Report on Wilton Park Conference 1022

WINNING 'HEARTS AND MINDS' IN AFGHANISTAN: ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DEVELOPMENT AID IN COIN OPERATIONS
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SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Development aid is becoming an increasingly important tool to 'win hearts and minds' and promote stability in counter-insurgency (COIN) operations. Given its centrality to current COIN doctrine and strategy, there is still a surprisingly weak evidence base for the effectiveness of aid in promoting stabilisation and security objectives. The main purpose of this conference was to bring together leading academics, policymakers, military personnel and civilian practitioners to explore what evidence does exist. The conference participants were presented with the findings of recent field research conducted by academics on the relationship between aid and security, listened to military and civilian practitioners regarding their experiences implementing stabilisation projects, and heard from policymakers regarding the implications of the evidence for COIN and development policies. The interactive round table format was enhanced through collaborative computer technology.

Key Points

- **Current Stabilisation Strategies Are Based on Entrenched and Often Questionable Assumptions.** Research findings presented at the conference questioned many of the assumptions underpinning COIN stabilisation strategies, including that: key drivers of insecurity are poverty, unemployment and/or radical Islam; economic development and 'modernisation' are stabilising; aid projects 'win hearts and minds' and help legitimise the government; extending the reach of the central government leads to stabilisation and development projects are an effective means to extend this reach; and the international community and the Afghan government have shared objectives when it comes to promoting development, good governance and the rule of law.

- **The Implementation of COIN Doctrine has not Adequately Addressed Political Issues.** The research findings from Afghanistan highlight that many of the fundamental conflict drivers there are inherently political in nature, such as ethnic grievances and inter- and intra-tribal disputes. Indeed, many Afghans believe the main cause of insecurity to be their government, which is perceived to be massively corrupt, predatory and unjust. A COIN strategy premised on using aid to win the population over to such a negatively perceived government faces an uphill struggle, especially in a competitive environment where the Taliban are perceived by many to be more effective in addressing the people's highest priority needs of security and access to justice. Without getting the 'politics right' both military and aid efforts are unlikely to achieve their desired effects.

- **Effectively Designed and Delivered Development Aid Does Seem to Have Some Stabilisation Benefits at a Tactical Level, but Not at a Strategic Level.** Researchers and practitioners described ways in which aid had been used effectively to legitimise interactions between international forces and local communities (i.e., 'to get a foot in the door'), which had proven useful in terms of developing relationships, and gathering atmospherics and intelligence. But these were relatively short-term transactional relationships, and there was little evidence of more strategic level effects of populations being won over to the government as a result of development aid. While there is ample evidence of development programmes having clear development benefits, for example the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) and the Basic Package of Health Services, there was little evidence of even successful development outcomes having major stabilisation benefits. Several critical questions remain, however. These include: whether aid in itself is unable to stabilise, or whether the current modalities for delivering aid to promote stabilisation are inappropriate; and, while development aid may not be effective at addressing the main causes of insurgency in the most insecure regions, whether aid could be effective at helping to consolidate stability in more secure areas.

- **Less is Often More – Too Much Aid Can be Destabilising.** There was considerable consensus that Afghanistan cannot effectively absorb the large increases in aid spending earmarked for the insecure regions of the country. Too much aid money spent quickly with little oversight can be delegitimising and destabilising in many ways, including by: fuelling corruption; creating destabilising winner-loser dynamics in ethnically and tribally divided societies; supporting a lucrative war/aid economy that benefits insurgents, corrupt government officials and other malign actors; and creating perverse incentives among key actors to maintain the status quo of insecurity and bad governance. Having to spend large sums of aid money quickly also reduces the opportunities for prioritising

the critically important processes of effective development, and instead focuses attention primarily on generating products. Historical evidence also suggests that the Afghan state's *rentier* economy has politically destabilising consequences, as it reduces the government's need to derive legitimacy from, or be accountable to, the citizens of Afghanistan.

- **Aid Seems to be Losing Rather Than Winning Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan.** At a time when more aid money is being spent in Afghanistan than ever before, popular perceptions of aid are overwhelmingly negative. Despite the considerable work that has been done, including the expansion of basic social services, major investments in roads and other infrastructure, and a communications revolution, negative perceptions persist that little has been done, the wrong things have been done, what was done is poor quality, the benefits of aid are spread inequitably, and that much money is lost through corruption and waste. Research findings suggest policymakers should be cautious in assuming that aid projects help create positive perceptions of the deliverers of aid, or that they help legitimise the government.

- **Strengthening provincial and district governance systems and fostering effective and transparent Afghan leadership which connects to Kabul is key.** Local governance is not a replacement for Kabul's leadership, but constitutes a key component in a social contract between the centre and periphery. In practice this means encouraging a more responsive and transparent state, promoting more merit-based appointment mechanisms, building social capacity along the lines of NSP, and addressing abuses of power that look inequitable to the population. Fostering quality Afghan leadership is also critical to a sustainable exit strategy.

Recommendations

- **The Coalition Should Ensure COIN Doctrine is Evidence-based.** There is an urgent need to ensure that the new 'population centric' COIN strategy is evidence based, and does not continue to uncritically assume that development aid 'wins hearts and minds' and/or promotes stability. Priority should be given to assessing stabilisation effects of projects, rather than assuming impact based on amounts of money spent or the number of projects implemented. Greater emphasis should also be given to understanding drivers of conflict, as aid projects can only be effective in promoting stability objectives if they are effectively addressing the main causes of instability.

- **Development and COIN Policies Should Acknowledge the Potentially Destabilising Effects of Aid.** There is a need for much greater awareness regarding the destabilising

effects of aid in terms of creating perceived winners and losers, promoting a destructive war/aid economy, and fuelling corruption. There also needs to be greater recognition of the inadvertent role of aid donors (and not just aid recipients) in fuelling corruption when they provide money without adequate safeguards and oversight.

- **Donors Should Prioritise and Strengthen Accountability Mechanisms to Minimise the Destabilising Effects of Corruption.** Civilian and military institutions should spend as much development aid as they can effectively and accountably, but no more. Spending money without adequate oversight will do more harm than good. Donors should therefore prioritise strengthening monitoring, evaluation and other oversight mechanisms to promote greater accountability and minimise risks of corruption. Incentive structures should also be created that reward quality and not just quantity, processes and not just products, and impact rather than just outputs.

- **Donors Should Differentiate Between Stabilisation and Development Objectives and Funding Sources.** Donors should avoid setting development aid up to fail by expecting it to deliver on unrealistically ambitious stabilisation objectives for which it is not well-suited. Donors should differentiate between stabilisation funds, used for relatively small-scale and short-term projects designed to promote stability effects at a tactical level, and larger-scale and longer-term development aid projects designed to promote development objectives. The perceived imbalance in aid spending between insecure and secure provinces could be redressed by spending more development funds in relatively secure regions while continuing to spend stabilisation funds in less secure regions.

- **An Afghanistan Trust Fund Should be Established.** Donors should consider establishing and contributing to an Afghanistan Trust Fund (or strengthening and expanding the scope of the existing Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund), which could take advantage of the current high levels of development resources being committed to Afghanistan, but would remove some of the pressures on donors and implementing partners to 'use or lose' their aid money. The pressure to spend too much money too quickly (i.e., to maintain 'burn rates') is having many harmful and destabilising effects, which could be mitigated by the establishment of a trust fund mechanism. This would allow development resources to be spent more accountably and effectively within more sustainable and realistic timeframes.

Introduction

1.   There was broad recognition of the urgency to appraise the international community's efforts to implement aid as a tool of COIN in Afghanistan. With the U.S. aid budget in Afghanistan set to double in the coming year, growing impatience of taxpayers from troop contributing countries, the looming 'Obama deadline', and general Afghan donor fatigue, time is short to produce results that are commensurate with the billions of dollars in assistance that have been channelled to the country.

2.   The newly introduced COIN doctrine in Afghanistan, championed by NATO General Stanley McChrystal, has introduced newfound optimism and a sense among practitioners that, despite previous failings, lessons have been learned and there is hope to 'get it right this time'. Nevertheless there is also a sense that the international community is 'muddling through' COIN, without clearly achieving synergy between the three tracks of security, governance and development.

What Does A Successful 'Winning Hearts and Minds' Outcome Look Like?

3.   The replacement of the international community's 'enemy-centric' approach with a 'population-centric' military strategy emphasises the need for a sober assessment of what motivates people to rebel, and a deliberate incorporation of these observations into the design of a more effective strategy that addresses the underlying causes of unrest. Such an agenda involves changing the mindset of the target population, through a combination of measures to provide population security, the delivery of small acts of support (e.g. medical or veterinary), and an effective information operations campaign for the stated objective of 'winning hearts and minds' (WHAM). It remains unclear to what extent the use of development assistance will contribute to this cause.

4.   During the 'classical period' of COIN in the 1950s, development assistance was certainly seen to be a valuable tool in promoting alliances and countering communism. In the post-Cold War period, the Western development logic moved from big-ticket, large-scale infrastructure projects aimed at WHAM of elites (i.e. a focus on the state – 'geopolitics') to a focus on persuading and protecting populations (i.e. 'human security' and 'biopolitics').

5.   In the current Afghan context, the main focus of WHAM appears to be on the segment of the population that is most at risk of joining the insurgency. The geographic focus is thus predominantly in the South and East; the ethnic focus is the Pashtun tribes; and men are the primary target.

6.   There are some serious concerns that constrain apparent advances in the state-of-the-art of COIN, including a general sense that the international community is still confused as to the underlying assumptions that are behind the WHAM concept. 'Whose hearts and minds is it?'. Indeed, a clearly-defined articulation of what, exactly, a successful WHAM outcome looks like remained a tellingly unaddressed point during the conference. Is WHAM what we are really aiming for? Or is that too ambitious a goal for what can reasonably be achieved? COIN doctrine's evolution has gone far, but not enough: it has evolved from 'kill the hell out of the enemy to COIN the hell out of the enemy by focusing on output, without questioning whether this has any impact'. There was agreement that this needs to change, and fast.

7.   Another key concern was related to 'whose vision of progress' the COIN approach reflects. As it is meant to encompass all stakeholders, and yet it has the appearance of being driven by the militaries, there was a fear that the civil dimension would become subordinated to military control. There were also many questions surrounding the role of humanitarian aid, and how it should be defined relative to other forms of aid and assistance.

8.   British General Sir Gerald Templar referred to WHAM as 'that nauseating phrase I think I invented', arguing against a growing conventional military wisdom which had begun to confuse the achievement of 'popularity' among local populations with the more important objective of competing for 'legitimacy' vis-à-vis the insurgency. Critical to Templar's view is the understanding that the primary competition is between the system of the insurgent and that of the host regime; hence the international community should be less concerned about its own perceived legitimacy and more focused on building the legitimacy of the Afghan state. Others noted that success does not necessarily lie in Western notions of what a state should look like. The current predatory behaviour of many people within the state apparatus suggests that the international community should be looking to all forms of political governance in the country, including structures which do not conform to Western expectations: 'It may be messy, it may be difficult, both morally and ethically, but by imposing a system which is not legitimate we are not serving our own interests, let alone Afghan interests'.

9.   Practitioners shared an understanding of the need to empower indigenous legitimate sources of governance to meet as many social, political and economic problems as possible. The planned shift in focus of the original Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) model, from building the short-term legitimacy of the respective international forces to the assumption of an increasingly subordinate role to the local authorities over the long-term, is reflected in the new 'provincial *support* team' model.

10.   In terms of roles and division of labour, problems arise when PRTs become the primary platform for delivering assistance. There needs to be much more thinking and analysis around which actor is most capable and appropriate for each task, in each locale. Resourcing and the creation of 'stabilisation' or 'stability' teams were discussed in some detail, in addition to the need to decentralise decision-making and improve training of new personnel. One of the main potential benefits of the 'teaming' concept would be to mitigate against the application of unilateral perspectives to a particular issue. We have to be able to identify, address, deconflict, and monitor progress on multiple avenues-of-engagement at the same time. Questions were raised regarding the composition of the teams (Afghanistan specialists? Urban or rural cultural advisers? People with good inter-personal skills?), and what they need to know in order to help WHAM.

11.   Because success in COIN rests on popular perceptions, there should be dual emphasis on both the emotive ('hearts') component and the cognitive ('minds') component. U.S. doctrine tends to place more emphasis on calculated self-interest, which perhaps leads to certain blind spots in understanding Afghans and their context. One view urges practitioners, at a minimum, to increase their understanding of Islam, Pashtun codes of honour, and Afghan sense of nationhood, before following a 'population-centric' track. An Afghan view noted: 'the international community still does not understand local culture and politics, as well as insurgents to adjust their policy. In order to win, they have to know the people who they want to deal with them'.

12.   Many argued that in order to 'know the people', the international community must remedy its lack of understanding of women in Afghanistan (in the household, decision-making, etc). Only then will it be possible to determine their importance to development initiatives, and their possible role in combating insurgency and violence. Insurgents and militaries are almost entirely male, but half of the population is female and these women have a role if international donors are trying to win the hearts and minds of the *population*. It is currently unclear how many of the ideas presented by men either originate from or are influenced by women.

13.   The general consensus, however, was that in encouraging the promotion of women's inclusion in Afghanistan, it is imperative for the international community to be extremely careful in assessing the potential unintended consequences of its actions. It may, for instance, be counter-productive to isolate women through specific projects that increase their participation in public spheres. This does not necessarily translate to 'raising their status', as it can lead to further exclusion and even contempt. It was proposed that a more constructive

focus should be on how engagement with marginalised groups more broadly can lead to better stability outcomes.

14.   From a broader aid and stabilisation perspective, there was a high level of agreement that an entrenched set of assumptions tends to influence intervention strategies in Afghanistan, including, inter alia, the suppositions that: key drivers of insecurity are unemployment, poverty, radical Islam; aid projects 'win hearts and minds' and help legitimise the government; economic development and 'modernisation' are stabilising; and extending the reach of the central government in Afghanistan leads to stabilisation and development projects are a means to achieve this reach.

15.   Added to these are assumptions that, from the humanitarian perspective, foreign troop presence generates bad local perceptions that increase their risk by association, and from a COIN doctrine perspective, the host government is cooperative, and local Afghans can adjust relatively straightforwardly from interfacing with 'warfighting' soldiers to understanding the 'look-listen-touch' approach.

16.   Many of these assumptions remain uncritiqued and were challenged at the conference, even as assistance continues to be implemented under the pressured gaze of donor governments, emphasising the need for greater enquiry into the role of aid in the new population-centric COIN strategy. Paradigms of Western, neo-liberal development that presuppose templates of democracy, capitalism, and centralised law and order may need to be adjusted to suit the international community's stated goals of fostering bottom-up, culturally appropriate solutions.

17.   In the context of these broad doctrinal questions, an empirical foundation was laid for the central question of aid effectiveness on stability in Afghanistan. So what does the evidence tell us?

What Do We Know About Aid And Stabilisation?

18.   A key theme is the critical lack of monitoring, evaluation, and empirical data available to assess the impact of aid on stability in Afghanistan. The methodological challenges of gleaning good information in conflict-affected areas, in addition to the failure across many international agencies to design projects with adequate pre, during, and post-assessment mechanisms, have led to a serious dearth of both quantitative and qualitative information. Questions were raised as to the explanation for this among military contingents with otherwise strong traditions of robust after-action reviews.

19.   Not only has the lack of dedicated monitoring and evaluation capacity limited the ability of actors in Afghanistan to assess the impact of their programs, it has also prevented ongoing adaptation and reform. Several academics raised the further complaint that a lack of transparency with regard to military and PRT data has deprived the research field of valuable opportunities to study these issues, and urged for steps to be taken to make such data more readily available.

20.   Despite the constraints there were, however, emerging ideas and hypotheses that could be drawn from the perceptions studies, comparative analyses, and anecdotal evidence shared by the conference participants. One of the most important assumptions to tackle was the thinking on key drivers of instability, for if neither unemployment nor poverty, for example, were found to be important destabilising factors, this would considerably limit the impact of development aid on WHAM, no matter how well aid programmes are implemented.

Key drivers of instability

21.   Research findings from Afghanistan highlight that many of the fundamental conflict drivers there are inherently political in nature, such as ethnic grievances as well as inter and intra-tribal disputes. Assumptions about poverty, unemployment and radical Islam as additional key drivers of instability attracted divergent views in the conference. According to one study that looked at employment, the common pattern to emerge across the insurgencies in Iraq, Philippines and Afghanistan was that increased employment is associated with increased violence. Many respondents in the Afghan studies did cite unemployment and the inability to achieve social goals as providing the 'enabling' conditions for recruitment to the insurgency. However, the extent to which this was the case remained uncertain as, for example, extremely few unemployed non-Pashtun were joining the Taliban, and it was not even entirely clear what unemployment means in much of rural Afghanistan where the economy is based on subsistence agriculture. If poverty and unemployment constitute enabling conditions for recruitment to the insurgency, it would appear that they do so within the context of the political conflict drivers.

22.   One major study on the role of Islam found that it was rather the failure of the state and Coalition forces to provide security and justice, including the experience of predatory security institutions, which drew people towards the Taliban (or groups that use violence against them). Similarly, the behaviour of foreign forces (rather than their presence per se) was identified as a major pull factor. Much of the dissatisfaction was caused by a sense that the troops' accountability flows to American and other donor taxpayers, rather than to the Afghans whom they claim to be protecting.

23.   In further support of this evidence, the same research project found that religious messages resonate primarily because they are couched in terms of opposition to a corrupt government and occupation by foreign troops. Aiming to understand from Afghans themselves why they support the Taliban or Hizb-i Islami, the project concluded that the majority of people's decisions grow out of pragmatic and moral reasons, rather than ideology. Importantly, those expressing support for the Taliban as a more 'moral form of governance' did not want them to replace government. The Taliban groups were seen simply as one of the only means to hold the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) to account and for ensuring greater political inclusion. The broader conclusion is therefore that radical Islam is attractive for people insofar as it is used as a way to redress corruption and representation issues. A positive WHAM outcome would involve winning more legitimacy for a less corrupt state system, rather than addressing the radical interpretation of Islam itself.

24.   Results from a study in Pakistan on support for militancy suggests that 'religious seriousness' is actually negatively associated with violence, implying that the West should be focused on ensuring that more children have access to a 'good' *madrassa* through their education. Despite the lack of causal linkage between Islam and the pull to join an insurgency, other research points to worrying processes of radicalisation already underway by political parties and Hizb ut-Tahir in Afghanistan. There is consequently no cause for complacency in learning more about how various interpretations of Islam can contribute to people's support for violent means of resolving grievances.

25.   Given that a major pull to the insurgents is the discontent with what they perceive to be corruption/abuse of power by GIRoA officials, and lack of means to make these people accountable, the international community should focus on strengthening the independent media and ensuring that such channels can be used more effectively to pressure Government. The current media outlets demonstrate that Afghans do speak out, but there are questions about how this information is used (if at all) strategically by the international community as a positive advocacy tool.

26.   Another noteworthy finding from field research in Afghanistan is that aid projects can give rise to destabilising effects in themselves, especially by fuelling corruption and a lucrative war/aid economy. Large donor budgets in Afghanistan have induced a political economy in which the GIRoA has taken on *rentier* state characteristics, exacerbating official corruption, eroding the accountability of the central government to its own population, and fostering a climate of aid dependency. In light of the distorting impacts on the local Afghan economy, research suggests that the injection of funds has failed to achieve the level of

stability desired. Those with a critical perspective on Western aid models suggested the cause of these funding trends is related to the intentional self-survival of an aid industry, while others argued that the reasons are grounded in the practical realities of political budgeting. Also raised were questions of the 'saturation points' of the Afghan aid sector, and means by which to gauge this metric more accurately so that the international community does 'less harm'.

27.   Because people's perceptions are so important in forming their view of whether to become violent, participants regularly flagged the pressing need to develop better messaging to the Afghan people, particularly where a shift in policy will affect the behaviour of those on the frontline. In order to develop successful communications strategies, it will be important to learn more about Afghan culture, including the influence of family structures and gender dynamics.

Stabilising effects of aid in insecure provinces

28.   All the research presented on aid and stabilisation in insecure provinces indicated that reconstruction and development projects are having development benefits, but we do not know whether they are addressing the major drivers of conflict/insurgency. Small-scale aid projects can certainly help to facilitate and legitimise interactions between external actors and local communities ('foot in the door'), and can be used to help address local grievances or perceptions of inequity. Some also reported intelligence-gathering benefits. The important caveat, however, is that the benefits are very local and tactical; therefore the relationships are transactional in nature, and the work is not winning populations over to GIRoA.

29.   This is very similar to the experience of U.S. COIN initiatives that have been attempting to tackle radicalisation in the Horn of Africa. The experience of local perceptions in the 'ungoverned' spaces neighbouring Somalia indicate that aid is not enough to buy strategic influence, and that a division must be drawn between 'tactical' and 'strategic' WHAM. For example, while there is some evidence that the projects have achieved a measure of tactical success by helping the U.S. military establish some presence in the region, the passive consent and acceptance of the civil teams has not equated to the aid projects having affected attitudinal change. Many sentiments remain, such as the mistrust about the purpose of the mission and utility of their projects.

30.   In the most insecure Afghan provinces under investigation in research carried out by Tufts University, perceptions of aid were universally negative. One of the greatest causes for dissatisfaction was the perception that GIRoA and PRTs are colluding in elite empowerment and corruption. In the Helmand study, for example, elite capture of development assistance

eclipsed any sense of it being a public good. In response to the negative perception of the development agenda, participants questioned whether the issue is with aid in itself failing to stabilise, or with the current modalities for delivering aid-for-stabilisation being misguided. The 'deliverers' of aid could be the problem, for in some of the most insecure parts of the country, the delivery mode has shifted away from traditional development workers to private contractors and the military, whose core business is not long-term community engagement.

31.   A significant finding across the provinces was the central importance of *process* over the product; how people are engaged is almost more important than the desired end state. Most people's experience of the National Solidarity Programme, for example, has been very positive because communities feel that they are benefiting equally through a genuine consultation process. Despite this apparent success, however, there is no clear evidence to suggest that this programme has direct security benefits.

Stabilising effects of aid in more secure provinces

32.   The main difference to emerge between the research findings from insecure and more secure provinces is that the international military is *not* seen as a destabilising force in the latter. On the whole, people are pragmatic about its presence. In fact, the main complaint about the PRT personnel was their *lack* of development activity – they wanted to see more projects, more results. The Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) team in the PRT under analysis also expressed frustration that they could not do more.

33.   While overall there appears to be a greater atmosphere of legitimacy and appreciation of aid programming in the more secure provinces, it is important to note that the direct correlation between the effectiveness of the aid projects themselves and these perceptions remains unclear. More critical perspectives from Southern provinces may be influenced by the inevitable fact that 'people in more insecure regions have more to grumble about' due to the *a priori* instability which attracted the aid-for-stabilisation efforts in the first place.

34.   Interestingly, people in the North of Afghanistan underscored the primacy of security as a means for winning their support, indicating that this is one of the most important features of WHAM in that context, despite being in the more 'secure' provinces. Beyond the effectiveness of CIMIC efforts achieving force protection, there was a general scepticism regarding the ability of aid projects to reduce physical security risks. In fact, one of the general criticisms levelled at the type of international assistance they receive related to the use of overly short-term strategies, like cash payments to local leaders.

35.   The most significant question raised as a result of the regional comparison, however, was whether or not the focus of assistance should now shift to the North, where there is likely to be more 'success' in the implementation of aid projects. There is a definite perception that donor money is following the violence and drugs to the South and South-West, creating a form of 'peace penalty' for those living in other parts of the country. It was felt that this was exacerbated by the resource-strained PRTs in those areas.

36.   In terms of shifting more aid into more secure areas, participants underscored certain 'unknowns' that require further investigation. These include how the shift might affect the evident perception among Pashtuns that they are being disenfranchised, if it happens that most Pashtuns live in insecure areas. Moreover, if we accept the evidence that suggests large flows of funds increases instability, then is it sensible to deduce that a significant injection of funds/aid to the North and West might increase the instability of those areas? Lastly, if process and participation, which are inherently time and energy consuming, are important to 'effective' assistance, then such a strategy also raises questions about using a massive and rapid infusion of resources as a means to transform an environment.

37.   At the most general level, the findings from both insecure and more secure provinces pointed to the need to improve aid effectiveness across the board, and emphasised that a central part of achieving this is to show active interest in ensuring value for money. This raises the question of what forms of aid have had (or are likely to have) the greatest positive impact on stability?

Aid modalities with the greatest (likely or proven) positive impact on stability

38.   Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) implemented through the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) funding appear to be a particularly effective model of aid delivery. Although it is difficult to determine the extent to which the examples of other stabilisation environments provide parallels to Afghanistan, the study that was presented on Iraq demonstrated that CERP spending appears to be violence-reducing. The various findings and experience from Afghanistan suggest that QIPs tend to foster a measurable increase in force protection at the tactical level, and as such are useful in supporting the WHAM agenda.

39.   The relative efficacy of QIPs is nevertheless tempered by their restricted impact. As in the Horn of Africa, QIPs mainly achieve short-term stability benefits that are restricted to the immediate transactional exchange, and so do not prove enough to persuade people to take personal risks in countering the Taliban. Temporary achievements conform well to the

rational-choice focus of U.S. COIN doctrine, but they do not reflect the type of transformation necessary to generate trust and reduce suspicion over the long-term.

40. Comparative research confirms this by demonstrating that the international community cannot 'stockpile' quick wins in the struggle for hearts and minds. Therefore, QIPs appear innately limited in their ability to achieve WHAM objectives at the strategic level.

41. In the design of future aid programmes, greater reflection should be dedicated to understanding exactly how individual CERP funding at the commander's level relates strategically to broader aid-delivery efforts within Afghanistan. There also appears to be a need for more research into the potentially destabilising effects of short-term QIPs in feeding corruption and/or the war economy. Not only does the potential for local government exploitation of such funds present a threat to host nation legitimacy, but it is of concern that allocating funding contracts to local power-holders and contractors with links to the insurgency has formed a back-channel directly in opposition to Coalition interests.

42. One study found that the impact of CERP funding is twice as effective when a PRT is present; and yet the same findings show, troublingly, that other reconstruction spending has no effect on stability. This type of research needs to be applied across the different regions in Afghanistan, which are likely to reveal varied results.

43. In general, the conference revealed an unsurprising tension of viewpoints in respect to the existence of PRTs, with some looking to how to reform and adapt them further, and others advocating their closure. The historical evidence suggests that, while PRTs have demonstrated a shift towards a greater supporting role for the GIRoA, their experience as brokers of development has led to the formation of parallel governance and funding structures, which substitute government functions and form unintentional competition for legitimacy. Afghan local mayors have complained about being in essence little more than 'carriers of orders from the people to the PRTs', their own legitimacy undercut by the dominant role of external actors.

44. In the context of CERP projects, people need more guarantees for personal safety than transactional exchanges of aid for force protection; hence, security sector reform (SSR) and governance programmes might be more effective options to pursue.

45. Some suggest more attention should be paid to Afghan private sector development. But then the question may be the level of risk international corporations would be willing to bear in the knowledge of deep corruption and protection rackets. Again, it would be useful if

research could demonstrate what would need to happen for such organisations to apply their skills, technology and capabilities in Afghanistan.

46.   Arguably the forms of aid that are likely to have the greatest positive impact on stability are those which the people feel they need, both from a rational and emotional perspective. In order to win their hearts and minds, the international community therefore must invest more in both measuring best practice/aid effectiveness and learning how to understand the Afghan people's needs. In this regard, evidence shows a divergence of opinion between the international community's understanding of what works, versus what the Afghans themselves would like.

47.   On the one hand, practitioners seem to be advocating for a shift to smaller and simpler projects (like small infrastructure support) that can be achieved more easily, with the employment of locals, and that have a better chance of being sustainable. Big projects are reportedly less sustainable because of the high level of technical capacity that is required but not available locally, and their tendency to cause local resentment and destabilising effects due to private contracting issues. Afghans conversely feel that big projects, implemented well, provide more evidence of the GIRoA and international community's commitment. Therefore there remains a disconnect between what people feel they want, and what the practitioners have seen to work better.

48.   Interestingly, Afghans also reportedly prioritise interventions that improve their security and promote clean government, which can only really be achieved through less tangible or immediate governance initiatives. While there was agreement that governance and SSR initiatives are of critical importance, this type of 'intangible development' is the most difficult to achieve, and must have a long-term horizon, which does not necessarily suit the political imperatives of certain donor governments, and also does not constitute the highly visible, large-scale type of project apparently desired by Afghans.

49.   Concern was expressed about the risks involved in pouring the bulk of resources into improving the national security architecture, which on the one hand is a critical part of establishing a platform for an exit, but at the same time, runs the risk of reinforcing the *rentier* status of the Afghan state. There are certain unknown dangers in installing a significant amount of new security personnel with a state not able to carry the economic burden of the surge in army and police.

50.   There was a general sense that there is still a lack of evidence about the usefulness of different modalities of aid as a COIN 'weapons system'. Arguably, the research question should have focused on whether some stabilisation approaches, such as through PRTs, are

more effective than others, and whether the way they integrated aid in their approaches could explain some of the differences. Such a question would certainly help build a more comprehensive picture of the various stabilising development options. Others suggest that when scaling up projects from $50,000 to almost half a million dollars, it would be wise to disaggregate lessons learned across the different sectors and projects to draw attention to ensuring sustainable transition to longer-term programmes, while taking into account 'do no harm' principles, governance concerns and the like.

Is There an Identifiable Hierarchy of Needs?

51.   There seemed to be widespread acceptance of the inherent value of development activity for people's general well-being, despite the unknown extent of its ability to produce stabilising effects. There were, however, divergent views regarding the sequencing of assistance best suited to WHAM. One body of research identifies the need to focus only on the economic and governance sectors, and that if these are executed well, the social sector 'would take care of itself'. Others question whether prioritising investment in economic development over and above other forms of development actually delivers social progress, human security, stability or life with dignity or effective governance and law and order. Moreover, good, or 'good enough' governance, is not a kind of 'project' that can be delivered. It is a process of decision-making, participation and accountability that applies to all formal and informal institutions. Unfortunately, most people think of governance almost as an object that is missing from the package of stability, and can be added as another piece to the 'government-in-a-box'.

52.   Discussion also centred on whether or not stabilisation and development efforts could occur in parallel, or if aid can occur without stability provided first. The metaphor of joining the 'stabilisation pipe' to the 'development pipe' was used several times to describe the need to connect short-term impact and long-term development programming in a way that will enhance stability.

53.   The main agreement that emerged from the perceptions studies and firsthand experience of those working in Afghanistan was in relation to the primacy of physical security. Improved physical security appears to be the first need to be addressed before the citizenry finds value in higher order needs, such as education and economic development.

What Do We Need to Do Differently and Better?

54.   Despite not having the optimal level of evidence at hand, it is still possible to gauge what critical factors the international community must get right in order to avoid the negative perceptions that are so central to winning a COIN campaign. Hence, some of the key drivers

of stability that relate to aid can be summarised as ensuring quality of assistance in aid projects; avoiding cultural *faux pas*; delivering on promises; attending to any harmful influences on the political economy that might provide people with incentives to sustain the conflict; demonstrating the commitment of donors/practitioners over the long-term; genuine consultation, which requires a proper appreciation for local context and culture; transparency and integrity, which requires a demonstration that corruption (abuses of power; waste of resources) is taken seriously; and reducing risk and providing some kind of assurance that people will become more secure by the international and Government presence over the long-term.

55.   Some were supportive of the 'Tiger team' concept, in which technical assistance teams are organised contextually around a particular challenge. It was suggested that more careful human resourcing strategies and locally-informed problem-solving would assist in making sure that some of the above factors are properly taken into account.

Getting the politics right

56.   One of the most challenging issues confronted during the conference was the potential disjuncture between COIN doctrine and political reality. It is questionable whether, even if we know what to do next (due to a better evidence base or dedicated Afghan expertise), it is realistically implementable due to political barriers. Fundamental to current COIN doctrine is the premise that the GIRoA, as host nation, is both a supportive partner to the international community and that the extension of its capacity and control over the country is the *sin qua non* of Coalition aid efforts. At a practical level, working through national institutions is presented as the sole means of sustainable progress in Afghanistan.

57.   Corruption alone, however, presents a major obstacle to such a partnership. It was noted that in many regions of Afghanistan, the local and national government is viewed with equivalent, or greater, distrust than the Taliban. Corruption, waste, and 'institutional capture' by unsavoury and ethnically divisive individuals – intensified by a political economy of aid which weakens government accountability to its own tax base – raises questions of how extending the reach of government via legitimising aid programmes and support can increase stability.

58.   While Afghanistan has indeed fallen to the second last position in Transparency International's last global index on corruption, regionally three of its neighbours are also in TI's top ten. This regional context highlights the need for donor countries to be realistic in their expectations for reduced corruption in Afghanistan. One participant suggested that international donors should focus above all on abuses of power that look hugely inequitable

to the Afghan population. Again, the question falls back to what extent the international community is willing to engage on these issues at a political level.

59.   At a more operational level, where there appears to be solid advancements in understanding the context and how to deal with issues like corruption (e.g. the International Security Assistance Force's 'malign influences' line of effort), practitioners complained that there was a lack of political strategy supporting the work of those who see, feel, and touch the issues on the frontline.

60.   These challenges require a robust and coordinated political strategy, which might even identify alternative leaders (that do apparently exist) to work with. One participant suggested that such an approach would need to outline a plan to deal with 'destroying its own eggs (i.e. killing warlords)'.

Constructive coordination

61.   In order to achieve an integrated WHAM effort, it was agreed that there needs to be constructive participation of all the major stakeholders; and yet, the usual issues arose regarding the cooperation of many actors with separate national interests in Afghanistan. Some believed it was a structural problem, and referred to the Dayton Accord in Bosnia as a good working model for international coordination. Others believed that the sheer quantity of divergent interests, in addition to past failed attempts at better coordination, mean that it might be better to work around the issue. From an operational perspective, civilians may need to become more comfortable in working alongside the military, so that the latter's role is restricted to combat and the provision of an 'enabling' security environment.

62.   Members of the NGO community that strive to maintain independence and impartiality raised the point that as long as NGOs seek to operate on the basis of community acceptance, they cannot align with or endorse any 'side' in the COIN mission (be that PRTs or ISAF more generally). While recognising that this acceptance is increasingly fragile, dynamic and under threat as external forces come into communities and decapitate local interlocutors, or sympathies shift, it was argued that full cooperation with the COIN agenda would place NGO personnel at too high a risk of being targeted by armed groups opposed to the mission. That said, NGOs expressed a willingness to comment on the implications of the different approaches that military actors have for communities they work with, or how they impact directly on their aid operations.

63.   In a challenge to the NGO community, some suggest that multi-mandated development agencies are 'hiding behind' humanitarianism as an excuse for inaction and 'bunkering down' their operations. One panel raised an interesting observation that through

the COIN strategy, the military is becoming more 'civilianised' at the same time that the aid agencies are becoming more risk averse, and disconnected from the populations concerned. However, it should be explored why aid agencies 'bunker themselves in'. The conclusion might be that the blurred line between aid and the military activities has forced the development actors to retreat. The question remains, given these changes, which stakeholders thus provide the best access to local people?

64.   Aside from the issue of humanitarian response, overall consensus was clear that greater coordination is necessary to oversee the aid effort in Afghanistan, despite many feeling that the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's role as chief coordinator was in need of serious reconsideration given its evident limitations.

Understanding and addressing the barriers to Afghan participation more specifically

65.   Regardless of improvements to the coordination of the international community's efforts, the participation of Afghan people themselves remains the key deciding factor in improving aid's impact on stabilisation. A better understanding of the continuing barriers to Afghan participation, therefore, represents a critically important way forward. For example, what costs do ordinary Afghans bear in terms of increased risk to personal and family security by participating in development programmes? How compelling is the 'value equation' of risk versus envisaged benefits to the people, and who are they prepared to constructively engage with in order to make such a transaction? While many say that the Afghan people should play a role or support the government, the people are between two hard rocks, they are not safe from the insurgents and they do not trust the government to provide security.

66.   When seeking to understand the Afghan risk-calculus in supporting Coalition efforts, a look at the history of risk-taking behaviour in Afghanistan may prove insightful. At what point and for what reasons have Afghans been willing to take risks to support a regime in the past? One view maintains the answer, simply put, is when they have been confident that they are on the winning side in doing so. This is a wholly understandable position, but one which raises concerns regarding the impact of the Obama deadline. Instead of the new strategy encouraging the people to move from a passive position to one that actively helps the COIN strategy win, the timeframe set to achieve the mission may be undermining incentives to side with the international community in supporting the GIRoA. The insurgents' major comparative advantage is not only that they understand the local culture, but that they are not scheduling any timeline for departure.

67.   From the perspective of Afghan elites, however, there is an alternative side to the deadline, namely that it has the potential to signal to those currently abusing positions of power that 'the party is not going to last forever' if they continue not to reform their behaviour.

What Are the Implications for COIN, Aid and stabilisation?

68.   The findings presented suggest that development aid can help win hearts and minds, albeit it a marginal way in comparison to the greater potential impact of successful interventions in the security, justice, and governance sectors. While the evidence is still not conclusive about the extent of aid's direct impact on stability, many agreed that aid is useful as an entry-point, or way of engaging communities. The results also suggest that better implementation and communication about the specific activities and objectives may well improve the chances of aid contributing to stabilisation.

69.   One of the obstacles to making use of a stronger evidence base is the fundamental disconnect between what 'needs' to be done, and where the current politics and timing issues are driving the international community. This has huge implications for the widely acknowledged need to rebuild trust and the respect of the Afghan people. The traditional Afghan game of Buzkashi can provide an analogy for the level of strain the current aid system is under: a 'dead horse', with 'riders' in the international community attempting to reform its corpse, instead of replacing it with a live mount.

70.   The major challenges remain political, which will only be solved with political solutions. Timeframes set by politicians will continue to impact aid effectiveness. Operationally, practitioners will have to prioritise how to balance the need for short-term stability gains with longer-term stabilisation and development objectives. While true success lies predominantly in the hands of those who engage over the long-term, i.e. the Afghans themselves, the international community has certain obligations in the immediate term.

71.   With respect to action points, the U.S. Congressional Election in November 2010, and troop drawback deadline of June 2011, were seen as two of the key milestones for measuring whether or not the international community has progressed closer to its goals of stabilisation and increased legitimacy for the GIRoA. From a political perspective, there was consensus that imperatives such as pushing significant amounts of funding through the system over a short period is not a productive way to stabilise Afghanistan.

72.   To deal with this problem, donors should consider establishing and contributing to an Afghanistan Trust Fund (or strengthening and expanding the scope of the existing Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund). A trust fund mechanism would remove some of the

pressures on donors and implementing partners to 'use or lose' their aid money and would allow development resources to be spent more accountably and effectively within more sustainable and realistic timeframes.

73.   Evidence on the aid-stabilisation relationship needs to be prepared in time for November 2010, which at this stage would comprise a meta analysis that brings together all available data, including any rapid assessments of PRTs if access is granted. This would form part of a strategic narrative for politicians that: demonstrates success stories where development activities/efforts have contributed to stabilisation; advocates on need for better understanding of multiple causes of violence and instability; points to the destabilising influences of current stabilisation/aid practice (such as amount of funding with tied timeline, and distribution of funding); and advocates for a conditions, and a needs-based, mechanism for implementation of the stabilisation aid budget.

74.   To deal with the issue of corruption and its destabilising effects on aid delivery, donors should act on their commitment to encourage 'good enough' governance, by focusing on a two-way/partnership effort that works to increase the Afghan public's ability to influence their own governance structures.

75.   From an aid effectiveness perspective, process (over product) will continue to be central to how much legitimacy the international community can win for both itself and the GIRoA, and also to how effectively it learns the lessons. All of these lessons have been 'learned' before and international donors have sworn over and over that they have absorbed them. Hopefully practitioners have discovered new lessons and emerging evidence, which will foster further enquiry and action based on what programmes do and do not work in Afghanistan.

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