

The Transition from Conflict to the Beginnings of Reconstruction

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INTRODUCTION

The use of the word “transition” has become frequent in political discussion. The context has usually been situations in Iraq or Afghanistan, and the term has a variety of interpretations. Though there is general agreement that transition is a stage between conflict and reconstruction requiring its own approach, there’s an apparent lack of consensus on what constitutes the elements of the transition stage.

The following observations on transition are based primarily, but not exclusively, on the perspective of working with a non-governmental organization (NGO). These comments are not a statement of any prevailing doctrine, as NGOs are little driven by doctrinal issues, but are meant to present a perspective on the nature of transition and for whom and under what circumstances this information is significant.

To be clear, I refer here to transition as that stage between the end of active combat and the stirrings of progress towards responding to immediate community needs and eventual movement toward full-scale reconstruction. The interpretation of what is significant will vary. This will, of course, affect the action taken. These differences may derive from the need to respond to political imperatives, as might be the case where public pressure for a successful outcome to the preceding conflict is dominant, or they could turn upon an informed evaluation of actual need.

Transition rarely may be described as having distinct phases or following a measurable progression. More often than not, it reflects overlapping—even competing—activities as the various actors follow their own direction. In looking at the present situation in Iraq, for

example, we have witnessed large-scale reconstruction initiatives presented as defining progress in transition, only to see them falter and essentially marginalize less ambitious projects.

One's description of transition may well turn upon to whom it is being presented and for what purposes. It may represent a portion of what is the larger reality if, for example, the audience feels constrained by mission statement or resource capabilities. In some cases, transition was actually a follow-on activity to what had begun to occur during the conflict phase. In Bosnia, the nature of the fighting was such that areas of relative tranquility were common, and here activities akin to those of reconstruction were initiated before the Dayton accords ended overall hostilities. The presence of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) reinforced these possibilities for retaining the elements needed to provide retention of the society's ability to recover. The UN, whatever its failings during that period, gave the non-governmental organizations in the region the support they needed to operate in relative safety during much of the war. The question then becomes, transition to what, for whom, and just where? The answer will be different within the same country.

Obviously, this affects donor response in terms of planning and availability of funding. The initial trust fund for Bosnia reconstruction was an example of a funding stream dedicated to the reconstruction of one city. It arguably reflected the special attention the city received during the war and recognition of its place in the recovery of the nation as a whole.

Transition in Rwanda took a strikingly different course. There were lingering security concerns both internally and externally because of the presence of a large fairly intact military force in the refugee camps across the border. In addition, issues of reconciliation were of major concern and these played a major role in government decisions regarding its role and that of the humanitarian community in recovery.

This paper, therefore, reviews what is the more difficult, but ultimately more useful, way of looking at transition. It takes a disaggregated approach and insists on looking at the roles of the actors in as complete a manner as possible.

It is worth noting that local communities face frequently conflicting concerns during this period. Old loyalties or questions of local authority may discourage supporting those involved during the transition. Conversely, the resources newly available may be an incentive for the less scrupulous to take advantage of the many uncertainties facing the new authorities. In light of this, external actors must be aware of the extent to which their actions may cause unintended shifts in the balance of power on the local level. The goals of transition must be continually reexamined.

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

The NGO view of options and responsibilities during a transition phase is based on a ground-up approach. It reflects a close connection to local communities and typically is resource-constrained. This view of options necessarily is less ambitious. It has put NGO efforts in opposition to larger efforts that seem to NGOs mistimed or even inappropriate. An example would be focusing on building a major power grid in the absence of the technical and material support needed to sustain it. Depending on how the desired outcomes are presented,

NGOs, local and international, may, as a result, even be seen as impediments to large-scale reconstruction plans.

Independence of decision-making is central to NGOs and ideally is based on a determination of objective need gained through assessments. NGOs do not consider themselves “force multipliers,” as Colin Powell, perhaps innocently, once described them. Their participation is based on concerns that are generally independent of political and military objectives or definitions of success. This might not be consistent with a desired view of their role during the transition phase, but it should be understood as the reality underpinning their involvement.

THE MILITARY

The military, as part of the top-down apparatus, is not presently designed to function within the nature of transition in the 21st century. This fact underscores the necessity to look closely at the degree to which interweaving of the military and civilian presence is critical to a successful outcome during periods of transition. The Commanders Emergency Response Fund (CERF) in Iraq was intended to provide commanders with the capacity to respond to immediate needs in a rapid manner, but it has yet to be demonstrated as having had a positive overall effect on the process of transition. In part, the use of these funds was largely uninformed, as there were relatively few opportunities for local knowledge, either from NGOs or the community, to be involved in the decision-making process.

Yes, there always may be targets of opportunity, a fundamental assumption of the CERF funding, but the military may or may not have the capacity to determine what they are in either the short- or long-term sense. The presumption that this capacity is provided by the Civil Affairs component is largely dependent on their availability and training. What looks good on a table of organization might have little relevance in real terms.

This is when a critical aspect of the transition process comes into play, namely, ensuring that a mechanism exists to broaden the options for cooperation with other actors at all levels. One way to reflect on this is to point out that this is where the functional aspects of being a force multiplier come into play. NGOs can provide the required information if a process of consultation is developed in advance.

THE USE OF LANGUAGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF TRANSITION

The fact of the military being an objective-oriented structure has an impact on how transition is viewed. Other communities see the military approaching language in terms that may be described as primarily functional. This may establish a mind-set that precludes understanding the intent of others' concerns. The use of a phrase such as “to ensure results” may baffle civilians dealing with communities coming out of conflict, as it implies that there is an ability to actually do this. Also, defining the expectation for non-combat support roles of Army Civil Affairs (CA) as related to “meeting the commander's intent” seems a bit limiting in relation to longer-term or more informed considerations. What if the commander

is uninformed? From the point of view of the civilian world, therefore, a reference to CA activities indicates that the priorities governing their behavior are military priorities placed within a limited civilian context.

Another example of the use of language that obscures the roles of communities is the phrase, "Work with local NGOs in all phases of transition, as their expertise is essential to the success of your mission." The problem with this phrase is that it rests upon at least three assumptions, which are still to be verified:

1. That the realities of working with NGOs and international organizations are well understood and that present efforts embodied in new directives such as DOD 3000.5 will address any present difficulties.
2. That the political and public expectations associated with the allocation of resources are consistent with the realities of achieving this goal.
3. That communities working with the military involved with transition are clear on whether they see this as being in their best interest. The answer to this will have an impact on the behavior of NGOs

ACCOUNTABILITY AND PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS

During periods of transition, questions of accountability often defer to announcements of the availability of funding. It is as if once a sum is mentioned, the work is done. As we note elsewhere in this article, the expectations of the public place considerable demands on decision-makers. Actual accountability often gets deferred, or reports on it are little noticed. In addition, the voices of the presumed beneficiaries are often not heard when issues of accountability are raised.

There frequently is an abundance of flawed information provided and questionable assumptions made during transition. In Bosnia, an important element in the planning of the transition phase post-Dayton was the question of return. Strategies were developed to encourage the return of the Serb minority, partly through the provision of housing. Implicit in the decision to allocate resources (drawn from other programs) was the conclusion that there was a willingness to return. This proved to be unwarranted.

In Kosovo, the perceived need to provide housing before the winter became a point of competition among the various donors involved. In effect, organizations attempted to present themselves to a concerned public as the most responsive, and there was little acceptance of efforts to achieve shared standards. Individual government initiatives further complicated the situation, as contributions were made of complete housing units that had little or no relation to the circumstances of the communities where they ended up being placed.

We often see what passes for planning as more indicative of attempting to organize a preferred outcome. This tendency is reinforced with the absence of information gained by assessments of need.

HIDING BEHIND STRUCTURES

Institutional behavior is an important element in transition. Needs evaluations and resulting proposals may end up being a reflection of what institutions think they can do best. The public and donors expect institutions to perform, and the easiest way is to fall back on comfortable approaches and procedures. Defining reality through the filter of capacity to respond then gets translated into proposals to donors and eventually action. When, for example, a large corporation sees a need for a major construction effort, the timing of funding and support for it can overcome interest in other less conspicuous needs. Any large-scale activity will have consequences in terms of human and material resources in the area. This is especially true following severe conflict where local resources are already dramatically reduced.

NGO capacity is an important element in an analysis of transition in the 21st century. This capacity is, however, very vulnerable to security concerns. The experiences with transition to reconstruction following World War II did not include these issues and the role of the NGO community was not a factor. That is certainly not the case in today's world of failed or unstable states. At virtually all levels, security may be an impediment. This applies to information gathering, working on the ground, and recruiting of local hires. Expenditures for security have crippled budgets, which, typically, had not made sufficient allowance for this line item. For NGOs, an increasingly important alternative has been to establish a strong supportive relationship with local organizations. This has enabled them to operate in a more remote manner while still being in a position to monitor and support their programs. It has had the advantage of providing additional opportunities to devolve more responsibility to local managers, but it may also have served to reduce their influence on ongoing local discussions.

It is also worth noting that NGO roles during the transition state are certainly less clear than when responding to emergency humanitarian situations, where the humanitarian imperative to save lives is dominant. The inevitable political overtones of transition and reconstruction do impact on the number of organizations involved and the extent of their commitment.

HOW TO DETERMINE SUCCESS

What are the indices of success during transition? In some respects, they may be self-evident. As an example, perceptible movement towards a stable community speaks for itself. The question as it stands, however, is an incomplete one. Equally urgent is the establishment of procedures to ensure the flow of verifiable information to decision-makers and other concerned groups. Pointing to success in one geographical area may obscure the existence of fundamental problems nationwide. An information clearinghouse operating in a neutral manner is essential. UNOCHA information hubs provide valuable information and they need to be better utilized in gaining an overall picture of progress towards a successful transition.

Transition has its "spoilers." In the most dramatic sense, they may attempt to derail the entire process, as we see in Iraq and elsewhere. In a less ominous manner, they may simply

reflect local disagreement with an overall plan that does not seem to sufficiently capture local issues. By that understanding, even a local NGO may be a spoiler. In the first case, there are clear limits on response options. In the case of local concerns, a flexible approach is obviously desirable. This requires maintaining an awareness of local concerns and being seen as reacting to them.

THE WAY FORWARD

1. There is natural tendency for the transition phase to move in unrelated directions given the plethora of motives and resource allocations. Consideration should, therefore, be given to the establishment of interagency and cross-community working groups. These working groups should be organized on the headquarters and field level and, based on the concerns expressed in 2., below. The planning stage must also include, to the extent possible, the thinking of the stakeholders, and not just at the senior levels. Achieving this requires an integrated process bridging the gaps between organizations and elements within organizations. In theory, at least, I understand this to have been one of the objectives of the establishment of the State Department's coordination office.
2. It is essential that the specific objectives of transition be clearly related to realistic options. We know where we would like to end up, but often consider the end states in the abstract without giving full consideration to what is essential to sustain them or move them forward. This approach is usually generated by the need to make all-embracing generalizations on the state of affairs following the end of conflict. The problem is that this becomes the basis for funding decisions and the provision of information to the public.
3. Funding support must be related to objective possibilities and not be driven by political whims or well-intentioned impulsive decision-making. Creating large sources of available resources in the absence of manageable planning and controls has been demonstrated to generate long-term consequences.
4. The stakeholders of concern and the options for performance might change with each phase of a transition. An awareness of this is critical to maintaining support among the beneficiaries and supporters. If there is no belief that results are achievable, this needs to be reflected in subsequent behavior.
5. Training and other preparation must reflect the competencies and understandings required to deal with the multi-faceted requirements of transition.
6. The distribution of information on the state of transition is essential. It is equally essential that this information be seen as unbiased and factual. To that end, the development of a neutral and credible information site as part of the structure recommended in 1., above, involving the relevant actors on the ground, should be carefully considered. It is necessary to establish criteria for the accumulation and distribution of this information.