

Extending Humanitarian Spaces to NNGOs

A Compelling Bargaining Chip for DfA

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The humanitarian landscape in Afghanistan presents a unique set of challenges that demand innovative solutions. In the context of governance under the De facto Authorities (DfA), a compelling opportunity emerges: legitimizing and expanding operational spaces for National Non-Governmental Organizations (NNGOs). These organizations, as the first responders to emergencies and humanitarian crises, serve as a vital link between the international community and Afghan citizens. Granting NNGOs the ability to function freely and ensuring the inclusion of women within culturally appropriate norms is not merely a gesture of goodwill—it is a transformative strategy that benefits all stakeholders.

The Role of NNGOs: Bridging the Gap

NNGOs are the backbone of Afghanistan's humanitarian response. With deep-rooted connections to local communities, they possess unparalleled knowledge of the cultural, social, and geographical nuances essential for effective aid delivery. Their ability to navigate challenging terrains and foster trust within communities makes them indispensable in addressing acute needs.

However, current restrictions and limited operational spaces hinder their effectiveness. The international community has emphasized the criticality of NNGOs in sustaining humanitarian efforts. UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Martin Griffiths, aptly stated, “Local responders are the first to act and the last to leave. They must be empowered, not restricted.” For Afghanistan, this empowerment means creating an environment where NNGOs can operate without fear, bureaucracy, or undue interference.

A Pragmatic Path for DfA

The DfA stands at a crossroads. By extending humanitarian spaces to NNGOs, they can leverage this as a strategic bargaining chip to gain international recognition and goodwill. This approach offers a multi-dimensional advantage:

1. **International Community Support:** The international community’s commitment to humanitarian principles aligns with the idea of empowering NNGOs. Facilitating their work demonstrates the DfA’s commitment to global humanitarian norms, paving the way for improved diplomatic relations.
2. **Afghan Citizens’ Welfare:** The Afghan people have endured decades of conflict, displacement, and deprivation. Allowing NNGOs to function freely directly addresses their urgent needs, fostering a sense of hope and stability.
3. **UN Collaboration:** The UN’s humanitarian agencies rely heavily on local partners for program implementation. Enhancing NGO capacities aligns with UN mandates and strengthens the global narrative of Afghanistan as a country willing to engage constructively.

Women in Humanitarian Work: Balancing Cultural Sensitivities

A critical component of this strategy is the inclusion of women in humanitarian operations. Afghanistan’s cultural and religious fabric necessitates that women interact with other women for effective service delivery, particularly in areas such as healthcare, education, and psychosocial support. Denying women the opportunity to work in these roles undermines humanitarian efforts and perpetuates inequities.

The DfA can draw on Islamic teachings to legitimize women’s participation within defined cultural parameters. Islam has a rich tradition of supporting women’s involvement in community welfare. The Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) wife, Khadijah (RA), was a successful businesswoman, and Aisha (RA) was an educator and advisor. These examples underscore that women’s contributions to society are both permissible and valuable within Islamic principles.

By framing policies that enable women to work while respecting cultural norms, the DfA can strike a balance that resonates with both domestic and international audiences. This approach not only upholds Islamic values but also enhances the credibility of their governance.

Case Studies: Humanitarian Models that Work

Afghanistan can draw inspiration from similar contexts where humanitarian access and local partnerships have yielded positive outcomes:

1. **Somalia:** Amidst decades of conflict, local NGOs partnered with international organizations to deliver aid in hard-to-reach areas. The Somali government's gradual recognition of these efforts facilitated broader engagement with the international community.
2. **Yemen:** In Yemen, women's participation in humanitarian work has been vital. Despite cultural barriers, local organizations ensured women's involvement in aid delivery, particularly in addressing malnutrition and maternal health.
3. **Nepal:** Following the 2015 earthquake, local NGOs played a pivotal role in relief and recovery efforts. Government support for their operations enhanced the country's resilience and recovery trajectory.

These examples demonstrate that empowering local actors and accommodating cultural sensitivities can create a win-win scenario.

Religious Justification for Humanitarian Actions

Islam places a profound emphasis on compassion, charity, and the collective well-being of society. The Quran declares, "Whoever saves one life, it is as if they saved all of humanity" (Quran 5:32). This verse underscores the sanctity of life and the moral imperative to assist those in need.

Furthermore, **Zakat**, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, obligates Muslims to allocate a portion of their wealth for the welfare of the underprivileged. This principle aligns seamlessly with the objectives of humanitarian work, providing a strong religious foundation for expanding humanitarian spaces in Afghanistan.

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also emphasized the importance of community welfare, stating, "The best of people are those who bring the most benefit to others." This ethos should guide the DfA's approach to enabling NNGOs and women to contribute meaningfully to society.

Recommendations for Action

To capitalize on this opportunity, the DfA must adopt a strategic and collaborative approach:

1. **Establish Clear Guidelines:** Develop transparent policies that outline the operational framework for NNGOs, ensuring accountability while minimizing bureaucratic hurdles.
2. **Facilitate Women's Participation:** Introduce measures that allow women to work within culturally acceptable boundaries, ensuring their safety and dignity.
3. **Strengthen Partnerships:** Foster partnerships between NNGOs, international organizations, and UN agencies to enhance resource mobilization and capacity building.
4. **Engage Religious Leaders:** Collaborate with religious scholars to promote narratives that support humanitarian actions and women's roles within Islamic principles.

Monitor and Evaluate: Establish mechanisms to monitor the impact of expanded humanitarian spaces, ensuring that the intended benefits reach the most vulnerable populations.

The Road Ahead

Extending humanitarian spaces to NNGOs and enabling women's participation is more than a pragmatic solution; it is a moral and strategic imperative. For the DfA, this approach offers a pathway to international legitimacy and domestic stability. For Afghan citizens, it brings hope and

tangible improvements to their lives. For the international community and the UN, it demonstrates a commitment to shared humanitarian principles.

As the world watches, the DfA has an opportunity to lead by example. By embracing this transformative strategy, they can redefine Afghanistan's narrative, not as a land of perpetual conflict but as a nation capable of resilience, compassion, and progress. Let this be a moment where pragmatism and humanity converge, paving the way for a brighter future for all.

--KHARKA Ravi, PhD Research Scholar.