

# How Afghanistan gets in your blood

For the past few years, I've found myself trying to explain the inexplicable to my three adult children who simply don't understand what it is about Afghanistan and its people that keeps drawing their father back.

by Mike Capstick, Peace Dividend Trust

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However, unlike most of the citizens of Western countries, they at least know that there are civilians working in [Afghanistan](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/>) and that the country and its people have a way of getting "in your blood".

The massacre of 10 civilian aid workers (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/7931862/British-doctor-and-nine-others-killed-in-Afghanistan-ambush.html>) in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province is a tragedy beyond words for the families of those murdered.



Dr Karen Woo, killed in Afghanistan

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It has also hit the international community working in Afghanistan very hard. In the aftermath of an event like this, those of us who live here, work here and love this contradictory country and its people, cannot help but question our reasons for being here.

Even if we didn't know the people involved, the several thousand non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff working in Afghanistan cannot help but feel pain and disappointment when a loss of this magnitude is suffered.

The Western media and public generally see Afghanistan through the single lens of combat operations by their nation's troops.

The civilian effort is usually ignored, and events like the murder of health care workers can only generate questions about why civilians would be here in the first place, what do they do and why are they taking the risks?

There are almost as many motives for being here as there are NGO staff.

Some are recent graduates looking for a start in the "development industry", others are motivated by a cause – medical care, HIV/Aids prevention, or human rights, for example.

Others are looking for a bit of adventure, while others have dedicated their lives to helping people around the world.

Almost all are here because they genuinely believe that their organisation is helping the Afghan people.

In Afghanistan, and around the world, NGOs assist people by providing services that weak governments simply cannot and that intervening Western armies are ill-suited to deliver.

Traditional humanitarian NGOs operate using the principles of neutrality and impartiality and have gained the confidence of the population over decades.

Others support government programmes and projects by employing trusted Afghan staff to work directly in communities.

Again, it's impossible to portray the diversity of the work that NGOs perform here, but most have one thing in common – the ability to deal directly with the Afghan people. That's a trait that heavily armed soldiers simply cannot hope to replicate.

I have been in Afghanistan most of the time since 2005 in various roles – soldier, governance adviser and with an NGO. Every day, I deal with ordinary Afghan men and women who are trying to make things better.

They have families and want to make their kids' lives a little better than theirs. It has long been a truism "that the strong exact what they can and the weak grant what they must".

This is truer in Afghanistan than almost anywhere else in the world, and as long as I feel that my NGO is helping to strengthen the weak, that's reason enough to stay.

Even if my kids don't quite understand my love of Afghanistan and its people, I know that they do support my decision to be here.

*▷ Mike Capstick, a former Canadian army officer, is Country Director –Afghanistan of Peace Dividend Trust, an organisation that works to make humanitarian work more efficient by the use of Afghan goods and services.*