

# *Counterinsurgency for aid and development organizations*

--G. Scott Alamanach Mikalauski

Counterinsurgency is primarily a political operation, not a military one. The only reason the military even gets involved is because, as Mao Tse-Tung wrote, Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. The reason insurgencies happen is because people are violently dissatisfied with their legitimate government. It is then up to the legitimate government to change in a way that redresses people's grievances. Aid and development organizations end up playing a major role in this process. Unfortunately, the members of such organizations do not think of themselves as counterinsurgents, and they tend not to behave like people waging a war. As a result the military has extensive literature on the topic of counterinsurgency; the aid community has virtually none. This is backward.

The ideas discussed here are based on a year spent in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in a position that allowed for exceptional learning opportunities. Others have already learned these lessons, but the contractual nature of this work and the rapid turnover that it encourages have prevented these lessons from being institutionalized. If we want to win, this needs to change. To quote the U.S. Army Counterinsurgency field manual, "In (counterinsurgency operations), the side that learns faster and adapts more rapidly— the better learning organization— usually wins." Here, then are the lessons that operations in the field have to teach us.

**Recognize who really holds the power** It is almost certainly not the legitimate government. If the government held power, there would not be an insurgency. But this does not mean that the insurgents hold the power, either; if they did, they would be the government. The two are in competition and struggling against each other. Who is more powerful in any given time and place is an open question, and it may well be neither of them.

In the rural areas of southern Afghanistan— which is most of the region— real power is held neither by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRoA) nor the Taliban, it is held by local village elders. Within their respective territories, these gentlemen are the most powerful people in Afghan political society. Their geographic range is limited, but within that range their word is usually law. The Taliban recognize this political reality, and in most cases they cannot operate in an area without at least the implicit consent of the relevant elder.

There have been occasional attempts by the Taliban to terrorize an uncooperative village into giving support. Sometimes this works. Sometimes it does not. There have been cases— plenty of them— in which an elder, supported by his village, has turned away the Taliban and denied them whatever

support or rights of access they were seeking. There have been cases of villages taking up arms against the Taliban when the Taliban's actions were not in the villages' interests.

**Find the people in the middle and get them on your side** In any insurgency, most people are not wholly on one side or on the other. Afghans especially tend not to be ideologues, and historically have sided with whoever appeared to be winning. The villages just discussed are a clear example. They usually have the power to resist the Taliban, if they choose. For an aid project being implemented in the vicinity of such a village, this is critical.

Winning the middle is the entire goal of a counterinsurgency. Insurgency is a form of asymmetrical warfare not because of the relative strengths of the two military adversaries, but because of the style of engagement. While insurgents rely heavily on guerilla tactics, terror, and propaganda, the counterinsurgent relies on improved government services, beneficial aid programs, and his own (generally more honest) propaganda. The insurgent seeks to delegitimize the government through violence. The counterinsurgent seeks to legitimize the government through the only thing that makes any government legitimate— earning the consent of the governed.

To help the government earn that consent, it is up to aid and development workers to win the great undecided middle. We do this by using the vehicle of our aid programs to make contact with communities and bring them better services. In the course of this contact we can learn their grievances and either address them within the context of our own programs, or communicate those grievances to other counterinsurgents who are better positioned to address them.

**Collect and analyze intelligence** During an insurgency, any time something blows up, it means somebody is upset about something. With the exception of a few lunatics— too few to make a difference— no one starts war for the sake of having a war. As Augustine pointed out, man starts war not because he hates peace, but because he seeks a peace that suits him better. The good news is that there is usually some common ground to be had between the insurgents and counterinsurgents, common ground from which negotiations can start. It is possible that among the hard-core insurgents, located at one extreme end of the spectrum, there might be no common ground to be had. But among the great unwon middle, there is always the possibility of negotiation.

The dedicated insurgents at the extreme far pole are beyond the scope of aid and development programs. They are for the military to deal with, using those methods peculiar to a military. Such extremists are rare, even among armed combatants. Many of those who take up arms to fight with an insurgency are of imperfect motivation, and may be turned under the right circumstances. In southern Afghanistan we see a great deal of this. Many Taliban fighters during the annual summer offensive are rural adolescents who simply have nothing better to do with their time. Rather than be a drain on

village resources during the lean summer months, their village elders release them to go fight with the Taliban.

There are also those who side with an insurgency only when and for as long as it suits their own purpose. It was mentioned above that elders can allow or forbid Taliban activity within their area. Sometimes they may allow it simply because doing so is less troublesome than preventing it. Other times they may allow it because permitting what the Taliban have in mind may help settle a score with a rival, or will bring some perceived economic advantage, or some other trifling personal reason.

These sorts of intrigues are what fuel both insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. If some locally powerful figure has a dispute with his neighbor, or he wants to make some gain for himself, these are issues the counterinsurgent can engage to positive effect. Aid and development organizations are perfectly poised to deliver infrastructure and services that redress such grievances or help achieve such anticipated economic gains. These are exactly the actions that starve insurgencies and bring peace.

The only way to deliver the right aid to the right people, in a way that will neutralize incentives to side with the insurgents, is to gather and analyze intelligence. Aid and development workers must know, in close and personal detail, the social dynamics playing out in their areas of focus. They must keep track of who is doing what, and why. They must identify individuals and their motives. Without this knowledge, aid is delivered blindly, stupidly. Aid delivered unintelligently is without net effect, and perfectly useless for advancing the cause of peace.

**Hire local people to provide security** Unlike aid and development projects in pacified countries, operations in war zones require a heavy layer of security. A number of contracting companies have sprung up in recent years to provide these services. Close protection of expatriate staff is often provided by retired military members working as security contractors.

Protection of project sites, when required, usually falls to local security firms employing local nationals. In practice, this may not be local enough. In southern Afghanistan especially, a real local is someone from the immediate area of the project; anyone else is an outsider. In some places, a person from only a few villages away is distrusted as a stranger.

It should be pointed out, though it should not need to be explained, that people do not want armed strangers prowling around their neighborhood, particularly during an insurgency. When aid projects bring in security workers from any distance away, this can create friction with the community and encourage attacks on the project. Keep in mind, most of the community is in that great unwon middle, and has no reason to extend trust to armed outsiders just for the sake of some aid project.

A better method is to hire members of the immediate community to provide security. This accomplishes a few things at once. It eliminates issues of friction due to outsiders, and it also gives like-minded community members a common cause to rally around. By organizing security around an aid project, they are also organizing in a way that will help them to resist hostile insurgents.

Also, involving a community in a project's security involves them in the project itself. Whatever changes in political allegiance a person may feel in the future, if he once helped to build the bridge near his village, he will be that much less likely to blow it up some day in the future. Additionally, by hiring security locally, that much more of the community will have been engaged with and will have a channel of communication with the counterinsurgency side. This is outreach, and the ability of our aid programs to contribute to it should not be underestimated.

**Beware of the lure of standards** There is an understandable temptation to apply first-world standards of quality and safety to any aid project, particularly those involving construction. It should be pointed out that building codes in all places are a matter of local policy, not some global standard. Even the International Building Code (IBC) is applied— or not— at the will of the local government. (Building codes are usually established at the municipal level.)

The mistake is often made that applying the IBC, or U.S. workplace safety standards, or others such foreign standards, regardless of codes at the local level will be “better” than what the local law requires. Sometimes there is no statutory local code, and aid organizations resort to something like the IBC as a default policy. This is a mistake for three reasons. First, it assumes in the absence of statutory code that there is no code at all, when in fact builders all over the world generally know what they are doing. Social mechanisms that a foreign aid worker cannot see exist to identify and correct poor workmanship.

Secondly, what is a suitable standard in the first world is not “higher” or “better” than other standards, it is merely more suitable under those first-world conditions. Most insurgencies do not take place in the first world, and the conditions which both allow for and require first-world standards simply do not exist. We can understand this if we keep in mind one cruel truth: the more expensive stuff is, the cheaper lives are. The United States maintains extraordinary standards of safety— automobiles come equipped with side-impact airbags for example— and it goes to such lengths because lives there are so precious. The average American commands a huge amount of wealth. Or, what amounts to the same thing, a huge amount of wealth supports just one average American. In America, stuff is cheap.

Elsewhere, stuff is expensive, and so human lives are cheap. Far less capital is spent on the support of any one person. Under these economic conditions, a higher level of risk is justified for any given endeavor; lower levels of risk cannot be supported economically and would prevent a project from going forward. It would be nice if some of the wealth from, say, America could be applied to boost the

safety of a project in, say, Afghanistan, but all of Afghanistan would have to be lifted to the level of America before the first-world safety of one project could actually be realized; aid programs to not happen in a vacuum.

(This relative cheapness of lives extends to expatriate staff as well. We routinely take on risks in an insurgency environment that would never be accepted back home. We sacrifice much just to be here, we have high turnover, and some lose their liberty, or their fortune, or even their lives through just one act of foolishness. In this place, our lives are cheap too.)

The third reason why we should work to local standards is that there is, after all, an insurgency to deal with. Effort spent on expensive attempts to impose foreign standards is effort that could otherwise be employed in additional counterinsurgency activities. We have a war to win, and a road that is built by men without hard hats is better than no road at all. The accidents which come from construction projects and other activities are much smaller in number than the destruction wreaked by an insurgency, and the sooner the insurgency is defeated, the sooner better working practices can be introduced. Though it would be nice to introduce improved practices right away, the insurgency is a far greater threat and must be given priority.

Do not impose foreign work standards. The local standards will do.

**Remember that they are spying on you** One of the great challenges in counterinsurgency operations is distinguishing combatants from the civilian population. Aid and development organizations work particularly closely with locals, hiring them as house staff, office staff, and for field positions. “Capacity building,” in which locals are trained in various skills, often figure prominently into development programs. Locals play a major and trusted role in our operations. The insurgents are aware of this, and their home field advantage makes it far easier for them to infiltrate us than for us to detect them.

Insurgencies are also fertile ground for petty criminals and organized crime. The latter may or may not have ties to the insurgency, and will frequently try to win lucrative subcontracts from aid organizations. They have also been known to infiltrate military units, getting their younger, more educated members hired on as interpreters or getting the uneducated hired as cleaners. This happens more frequently than many seem to realize. It is usually done for the purposes of data gathering; reports of sabotage or violence by employees are extremely rare.

Kidnappings and violence outside a protected compound, however, are common, and are often guided by inside knowledge. For these reasons, local employees should never be trusted with any information that is at all sensitive. Expat staff movements and details about anyone’s security arrangements should be especially guarded. If they do not need to know something, do not tell them.

**Understand what “failed state” means** The [Fund for Peace](#), a think tank based in Washington, D.C, defines a failed state on the basis of twelve complex [indicators](#) that include elemental factors such as food supply, presence of refugees and internally displaced persons, opportunity for social interaction, and so on. Note how fundamental such factors are to human growth and development. Chronic problems among any one of these will prevent a person from fully realizing a healthy, mature adulthood.

One of the principle causes of the failure of a state is the loss by the legitimate government of the monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force. This is exactly the condition that exists during an insurgency, and an insurgency threatens to ruin a state, if that state has not already failed.

Afghanistan, having been at war for over 30 years now, became a failed state a long time ago. No one who has grown up here has experienced a normal life. Because of this, most Afghans do not possess the level of intellectual sophistication that is common elsewhere in the world.

A specific example will be the safest way to illustrate this. A short test of logical syllogisms was given to a sample of eighteen Afghan men last year. The test was administered in both English and Pashto, and a sample syllogism was provided to illustrate the idea behind the test questions. The following was a typical question from the test:

1. No pomegranate orchards are in Kandahar Province.
2. Rahmatullah’s orchards are in Badakhshan Province and Kandahar Province.
3. One of Rahmatullah’s orchards grows pomegranates.

Where is Ramatullah’s pomegranate orchard?

Three subjects— less than twenty percent of the total— managed to answer correctly. Everyone else either answered incorrectly, or failed to give any intelligible response. This result was typical across the entire test, and it should be noted that no one was able to finish in a reasonable amount of time; even the top performers, all of whom possessed post-secondary educations, took at least twenty minutes to answer just five questions. No one achieved a perfect score.

Such limitations are by no means insurmountable, but where they exist, they must be kept in mind. Populations that are operating with this kind of deficit need hands-on guidance if they are to participate in implementing aid programs. Subcontractors and local field staff, routinely tasked to carry out complicated work at a professional level, require guidance, teaching, and an occasional helping hand. They should not be expected to deliver output at a first-world level unassisted.

Aid and development programs that succeed in guiding their staff and subcontractors succeed in capacity building. This can be some of the most personally rewarding work that an expatriate aid worker will perform. It requires, however, close engagement with the local nationals, and all the tolerance and patience that such engagement entails. Expatriate staff who do not have an aptitude for such cross-cultural work are best suited to positions that have no local nationals reporting to them.

**Aid needs to be demand-driven, not supply-driven** No aid program will last forever. No country will receive aid forever. When those supports are removed the country must be able to stand on its own, or else the entire exercise was a vanity. If aid is to be effective, it must be effective in the long term.

To achieve this, aid has to be responsive to market forces. Regardless of whatever type of economy a country tries to establish, free market forces will always be the underlying reality. Artificial policies can distort those forces, but they can never eliminate or rewrite them, no matter how much some leaders may try. Only aid that makes sense in a free market will have positive long-term effects.

For this reason, the particulars of an aid or development program should be shaped by demand. Infrastructure programs offer a clear illustration of this. Currently, the two largest USAID contracts in Afghanistan are devoted to road building, with some discretionary funds for miscellaneous smaller projects such as wells and first aid clinics. In practice, this discretionary funding has been going to wells almost exclusively; wells are simple, useful, and people are always happy to have them.

But by getting to used to offering only wells, and building only roads, these aid programs become supply-driven; there is a plentiful stock of wells and roads, and they are free to more-or-less anyone willing to have them. Being free, people accept them whether they need them or not.

Smaller programs have seen success here by having a variety of infrastructure items they are capable of building— roads, bridges, culverts, wells, irrigation canal intakes, flood protection walls, and so forth— and by having a variety of items to offer a community, they have been better able to meet those communities' particular needs. Not everyone really needs a well. Different people need different things.

In southern Afghanistan, demand-driven approaches hold great promise in the particular problem of poppy displacement. Many farmers harvest poppy for purely economic reasons; they can get a good return on their investment. Modern agricultural methods would yield a return on licit crops that outstrips what could be made illicitly with poppy, if only the tools and knowledge of such methods could be introduced. An aid program taking a demand-driven approach could provide such things in negotiated exchange for voluntary poppy reduction. For example, in exchange for a farmer converting 5 acres of poppy over to wheat, he might receive wheat seed, an irrigation system, and a grain silo. By

negotiating with him, it can be determined just how valuable his poppy field is to him really, and what it would take to get him to part with it.

Aid of this sort has to contend directly with the forces of the market. If such an approach were implemented throughout southern Afghanistan, an agricultural sector would be built that was robust, competitive, and able to survive in the long-term. This would starve the Taliban of funds and make lawful society appear more attractive to the unwon middle.

**Offer an alternative** In Afghanistan, most people do not especially favor the Taliban. They remember what Taliban rule was like, and do not desire to go back to it. At the time of this writing, the current government is extremely corrupt, and is engaging in criminal activity at every level. Bribery, extortion, and drug trafficking rule the day. As one Afghan businessman put it, one must choose between paying bribes to the current government, or accepting beatings from the Taliban. Afghans recognize that for all its faults and excesses, the Taliban regime did provide law and order, something which presently they lack.

If a counterinsurgency is to succeed, it must have a viable alternative to the insurgency that it can offer. Perhaps here more than anywhere else the political nature of the conflict becomes clear. Aid and development organizations conduct good-governance programs, and without success in this area, all the infrastructure, health care, education, and food programs count for nothing.