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Building Consultation Mechanisms for Local Civil Society Participation and Leadership in Disaster Response

By Lisa Schirch, March 6, 2011

Personal Note:

For the last twenty years I've worked on the ground in conflict-affected regions mostly with local NGOs and civil society leaders such as women's groups, religious leaders and university professors. While internationals talk about lack of local capacity, I see the opposite. I see local people creating solutions to their own problems. I see internationals, often lacking language capacity or cultural sensitivity and context awareness, come in with a "we know best" attitude that undermines or ignores local capacity. In response to working with Iraq and Afghan NGOs, I started the 3D Security Initiative to ensure that local people have a voice in US policies and programs. In the last year, I've facilitated a series of dialogues between local civil society leaders and military personnel about the tensions in their approaches to responding to crises. The tense relationship between local civil society and international NGOs and governments was also revealed in these dialogues. This paper outlines some of the key ideas and recommendations discovered through that dialogue process.

Background

In the chaos following disaster or war, local civil society organizations and leaders are often left out of humanitarian assistance efforts. International military forces, international government assistance, and international humanitarian NGOs descend on the disaster-affected region often without knowing much about what civil society resources exist locally.

Ideally, local government and local civil society coordinate. But in developing countries, this is not often the case. The UN OCHA coordinates between international governments, military and large international humanitarian NGOs. This international coordination overshadows and often excludes how an independent local civil society relates to international military forces and governments and NGOs. Often, humanitarian aid presumes a lack of local leadership or resilience. Existing capacity is overlooked or seen as "difficult" to engage with because local civil society may not be organized in a way that makes it easy for outsiders to engage.

A comprehensive approach, according to US military stability operations doctrine,[1] integrates cooperative efforts of the departments and agencies of the United States Government, intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, multinational partners, and private sector entities such as CSOs to achieve unity of effort toward a shared goal.

A whole of society approach recognizes the key roles civil society plays in addressing crisis and disaster from the ground up. Historically, military strategists advised on how to "pacify" local civil society. Today, building civil society is a key element in reconstruction and stabilization strategies. But the concept of "civil society" is still not widely known.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are groups of citizens not in government that organize themselves on behalf of some public interest. CSOs include religious, educational, media, community-based organizations (CBOs), business and trade associations, traditional and indigenous structures, sports associations, musicians, artists and more. There is no single

[1] See *Stability Operations US Army Field Manual 3-07*. October 2008.

representation for civil society's vast diversity. CSOs represent a wide variety of views, and do not agree on all issues.

CSOs conduct a wide variety of activities including economic development, health, agriculture, human rights, conflict resolution, participatory governance, security sector reform, as well as disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and fostering moderation and coexistence. Many CSOs hold several mandates.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are a type of CSO. There are several types of NGOs: humanitarian, development, human rights, research, environmental and peacebuilding. There are both local NGOs (LNGOs) and international NGOs (INGOs). NGOs must meet specific legal requirements for organizational oversight and accountability.

Internal CSO tensions: Large international NGOs shaped existing humanitarian NGO-military guidelines. Local and international NGOs often differ in their analysis and long-term commitment to the local context. For-profit entities and nonprofit NGOs also conflict over the missions and motivation guiding their work. Local CSO's strengths lie in their cultural, linguistic, and socio-political knowledge of and long-term commitment to the local context. International CSO's strengths lie in their technical knowledge, capacity building, broader resources, comparative experience across contexts, and access to advocate to international policy makers. INGOs often hire the country's best and brightest at salaries higher than local government or CSOs can afford, and create parallel government structures that can undermine local capacity.

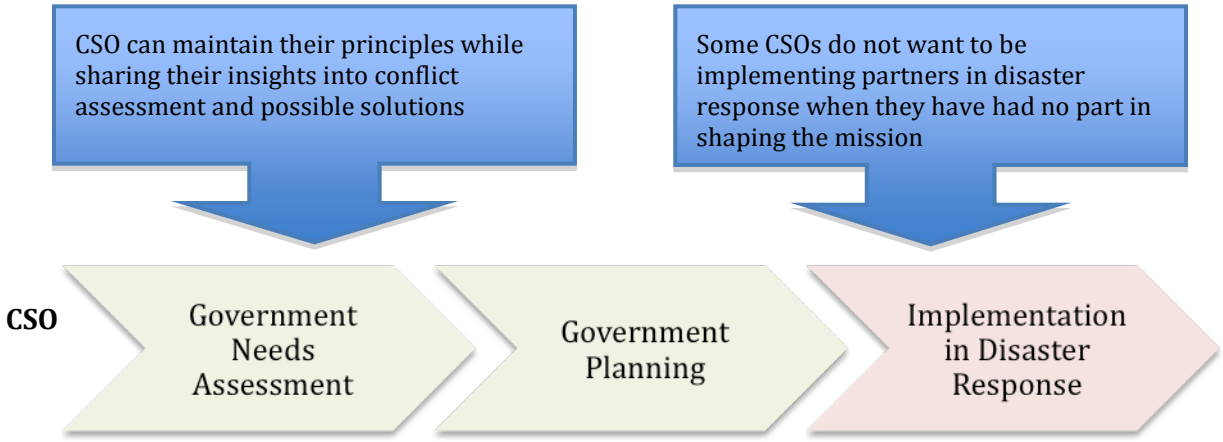
Governments and military forces look for cooperation with CSOs. The NATO CIMIC policy states "The immediate purpose of CIMIC is to establish and maintain the full co-operation of the NATO commander and the civilian authorities, organizations, agencies and population within a commander's area of operations in order to allow him to fulfill his mission."[2]

Any "comprehensive approach" or "unity of effort" requires unity of understanding and unity of mission. Local CSOs often complain that international actors do not take the time to consult with local civil society to discuss local social, political and economic factors. They balk at military "human terrain teams" and complain that the "we know best" attitude ignores democratic principles and the will and capacity of local CSOs to provide cultural advice. Military actors on the other hand, may wish to consult CSOs, but have no way of identifying whom they should consult. Underfunded and understaffed USAID offices are also often not aware of local NGO capacity. The comprehensive approach cannot have a unity of effort including CSOs until there is a shared understanding of the causes driving conflict and violence and a shared mission that includes broader human security.

CSOs see communication, not integration, as necessary for a comprehensive approach. Many CSOs resist terms that name them as "force multipliers" or requests for them to "coordinate" with or "implement" a mission and strategy perceived as different from their own. However many CSOs do recognize the benefits of policy dialogue and "communication" with government and military actors. Yet few consultation structures exist to engage with those CSOs willing to provide policy advice, share conflict assessments, or to discuss

[2] *Civil-Military Coordination in UN Integrated Peacekeeping Mission (UN-CIMIC).* United Nations Office of Military Affairs, Policy and Doctrine Team. October 2010.

overlapping human security goals.



challenges include dealing with incapable and corrupt CSOs operating in the midst of legitimate CSOs, maintaining consistent funding despite donors' shifting priorities, evaluating their work, and dealing with growing government repression of civil society restricting CSO activities. Local populations trust some CSOs and distrust others. Some CSOs also exacerbate conflict and violence. Vetting systems can distinguish legitimate from illegitimate CSOs.

Key Tensions:

In post-disaster and conflict-affected regions, key tensions and differences between civil society organizations and US military and government center on how they define and pursue security. All actors see the need for stability and security. But when asked "stability for whom and for what purpose?" their perceptions diverge.

Human Security Defined: Human security emphasizes the safety of individuals and communities around the world. Human security includes civilian protection, fostering stable, citizen-oriented legitimate governments with participatory democracy, human rights, human development and peacebuilding. It requires a locally led, bottom-up approach including civil society and local government that works, when necessary, with civilian-led, legitimate, multilateral actors.[3]

National Security Defined: National security traditionally prioritizes political and economic interests of the state deemed central to the nation's survival or way of life. While the National Security Strategy also names key US values in freedom, human rights and democracy, it is not clear which takes precedence when US values conflict with US economic and geopolitical interests?

Merging Threats: Transnational threats from natural disasters, diseases, and trafficking of humans, weapons, extremist groups, and drugs challenge both "national security" and "human security." Some CSOs want military services to focus on population-centric security and argue that national security and human security need not contradict. With wider consultation, the two approaches could better complement each other.

[3] Shannon D. Beebe and Mary Kaldor. *The Ultimate Weapon is No Weapon: Human Security and the New Rules of War and Peace*. New York: Public Affairs, 2010.

Legitimacy and Consent: Both local and international CSOs question the legitimacy of security missions, national or international, when military forces act without the consent of local populations, and when no legally enforceable mechanism exists to hold forces accountable to legitimate local political decision-making bodies. CSOs cite a long legacy of military forces acting against the interest of local citizens to achieve access to resources or geo-political gains. Greater consultation with CSOs before and during military interventions could help achieve greater legitimacy, consent and collaboration on human security goals.

Control vs. Empowerment: Residual military references to more widespread "population control and pacification" as well as the metaphor of "human terrain" raise suspicions, misunderstandings or confusion of military objectives. While CSOs and military articulate the goal of "local ownership," both struggle to operationalize it.

Short-term vs. Long-term Time Horizon: US policies direct military actors to focus on short-term, quick-impact relief and development efforts to reduce immediate national security threats. CSOs generally take a long-term, relationship-based approach. CSOs claim that these different time horizons more often undermine rather than complement each other.

Types of and Mechanisms for Civil Society-Military Relations

A spectrum of civil-military relationships, defined by UN OCHA, exists at the operational level.

Curtail Presence	Where it becomes impossible for CSOs to operate safely, international CSOs may pull out and local CSOs may go into hiding.
Co-existence/ Communication	Where CSOs, government and military operate in the same space but their missions do not align, only basic communication on logistical details takes place.
Coordination	Where CSOs, government and military missions partially align, there may be some basic coordination to promote CSO core values in human security.
Cooperation	Where CSOs, government and military missions partially or fully align, there may be collaboration on joint projects, particularly in disaster relief or DDR.

CSO-military communication happens informally and formally. Where there is no coordinating body, groups coordinate informally when working in the same area, or groups coordinate via "Heineken diplomacy" as individual people build relationships in informal settings. **Coordination by command** refers to some type of government Civil Military Operations Center (CMOC) or international coordinating agency (UN OCHA) that has legitimacy through formal authority, through the rewards for being coordinated (e.g. funding) or the punishments for not following commands (e.g. denial of access to certain areas or refugee camps). Given CSO humanitarian principles of independence, coordination by command has not worked in places like Afghanistan, Haiti or Rwanda. More often, there is minimal **coordination by consensus** when a recognized coordination body builds consensus among diverse actors to work in ways that complement rather than conflict.

Examples of Coordination and Cooperation Models

In Ghana, local CSOs, government, and security forces coordinate rapid response to potential violence via a "National Architecture for Peace." During the 2008 elections civil society leaders mediated between political candidates to deescalate impending election-related violence.

In the Philippines, Filipino military leaders attended training at a local civil society-led peacebuilding institute on negotiation, mediation and peace processes. Military leaders then asked for a peacebuilding training program for thousands of military personnel.

In Thailand, local civil society worked with the military to write the national security policy for the southern border provinces from 1999 to 2003. The process of developing this strategy together changed how top military leaders saw their role in supporting a human security agenda.

In Afghanistan, the US State Department and International Security Assistance Forces in Afghanistan have a staff person with the title "NGO Liaison." The ISAF NGO Liaison helped build momentum around a successful local CSO pilot police program to improve SSR and police-community relations.

In the US, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties consults with a group of approximately 20 Arab, Muslim, Sikh, South Asian, and Somali community leaders. DHS draws on this group for crisis rapid response phone consultations, broader community consultations to identify concerns and brainstorm solutions, and to develop DHS cultural competency.

Recommendations:

1. **Mechanisms for Multi-stakeholder Consultations:** CSOs, civilian government, and military personnel do not have adequate forums for information exchange, monitoring of civil-military guidelines or general discussion of issues related to need assessment, conflict assessment, planning, and implementation. *Which mechanisms could provide a space for CSOs to share conflict assessments, advise on policy options, or address field-level issues with the US government and military?*

2. **Development of Shared Standards:** CSOs, governments, and military actors responding to a crisis all share similar challenges of fostering local ownership, accountability, and monitoring what is working and what is not. While many CSOs oppose military-led relief and development, they do argue that they should at the very minimum be transparent. *Could shared standards help to build civil-military transparency on program effectiveness, cost, and sustainability?***"**

3. **Do No Harm" Training for Military:** Despite decades of humanitarian relief expertise, even many CSO still make significant mistakes that waste resources and may even undermine longer term development or fuel local conflict . Development and peacebuilding CSOs have undergone extensive training in a "Do No Harm" methodology to avoid negative impacts of their work.[4] The Australian military and AUSAID co-train so that all actors understand the potential for harm in humanitarian assistance. *Could the US military include a "Do No Harm" training?*

4. **Training on CSO-Military Relations:** Both CSOs and military suffer from a lack of training and capacity for managing their interactions. Knowledge of existing humanitarian NGO guidelines and International Humanitarian Law is lacking. *What curricula and training opportunities could assist CSOs and military to advance their understanding?*

[4] Mary Anderson. "*Do No Harm: How Aid can Support Peace – or War*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, February 1999.