and vocational training have been implemented. There were 187 NGOs as implementing partners, out of which 165 were Afghan. Considering the effectiveness of this program, the Afghan government has accepted the continuation of GAGP as an exceptional case of Article 8 of the new NGO law.

This approach is not common among donor communities. Many Western donors use a contract form, as opposed to grant or donation, for development projects implemented by NGOs. This type of contract basically allows the costs for administration and contingencies. Furthermore, these donors prefer to make contracts with international NGOs. It is a common practice for an international NGO to enter into a subcontract with a reliable Afghan NGO and then the latter creates a further subcontract with its umbrella NGOs. By deducting a commission at each subcontract stage in the name of administration cost, the final amount to reach end beneficiaries becomes very small. The situation naturally results in a poorer quality of services. This is one of the reasons the Afghan government feels suspicious about the ineffectiveness of project implementation through NGOs. The experience in Afghanistan may cause enough of a commotion in the donor communities for them to reconsider the efficiency and effectiveness of their aid schemes.

ii) For the Afghan government

The structure of the Afghan government is still so fragile that it is not ready to provide full social services on behalf of the NGOs. The Minister has full influence on the policy decision; however the content and its background are rarely shared among relevant departments within the ministry. It is no wonder that provincial and district level government officials are not well-informed. This situation often causes confusion particularly in the NGO's field operations. The Afghan government as well as the media and the general public simply expect that many capable NGO staff will return to the
government once they give up re-registration as an NGO under the new NGO law. But this is too optimistic. The salary level of a government official ($40 to $50 per month) is almost one tenth of that of an NGO employee (and far less than that of UN agency personnel). Moreover, the current economic situation surrounding the infrastructure does not allow business opportunities to develop very rapidly. So for the time being, the government should really be concerned about their brain drain to foreign countries.

The Afghan government pays less attention to or misunderstands many key components of genuine NGO activities, one of which is the involvement of local communities in the project cycle. In the case of a commercial contract with a private company, the local people tend to pay little attention to the maintenance because they are not involved in the project planning and implementation processes. In addition, as the mission of private sector is to earn profit, the companies prefer to employ cheaper labor from neighboring countries, which may cause a hitch within the Afghan labor market. (The symptom is already seen in road construction works.) The other point is about profit gained through NGO activities. It is widely acknowledged that a NGO can produce profit as long as it will be used for the NGO’s original objectives. But many Afghan people, particularly among the intellectual population, presume the professional NGO should be treated like a volunteer group and thereby be denied any monetary gain.

It should be noted that at the beginning of the reconstruction period, many NGOs were burdened with an aid fund beyond their capacities. The situation led many people to be misguided and tarnished the virtue of the NGOs. However, we should not presume that all NGOs are ineffective and useless. The Afghan government is expected to understand this and provide an environment for each sector to maximize its capability. I do not believe that the current tendency among the Afghan people to reject much of NGO activities will last long. I am more worried that a new corruption may spread among government authorities as a result of certain gigantic private companies, mostly construction enterprises, being treated warmly by the government. The situation surrounding the economic development of Afghanistan will inevitably require the help of genuine NGOs in the near future again. At that time, everyone will need to understand that the government and the NGO are not mutually exclusive but are meant to exist together.

iii) For the NGO community

The NGO sector needs to work harder to get support from the local community and the government. Many NGOs tend to pay more attention trying to meet the donors’ requirements than the needs of the local community and government. For example, when I visit GAGP construction sites for a monitoring and handing over ceremony, I am often surrounded by community representatives who ask if the NGOs really accomplished those projects according to the originally approved budget. It is true that our limited budget often can not absorb all of their needs in a project. But this kind of experience reveals that the NGO has not been diligent in explaining the details of the project to the local community. It is
easy to imagine how a small misunderstanding among the local people can grow into a large scale distrust of the NGO sector.

In this sense, it is a welcomed sign that the major NGO coordination bodies are aware of the need to enhance accountability and transparency of NGO activities. In fact, they jointly announced the introduction of the NGO Code of Conduct in May 2005. When the new NGO law was being established, it was argued the signing of this Code should be a prerequisite for NGO re-registration. Although it was not realized, this initiative was warmly accepted by both local and international NGOs.

With the enforcement of the new NGO law, many organizations are expected to convert to private companies. The Ministry of Economy estimates the total number of re-registrations will be reduced to only 300 to 350. Although it is hard to say what an appropriate size of the NGO sector should be, it is an absolutely welcomed measure that fake NGOs will be shunted aside. Some NGO directors are concerned that the prohibition of their enrollment in construction works may limit the scope and effectiveness of their activities. However, this transition process should be accepted by the NGO sector as an opportunity to improve their collaborative and implementation skills. I believe their toughness and wisdom, which were fostered in the consecutive hardships of the refugee camps, the Taliban regime, and the chaotic atmosphere in early 2002 will surely help overcome the present difficulty to make for a brighter future for all of Afghanistan.

**In conclusion**

Time flies and global circumstances change very rapidly. In the past four years, the major concern of the international community has already shifted to Iraq. It is mandatory for the Afghan government to seek a more efficient and effective use of its limited donor funds in order to realize its self reliant economic development plan as soon as possible.

I think the perception change of NGOs is a positive example that the Afghan people are in line with this goal. As they continue to revise their perceptions of NGO activities, the people of Afghanistan will take on the challenge of the post conflict difficulties and in so doing, become a role model for those in other peace building nations.

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