



Civil Society and Counterinsurgency– II: Recruiting Citizen Armies for COIN

by A. Lawrence Chickering

In their recent SWJ article, “Stabilization and Reconstruction of Nations”, Carol E. H. Choksy and Jamsheed K. Choksy implicitly highlight why a strong civil society strategy is important not only in current theaters of conflict, Iraq and Afghanistan, but in many other countries threatened by potential insurgencies.¹ In reminding us that we cannot intervene everywhere, they highlight the unpleasant reality that we may face insurgency threats in more countries than we can possibly handle. This makes it important that we need to be clear about the subtitle of their article: where, when, and why should the U.S. intervene.

They leave out “how”—a critical omission. The authors assume that current COIN strategy will continue unaltered. They assume, as most people do, that there are no underutilized resources that could be brought into play, expanding our capacity to intervene.

This paper will argue that expanding our capacity is an important reason for developing a powerful civil society strategy—empowering citizens, who are a greatly underutilized resource, to become active participants in COIN. A common statement of this objective would be to say this will greatly increase “*our capacity*” to resist insurgencies, but the real point is to increase “*the societies’ capacity*” to resist.

The idea is to empower the people of a country to take much greater, active responsibility for security, empowering them to play an active role in COIN much more quickly than is happening now in response to current programs aimed at recruiting them. We have, right now, the knowledge and resources to activate them to play this role. Although research and experimentation are needed to refine the strategy, there are good reasons for believing we could recruit *armies* of citizens to play this active role—and we could do it at very, very low costs. (The strategy for activation has been developed for purposes other than security; it will need to be refined to add security as an objective.)

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): Roles in COIN

In considering the roles that CSOs might play in COIN, the first role would be to protect local institutions and communities from terrorism. Nicholas Kristof, in a recent column on Greg Mortenson (*Three Cups of Tea*), describes how this might work.² The key is *ownership*. Poor people in many countries, including Afghanistan, have no stake in the system and therefore no reason to defend the system against forces trying to bring it down. When communities have ownership of a school or health clinic or well, they become stakeholders, and they will protect it

¹ Carol E. H. Choksy and Jamsheed K. Choksy “Stabilization and Reconstruction of Nations: Where, When, and Why Should the U.S. Intervene”, SWJ, posted 10/31/10.

² Nicholas Kristof, “Dr. Greg and Afghanistan”, *New York Times*, 10/20/10.

against terrorism. CSOs report this same phenomenon from all parts of Afghanistan and other countries.

A second role CSOs can play is for intelligence. Hernando de Soto's experiences in fighting Peru's violent Maoist terrorist group, Sendero Luminoso, shows what is possible.³ De Soto and his organization, Instituto Libertad y Democracia (ILD), have earned a global reputation for advocating expansion of property rights to expand the benefits of capitalism for the "informal sector"—those who work "off-the-books". In his native Peru, de Soto was winning the war of ideas and gaining the poor's allegiance. As a result, Sendero repeatedly tried to assassinate him—at one point deploying a 17-person hit-squad for that purpose. De Soto, on the other hand, was on the hunt for Sendero's founder and leader philosophy professor Abimail Guzman. Guzman was hiding in the countryside among the peasants, whom he believed were his natural followers. However, when the peasants got property rights—giving them a stake in the system—they had a reason to resist forces that were trying to bring the system down. When they became stakeholders, the peasants started giving information to the authorities about where the terrorist was hiding. As a result, the authorities chased him out of the countryside into Lima, where they quickly arrested him. That was in 1992. His movement collapsed shortly thereafter. He has been in prison ever since.

It is commonly said that people know who the Taliban are in their communities. When people are empowered, and when they can communicate undetected—perhaps by cell phones—it is possible that increased intelligence from this source on a variety of subjects could make a very significant difference in strengthening counterinsurgency.⁴

In recent weeks, there has been increasing experimentation with community defense initiatives. An obvious, crucial piece in these initiatives is how to promote development of communities so they are actively prepared to participate. Although empowering communities in the sense discussed here is not, explicitly, intended for this purpose; but this approach will certainly help prepare communities for a variety of roles, including active combat. If it is done well, local fighters would concentrate on protecting their communities, like a local, community-based police—while also institutionalizing active cooperation with neighboring communities and with the government.

Focusing on Empowerment

GEN Petraeus's own fingerprints are all over the essential idea, going back to at least early 2006. When he was a lieutenant general deployed in Iraq, Petraeus wrote an article in which he laid out fourteen basic principles of COIN.⁵ To explain his first principle, he quoted T. E. Lawrence, writing in 1917: "Do not try to do too much with your own hands," Lawrence

³ For a more complete description of what happened, see A. Lawrence Chickering, Isobel Coleman, P. Edward Haley, and Emily Vargas-Baron, *Strategic Foreign Assistance: Civil Society in International Security*, 2006, chapter two.

⁴ Some caution is important here because it needs to be demonstrated how to do this operationally.

⁵ LTG David Petraeus, "Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations from Soldiering in Iraq", *Military Review*, January/February 2006.

wrote.⁶ “Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. . . . [T]he work . . . may take them longer and it may not be as good as you think, but if it is theirs, it will be better.”⁷

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of this insight, which really implies two separate ideas. The central point is about *ownership*. Ownership can come both from *what they do* and also from also allowing them to *decide what to do*. If the issue is building a well, local people are empowered by letting them build the well even if it is not perfect. This gives them ownership of the well. But they get even more ownership, and they are even more empowered, if they get to participate in the decision to build the well.

Lawrence’s insight about ownership and empowerment is important to build social capital in communities to be helped, and it is also important for sustaining the value of the well: when people have ownership, they will maintain it; when they do not, they will often not maintain it, and it will break down and lose its value.

Most people embrace Lawrence’s insight, but only abstractly. His insight, in truth, conflicts—fundamentally—with almost universal philanthropic and donor norms and practices.

To focus on ownership rather than the well is to focus on the psychology of the recipient of help rather than on the help itself. The help (a well) is about the present; the internal state of the recipient is about the future. Although the word “sustainability” has come to have almost transcendental importance in the donor/philanthropic vocabulary, sustainability, which is about the future, conflicts with another mantra of philanthropy, which is *results*. That is why despite near-universal and ritual embrace of Lawrence’s insight about ownership, people tend quickly forget it when they are doing the “really serious work” of making and implementing plans. “Really serious work” is about *objectives* and *measurable results*. Ownership is about sustainability and the future. No matter what Petraeus and Lawrence say, the nearly universal understanding of the best of philanthropy has nothing to do with the *subjective* state of people one is trying to help; it has to do with “real things” like schools and hospitals and wells. It is about the *present*, not about the future.

If sustainability and the future are the real objective, it needs to come through ownership and *empowerment*, which come from accepting an imperfect present for a powerfully sustaining future. This insight of Petraeus and Lawrence is essential not only for development; it is also the ultimate mechanism for recruiting the populace of a country to become active participants in COIN.

The failure to understand the importance of empowerment and how to promote it is a great problem we face in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places. Until we learn this lesson, we face the possibility of a nightmare of insurgencies in many places.

Lawrence expresses the essence of how to promote empowerment and its central importance in COIN. The idea is that *how* something is done is more important than *what* is done. It is process over substance. This is the essential idea underlying empowerment, which occurs when people *do things for themselves*—when they *own* what they do. It is also important to add: when people get to decide *what* to do for themselves. While we should be *empowering rather than helping*, much of what we are doing is helping rather than empowering—helping and

⁶ T. E. Lawrence, *The Arab Bulletin*, August 1917.

⁷ Quoted from David Petraeus, “Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations from Soldiering in Iraq”, *Military Review*, 2006.

disempowering.⁸ We need to be helping and empowering. But Lawrence's statement, which Petraeus quotes to express his first principle of COIN, clearly puts empowering first.

With an empowerment intervention model, civil society organizations (CSOs) can mobilize citizens to become active agents in taking responsibility for advancing progress, including security. Real experiences have shown that CSOs can empower people as citizens and bring them together to reform schools, do community projects, and even encourage people to change their private behavior, including allowing girls to attend school.⁹ Although most of these experiences have occurred in places that do not have Afghanistan's severe security issues, notable cases exist where CSOs have successfully taken on the challenge of security against terrorists representing violent forms of radical Islam.¹⁰

An important subtext of the Choksys' argument, of course, has to do with *cost*. As long as we assume the overwhelming burden of resisting insurgencies, we will not be able to do very much of it. This unpleasant reality highlights the importance of finding new mechanisms for recruiting help for COIN, and the greatest underutilized pool of potential, underutilized resources is the *people of countries threatened by insurgencies*.

I have described how this could be done in two papers recently posted in the SWJ.¹¹ In this paper, I want to address some particular problems, both perceived and real, associated with empowering civil society.

Addressing Particular Problems

Among real problems, the most important is a lack of leadership from senior foreign policy and national security officials and from the communities they represent. This problem is directly related to lack of knowledge and experiences by communities who know only about states and governments—and very little about societies and cultures.¹²

A second set of problems arises from powerful, distorting incentives in the donor/philanthropic financial markets for civil society organizations. I want to address these issues in a separate paper, but a summary of them would include contracting practices aimed at promoting efficiency of administration rather than effectiveness in the field. A high official in the G.W. Bush White House confided to a friend that the White House had made a conscious decision to channel USAID funds through a small number of "Beltway Bandits" to "solve the coordination problem". One's initial reaction to this is nausea about how completely detached this statement is from any serious reality—or even any *concern* for reality.

Yet this statement from The White House is not significantly different from other important realities about official Washington's attitudes and behavior toward aid and aid policy.

⁸ This is a central theme in my article, "Civil Society and Counterinsurgency", SWJ, 11/3/10.

⁹ These are among the powers given to traditional communities by many CSOs committed to empowerment, including the CSO I founded and run, Educate Girls Globally (EGG). For a discussion of EGG, see my article "Humanizing 'The Man': Strengthening Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan", SWJ, posted 10/11/10.

¹⁰ Three cases might be mentioned here: UNICEF's Girls' Community Schools, in Asyut, the "epicenter of Islamic terrorism" in Upper Egypt; the Ammal Project in Northwest Pakistan, bordering Afghanistan; and in central Punjab, near the city of Multan, a center of Islamic terrorism in that country.

¹¹ A. Lawrence Chickering, *op. cit.*

¹² For a complete discussion of this, see my paper, "Civil Society and Counterinsurgency", SWJ, posted 11/3/10.

Until recently, for example—one hears this has changed, but I am not aware of any confirmation of it—Congress earmarked something like 85% of USAID’s budget. This suggested that Congress has regarded aid policy as nothing more than a patronage program to pay off favored constituencies, especially the Beltway Bandits. This, while the air is filled with political rhetoric about the idealism of aid the poorest countries.

These and other realities force conclusions a) that all branches of the government (unsurprisingly) have followed the foreign policy community in believing that aid has no significant role to play either in supporting foreign and security policy; and b)—related to the pessimism about development—that they feel no confidence that aid policy makes any difference in promoting development. The latter point is, incidentally, supported by shifting “fashions” (over decades) in development theory, moving from one thing to another, searching for a “silver bullet”. It is also supported by continuing, strong critiques that much foreign assistance either makes no difference or actually *retards* development.¹³

For these and other reasons, important parts of the institutional structure of USAID is programmed for failure. Part of the problem is interference from other branches of government, not allowing development professionals to do their job. Some people think part of the problem is that no one, including development professionals, know what aid policies might make a real difference. And part of the problem, relating to lack of foreign and national security policy leadership, comes from continuing focus on states rather than societies and culture—with no guidance, therefore, on how aid might influence societal and cultural change.

Even more distressing and perplexing is that it is hard even to interest in *researching* and *experimenting* to fill gaps in knowledge about what might be possible. Failing is one thing; unwillingness to try to improve is another thing altogether.

Returning to the specific issue of civil society, the distressing thing here is that the foreign policy community knows next to nothing about civil society and its strategic potential. Not knowing what it can do, it is not surprising that aid policy has come to serve narrow political interests and to serve the largely *theatrical* role that Washington knows how to engage the new world it faces. One wonders how long the current theater can run before the performance is forced to close.

The Time Challenge

The principal problem foreign policy experts cite about civil society is the mistaken belief that civil society action can only be strategic over time frames too long to be strategically significant. This mistake comes from the same place as the rationalist belief in what constitutes “really serious work” (i.e., objective things, things that are measurable).

What is widely acknowledged, but, again, almost universally forgotten in plans and implementation, is the importance of *narratives* and their impact on people’s subjective *perceptions*. The belief that civil society activities—for instance, in promoting education for girls—is too slow to matter strategically comes mostly from foreign policy experts who nothing about how CSOs can address the challenges associated with tribal cultures. Although these experts routinely acknowledge the importance of narratives and perceptions, they always come

¹³ The most prominent critique is a widely celebrated book by New York University economist William Easterly, *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done so Much Ill and so Little Good*, 2006.

back to the need for “results”. Thus, they avoid serious consideration of how civil society action can powerfully *and quickly* influence strategic narratives and people’s *perceptions* of what is true. As David Kilcullen and others have argued, radical insurgents understand the central strategic importance of perceptions in radical insurgencies. If our adversaries understand this, why can’t we?

Civil society action can exercise strategic influence on perceptions almost instantly and could increase them much more with more strategic civil society strategies, combined with strategic communications programs.¹⁴

It should be possible just to make this statement and then move on. However, it is not. The problem here is the emphasis that foreign and national security policy experts place on objective ends, because that is what they know—and their unwillingness to look at what they don’t know about tribal cultures and the subjective challenges of sub-group loyalties.

The failure to take these “soft” subjects seriously is partly borne from lack of knowledge and experience, but it is also related in deeper ways to limited vision in the Western psyche. While our Enlightenment belief in reason has brought many wondrous benefits, it also explains our preoccupation with “results” and our blindness to the importance and secret of motivating and empowering others.¹⁵

Perceptions can of course change instantly. How quickly can objective events trigger those changes in perception? In the case of my own organization, Educate Girls Globally (EGG), in the first community meeting it takes less than ten minutes for the men to transcend their habitual, traditional selves, empathically embrace girls who ask to return to school, and become active advocates for educating them. In a flash, they go from absolute indifference to educating girls to active advocacy of education for them.¹⁶ People doing this work report similar results from many countries.

In thinking about civil society, it is important to avoid generalities and understand distinctions about different civil society models—what they can and cannot do. Different civil society actors, both international and in host countries, have different contributions to make. But the most important difference *by far* is to focus on CSOs that understand the difference between empowering and helping and that focus on empowering.

Searching for What is Strategic: The Key Is Empowerment

Sketching a conceptual map of CSOs will make clear that the field is not at all a unitary concept. To explore its strategic potential, it makes sense to focus on particular issues that are strategic and then focus on civil society models that can pursue them.¹⁷

¹⁴ I explored this issue at length in A. Lawrence Chickering, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ For a summary of how EGG’s program works, see “Humanizing ‘The Man’: Strengthening Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan”, SWJ, posted 10/11/10.

¹⁷ In our book, *Strategic Foreign Assistance: Civil Society in International Security*, my coauthors (Isobel Coleman, P. Edward Haley, and Emily Vargas-Baron) and I focused on four issues that we thought are widely regarded as strategic, and we focused our discussion on particular civil society actions based on real experiences for each issue.

The civil society world is divided into various parts:

- International v. indigenous CSOs;
- Among international (U.S.) CSOs, large, Washington-based organizations (the so-called “Beltway Bandits”) and small, entrepreneurial organizations;
- CSO action that aims at *helping* versus those that focus on *empowering*;
- CSO that concentrate on *action* versus those that focus primarily on *advocacy*.

This paper employs a narrow definition of “strategic”. Our definition will focus on potential for big impacts, especially in citizens’ perception of the political and social system. Following Petraeus and Lawrence, strategic activities, in the conception here, *empower rather than only help*. Unfortunately, the principal actors in the civil society space—both CSOs and donors, both public and private—are under a lot of pressure to show “results”. This means concrete, measurable things. And this means they ignore empowerment and focus on helping.

(The U.S. Government recently made a strategic decision to direct most of their social investments in Afghanistan through the government rather than through CSOs. That will be a positive development *if* the government ministries who are making the decisions understand how to promote empowerment and how to promote relationships with local, tribal communities that will bring everyone together. Since the ISAF structure has not shown itself able to implement empowering policies with its own provincial reconstruction teams [PRTs], and since the ministries are under the same pressure to produce “results” as everyone else, it is unlikely that this new directive will produce results anything like those that policymakers hope for.)¹⁸

It is hard to be optimistic about any hope that civil society action can be managed to promote empowerment rather than help given the pressure that everyone acting in this space faces to show results. The key here is *trust* that empowerment will produce far greater results—and relatively quickly—than any policy that focuses immediately on helping and ignores empowerment. Earning that trust will depend on serious, randomized evaluations that reveal this truth. And such evaluations are expensive. This raises once again a subject I have mentioned often in these pages on the importance of creating major research and experimentation programs testing civil society strategies and their impact on foreign policy objectives, including COIN.

We do not need to choose between empowerment *and* helping; the challenge is to empower and help *through empowerment*—so that the people of the country, working through civil society, themselves become important producers of the help.

There are examples in many countries showing that empowerment will produce much greater results than any short-term focus on helping. My own organization, Educate Girls Globally (EGG), follows these principles, and its experience provides powerful testimony to what an empowerment model can achieve in terms of results. Many others also emphasize empowerment in many countries today. Even as far back at the 1990s, The World Bank financed many empowerment projects promoting education reform in the state of Baluchistan in Pakistan. (EGG’s model is unusual in implementing its model through operating government schools. Leveraging off of governments’ investments in education allows EGG to operate at enormous scales and very low costs, which makes its model especially strategic.)

¹⁸ See “Humanizing ‘The Man’: Strengthening Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan”, SWJ, posted 10/11/10.

Conclusion

Besides Afghanistan and Iraq—and given how costly COIN is, both financially and politically—there is little doubt that the United States will be cautious about launching another counterinsurgency operation any time soon, modeled on the experiences in those two countries. Since the causes of conflict in those countries are also present in many other countries, what alterations in strategy might be considered as an alternative to simply withdrawing from engagement from this increasingly dangerous world?

The great underutilized resource is the people of countries threatened by insurgencies. Significant knowledge now exists about how to recruit these people as active participants in COIN. To avoid expansion of conflict that we cannot control, it is imperative that both military and civilian policymakers start to research and experiment with the civil society models that can accomplish this recruitment. The hour is very late and the need very hard to exaggerate.

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