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This paper is intended as a point of departure for discussion about a vital but often overlooked aspect of international relief and development – namely, how (and how effectively) international aid agencies assess local non-state actors. The ability to get an accurate read of local NSAs -- their power, their legitimacy, their commitment to meeting local needs, their interests, their relationships with one another, their relationship with the state, and their likely response to international relief and development work -- is essential, and often constitutes an abiding pre-occupation of good project managers and field staff. Yet the collection and analysis of what amounts to humanitarian field intelligence is rarely discussed as a topic in its own right.

Significantly, most complex emergencies and post-conflict situations feature local political and economic configurations of enormous complexity and flux, so that “getting an accurate read” is a daunting challenge even to outside organizations with a strong corporate commitment to understanding and working with local political realities. Still, experience has repeatedly demonstrated that some aid agencies and projects have fared better than others, suggesting that while there may be no ‘silver bullet’ solution, there may well be some “emerging best practices” worthy of note. What is unquestionably true is that those agencies which enter complex emergencies and post-conflict situations with no knowledge of NSAs or with an inflexible, pre-established policy towards them invariably end up in grave difficulties.

To minimize the possibility of our discussions getting bogged down in making distinctions about different types of situations and non-state actors – a common concern when engaging in comparative analysis of different cases -- let me propose a few important distinctions at the outset.

- *A distinction is made between different operating environments – normal development settings, emergency relief, complex emergencies, and post-conflict*

settings -- each of which tends to produce its own set of NSA configurations. Relief and development agencies work in and deal with a spectrum of operating environments which ranges from very well-governed to completely lawless, and everything in between. It goes without saying that assessment of non-state actors is usually a relatively peripheral matter in operating environments featuring a strong and effective central administration and “national execution (NEX)” of projects by the government. By contrast, assessment of non-state actors in complex emergencies and post-conflict situations where the state is weak or functionally non-existent is vital. This paper places more emphasis on the latter.

- *A distinction is made between types of NSAs: (1) local powers or authorities (legitimate or otherwise), (2) local partners (such as NGOs), and (3) local subcontractors.* The distinction between these three is not always hard and fast, but these are the most common types of relationships INGOs and UN agencies have with non-state actors. The first type – local authorities – includes all NSAs which possess a level of militia, economic, or civil power of enough consequence that they can influence the outcome of relief and development work. This could include, for instance, a gang of militiamen, a group of businesspeople, or traditional elders. Just to be controversial, I include in this category of NSAs municipal authorities, even though they are technically a state actor. Why? Because in so many locations, local municipal (or district) authorities act more like local NGOs than they do a “state” authority. Specifically, they have very limited budgets and so seek out “subcontracting” opportunities or partnerships with international agencies; they usually have competitive, strained relations with the central authority, which has in a growing number of instances been pressured by international donors to decentralize politically and which views municipalities as a potential threat; and they are generally viewed (and treated) by international agencies more as a manifestation of civil society than of former government.
- *A distinction is made between the criteria on which assessments are made and processes by which international agencies assess NSAs.*

Assessment of NSAs by international aid agencies – the state of the art

To the extent that assessment of NSAs is done at all, it is usually nested within broader political and economic assessments – as it should be. Our focus, then, should be on the state of the art of general social, economic, and political analysis – or field intelligence – of aid agencies. This leads to a number of general observations:

1) *The UN system is not built to generate country and field intelligence.* The first and most obvious observation on this score is that the UN as an institution lacks an intelligence gathering and analysis capacity, and will likely remain so as long as its member-states see that as an inappropriate role. What this means is that UN specialized agencies face the same problems as DPKO, DPA, and the UN special envoys sent into crisis zones – namely, they cannot rely on an institutional source of political assessments, and must generate their own assessments on the ground. That this is less than ideal is self-evident; that it is unlikely to change is also self-evident.

2) *Assessment capacity and results are principally defined by unevenness.* Assessments of NSAs and their political environment are defined by unevenness and disparity in quality. This is painfully evident to anyone who has ever sifted through the reports of INGOs and UN projects. One aid agency may be operating on a store of insights and analyses which rival that of the best intelligence agencies (and its project staff thus sought out by media and foreign diplomats); another agency may go into a complex situation completely blind to local political realities. A certain percentage of projects are defined by a *willful* ignorance of local politics and NSAs. This is most commonly the case when projects are headed up by individuals who view their work as “strictly humanitarian” and therefore presume political assessment is unnecessary, dangerous, or “dirty;” and by individuals or groups who view their work as strictly “technical” and that assessments can thus be limited to technical matters as well. We have all seen planning documents for major projects which are rich in every technical detail and devoid of any assessment of the political and socio-economic landscape in which the project will operate. I would add here a third instance of willful ignorance – “survival ignorance,” one which tends to occur mainly in very dangerous operating environments in which the agency is at the mercy of a local warlord or militia. In these cases, aid workers may or

may not be aware that their agency has been “captured” by a particular faction or warlord, and that their national staff is carefully controlling the information they receive. Attempts to poke around and assess NSAs in this context runs the immediate risk of physical threats and/or the disruption of the agency’s activities. In Somalia, aid personnel who made themselves well-informed about local politics (all of which were NSAs) and who started to learn the Somali language were often the first to be “PNGed” by a local warlord; the adage in aid circles was that Somali warlords “like their foreigners stupid.” The survivalist response is to oblige the warlords by being indifferent to local politics. We have all seen this at play, in both its utilitarian and its careerist mutations. The utilitarian path to survival ignorance is done in order to keep the project running on the grounds that the greater good is served by continuing the agencies’ services flowing to those in need. The careerist version occurs when project directors or staff willfully ignore political realities because to acknowledge them would likely lead to a decision to terminate the project, which would harm individual careers or the agency’s need to be in a country for fund-raising and visibility purposes.

3. *NSA assessments are also typically inconsistent with each other.* Where a half dozen aid agencies operate, you are likely to find several different interpretations of NSAs, and hence several different patterns of interaction with NSAs. Examples abound of this problem. In 1998 in the Gedo region of Somalia, one UN agency worked with “district management councils;” another only with a self-declared regional authority; one INGO concluded that only district authorities were functional; another INGO worked exclusively through clan elders; and several INGOS worked only with local NGOs. In south Lebanon, USAID works directly with local NGOs via INGOs, and avoids both the Lebanese government and Hezbollah; UNDP works with municipalities and local community organizations, via the Lebanese government and with quiet understandings reached with Hezbollah. Often these contradictory assessments are a reflection of institutional predispositions or policies, but in other cases they reflect different conclusions reached by field staff.

3. *Inconsistencies of assessments occur **within** as well as between agencies.* Assessments of NSAs can vary and contradict themselves even within the same agency in the same country. This is usually the result of differences of preference or interpretation by

individuals in the agency. For example, in the UNITAF phase of the intervention into Somalia in 1993, the US military pursued very different policies regarding local authorities in different regions of the country. The variation was entirely due to two distinct analyses (*shaped by two pre-existing worldviews about politics and power*)¹ by two generals. In an after-action meeting, one general insisted that the “guys with the guns” (i.e., warlords) were the people with power, and hence were the authorities he worked exclusively with. A second general disagreed, stating that after a time he realized the guys with guns possessed only the capacity to loot and destroy; when he wanted something done, he found the clan elders had the needed social authority. This created inconsistencies with real political consequences (charges of favoritism). In other cases, the inconsistency can occur within the same project, over time. In a city in Somaliland, a major piped water project funded and executed by UNICEF was nearly derailed by the fact that the first project manager worked with and through the mayor and municipal authorities, in close cooperation with clan elders, believing he was not only delivering clean drinking water but also building the capacity of local government. His successor shifted all contacts to a ministry in the Somaliland government, in the belief he was building capacity, too – only at a different level.

4. *Some agencies cultivate a culture of political analysis, others do not.* It is certainly the case that some aid agencies tend to encourage a culture of indifference or hostility to political discussion (which of course precludes political assessment) while others are founded on and reinforce a culture of careful analysis of local politics. The most compelling example of a culture of political analysis of NSAs (as part of broader political, social, and economic analysis) is the War-Torn Societies Project (WSP). In its work in post-conflict situations, WSP is extraordinarily meticulous about preparatory analysis, conducting extensive “mapping” exercises of the local political landscape before establishing a direct presence there. A number of other INGOs, such as Action-Aid and Oxfam, also have a distinguished record of sponsoring excellent field studies of non-state actors in their areas of operation (discussed below). But for every one of these

¹ There is a rich and extensive literature in political psychology about theories of cognition and belief systems which predispose decision-makers to interpret reality different ways. This isn't the place to go into it, except to note that agencies which make a conscious effort to socialize their staff into certain perspectives on NSAs are aware of the importance of belief systems.

agencies, there are numerous aid organizations which possess a “contract culture” -- they receive a project contract and focus exclusively on the technical terms of reference in that document and on their relations with the donor, not with local NSAs. In some instances, certain donors exhibit a marked preference for assuming control over political assessments and judgements of NSAs, and give INGOs little room for independent assessment.

5. In the aggregate, the extent to which UN agencies and INGOs conduct strong assessments of NSAs is driven mainly by individual project directors and their staff.

Some field officers and project staff members intuitively appreciate the importance of field intelligence on NSAs, while others do not. Some have a natural knack for astute political assessment, others do not.

6) Overall, the quality of assessment of NSAs by aid agencies is low. This conclusion is reached on the basis of a decade of direct and indirect personal observation by the writer (I look forward to hearing if others share this conclusion!) Why is the overall quality of NSA assessments so poor? For many reasons, including:

- Political analysis is usually a residual concern of aid agencies, which devote far more attention to funding modalities, logistics, and technical aspects of project planning.
- Political analysts with training and expertise in the country or region are rarely brought in as consultants in planning, execution, or evaluation stages (discussed below). Unlike other sectoral specializations (in health, education, hydrology, agriculture), political assessment is usually seen as a “general” skill to be handled by whoever is directing the project. Aid agency field staff are rarely provided any sort of training in socio-political analysis. In worst cases, project staff fancy themselves gifted analysts and pose as experts to the media and others when they are in fact doing little more than repackaging a combination of preconceived ideas and office gossip. This can lead to dangerously sloppy and inaccurate policies for anyone careless enough to listen.
- There is no reward system for political assessment in aid agencies. There are few incentives for individual field officers to engage in assessments of NSAs, and no penalties for failure to do so. Project proposal documents for some agencies do include a risk assessment where these considerations can be treated, but those risk

assessments are usually very short and general. When NSAs engage in behavior which disrupts or reduces the effectiveness of projects, project evaluations routinely treat it as an “externality” over which the agency had no control. Had projects been designed to consider the impact and reaction of NSAs from the outset, evaluation documents would be much less prone to treating them like unforeseen natural disasters (“acts of God”) and more prone to consider why the project failed to anticipate NSA behavior.

- High personnel turnover in difficult situations yields low institutional memory, so that even when an agency possesses a strong assessment capacity it usually loses it within a few years. NSAs tend to be most powerful (for better or worse) in the more conflict-ridden, difficult posts, where personnel turnover is highest. Thus institutional memory on NSAs is weakest where it is most needed.
- Even when good analysis of NSAs is captured in written reports, aid officers rarely have time to read them. Project officers are too busy and exhausted, and the reports are often not easily accessible to t

informants may provide radically different versions of trends and events; sifting through the propaganda, rhetoric, and slander to arrive at the truth about NSAs is not a simple matter, and aid agency staff have many other obligations to tend to besides tracking down rumors. We must, in other words, be modest about what we can reasonably expect aid agencies to produce by way of NSA assessments. An analysis of the nature of the interests of non-state actors, for instance (intransigent versus variable or malleable), which our discussion group focused on as an important element in determining strategy for dealing with NSAs, requires a deep and intimate understanding of NSAs that even the most dedicated and well-trained political analyst might not be able to acquire. That is not to excuse some of the shoddy analytic work which clearly could be improved upon, but it is to insure that we are not setting the bar unreasonably high. There is a troubling corollary to this observation, however. We have in recent years placed a critical role of political analysis on the shoulders of local and international NGOs and UN agencies, as part of conflict early warning and prevention systems. Many aid agencies have gladly assumed this responsibility, without recognizing how limited they are in political analysis of these “special development circumstances.” Aid agencies need to be careful not to promise more than they can deliver on this score.

How do aid agencies assess NSAs? Practices and processes

Aid agencies rely on a wide range of processes, some formal and others informal, to render assessments of NSAs in their areas of operation. Often they arrive at a conclusion using two or more of these processes. Some of the most common mechanisms include the following:

- *Reliance on or acquiescence to the central government’s policy on non-state actors.* Aid agencies sometimes resolve this difficult question by relying strictly on the central government’s assessment and policies. This is most convenient when the state authorities’ assessments of NSAs are both accurate and reflect a commitment to provide relief and rehabilitation to communities in need. When the state’s assessment is highly politicized and intended to attack, discredit, or weaken NSAs, however, then

uncritical reliance on the government's position is problematic. The case of Sudan is perhaps the most obvious example. UN agencies which are mandated to work with and through state governments are most likely to adopt this approach, though in practice most UN agencies negotiate with and if necessary partially circumvent government policies on NSAs if humanitarian imperatives warrant.

- *Reliance on an agency template.* Some aid agencies have a corporate policy preference regarding local partners and authorities and apply that template globally. Some INGOs, for instance, work exclusively with local NGOs on the grounds that they are committed to building civil society. Even UN agencies sometim

actors, and the adoption of a common policy towards certain non-state actors. In Sierra Leone, for instance, humanitarian agencies adopted a common code of conduct prohibiting the paying of bribes to militia at roadblocks;² in Goma, INGOs created a coalition to press for a policy of disarmament of the combatants; in Somalia, the Somalia Aid Coordination Body (SACB) created a code of conduct expected of local NSAs relating to security and human rights, and features sectoral committees which provide the invaluable service of assessing NSAs specific to each sector. The advantage of these coordination body common policies is that they promote unity and coherence in assessment of NSAs. For smaller UN agencies and INGOs, and for agencies which are new to the scene, these coordination bodies also provide an institutional memory and a more robust capacity for political analysis of NSAs than the individual agency is capable of producing. Because coordination bodies are semi-permanent entities, they have the added ability to revisit and adjust analysis and policy as circumstances change. This is a crucial issue in many complex emergencies and post-conflict situations, where the status and interests of NSAs are subject to quick and dramatic shifts. Assessment processes which are built to monitor and account for a changing political environment are much more useful than static templates. Coordination bodies are not flawless, however. They tend to take on all the unwanted traits of large committees bringing together groups with different corporate cultures and agendas. They are slow; they are prone to compromise decisions which may lack analytic coherence; they can be dominated by the views of the major donors; and they produce assessments which can sometimes be aimed more at advancing a diplomatic agenda than at improving real understanding of key NSAs.

- *Reliance on UN inter-agency coordination bodies and assessments.* In addition to the broad inter-agency coordination bodies discussed above, a sub-set of that type of coordination is UN inter-agency coordination units. These coordination units can consist of OCHA staff or coordination units operating directly for the UN Resident Representative. These offices are generally designed to provide reporting on humanitarian conditions in order to promote coordinated response within the UN

² See Bill O'Neill's response to the questions sent out to "UN on the Ground" participants, March 27 2002.

family, but they also can provide excellent political assessment of NSAs as part of coordinating common agency policies towards warlords, businessmen, militia roadblocks, etc. In addition, where countries in crisis have required high-level diplomatic intervention from the UN, another source of assessments and policy recommendations can come from a Political Affairs office, or from a special-representative appointed to the country by the Secretary-General. There are also numerous UN reports and documents which can promote common assessment of NSAs. UN consolidated inter-agency appeals have evolved into assessment tools; UNDP's country human development reports, and in some countries its monthly early warning assessments, also serve that purpose; and the Secretary-General's reports to the Security Council provide a certain level of analysis of NSAs. Despite all this, UN inter-agency coordination on political assessments is weaker than it should be. Part of this is related to time-honored resistance by specialized agencies to be "coordinated" in a way that might threaten their autonomy; agencies will pay lip service to common assessments by the Res Rep or OCHA, and then proceed with their own agendas. Policy assessments of NSAs can have severe consequences for agencies in the field. An agency which has a well-established relationship with a local warlord to allow food aid convoys through his territory will fiercely resist a common assessment which marginalizes that warlord, as it undermines their entire delivery strategy. In addition, quarrels over interpretation within the UN offices which assume the right to make common political assessments are endemic. In Somalia, the UN Coordination Unit, the UN Security Office, and the Political Affairs Office never came to a shared analysis of key NSAs in Somalia, leading to unhelpful and at times bitter public feuds over common UN policy and reporting to New York. Finally, it must be pointed out that UN inter-agency policy coordination on NSAs and other policy matters remains variable and generally weak despite the best efforts of Res Reps and OCHA units. In Lebanon, a half-dozen of the most important UN specialized agencies and the World Bank share a common building, but each has their own separate library and documentation unit, and were by their own admission very poorly informed about one another's policy documents.

- *Common inter-agency assessment, strategy, and code of conduct regarding NSAs at the local level.* At times, humanitarian agencies in a specific field location will create their own local inter-agency mechanism to share assessments and devise common policies relating to local NSAs. These types of mechanisms can be extremely useful when populated by project staff with a keen understanding of local politics. They typically arise in situations of crisis or political turmoil, when agencies feel a strong need for shared analysis and common policies. In zones where a humanitarian emergency is building and new aid agencies are arriving, these local coordination mechanisms give newcomers instant assessments and can help them avoid costly errors. The main shortcoming of these mechanisms is the difficulty of maintaining unity within the INGOs, especially when their policy recommendations require action by a donor. INGOs which insist on a policy change based on their common assessment of NSAs find that they are easily replaced by new INGOS eager to assume the contract. This kind of field-level assessment can also be second-guessed by headquarters, which can be jealous of its prerogative in policy-making. In Goma, a local coalition of INGOs found that their headquarters in some cases failed to support their assessment and policy demands because of concerns by Boards that their field staff were “too far out front” on policy.³
- *Informal consultations with other agencies.* When it comes to assessment of local NGOs and contractors in particular, informal “word of mouth” is often the single most important source of analysis for aid agencies. A contractor providing reliable and high-quality transportation, money exchange services, construction, procurement, or other services to an aid agency is often rewarded with additional contracts from other agencies because they share information with one another. In Mogadishu in 1992, a small-time Somali money exchanger for the INGO International Medical Corps earned additional business as new INGOs arrived and consulted IMC as to who they should change money with. By 1994, this money changer had cornered most of the business with international agencies, including the enormous UNOSOM mission, and today is considered one of the wealthiest and most powerful businessmen in

³ See Roy Williams’ comments on Goma in his response to the “UN on the Ground” questions to discussants, March 28 2002.

Somalia – all because of the assessment one INGO shared with others in 1992. The principal danger with reliance on consultations with other agencies is the possibility that simply subscribing to the assessments of other agencies runs the risk of blindly repeating someone else's mistake. As a general rule, however, most field assessments of NSAs by aid agencies are very much driven by informal discussions with cohorts.

- *Reliance on UN Security office (UNSECOORD) assessments.* UN agencies in conflict zones are often reliant on UNSECOORD security assessments. Though UN security officers are mainly tasked with assessing security and determining what if any security restrictions must be in place for UN staff, their security assessments are rarely done in isolation from a broader political assessment of NSAs (as it should be). They are often in the best position to deliver assessment of NSAs, as they deal directly with militia leaders and other local actors and have an extensive network of local contacts on which to draw. They possess, in other words, the only organizational infrastructure which can generate field intelligence systematically rather than incidentally. As a result, UN Security officers can, in some cases, play a major role in shaping the UN's assessment of NSAs. UNSECOORD has weaknesses, however. It is generally staffed by former military and police officers who are not trained in political analysis, and its assessments are variable in quality. Whether these are weaknesses which could and should be corrected by strengthening UNSECOORD's political analysis capacities (perhaps through some type of partnership with DPA), or whether UNSECOORD's role should remain limited to narrow security assessments, is an interesting question.
- *Reliance on national staff members for assessment of NSAs.* There are few better solutions to the problems of generating good assessments of NSAs than having a top team of national project officers who possess strong analytic skills and a commitment to reporting as honestly and accurately as they can. When they are good, national officers enjoy a number of strengths which are very difficult to replicate otherwise. They have a much deeper knowledge of their country; they have a rich network of contacts; they can move around freely to see, listen, and assess; they speak the local language(s); they tend to stay employed long-term with the agency, providing an institutional memory and enabling them to assess changes over time. Evidence from

the field is pretty clear that UN agencies and INGOs which are clever or lucky enough to hire and retain strong national officers, and then encourage them to do political analysis of NSAs, are much more likely to navigate the dangerous shoals of complex emergencies and post-conflict situations. A case in point is UNDP-Lebanon, which is almost entirely managed by national officers with very strong analytic skills and excellent contacts. They have as a result been able to operate effectively in south Lebanon despite the enormous political complexities of the area. The challenge on this score is that in many complex emergency settings there is a profound scarcity of well-qualified national staff. Most of the country's top professional analysts have left the country, leaving the ranks of high-quality national staff members thin. Still, even in the most desperate situations, there are always a handful of first-rate nationals willing and able to share impartial and high-quality assessments of NSAs. One thing that is rarely done is provision of training in political analysis to these national officers. If they are generally the best source of analysis of NSAs, they should be groomed to play the role as best they can.

- *Use of external consultants.* Some INGOs and UN agencies out-source political analysis (including assessment of NSAs) to external consultants, who are asked to produce studies and reports for the agency's use. If written by a consultant with close expertise on the country or region, these reports can be excellent tools. The fact that they are produced by outsiders allows the analysis greater liberties to speak frankly about potentially delicate issues related to NSAs. The main weakness of this approach (besides the variable quality of the reports) is that it produces a static analysis and product in a dynamic context. The reports are often partially out of date within a year. Another chronic problem with this mechanism of assessment is that the reports fall into the realm of "gray material" which is rarely distributed widely and hence is usually not easily accessible. Too often, these reports gather dust in an NGO office and are read by only a small group of people. If this kind of report could be more widely distributed and if it were structured as a running analysis (updated and revised yearly) it would be a more useful tool in assessing NSAs.
- *Establishment of an office for research and analysis within the headquarters of the agency.* In the absence of a UN intelligence capacity, some UN specialized agencies

are developing their own in-house research and analysis units which can provide more systematic political assessments to field officers. UNHCR, for instance, now has a research and documentation unit which hires consultants to produce political situation and trend analyses in countries of concern, giving UNHCR a nascent intelligence capacity. In this regard, IRIN should be mentioned as a general source for UN agencies and INGOs, and one with potential for further use. IRIN currently provides mainly general news, not close field analysis of NSAs. But it does feature excellent occasional “special reports.” One possibility might be to harness IRIN’s growing reporting strengths to agency efforts to assess NSAs.

- *Sub-contracting to INGOs with strong knowledge of local NSAs.* In some cases, agencies know they lack field intelligence in complex emergencies, and rather than risk making serious errors they sub-contract out project execution to INGOs which have the reputation of having a strong working knowledge of NSAs in a particular region. In Kosovo, UNDP’s skeletal staff recognized that they could not quickly master the complexities of local Kosovar politics, and so turned to an INGO, ADRA, which had years of experience on the ground, to manage a housing renovation project. Sub-contracting out project execution to agencies which have the field intelligence and networks is an appropriate tactic when time is short and organizational assessment capacities are low. It has the added benefit of creating a reward system for agencies which take the time to cultivate political assessment expertise.

Conclusion: Emerging best practices

Our assessment capacity of NSAs is highly uneven and generally weak, both for analytic and institutional reasons. Some of these reasons are chronic, others can be improved upon. A quick survey of the various processes by which aid agencies assess NSAs in the field reveals several practices worthy of broader application. Among these include making full use of inter-agency assessment capacities, especially through coordination mechanisms at the national and local level; hiring, training, and retaining top national officers whose TOR includes political assessments of NSAs; and sub-

contracting out direct execution to INGOs with strong knowledge of the local political situation. Interesting possibilities may also exist for strengthening the political analysis capacities of UNSECOORD. Processes which can deliver a running analysis rather than a static assessment are intrinsically superior in situations of rapid change. But expectations must be kept at a reasonable level; assessing NSAs remains a difficult challenge which we address with limited organizational and analytic tools.