



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

The Village Engagement Center: Stabilizing One Village at a Time

by M. Shands Pickett

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) understands the need to develop “local knowledge, cultural understanding, and local contacts” in order to implement a successful counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan.¹ And it has developed a handful of brigade-level tools like Agriculture Development Teams (ADTs), Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), Operational Liaison Teams (OMLTs), and Police Operational Liaison Mentor Teams (POMLTs) to work directly with the local population and build connections between Afghans and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA). Each ISAF forward operating base (FOB) typically has most, if not all, of these teams on-base.

However, ISAF’s brigade-level assets are hamstrung by a forward operating base-centric footprint. To partner effectively with Afghans, the various teams (or “functional enablers” in ISAF parlance) must establish a presence in the villages they hope to assist—a whole-of-place concept called the Village Engagement Center (VECs). Only full-time interaction outside the base gates with both local Afghans and GIRoA counterparts will give ISAF’s functional enablers the village-level contextual knowledge necessary to create meaningful change. This is an idea with precedence from the Marines’ Combined Action Program (CAP) in Vietnam to a program, the Village Stability Platform (VSP), currently operated by Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan. The Village Engagement Center is not another new capability but is instead an organizing principle for existing assets. It pushes those functional enablers off of ISAF bases, thereby helping Afghan communities to resist insurgent pressures while increasing their stake in GIRoA’s success.

Precedents and present day models

The Village Engagement Center draws both from the conceptual legacy of Vietnam-era counterinsurgency theory and from the lessons learned in the field today. Specifically, the Marine’s Combined Action Program in Vietnam and Special Operations Forces’ (SOF) Village Stability Platform in Afghanistan are key inspirations. The VEC transposes the capabilities of the Marines and SOF into a pragmatic and actionable program for Big Army and its assets on-the-ground right now, integrating the functional enablers’ more robust governance and development programs.

The CAP (1965-1971) embedded Marines in Vietnamese villages, and Marine squads lived alongside Vietnamese soldiers, providing them training and security.² The program was one of the most successful in the American campaign. It enabled a small force to establish a presence over a vast amount of terrain. Lieutenant General Lewis of the Marines wrote: “Of all

¹ David Killcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 242.

² As described in Bing West’s *The Village* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

our innovations in Vietnam none was as successful, as lasting in effect, or as useful for the future as the Combined Action Program."³

In the present, SOF has developed the most innovative counterinsurgency program in Afghanistan, an initiative called the Village Stability Platform. The VSP embeds SOF soldiers in Afghan communities. They live in Afghan villages that support GIROA but cannot stand on their own against the Taleban. SOF soldiers engage in community-driven development projects. They install street lights, repair roads. In addition to these modest projects, SOF does something far beyond development. They also help to stand up local GIROA-backed security forces made up of villagers—groups of armed Afghans who want their daughters and sisters to be able to get an education in safety.

Most importantly, both CAP and VSP teams shared risk with the local population, a true partnership (of which much is made by ISAF). They stayed in the villages night and day, alongside the security forces they trained, building trust within the community, and learning the landscape of the human terrain. But VSP resources are limited. We cannot match every village with a SOF team. However, regular Army forces are massively scalable, especially with the increased troop levels. Although the average soldier does not have the same skill set as a SOF soldier, the regular Army soldier is amazingly capable of adapting to the most challenging situations. Big Army, inspired by the Marines and SOF, has already made great strides toward re-positioning itself from a large force-on-force posture to a COIN population-centric posture.

The right time, places, and capabilities

The present day in the war in Afghanistan represents a unique moment in time. With an additional 30,000 troops deployed in-country, there is a temporary surge in ISAF operational capabilities, an opportunity for the regular Army forces to expand GIROA's bubble of governance beyond district centers and into the countryside. The most intuitive starting point for expansion is in ISAF's backyard, in the villages just outside ISAF's forward operating bases where logistics and force protection can be easily managed.

The Village Engagement Centers will be the focal point of rural ISAF expansion. ADTs, PRTs, OMLTs, and POMLTs will embed at VECs on a rotating basis along with a small security force, resulting in a 24/7 ISAF presence and much greater ISAF situational awareness and understanding of local issues. VECs will only be built in villages that want them, where the village jirga desires a real ISAF partnership.

ISAF assets at the VECs will live with, eat with, and work with their GIROA counterparts (staffed through ISAF unit agreements with district sub-governors). Each ISAF functional enabler will provide a few members from their team to occupy the VEC in shifts determined by the needs of the population. The functional enablers will engage local village power structures, whether they are tribal or political. In addition to facilitating cross-pollination among the various enablers, the VEC will primarily act as a hub for GIROA mentorship, community development, and security assistance.

³ Quoted by Captain Keith F. Kopets in "The Combined Action Program: Vietnam," *The Small Wars Journal*, accessed 21 September 2010 at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/kopets.htm>. Originally from Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on the War in Vietnam* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970), 105.

Every VEC will have a different composition based on the ISAF and GIRoA assets available, and every VEC will have different priorities based on the needs of the village. For example, some VECs may be heavily staffed by the ADT and the Department of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (DAIL) if farming issues are a village's main concern. Other communities with localized security problems will have POMLT and Afghan National Police (ANP) or Afghan Local Police (ALP) teams embedded at their VEC. Command units should develop a menu of capabilities to offer village leaders. And, where possible, GIRoA should take the lead in negotiating VEC creation.

A consistent presence, deeper connections

In the past, ISAF has generally interacted with villages on an ad hoc basis, the rhythm of which has varied with command unit and the point in that unit's rotation cycle. This has led to the "meeting again for first time" syndrome endemic to ISAF community relations. It is a frustration for ISAF and the local population alike. And Afghan cultures usually lack a hierarchical structure that mirrors military command organizations. This makes it difficult to "plug-and-play" with villages, with ISAF only coordinating hand-offs of communities between team and village leaders.

To solve this problem, the Village Engagement Center will be an entity that exists within villages regardless of the unit's time remaining in-country. Functional enablers like ADTs most often have their own lifecycles, transitioning in and out at different times than the units they support. Now, functional enablers create continuity across the Relief in Place/Transition of Authority (RIP/TOA) processes on-base. They can also be used present a far more consistent ISAF face to local villages.

Many projects in villages lose traction or fall through the cracks when functional enabler's team members themselves leave an area of operation. But if new team members are rotating through VECs on a weekly basis, meeting with their local partners and GIRoA counterparts daily after personal introductions are facilitated by their respective predecessors, it will be much easier to maintain community relations and build deeper, more meaningful connections.

Logistics, force protection, and quality of life

The physical placement of the VECs will be inside of villages, in a walled home (qalat) rented from the village or built by craftsmen from the community. Its footprint should be as unobtrusive and as small as the security environment allows. There will be no guard towers or "t-walls" to signal barriers between the communities and the VECs. (Gabions in the form of Hesco barriers can be used to reinforce the walls of the qalat from the interior.) VECs will procure food and employ translators from the local community. With the assistance of the Army Corps of Engineers and other on-base engineering assets, most VECs can be completed and occupied in less than two weeks, with little to no additional equipment or personnel needed from ISAF HQ.

While they will eventually rely on relationships with the local community for protection, the first VECs will be within a few kilometers of a FOB. It will take time to build trust with the village populations. In the interim, a platoon-sized ISAF security force will provide security alongside ANP/ALP assigned to the village by the district sub-governor. A quick reaction force (QRF) will also be assigned to support the VECs. But, overtime, the ISAF security force

(SECFOR) will be reduced to a bare minimum (freeing FOB resources to create new VECs) as ANP/ALP take over primary responsibility for VEC force protection.

VECs will not reduce the quality of life important to ISAF personnel. ISAF staff at the VECs will still have access to the necessities and comforts that FOBs provide. The functional enablers will rotate through VECs on three to four-day stints with the rest of the week spent back at the FOB. During that time, they can use the mail, health, and professional services available on bases. And those functional enablers will bring important local perspectives back to FOB meetings and planning sessions.

Creating efficiencies by focusing efforts

The VEC extends the sphere of influence of each FOB while conserving ISAF resources. Currently, every Key Leader Engagement (KLE) or routine check on a local project requires a dedicated mission. Missions can wrap a handful of objectives together, but often physical distance calls for multiple missions. Each mission must have extensive plans, a minimum of four vehicles, and a SECFOR in addition to the core functional enablers. And the distance of engagement does change the force requirements. For example, on any given day a FOB might have four vehicles, SECFOR, and State Department personnel at a KLE 30 kilometers to the north and four vehicles, SECFOR, and USAID personnel at a PRT building inspection 2 kilometers to the south, and so on. The current model places great stress on FOB assets, cutting short meaningful community engagements. It is very difficult to drink three cups of tea with a SECFOR anxious to move to the mission's next stop.

VECs operate outside the mission framework and without the discrete and serialized objectives like those found in a typical mission's concept of operation (CONOP). VECs are holistic and simultaneous in their operations. Because they require no dedicated thick-skinned, mine-resistant, ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles and use GIROA assets as SECFOR, VECs actually free FOB resources to pursue more distant missions and to strengthen QRFs. VECs solve the distance of engagement problem, enabling FOBs to expend logistical effort at arm's length while utilizing the functional enablers more efficiently closer to home. As a result, VECs will drastically reduce "storyboarding" and PowerPoint briefings in favor of substantive counterinsurgency efforts.

Identifying projects and providing a bulwark against corruption

Unity of effort across ISAF functional enablers is at the core of the Village Engagement Center model. VECs will tighten coordination among enablers, acting as "fusion cell" for community engagement. Yet, many functional enablers (like PRTs) have large civilian components that cannot be tasked by the unit command like soldiers. It is therefore important to articulate how staffing VECs will help them to meet their own program requirements. Though most will enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to gain more local insight, those reluctant functional enablers will have to be persuaded of the value-added to their missions.

The key terrain is the human terrain, and most Afghans live in villages. Without understanding the village context in which a functional enabler intends to start a project – from an ADT grape trellising program to a PRT employment initiative – those programs will, at best, meet with only marginal success and, at worst, abet corruption.

Corruption is “as much of an enemy as the Taleban.”⁴ It has wasted untold amounts of ISAF aid money, crippled GIROA, and strengthened insurgents. ISAF COIN contracting guidance exhorts: “Know those with whom we are contracting.”⁵ Without a village-level presence, it is impossible to know the Afghans contracted to complete the overwhelming majority of projects. Only local knowledge and local contacts create relationships with those whom ISAF hires. Empty school buildings and abandoned wells across the country stand testament to projects undertaken without an understanding of village capabilities and needs.

Setting priorities and establishing metrics for progress

Afghanistan is full of “yellow villages.” These are places where the community theoretically supports ISAF but feels great insurgent pressure. They are neither unfriendly nor pro-GIROA. Much like commercial consultants in the United States, ISAF will enter these villages, conduct an assessment, and generally make promises of support – which, however well-intentioned, may or may not be fulfilled for a number of reasons from troop rotations to lack of resources. Later, usually at night, insurgents will enter the same village and threaten the Afghans who met with ISAF forces, staging trials, and holding anti-GIROA meetings. Often, they will issue “night letters” and physically beat ISAF sympathizers.

These “yellow villages” are the places task forces should be prioritized for VECs. By establishing a 24/7 ISAF/GIROA presence, VECs will secure the population from the Taleban, creating active denial through partnership. The “yellow village” will become a “green village” when community leaders see real progress in the security, governance, and development.

ISAF has already created useful metrics to track and monitor VEC successes. The District Stability Framework (DSF) is a joint COIN Training Center—Afghanistan (CTC-A) and USAID product. It combines the Military Decision-Making and Planning process (MDMP) with community program management. The DSF “is intended to aid in understanding the operational environment, identifying local perception, identifying the root causes of instability, designing activities to address them, and monitoring overall impacts and outputs.”⁶ The DSF is an off-the-shelf tool ISAF can use to ensure that VEC efforts are working to transform the “yellow village” into a “green village.”

Building GIROA from the bottom-up and top-down

ISAF plans to occupy “key terrain districts (KTDs),” moving troops off the forward operating bases and into the district centers (mostly in the eastern portion of the country). While a step in the right direction of securing the population, this footprint is not nearly wide enough. Essentially, KTDs create miniature urban FOBs whose main interest is creating and maintaining connections with GIROA structures. But ISAF must win the hearts and minds of the villagers, not just those of Afghans living in the cities. The “oil spot” of security and GIROA influence must flow beyond Kandahar and Helmand throughout the countryside, all the way up to Pakistan’s doorstep.

⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman, “How America Corrupted Afghanistan: A Time to Look in the Mirror” (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2010), 3.

⁵ “COMISAF’s Counterinsurgency (COIN) Contracting Guidance,” September 8, 2010.

⁶ Cited in DSF training materials provided by CTC-A and USAID.

SOF's VSPs will work in far-flung villages, and Big Army will work in the district centers and in more accessible villages. When the complementary "oil spots" converge, VECs will play a central diplomatic role in reconciling tribal and local leadership with GIROA provincial governments. How this process takes place and its degree of success will vary greatly across Afghanistan's diverse populations and social fabrics. At minimum, VECs should act as intermediaries in the reconciliation process taking place with the Taliban. VECs can ensure that reintegration does not result in Taliban-inspired radicalization.

VEC successes will market GIROA buy-in to surrounding villages, selling GIROA from the top and building enfranchisement from the bottom. It is whole-of-place process unique to each village. While the process itself will take time, as much should be done as soon as possible to build VEC capacity before the proposed draw-down takes place in 2011, when the initial ISAF SECFOR assets VECs require will become less available. This fall, we have the hard-won – albeit temporary – resources to stabilize one village at a time. With Village Engagement Centers, those resources can be spent quickly and spent wisely.

M. Shands Pickett is an analyst with the Human Terrain Team attached to TF White Eagle in Ghazni Province. He holds an MA in U.S. Foreign Policy from George Washington University.

The views of the author do not necessarily reflect the official policies and positions of the Human Terrain System, U.S. Army, ISAF or the U.S. Government.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.



Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).