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**Humanitarian Policy Group**

# Negotiating perceptions: Al-Shabaab and Taliban views of aid agencies

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## Key messages

- Aid agencies working in Afghanistan and Somalia have generally been treated with suspicion by Al-Shabaab and the Taliban. These suspicions derive from the belief that agencies are not primarily interested in helping local people, and are acting as spies or profiteers.

- The potentially dangerous consequences of such negative perceptions underscore the importance of aid agencies repeatedly, clearly and consistently communicating their goals and values with interlocutors at all levels of these armed groups.

- It is not enough for aid agencies to simply claim to act impartially, neutrally and independently: they must be seen to behave accordingly and deliver high-quality, needs-driven programming.

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Somali Islamist insurgents patrol a street in the Tarbunka area of Mogadishu in 2009
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This Policy Brief explores how the Afghan Taliban and Al-Shabaab in Somalia perceived aid agencies, and the implications of these perceptions for their work.[1] Neither group saw agencies in a wholly unfavourable light, and both allowed some to work in areas under their influence or control. Both groups also established strikingly similar mechanisms to oversee and negotiate with aid agencies, and a set of rules and policies governing aid work. Generally, however, negative perceptions of the aid enterprise presented formidable challenges to access and to the ability of agencies to do their work safely. Various factors have shaped attitudes towards aid agencies, including the troubled history of aid interventions in the two countries, suspicions about the motives and

1  This Policy Brief is based largely on interviews with members of the Taliban and Al-Shabaab, aid recipients and aid workers in Afghanistan and Somalia conducted in 2012 and 2013. See A. Jackson and A. Giustozzi (2012) *Talking to the Other Side: Humanitarian Negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan*; and A. Jackson and A. Aynte (2013) *Talking to the Other Side: Humanitarian Negotiations with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, HPG Working Papers.

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functions of aid agencies and the widespread conviction that agencies are part of a more general assault on Islam. These general suspicions coalesced around two more specific accusations: that agencies were operating as spies for, or collaborators with, states hostile to the Talban and Al-Shabaab; and that they were profiting from their work, rather than acting in the best interests of the people they were meant to be assisting.

## 'Spies' and 'collaborators'

The prevailing negative impression of aid agencies among the Taliban and Al-Shabaab was that they were allied with military efforts against them. One Taliban fighter claimed he would never allow aid agencies into his area because they all 'work under the universal powers who drink the blood of Muslims' and 'have converted people to Christianity'. Although articulated in extreme terms, this sentiment was common among the fighters of both groups, and drove them to prohibit activities they believed might threaten group values (for example, women participating in programmes). These suspicions persisted despite the fact that the vast majority of aid workers on the ground were Muslims, often from the very communities or areas that they were working in.

The fear that aid agencies were working against them was reflected in the aid access policies established by the Taliban and Al-Shabaab. Both groups required agencies to sign pledges or otherwise agree, among other things, not to spy in the service of their enemies, and both extensively monitored aid agencies' activities. Even routine tasks, such as surveys or gathering information for needs assessments, could be seen as attempts to compile intelligence and could arouse distrust. One aid recipient in Somalia recounted being compelled to report to Al-Shabaab on aid operations and provide information on any 'new faces' he encountered. In July 2014 the Taliban banned polio vaccinations in Helmand province – an activity that was previously widely supported by the group – on the grounds that vaccinators were spying for the government.[2]

In some instances aid agencies were blamed for events well beyond their control. Taliban members interviewed recounted episodes where aid agencies had been accused of providing intelligence that led to airstrikes and night raids executed by international forces. As

the only 'outsiders' present in these areas, it seemed to Taliban fighters that they were the only ones who could be responsible. Similarly, Al-Shabaab expelled CARE and International Medical Corps from areas under its control in 2008, on the grounds that they had provided information to the United States that resulted in the killing of an Al-Shabaab leader. The UN Mine Action Service was expelled in 2009 for 'bribing' elders and 'surveying and signposting some of the most vital and sensitive areas under the control of the Mujahideen'.[3]

## 'Profiteers'

Badly implemented programming reinforced perceptions of aid agencies as profiting from funds meant to benefit local populations. In Afghanistan, one commander commented of aid agencies that 'the projects they completed during the last ten years are not positive or long term; they are short-term [and] don't have any durable benefit. Therefore, our view is that they have [a] hidden agenda and have not come to help the Afghans'. Even among the Taliban leadership, where attitudes towards aid agencies were much more tolerant, there was a suspicion that aid agencies were not really there to help. Explaining this belief, the Taliban commissioner in charge of aid access asked why aid agencies had not worked as extensively or spent as much money when Afghanistan was under Taliban government. While UN data shows the greatest humanitarian needs in southern Afghanistan and South-Central Somalia, aid agencies are disproportionately concentrated in the more peaceful northern and central parts of Afghanistan and work outside Al-Shabaab areas in South-Central Somalia. This disparity has reinforced resentment and suspicion.

Surveillance of aid activities by Al-Shabaab and the Taliban extends to monitoring programme quality. This monitoring was described fairly consistently across both groups: members of the armed group assessed whether activities were truly needed and sought to regulate the time, equipment or other items that would be needed to carry out the planned activity. They would then monitor implementation, either through direct observation or indirectly, through incentivising or coercing civilians to provide information.

Some concerns about programme quality appear to be more about exerting pressure on aid agencies to

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2   E. Graham-Harrison, 'Afghan Taliban Bans Polio Vaccination Teams from Southern Helmand', *The Guardian*, 8 July 2014.

3   Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen (2009) 'Press Release Regarding the Operations of Mine Action', 17 December.

comply with their demands. Al-Shabaab routinely criticised aid agencies on the grounds of programme quality concerns, and was seemingly well aware of how damaging these accusations could be to an agency's reputation, using this as leverage to pressure agencies to hand over food or other aid materials.

## Improving perceptions

Neither the Taliban nor Al-Shabaab made much distinction between different agencies (or, in Afghanistan, between humanitarian agencies and non-humanitarian actors delivering aid, notably Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)). One Taliban commander referred to 'PRT NGOs' as though they were one unified entity. The contractor-led model of aid delivery favoured by USAID has similarly blurred the lines between different actors.

The Taliban claimed that they would, in principle, allow any aid agency to work as long as it behaved neutrally and complied with Taliban conditions, and it did not matter whether the aid agency was affiliated with the UN or espoused Islamic values, nor did it matter where its funding came from. Indeed, the Taliban allowed several agencies to work in areas under their influence despite them being heavily funded by states contributing troops to the international military presence in the country. Al-Shabaab was marginally more discriminatory, with a greater tendency to crack down on UN agencies or US-funded NGOs. The group banned specific UN agencies (while permitting others to continue working), at least in part because UN agencies were seen as the 'most spy-friendly agencies' due to the actions of the UN's political wing.[4]

In general, the political or military leadership is likely to have more direct interaction with agencies, and is more likely to distinguish between them. The Taliban commissioner in charge of aid access had served as a minister of health under the Taliban government and had extensive interaction with many of the aid agencies still working in Afghanistan. In Somalia, many humanitarian negotiators working for Al-Shabaab had positive associations with specific aid agencies and could recall the good work they had done during the 1990s. Ground-level fighters were generally more negatively disposed towards aid agencies than members of the senior leadership, and when they were able to

differentiate between different actors the distinctions they made were intensely personal ones, often based on their experiences as part of the community that aid agencies were working in. In Afghanistan, one Taliban fighter expressed approval of a specific UN aid agency because his father worked there.

The fact that, in their policies at least, neither the Taliban nor Al-Shabaab paid much attention to distinguishing between aid actors suggests that the identity or funding source of a particular agency was less important in how it was perceived than the type and quality of its programming. Healthcare services were the most likely to be welcomed, while education, especially for women, could be more contentious. Construction, particularly road construction (which might interfere with the planting of improvised explosive devices) was more likely to be seen as a non-humanitarian activity and more likely to face opposition. However, several agencies in both Afghanistan and Somalia were able to leverage widely accepted activities, such as healthcare and food distribution, to build confidence. Particularly in the context of an emergency (such as a disaster or famine), the provision of medical services or food aid allowed some agencies to establish a relationship and build trust that led to armed groups consenting to longer-term programming.

Ultimately, it was only through building relationships at all levels of the armed group that aid agencies were able to establish trust and distinguish themselves from the broader field of actors present. Negotiating directly with the armed group at senior levels and gaining permission to work was critical, as ground-level fighters of both groups generally obeyed agreements made with the senior leadership. However, engagement with mid-level commanders and fighters was also essential. Staff members at all levels must repeatedly and consistently explain the objectives and values of the organisation to members of the armed group. This is time-consuming and resource-intensive, and it must be systematic rather than ad hoc. It requires internal transparency and a commitment to dialogue, clear policies and guidance understood throughout the organisation, along with significant support for staff members undertaking this work.

Transparency and communication are also critical in counteracting accusations of spying. One aid worker in Somalia who undertook direct negotiations with Al-Shabaab described giving Al-Shabaab 'a detailed

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4   Telephone interview with a former Al-Shabaab official, March 2013.

list of goods we deliver, the amount and the place we deliver to so they can follow us and see what we are doing'. Deviation from agreed plans and activities arouses suspicion and can even prompt an agency's expulsion. Clearly and consistently articulating aid agency activities – and adhering to plans – is critical. Assessments and surveys must be undertaken with special care, and the safest approach is likely to be one in which the activity is conducted with explicit consent from the armed group. Aid agencies would also be wise to be transparent about any association with the government, donors or the military, whether it be funding from a Western government or working on a government-led programme. Disclosing these associations is unlikely to affect whether an agency gains access, but a later discovery that an agency has been concealing the facts could have potentially serious consequences. In maintaining access, high-quality, needs-driven programming and monitoring is essential. Many agencies struggle to thoroughly monitor their work in volatile areas, where they may pursue remote programming or where expatriate staff may not be permitted to visit field sites. Third-party independent monitoring may be difficult, and the need for third-party monitors prompts the question whether there is sufficient acceptance to allow effective programming at all.

Simpler and more cost-effective options were generally more pragmatic and effective. Community feedback and complaint mechanisms were particularly helpful in gaining trust. One Afghan NGO in Kandahar set up a dedicated cellphone line where members of the community could call or text with questions or concerns about the agency's work. The NGO also provided this number to Taliban interlocutors, and received positive feedback from the group when they saw the agency promptly addressing complaints.

## Conclusion

The perceptions of aid agencies held by Al-Shabaab and the Taliban are shaped by local history and conflict-specific dynamics, but they are indicative of many of the challenges agencies face in difficult environments. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the measures aid agencies must take to counter negative perceptions and maintain access are largely in line with best practice in humanitarian and development programming. It requires aid agencies to communicate clearly and consistently with all belligerents to gain acceptance;

to demonstrate transparency and adherence to agreed plans; and to provide needs-driven programming and mechanisms to ensure feedback and redress.

Many aid agencies remain reluctant to purposefully and strategically engage with the Taliban and Al-Shabaab. Part of this reticence springs from a fear of engaging with groups that are proscribed under counter-terrorism laws and regulations, particularly in Somalia. Many aid agencies fear that even engaging in dialogue with Al-Shabaab could lead to the suspension of funding or even criminal penalties. In this respect, joint advocacy on humanitarian exemptions and efforts to bring greater clarity to counter-terror laws and policies are important.

Significant resources and investment in time and analysis are required to build relationships and maintain dialogue. It requires staff training at all levels on negotiations and the development of clear policies within the organisation governing interaction and negotiation with members of armed groups. Regrettably few organisations have invested in the requisite systems and capacity to support this work; those that have are much better positioned to maintain access and ensure staff safety.

It is not enough for an aid agency to simply claim that it is impartial, neutral and independent, or that it is there solely to meet humanitarian needs. Agencies must be seen to behave accordingly. Any deviation from agreed or accepted actions and behaviours can exacerbate suspicions. High-quality programming that is responsive to community needs is essential to maintaining positive perceptions and enabling agencies to work safely. By being flexible and responsive to needs as they arise, aid agencies may also be able to leverage some forms of programming (healthcare or emergency response) into confidence-building measures that will enable them to increase trust and ultimately expand their work.

Monitoring programming in dangerous operating environments like Afghanistan and Somalia is challenging. However, the Taliban and Al-Shabaab watch aid agencies closely, and it behoves aid agency managers to have a strong grip on the actions of their staff in the field and the outcomes of their activities. Ultimately, effective programming is not only an accountability issue, but is also integral to ensuring aid workers' safety and acceptance.