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The Importance of Vertical Engagement in Village Stability Operations

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A variety of recent media reporting has highlighted the success and challenges of ongoing local engagement initiatives in Afghanistan. Under the banner of Village Stability Operations (VSO), these initiatives are efforts by U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) and other Special Operations Forces (SOF) to improve local governance, security, and infrastructure throughout the country. The current National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Afghanistan suggests that VSO and the associated development of Afghan Local Police (ALP) are proving more effective than many other concurrent Coalition military efforts. Conversely, other reports also reveal that many Afghans harbor serious concerns about some of these ventures, and in particular suggest that the push by senior military and civilian leadership to accelerate many ALP programs may in fact create a local backlash as Coalition forces bypass necessary checks and balances in the clamor for ALP numbers. However, any generalizations about potential success or failure of VSO programs overlook a salient point: the intent of the programs is to engage at a local level and address the specific problems of a local area. Success or failure may look dramatically different between various regions of Afghanistan. Outside audiences should not assume that there is a universal template for successful VSO programs, or that these programs are revolutionary or novel in their approach. Fixating on the term 'Village Stability Operations' itself may actually restrict appropriate analysis of local problem sets.

Events in Kandahar Province during late 2010 and early 2011 showed that SOF teams conducting VSO were more likely to achieve identifiable success in improving local governance, security, and infrastructure at the District level rather than at the village, and efforts by those elements to enlist and leverage the support of District and Provincial powerbrokers for VSO provided the necessary kindling to turn notional programs into reality.

The following article will address why focusing myopically on the village level in some areas of Afghanistan is a recipe for stagnation and may in fact be counterproductive to overall efforts at developing enduring local security across a broad base. In a hierarchical environment, an exclusive effort at the village level attempts to create change through engagement of those with no real power or ability to make decisions. Such efforts neglect to account for the vertical allegiance networks that dominate sections of Afghanistan's south and an agrarian society where large-scale land ownership is a frequent determinant of authority. Secondly, in some environments a focus on one village or community becomes inevitably exclusionary towards neighboring communities, and may instead alienate potential supporters. Such cases may require a more top-down approach involving 'vertical' engagement that parallels the Afghan District and Provincial hierarchies above the village level.

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