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## The Closers Part VI: NGOs and IOs

**Gary Anderson**

“Don’t try to organize the NGOs; it’s like trying to herd cats”

--Good advice I got in Somalia

Nongovernmental and International Organizations (NGOs and IOs) will likely be present during counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. Learning to deal with them effectively is a required skill. They can be helpful, benign, or present problems depending on how they are approached and how they are dealt with by the local commander and Reconstruction Team leadership. As in dealing with anyone from a different culture, some attempt needs to be made to understand where they are coming from and their motivations. Make no mistake, they are coming from a different culture from the military, and will likely have a different mindset from most Reconstruction Team civilian employees who will tend to come from a more bureaucratic culture than the NGOs are used to.

*COIN and Development: They are Not Always Synonymous.* NGOs and IOs working in the battle space of a COIN campaign will normally be engaged in some kind of development activity. In some cases, the NGOs may be working on USAID or IO grants. However, it would be a mistake to automatically assume that they are supporting the COIN effort. Development is a part of COIN, but most development in a country can, and usually does, go on totally independent of the COIN effort. In fact, their goals and motivation may be very different. This does not mean that their efforts are necessarily counter to what we are doing governmentally; most of the time, the efforts will be complementary, but they will generally resist efforts that are made to include them in the COIN effort as “members of the team”. There is a reason that they are called nongovernmental.

*What are NGOs?* NGOs come in all shapes and sizes. It is a mistake to lump them all together, which I have seen some people on the government side do. Although most do development work, each NGO has a distinct approach. Some deal with health such as Doctors Without Borders and the International Medical Corps. Others specialize in water issues; this is one of OXFAM’s strong suites. CARE has a fairly diverse portfolio, and does many things. Some NGOs deal with human rights, and this is a category with which the U.S. military has had issues in the past. However, most Reconstruction Teams and tactical military units will not usually see them on a day-to-day basis as they tend to deal at the national-strategic level. The working NGOs that most people involved in COIN and reconstruction will deal with are very mission and outcome oriented, perhaps even more so than the U.S. military. They are generally flatter, non-

hierarchical organizations, and they tend to be impatient with governmental entities that have to seek permission within a chain of command.

Development is done within the context of reconstruction in COIN, particularly in the build phase; development in COIN is done with the purpose of separating the insurgents from the population. Most NGOs will maintain that they are neutrals and not working against any party to the conflict. Although major NGOs stopped working in Iraq after the 2003 bombing of the UN compound in Baghdad, some are returning, but most reputable NGOs stayed in Afghanistan and some accept USAID grant money for what they consider to be projects that do not have military implications. Most will balk at any use of the term “COIN” in their grant proposals, which for a while, USAID was demanding. They take the position that they are not contractors; if a U.S. funded project could have been done in a peacetime environment, they will consider it. Building a non-military clinic would be such a project.

Contractors, as opposed to NGOs, generally work on straight contracts rather than grants as the NGOs do. There have been several NGOs in Iraq that have accepted COIN related contracts from the U.S. government, but they are generally not accepted by other NGOs as true “not for profit” organizations.

The culture of the NGO community is that most of the personnel would be more comfortable in the Peace Corps than the Marine Corps, and some are vocally anti-military; I think that has changed greatly over the last few decades as NGOs and the American military have now had quite a bit of experience working productively together in many natural disaster situations, but there is still some residue of antimilitarism in their ranks. This is sometimes exacerbated by hostility from the military side. In addition, NGOs will tend to see the military and other governmental entities involved in COIN as encroaching in their developmental domain. They need to show their donors what they are accomplishing, and if a governmental entity is already doing it, there is a fear that the donors will say, “why not let the government do it?”

The reality is that the NGOs are the natural follow-on to the build phase once the COIN situation is such that some semblance of normality returns, and when I am in a governmental position, I like to stress that to the NGOs. If an NGO can safely do a development project, there is no reason for the military or another governmental entity to do so. If we are smart we can complement each other, but the NGOs do not want to appear to be under governmental control for force protection reasons, if for none other. When NGOs take grant money from USAID or from any governmental entity, they are termed implementers. Sometimes, they, in turn, will hire local contractors to do the actual labor as their implementers.

The NGOs depend on the good will of the local population for security. When the population in Iraq could not provide it due to the general hostility of Al Qaeda in Iraq to all things western, they felt compelled to leave Iraq. Afghanistan is different; there, the Taliban seem to have generally tolerated the NGO presence, with some notable lapses. Both sides in a conflict will tend to try to use NGOs to their advantage. If we are smart, we won’t duplicate their efforts and USAID will fund them with grants if the project appears to be purely developmental. The Taliban will attempt to extort their local contract worker implementers to raise money in a protection racket role. We don’t like this, but there isn’t much we can do about it.

Most of the NGOs will try to foster civil society and local governmental reform. This will sometimes put them at odds with our host nation governmental allies, and not getting caught in between can be a tricky proposition for personnel involved in the governance side of COIN. It becomes another minefield to be avoided.

*What are IOs?* International Organizations (IOs) are non governmental entities that are sponsored by international bodies and operate within the framework of international law; the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) being foremost among them. They act as mega NGOs, doing humanitarian and developmental work; and they often use NGOs as implementers to do their projects. Like the NGOs they try to be neutral, but that doesn't always work out with all combatants as was the case with al Qaeda in Iraq. The alphabet agencies of the UN are the most notable aside from the ICRC. Each has a specialty. Some of the most notable are listed below:

- World Health Organization (WHO) - Health
- UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) –Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons
- UN Development Program (UNDP) - Long Term Development
- World Food Program (WFP) – Food
- UN International Children's Fund (UNICEF)

*Dealing with NGOs and IOs.* Whether you think NGOs and IOs belong in a conflict environment is irrelevant. If they can be there, they will be. As with the weather, they are something you will deal with. You will need to learn how to take advantage of their strengths and try to avoid any negatives that may result in doing this in a combat environment where you are working side by side with one of the combatants.

IOs are somewhat more diverse in their approach to dealing with American officials than are NGOs. Some, like the ICRC, will not be able to deal with your military partners because of their charters. Others, such as the UN alphabet agencies will be glad to deal with you in your development role if it lines up with their charter. Like the NGOS, however, most will portray themselves as neutral.

*How NGOs and IOs Can Make Your Life Easier.* I'd recommend becoming acquainted with those operating in your area as soon as you get there. Normally you will have to go to them. Some, by charter cannot visit military installations; others will not come as a security precaution. It should be a neighborly social visit, and you will get an immediate feel for how much or little they want to have to do with you as a government representative. Again, be patient, even if there is some initial hostility, I encourage you to work at it.

One area of common interest that you can use to begin a relationship is to discuss the possibility of humanitarian assistance in preparation for any potential natural disasters that might occur. In situations like that, the majority of NGOs have the additional duty of disaster relief, and the strictures about working with you and your military partners will be loosened considerably during the crisis phase and they will likely need the transportation and communications assets of your military partners. A little prior planning is prudent, and that can be an ice breaker.

*Culture.* These organizations were likely there before you, and will be there after you leave. They will have a feel for the culture, politics, and personalities of the area that you would otherwise need months to develop. It doesn't hurt to listen.

As an example from my military experience, when our Joint Task Force assessment team arrived in Bangladesh in 1991 as the advanced party for a humanitarian relief and disaster assistance operation in the wake of a tropical cyclone that had devastated that country, few of us in the organization knew much about disaster relief. The USAID chief in country did know something of it, and arranged for us to meet with NGOs who had been in the area longer than she had.

Many of the more established NGOs such as OXFAM and CARE had been in Bangladesh for years and had been through several similar disasters. Much of what they told us was invaluable and some of the cultural information contained items that we never would have thought of. For example, we were under some pressure to take on the job of disposing of the thousands of corpses (human and animal) that were being washed ashore in the aftermath of a massive tidal surge. CARE told us that if we could help with transportation (normal road networks were flooded), they had funding to contract with the ad hoc mortuary companies that traditionally crop up in Bangladesh after their frequent natural disasters. CARE would not only do the contracting, but they were experienced enough to keep an eye on the contractors because there would eventually be a shortage of bodies as the job got done. Some of the contractors were not above digging up remains at night and collecting them again to bury the next day. None of us would have suspected this macabre practice existed. CARE saved us a great deal of time and trouble.

Another matter of cultural sensitivity came in the area of water. Marines are proud of their Reverse Osmosis Purification Units (ROWPUs), which can make clean water of sewer water at industrial rates, and would use them in a heartbeat in Bangladesh if they could. OXFAM, an NGO that specializes in water issues among other things, warned us to be careful. In a recent disaster, a French NGO had brought in such units, and had signs printed in the local dialect that advertised free sterilized water. The Muslim Imams in the villages interpreted the signs literally, and told the largely illiterate women that they would never have any more children because the water was sterilized. The effort was a debacle as children are the only retirement insurance for the poor in that country.

In a similar manner, the better NGOs will scout local bazaars, knowing that the natives don't like the prepackaged emergency rations that aid agencies hand out in a disaster. When the NGO spotters see the rations coming out in barter, they know enough to switch to rice and cooking oil in the knowledge that the local system is coming back to life. Again, that is something that we never would have thought of.

*Security.* NGOs generally count on the locals to give them protection. This has broken down a few times in Afghanistan, but the Taliban generally seem to tolerate them as a potential source of income (more on that later). However, use can be made of it. If the Reconstruction Teams as well as their military partners take note of the routes that the NGOs use, they can be reasonably sure that they will be free of unattended Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and mines. This is not the case with attended booby traps and radio controlled IEDs which can be triggered selectively,

but at the present time, unattended booby traps (Victim Operated IEDs in military parlance) are the most prevalent threat in Afghanistan. If the Taliban do not want to kill villagers and NGOs, we can at least passively profit.

*Knowledge of Local Tribal Politics and Personalities.* The degree with which local NGOs and IOs will share such information will likely depend on the personal relationships that you make with such organizations in your operating area. Again, if you can profit from the knowledge and experience of others, you should do so.

*How NGOs and IOs Can Make Your Life Harder.* If you are closely partnered with a U.S. or Coalition ally military unit, and they are operating in a manner that displeases one or more of the IOs and NGOs in your Area of Operations, it will make developing a relationship with them that much harder. At that point, you can choose one or more courses of action depending upon your analysis of the situation. First, you can try to act as an intermediary and attempt to resolve problems as best you can. You can also attempt to maintain a separate relationship with your NGO or IO counterpart, and stay neutral in the disagreement in order to build some kind of a productive relationship. I would argue against the third option that would be to side against your military partner openly, even if he is in the wrong. COIN needs unity of effort from those involved in it. The population will quickly pick up on any fissures in U.S. and Coalition solidarity, and the opposition will eventually take advantage of it if it can.

There are several areas where friction can arise between U.S. and Coalition partners doing COIN operations in an area where NGOs and IOs are operating:

*Duplication of Effort.* As mentioned earlier, NGOs receive their funding through donors, both governmental and non-governmental. If donors see a U.S. government agency in an area doing something that the NGO is also advertising that it is doing, there is a good chance that the donor will put his money into something else. Therefore, this begs the opposite question. If an NGO is funded to do something, why are we doing it? In some cases, the military undertakes projects that the locals show an interest in purely to build good will and thereby improve its force protection posture. This is where local project review committees can come in handy; one of their functions should be to resolve wasteful duplication of resources. To the extent that you can do so without breaking ranks with your military colleagues, you should assist in resolving such redundancies. In a similar manner, you should try to maintain situational awareness of what NGOs and IOs are doing in your area in order to avoid redundancies.

*Human Rights.* NGOs and IOs, even those that don't have human rights in their charters will usually be more mindful of these things than your military COIN partners, and this will often cause issues regarding detainees, the manner in which searches are conducted, and in collateral damage. As a matter of policy, I'd recommend staying out of such disputes unless you have a human rights aspect to your job or are working Rule of Law issues and have to get involved.

One of the issues most likely to arise is that of women's rights. Most major NGOs consider this a key issue, and many local NGOs in host nations are women centered. They will likely put these NGOs in conflict with some local officials and almost certainly with conservative tribal elders. While I agree that it is a major human rights concern, as I have said earlier in this series, I

consider this to be a post- COIN development issue, rather than a key COIN concern. I think that is sound advice. This is a divisive issue, and COIN is a concern that seeks community consensus. Some others who have acted as civilians in COIN will disagree with me, but that is my advice.

*Relations with the Host Nation and Local Government.* Some NGOs will have a tendency to disagree with certain policies of the host nation and local government al entities that you are trying to support and improve. In many ways you may have the same goals, but will go about achieving them in ways that are diametrically opposed. Chances are that you will be working to improve the performance of the local agencies within your charter, and moving quietly to remove corrupt or incompetent officials. Some NGOs will take a more confrontational approach publicizing corruption and incompetence, organizing demonstrating against officials and policies that they disagree with, and otherwise publically demanding change. As is the case with disputes between NGOs and our military, I would recommend that you avoid becoming publically involved, even if you agree with the NGO's objectives.

That does not mean that you cannot use their efforts in pursuing yours. When our local tribal council in Abu Ghraib was trying to get the commander of a local Iraqi Army company fired for abusing the population by going to the press, I used the negative publicity as a way of trying to convince the commander's boss that the negative publicity was reflecting negatively on him as well. I believe that this hastened the departure of the offending officer.

*Conclusion.* You will almost certainly deal with NGOS and IOs. You should deal with them the way a good tactician deals with weather. If you can't control it, you need to use it to your advantage as best you can. You can't ignore it.

*Gary Anderson is a retired Marine Corps Colonel. He was the Senior Governance Officer for a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Iraq from 2009-10. He is an Adjunct Professor at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs.*

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