Achieving Policy Coherence in Challenging Environments:
Risk Management and Aid Culture in Sudan and Afghanistan

A two-year ESRC/DFID Joint Scheme funded research project led by Professor Mark Duffield (Global Insecurities Centre, University of Bristol) and Dr Sarah Collinson (Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI), October 2010 – September 2012

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1. Resilience and the Crisis of Acceptance

Mark Duffield

This research comes out of the work being done by Sarah Collinson and her HPG colleagues on ‘humanitarian space’ and my ongoing interest in the continuing evolution of the development-security nexus. The original research proposal, which highlighted the growing trend to risk-management within the aid industry and its implications for policy implementation within integrated missions, was submitted to ESRC-DFID in September 2009. Following a competitive peer-review process, the two-year funding for this project began in October 2010.

While the research concerns aid and risk-management more broadly, with a focus on Afghanistan and South Sudan, it has a strong fieldwork component. Indeed, together with being able to call on the help of local partners, our research is unusual in that it involves up to nine months fieldwork in Afghanistan and South Sudan. With our final outputs not due till September 2012, this extended timeframe is part of how our research differs from much of the industry-led work in this field. While we seek to collaborate with aid agencies and are committed to making our research policy relevant, we are also independent of the aid system. As such, we lack the access that consultancy-based research is built upon. We are also a small team. With support being provided by myself and Sarah, we have two lead researchers. In Afghanistan this is Karl Sandstrom, and for South Sudan, Carol Berger.

What we lack in resources, however, we make up in terms of a long-term engagement that enables a more ethnographic and participant style of working. Rather than beginning with a prescribed ToR, our questions are constantly evolving through a process of on-the-ground experience and inter-group discussion. Carol, for example, has just returned from an initial three
month visit to South Sudan and will shortly be returning for a similar period. For a number of reasons, our work in Afghanistan has yet to properly begin.

In this introduction, I’d like to spend a few minutes outlining how we see our research as different from – but complementary to – much of the industry-led policy work in the area of aid and risk-management.

It’s well known that since the mid 1990s, there has been growing concerns over the increasing number of aid workers being killed, injured or attacked as a result of their work. More recently, especially since 9/11, it is widely acknowledged that the aid environment has changed. The protective shield of neutrality no longer seems to be working. Since the mid 1990s, and until relatively recently the response to this changing environment – what we can call the initial phase of risk-management – has involved a number of interconnected elements. Here I can only give a brief overview:

Training: Beginning with NGOs but soon finding a home within the UN system, there has been a relatively rapid spread of field-security and threat awareness training across the aid system.

Centralisation: Since the mid 1990s, the role of the security advisor has grown together with the tendency to centralise risk-management within the aid industry. This trend is reflected, for example, in the formation of UNDSS. At the same time, risk-management concerned itself with issues and triggers concerning ‘when to leave’.

Bunkerisation: Reflecting the growing securitisation of the aid sector, including the increasing importance of insurance issues, the fortified aid compound has become the signature architecture of the integrated mission.

While these trends will remain a feature of the aid environment, over the past two or three years a new phase of risk-management has emerged. The industry has grown more reflexive. Today, centralisation and bunkerisation, for example, are widely seen as problematic and potentially working against achieving policy goals. This shift is aptly summarised in the ethos of the UN’s current attempt to reform its approach to risk-management – rather than when to leave, the emphasis is now ‘how to stay’. There is currently a good deal of industry-led, consultancy-based or survey-style work that, in one way or another, is addressing the how to stay issue.

This work usually focuses on things like the decentralisation, localisation and indigenisation of risk-management. Through developing more sophisticated tools of threat assessment, it is concerned with decoupling risk-management from centrally defined organisational responses; in particular, bureaucratically defined ‘when to leave’ triggers. Ideally, the aim is to encourage skill-sets and provide tools that give more scope for local and regional aid managers, in the light of programme responsibilities, to make more informed judgements on when and how to stay.

Given its current dominance as a lingua franca of risk, preparedness and survivability across the physical, natural and social sciences, it is perhaps inevitable that the idea of ‘resilience’ has entered this debate. That is, the ability of an individual or an organisation, indeed, any ‘life-like’ system, to absorb shock and adapt to change while still retaining system functionality. Reflecting the attitudinal shift from when to leave to how to stay, it is important to note that resilience establishes a new relationship to disaster. Whereas centralised forms of risk-management respond to danger through protective measures like bunkerisation and risk-aversion, resilience thinking sees calamity as an opportunity.
Through ideas derived from complexity science, together with practical measures as decentralisation, localisation and indigenisation, resilience thinking reworks disaster as an opportunity for aid agencies to re-invent themselves through new modalities of organisational responsiveness and adaptability. In the face of turbulence and uncertainty, aid agencies measure resilience in terms of their ability to operate in an agile and graceful manner.

As already mentioned, most of the current research and consultancy in the field of risk-management is concerned with this broad resilience-related how to stay agenda. In so far as it does allow aid agencies to stay and meet their responsibilities in challenging conditions, this work is of vital importance. At the same time, some excellent work is being done, including that of colleagues within HPG and Humanitarian Outcomes. Given that there are many organisations and research initiatives now working on these themes, many of them better resourced and having more access that we have, it is not a good use of the time and ethnographic skills that we do have to try to duplicate this work. We would rather compliment it by looking at the issues the how to stay agenda either overlooks or places in the background.

Within some of the recent work on aid and risk-management there is an emerging if ill-defined research theme that can loosely be called the crisis of acceptance. While complementing the existing resilience-related risk-management work, the crisis of acceptance (CoA) is a wider concept and allows risk research to explore a number of new and emerging contextual themes. For example:

- Current risk-management work acknowledges the problem of politicisation. That is, the instrumentalisation of aid according to the needs of Western foreign policy. While acknowledging politicisation, a CoA framework is much wider as it takes in the aid system as a whole.

- The CoA implies a tangibly distinct system or model of Western aid. This system is more than a distinct set of organisational interactions between its different component agencies and donors. Importantly, the system is also synonymous with certain values, cultures and life-styles that are intrinsic to the experience of aid. Not least, the Western aid system is also identified with a distinct type of product in terms of what it attempts to deliver.

- Rather than assume that host populations are misinformed, gullible or easily led, a CoA approach accepts host populations as rational-political subjects. If we can see some of the shortcomings of the Western aid system, after thirty or even forty years on the receiving end, they have a much fuller and direct understanding of these problems than us.

- Seeing aid as a definable system or model, allows us to introduce an historical dimension into the research. It introduces ideas concerning the changing political economy and geopolitics of aid. At the same time, in a period of global rebalancing, it allows speculation on the future of the Western aid system.

- A CoA approach allows the spatial implications of the aid system to be explored. There is a small but growing body of work, for example, concerned with the contribution of the aid industry, especially its demand for gated residential and office complexes, to the process of urban fragmentation and the increasing polarisation between public and private space within post-interventionary societies.
The CoA framework introduces the aid system as a complex hierarchy of inequalities involving differences in entitlement, contractual arrangements, insurance cover and ability to circulate. Importantly, it flags as an object of research the important differences between ‘international’ and ‘local’ staff within the aid system.

Finally, as the BRIC countries lift their peoples out of poverty through industrialisation, the typical product or goal of the Western aid system is becoming more visible. That is, the preoccupation of Western aid with delivering post-industrial solutions (eg, self-reliance within the limits basic needs and community action), often in the context of a democratic deficit. This sits uneasily with the demands of rational-political host populations for material and political advancement.

We believe that research in this broad terrain compliments and extends the current how to stay concerns within risk-management. It helps answer the becoming resilient to what-type questions. The outcomes will furnish aid providers and users with a more expansive and nuanced understanding of the changing aid environment. It will also highlight opportunities for reform and positioning beyond those already implicit in the how to stay agenda.

2. Impact Plan
ESRC / DFID research grant demands demonstrable impact / research uptake through direct engagement with stakeholders across the aid industry (in Sudan, Afghanistan & internationally):

- Close and ongoing communication with key stakeholders during the research (including International & Country Reference Groups)
- Production and dissemination of outputs that tackle strategic and operational problems, priorities and dilemmas facing agencies in challenging security environments

Required outputs:

- Post-field workshop & paper for each country for dissemination among in-country stakeholders
- Two academic journal articles based on the fieldwork papers & a third journal article analysing key overarching themes
- Full synthesis project report published as a 50-page ODI policy report & accompanying 10-page policy briefing
- Short ODI ‘toolkit’ publication and related spin-off articles (e.g. in *Humanitarian Exchange*) to be posted on relevant external network resource websites (ICVA, etc.)
- Other short spin-off articles and blogs in relevant network publications and websites
‘Impact’ outputs need to:

– Be designed to support decision-making within and among stakeholder organisations around strategic and operational dilemmas

– Draw on & complement already existing frameworks for informing & supporting strategic and operational decision-making (e.g. HPN’s Good Practice Review #8)

– Be developed through collaboration with partner institutes, reference groups, other stakeholders, ALNAP, etc.

– Be piloted in multi-stakeholder workshops towards the end of project (in each case study country & an international workshop)

Approaches to research uptake (guidance frameworks, etc.) often imply linearity in policy and programme decision-making:
For example, the ‘Security Risk Management Framework’ (HPN Good Practice Review 8):

But real-life decision-making is usually highly dynamic, particularly in complex or uncertain situations or in the face of complex problems:
Mainstream security risk management frameworks seem to imply or assume consistency of standards, reliability of knowledge, rationality in assessments and judgments & linearity and objectivity in decision-making.…. 

… and yet…

• ‘How to stay’ = adaptability
• Adaptability means compromises
• ‘Acceptable’ compromises affected by complex interactions of individual and institutional interests, imperatives and influences that are highly variable at different levels, different places and across different organisations
• In complex environments, decision-making to support adaptability is necessarily responsive, fluid and subjective and involves high levels of uncertainty

Project outputs intended to support policy and practitioner research uptake will need to take careful account of the types of observations emerging from the research about what ‘how to stay’ in violent contexts means in practice….
... For example:

• Adaptability to crises involves trade-offs and compromises, so in tension with common standards and principles
• Risk perceptions are highly variable at individual level & adapt to conditions on the ground and over time
• Uncertainty as regards risk environment combines with uncertainty in highly competitive (/commercial) aid environment
• Institutional pressures and imperatives interact with programming priorities, and programme priorities often unclear
• ‘Agency staff’ not a homogeneous group – different staff have different and shifting perceptions of ‘acceptable risk’ cf. other pressures, incentives and imperatives, and different policies apply
• Responses to security risks always in dynamic interaction with other types of risk, e.g. to career prospects, income streams, etc.

... contd. (1):

• Analysis of context and assessment of risk is rarely as objective or systematic as is advocated by best practice guidance
• There is no common objective and consistent ‘threshold of acceptable risk’ – varies substantially between individuals, different levels of organisations, different agencies, locations, etc., & affected by subjective cultures of risk perception, assessment and responses (influenced by security training, etc.)
• Cannot assume that suspension or withdrawal is most likely response to unacceptable risk: imperatives of adaptation and resilience mean instead that individuals and organisations adapt to make risks acceptable (compromising programmes, transferring risks, etc.)
… contd. (2):

- Perceptions and responses to risk profoundly affected by processes and legacies of engagement over time, creating embedded relationships, vested interests at different levels
- Security management frameworks assume that particular organisations have a particular ‘security culture’, but large transnational organisations are likely to incorporate diverse security cultures and diverse agendas and imperatives affecting ‘acceptable risk’ calculations and adaptations … hence a diversity of trade-offs and compromises in practice
- The professionalisation and standardisation of risk and security management may be in fundamental tension with the ‘real’ dynamics of commercial opportunism / competition in the political economy of the aid industry

3. Summary of Carol Berger’s presentation on emerging South Sudan issues

From November 2010 to mid-March 2011 I was resident in South Sudan carrying out the first phase of fieldwork. During this period I carried out interviews with nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations (IOs) in several states, including Lakes, Warrap, Western Bahr el Ghazal and Central Equatoria. Wherever possible, I travelled by road. I spent considered time with national and East African NGO employees, particularly those working with religiously based groups. The church continues to be an important expression of civil society throughout South Sudan. Outreach programmes, particularly in remote areas, employ a greater proportion of regional rather than international staff.

The Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) continues to be the dominant political/military force. In the immediate post-war period, since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, the SPLA has received substantial support, both financially and with materiel, from the international community. Despite the much-touted disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme, the SPLA has continued to recruit new soldiers and is today a larger force then it was at the close of the civil war.
On the question of risk faced by aid workers, a constant throughout South Sudan has been threats of violence and robberies which are largely seen as the work of soldiers from within the SPLA. Salaries for soldiers continue to be paid late, if at all, creating a general climate in which aid agencies and their staff are considered a possible source of cash and property. This ranges from demands for cash from armed men to armed robberies within guarded NGO compounds and the seizure of NGO vehicles. Over the past few years, there has been a substantial growth in the use of private security firms. It has become routine, particularly in main urban centres, for NGOs to employ guards from these firms to protect their compounds. These same companies provide security for major IOs, including the WFP and UN agencies. Paradoxically, the guards hired by private security companies are taken from the ranks of the SPLA. As well, the largest companies include senior SPLA officers on their boards.

The recently concluded referendum on the separation of South Sudan, carried out in January, has served to highlight the different responses to regional (rather than personal) security by IOs and NGOs. International responses to the perceived security threat connected to the holding of the referendum varied, with some nations ordering their nationals to leave South Sudan during the referendum period, and other countries and organisations adopting less dramatic measures, including extended leaves for staff already planning to be outside the region during the Christmas period, and reduced activities.

It is regrettable but the referendum may prove to have been the most peaceful period that South Sudan experiences for some time. In recent weeks, renewed fighting in particularly Upper Nile, along the border with Ethiopia, and the disputed territory of Abyei on the North-South border has led to the killing of hundreds of southern Sudanese. This renewal of internal, internecine fighting within the SPLA and along the contested border area will present new challenges to the international community in terms of carrying out their aid and development programmes and in ensuring the safety and well-being of their international, regional and national staff.

In relation to the latter — the different origins of IO and NGO staff — NGO staff drawn from neighbouring countries, including Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and other sub-Saharan African nations, are particularly vulnerable. The safety of African aid workers and support staff, whose numbers in South Sudan are growing, is a seemingly underappreciated issue, with these
workers often choosing to not draw attention to the security problems they face or to exhibit a high level of tolerance for risk.

In the coming, more lengthy, research period (March to November 2011), I intend to follow the following questions and issues:

1. Provide an “architecture” or hierarchy for the IO and NGO management of risk, acknowledging the influence of particularly the US, given its major role in South Sudan, in setting the parameters or norms for representations of risk and responses to it. Included in this is the growth of private security companies (i.e., expansion of East African-based, European-led firms into South Sudan, and relationships between those firms and the major IOs).

2. Further to this hierarchy of risk management, there is the matter of the ways in which the infrastructural needs of IOs and UN agencies affect local security conditions, including controversial land deals for construction of massive compounds.

3. Provide a better understanding of employment provisions (including security arrangements) for international, regional and national staff.

4. Document the ways in which small NGOs working in contested or conflict-prone areas are being both facilitated and used by western governments. It is apparent that NGOs are responding to the heightened demand for information related to security by developing programmes which deal with matters of conflict and peace-making. In return for funding, these NGOs then effectively become part of a broader western presence within South Sudan.

5. Examine the apparent concentration of NGOs in the capital city of Juba and classification of all other parts of South Sudan as being “in the field”. As part of this, I will look at the lived experience of IOs and NGOs “in the field”, showing the contrast and contradictions between official security policy and actual practice of individuals.

6. With the support of our Juba-based counterpart, Mr. Leben Nelson Moro, conduct interviews with nationals which examine their perceptions of the role of international organisations in South Sudan. NGOs have become important sources of employment for educated southern Sudanese. At the same time, there is tension between local communities and NGOs. This
tension can be attributed to misunderstandings surrounding NGO programmes, disputes over salaries given to local staff, the targeting of expatriate employees for spurious criminal charges, and a general perception that foreigners are benefiting at the expense of nationals of South Sudan.

4. Summary of Discussions

Key issues and lines of enquiry

The discussion began with a reminder of how much current patterns of aid work are interconnected with counterinsurgency. In other words, the changing nature of risk is interconnected with the changing pattern of aid. This is reflected in current concerns over the politicisation of aid. It was also pointed out that while aid agencies might be moving towards ‘how to stay’, donor governments are still in the centralisation and bunkerisation phase.

It is important to scrutinise the changing nature of risks, not just changes in how agencies are responding to risks and threats. These may be partly a function of important changes in the system itself. The risks that aid agencies face are linked to how aid is politicised. In the past, many NGOs positioned themselves as critics of the West. During the 1990s, however, the aid industry made a Faustian bargain with donor governments: the state came back into development thinking and NGOs, in particular, had to accept that they were no longer ‘non-governmental’. The aid industry has moved to a new place, with the dominant aid actors now de facto servants of the West, effectively professionalised into international civil servants. The system is characterised by distinct cultures, lifestyles, etc. which are perhaps being made more visible and anachronistic in many contexts by the expanding role and presence of non-Western aid providers with very different practices and forms of local engagement.

In determining ‘how to stay’, the benefit of an aid project – or its ‘criticality’ – is deemed important for assessing what risks are appropriate or acceptable in particular cases. How this is understood is central to defining ‘who you are and why you are there’, and hence for determining the relative importance and legitimacy of an intervention.

Aid agencies will have to be willing to take risks in insecure environments, but it is questionable whether many are ‘ready to make a sacrifice’. Although the ‘how to stay’ agenda is treated as a new chapter in risk and security management, in fact it has always been part of aid practice. It might be better to ask how the ‘how to stay’ agenda has changed, rather than treating it as an entirely new development. This raises the question of how, in the context of an expanding and competitive humanitarian aid industry, current practice around ‘how to stay’ depends on risk transfer as a form of institutional resilience. It places more responsibility on individuals and local managers regarding the level of risk they are prepared or expected to accept for the sake of the programme, thus institutional resilience in insecure environments depends upon the resilience of individuals working on the ground.

It was noted that the position of local staff has long been an issue for aid agencies (e.g. pay and contractual issues). At the same time, aid managers have also recognised for some time the special circumstances relating to the security of local staff and where they can be deployed. For
example, ethnic identity requires sensitivity in relation to geographical deployment. But the issue of local staff, especially relating to security considerations, is now becoming an important part of risk management research. The danger of the security lens is that local staff will only be recognised as a special case in relation to their ethnicity, and that wider issues of equality will be missed. In other words, the way they are recognized as a special case confirms their outsider status in relation to the international space of flows that aid has created. It was pointed out that the Sphere Standards and other humanitarian Codes of Conduct that have emerged make no mention of any equity obligations towards local staff or implementing partners. Some thought that, since the security sensitivities surrounding local staff have been known for some time, the more important question relates to implementing partners. Especially, what are an agency’s obligations towards their implementing partner? In many respects, the HQ policy statements on this issue lag behind the initiatives being taken in the field.

These challenges and questions bring to the fore the interfaces and tensions between international, national and local levels of aid delivery, including the role of local governance in the management of aid. In many contexts, host populations have had a long exposure to Western aid and local actors have evolved efficient systems for managing aid inputs. This is becoming more important as a consequence of bunkerisation and remote management which weaken direct management of aid action on the ground by the dominant agencies in the industry. Given that the majority of aid workers are now locally recruited, the local management of aid can be seen as an important facet of ‘de-Westernisation’. But, at the same time, Western concepts and practices of risk management are being imposed on local capacities, communities and relationships, potentially undermining or distorting local humanitarian impulses.

The discussion focused upon how issues of criticality are central to how the aid system understands itself. In the past, aid agencies had used ideas of criticality and the ‘greater good’ to defend their decisions to continue working under authoritarian regimes (e.g. Ethiopia in the mid 1980s). It is interesting that criticality is now being used as a means of assessing acceptable levels of risk that aid workers (both ex-patriots and locals) should be exposed to. Agencies tend to rely on their own judgements and perceptions of the benefit of their actions, but these may not align with how people on the ground experience things: labelling interventions as “life-saving” carries an assumption of importance or criticality which may not be shared by people on the receiving side. Who decides on ‘criticality’? If it is the ‘system’ that decides (UN, etc.), how are local staff involved in determining programme criticality? This problem can be quite fluid, and is closely linked with the ‘crisis of acceptance’. Note that the ‘value for money’ agenda is likely to influence how the criticality of aid programmes is weighed against acceptable risks by donors and the agencies that are reliant on official donor funding. It is also important to scrutinise the quality and reliability of forecasting within the system, as this is central to risk management and the ‘how to stay’ agenda in practice. There is often an assumption that agencies’ forecasting can be relied upon, but this needs to be questioned.

Focusing on resilience (both individual and institutional) raises the question of resilience to what? It was pointed out that since the 1980s, it has been accepted that disasters, risks, etc, are integral to societies and ways of life. They do not exist outside but are inseparable from social and productive relations. This approach has been very useful and influential. It has allowed ideas relating to networks and complexity to be introduced and has shaped how we understand, for example, livelihoods, coping and recovery as constantly changing and emerging processes. There are two ways to develop the idea of risk in relation to this networked and radically interconnected view of society. One comes from ecology and the discovery in the 1970s that populations in the natural world survive on the edge of extinction. They are continually moving between new states of temporary equilibrium. This is central to resilience thinking. Existing on
the edge of extinction gives natural species their evolutionary dynamic. In the application of resilience thinking to risk management, it is now the aid industry that by implication is seen as surviving on the edge of extinction. Much of the how to stay work is trying to identify how close to the edge individuals and organisations can go. However, during the 1970s, there was a different approach to the idea that risk and disaster was integral to social and productive relations. This was a Marxist tradition which saw relations of exploitation and dispossession at the heart of the different levels of vulnerability and exposure to risk that separated rich and poor. It is interesting that these different approaches can lead to different policy-sets. While we have lost this materialist approach over the last couple of decades, is it returning?

Impact

All agreed that it is important to seek an appropriate balance between the academic and practice / policy impact sides of the project, and there was consensus that there would be no value in trying to replicate or duplicate the recent good practice guidance, including the HPN Good Practice Review update and the recent OCHA study led by Harmer and Stoddard. Nor would we have the resources for this. An impact ‘product’ is an important output requirement of the project. It was suggested that it would be very useful to include workshops (local and country levels) and developing a workshop format that can be replicated beyond the life of the project. It would be designed to encourage and facilitate thinking around the key findings and issues coming out of the research. It is also important to think carefully about what is meant by ‘stakeholders’ and ‘stakeholder engagement’ - these are nice labels, but who are they and what will this engagement look like? The project team have been consulting with ODI’s RAPID (research into practice) team on these questions, and are working on the basis of a model of differentiated and evolving engagement as the research progresses at both field and international levels.

Field research in South Sudan

The discussion picked up on how far there had been a reduction of NGOs operating outside of Juba. It was pointed out that changes in aid flow and donor policy can, in addition to perceptions of security, also affect the geographical spread of NGOs. Moreover, changes in aid flow differ between states. Many NGOs, especially, the smaller organisations like faith-based agencies, are also not represented in the official statistics. At the same time, given the variety of aid agencies, there are many different approaches to risk. The extensive OLS security system was dismantled with the CPA. However, the tradition of OLS, for example, in relation to security training still carries on. Aid agencies operating in South Sudan are still governed by things they can and cannot do.

The discussion took up the issue of the militarisation of cattle rustling and consequent involvement of the SPLA in the wider climate of insecurity. There was some disagreement as whether this was just the SPLA. It was pointed out that NGOs are reluctant to cite the SPLA for any security incidents as they are dependent upon the SPLA for access.

The discussion moved to the question of who are the stakeholders for this research, do they include the security firms? It was pointed out that NGOs attempt to distance themselves from security companies. Besides the usual agencies, it was felt that church bodies were an important element within civil society in the South and should be included. Reference groups have their own dynamics and one has to be really clear on which expectations and what the independence of the research means in this context.