

Leading by Example: Australia's Reconstruction Task Force and the NGO Civil-Military Relationship in Afghanistan

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The pace of Afghanistan's reconstruction and development is of increasing interest to the international community. Individual nations, multilateral institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged in Afghanistan's state building project are keen to highlight their successes. Commentators seek evidence of tangible benefits emerging from the United States-led "War on Terror" in Afghanistan, designed primarily to transform the nation from a failed state to a functioning one. However, many commentators now assume that international efforts are at a crossroad, given mounting concern over the slow pace of development, and the draw-down of US troops, which is linked to the resurgent Taliban offensive of recent months.

Until now little has been said of the relationships between state building actors in Afghanistan as a mechanism for successful reconstruction and development. The civil-military relationship is especially important, particularly for NGOs and their international military counterparts. Both are engaged in reconstruction and development, often advocating similar strategies while operating in close geographic proximity to one another.

A robust partnership between NGOs and the Australian Defence Force Reconstruction Task Force, which recently arrived in Oruzgan province, Afghanistan to augment a Netherlands-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), will strengthen the state building process. Encouraging and supporting the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) in its efforts to lead Afghanistan's reconstruction and development will also enhance the Australian military presence and its own development activities.

Afghanistan's State Building Framework: The Role of NGOs and the Military

Afghanistan's state building agenda, undertaken in partnership between the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) and the international community, is now

the primary rationale for the international presence in Afghanistan. Consequently, international and local NGOs, and international military actors, are obliged to further the process, which is itself framed within a National Development Strategy (NDS) encompassing a three-pillar development plan for governance, rule of law and human rights, security, and economic and social development. External resource requirements are significant; the GoA has requested donor assistance amounting to USD 4 billion per year for the next five years to finance the NDS.¹

NGOs in Afghanistan sustained the indigenous population with basic services throughout Soviet occupation, civil war and the era of Taliban rule. This continuity has led to NGOs becoming the primary service providers in Afghanistan. Their sectoral activities are diverse; while some NGOs continue to provide traditional humanitarian assistance, an increasing number are undertaking or supporting the development process via activities such as agriculture and rural development, urban reconstruction, peace building and reconciliation, the advancement of women, and private sector regeneration through micro-lending. Accurate data on the total NGO contribution to Afghanistan's reconstruction and development is unavailable, but information provided to the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief by twenty-three prominent NGOs indicates that these NGOs have built, repaired or supported 388 health clinics, 3 092 schools, 6 949 kilometres of irrigation systems and 7 343 kilometres of tertiary roads since 2002. NGOs also partner the GoA on a number of National Priority Programs such as the National Solidarity Program, designed to support local governance through community-identified reconstruction and development projects.²

The international military presence in Afghanistan, which includes counter-insurgency operations, is reinforced by large amounts of military aid and, most controversially of all, a development agenda that has facilitated the emergence of Coalition Forces' and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) PRTs. NGO representatives have critiqued the growing military involvement in development activities, pointing to a "blurring of the lines" between NGO activities and those conducted by their military counterparts. Of greater NGO concern are the quick impact "hearts and minds" projects designed to win the support of indigenous populations for counter-insurgency objectives in conflict-ridden areas. The wisdom of military actors undertaking development activities will not be debated here, although it should be emphasised that NGOs do not have a monopoly on state building activities.

¹ *Afghanistan Interim National Development Strategy: A Strategy for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction* (Summary Report), Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, January 2006, pp. 20 and 56.

² *ACBAR Statement for the Afghanistan Development Forum*, April 2005, pp. 2-3; *National Solidarity Program: Operational Manual*, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2004, p. 4.

Statistics provided by Coalition Forces highlight the similarity of their projects and those of NGOs. In 2004, the Coalition estimates it built 74 schools, upgraded and/or repaired an additional 51 schools, supplied 43 schools with resources, built 321 single wells and repaired an additional twelve. In the first three-quarters of 2005 the Coalition initiated over 2,630 projects utilising a discretionary Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP). Typically used for "hearts and minds" activities, the CERP has contributed to the reconstruction and development effort. CERP funds totalling approximately USD 80 million in the first three-quarters of 2005 supported sectoral activities such as governance and rule of law (including judicial reform), transportation infrastructure, and health and education.³

The relationship between NGOs and military actors in Afghanistan is crucial for the state building agenda since both operate to sustain it on the ground, in complementary ways. Local support for Afghanistan's overarching political process is also dependent on the conditions created by NGO and military actors; on this basis, the Afghan population will decide whether state building in Afghanistan is worthy of continued support.

Institutionalising the NGO Civil-Military Relationship

In September 2004, the United Nations institutionalised the relationship between NGOs and the international military presence in Afghanistan by creating the NGO Civil-Military Working Group. Meeting on a regular basis at the Ministry of Interior in Kabul, the working group, according to its charter, "facilitates communication among NGOs, international military forces and the Government of Afghanistan over security of operations and aid coordination with the objective of addressing NGO concerns and maximising the effectiveness of all parties."⁴ To this end, the group is tasked with developing mechanisms "for effective communication," identifying, clarifying and prioritising "issues of concern" and recommending solutions, developing systems and policies "to resolve and prevent conflicts and difficulties," and documenting lessons learned on civil-military coordination.⁵

An informal analysis of the group, conducted in August 2005, concluded that it served as a channel of communication between NGO and military actors, but was "encumbered" by poor NGO participation and follow-up. GoA participation was identified as non-existent. Military rotations – often on a six-month basis – hindered institutional development of the NGO civil-military relationship while the "infrequency of military representatives placing their own issues of concern on the agenda" suggested a level of indifference on the part of the military. The analysis suggested that "different institutional cultures within NGOs and the military" rendered NGO-military exchanges

³ *Facts to Follow, Coalition Forces Command - Alpha*, 18 August 2005, pp. 2-4.

⁴ Meetings were conducted on a bi-monthly basis; after October 2005, meetings were scaled back to once a month.

⁵ *Charter of the NGO Civil-Military Working Group, Kabul*, undated.

“somewhat challenging,” and noted that meetings largely focussed on operational issues as opposed to larger policy considerations.⁶

Opportunities to discuss NGO civil-military policy issues are found at capital-level fora, conferences and meetings. The UK NGO-Military Contact Group, for example, is based in London and flags issues relevant to the global NGO civil-military debate, with participants representing the UK’s Ministry of Defence, DFID, and various British NGOs. The Contact Group is widely perceived as useful; participants point to various successes stemming from the group’s formation, including increased awareness and recognition of mutual positions and concerns.⁷ In response to its growing role in Afghanistan, NATO has increasingly sponsored and chaired a number of conferences to discuss the NGO civil-military relationship, even inviting NGO representatives to mission rehearsal exercises. International think tanks such as the United State Institute for Peace (USIP) have also facilitated global NGO civil-military discussions; the USIP guest list for a 2005 dialogue included US government representatives from the Office of the Secretary of Defence, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization at the State Department.

Yet for all the institutionalisation of Afghanistan’s NGO civil-military relationship, and the recognition of its growing importance, the relationship’s effectiveness has been hampered somewhat by NGO ambiguity over engagement with the military. NGO attitudes range from strong willingness to engage with their military counterparts to, in some cases, simple refusal. Coalition and ISAF representatives have generally expressed a more consistent willingness to work with NGOs, and many have expressed frustration and bewilderment at the reluctance of some NGOs to enter into formal dialogues with them.⁸ NGO representatives attempting to explain NGOs’ aversion to “working” with the military cite the twin humanitarian pillars of impartiality and neutrality as key reasons.⁹ Unavoidably, the policy environment has suffered, becoming entrapped within NGO humanitarianism that bears little resemblance to Afghanistan’s highly politicised development agenda, which requires operational coordination and cooperation to maximise available resources. This key dilemma has yet to be fully identified and resolved by NGOs and the rest of the international community operating in Afghanistan.

⁶ *An Analysis of the NGO Civil-Military Working Group: A Report Presented to the NGO Civil-Military Working Group by ACBAR, Care and Oxfam GB*, September 2005.

⁷ Comments made by Toby Porter, Emergencies Director, Save the Children UK, *Interaction Forum 2005: HPPC Panel on Post 9-11 Relations with the Military*, June 2005.

⁸ Author’s field notes.

⁹ See *Non-Government Organisations in Afghanistan: A Presentation to the Military*, by representatives from ACBAR, Care and Oxfam GB, Kabul, May 2005.

Mechanisms for NGO—Military Coordination: A Role for the GoA

NGO impartiality and neutrality has never inhibited coordination of humanitarian assets in humanitarian crises or complex emergencies; the development context is certainly no different. Resource coordination is universally acknowledged as enhancing a state building process, and uncoordinated efforts can hinder a country's reconstruction and development through waste, duplication and the establishment of parallel systems. Lack of coordination is a problem in many state building environments, and Afghanistan is no exception. Even the relatively small sub-sector of livestock vaccination has suffered as a result of uncoordinated programs conducted by NGOs, Coalition and ISAF authorities, and not always in support of GoA policy.¹⁰

A plethora of coordination mechanisms existed at the end of 2005 to support the state building process. In addition to the NGO Civil-Military Working Group, various Kabul-based NGO and ministerial sector working groups were operational and could conceivably have included the NGO civil-military dimension in technical, sector-specific discussions. Many did not, however, because interested parties were not always invited to discussions. In one instance, military representatives were excluded from a sectoral working group until existing members agreed to their presence.¹¹ Invariably the operating environment suffered from coordination failures, as resources were not efficiently utilised.

While the NGO Civil-Military Working Group made attempts in late 2005 to institutionalise discussions around sector-specific activities, it now makes sense to pursue technical, sector-specific discussions at the provincial level, thereby complementing the planned GoA-led Provincial Development Committees (PDCs).¹² The provincial replication of the NGO Civil-Military Working Group is the most obvious mechanism to undertake such an initiative, although there is nothing preventing NGO or military actors from conducting informal discussions for coordination purposes. It is also recognised that coordination efforts must seek to encompass PRT activities; in the second half of 2005 GoA representatives attempted to draw Coalition

¹⁰ In the second half of 2005, a small group of NGOs were coordinating livestock vaccination activities with Coalition Forces, unbeknownst to ISAF and other NGOs already providing livestock vaccinations to herds belonging to the local population. Additionally, GoA policy on livestock vaccinations – decreeing that vaccinations must not be dispensed free of charge – were not always adhered to by ISAF and Coalition authorities. *Minutes of the NGO Civil-Military Working Group*, 19 October 2005.

¹¹ Author's field notes.

¹² NGOs and PRTs are designated as observers to the PDCs, and their presence is required only when requested by the provincial government. *Establishment of Provincial Development Committees within the Framework of the Provincial Administrative Structure: A Policy Paper (Draft)*, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 21 August 2005.

and ISAF PRTs into the NDS process, although their efforts were ultimately unsuccessful.

For several reasons, the GoA should coordinate the NGO civil-military relationship as a matter of priority. Firstly, the GoA's request for external assistance totalling USD 20 billion over the next five years obliges President Hamid Karzai's government to demonstrate its leadership credentials; assuming the lead coordination role would do much to create a positive perception. An additional reason focuses on the need for an enforcement mechanism; without it, NGO-military coordination is unlikely to be systematic and rigorous. To this end, the GoA could submit legislation to the Afghan parliament covering NGO-military coordination as a condition for operating in Afghanistan. Penalties for organisations failing to coordinate could include official censure and even deregistration. Finally, GoA coordination of the NGO civil-military relationship would go some way in addressing the lack of capacity within the government itself. Poor GoA capacity to implement Afghanistan's state building agenda is a perennial complaint of the international community, and one levelled against the Karzai government. Transferring sole responsibility for NGO-military coordination to the government would do much to develop the expertise of government bureaucrats.

The Scope for NGO—Military Cooperation

Enhancing the reconstruction and development effort in Afghanistan can be achieved via the evolution of the NGO civil-military relationship to include cooperation. The scope for NGO-military cooperation is quite broad, and although controversial, could include activities such as information sharing, joint strategising, and even joint NGO-military operations. Sharing best practices and lessons learnt between NGO and military actors operating on the ground occurs informally, but infrequently, and is complicated by sub-optimal coordination mechanisms. Operating partners have always understood its importance, but the sheer number of development actors on the ground, coupled with the formalisation of the state building process to include monitoring mechanisms, now means that the practice of information sharing must become systematic. Again, this constitutes an area for GoA engagement. NGO-military strategising can be similarly justified, and need not involve any operational collaboration; a division of labour between the two sets of actors can instead be agreed to avoid overlap and ensure complementarity of NGO and military programs and projects within a given geographic location. Joint NGO-military operations in combat-free zones represent an additional option for NGO-military cooperation, and should be based upon identical operational objectives and strategies that maximise available financial resources and technical expertise.

NGO-military cooperation, particularly the joint operations concept, is deeply unpopular amongst the global NGO community, less so amongst military

representatives. Nonetheless, cooperation should be explored to enhance existing state building resources by improving the NGO civil-military relationship. NGOs cite their impartiality and neutrality when confronted with potential avenues for NGO-military collaboration, and argue that such activities increase NGO security concerns and place NGO staff at risk. NGO representatives also reject the notion that NGO and military representatives share common objectives, a position which is increasingly difficult to maintain in Afghanistan's state building framework, which is collectively endorsed by the international community.¹³

Joint operations are gaining traction and would be easily dismissed if Coalition and ISAF military actors were operating without an international mandate.¹⁴ This is not the case, however, as the international military presence in Afghanistan is sanctioned by the international community, including its multilateral institutions. Even more importantly, and in spite of recent civil unrest, most notably in the first half of 2006, Afghans largely support the international presence.¹⁵ That said, attacks against NGO staff occur, and will most probably continue, because NGOs represent soft targets for criminals and those with a strategically and politically motivated desire to splinter Afghanistan's state building coalition. They do not occur because attackers are unable to distinguish NGO staff from Coalition and ISAF soldiers. Nor do they occur as a result of overt collaboration between NGOs and military actors. The breach of security at Oxfam GB's Kabul compound by rioters in May 2006 readily demonstrates the threats facing even those NGOs that maintain strict guidelines regarding contact with military actors. In Oxfam GB's case, the presence of weapons within its compounds is prohibited. As a result, staff meet with military representatives off-site, usually in the offices of the United Nations and Government of Afghanistan ministries.

The GoA can de-politicise joint operations by initiating discussions to explore the concept. At the very least, joint NGO-military operations should be considered, if only to acknowledge the similarity of objectives that drive state building actors, and the overarching political agenda that even the most

¹³ See, for example, comments made by Barbara Stapleton, Advocacy and Policy Coordinator, Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, *Copenhagen Seminar of Concerted Planning and Action of Civil and Military Activities in International Operations*, June 2005.

¹⁴ Author's field notes. The idea is also gaining ground in the wider NGO civil-military policy environment. In discussions focusing on Iraq, General (ret.) William L. Nash, Senior Fellow, and Director of the Centre for Preventive Action at the Council on Foreign Relations argued that, "We need to think in terms of civil-military operations, or conduct of operations." *Summary of the EOSG Colloquia Series on Civil-Military Cooperation in International Peace Operations*, January 2004.

¹⁵ As of late 2005, 83 percent of Afghan respondents to one opinion poll expressed a favourable view of US military forces in Afghanistan. The United Nations obtained a 93 percent favourable rating; 79 percent of Afghans polled also perceived "international aid agencies" in a favourable light. See "Poll of Afghanistan, 27 November 2005 – 4 December 2005," Survey designed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes for the WorldPublicOpinion.org website.

apolitical organisations are supporting through their very presence in Afghanistan.

Leading By Example: A Role for Australia's Reconstruction Task Force

Encouraging and supporting the GoA as it attempts to lead Afghanistan's reconstruction and development agenda should be the primary aim for Australia's Reconstruction Task Force in Afghanistan. NDS strategic priorities must be adhered to, and GoA development mechanisms such as the PDCs must be utilised to plan and coordinate development inputs. In doing so, the Australian contingent can lead by example, and in the hope that other state building actors will follow suit.

Forging a constructive partnership with NGO colleagues is an equally important task. The Netherlands PRT, including its Australian contingent, should seek out NGOs willing to operate in tandem with their military counterparts. Priorities and strategies, in line with the NDS, should be jointly determined, ideally with GoA line ministry knowledge and participation at central and provincial levels. In light of the range and depth of NGO experience in Afghanistan, the Netherlands PRT, and its Australian contingent, should seek guidance from NGOs in terms of best practices and lessons learnt. An NGO-military division of labor should be agreed upon, especially if operational overlap becomes apparent. Finally, and bearing in mind that cooperation will enhance the development outputs of both sets of actors, opportunities for NGO-military joint operations should be identified and developed. By implementing this strategy, the NGO civil-military relationship will become systematic and rigorous, and will not be solely reliant on personalities for its further institutionalisation.

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