

THE PEACEBUILDING, DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY PROGRAM (PDSP)

**CENTRE FOR MILITARY
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Beyond Information Sharing & False Coherence: Interagency Coordination in International Peace Missions

These findings are the product of research on the field-level dynamics of interagency coordination and a two-day practitioner workshop, “Coordinated Approaches to Security, Development and Peacemaking: Lessons Learned from Afghanistan and Liberia”, held March 30 and 31 at the University of Calgary’s Centre for Military and Strategic Studies (CMSS) in conjunction with the Centre’s Washington, D.C. based program partner, the Institute of World Affairs (IWA).¹

FINDINGS ON THE COORDINATION CHALLENGE

The level, range, and depth of today’s international interventions in states emerging from civil wars are unprecedented, resulting in a dizzying array of organizations and agendas. In these situations of an incomplete or fragile peace, the interlinked nature of security and development is inescapable, with basic security enabling the delivery of humanitarian relief and longer-term development efforts that, in turn, give people a stake in the peace process.

In the cases of Afghanistan and Liberia, international organizations, NGOs, military interveners, donors and host governments strive to meet enormous basic humanitarian needs while moving ahead with development and statebuilding at a pace often driven by political imperatives and the limited staying power of international donors. Roles and mandates overlap as military forces work on reconstruction and governance support, donors work directly with provincial and local governments, and development actors participate in security sector reform. Whether the military, UN and donor country diplomats, and humanitarian and relief agencies choose to explicitly work together or not, the outcomes of their efforts are deeply intertwined.

Lessons from Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, military, humanitarian and development actors work side by side (though not necessarily together) with an ongoing insurgency in some regions and relative stability in others. The agendas of violence reduction, democratization, civil society building, and good governance are interdependent conceptually but can clash in practice. Tensions exist between military and

¹ Generous financial support for the workshop was provided by the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, the Institute of World Affairs, the Canadian International Development Agency’s (CIDA) Conference Secretariat, the Department of National Defence’s Security and Defence Forum, NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division, and the Faculty of Social Sciences, the International Centre, and the Political Science Department of the University of Calgary. As well, many participating agencies covered the time and costs of their personnel. Though the findings are based on the experience and creative insights shared by workshop participants, responsibility for the conclusions presented here rests exclusively with the authors – Lara Olson and Hrach Gregorian, Co-Directors, The Peacebuilding, Development and Security Program.

development actors over a perceived militarization of aid through hearts and minds efforts by the military and the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) model. Furthermore, many actors criticize a lack of clear, accepted leadership of the overall effort.

Examples of effective coordination cited were the health sector and the government's National Solidarity Program where participatory, inclusive processes involving the government, donors and implementing NGOs resulted in significant "buy-in" from key stakeholders. The record of coordination in many security-related areas, however, is reportedly poor, where civil-military actors lack a history of constructive engagement, a common strategic vision, and have few inclusive and participatory planning processes. In many cases, field coordination efforts are resisted as an attempt by powerful actors to exert control and impose their models and strategies over other assistance actors.

Lessons from Liberia

In Liberia, basic security has been consolidated but long-term stability rests on meeting daunting humanitarian and development needs, and building legitimate, effective government institutions, especially the army, police, and justice system. The 15,000 strong UNMIL peacekeeping force remains key to security with domestic institutions still very weak, while relief and development efforts are heavily dependent on UN agencies and NGOs.

Examples of effective coordination noted were in health and education, where there is a history of engagement and UN-led humanitarian coordination mechanisms that promote joint analysis and strategy making amongst civilian assistance actors. In contrast, security sector issues lacked broadly inclusive and transparent consultative processes, and coordination was deemed weak. Coordination problems identified overall were: lack of a common strategic vision; power asymmetries between UN agencies, governments and NGOs that inhibit the creation of a truly joint vision; fundamental differences in how problems and solutions are defined between key actors, and a tendency for external actors and funding to dominate in defining frameworks and strategies. Current coordination processes were also criticized for advancing the UN mission's political goals over humanitarian and development goals, and for coordination gaps with key U.S. policies.

Barriers and Supports to Greater Coordination in Both Cases

Both cases showed that the international military forces, political and diplomatic actors, and relief and development agencies operating in international peace missions have very different mandates, accountability chains, motivations, and deeply held models of how to promote change. These incompatibilities make even effective communication difficult, let alone coordination and collaboration. The fundamental blocks in evidence were:

1. Dearth of Accepted Models

There is no commonly accepted model for effective peacebuilding, and few solid, independent evaluations of past experience to substantiate any one approach. Without hard evidence that certain approaches "work", diverse assistance actors have few incentives to abandon models based on their own worldviews and preferred tools.

2. Lack of Common Purpose

Assistance actors often do not agree on the basic purpose of coordination efforts. Even amongst humanitarian actors, some emphasize minimalist goals of information exchange and mutual awareness, while others aspire to joint analysis and strategy making, and a functional division of labour. Regarding civil-military coordination in particular, military actors expressed frustration with field coordination exercises as “just information sharing”, while many development actors saw the purpose as rightly limited to information sharing, so that the NGOs and beneficiaries “do not get shot at” and the “military understands our approach”. They expressed more concern about the quality and reliability of the information shared.

3. Varied Sensitivities to Power

Agencies have very different sensitivities to the power asymmetries inherent in coordination efforts, with NGOs and host government representatives emphasizing power differentials and international political and military actors discussing coordination largely as a technical exercise that is power-neutral. Not dealing directly with the power issues (the “elephant in the room”) undermines the trust of weaker players in the process.

4. Different Guiding Principles

Assistance actors operate on the basis of fundamentally different principles for decision making, with little agreement about the “greater good,” given different values, orientations, constituencies, mandates, and timeframes. The principles of “neutrality” and “humanitarian need” of development actors clash at times with the principle of “UN endorsed partiality” guiding the statebuilding activities of diplomatic, political and military actors in their support for the established government. Furthermore, military and diplomatic actors’ ultimate objectives are to protect national security and the national interests of home governments, with their performance assessed on these criteria. For relief and development actors, especially NGOs, criteria for success relate to improvements in beneficiary welfare, rather than home government interests. Furthermore, the principle of local ownership is difficult in practice when the expressed priorities of national, provincial, local governments and grassroots communities conflict, with international agencies working at different levels hearing different “local voices”.

Given these fundamental differences, centralized control is resisted because it would sanction one (unproven) model of peacebuilding, and undermine the positive benefits of diverse approaches. Without centralization, agencies can still improve the way their efforts link up and support broader peacebuilding goals, while working side by side in such settings and preserving their autonomous mandates and roles.

Supporting Factors

The following factors reportedly support effective cross-agency coordination in the field.

- ❖ Informality and “face to face” time
- ❖ Getting “straight information” from someone you trust, not agency “propaganda”
- ❖ Transparency and horizontal relationships amongst agencies/people
- ❖ Inclusiveness – getting all key stakeholders involved early in the process
- ❖ Sincere motives to improve program impacts (vs. funding, competition, credit)
- ❖ Good negotiation skills, ability to articulate arguments and win over others
- ❖ Common knowledge of the issues amongst participants

- ❖ An ability to accept criticism from others
- ❖ When internal consensus on key issues exists within agencies and networks
- ❖ When higher decision makers allow for flexibility and negotiation in the field
- ❖ Time - improving coordination takes time and is a learning process

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVED COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION

Feedback reflected frustration that despite the goodwill and time invested, field level coordination efforts often amount to either “just information sharing” or a “false coherence”, a superficial agreement on strategies that is more forced than sincere, and doesn’t reflect a true common approach. Effective communication and coordination requires greater effort both between and within assistance communities, with changes in the areas of principles, processes, people and structures. Investments of time, resources and political will in these areas can promote more effective and reliable communication amongst assistance actors in the field, creating a solid foundation for greater coordination, where it is an agreed goal.

PRINCIPLES

- ***At the country level, clarify broad, basic principles amongst the major international assistance communities*** working side by side in the field. Common baseline principles would build mutual understanding, trust, and accountability between diverse assistance actors and, importantly, between international actors and national actors and publics. This effort could take the form of a consultative process or a code of conduct for the international assistance effort.
- ***The development assistance community should clarify what basic principles guide their actions when robust international military missions coexist, and sometimes overlap, with development efforts.*** What key principles guide development efforts, as opposed to humanitarian relief, in statebuilding contexts that involve ongoing insurgencies? What guides the work of multi-mandate agencies working on relief and development in these contexts?
- ***Equally, international military forces should clarify the principles that guide their involvement in these contexts.*** What principles should guide the military’s non-military operations to ensure they contribute positively to the broader stabilization effort? How does the interdependence of security and development in these settings change the way such operations need to be planned and decisions made?

PROCESSES

- ***Conveners of particular coordination efforts should clarify assumptions and goals upfront,*** allowing groups to be clear on what to expect, and thus, whether and how to participate. For some agencies, coordination represents centralized management and control, for others it represents information sharing leading to self-coordination, while for others still, it implies explicit consensus-building.
- ***Coordination efforts should explicitly acknowledge the power asymmetries in the room that block frank communication, and aim to construct horizontal relationships.*** False or

forced agreement at the planning level (because of power or funding relationships) simply pushes resistance to the implementation level.

- ***Separate power from leadership of the coordination effort.*** Agencies need to know if a given coordination process will involve a two-way relationship and mutual influence, or whether it is simply an effort to establish control over other actors. The coordination function should not be led by an agency with the preponderance of power, but by one respected as an honest broker.
- ***Involve national governments in oversight and consultative roles at the implementation level of major international projects.*** Formal agreements on broad recovery frameworks can represent a misleading false coherence, and don't eliminate the need for consultation, consensus building, and clear communication tools between international and national actors at the project level.
- ***Broaden consultative processes on politically sensitive security reforms to involve national and international NGOs along with donors and national governments.*** Lack of such broader consultation undermines the goals of recreating new security institutions that the public can trust, especially after years of experience with predatory military and police forces.
- ***Support in-country intra-NGO coordination processes with resources*** to help NGOs strengthen internal networks and dialogue so that common NGO positions can be represented in country-level strategies for peacebuilding.

PEOPLE

- ***Promote and train for skills in consensus building*** if field-based leaders are to foster coordination across major organizational divides.
- ***Promote a two-way flow of personnel between the field and HQ*** to ensure personnel understand the broader dynamics at play and can interpret the intent of decision makers at both levels of their agencies.
- ***Increase resources dedicated to interagency communication and coordination*** to allow agencies to allocate the staff time and attention needed for coordination, and to recruit for, and reward, the specific professional skills required.
- ***Create concrete incentives within agencies for leaders to be accountable for broader project impacts related to the peacebuilding process***, rather than purely narrowly focused outputs (i.e. roads and schools built, contracts won), promoting a focus on the “big job” rather than narrow organizational goals or personal egos.

STRUCTURES

- ***Maintain a separation of security and development roles in practice.*** Militaries and civilian aid agencies should be seen as working side by side, not together, in the field, while recognizing that security and development are tied goals. Humanitarian, development actors and military personnel in the field have serious, practical concerns about blurring these roles.

- *Policy makers should clearly articulate the value of distinct security, relief and development roles and specialists* to the publics of both donor countries and recipient nations. Policy makers should resist the temptation to promote critical and life-saving security assistance by foreign military forces in humanitarian or development terms, emphasizing instead the strong value populations place on security first and foremost.
- *Where possible, avoid direct civil-military coordination in the field and strengthen civilian-civilian coordination models.* The case-specific need for civil-military coordination should be handled through authorized civilian bodies, removing much of the distracting friction from civil-military relationships.
- *Forums for civil-military contact and communication, however, should be encouraged,* but should not be viewed as coordination meetings, and should be renamed in more neutral terms, such as "contact group", to avoid false expectations, mistrust, and public misperceptions. The term coordination implies a common purpose, and should be used when it reflects the real, and agreed, aspirations of the agencies involved.
- *Develop financial mechanisms to allow NGOs to respond more quickly to urgent needs in areas where there is an international military presence,* avoiding the need for military forces to fill assistance gaps with separate aid programming.
- *Implementing agencies should develop evaluation methodologies that explicitly assess the broader impacts of their programs on development prospects and security.* This would compel agencies to articulate just what broader goals their projects are fostering and how it is possible to tell if they are reached. A first step could be to convene relevant field-based agencies to assemble a first cut of such assessment criteria for further testing.
- *Policy makers at HQ should avoid micro planning of interventions, or dialogue, consensus building, and alliance building in the field is rendered "pointless".* People reported defecting from coordination forums when they saw little ability to affect policies that "come down from above".

The Peacebuilding, Development and Security Program (PDSP) aims to foster practitioner-focused research, interagency and civil-military dialogue, field projects and training to advance the understanding of effective linkages between relief, peacebuilding, development and security assistance to conflict affected countries.

For further information see <http://www.ucalgary.ca/pdsp/> and contact Co-Directors:

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