



Office of Transition Initiatives

Lessons Learned

COUNTERINSURGENCY PROGRAMMING

Through its 15-year history of political transition and stabilization programming, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) has worked with communities in volatile, politically-sensitive environments. OTI is now applying lessons from these experiences – and integrating new lessons – to its programs in counterinsurgency (COIN) settings such as Colombia, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Stabilization through confidence-building – OTI bases its programming on two underlying assumptions: (1) by building communities' trust in local institutions, they will be less inclined to support the insurgency; and (2) unless trust in credible local institutions is restored, no stabilization effort will be sustainable. The host government (or other credible institution, such as a tribal group) must have a high degree of ownership over all aspects of the process.

Community security is paramount – The key determinant for winning community confidence is often which group they perceive to be in the position to provide them with security long-term. In Colombia, OTI has seen that once a community comes to believe the army is there to stay and not just conducting periodic sweeps, a critical mass makes the collective decision to switch allegiances. Physical security must then be closely connected to the economic and political dimensions of human security.

Security, as locally defined, is contextual and complex – In places where ideology is important and where culture, traditions, tribes or clans are strong and deep, making a “rational choice” about security often involves more than personal security as is commonly understood in Western society.

Quick, flexible, and adaptive programming is key – The need to quickly demonstrate results and actively address grievances is essential given the high expectations of communities. Programs need the flexibility to change course and scale up and/or down operations depending on a changing security and the political situation. Successful operations require flexible contracting mechanisms, decentralized management, and close coordination with implementing partners and communities in order to continually adjust the program response. But speed must be accompanied by care in selecting which local partners and institutions to support. Sometimes a decision *not* to act is the right one.

The community is the center of gravity, and must “own” the projects – Sense of ownership is important: (1) So that locals will be more likely to protect and defend these projects – their own community – against potential backsliding or incursions. (2) To maximize quality control – no-one is more vested in the quality of a classroom's roof than the parents of the children in that classroom. (3) To ensure that the projects are truly responsive to community needs (if they're not, attempts to build credibility can backfire).

Think locally, act locally – Every region has its own dynamics: every valley, every village. What is successful in one area can't automatically be replicated in other places, cookie-cutter fashion. Thus, programming must be based on strategies specifically tailored to each distinct region. And locals know the environment best. OTI engages and trains large numbers of local staff, hired through implementing partners, who work out of field offices. Their knowledge and analysis continually informs programming.

Coordination, coordination and more coordination – All three “D”s – defense, diplomacy and development – are equally important and must work closely together at various levels. For example, community infrastructure projects will fail if there is no security to hold the area; ongoing communication with the U.S. Department of State is necessary to ensure that all activities are carried out in furtherance of U.S. Government policy in a highly fluid environment. Host government coordination will almost certainly need to be bolstered, whether across agencies, between regional and national governments or between civilian and military institutions.

Corruption is a killer – Programs must be extremely cautious to ensure that the institutions or individuals supported are credible. Avoid backing an individual or institution viewed as corrupt – triangulate information carefully and where possible, spread risk by developing multiple partnerships. Programs can and should increase transparency and instill better governance practices where practicable. In Pakistan, small projects are now conducted using competitive bidding procedures for the first time. Use of in-kind, rather than monetary, grants helps minimize risks.

Strategic communications – Perceptions are more important than reality. A strategic communications component is necessary to highlight positive developments and host government achievements, to moderate community expectations, and, where relevant, to counter ideology propagated by extremists. Any messaging must be contextual, authentic, and crafted with sensitivity toward local culture and religion. Programming to develop/enhance in-country media and communications capacity may be necessary.

Take a “venture capitalist” approach – Small amounts of resources at the community level can have a significant impact. By starting small, a greater calculated risk can be taken, allowing for innovative programming or working with untested local partners. Programs can build on what is successful and discontinue ineffective investments.

Development is not the immediate aim, but links to longer term development are critical – COIN projects and traditional development or humanitarian assistance may look the same (e.g. school repair, water and sanitation) but the target beneficiaries, geographic locations and implementation methodology will likely be quite different. Projects are not designed according to need, but for strategic or tactical purposes. But if they are not connected to larger-scale, longer term assistance, community expectations may be frustrated and the whole endeavor undermined. Longer-term planning must be incorporated into strategy discussions very early on to ensure smooth follow-on.

Don't neglect the justice sector – When local grievances fester without an outlet, the rapid “justice” offered by militant groups has greater attraction. Consider alternative dispute resolution, mobile courts, or other appropriate ways of speeding up legitimate grievance resolution mechanisms and connecting them to longer-term rule-of-law efforts.

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