HOW DEVELOPMENT ACTORS CAN SUPPORT
NON-VIOLENT COMMUNAL STRATEGIES IN INSURGENCIES

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Executive Summary

The majority of casualties in today's wars are civilians. Finding strategies that reduce the risk of getting harmed is a matter of life and death for civilian actors. Yet, we know surprisingly little about these strategies.

This policy brief is based on a larger research project that investigated how rural communities in Afghanistan strategize staying out of harm's way during war. The research intended to uncover "civil actions" by Afghan rural communities that could help reduce the likelihood of violence. In a marked change from most studies on violence against civilians, the research was conducted from the communities' perspective as much as possible, not only because they are the most vulnerable segment of society, but also because it allowed me to shed new light on how the communities themselves cope with violence and war.

In what follows, I briefly describe the strategies that communities use. I then show how aid actors can inadvertently reduce the space for civil action, either by attracting violence to the villages or by damaging the social fabric which enables these civil actions. I offer ways to reduce these negative impacts.

A mixed-methods approach was used. During a field trip in October 2016, 12 semi-structured interviews with local political analysts working on the ground in Afghanistan and 68 open background interviews with aid practitioners were conducted. In addition, survey data was used to corroborate the findings from these interviews. The survey was conducted in late summer of 2016 among 3200 respondents in 19 districts of Northern Afghanistan.[1] Ten of the sampled districts were mostly under government control, eight were contested, and one was fully under the control of armed insurgents. This variation in the local security environment allows us to gauge the impact of security on the locally available strategies for "civil actions". It also allows us to gauge the impact of the security environment on the impacts of aid.

Preconditions for Civil Action

Two preconditions are required for "civil actions" to take place in civil wars. First, a space for them must exist. In highly polarized situations when one side has a principled hostility towards the other, such a space does not exist. However, this is not the case in many asymmetric wars. In Afghanistan, as well as in many other situations of insurgency, both warring sides are to some extent dependent on cooperation with local communities. This dependence to some extent restrains violence and opens up a space for negotiations. The other precondition is that local communities have the capability for collective action; they need agency to devise and implement strategies. In Afghanistan, the village community continues to be the most important social and political unit for the rural population. The village community has its own institutions for self-governance, and rural Afghans widely perceive their community – to a very large extent – as self-governed and self-sufficient. The two most important institutions are the village elders and the village shura (village council).

There is no doubt that both preconditions are met in Afghanistan, enabling Afghan rural communities to engage

in civil action to reduce the risks of war. The survey data is in agreement: We asked respondents to tell us which actors contributed to increased security for them. One question specifically referred to the impact of the village communities on their own security. More than half of our respondents (51.3%) said that "the villagers themselves contributed to better security," meaning Afghans perceive these civil actions as meaningful.

Three Strategies for Communities in War Zones to Reduce the Risks of War

The open and semi-structured interviews pointed to three strategies that rural communities use to reduce the risks of war. The first one can be called **"to negotiate and plea".**

As we have mentioned before, collateral damage is the main source of violence against villagers. Communities therefore often negotiate with insurgents, asking them to leave the village. It is not unusual that insurgents leave a village when asked by the elders. Such negotiations are more often successful when the insurgents are from the region. Foreign fighters are less likely to be bound by kinship ties, patronage ties or reputation, and are therefore less restrained. Such pleas for restraint are typically framed in a narrative that is meant to convey that villagers and Taliban have the same Islamic and traditional values, and that helping to avoid civilian casualties by respecting the council of the elders is a value that is important for both. However, even if villagers can convince the insurgents to leave the village in order to avoid collateral damage, they will often still have pay "taxes". These "taxes" are sometimes negotiable, but typically communities have to pay with food, recruits, goods and sometimes money .

A second strategy is **"neutrality".** This strategy necessitates that communities credibly communicate their intention to remain neutral in the ongoing conflict. The strategy only works when communities can control their own members and prevent them from joining armed militias, and when all warring sides are capable of controlling all of the local factions. Paradoxically, this is more often the case in districts where insurgents are stronger and have established governance structures. Both our qualitative and survey data shows that "neutrality" can be a successful strategy. Communities that effectively communicate to all armed groups that they intend to be neutral can stay out of harm's way.

A third strategy communities may use is **self-defence.** Many communities form their own "community defence units". These are usually small and comprised of only a handful of armed men from the village. Because of the small numbers, however, these self-defence units are not always capable of deterring armed groups from entering the villages. Our data suggests that self-defence, while still frequently used, is perceived to be the least effective strategy. There is also the risk that the strategy backfires: Communities sometimes form larger militias or ally with other armed groups, but these larger formations are then typically co-opted by stronger regional power brokers into their own patronage networks. They are then no longer perceived as self-defence units of a neutral community, but rather as a unit in a larger network of militias. Communities are then no longer capable of portraying themselves as neutral and make themselves more vulnerable as a result.

The survey data corroborate the existence of all three strategies. The data also allows us to see which strategies are more frequently seen as successful, and to what extent the local security environment influences these perceptions. We formulated three questions which proxy the major strategies identified in our qualitative work. In order to proxy the "negotiation strategy", we asked respondents to what extent they thought the following statement was true: "Our elders have asked armed groups to stay away from our village". In order to proxy the "neutrality strategy", we asked respondents to what extent they thought the following statement was true: "Our village is safer because no one takes sides in the conflict between the government and other armed groups". In order to proxy the "self-defence strategy", we asked respondents to what extent they thought the following statement was true: "We have our own armed men, from local areas/villages, to protect us". The data provides support for all three strategies, ranging from 63% (negotiation) to 59% (neutrality) and to 50% (self-defence).

The data also shows how the security environment affects these strategies. "Neutrality" is more often seen as effective in contested districts and less so in districts controlled by one party. "Self-defence" is, as expected, often used in contested districts. And negotiation is more often effective in districts mostly controlled by the government, presumably because insurgents are weaker and communities therefore have a better bargaining position. Table 1 summarizes the results.

	All respondents	Respondents from mainly government controlled districts	Respondents from contested districts and districts under the control of armed opposition groups
Negotiation "Our elders have asked armed groups to stay away from our village"	63	65	60
Neutrality "Our village is safer because no one takes sides in the conflict between the government and other armed groups"	59	55	63
Self-defence "We have our own armed men, from local areas/villages, to protect us"	50	47	54

Table 1: Respondents' assessment of effectiveness of various strategies, in % of those who said that the statement is true "to a great extent" or" to a moderate extent"[2]

HOW AID CAN ATTRACT VIOLENCE AND UNDERMINE THESE THREE STRATEGIES

Aid organizations continue to work in rural areas of Afghanistan, even in regions that are no longer fully under government control. While aid often does improve the livelihoods of rural communities, it can also make communities less safe and less resilient. To prove this point, we asked respondents whether they could "think of an instance, in your community or in a neighboring community, when groups such as the Taliban used violence in order to obstruct a development project?" Over the whole sample, 6.4 % said they could think of such an instance. When we look only at districts which were mostly under government control, the number is – as expected – lower, dropping to 4%. Conversely, that number is higher in districts where the insurgents exercise some or most control. In such districts, the number reaches 10%. Looking only at respondents from the one district which was fully under the control of armed groups, the number is higher yet, reaching 15%. Clearly, aid can attract violence.

The notion that aid can do harm is not new. There is a sizeable "do-no-harm" literature, which warns that aid can be misappropriated by local violent actors who then use it to perpetuate more violence. Or that aid can fuel violent competition over these resources between those who have guns. In this research, I have focused not on violent actors, but rather on civilian actors. This approach helps to highlight how the communities' strategic options and their space for civil action are impacted by aid.

It matters who delivers the aid

Firstly, and not surprisingly, whether or not aid attracts violence to a community depends on who delivers the aid. Some aid donors are seen as neutral, whereas others are labeled as enemies. These labels are ascribed by the insurgents, primarily based on the national origin of the organizations and donors. In the Afghan context, it appears that many US and British NGOs, even though they may be strictly humanitarian, are often seen as the extended arm of the military enemy, whereas NGOs from other nations, even if these nations took part in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), were often seen as acceptable. The likelihood that aid projects, the contractors who implement the projects, and the communities who cooperate with the donors, are attacked is significantly higher when the donor is labeled as "enemy".

It matters what type of aid is delivered

Violence against aid projects and their host communities can also happen when the insurgents disapprove of a particular type of project. Some projects are labeled as "un-Islamic" by the Taliban. Many respondents mentioned that schools for girls or projects specifically for women would often fall in this category. More generally, projects that can be perceived as attempts to change traditional social and cultural patterns are much more likely to attract resistance than infrastructure projects aimed at providing basic services such as clean drinking water, irrigation or electricity.

Most likely to attract violence are projects that are perceived

[2] Source: SAP/BMZ survey 2017. See footnote 1.

by the insurgents as beneficial to the government and its security structures. These projects often include buildings for government use, such as court houses or police stations, but also roads and bridges which make remote villages accessible for vehicles, including military vehicles.

One respondent gave a telling example. A community wanted the US army, within the framework of the Commanders Emergency Response Program, to build a bridge which would make the village accessible year-round. The bridge was built, and it was strong enough to bear the weight of a Humvee. Sadly, the Taliban immediately destroyed it. The respondent added that he was certain that the bridge would not have been destroyed if it had been built to only hold the weight of, for example, a donkey. There is some deeper truth in this anecdote. More modest projects often tend to do more good and less harm than some ambitious projects. Bridges for donkeys may be better than bridges for Humvees. The survey data shows strong support for the notion that building roads and bridges can attract violence. The majority of all reported violence, 48%, was directed against the construction of roads and bridges. Thirteen percent of the reported attacks were directed against school construction. The data cannot tell us whether schools that were supposed to teach both boys and girls were targeted more frequently than other schools, but anecdotal evidence suggest that it is especially the notion of co-teaching boys and girls in the same building or even the same classes which infuriates the Taliban.

It matters to whom the aid is delivered

Another way by which external actors can shrink the space for civil action is by inadvertently damaging the authority and position of those institutions that have the agency to exploit the space for civil actions. In Afghanistan, these are the traditional shuras and the elders. As we have seen, the elders and shuras often engage in negotiations with insurgents. They are more effective in these negotiations when they are seen as widely respected and homogenous.

But external aid can sometimes undermine the shuras. For example, Karell (2015) describes how foreign donors channeled resources to those locals whom they could most easily relate to.[3] These locals were not the socially-embedded,

traditional community leaders, but members of armed local militias who now posed as community leaders. As traditional elites became weaker and the newly empowered elites grew stronger because of the aid, intercommunity tensions and grievances increased. The established social fabric of the community suffered, making communities less capable of negotiating and, thus, more vulnerable to violence.

How development actors can do better

Acknowledge the dilemma, make a principled decision

When working in conflict zones, development actors face a difficult dilemma: They can continue to deliver aid to insecure regions, risking the possibility of increased violence, or they can pull out of such regions and cut off aid to communities who may need it most. It is important that development actors acknowledge this dilemma and then take a principled decision about whether to stay or pull out. It is certainly difficult to predict the costs that this decision entails for communities (in terms of either the risk of violence or the loss of aid); however, the exercise is still vital and will make aid organizations much more aware of the possible risks to communities from aid. Aid organizations usually have good understanding of the risks for their own personal safety, but that risk may be not the same as the risk for communities. The decision to stay or pull out should also be based on a risk assessment for communities. This requires that organizations develop clear criteria for "contested" and "secure" regions. Only a thorough analysis of the local political economy provides such information. Aid organizations should invest in this type of local knowledge, but few currently do.

Do not undermine the neutrality of communities, not even symbolically

Much of the space for civil action depends on whether a community can credibly portray itself as neutral. There are subtle ways of inadvertently undermining that neutrality. For example, most donors want to showcase their projects and make their contributions highly visible. It is common to see all kinds of flags and signs highlighting that a given project was funded by this or that Western organization. From the perspective of the organization, one of the rationales for this is to earn the gratitude of the community, which may lead to better security for the organization. However, the effect

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[3] Karell, Daniel. 2015. "Aid, power, and grievances: Lessons for war and peace from rural Afghanistan". *The Economics of Peace and Security Journal* 10(2): 28-42..

may be that these visible signs of cooperation between a Western organization and a community puts that community on the radar of insurgents as potential collaborators, or as a potentially taxable community. External actors could make more efforts to symbolically support the neutrality of communities, for example by putting up less signs or by working through non-Western, local NGOs.

Use participatory approaches, choose the right partner, and have a list of non-eligible projects

Development actors working in conflict regions should always use participatory approaches. Participatory approaches require development actors to closely engage and work with the communities, essentially letting the communities decide what type of aid projects they want. It is unlikely that communities would pick projects that they think may attract violence. In designing participatory approaches, aid donors should always be careful to work with established social institutions; it is these institutions that have the mandate and agency to negotiate with insurgents. Working with other actors may, as we have seen, undermine the socially-embedded institutions. It is evident that many traditional and embedded local institutions, such as the elders in Afghan communities, are not supporters of the rapid social changes and Westernization that many aid donors (and the central government) like to promote. Donors need to accept this and stop pushing agendas which – while they may resonate with their own constituency at home – are not appropriate for the context. This is just one of the many trade-offs when working in such difficult situations. Donors should also have a list of non-eligible projects. These would be projects which are known to attract violence. This list obviously varies depending on the context, which again makes an analysis of

the local political economy so important; however, projects which can potentially be used for military purpose should be always avoided, even if it means building bridges for donkeys rather than for Humvees.

Learn to understand and respect the social fabric

Finally, aid actors working in insecure regions who are truly committed to minimizing the risks for civilians need to better understand the complex social fabric of their environment. They need to learn to appreciate that the civil space in insecure regions depends on the ability of civilians to plea, negotiate, and be neutral, and that this space depends to some extent on continued existence of family and tribal ties between members of the community and members of the insurgency. Social, cultural and ethnic similarities, as well as shared traditional and Islamic values enable communities and insurgents to speak the same cultural language. Community leaders can frame their pleas in that language. It is these ties and the shared value system that enables opportunities for civil actions. This also means that the boundaries between friend and foe are often fluid in rural communities in Afghanistan. This does not come easy to many Western actors (nor to many Afghan actors in Kabul), who are much more at home in the master narrative of the macro-level conflict that pits "modernizers" and "Westerners" against Taliban and terrorists. But for many actors at the local level, this master narrative does not adequately reflect the social reality in which they have to navigate. Knowing the local social fabric and its frames may help external actors to better appreciate and support the space for civil action that still exists, even in such an unlikely context such as Afghanistan.

About this Series

About the Author

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