

In conversation with Justine Nola, Deputy Programme Director, Disaster Management Team, Tearfund, Afghanistan

Dr John Neugebauer, Centre for Employment Studies Research (CESR), University of the West of England, Bristol



Few parts of the world have been so war torn for so long as Afghanistan. In response to the 911 attacks in the USA, America stepped up the military campaign in Afghanistan in 2001. The then Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, pointed out that more needed to be done to support the innocent citizens of the country. In addition to this humanitarian aid, the campaign policy for Afghanistan was 'Take, Hold, Build' – recognising that hard-won military gains must be supported by rebuilding of the country.

But even after ten years of the present campaign, fresh challenges come in the shape of planned troop withdrawals, a focus on achieving more through Afghan military and citizens, and continuing allegations of corruption and mismanagement in Afghanistan's central bank, Kabul Bank, through which much overseas aid is channelled.

Amongst those Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) still striving to make a sustainable and real contribution to the people of Afghanistan is UK-based charity, Tearfund, whose Deputy Programme Director in Kabul is Justine Nola.

Justine's story provides a fascinating insight into how careers are developed and managed in overseas aid, and how development and aid organisation priorities are determined.

“*What is the role of Tearfund in Afghanistan?*

Tearfund has been in Afghanistan since 2001 and employs approximately 100 staff (expatriate and local) here on an annual budget of over £2 million. The programme is assisting communities in the northern provinces of Jawzjan and Faryab and the southern province of

Kandahar, along with recent projects in the central provinces of Parwan and Kapisa.

The major focus for the Afghanistan programme is water, sanitation and hygiene. The second area of focus is disaster risk

“Tearfund has been in Afghanistan since 2001 and employs approximately 100 staff (expatriate and local) here on an annual budget of over £2 million.”

reduction, working with government and local communities to establish disaster risk reduction into Afghanistan's development programming to empower vulnerable people in disaster-prone areas. The approach aims to both mobilise government ministries to roll out national disaster risk reduction policy and programmes and to

assist communities to prepare for disasters at a local level, for example, in flood prevention workshops.

Tearfund is also involved in livelihoods and small income-generation activities with communities.

What got you into humanitarian work, and to Kabul?

A couple of things happened as I was growing up which seemed to point me in the direction of humanitarian work. My folks snuck me in to see the adult rated movie 'The Killing Fields' when I was 10 years old which was the true story of a journalist's view of the war in Cambodia in the 1970's. When I was 12 years old there was a speaker at our school assembly who was an aid worker in El Salvador (at that time in civil war) who showed us photos and described his work. Something in me changed from that point onwards. However, I ruled-out humanitarian work in my teenage years to mid-20s, thinking it was only for health professionals (doctors, nurses). I remember the genocide in Rwanda affected me profoundly. Once I had graduated and was in full-time employment in Australia and then Cardiff I did some voluntary work in Croatia, Bosnia, Peru and Bolivia during my summer holidays.

At 28 years old I applied with Tearfund for their Disaster Response Register. That's when the opportunity in Afghanistan first came up and I spent a year out there (2003-4). I returned to Afghanistan in February 2008 with Tearfund and have been working there since.



How does an organisation like Tearfund identify what needs to be done in a host country? Do you ever find yourselves 'competing' with other organisations on aid programmes?

We must be present and in-touch with the provinces that we choose to work in (usually based on the most needy or least-served by NGOs). We'll often have already established relationships with provincial government ministries and other NGOs in the areas that we're interested in working in to be regularly informed of the needs. We base our choice of work and projects on regular needs-assessments. These assess the most needy communities in services such as their lack of access to clean drinking water, their vulnerability to natural disaster such as drought or flooding (sometimes a community will be vulnerable to both!), hygiene practices, and lack of small-scale income opportunities.

We recognise that Tearfund isn't 'expert' at everything, and some agencies are better at responding in certain sectors (such as microfinance or health service provision). We are an agency that builds on what we're good at in order to provide the best quality response for specific communities.

The humanitarian sector often prides itself on its strong coordination, with other NGOs, the UN, international government donors to enable a more comprehensive needs assessment of the people, and to coordinate 'who' responds to 'what' in order to serve the most needy people and their greatest needs.

Realistically, there is always a limited capacity of international government funding so there is often the situation where multiple NGOs are applying for the same donor call.

The role of Tearfund in Afghanistan is clearly very demanding, but what would you say are the key challenges for your local and expatriate colleagues?

Access to the communities we work in on a regular basis (in order to monitor the quality of and needs of the projects) is probably one of our biggest challenges. The security situation is very unpredictable, even in remote or small communities, and it is an issue that we need to review daily in order to keep our staff and the communities as safe as possible.

Government ministries and general bureaucracy is also quite a big challenge within the country, with an increasing number of procedures and requirements. Good relationships with local and provincial government are key in being able to continue our work in communities. Tearfund also has very clear values and a Code of Conduct which makes bribery and staff involvement in corruption unacceptable. Such values do make work somewhat more challenging and time-consuming. However they also make me very proud to be working for Tearfund!

Even so, humanitarian aid workers must be very driven to sustain their performance in a host country. How do you balance work and life especially in conditions as demanding as Afghanistan, and avoid burnout?

I have an album of about 25 different exercise DVDs which keep me sane on most evenings when I am mentally exhausted but still have a lot of pent-up energy from not being able to walk/jog around the place! I also find that life is almost simpler (than the West) when it comes to friendships and rest-time outside of work. I'll often spend my evenings at a friend's house, watching a movie or playing cards or board games. I've also found quiet evenings and weekends

provide a great opportunity to study. I managed to finish my Masters in Afghanistan! Also, Tearfund ensures that we must leave the country at least once every three months on compulsory leave which allows us to breathe in some fresh air and just rest.

Afghanistan is very much on the wider government agenda – does Tearfund have a similar strategy to hand over to Afghan locals? How is this achieved?

We do. Our country framework in Afghanistan sets out how long we anticipate directly working in the country for, based on the current level of need, the political and security environment (which affects the communities we work in and the safety of our staff) and internal capacities within the country. Sadly, we do not anticipate that all of these areas will have improved significantly over the next few years. However, we do review our Exit

Strategy every couple of years to assess whether we need to maintain a directly operational team in the country and the feasibility of handing over project activities to local partner agencies who will carry on the work once we've left.

A conventional commercial organisation with local and expatriate staff would have a significant budget to support learning and development. How do you manage learning and the transfer of knowledge within Tearfund in Afghanistan?

Well, we don't have the significant budget of most conventional commercial organisations to support learning and development. We also don't have many of the conventional types of training activities such as high-quality training courses available in Afghanistan.

All of this forces us to be creative and quite in-house in how we meet staff development needs. For example, we provide

opportunities such as management coaching, job-exchange and shadowing, and in-house workshops. We're also using an aid-agency wide E-learning website (LINGOS) which allows our more theoretical learners to focus on financial, time-management and delegation skills (just some examples!)

Some international government donors support staff development and provide a percentage of the project budget towards this. Other donors don't. Tearfund also provide education-aid to staff to improve their professional qualifications.

Tearfund considers staff learning and development as essential to the capacity-building work that we are involved with within a country. We are signed up to the *People In Aid Code of Conduct* that requires prioritising the development of our staff as one of its seven key principles.

Tearfund also places a lot of importance on learning reviews of projects we have been involved with, along with actively requesting feedback from members of the communities we work with (who, ultimately, are our customers). Such reviews are sometimes uncomfortable short-term but have provided us with incredibly valuable insights and the opportunity to adapt our activities to be better at what we do and work on with communities.

What are typical career paths for an expatriate, and for a local member of staff in Afghanistan?

We're really fortunate to have a great team of staff in all of the locations we work in, and we really try and encourage internal promotion and capacity-building our key staff into higher grade roles when these roles are available. We also recognise that we sometimes need to say goodbye to staff

as they go to the UN or higher-paying contractors or the private sector. We also have had national staff in some of our other programmes who have moved on to international (expat) positions within Tearfund.

For expatriates, we recognise that many expats will only spend about 3-5 years within humanitarian work overseas. On average, Tearfund does retain its expatriate staff in a particular country much longer than most other agencies, usually an average of 18-24 months.

Tearfund often rewards many of its committed staff with interesting areas for their own development (not always 'up' but also 'across' the organisation structure, and sometimes roles in the UK).

It's also important to realise that Tearfund is not big enough to support structured career paths for every staff member, and that staff

"Tearfund considers staff learning and development as essential to the capacity-building work that we are involved with within a country."

may need to step across to other organisations (as I did a few years ago) in order to gain experience and breadth to possibly rejoin Tearfund in the future.

So where next and what next?

Who knows?! I am on secondment to the Democratic Republic of the Congo until the end of the year and then hope to be in Afghanistan for 2012.

”

