

“Stability Operations” and NGOs: What’s in a Name?

by Mr. Roy Williams

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet."

William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet (II, ii, 1-2)

The Bard of Avon reminds us that what matters is what something is, not what it is called. However, in the case of the lovely rose flower, just about everyone knows what it looks like. Therefore, a reference to “a rose” will likely evoke essentially the same image for everyone. Unfortunately, a reference to the phrase “stability operations” will not have the same result of shared understanding. Even among the communities and organizations that have a similar level of program involvement and activity intensity in post-conflict environments will describe those actions in strikingly different ways. This lack of shared language is often reflective in the inability to marshal resources in an effective manner. Or, more importantly, results in the inability to solicit collaborative engagement from organizations whose own terms of reference do not include the phrase “stability operations.” The obvious question then is this: does there exist sufficiently common ground for presenting a shared view when we do not have a shared language?

We now recognize that the iconic images that invariably accompanied the end of conflict between nation-states—complete with the usual ceremonial marking of the event—are descriptive of a reality that no longer exists. With the end of the straight-forward dichotomies of the Cold War, and the advent of both state- and principal (if you will)-sponsored terrorism, what we used to call simply “post-conflict reconstruction” has seemingly become something else. However, accepting the shared image of an increasingly fragile international framework has not led to acceptable of common language by different communities when referring to what happens when major combat ends. Most importantly, this shared acceptance of a world-view says little about how different groups see their respective roles in addressing the reconstruction and humanitarian needs that both inevitably emerge as well as addressing any overlapping concerns.

The phrase “stability operations” is but one example of this dichotomy. Currently it is in use by the U.S. government and its military, while it is essentially ignored by the non-governmental organization (NGO) world. One could be forgiven if led to believe the NGO community is not involved in the post-conflict (generally post-combat operations) phase of recovery. Why, then, should this be the case? Ironically, the existing and emerging U.S. government and military policy and doctrine reflect an appreciation of both the tangible as well as the intangible benefits of NGO-community contribution to the stabilization efforts. Security permitting, they are an essential part of the reconstruction and stabilization process, especially at the local level. Is it simply a matter of a breakdown in communication between communities? Or, perhaps, and more of concern, does the lack of common language and signify a situation in which there is no consensus on what is being discussed, much less resolved?

BEGINNINGS. Arguments in support of military involvement in post-conflict recovery often assert that military assumption of these types of tasks is not new. The reconstruction of post-World War II (WWII) Germany and Japan are often raised as clear illustrations. From there it follows, according to some, a train of logic that directly relates to today’s post-conflict actions; now referred to as stability operations. Beyond a doubt, the military involvement in those historic operations was extensive and all-comprehensive. However, before one accepts the post-WWII European and East Asian reconstruction scenarios as direct analogies to our current environment, it is important to consider the differences. First, it was a different military—comprised of an exceptionally large body of military men that were only a few months or years from their own civilian jobs who could fairly readily assist in governance and economic operations—from basic subsistence to wholesale

commercial distribution—from their own experience and education, Second, and most importantly, it was a military that was addressing nation-states that had not lost or had even really questioned their national identity. In other words, while defeated in combat, they were a long way from reflecting the hallmarks of fragile states. These nations had strong and supportive influential middle classes and viable civil societies—elements inconsistent with internal instability.

Further, the industrial base of these countries, while significantly affected by the conflict, was far more integrated into the very nature of both local and global society, than is the case with today's conflict and post-conflict areas. Educational, financial, and political systems were all still woven into the very fabric of these countries. While there were underprivileged parts of the population, there were sufficient counterbalancing elements to reduce their potential negative impacts. Finally, it is also fair to say that, in both cases, reconstruction was very much in our national interest and the involvement of the various branches of government clearly reflected a general acceptance of that recognition.

Therefore, the usefulness of the post-WWII reconstruction story is more parable than analogy. The point is that defining stability operations in terms of these historical events, correctly or otherwise, presents an understanding of the term and roles that is inconsistent with the way NGOs see themselves, and therefore serves to confuse more than it does to enlighten. While the eminent organization, CARE, traces its origins to the post-WWII era (see <http://www.care.org/about/history>), most of the NGOs of today do not share in that organizational memory. Further, while the role CARE played with its famous packages was critical, it is not likely that its efforts were integrated as a planning assumption in a U.S. government reconstruction strategy.

In short, the premises incorporated into the present understanding of stability operations are at odds with the more limited sense of mandate and objectives common to NGOs. The world of NGO work is enormously fragmented as it is so closely connected with specific community concerns of their constituents, both client and donor. Given these differing perspectives, there is little chance that a common frame of reference will develop amongst civil society writ large.

CONCLUSION. Despite the language-barriers, NGOs are stakeholders in reconstruction. It is therefore important that NGO input—originating from all levels from local through international—be incorporated into any inclusive understanding of stability operations. It is equally necessary that we maintain an ongoing dialogue on this issue as every post-conflict situation is different and decisions on priorities must take these differences into account. For example, there will be times when resolving major power-grid issues will be significant while at other times, the reestablishment of local health facilities will be seen by the populace as the major concern. One example of achieving and maintaining this dialogue is the extended working group process, led by the United States Institute of Peace and the NGO consortium, Interaction, which resulted in civilian-military guidelines for interaction during conflict. The outcome of two-plus years of meetings was a document specifying agreed upon common terms of reference presented as operational guidelines that is now found throughout many of the Combatant Commands as well as local NGO field operations offices.

What is meant by the term “stability operations” is very relevant to today's military and political environment. Ensuring that all the actors can enter into meaningful exchanges is critical.

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