

New Potentials for Provincial Reconstruction Teams

Michael Hallett

The promulgation of the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) as the overarching reconstruction and development policy guidance in conjunction with the development of Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GOIRA) capabilities over the past 6 years, (as seen in the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and the 2007 creation of the Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG)) has significantly influenced the Afghan environmental dynamics and has thus created new opportunities for PRTs to engage in governance support activities.

Responding to this situation, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Strategic Vision issued at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008 said the following on PRTs: “Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) play a significant role in enabling security, governance and development. We pledge to provide all the PRTs need, enhance their unity of effort, strengthen their civilian component and further align their development strategies with Afghan Government priorities until such a time as Afghan Government institutions are strong enough to render PRTs unnecessary.”¹ Enabling this ultimate transition requires that PRTs shift from helping the people of Afghanistan directly through activities like project, funding, medical assistance and disaster relief materials provision to supporting the government of Afghanistan in executing these activities. Or, as some have put it, Afghan government capabilities have advanced to the point that it is “time to take off the training wheels”.

Yet what does supporting the government, instead of the people, mean in practice? At the highest political level, nations and organizations like the World Bank can provide funding directly to government organizations, (the Ministry of Finance for example) instead of channeling the money through national aid agencies who subsequently fund contractors, private voluntary organizations, or non-governmental organizations to provide public services. However, what does it mean to “take of the training wheels” at the PRT level, or to put it more formally, operationalize PRT support for the government of Afghanistan as the improved Government capability makes new sets and types of PRT activity both possible and necessary?

I will discuss this in three parts. First, I will briefly describe the government institutions whose capacity increases have changed the governance environment and thus made the shift from PRT service provision to support for government service provision possible, the Ministry for Rural Reconstruction and Development (MRRD) and Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG). This will be followed by a discussion of PRT governance capability cultivation

¹ <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-052e.html> accessed on 18 May 2008.

activities in the new environment, and a discussion of potential risks to PRTs caused by the transition.

The Institutionalization of GIROA Development Capabilities – The MRRD and IDLG

The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) is responsible for the implementation of programs to foster what it refers to as “pro-poor growth.” The MRRD Strategy Brochure explains that pro-poor growth is “...not about redistributing fixed assets to either investors or the poor, but about initiating mechanisms to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship, that will include all who can contribute to growth and development, and as importantly, to protect those who cannot. In promoting poverty reduction, our task is to act in ways that encourage these dynamic processes.”² The MRRD programs, including the National Solidarity Program (NSP), are intended to support the execution of the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and have had a significant effect on the environment in which PRTs operate.

The NSP provides funds to Community Development Councils (CDCs) with which these organizations of local leaders can plan and execute high priority community projects. It has proven extremely successful. Hamish Nixon, in his *The Changing Face of Local Governance? Community Development Councils in Afghanistan* says, “The creation of CDCs under the NSP have introduced a dramatic change in the development resources available to many communities in the country, and where these resources have been converted to successful sub-projects, the acceptance and legitimacy of the programme, and by extension the government, has been expanded.” (Nixon 8) NSP CDCs have enabled communities to take ownership of the reconstruction and development processes, and this ownership has translated directly into both support for the government and improved project sustainability. The NSP CDCs provide the PRTs with insight into the needs and will of the community, and thus constitute a high leverage point at which the PRT can contribute to support the people’s own efforts.

Independent Directorate for Local Governance

The IDLG was created by an executive decree of President Karzi on 30 August 2007 and was endorsed by the national parliament in March of 2008. The IDLG has assumed all sub-national governance responsibilities from the Ministry of the Interior. Its primary goal is to improve the relationship between the people and the government by improving the functionality of local, district and provincial government bodies. According to Baran Karimi, IDLG Deputy Director, the “Mandate of the IDLG is to bring people closer to the government, to bring all elements of good governance to the country.”³

PRTs and IDLG - The IDLG, according to a presentation at the ISAF PRT conference in April 2008 by Mr. Karimi, hopes the PRTs will support the provincial administration in project planning, funding, implementation and maintenance and continuation in accordance with Provincial Development Plans (PDPs). The PDPs, according to Mr. Karimi, are well integrated

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³ Remarks at Provincial Reconstruction Team Conference held at the International Security Assistance Force Headquarters, Kabul, Afghanistan 3 APR 08.

with the aims of the Afghan national Development Strategy and were developed through consultation with approximately 12,000 people in 34 provinces. The PDPs can thus serve as a very effective tool to foster greater coordination between the PRTs and provincial governments by providing guidance concerning community priorities within the education, health, roads agriculture and rural development sectors.

New Environment Activities

If PRTs are no longer the primary project service provider, then where should PRTs focus in the new environment shared with the increasingly robust MRRD and IDLG? PRTs can add value through continued engagement on planning and quality assurance associated with reconstruction and development projects, enhancing specialized expertise through serving as “running mates” for local counterparts and providing sample texts as starting points for GIoRA activities.

Project Involvement as Governance Training

From 2002 to 2007, local village, district and provincial *shuras* articulated their project priorities to the PRT commander, who would then, using CERP or working with civilian partners like CIDA or USAID, fund the required project or provide requested disaster relief materials.⁴ In the new environment created by the advances in GOIRA capacity, PRTs are no longer the sole, or even necessarily a primary, project source. Thus PRT commanding officers are stepping back and allowing PDCs, CDCs and local government officials to lead projects- the PRTs are only one of many potential project related partners.

However, the degree to which the local government actors are ready and willing to undertake the project management role differs with location. This generates a new question for the PRTs – not, “How to ensure that projects are planned and executed in light of the ANDS and local needs”, but “How to provide required guidance to local organizations performing project leadership functions?”. In other words, the question becomes “How to facilitate the development of governance capability on the part of provincial and district line ministers?”

We will now examine two ways to do this: ensuring mutual support among projects and “focused interaction”.

Project Mutual Support

A key part of the building governance capability task is improving the ability of local actors to link projects to generate mutual reinforcing benefits for the geographic area. This requires enhancing governance execution both temporally and spatially.

Temporal- The allocation of scarce resources to generate effects with the consent of voters, who may prefer immediate benefits to longer term gains, especially when their lives are especially uncertain due to a lack of physical security, is a vital governance task. Yet linking current immediate costs to long term, somewhat concealed, benefits is though often difficult, possible. For example, progress toward achieving the long term objective of increasing economic growth

⁴ This in some cases led to undesirable perceptions of PRT activities and roles in the new Afghanistan. For example, PRTs may in some cases have been perceived as governance nodes that minimally competed with local government structures and maximally as rendering such structures unnecessary.

through improving productivity can be met in part by providing paid vocational training. A paycheck and goods and services (like new doors or home lighting system installations) made by the students as part of their training provides short term benefits for local populations as they work toward the longer term payoff.

In addition to structuring projects with both short and long term payoffs, the focus on the temporal dimension, can be operationalized by PRT staff members through raising questions in provincial government planning meetings about the long term significance of a project in order to extend the planning horizon.

Spatial: Linking infrastructure and facilitating government official interaction - Enhancing the links between districts, in order to better connect the spaces and activities, will magnify the beneficial effects of projects focused on district or provincial centers and help ensure that the PRT fulfils its role as a provincial (not just district where it is located) reconstruction team. This means that PRTs should focus on building “linking infrastructure” like bridges and key roads that will connect or link the projects of other actors. This specialization on supporting the development of linking infrastructure would ensure that PRT efforts generate the largest effects.⁵

PRT staff members can also guide local actors to consider aggregating projects so they are mutually reinforcing. For example, linking a business development project for the local agricultural merchant organization to a road project and cold storage facility project offers the potential for greater gain than pursuit of each project without reference to the others. In this case, the merchant organization could provide the administration of the cold storage facility, and the road access would ensure the maximum value is derived from the cold storage facility. In the absence of coordination the cold storage facility might be built without access to transportation or the administrative support necessary to ensure its efficient operation, thus seriously reducing its effectiveness.

Managing distance. The challenge in operationalizing democracy caused by poor communication links is perhaps underestimated by people in developed countries for whom traveling between the capital and back home to meet with constituents is so easy as to be beneath notice. Participation in decision making is difficult when an official cannot attend the meetings. By facilitating transportation for district leaders from remote areas, the PRT can help ensure that the districts both feel that their concerns are being heard and that they are getting their fair share of resources that might otherwise not come their way due to poor communication (both road and telecommunication) links between the district and the provincial center.

PRT assistance in enabling officials to gather for deliberation is especially important for intra-district coordination required so that districts can efficiently combine their efforts on projects affecting multiple districts within a province. For example, the PRT facilitation of a *shura* between three districts in order to help them manage a road project that would benefit all of them but that is of too large a scale for any single district to execute or that exceed NSP funding amounts can add significant value to local government functioning. In addition, the PRTs involvement as a monitor could help prevent situations in which one district, after committing to

⁵ For example, the PRT could focus on working with other military forces to provide security for road construction crews to build a secondary road that would connect a previously isolated region to the national transportation grid.

a bridge project for example, backs out (perhaps due to the emergence of a higher priority activity) so that the road the other district funded remains unconnected to the larger road system.

Practical Steps: Enhancing Local Government Official Capability Through “Focused Interaction”

Through no fault of their own, some officials in Afghanistan are less than totally prepared to execute their duties. Additional interaction with these officials is thus required to enable them to improve their administration and governance skill sets. How can PRT staff members contribute to increasing government official capability efforts? Although there is often talk of “mentoring” most of the interactions between PRT staffers and government officials are not sufficiently extensive to count as mentoring. In addition, many government officials do not perceive themselves as in need of mentoring. Therefore, in many cases the relationship between PRT staff members and government officials is not of the older, more experience mentor guiding the younger, less experienced mentoree, but can better be described as “focused interaction”.

The focused interaction can take place in a wide variety of ways. I provide four brief examples here.

Paperwork - Meeting the reporting requirements associated with planning and execution of projects of any type (for example, the GOIRA Ministry of Finance Harmonized Reporting Format or Regional Command daily summaries) to higher authorities is a challenge for all staffs. The common nature of the challenge makes collaborative learning possible. Since many actors in the engagement space have similar planning and reporting requirements, the PRT staffer and local government official sitting together to complete reports to their respective chains of command will enable rapid learning for each and improve both actor’s products.

This collaborative approach to tackling paperwork is applicable to other planning and reporting documents. For example, composition by an international government aid agency staff member of her organization’s vision statement will be both aided and enhanced by involving her local government counterpart, (such as a provincial governor’s development advisor) in the writing process. The development advisor can simultaneously update his own vision statement and submit it to the district and provincial councils as a starting point for the counsel’s own vision plan. The district plan will thus be in accordance with major donor plans, who have ensured that their plans are in accordance with the ANDS - the different levels of government and actors will be working from the ‘same sheet of music’. Bureaucratic staff activity will thus support effective organizational interaction. Most importantly, the training will have taken place so that the external actor involvement is less required for the following fiscal year iterations - building sustainable government capability.

Meetings - Collaboratively tackling common tasks can also take the form of facilitating intra-government communication. For example, in a western province, communication and cooperation between the Governor and the Provincial Development Council (PDC) was less than optimal. The PDCs were established by the 2005 Provincial Council Law as a way to improve representative mechanisms between the people and government at the provincial level. In this particular province the PDCs were unable to perform this function because the Provincial

Governor considered the members of the Provincial District Council “communists”.⁶ Further, since the PDC had no budgetary power, the Governor saw little need to engage them. The PDC, for its part, refused to talk to the Governor.

The PRT Department of State representative used her access to both groups to improve their interaction. By scheduling a meeting with the PDC at 1000, for example, and a meeting with the governor at 1030 she was able to help the PDC work through an issue among themselves, developing a consensus position, and then bring the PDC directly to the governor to get his input and reach a final decision. The meeting between the PDC and governor occurred as a positive externality of interaction with the PRT representative – neither group had to back down from their mutual disinclination to work with the other, but the work of the government (service to the people) was accomplished. This simple gambit proved very effective in overcoming the resistance of the two groups to speak to one another by demonstrating the gains from cooperation – an essential step in improving provincial governance.

Quality Assurance (QA) and Quality Control (QC) - PRT staffs can, in addition to the collaborative approach discussed in the first two examples, play a more direct role through subtly fostering intragovernment coordination and cooperation through Quality Assurance and Quality Control activities. In many cases the PRT staff’s QA/QC expertise is essential to project success – qualified QA/QC engineers are a scarce resource. Developing Afghan expertise in this area is therefore crucial.⁷ The QA/QC process can also play a role in governance training.

The QA process is important in itself, to ensure that projects are executed properly. But from the developing government capability perspective, QA is more important as an example of enforcing accountability – how to enforce it, and why to enforce it. Thus project monitoring, through the Quality Assurance/Quality Control process can provide the vehicle for unobtrusive focused interaction to cultivate local government capabilities. This training in enforcing accountability both educates the government officials and the people.

Officials - The interaction to develop more robust QA/QC capabilities provides valuable training for *shura* officials, local political leaders, and ethnic or religious leaders on the requirement to generate effects that improve the long term prospects of their constituents. The QA/QC process demonstrates the benefits of acting in accordance with the abstract, technical requirements of the projects, not personal gain or to promote the short term interests of their family or ethnic group. Participation in the QA/QC process, even if that means simply reviewing QA/QC reports and acting in accordance with their recommendations, will thus help political actors to see themselves as representatives of constituents, accountable for their actions and subject to replacement by voters if they fail to create and subsequently act through effective institutions.

Citizens - The emphasis on accountability can help manage the expectations and satisfactions of the people such that contentment no longer consists of status income gains from their leaders making life difficult for another group and designating that “success”. Instead, the QA/QC emphasis will help create a demand for tangible improvements in the standard of living, improvement enabled by the government performing its core standards (from building codes to

⁶ The governor even gave the PRT CDR a lecture on which were Maoist communists and which Soviet.

⁷ Further discussion of this point is beyond the scope of this paper.

civil and criminal law) enforcement function.

Sample Texts: Economic development plans - The provision of sample texts, like economic development plans, could also prove useful. For example, a small rural community in Northern Saskatchewan may face some of the same development issues as a small Afghan rural community in terms of fostering non-agriculture based businesses to supplement farm income and increase local economy resilience. Samples of how these small communities around the world have approached economic development could provide some insights for local Afghan district ministers of the economy. PRT provision of these plans, through links with academia or provincial, state and municipal economic development offices from their home nations can help local Afghan government actors create plans appropriate for their particular situations. The provision of the plans will enable the PRT to add value to other actor reconstruction and development activities by enabling the substitution of knowledge for other inputs, like money and time.

Focused Interaction Aggregation - Office hours A few PRTs have begun holding “office hours” at the Provincial Government compound as a way to regularize their interactions designed to improve the functioning of established government structures. During office hours PRT staff members meet with government officials to discuss project planning or status, upcoming *shuras*, and other issues. The regular, persistent presence of PRT staff in the Government office complex, by allowing an opportunity for collaboration, (the development advisor can stop by to chat, a PDC staffer can ask a clarification question about a contact, the Economics Minister can get help to contact a line ministry in Kabul, etc.) facilitates government agency capability increases.

Managing the Transition Risks

Taking off the training wheels and stepping back from direct project involvement entails significant risks. The emphasis on long-term projects, like vocational schools and cold storage facilities, may mean that the PRT role in the project becomes concealed. Sitting with the development advisor to draw attention to the potential gains of collating the new agricultural products market with the cold storage facility is not a high visibility activity. Therefore, during the transition between the PRT reducing its leadership role in planning and executing projects and the government and other local actors stepping up, the local population may feel more hostile toward the PRT as it will appear that they are doing little to help the local community. To mitigate this risk, it may be appropriate for the PRTs, depending on the situation, to continue some distribution of disaster relief materials, school packets, and other “feel good” sorts of activities. Transition to complete government ownership of distribution could be facilitated by local government staffers playing a prominent role during these events.

Therefore, the expectations of the local people, who have become accustomed to the PRT as service provider, must be carefully managed during this transition to avoid disappointment that could translate into decreased support for international community efforts in Afghanistan. Explaining the shift from direct service provision to enabling local actors to execute their own projects, as part of the general project of continuously cultivating mutual understanding, is

crucial to overall mission success.⁸

Shuras provide an excellent venue for explaining the shift in PRT activities. For example, in April 2008, the PRT staff was invited to a *shura* held at the district government compound. The seating arrangement reflected the previous understanding of PRT activity – the PRT staff was seated at the head of the tent with the district governor: the elders sat along the sides. After introductory remarks by the district governor, the assembled elders directed their requests for projects and complaints about international military force activities to the PRT commander. The PRT commander listened patiently for an hour to the various district elders articulate their desires for road projects, bridges, micro-hydro systems and diesel generators to power the computers currently sitting useless in a school. Then, through a translator, the PRT commander used an opportunity to answer a specific question to address the new role of the PRT. He explained to the elders that the PRT was there at the request of the local government to support the entire province. Therefore, district and provincial government staffs were the key points of contact for concerns and projects - all requests for action by the PRT should go through them. As PRT commander, he said, he relied on the governor to prioritize the needs of the district. The *shura* should thus communicate its needs to the district governor and through him to the provincial development councils and provincial governor.

Conclusion

Three years after the national elections the GOIRA has made great progress in its ability to govern the country. In spite of the lack of budgetary power, (budgets are controlled by the central government) PDCs and CDCs are making new avenues of activity possible for project planning and execution at the village, district and provincial level. The new processes require the PDCs and CDCs, in conjunction with provincial and district governors, to undertake project prioritization, planning and execution in accordance with the overarching guidance provided by the ANDS. These shifts require in many cases a delicately handled course change on the part of the PRTs. Tensions, primarily concerning the management of local expectations of the PRTs exist within the transition from service provision to government organization support.

As a result of the impressive efforts of government employees and the international community, it is clearly time to “take off the training wheels” for Afghan officials. Yet the immediate assistance efforts required when the training wheels come off often exceeds that required when the student has become accustomed to training wheel use – with the training wheels off, you have to run faster and work hard to preserve momentum and avoid crashes. If, the PRTs decrease service provision while the people are losing faith in government (primarily due to the still far too widespread corruption) willingness to take risks against anti-Afghan forces may decrease, hindering the ultimate effort to help Afghanistan provide for its own human security. Therefore, until existing government bodies prove capable of taking up the slack as the PRTs decrease service provision, a short term increase in PRT service provision velocity may be necessary. Depending on the area, medical assist visits be increased, with Afghan partners taking an increasingly larger role in each engagement.

⁸ However, this concern should not be overstated – the local actors will be aware of PRT involvement, and emotionally respond to that involvement, even if the PRT commander is not cutting the ribbon at the opening ceremony.

Meeting this momentum maintenance challenge is well within our capabilities - we have extensive experience in maintaining mission momentum while training, gradually allowing the under instruction person take more and more of the load in terms of responsibility and execution, while still standing by to ensure successful outcomes.

Taking off the training wheels can also enable a more “venture capital” and less state aid driving approach. The commitment to a centralized, government/international aid approach to development, (which has nowhere generated significant economic growth) that has guided much of the international community’s interaction, is peculiar. The security situation may necessitate government involvement, if only to create the financial incentives for private actors to provide services, but it is now time to move away from an exclusive focus on government driven development and help empower the private sector to begin to take more of the load. The USAID Economic Empowerment in Strategic Regions and the Peace Dividend Trusts business development activities are examples of possible ways ahead.

Ideally of course, the local communities will rely on their own private sector actors to continue the service initiated by PRT reconstruction and development activities. Progress cannot wait for perfection of government apparatus intended to provide the service – government, (other than in the areas of outside of security provision and rule of law enforcement) need not be the only service provider. If PRTs can help accelerate this shift to private sector job creating and locally sustainable activity, they will have achieved their mission goals in a way appropriate for 21st century forms of governance.

Commander Michael Hallett is currently assigned to Supreme Allied Command Transformation on NATO Lessons Learned. His previous assignments have included tours at the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Headquarters in Kabul, with COMNAVEUR-COMMANDER SIXTH FLEET Operational Net Assessment directorate as an Africa and Black Sea region analyst, the Civil-Military Interaction core team at Allied Command Transformation and Engineering Officer on the USS SIDES (FFG-14).

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