

## Afghan Staff, the Brokers of the Intervention



The village of Bot Khak, winter 2007. Salim is talking with the members of the *shura* in Dari, breaking off from time to time to inform me of the main points of the discussion. This relates to living conditions in the village, particularly housing and water supply, as the Kabul Sub-Office has to decide which are the most ‘vulnerable’ of the villages housing returnees and which will be funded in the following year. To avoid setting up expectations, Salim does not reveal that this is an ‘need assessment’, pretending he is simply looking for feedback on projects carried out this year. After the meeting, he insists on a tour of the village, in order to corroborate the information provided by the *shura*, who Salim suspects of resource tapping. His suit and shirt, his uncovered head and his well-trimmed, relatively short beard contrast with the *shakwar kameez*, blankets and long beards of those he is speaking with. Although he is holding them discreetly, he is the only one with a notebook and pen. On return to the office, he will write up his report in the Sub-Office’s bureaucratic language of indicators.

The functioning of the UNHCR is based on the articulation of two distinct groups of staff: expatriates (or ‘international staff’) and staff recruited locally (‘national staff’). The former are recruited centrally, from among all nationalities, and circulate from one posting to another. The latter are recruited in the country where the UNHCR is intervening, remain there, and are associated with the organisation only for the duration of its presence there.<sup>1</sup> The respective distribution of the two groups within the organisation is complementary. In 2007 over 30% of ‘international’ officers were concentrated in Geneva, and of the thirty expatriates in the Afghan Operation, nineteen worked at the Branch Office. Away from Headquarters ‘national’ staff are substantially in the majority: 80% of the organisation’s employees were local, spread across the

various missions. In Afghanistan about 90% of the staff were ‘nationals’. Half of the Afghan staff were drivers, cleaners and other service personnel. The other half were ‘professionals’ who supported the expatriate staff in managing programmes.<sup>2</sup>

These simple figures give an idea of how important ‘national’ staff are in rooting the UNHCR in the locations where the organisation intervenes. Yet little attention is devoted in the literature to staff recruited locally by aid organisations. The few studies on this subject (Ong and Combinido 2018; Redfield 2012; Roth 2012; Shevchenko and Fox 2008) focus mainly on the inequality between expatriate and local staff, and the way in which this inequality plays out and is managed and indeed reproduced within humanitarian organisations. This division is very evident in the UNHCR and for me, as I note below, constituted a significant methodological barrier. But while it is important to analyse this division, in order to study the UNHCR’s action in Afghanistan, it is equally important to consider the role of Afghan staff in the concrete implementation of programmes and the social transformations that go alongside them.

Development anthropology offers useful tools in this respect. Norman Long and the authors who follow the line of his work (Arce and Long 1993; Bierschenk et al. 2000; Lewis and Mosse 2006; Long 1989) have drawn attention to the interface between local populations and aid institutions, as a key terrain for studying the social processes and power relations that are an integral part of aid projects. Taking an interactionist perspective, they analyse the various meanings given to interactions depending on the position of the actors, the way in which meanings and identities are produced and negotiated in interactions, the strategies of actors and the role of intermediaries. Attention is focused primarily on ‘local development brokers’, actors established in a local arena who represent the local population in interactions with external funding structures. Researchers have emphasised the strategies deployed by these brokers to capture and redistribute external resources, which often go hand in hand with strategies for social and political self-promotion (Bierschenk et al. 2000; Blundo 1995). The role of *maleks* (notables) in the camps in Pakistan in the 1990s (Centlivres and Centlivres-Dumont 1999: 951; Edwards 1986: 319–20), and the constitution of the *shuras* in Afghanistan (Centlivres and Centlivres-Dumont 1999) are examples of this configuration.

In this chapter I will show how, by virtue of their position at the interface between Afghan society and an international organisation, the UNHCR’s Afghan staff too were caught up in an equally crucial role of brokerage. Although within the organisation it is seen as no more than a simple job of linguistic translation and relaying international norms, this brokering role is much more complex. It performs an essential function for the organisation, preserving the consistency of its programmes in a country in which its

rationale is little understood, challenged and indeed contested by part of the population. I will first consider the relationship between Afghan and expatriate staff in the Kabul office, and will then situate the Afghan employees in Afghan society and show that their engagement with the UNHCR formed part of strategies for survival and sociopolitical promotion in an uncertain context. I will then turn to the function of mediation at the heart of their work in order to see what it consisted of, what tensions were inherent within it and what functions it performed for the UNHCR's action in the country.

### **The Gulf between Expatriate and Afghan Staff**

The articulation between two categories of staff with a complementary relationship to the contexts of intervention is fundamental to the operation of the UNHCR's apparatus. It enables the organisation to intervene in many geographically, culturally, linguistically and politically distinct contexts while retaining an overall level of consistency. The 'international' staff form the pivot of the organisation, as bearers of its institutional culture, its purportedly universal frames of reference and norms – the hard kernel that holds the fragmented mechanism together and guarantees its unity. The 'national' staff enable the organisation to adapt to heterogeneous contexts, to anchor itself locally and to carry out its activities in these diverse contexts.

The Afghan agents, bulwarks of the UNHCR in Afghanistan, anchored the organisation in the country, guaranteed its institutional continuity there and became the brokers of its activity. With the language barrier and the travel restrictions to which expatriates were subject, their role expanded during the 2000s. Everyday follow-up of programmes was thus in fact conducted mainly by Afghan officers. Depending on their role, they interacted directly with the organisation's Afghan interlocutors in the country: local political leaders, administrative authorities, media, local NGOs and so on. For their expatriate colleagues, they were essential intermediaries to the accomplishment of their mission.

Yet despite the complementarity of their roles, there was a clear hierarchy between the two categories of staff. Managerial posts were occupied only by expatriates, whose salaries were also far higher. Discussion of the most important decisions and debates on the most sensitive questions were always conducted exclusively among expatriates. The opinion of Afghan officers might be more or less highly valued, depending on the degree of trust they had established with their closest expatriate colleagues, but they were still hierarchically subordinate. Whatever their age or their length of service, every two years they had to account to a new expatriate. Unlike the 'international' staff, they were not deemed to be posted to a 'hard duty station', with all the

ensuing benefits in terms of enhanced salary, housing provision, etc. The procedures for evacuation in situations of extreme danger applied only to the expatriate staff.

The 'international' staff's superiority also played out on the cognitive level. Expatriates were the holders of the expert knowledge that is most highly valued in the organisation (see also Roth 2012; Shevchenko and Fox 2008), on the refugee paradigm, the functioning and institutional culture of the organisation, international refugee law and funders' priorities. Knowledge of the local context and proximity to the field – the expertise that 'national' staff were acknowledged to have – was of course important and gave them some authority, but it was less highly valued. This knowledge was supposed to enable the 'national' staff to apply and relay the organisation's policies, not to question their relevance or appropriateness to the local context. Expatriates and 'nationals' often emphasised the benefits in terms of 'learning' that Afghan employees gained through this UN employment. Expatriate employees often felt they had an 'educator' role in relation to their Afghan subordinates, for whom numerous workshops were also organised. For the organisation, the aim of these sessions was primarily to train its local staff, but also to reduce inequality between the two categories by giving temporary staff a skill set that would help them in their future careers.

This hierarchy is fully accepted by the organisation and its expatriate staff. Within the UNHCR, as in many other aid organisations, this difference in treatment derives from the high value placed on expatriates' distance from the context where they intervene. 'International' staff can thus claim to guarantee the organisation's objectivity and 'neutrality': since they come from outside and stay for a limited time, they are deemed to be above local power relations and to have no personal interests in the local context.<sup>3</sup> From this point of view, the allegiance and neutrality of staff recruited locally, who are caught up in local power relations, is always in doubt. In the Branch Office, expatriates often expressed a degree of distrust towards their Afghan colleagues – they worried about potential diversion of resources, following criteria that did not conform to those of the organisation. There were rumours in the office that several Afghan colleagues had been dismissed for misappropriation of funds.

In the Kabul office in 2008, this hierarchy and these disparities were materialised in a dense social barrier between expatriate and Afghan staff. This division was the strongest marker of alterity within the office, and obstructed socialisation between the two categories of staff. The spatial separation described in Chapter 5 was reinforced by administrative arrangements that limited the opportunity for interaction still further. The hierarchy of posts meant that it was rare for an expatriate and an Afghan to share an office. There were two Human Resources departments and two separate email distribution lists. The measures Saverio took to reduce this barrier – increasing the number of

meetings of all staff and encouraging expatriates to use the cafeteria – did little to change the situation.

Among expatriates, one of the consequences of this social barrier was a fixed perception of their Afghan colleagues en masse as ‘prototypical Afghans’. This image, which was consistent with the role assigned them in the organisation, was reinforced by expatriates’ segregated accommodation and the language barrier, as ‘national’ colleagues were often the only Afghans with whom expatriates had the opportunity to talk. Thus, Afghan colleagues were considered the experts on Afghanistan and its history and culture, and became the spokespeople for a world that remained largely unknown to expatriates. At the beginning of my mission, I often asked my Afghan colleagues’ advice on whether foreign women should cover their heads: did they recommend I should? In which situations? Over time, I realised that assigning them this role, while at the same time failing to understand their social position in Afghan society and the effects of the barrier between expatriate and Afghan colleagues, could lead to deceptive simplifications. Was the driver who invited me to leave my head uncovered not in fact giving me a message about his own beliefs? Viewing the veil as unimportant is a marker of belonging to an educated and ‘progressive’ urban social class. It is also a way of presenting the country to foreigners as on the path towards ‘civilisation’, stating a view consistent with the expectations of expatriates. And how could my Afghan colleague tell me he was in favour of the headscarf in the field when a woman who ranked above him, who was present in the room, did not wear one?

For their part, Afghan colleagues readily lent themselves to playing the ‘authentic Afghan’ and the ‘well-versed local’. Such assigned roles were often accepted and even claimed, sometimes going as far as identifying with the entire Afghan population, for whom they made themselves spokespeople. For example, at farewell ceremonies for expatriate staff, the ‘national’ staff often spoke in the name of the ‘Afghan people’ to thank the departing member of staff for helping the country. Adopting this role can be seen as a way of establishing one’s authority in accordance with institutional criteria: since expert knowledge of the context of intervention is precisely what justifies the importance of ‘national’ staff, playing this role was a way of defending their autonomy and their scope for action within the organisation. This analysis aligns with that of Peters (2016) in her study of local staff in Angola: conforming to the expectations of the institution is a way of retaining a job that has many advantages.

The bureaucratic divide between ‘international’ and ‘national’ adds to broader sociopolitical differences that go beyond the organisation. These inequalities become meaningful on the global political stage, a stage that the organisation itself materialises through its UN cosmopolitics, and by bringing together individuals from contexts far removed from one another. Thus, expatriates embodied a privileged ‘global’ elite (first-class citizens of the world),

while their Afghan colleagues became the representatives of a subaltern population (second-class citizens of the world). This polarisation deepens the gulf, making it still more unbridgeable.

Two forms of inequality frequently emerged in exchanges with colleagues and in office life. The first was the experience of violence. Speaking with an Afghan colleague about their life, you would immediately realise that they had direct experience of war (violence personally experienced, the loss of close family members, etc.). It was often through colleagues' stories that I was able to get a more concrete picture of the phases of the conflict, which I had only read about in books. Of course, a number of expatriates had also experienced violence in the contexts where they had intervened, but in their case they experienced it in the context of their work, as the consequence of a professional choice. The other inequality was the extremely limited legal pathways for Afghan employees to emigrate, whereas international mobility is second nature to expatriates. This inequality was recurrently manifested even in work: organising foreign missions for Afghan staff was often extremely complicated. Despite their status as UN employees, as Afghan citizens their mobility was strictly contained: travel to the countries concerned was authorised only for the event they were to attend and sometimes they were not even allowed to leave stopover airports.<sup>4</sup>

These inequalities affected relations between colleagues and often made it impossible to establish links beyond the context of work. For expatriates, the awareness of belonging to a privileged class reinforced their determination to train colleagues, to help them through administrative procedures and even to sponsor them financially, creating paternalistic relationships. This awareness could also generate a feeling of discomfort that paralysed the relationship. Among Afghan employees, I noted a tendency to see expatriates as representative of 'foreigners' – 'foreigners' to be made aware of the subaltern condition of Afghanistan and its people, or to be 'exhibited' as prestigious guests at weddings.

I got a measure of the depth of the gulf between expatriates and 'nationals' when a car bomb hit the expatriate district. When I arrived at the office profoundly shaken and thoughtful, I realised that it was very difficult to talk openly about this event with my closest Afghan colleague. Indeed, he seemed almost embarrassed by my state: what was I worried about? I could leave whenever I wanted. And in case of a major security issue, the UN would evacuate me. I also realised that for someone with personal experience of the civil war, who was regularly threatened by the Taliban and had already had his house looted twice, it was incomprehensible that I should be so upset by simply hearing an explosion.

The division between Afghan and expatriate staff, and the play of preconceptions that arose with it, had powerful methodological repercussions for my

fieldwork and the first stages of my analysis. Any interaction with Afghan employees was strongly influenced by our respective status. My status as an ‘international’ employee led me to develop a victimising perspective on Afghan colleagues, reinforced by the inequalities of which I was strongly aware and that I found unsettling, and also by the way in which my colleagues themselves presented themselves to me. In these conditions it was difficult to ask myself (before asking *them*) how working for the UNHCR changed their subjectivities and their view of the world, for example.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to providing information on social relations within a UNHCR office in the field, recognising this deep division and the way in which it shapes relations between employees shows how the diffuse bureaucracy of the UNHCR, which stretches over social realities far removed from one another, is shaped from the inside by inequalities that operate worldwide. But analysis needs to go beyond these observations. Seeing Afghan employees purely through the lens of their relation with their expatriate colleagues fixes them in a power relationship and fails to take account either of their relation to the organisation or of the important role they play in the implementation of programmes. In the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on another interface – that between foreign aid workers and Afghan society, and the way in which the UNHCR’s Afghan staff operate in this context.

### Which ‘Locals’?

The UNHCR’s Afghan staff comprised individuals of diverse geographical origin, ethnicity and political orientation. Some of them were or came from families that had been close to the communist regime and had spent time in Russia; others were or came from families close to the Mujahideen and grew up in Pakistan. What characterised the UNHCR Afghan staff in Kabul in the 2000s (and also linked them to some other Afghans employed as ‘national’ staff by international organisations) was that they belonged to an educated urban elite, in contact with foreigners, in a country where education is not widespread and the rural world remains very remote from international organisations, and indeed distrusts them. In the scene I described at the start of this chapter, Salim wears the symbols of urban technocratic power (his clothing, his hairstyle and his ballpoint pen), contrasting with the council of a rural village. The social class to which the UNHCR’s Afghan staff belonged was an intermediate elite. While they were clearly distinguished from the recipients of UNHCR programmes, they were also separate from the high political and economic elite, which consisted of men of power who occupied key positions in the state administration, and of those who controlled drug trafficking.

Within the UNHCR, Afghan employees were assigned and adopt the status of 'local', in recognition of their supposed familiarity with the context of intervention and their proximity to the 'field'. Yet most of them were not 'local' in the literal sense of the term. Paradoxically, very often the immediate reason for their presence in the field was precisely their employment with the UNHCR. Most of them had not always lived in Afghanistan, the conflict having led them to leave the country for shorter or longer periods. Some of them did not come from Kabul, but moved there when they were appointed; others lived in the Central Region and returned to their families at weekends. Furthermore, many of them retained an outward focus: their families were often transnational and working for the UNHCR was, as I will note below, generally considered a springboard that would enable them and subsequent generations to leave Afghanistan.

Salim came from Kabul and studied civil engineering there. During the communist period, he worked for the government; the Taliban then removed him from his post, and he found employment with an NGO. But the Taliban continued to harass him, particularly because the NGO was grounded in a Christian ideology. Fearing arrest, he left for Pakistan, where he lived for years working for other NGOs. After 2001, he returned to Afghanistan, attracted partly by the opportunities offered by construction companies and UN agencies. After a year with Action Against Hunger, in 2003 he was recruited by the UNHCR as Field Officer. Soraya was a young Pashtun woman from an important family in eastern Afghanistan. She came from a younger generation, but her career path had been similar. She grew up between Kabul and Jalalabad, and then left Afghanistan under the Taliban regime in the mid-1990s. After studying in Peshawar in Pakistan, she started working for NGOs. In early 2002 she returned to Afghanistan, where she was soon taken on by the UNHCR.

In most cases, belonging to relatively well-off kin groups did not spare the Afghan staff from the war, but gave them more options than those available to the vast majority of the population. Their socioeconomic resources also enabled them to make the most of exile. Many of them have lived in Pakistani cities – mainly Peshawar, Quetta and Islamabad. In addition to gaining a secondary education, they learned English and IT skills there, two fundamental assets for working in an international organisation. Very often they had prior experience working for NGOs in Pakistan. It was thus natural for them to follow the new epicentre of international aid programmes, reinvesting the linguistic and professional capital acquired in exile.

The arrival en masse of international organisations after 2001 resulted in a high demand for English-speaking Afghans with IT skills, preferably with experience working for NGOs. Working for an international organisation thus became an attractive possibility – some even returned with the intention of



finding a job under the auspices of the international reconstruction project. In other countries, their skills would not be valued to the same extent, as the experience of family members living in America or Europe showed: despite their qualifications, they were working as drivers or petrol station attendants, or, in the best case, had started a small business.

Given the mobility and careers of the UNHCR's Afghan employees, it is difficult to describe them as 'local' in the sense of a permanent presence in the country as natives. But the term acquires meaning when contrasted with the 'international' staff and if we take into account the 'gravitational force' that the Afghan context exerted on their field of possibility. Unlike their expatriate colleagues, who were freed from the sociopolitical context of their country of origin, their choices and strategies continued to be impacted by political developments in Afghanistan (conflicts, reconstruction project, resumption of conflict, etc.). Unwilling or, much more often, unable to radically detach themselves from their origins, their strategies for geographical, social and professional mobility remained linked to the Afghan political context. Even if they were to migrate to Europe, the recognition of their refugee status (virtually the only possible route to legal immigration) would depend on the situation in Afghanistan. As Redfield (2012: 360, 365) notes, what characterises 'national' employees is the 'gravity of local attachment': while expatriates, 'materially heavy and socially light', are 'swept away by distant concerns', 'national' staff, who are 'materially light and socially heavy', remain 'stolidly set, a repetitive actor in local history'.

### A Job That Opened Doors

While in 2002 the geopolitical context made returning to Afghanistan and a UN job attractive prospects, the evolution of the conflict gradually altered the situation. Certainly, for most Afghans who had lived through the civil war, the Taliban regime and the US air strikes, the period from 2007 to 2008 was relatively stable. But the rising power of the Taliban placed all those Afghans who were cooperating with international organisations in a difficult position. With the escalation in violence in the country after 2005, they had become the targets of brutal acts (murders and kidnappings) and intimidation<sup>6</sup> (Giustozzi 2007: 105–35; United Nations General Assembly 2008: 3). In 2007 the situation was less oppressive in Kabul than in the south of the country, but UNHCR staff were also affected. The risks were so real that paradoxically, employees of humanitarian organisations were among those eligible for refugee status, under the category 'Afghans associated with international organisations and the security forces' (UNHCR 2007c: 72–73). Present insecurity was compounded by future precarity: in the event that the Taliban returned to

Kabul, they would immediately find themselves on the ‘wrong side’. Unable to leave, they would have to suffer the consequences.

Nevertheless, a job with the UNHCR offered a number of ways to deal with uncertainty. In this sense, engagement in the organisation’s work was one of the strategies deployed for survival or for social advancement. It was not only the desire to work for a cause (the future of the country, the reconstruction process and the fate of refugees) that motivated Afghan employees, but also the necessity of meeting their everyday needs and the uncertainty of the political context, as well as the aspiration towards social and/or political advancement. There were four main resources that a UN job offered ‘national staff’: financial security, the possibility of involvement in politics, a professional capital that could be drawn on in the future, in Afghanistan or elsewhere, and routes to leaving the country. I will now consider these four resources in more detail.

In the first place, these jobs were particularly attractive from a financial point of view. They offered a regular salary well above the average, in a country where the normal income on the informal market was three dollars a day. UN salaries were approximately twice those offered by NGOs and bore no comparison to those in the national administration. As an indication, in 2007 the director of a provincial office of the Ministry of Refugees received a salary of \$130 a month, while a cleaner employed by the UNHCR earned almost twice that. Such a salary was a means of financial advancement for that person and their family. The money was often redistributed among family and community members, enabling the UN employee to acquire an important status in these circles and consolidate their solidarity networks. The money was also invested in children’s education in order to facilitate family advancement through the generations. Salim, for example, encouraged his eldest son to go to India, where he would be able to fund his university studies and enable him to find work easily when he returned to Afghanistan. This money also constitutes a safety net in the event of the resumption of hostilities, making it easier to emigrate. The disadvantage is that such people become the target of the organised criminal networks that have proliferated in the cities, who engage in looting and kidnapping for ransom, often with impunity. Many of the UNHCR’s Afghan employees had been victims of armed robbery: Tahir, for example, told of how one evening, armed men had burst into his house, tied him up in front of his wife and his mother, and taken all they could find.

For some of the UNHCR’s Afghan employees, the job was also a way of making a commitment to the future of their country and/or for the benefit of the Afghan people. A number of colleagues told me they wanted to contribute to the reconstruction of the country. The differing cases of two young female employees sensitive to the condition of Afghan women show both that the terms and modalities of this commitment could vary widely depending on the

person (their social position, values, position in the organisation and so on) and that such a commitment did not necessarily equate to total adherence to the organisation's values and aims.

Hadija was a young woman who worked in the Administration department at the Branch Office in Kabul. She was from an urban family in Herat and had grown up in Pakistan. She was always in full make-up, wore tight jeans and bright colours, and did not cover her head when she was at the office. These clothing choices did not go without saying: even in her social milieu, her style of dress, coupled with the fact that she worked, expressed her claim to belong to an educated and progressive Afghan elite, and were also ways of laying claim to a new place for women in this environment. Her male colleagues, some of whom were unused to seeing women dressed this way, formed part of her audience, for they had to interact with her professionally and show respect for this woman in the workplace.

Soraya was a young Pashtun woman who worked in the Kabul Sub-Office as Field Officer. She saw her job as a commitment to the Afghan people, particularly the women. She felt it was vital that they had access to education. She always kept her head carefully covered and wore loose, dark-coloured clothing – a style that many expatriates, who see the veil as a symbol of the oppression of Afghan women, would describe as very 'traditional'. But for Soraya, the headscarf was essential to her fight. She wanted to show those she interacted with in the field that being an educated woman, who worked and interacted with 'foreigners', was not incompatible with being a respectable Muslim Pashtun woman. She wanted the most conservative village leaders not to be afraid for their daughters to become like her. She therefore presented herself as a positive and acceptable model.

As well as offering financial capital and an opportunity to contribute to their country, working for the UN also enabled people to acquire a professional capital – what could be called 'international capital' – that could open doors in the near or more distant future. Working in English, in constant contact with expatriates, and following training and language improvement courses offered by the organisation opened the door to spending time in international and multicultural environments, acquiring language skills and also understanding the reasoning of international organisations (the rudiments of international law, the terminological and conceptual registers of the world of international cooperation and familiarity with international standards). They also acquired a technocratic knowhow in bureaucratic procedures and administrative management, as well as brokering skills that I consider below – in other words, the capacity to act as intermediaries between Afghan interlocutors and foreign agents. These skills combined with a social capital constituted by the relationships they formed with a large number of expatriate colleagues.

The fourth and final resource that a job with the UNHCR could offer was the chance to move out of the country in the short term. Many of the UNHCR's Afghan employees aspired to this, particularly the younger ones and those most exposed to danger. The outside world, especially Europe and the United States, exerted a strong attraction. Walking around the Branch Office, you would come across the CD of a German course a colleague was following at the Goethe Institute, and then hear another repeating a few basic phrases in Polish. Others were taking language courses at the French embassy. With the exception of the young women waiting to join their husbands in Europe under the family reunification programme, for most this aspiration faced the obstacle of the very limited number of legal channels for leaving the region. Contact with expatriate colleagues could then become a precious resource, sometimes manifested in access to information, as was the case with the watchman at my residence. An American colleague had told him about the US visa lottery, and then helped him to write and submit his application. I was asked several times about the procedure and criteria for obtaining Schengen visas. For the watchman Jaweed, the support of UNHCR managers was key to his success in obtaining a visa.

For a minority of Afghan employees, promotion to the status of 'international' staff, which was highly competitive and subject to very stringent conditions, became the means to escape the weight of the local context and radically alter their field of possibilities. From this point of view, employment with a UN agency represented an important springboard. Tests were regularly organised internally, and the skills acquired combined with the support of expatriate colleagues were often crucial factors in passing them.

Studies of the internationalisation of elites prove fully relevant to the case of Afghan employees of the UNHCR. Certainly, the studies by Wagner (2007) and Dezalay (2004) focus on the upper echelons of national elites, and in the Afghan context the central focus is on pragmatic survival strategies rather than deliberate tactics for accumulating power. Nevertheless, here too, the internationalisation of Afghan employees of the UNHCR – first through privileged expatriation and then through employment with an international organisation – is a determining factor in the formation and reproduction of a privileged class. The capital acquired through the first expatriation gave them access to their current employment, which will furnish resources for the future, regardless of whether or not they stay in Afghanistan.

### **Bridging the Gap between Disconnected Worlds**

Located at the interface between Afghan society and an international organisation, the Afghan employees of the UNHCR acted as mediators between

these two worlds, each with its own universe of meaning, such that mediation involved constantly juggling between different registers and understandings. But the relation between these two worlds was also a power relation, for during the 2000s, international organisations held a great deal of sway in Afghanistan. The language barrier extended the Afghan staff's mediating role, since in fact the organisation delegated the concrete negotiation of its legitimacy, its reputation and its local policies almost entirely to them – particularly to the employees entrusted with interacting with its Afghan partners.

The most salient feature of the interface between these two worlds was the breadth of the distance between them. Edwards and Centlivres emphasise the incommensurable difference between the humanitarian ethos – egalitarian, individualist, secular and depersonalised – and the Pashtun ethos, grounded in self-determination, social reciprocity, a code of honour, the religious ethics of Islam and bonds with lineage groups (Edwards 1986; Centlivres 1988). Centlivres also points out that mutual aid in Afghanistan is not based on the principle of humanity, but works on a more localised scale, according to different rationales:

for Afghans, humanitarian aid sits outside of the charitable precepts that govern the Muslim community and beyond the rules of solidarity and tribal assistance. (Centlivres and Centlivres-Dumont 1999: 958)

Afghans, particularly in rural areas, often find it difficult to understand the bureaucratic rationality of international aid bodies. Prior to 2001, the concepts of human rights, humanitarian aid and development were alien to Afghanistan. Furthermore, given the limited presence of the state across the territory, in the early 2000s the people were not used to interacting with bureaucratic institutions. Notwithstanding the quantity of external actors, their modes of operation, criteria for intervention and objectives remain obscure for a large part of the Afghan population. Several Afghan Field Officers told me that the majority of the rural population 'puts all foreigners in the same box'; in other words, they cannot distinguish between military and humanitarian personnel, between government bodies and NGOs, between the UN and NGOs, and so on. These bodies are all designated by the single term *mu'asisa* – organisations.

The gulf was deepened by the generalised mistrust and even hostility towards foreigners. History teaches Afghans to distrust interventions from outside. This goes back to the arrival of the British and their abortive attempts to conquer and colonise the region in the second half of the nineteenth century. Since the Soviet invasion in 1979, everything that has come from outside has been associated with conflict: military invasion and external aid have often gone hand in hand. In 2007 air strikes were deeply unpopular, reinforcing the disappointment generated by the lack of concrete results from development

projects (Donini 2006). The people wondered how the billions of dollars disbursed to the country had been spent, when they had seen so little change in their everyday lives. The presence of NATO forces was often likened to an ‘occupation’ dominated by US interests, a reminder of the Soviet occupation (Daulatzai 2006: 304). Some colleagues told me that when they went to the villages, they were seen as spokespeople for the Americans, and that in other very remote villages they were even taken for Russians. The PR officer, who often appeared on television and was well known in Kabul, told me that his friends often jokingly called him a ‘slave of the United States’.

Distrust of foreigners was also apparent at the level of values. Aid programmes are rooted in a desire for social change, based on principles of democratisation and the fight for women’s rights, which can be misinterpreted in a country where Islam informs all aspects of social and political life (Centlivres and Centlivres-Dumont 1999: 953; Daulatzai 2006; Roy 2004). The most sensitive areas were women and *sharia* law. Foreigners were seen as the bearers of incompatible values, if not corrupt customs, in terms of the position of women and the consumption of alcohol, for example.

I have already addressed several aspects of the UNHCR’s ways of thinking. Here I will emphasise two points. The first is the fact that the values and norms of refugee law are conveyed via the intervention of a managerial and bureaucratic logic comprised of allocation criteria (‘vulnerability’, ‘needs’, ‘high-return villages’), objectives to be achieved and schedules – precisely the kind of logic that was unknown in rural Afghanistan in the 1990s. Second, this logic, used by expatriates, does not lend itself to negotiations of substance, requiring only to be *applied* in the field. For expatriates, its legitimacy derives from the interstate sphere and the presumed universality of the values upheld by the UN. It goes alongside an eschatological understanding of international refugee law: where it is not ‘yet’ applied, the aim is to disseminate it. These norms are not set on the same level as those that govern the life of much of Afghan society (lineage solidarity, codes of honour, etc.), which are reduced to ‘cultural’ or ‘social’ practices.

Afghan employees operated at the crossroads between these two worlds. They navigated the interface between international aid and Afghan contexts, and their work consisted precisely of bridging the gap between them. The difference between the two worlds generated tensions that the Afghan staff had to contend with directly.

It often happened, for example, that the expectations of the population conflict with the UNHCR’s allocation criteria. Afghan employees then had to explain why the organisation could not provide the expected aid. This could be very delicate, especially in the case of people who, despite their manifestly distressed situation, did not ‘fall within the mandate’ of the organisation. Such was the case in very poor villages that had not received enough returnees, or

Afghans who, owing to their undocumented residence in Iran or Pakistan, could not be considered 'returnees' even though they had spent very long periods outside the country.

This gap between international and local norms became powerfully apparent during the crisis over expulsions from Iran in April 2007, when the UNHCR's position provoked total incomprehension, and indeed anger and outrage, in the Afghan media and among the Afghan population: why was the UNHCR not coming to the defence of deportees, who in Afghanistan were considered 'refugees' (see Chapter 7)? Nourullah, the PR officer, was on the front line, especially during the first few days when the UNHCR's official position had not yet been determined and the media were hysterical. Constantly interrogated by journalists, he faced often aggressive and accusatory questions. He had to be very careful in the statements he made in order to untangle the unintelligible situation that had arisen and defend the organisation's reputation, while showing sensitivity to the objections. One day, returning from a press conference, he told me he had been deeply shaken by one explicitly moral question. As he was explaining that, from the point of view of international law, the Iranian authorities had the right to deport these Afghans, he was asked: 'As an Afghan, are you not angry at the treatment of the deportees?' He had stood dumbfounded in front of the microphone for several seconds.

The UNHCR's Afghan staff repeatedly had to defend the organisation's legitimacy within local arenas of power, when the organisation's very presence destabilised the balance of power. Aid could become a stake in conflicts between solidarity groups and notables, and the organisation's activity could also contribute to weakening the legitimacy of a given actor and provoke his hostility. Hassan, for example, worked as Protection Officer at a UNHCR Sub-Office. His role was to report human rights violations. He told me how he had often been threatened by local commanders or had been prevented from entering a particular area or village. He recalled, with still visible agitation, the time when he unwittingly interviewed a commander known for having perpetrated atrocities during the civil war, who had introduced himself as a member of the *shura* and whose identity he had discovered only afterwards.

The tapping strategies of the UNHCR's Afghan interlocutors also had to be regularly managed. The leaders of a group might absorb what they had observed to be the criteria for allocation of international organisations and NGOs, and attempt to obtain aid, or more aid, using tapping strategies well understood in development sociology. They would highlight the 'vulnerability' and 'needs' of their location, or point out widows or sick people during visits by organisations. We observed this in the village of Bot Khak when Salim went there on mission, where the members of the *shura* inflated the number of returnees and emphasised the gaps and therefore the inadequacy of

projects implemented up to that point. In these contexts, UNHCR staff have to demonstrate lucidity and diplomacy: they need to be able to construct a realistic overview that will be recognised as such by their colleagues and make it possible to allocate funding to the villages in accordance with the organisation's criteria, while maintaining relationships with the village leaders, whose collaboration is essential in order to complete projects successfully.

There was a further challenge in presenting themselves as credible and respectable actors to interlocutors who were distrustful or even hostile towards international organisations. Their proximity to 'foreigners' often sparked challenges and suspicions of both financial and moral corruption. This was even more the case for women: working for an international organisation equated to putting one's respectability at risk not only in the field, in the context of work, but also in daily life. Some female colleagues told me of the strong social pressure they felt: even those in their close circle regarded them with distrust and sometimes contempt. Persistent rumours circulated in Kabul that Afghan women were all required to uncover their heads when they entered international offices. Soraya refused several proposals of marriage from men who asked her to stop working for the UN.

What was at play in these situations often went unnoticed by expatriate colleagues. When they arrived in the field, the expatriate had the impression that attention is focused on them, whereas it was the behaviour of the Afghan staff that made the difference. Whether the expatriate officer covered her head or took off her shoes in the village meeting room can be much less important than where her female Afghan colleague was seated in the car. If she sat next to a male colleague – an immoral proximity according to local codes – it might affect not only her reputation but also that of the expatriate colleagues accompanying her, the UNHCR as an organisation and, by extension, all international organisations in the country.

### **Intervention Brokers**

The typical situations described above show that the role of Afghan staff cannot be reduced simply to that of translating or relaying information that the organisation assigned to them. It was a much more crucial and complex role of brokering that required specific skills and a considerable personal commitment. The skills Afghan employees demonstrated went well beyond simple linguistic competence and familiarity with the context that the organisation valued them for: in order to manage the kind of situations described above, they needed tact, diplomatic skills and, above all, the capacity to continually change register depending on whether they were speaking with expatriate colleagues or the organisation's Afghan interlocutors. Jonathan Ong and Pamela



Combinido (2018) point to a ‘mental mobility’ and an ‘epistemological openness’ that expatriate colleagues lack. The responsibilities that Afghan employees effectively took on were also important ones, since they had to negotiate the reputation and legitimacy of the organisation on the ground. Finally, while expatriates were sometimes doubtful about ‘national’ colleagues’ loyalty to the organisation, it is clear that whatever their personal values, they demonstrated serious commitment, since they embodied the organisation, imposed its way of thinking and established its power in Afghanistan, presenting themselves individually as its representatives, and thereby putting their reputation and sometimes even their safety on the line.

A consideration of the UNHCR Afghan staff’s brokering role opens at least two fertile avenues for analysing the UNHCR’s activity ‘in context’ (Fresia 2009b): the functions this brokering role performs for the UNHCR as an institution, and for its intervention in Afghanistan.

First, the institutionally undervalued activity of brokering by the Afghan staff helps to reproduce and mitigate the gap between the two worlds they straddle. David Lewis and David Mosse’s edited volume (2006) shows that rather than putting two worlds of meaning in direct communication, the translation operations inherent to the implementation of aid projects tend instead to reproduce the gap between them. It is by reproducing the disjunctions that translation holds incommensurable worlds in connection and thus helps to preserve the coherence of a given project. This is a heuristic thesis. In fact, most of what happened in the field, managed by the Afghan staff and then translated into the institution’s language, did not filter through to most expatriate colleagues, and hence to the organisation’s official accounts that the latter were in charge of.

Afghan staff’s brokering thus preserved the ignorance of the expatriate staff (for whom the Afghan context and the stakes involved in programmes remained to some extent opaque), and prevented the distrust, incomprehension or indeed opposition to the organisation’s rationality that might arise on the ground from challenging the UNHCR’s programme in Afghanistan or its global project. When they talked in terms of ‘vulnerability’ or ‘international law’, Afghan employees helped to stabilise projects and disguise the gap between Afghan society and aid organisations. This effectively helped to disconnect the organisation from the Afghan arena and thus to preserve its central rationality. In this way, the organisation could represent its programmes as coherent, in accordance with the ‘needs’ of the population and successful in their objectives, even if the rationale behind these programmes was not always understood or accepted locally.

This thesis is corroborated by the cushioning role that, as I have shown, Afghan staff often played – a role that goes hand in hand with brokering, but to which less attention is paid in development sociology. The friction between

these two very different worlds generated tensions. Whether as targets of violence or intimidation from the Taliban, in the daily management of distrust, or when they defended the UNHCR's criteria for resource allocation in the face of incomprehension, the UNHCR's Afghan employees absorbed these tensions, playing a cushioning role. In my research I was not able to assess the extent to which, in addition to being suffered as an 'occupational hazard', this gap was something the 'national' staff actively sought to preserve, since having the monopoly on managing the interface was also a source of power and influence in the Afghan arena.

Second, the Afghan staff's brokering role invites reflection on the effects of the UNHCR's activity in the country. This focus on the organisation's Afghan employees has begun to show how these effects go well beyond the isolated impact of programmes. Changes in the labour market, the training of a middle-level elite with financial and professional capital, the introduction of new paradigms, repertoires of political action, criteria for resource allocation – the UNHCR's presence was an integral part of the processes of social reconfiguration and political competition in post-2001 Afghanistan. Even though the Afghan arena remained largely illegible to the organisation, the changes these processes instigate in Afghan society are substantial.

The methodological obstacles due to my status as an expatriate (and to the ignorance typical of this status) prevented me from researching both interactions between the UNHCR's Afghan employees and its Afghan interlocutors, and the Afghan employees' relationship to the organisation (what kind of loyalty to the organisation, its way of thinking and its values? How did they take on, interpret and elaborate this way of thinking and these values? What impact did this job have on their subjectivities?). The example of Soraya, who combined her commitment to improving the condition of Pashtun women with her work as Field Officer, shows in any case that in addition to strategies for advancement, there are ways that people re-appropriate the organisation's rationality, and that processes of social and political reconfiguration, in which Afghan staff played an integral part, played out in the interactions between them and their Afghan interlocutors.

## Notes

1. The administrative staff employed in Geneva have a separate status and therefore constitute a third category: they are also recruited worldwide, but remain permanently posted at Headquarters.
2. It was with the latter that I had most interaction and this chapter focuses on them.
3. Silke Roth (2012) argues that this reasoning is a justifying myth, rightly remarking that expatriates are not necessarily neutral by virtue of coming from outside, for they surely arrive with preconceived ideas about what should be done.

4. There was one particularly striking case: a colleague who had obtained a Schengen visa, at the request of the UNHCR, to participate in a training in Italy was arrested at Islamabad airport, on suspicion of holding a false visa. It was only when the UNHCR and the embassy that had issued the visa intervened that he was able to continue his journey, after spending a night in detention.
5. In order to study these questions in depth, I would have had to stay in Kabul beyond the end of my contract or return as a researcher some time afterwards, which was unfortunately not possible.
6. 'Night letters' were the most widespread form of intimidation – generally thrown into the house's compound during the night. They discouraged those targeted from working with the 'invaders', sometimes threatening their addressees with death, and thus making it clear that they had been identified and were being watched.