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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report from the United States Institute of Peace's Center of Innovation for Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding illustrates the importance of local ownership in peacebuilding and stabilization operations—not just in concept but in practice.

It does so by drawing on the author's personal experiences with post-conflict media reform over the past fifteen years in countries ranging from 1990s Bosnia and Herzegovina to present-day Afghanistan. It argues that the lack of practical local ownership in Afghanistan is a considerable factor in holding back progress there.

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Simon Haselock

Make It Theirs

The Imperative of Local Ownership in Communications and Media Initiatives

Summary

- International interventions—no matter the moral or national security considerations that inform them—are inevitably characterized by some as just a new form of colonialism, with the West trying to shape fragile and failing states in its own image.
- The question of the merits of such a characterization aside, perceptions affect outcomes. An examination of communications and media reform initiatives in five post-conflict countries illustrates important lessons about the general need in international interventions to move away from the paternalistic practice of “we know best” to a more nuanced approach of “you know best.”
- The most effective stabilization and reconstruction programs are those in which local professionals, civil society, and communities have participated and taken ownership. But as experience has shown, local ownership cannot be taken for granted. The international community must quickly establish effective partnerships with local actors in a project's entry phase.
- Achieving local ownership requires that planners and implementers have as full an understanding of the context, culture, and history of a society and situation as possible, as early as possible. Demand-driven development projects are the most likely to succeed, but they require an approach to communications that places as much emphasis on listening to the local population as on transmitting information to it.
- International missions need to act as “learning organizations” and maintain rolling research programs, public opinion polling, public consultations, media monitoring, local intelligence gathering, and analysis to understand the drivers of conflict, the word on “the street,” and the people's perceptions.
- Establishing the levels and extent of local capacity, knowing where to find it, and being confident about its authenticity is vital to meaningful, and not just optical, consultation.

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- Peacebuilding and counterinsurgency are about politics, which is in turn about persuasion and consensus. Because all politics is local, this means that two-way grassroots communications are crucial for success on either front.
- Communicating to the grass roots requires an understanding of how information is transmitted across a society and the way in which traditional networks are used. As a result, communicating in traditional tribal societies often requires unconventional approaches.
- The current international narrative on Afghanistan revolves around the timeline for military withdrawal and handover. The concept of Afghan ownership looms large on the agendas of politicians, diplomats, and soldiers alike as the clock starts ticking. But successfully transferring ownership is first about understanding culture and context—and that requires effective two-way communication.

Introduction

The NATO military intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina in late 1995 marked the beginning of a new post-Cold War era of international intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states. The Rwandan genocide and the specter of similar atrocities returning to Europe, spotlighted by twenty-four-hour rolling news, galvanized—or perhaps shamed—the international community into action. A new doctrine of humanitarian intervention evolved that is justified by the notion that there is a moral “responsibility to protect” populations from the excesses of war, oppression, and other disasters. Elsewhere in the Balkans in 1999, for example, the idea of moral responsibility was used to justify NATO’s bombing and subsequent invasion of Serbia/Kosovo. Following the attacks on September 11, 2001, and the declaration of the “war on terror,” older notions of the right to self-defense reinforced this interventionist zeal.

As a consequence of this new doctrine, the powerful nations of the world, primarily in the West, have intervened not only in Bosnia and Kosovo but also in Sierra Leone, Chad, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In fact, of the fifty-four UN peacekeeping missions since 1945, forty-one began after 1988, with fifteen still in place today.¹ But no matter the moral or national security arguments that are deployed in support of these interventions, there are those who inevitably characterize them as just a new form of colonialism, with the West trying to shape fragile and failing states in its own image. Although the focus of this report is not on the relative merits of intervention, moral or otherwise, it is clear that such perceptions do affect outcomes. As this report argues, international interventions need to move away from the paternalistic “we know best” approach of stabilization and reconstruction to a more nuanced approach of “you know best”—that is, of helping countries help themselves. In other words, this report argues for the importance of “local ownership.” However, it is necessary to stress that this report’s findings are not drawn from a specific course of research but rather from the author’s own practical experience with local post-conflict media reform in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa over the past fifteen years. As such, although this report focuses specifically on the intersection between international intervention and local media reform in post-conflict countries, its findings are meant to illustrate the importance of local ownership in stabilization and reconstruction efforts more generally.

Nation Building in Bosnia, 1997–2000

Not since the end of the Second World War had the international community had experience in nation building on the scale embarked on in Bosnia after the Dayton Agreement was signed. Even the wars of the collapsing Yugoslavia that coincided with the democratization

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of the Soviet Union and the old Warsaw Pact could not compare to the devastation and division that was Bosnia at the beginning of 1996, as evidenced in the state of the media itself. In June of that year, for example, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) described the war's effect on the media in Bosnia as having totally destroyed its previously integrated information system. In its place, three separate and mutually antagonistic systems had been created. There was no free flow of information, and the distribution and regulation of both the written press and broadcast programming was restricted along ethnic lines. Not a single one of the essential ingredients for a common media market existed. The Office of the High Representative (OHR) confronted the formidable challenge of breaking the political control of the Bosnian media, which had been carved up between the three hard-line sectarian parties that had prosecuted the war.

The OHR's "big idea" was essentially to create an information environment that allowed free and open debate and provided a mechanism for reconciliation and the conduct of free and fair elections. The intention was to develop a democratic Fourth Estate that would be independent of the government and party politics but that would hold them and the judiciary to account. Democratizing the media, it was hoped, would help to democratize Bosnia. How to achieve this, though, was new territory for everyone, despite the experience with media reform efforts in other parts of Eastern Europe.

The only previous experience of anything of the same ambition was in postwar Germany and Japan. The prevailing principle in the approach of that era was contained in a 1944 letter from President Franklin Roosevelt to Secretary of War Henry Stimson: "The German people as a whole must have it driven into them that the whole nation has been engaged in a lawless conspiracy against the decencies of modern civilisation." After Germany's capitulation, President Harry Truman's directive to the commander in chief of U.S. forces called for essential steps to be taken, including "eliminating Nazism and militarism, apprehending and punishing war criminals" and preparing "for an eventual reconstruction of German political life on a democratic basis."² Similarly, the United States' post-surrender policy for Japan included the requirement to "eliminate the influence of militarists and bring about the eventual establishment of peaceful and responsible government, conforming as closely as possible to the principles of democratic self-government."³ Media policy in both Germany and Japan supported these political aims by dismantling the previous state propaganda machines, developing public media systems, and training journalists in the Anglo-American school of liberal journalism. It emphasized freedom of expression and access to information on public matters, the strict separation of news from commentary, and the detailed reporting of the facts supported by standardized routines for designating sources.⁴ It was essentially a policy of imposition underpinned by the power of an occupying army and designed to achieve political outcomes.

While the OHR did not consciously examine and apply the post-World War II model, it adopted a similar "impositionist" frame of mind by looking at how Western liberal media systems were constructed and regulated and trying to replicate them. The Madrid Peace Implementation Council (PIC) declaration of 1998 articulated the media reform objective for Bosnia: "The establishment of a free, pluralistic, multi-ethnic and professional media throughout BiH [Bosnia and Herzegovina] with strong public and commercial sectors, promoting co-existence and reconciliation among ethnic communities." The three primary subobjectives were (1) "the removal of direct party political control from all media"; (2) the "establishment of a legal and regulatory framework to maintain media standards consistent with Western democratic best practice, ensure media freedom, and raise journalistic and broadcasting standards"; and (3) the "adoption and full implementation of Western public service standards at all public broadcasters." It was a forward-leaning and uncompromising approach, very similar to the one in postwar Germany and Japan, designed to reconstruct

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the Bosnian media in the image of a Euro-Atlantic democratic model. The OHR was also prepared to impose it through robust diplomacy and if necessary by military force, as was demonstrated in 1997 in the case of Srpska Radio Televizija Pale (or SRT Pale, named after the then capital town of the Bosnian Serb political entity Republika Srpska).

The example of SRT Pale is instructive, as it was controlled by the party of Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, which was seen as fanning discord and engendering opposition to the implementation of the Dayton Accords and NATO's mission. Indeed, there was an election looming, and SRT held a monopoly of the airwaves in Republika Srpska,⁵ giving no space to the political parties that opposed Karadzic. It therefore posed an obstacle to free and fair elections. Inevitably, as the hard-liners saw their monopoly being eroded, they tried to challenge the process of reform by reacting with a visceral propaganda campaign against the international community and NATO in particular. The international community considered that this challenge should be met robustly, because it threatened the credibility of the international administration in Bosnia and the emergence of a moderate Serb body politic. The OHR persuaded NATO to take action, and NATO responded by seizing the transmission towers that propagated SRT Pale's signal. NATO and the OHR then reversed the polarity of the transmission system, allowing the broadcasting hub to be controlled from Banja Luka, which was the center of moderate Serb politics. Whether the subsequent collapse in the power of Karadzic's party and the emergence of less extreme Serb politicians was due to this action has been the source of considerable debate ever since.⁶

In parallel with its activities designed to transform the existing nationalist state and entity TV stations, the OHR established a new cross-entity public broadcasting service that became known as the Open Broadcast Network (OBN). The mission statement of the network was "to provide Bosnia and Herzegovina (with a locally run but national and cross-entity TV network . . . and [to provide] the viewers with programming they can trust, whether locally produced or acquired from other sources." From the beginning, the enterprise was criticized for being dominated by international administrators and consultants. The OBN board, for example, included no local representation, because the OHR and the international community more generally saw it as the trustee of international funding and best practice and not as an active board of directors. This gave rise to the perception that the international experts entrusted with the formative research were not interested in the opinions of local professionals, while the experts, for their part, had little confidence in the capacity of locals to work across ethnic boundaries.⁷ After all, the media had been instrumental in fanning the fire that led to the war and had been traumatized dramatically by it. Further, the OHR was not sure which local experts to trust. Indeed, much of the local dissatisfaction came from those who had their own interests in maintaining the political status quo or who felt the project would divert international funding from other media enterprises.

Nevertheless, the OBN defied skeptics and by late 1998 was being described by the International Crisis Group (ICG) as "having evolved into a much watched highly influential medium,"⁸ covering over 80 percent of the territory of Bosnia.⁹ Despite having been regarded as a white elephant, it is now operating as a commercially funded privately owned network. However, with the benefit of hindsight, this result might have been achieved more rapidly and with less acrimony had the international officials charged with delivery, of which this author was one, taken more time to consult more broadly with local professionals and representatives of civil society before launching a plan driven more by political deadlines (the elections) than an awareness of available local capacity.

Although the OHR media reform policy has been criticized by some freedom-of-expression advocates and local Bosnian journalists as being high-handed and having been imposed with little consultation, it should be stressed that it was designed for the specific purpose of ameliorating the effect of hard-line sectarian politics in the immediate aftermath

of a vicious ethnic war. Other than the experience in postwar Germany and Japan, the policy had no clear template to follow and was thus not based on the more altruistic approach of media development that has emerged since. As a result, local ownership, although recognized as desirable, was never the first priority of the reform effort.

Addressing Hate Speech in Kosovo, 2000–2001

The NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was initiated with the Bosnian experience still very much at the forefront of the international community's thinking. The predominant view was that, before 1995, the international community's response to the war in Bosnia had been weak and inadequate and that this had permitted atrocities like Srebrenica to occur.¹⁰ In short, the mandate of the UN mission had not been sufficient to the task and the international community in general had been indecisive and feeble until NATO intervened. Not wanting a repeat of Bosnia, NATO forced a Serbian military withdrawal and the international community, through UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1244, established and empowered the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). Chapter VII of the UN Charter provided UNMIK with the legal clout to enforce UNSCR 1244 and to use military force if necessary, with NATO providing the muscle. This meant that both the head of UNMIK and the special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) possessed significant power and the means to use it.

At the time, one of the main concerns of the international community in Kosovo was the threat of Kosovar Albanian reprisals against the Kosovo Serb population. The United Nations and NATO clearly could not be seen as having intervened to protect one segment of the population, the majority Albanians, only to have them turn on the other, the minority Serbs. Much of this concern focused initially around hate speech in the media, the debilitating effects of which had already been witnessed in both the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.¹¹ As Daan Everts, the deputy SRSG for democratization, stated in February 2000, "We cannot tolerate hate speech anywhere in society—whether it is on the radio, in the classroom, in a newspaper, or at a political rally."¹²

In May 2000, a Serb UNMIK employee, Petar Topoljski, was found stabbed and strangled to death after he had been accused by a local Albanian newspaper, *Dita* (Day), of being a war criminal and of having committed crimes against Albanians. The article had included a photograph of him and given details about his home address and workplace. Shortly after his body was discovered, the editor of the newspaper published an open letter to the SRSG saying that he would continue to publish the names and addresses of those who had been "involved against Albanians." Using his formidable executive authority, SRSG Bernard Kouchner ordered the newspaper on June 3, 2000, to close its offices for eight days on the grounds that it and its editor had "violated the spirit and letter of Security Council Resolution 1244."¹³ Catching UNMIK slightly off guard, the media community in Kosovo reacted dramatically and expressed vehement opposition to the decision. Veton Surroi, the editor of the main independent daily, *Koha Ditore*, offered to publish *Dita's* editorial pages in his newspaper until its offices were reopened. *Koha Ditore* also carried a headline on June 4 that reflected the sympathy of other Albanian journalists: "*Dita* is closed by decree, not through normal procedure." Hacif Muliqui, head of the Kosovo Journalists' Association, accused SRSG Kouchner of having broken the law himself by halting the publication of the newspaper without a court hearing. The association described the closure of *Dita* as an arbitrary act that endangered press freedom, and it asked the United Nations to rethink the decision, as it could set a dangerous precedent for local media.¹⁴ At the time the article was published, *Dita* reportedly had a daily circulation of around five hundred copies. When UNMIK's ban was lifted, sales apparently more than doubled.

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The problem with the SRSG's decision in the Topoljski case was not so much about the rights and wrongs of the decision itself but the way in which the decision was taken. No one disputed the power and authority of UNMIK and the SRSG. What was in dispute was the seemingly arbitrary manner in which that power had been used. In other words, it was not about the power itself, but the legitimacy of its use. A normative principle for the regulation of any industry, if it is to be effective, is the consent and cooperation of those who are going to be affected by it. Fundamental to this is wide consultation and the application of a system of due process that everyone recognizes and understands. Prior to the SRSG's decision, there had been no consultation with the profession on the regulation of hate speech and little public debate about the responsibilities that accompany the right to freedom of expression. The decision was seen as an outside imposition in which local professionals had no part. There was therefore no local ownership of the decision itself or the process that had led to it.

It was against this background, and in the immediate aftermath of the UN action against *Dita*, that this author was appointed temporary media commissioner (TMC) in Kosovo. It was clear straight away that there was a serious potential hate speech and incitement problem in the Kosovo media. However, to address it would require the agreement and cooperation of the media profession, the understanding of the audience and readership, and the endorsement of independent international experts and expert bodies. A system was needed that was owned, and therefore legitimized, by both the public and the profession. What was required was wide consultation, and the *Dita* newspaper case provided the opportunity and the frame for such consultation. The resultant discussions showed the extent to which Kosovars viewed the SRSG's decision as having been imposed from outside and arbitrary. Those who were consulted understood why hate speech and incitement were so poisonous to the rehabilitation of Kosovar society in the aftermath of war, but they felt that they should be included in the formulation of the mechanisms that would regulate it. The consultations that took place included international experts and practitioners so that any system proposed to the Kosovars would be seen as consistent with international standards and best practice.

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The system that emerged was based on the pervasive nature of human rights law as laid down in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. Its legitimacy was underpinned by the understanding and acceptance by the media profession and general public that the right to freedom of expression brought with it certain duties and responsibilities. This consensus enabled the application of specific UNMIK regulations and codes of conduct that were produced in partnership with the profession. The regulations and codes were administered by an UNMIK-appointed regulator, the TMC, and adjudicated by a hearings board with an automatic right of appeal. The hearings and appeals boards included local Kosovar media professionals and lawyers. The legitimacy of the system was further enhanced when the media appeals board (MAB) examined and ruled on the *Dita* case. The MAB found that, although *Dita's* editor had acted irresponsibly and could have been subject to prosecution, the SRSG had acted without the due process required by international conventions, and the decision was rendered null and void. Because the system had been developed transparently and in consultation with local actors, it was seen to be demonstrably independent.¹⁵

The consequence of this improved legitimacy was that all future decisions of the TMC that were upheld by the MAB were broadly accepted, and, in the few cases where financial sanctions were applied, penalties were paid in full. Furthermore, the incidents of hate speech and incitement decreased significantly, and most of the cases that did occur were resolved by negotiation and agreement before they reached the formal-hearings stage. There was also a clear lesson to be learned about local ownership of local problems and the necessity for local buy-in for their effective resolution.

Letting Go in Kosovo, 2001–2003

In mid-2001, this author joined UNMIK as director of the Department of Public Information (DPI). As already discussed, UNMIK in effect served as the government of Kosovo. It was interim only in the fact that the international community wanted to delay any form of sovereign government until the sovereign status of what was still formally a province of Serbia had been resolved. Nevertheless, UNMIK was mandated to establish and develop autonomous provisional institutions of self-government (PISG) on the basis of free and fair elections. The focus of UNMIK's effort at the time was thus the development and establishment of the constitutional framework that would establish the structure of the PISG and the basis for elections to a multiethnic Kosovo Assembly. UNMIK saw its role during this phase as stewarding Kosovo through the process of establishing these provisional institutions and building the local capacity necessary to make them effective. The Kosovars, on the other hand, were impatient for more power more quickly than the international community was prepared to devolve to them. There was therefore a natural tension between the UNMIK administration and the PISG.

DPI set out to establish popular consent through public information and education, dialogue, and participation—and to build the legitimacy of the Kosovar provisional institutions rather than the profile and popularity of UNMIK. Effective local institutions that were seen to be able to deliver the key benefits of peace to all elements of the population were central to the mission's endgame. Not everyone in the United Nations' public information establishment at the time saw the DPI's role the same way, as the traditional approach seemed to be much more about selling the United Nations and its image. Again, this was a question of creating a sense of local ownership that would result in the Kosovars taking possession of all their problems, including the ones that they would rather leave to the international community, such as minority rights, for fear of making their politicians unpopular. This was not a popularity contest between UNMIK and Kosovo's politicians, as it was perceived by some, but rather an attempt to build a partnership that would result in the embedding of local institutions.

To do this, DPI instituted a series of specific participatory information campaigns on what were considered to be the key issues: the constitutional framework, police and justice, community relations, and the new economy. On the constitutional framework, DPI broke a complex legal document down into a series of simple explanations, diagrams, and pictures. These were then combined into a booklet that was distributed to every household in Kosovo as the basis for an informed interactive public discussion through phone-in TV and radio programs and live audience debates. On the police and justice, DPI recognized the importance of localizing the police force, building public trust, and bringing them closer to the population. It embarked on this through a weekly television program similar to *America's Most Wanted* in the United States and *Crime Watch* in the United Kingdom called *Dosier Krimin* (Crime Files). However, the Kosovo program was fronted entirely by Kosovar police officers and was an attempt to get people to understand that they had a civic responsibility to work with their police and not against them. This program, which required the audience to interact with the presenters, became Kosovo's most popular TV show. On community relations, DPI established Community Information Centers in the minority areas that were staffed by locals and designed not just to answer the population's questions but to find out what those questions were. DPI also produced a weekly communities magazine, *Danas i Sutra* (Today and Tomorrow), both in print and as a TV program on Kosovo's main channel. These initiatives reflected the issues and topics that DPI was hearing on the grassroots level. On the economy, DPI took a similar approach with a weekly TV program backed up by a traveling road show designed to provide information on how local business can work. The significance

of this approach was that the campaigns were designed to recognize that communications is a two-way process and that public trust is gained as much by listening as by talking.

As already noted, a peacebuilding mission's endgame is to hand over all of its responsibilities to a capable partner. It has therefore succeeded only when it has made itself superfluous. As a yardstick to measure progress toward this goal in Kosovo, the SRS, Michael Steiner, developed a set of standards or benchmarks. These benchmarks covered the basic requirements for any functional democratic society: democratic institutions, the rule of law, a viable market-based economy, property rights, multiethnicity and returns, and freedom of movement. The point of writing them all down in a list and publicizing them was to ensure that all relevant actors—the international community, UNMIK, and Kosovo's institutions and civil society—were all singing from the same song sheet. On the international side, it would make it easier to identify both achievements and problems. Most important, though, on the Kosovo side, standards helped Kosovo's citizens understand and own the challenges that were confronting them. Again, a major public awareness campaign was constructed around the benchmarks, which became known through the slogan "Standards before Status."

The final challenge to this process, however, was an unexpected one. For many international civil servants, conferring ownership to the local population means losing ownership themselves. On an individual level, it implies switching from doing everything yourself to mentoring and advising, and this can be a difficult transition. In general terms, mission staff will often have spent considerable time and effort in difficult circumstances working and developing systems that they are proud and in control of. Handing this responsibility and expertise over to someone who might be considered less prepared and qualified is often a risk that some are reluctant to take, but it is essential if international missions are to be successful. It means that internal education and communications campaigns are as important as public ones if international officials are to learn what Michael Steiner referred to in Kosovo as the "art of letting go."

Internal education and communications campaigns are as important as public ones if international officials are to learn . . . the "art of letting go."

Encouraging Independent Media in Iraq, 2003–2006

On leaving UNMIK, this author was already working with an Internews project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to develop a framework for creating and encouraging a free and independent media in Iraq. This process started with a five-day working group in Cairo in the spring of 2003 that was designed to produce a draft background document and model law that could be presented at a wider conference in Athens in June of that year. While the drafting team in Cairo included two Iraqi expat journalists, the aim of the Athens conference was to work through the draft and produce a final document that was the result of a thorough consultation with as wide a group of experts and stakeholders as possible. This group included Arab journalists associations, government officials, freedom of expression advocacy groups, and expat Iraqis. However, significantly, it was difficult to include indigenous Iraqi journalists or potential Iraqi government officials, both because of security concerns and because they were worried about being regarded as collaborators by their peers back in Iraq.¹⁶ This later turned out to be a major disadvantage in the competition for legitimacy and local ownership.

The document that emerged from the conference became known as the Athens Framework and formed the basis of the author's work as the head of the Media Development Advisory Team in the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Baghdad. It was based on four main areas of work:

- the overall legal framework;
- independent regulatory structures for broadcast and print media;

- public-service broadcasting; and
- professionalization, training, and public education and awareness.

In early July, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office dispatched this author to present the framework to ambassador Paul Bremer, the U.S. administrator in Iraq and head of the CPA. Although Bremer bought into the strategy and endorsed the author's appointment to his team, pressures from officials within his inner circle produced tensions between ideology and experience, complicating the framework's implementation. Essentially, three conflicting approaches to media development in Iraq presented themselves. The first was the idea of "no regulation." This "let-a-thousand-flowers-bloom" approach came from some of Bremer's close advisers and was based on an ideological notion of *laissez-faire*. The second was driven by the security concerns of the military and represented an argument for arbitrary powers similar to those initially used by UNMIK in the *Dita* case; controversially, this concern had already represented itself in a CPA anti-incitement order, CPA Order 14, that had been enacted prior to the arrival of the Media Development Advisory Team (MDAT) and that meant that the administrator could close down media outlets by fiat and without due process. The last approach represented a third and middle way and was the one on which the Athens Framework was founded. Delivering this framework, however, against the background of the competing agendas that characterized the CPA, proved to be more challenging than was first thought. At no time was this more apparent than when this author visited the Pentagon to discuss the framework with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's aide, Larry Di Rita, who said, "Forget how you did it in the Balkans, the Pentagon is in charge, and they intend to do things their own way."

There has been a deluge of critical analysis about what went right and wrong in Iraq after 2003, but the U.S. administration of the time seemed to have learned little from the experiences of the Balkans, where the approach to nation building had migrated from imposition to consultation and local ownership. The policy was more akin to that of post-World War II, with the Baathists playing the role of the Nazi Party or the Japanese militarists. Although the Iraqi Governing Council was established to confer a degree of legitimacy on the CPA, it consisted primarily of expatriates, most of whom had little credibility with the indigenous population. The decision to transfer authority from the CPA to an Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) in June 2004 appeared to have been done in haste for optical purposes rather than as a substantive attempt at indigenous self-government. Ayad Allawi and the IIG were perceived as a surrogate for the international community and specifically the United States. The *New York Times*, for example, reported that Lakhdar Brahimi, the United Nations' special envoy to Iraq, endorsed Allawi only as a result of pressure from U.S. officials.¹⁷ In response to a question about the role of the United States in Allawi's appointment, Brahimi reportedly replied: "I sometimes say, I'm sure he doesn't mind me saying that, Bremer is the dictator of Iraq. He has the money. He has the signature. Nothing happens without his agreement in this country."¹⁸

Notwithstanding the problems of the CPA and the IIG, there were also practical difficulties that made consultation with professional bodies and local actors problematic. Many nongovernmental organizations (NGO), for example, found the security conditions in Iraq impossible to cope with. Other international NGOs refused to become involved because of their disagreement with the invasion in the first place or because they were not prepared to work with the Pentagon, preferring to have the State Department or USAID as partners. Indeed, the very NGO that had been contracted by USAID to carry out the public education and awareness campaign that was supposed to have accompanied the technical implementation of the framework considered the situation in Baghdad to be too dangerous to perform its duties. This obstacle was highly significant as it meant that although the MDAT was eventually able to institute the most liberal media framework and regulatory regime in the Middle East, few people understood it or how to use it.

Although the MDAT was eventually able to institute the most liberal media framework and regulatory regime in the Middle East, few people understood it or how to use it.

A consequence of this lack of public understanding was that, after the handover to Ayad Allawi's IIG, there was a gradual progression toward a familiar assertion of authoritarian control of the media by government. Soon after taking power, Allawi appointed his friend Ibrahim Al-Janabi as his media adviser. Al-Janabi then created a government-controlled Higher Media Commission that, de facto, compromised the principles of independence and due process that underpinned the new regulatory and public-service broadcasting structures established under the CPA. This approach was symptomatic of the attitude expressed to this author during a workshop in Baghdad with a group of Iraqi civil society representatives and which further demonstrated the absolute requirement to accompany technical reform with a public advocacy campaign. In response to an explanation about the practicalities of independent media regulation, one delegate said that while he fully supported the idea of a media regulatory body independent of government, he wondered who was going to control it.

Nevertheless, as many Iraq commentators have often said, there was a window of opportunity in the summer of 2003, before the situation had deteriorated to the extent that CPA officials and advisers could no longer move outside the Green Zone. During this period, this author was able to travel to the Khadamiya Mosque in Baghdad before Friday prayers and discuss freedom of expression with an assembly of Shi'a clerics. These discussions were disarmingly open and enlightened, and the participants were extremely pleased to be consulted about a system that could be adapted to their culture and practice without compromising best practices. If there had been more consultation and discussions of this nature across the country, many of the media excesses and excessive reactions to them could have been prevented.

Encouraging Local Ownership of the Darfur Peace Process, 2006–2008

The impassioned entreaty of a tribal leader in South Darfur in 2008, who said that the international community should “forget the government and the [rebel] movements as it was time that [their] voices were heard,” goes to the heart of the problem facing peacemakers in Darfur. His comment simply meant that the majority of those most affected by the conflict felt no ownership of the peace process aimed at ending it.

Marrack Goulding, the former head of Peacekeeping and Political Affairs at the United Nations, wrote that most governments and intergovernmental organizations have traditionally viewed peacemaking as a quintessentially governmental activity.¹⁹ As a consequence, the prevalent strategy for ending civil wars has been to bring the combatants, usually the government and representatives of the armed insurgents, to a neutral venue to negotiate behind closed doors with the assistance of an international mediator or envoy. While this approach has worked in many places, it rarely provides an opportunity for those who have not taken up arms, the majority, to have a voice in shaping or endorsing the agreements that result and thereby ensure the agreements' sustainability.²⁰ The efforts to bring peace to Darfur so far have been no exception to this tradition.

This author first found himself in Sudan at the end of July 2006 after leaving Iraq, when the company he cofounded, Albany Associates, was asked by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to assist the African Union (AU) in devising and implementing a strategy for explaining the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) to ordinary Darfurians. The DPA, which had been signed in Abuja the previous May, was the result of seven rounds of talks under the auspices of an AU mediation team supported by the United Nations, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other international partners. While it was generally considered, with

some notable exceptions, to have been a good text covering the main causes of the conflict as perceived internationally, it was signed only by two of the four principal parties. The DPA had been driven by deadline diplomacy with little to no public consultation, and, as a consequence, the parties had little embedded commitment to it. It also exacerbated existing fault lines between the parties, which resulted in new fighting between those who signed and those who did not and in the splintering of the rebel movements into an alphabet soup of competing armed factions. As Laurie Nathan of the Centre for Conflict Resolution, who was in Abuja at the time, put it, "Deadline diplomacy inhibited effective mediation, resulted in a peace agreement that did not bring peace and sowed divisions that exacerbated the conflict."²¹

By June 2006, the DPA was already in trouble, with the UN secretary-general's representative in Sudan arguing that there was a risk that it would collapse, not least because it had no resonance with the people of Darfur themselves.²² This clearly meant that the task of helping the African Union to explain the agreement to Darfur's population was going to be a formidable undertaking, so much so that by the end of the year those involved had to think again about whether it was a realistic proposition at all. What had become clear was that the process by which the agreement had been prepared and concluded was at least as important to its legitimacy as the content of the agreement itself. The DPA had been delivered by a deadline, but in so doing, the complexities of the conflict had been underestimated and the imperative of ownership neglected.²³ What was needed was a communications strategy that addressed these shortcomings and supported the peace process as a whole. Civil society needed to be empowered and voice needed to be given to those without the guns.

Despite the prevailing paradigm that peacemaking is the preserve of governments, there are many examples where civil society and grassroots public participation has been the key to building successful and sustainable peace processes. In the African context alone, there are a number of examples, most notably in postapartheid South Africa, where an explosion of political violence was avoided in part because of the process of open dialogue that had helped bring about democracy and a culture of peaceful negotiation and coexistence. Public participation through mass organization, public debate, and direct participation at local and regional levels created a sense of legitimacy and public ownership of the process, which fostered a culture of cooperation and compromise.²⁴ The effort to end persistent violent conflict in northern Mali in the mid-1990s also provides another good example. As in Darfur, negotiated agreements between government representatives and the armed factions were unable to bring the conflict to a conclusion, and in fact exacerbated it. It was only when thousands of people engaged directly in intercommunity peacemaking that the path to national reconciliation opened. The involvement of those most affected by the conflict in open and inclusive dialogue was able to achieve what the official political negotiations could not.²⁵ Similarly, with regard to the United Kingdom's experience in Northern Ireland, only with active civil society engagement and the realization by the government that communities and community groups, far from being a distraction to peacemaking, were in fact central to its success, could light be seen at the end of the tunnel.²⁶ These grassroots approaches to mobilizing voices, understanding the issues, and developing a popular constituency of interest is the context that formed the basis of a research project in Darfur designed to replicate some of the success witnessed in other parts of Africa and the world.

In early 2007, an ever-increasing and disparate mixture of experts, exiles, and rebel movements claimed to speak with authority on behalf of the people of Darfur. But it was clear that there was very little empirical evidence to support what they were saying, either positively or negatively. Very few seemed to be asking ordinary folk for their opinion; and, as a consequence, it was apparent that these same individuals felt excluded from the

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process, as they were unable to recognize their own voice in the discourse. Equally clear to the African Union and the UN-AU Joint Mediation Support Team (JMST) was the lack of adequate and accurate data to support the mediation effort itself; most of the information that was available was old, anecdotal, or extracted from intermittent whirlwind official visits. What was needed was genuine, academically rigorous, and reliable research that could be used to inform and shape the overall political process from the bottom up; enable the negotiators to understand the context of the conflict and the needs of those affected by it; assist in building ownership and inclusiveness by representing individuals' views and experiences in a way that they could recognize; challenge the assumptions of all of the stakeholders to prevent them from hijacking the process; and, finally, measure the level of public understanding and awareness of the peace process as a whole. The question, however, was, how could this be done?

It was clear from the outset that to be seen as credible, the research had to be genuinely independent. It would have to be as transparent as conditions on the ground would allow, and its data and reports should not be secret and proprietary but rather available to the public and disseminated as widely as possible, much like the Initiative 92 reports that nudged the peace process forward in Northern Ireland. Public presentation would be vital so that people could feel that they were beginning to participate in a process where their views were being accurately reflected. The research also needed to be ambitious in scale if it was to generate the momentum necessary to have any impact.

But traditional polling techniques were unlikely to be reliable in the war-torn environment of Darfur, where tribal suspicion, the threat of intimidation, and a fear of strangers asking questions are the norms. Standard survey questionnaires and conventional random sampling are of questionable use in such circumstances, so a new and creative research framework that could be trusted and tailored to the specific social dynamics of the region needed to be developed. As a consequence of a series of workshops with Sudanese academics and international polling experts, a research team from the Annenberg School for Communication at the Center for Global Communications Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and the Stanhope Centre for Communications Policy Research in London produced a framework. At the same time, the team also came up with a methodology for using the resulting research to support the inclusive grassroots diplomacy that was required to break the intransigence of the parties to the conflict and to help kick-start a sustainable peace process owned by all sections of the population in Darfur.²⁷

This methodology was based on the experience that had earlier been gained in Darfur in trying to explain the DPA, when a broad grassroots outreach network around the brand name Afia Darfur (Health to Darfur) had been built. Afia Darfur was established as a positive brand through a series of large cultural festivals that were organized and run in the three Darfur state capitals as well as through a free newspaper that was produced by Darfurians for Darfurians. The week-long festivals were fronted by one of Sudan's foremost folk groups and consisted of a range of activities in both 2006 and 2007. These activities included street theater, participatory workshops, sports competitions, poetry readings, and musical concerts, all delivering the messages of reconciliation and participation in the peace process. The newspaper was designed to appeal to those who could not read and thus emphasized the use of color and pictures. The idea was to encourage those who could not read to sit with those who could so that they could then spontaneously debate the stories. It was a genuine attempt at producing an independent news source on local affairs, and a hundred thousand copies of the paper were distributed across Darfur twice a month. To communicate with the nomadic tribes, the team helped a local NGO, Governance Bureau, to arrange a horse festival where nomads could come to race their horses and then sit down and eat together in tents in the evening and debate the issues of the day. These techniques all proved highly effective and popular.

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At the time of writing, the second round of field research is in progress in Darfur, and so it would be premature to talk about the results and their impact on public discourse about making peace. It is clear, however, that the attempts to produce an inclusive and lasting agreement between the myriad self-proclaimed and recalcitrant rebel movements and the government of Sudan continue to fail, and that they will continue to do so until ordinary Sudanese at the grass roots feel that they are included and are able to take some ownership of the process. Crucially, for this to happen they must first be listened to and feel that their views are being heard.

Building Relationships in Afghanistan—Today

General Sir Rupert Smith asserts in his book *The Utility of Force* that there has been a shift in why and how wars are fought. “The old paradigm,” he says, “was that of interstate industrial war. The new one is the paradigm of war amongst the people.”²⁸ Nowhere is this more apparent than in Afghanistan, where the international community, as represented by both NATO and the United Nations, is engaged in a counterinsurgency “among the people” of that country. Most experts would agree that countering insurgency is essentially about politics and, as House Speaker Tip O’Neill once famously said, “All politics is local.” So why is it that—nearly nine years after the ousting of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the deployment of over 140,000 coalition troops, the delivery of billions of dollars of aid, and the assembly of countless conferences, declarations, and strategic reviews—the international community is still struggling to win over ordinary Afghans?²⁹

There is certainly no shortage of analysis on this subject, though most would agree that the civil and political aspects of the campaign are paramount and, as the Obama administration has done, call for a civilian lead. After all, this approach to counterinsurgency is not new. Indeed, Sir Gerald Templer, the British high commissioner and director of operations in Malaya, first coined this now well-worn phrase in the 1950s when discussing the “battle for hearts and minds” in the British fight against the communist insurgency in Malaya, while Robert Thompson’s famous five principles for success in counterinsurgency operations were drawn from his experience as permanent secretary for defense in Templer’s administration in Malaya. His fourth principle states that “the government must give priority to defeating the political subversion not the guerrillas.” He regarded that the key to this was establishing the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the general population.³⁰ Templer himself in early 1952 wrote to a colleague that “the shooting side of the business is only 25 percent of the trouble and the other 75 percent lies in getting the people of this country [Malaya] behind us.” Thus he identified the hearts and minds of the population as the center of gravity for success.

President Barack Obama’s Afghanistan strategy comprehends this approach, identifying as one of its goals a specific “civilian strategy” and acknowledging that the people of Afghanistan, not the insurgents, need to be at the center of the plan to defeat the Taliban. There is little disagreement that the legitimacy of the Afghan government and its ability to improve the social and economic conditions of the Afghan population is vital. Yet the Taliban continue to consolidate their power in large areas of the country at the expense of a weak and corrupt central government. Concurrently, domestic tensions between ethnic factions threaten communal violence, which compounds instability in the rest of Afghanistan and further undermines the legitimacy of the government in Kabul.³¹ In October 2006, a local Taliban commander in northern Helmand told BBC journalist David Loyn that the failure of the international community to improve the lives of ordinary Afghans was the reason the Taliban were making a comeback.³² If he asked the same question now, he would probably get the same answer.

So why is it that, despite such a clear consensus on the overall strategy and what needs to be done, the situation remains as it is? In short, there is a mismatch between aspiration and implementation in Afghanistan. As argued earlier, counterinsurgency is fundamentally about politics, and politics is about persuasion, influence, consensus, and agreement. But it is also about understanding constituencies and, given the assertion that all politics is local, the key constituency is always the grass roots. It is possible that this is where the international community has gone wrong in Afghanistan, with participating countries invariably focused on their own domestic audiences and not on the villages and hamlets where the troops are deployed.

This author's involvement in Afghanistan started in late 2007 when Albany Associates was asked by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to assist in the development of a communications strategy that would support the aims and objectives of the Afghanistan Compact, which sets out common goals for the future of Afghanistan in terms of security, governance, and economic and social development.³³ The strategy was to be delivered through the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB), which represents a partnership between the Afghan government, UNAMA, and participating nations and international organizations. The JCMB's job was and is to improve the effectiveness of international assistance through better coordination and to monitor the progress of the compact. The main implementing tool for this was intended to be the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS), which at the time was being developed by a team of Afghan government officials.

While the officials on the Afghan side were keen to have technical assistance in writing a plan, they were much less keen about having embedded internationals to work on implementing it—this, despite not having the capacity in terms of numbers and expertise to do much themselves. Their experience with a procession of international consultants had not been positive, and they were sensitive to being told what to do. They wanted to be helped, not patronized, and they wanted the human resources budget that the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) had for consultants to be used to recruit Afghans. The reality is that they were probably overly sensitive and suspicious, but it underlines the notion of ownership from the perspective of the beneficiary. The approach of least resistance is always partnership rather than leadership. The point being that building relationships is fundamental to the concept of local ownership in international assistance. If the attitude held by the ANDS officials was a reflection of a widely held mind-set, it is no wonder that there was a problem convincing grassroots Afghans of what the international community and the Afghan government were trying to achieve together. Just as in the corporate world, winning the trust and confidence of your client is the essential precursor for progress and should be planned for and practiced as part of the preparation phase of any project. The key to this is to approach the relationship from the outset as a partnership, and successful partnerships require partners to listen to and not just talk at one another.

Albany Associates has subsequently returned to Afghanistan on a number of occasions to assist in devising the ANDS communications strategy. The most recent visit was in 2009, when it was asked by UNAMA to come up with an approach to communicating development that was capable of being implemented. The aim was to develop a practical work plan that would establish a new narrative that focused on the civilian rather than military effort, concentrating on social and economic issues consistent with the new NATO/U.S. strategic emphasis. The plan that was conceived took account of existing programs, reinforcing those that worked and identifying where new effort was required. It was based on a series of interlocking initiatives, some to be carried out directly by the Afghan government and others to be carried out indirectly through local partners. The aim was for the sum of these activities to build a critical mass of public confidence that would progressively undermine

the insurgency. It was a plan designed specifically around local ownership and the empowerment of an Afghan voice and focused on demand-driven projects developed on the basis of grassroots consultations.³⁴

In carrying out the initial audit of the communications projects that were already in place, Albany Associates noted that, although there were some very impressive individual programs, there was a surprising lack of grassroots initiatives of the scale necessary to have any real impact. The audit further revealed that the international community's strategic communications focus was largely external rather than internal and that the international community was still primarily concerned about gaining the support of its own domestic populations rather than about seriously attempting to win over the hearts and minds of the Afghans. In summary, the audit identified five key problems with existing communications projects in Afghanistan:

- **Wrong message**—most messaging is about the military campaign and the war against the Taliban rather than about civilian and socioeconomic problems and solutions. That is, messages need to be driven by local demand and needs.
- **Wrong voice**—the predominant voices on Afghanistan are foreign; they need to be Afghan.
- **Wrong audience**—messages are principally aimed at the public in donor countries rather than at the Afghan audience(s).
- **Fragmented approach**—although there are many initiatives in place, some effective and some not, they suffer from a lack of core vision, minimal coordination, and a tendency to “stovepipe” individual programs in the areas where individual donor nations are deployed.
- **Lack of capacity**—neither the Afghan government nor UNAMA has sufficient capacity in personnel, expertise, or resources to implement and coordinate a plan of the scope and scale necessary to counter the community-based campaigns of the Taliban.

Conclusions

As this report attempts to demonstrate, the most effective programs of reform, transformation, and advocacy are generally those in which local professionals, civil society, and communities have participated and taken ownership. But what past experience has also shown is that local participation and ownership is not a given. In the entry phase of a project, thought must be put into creating effective partnerships between the local actors and stakeholders and international officials and experts as quickly as possible. This partnership must be the essential operational objective of any project, and it needs to be thought through and planned for as the critical part of the methodology of delivery. The impact of projects can be sustained after the international assistance is over only if they are wholly owned by the people, professions, and communities that they were designed to help. This is the essence of the “art of letting go.”

Achieving local ownership requires planners and implementers to have as full an understanding of the context, culture, and history of a society and situation as possible, as early as possible. Research is a much vaunted but neglected process, and this author has often been staggered by the lack of cultural, historical, and situational awareness of many international planners and officials, even of the information that is available through open and readily available sources. It is impossible to be effective in any project without an understanding of the society in which the project is grounded and of who the people are and where they come from. Demand-driven development projects are by far the most likely to succeed and require an approach to communications that places as much emphasis on listening to the population as on transmitting information. Peacebuilding does not just mean

Although there were some very impressive individual programs, there was a surprising lack of grassroots initiatives of the scale necessary to have any real impact.

Missions need to maintain rolling research programs, public opinion polling, public consultations, and media monitoring and analysis in order to understand the drivers of conflict and change.

Communicating at the grass roots also requires an understanding of how the information ecology of a society functions.

creating clones of Western European societies. For projects to be sustainable, international best practice needs to be adjusted to suit local traditions and culture, provided those traditions are consistent with international human rights standards.

It may seem banal, but international missions need to be “learning organizations.” To be effective, missions must study the environment, its political rivalries and alliances, how people make a living, and the stories they tell one another. Missions need to maintain rolling research programs, public opinion polling, public consultations, and media monitoring and analysis in order to understand the drivers of conflict and change and how people view their situation. Missions need to have an intelligence-gathering capacity so that they can fully understand the political dynamics, points of influence, and the perceptions of those in the street. They also need mechanisms for capturing and passing on institutional knowledge to ameliorate the loss of experience from staff turnover. Understanding the environment and learning from experience is key to ownership and success. Particularly important is establishing the levels and extent of local capacity. Using local expertise implies knowing where to find it and being confident about its authenticity.

Given the political nature of peacebuilding and counterinsurgency, the importance of communications cannot be overstated. Strategic communications is another overused but commonly misunderstood expression. Politics is about communications, persuasion, and consensus building, and because all politics is local, this means making the local audience the first priority. If there is local understanding, cooperation, and support, it is self-evident that the mission will succeed. The leaders and politicians of contributing nations are often more concerned about audiences back home than they are in the theater of operations. This needs to change. As nothing succeeds like success, the concerns of international constituents will take care of themselves if success on the ground becomes apparent.

Communicating at the grass roots also requires an understanding of how the information ecology of a society functions.³⁵ How does information get disseminated? What methods and sources are trusted? And what is the relative importance of traditional and cultural networks over conventional media? For example, as in Darfur, communicating in traditional tribal societies often means adopting unconventional approaches.

Finally, a word about training: most civil servants, international officials, consultants, and contractors involved in overseas intervention are insufficiently prepared for the environments in which they find themselves. The military spends considerable time and resources training its personnel for what they might have to do and engages them in a period of specific predeployment training before arriving in theater. Civilian missions should do the same. In addition to training civilian officials in the context and culture in which they operate, they should be made aware of institutional knowledge gained prior to their engagement and of the lessons learned from previous experience. Although documenting “lessons learned” has become increasingly popular, they are seldom truly learned by others and passed on.

The current international narrative on the most pressing stabilization operation of the moment, Afghanistan, revolves around the timeline for military withdrawal and handover. The concept of Afghan ownership therefore looms large on the agendas of politicians, diplomats, and soldiers alike as the clock starts ticking. But successfully transferring ownership, as this report argues, is first about understanding culture and context—and that requires effective two-way communication.

Notes

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