When discussing concepts such as “stabilization” and “security” in Afghanistan, it is important to be sure of what exactly is being discussed. These terms mean different things to different groups. To the military, security equates counter-insurgency while to civilians it is more about governance issues. Long-term relationships are necessary to establish trust between aid organizations and the civilian population in the recipient country. Strategic limits should be set more rigorously and the project goals should be more specific. Perception matters so it is important to manage expectations. Aid organizations should attempt to do less and take more time. Most conflict is caused by bad governance. Aid organizations must restructure their incentives and recognize that sometimes aid can be destabilizing.

**Stabilization and Security: What do we mean by these terms?**

“Stabilization” and “Security” mean different things to various constituent groups. From the viewpoint of the interveners (military or aid organizations), stability is a situation when a state is able to absorb and respond to a series of potentially interconnected man-made and natural threats to a population or to the state itself. Conversely, from the viewpoint of the recipient, stability is the normalization of relationships that allows people to live in peace and security and have the ability to plan for the future, seeing improvement in their family’s status. While these understandings of “security” are different, they are not necessarily incompatible. Stabilization is often more effective when it is indigenous and comes from the perspective of the local population. For example, in Kalakan (north of Kabul), a local process was initiated of addressing grievances and reconciliation from the Afghan perspective. In contrast, efforts in Nahr-i-Sarraj (Helmand) failed because external intervention was competing against an illicit economy and there was low buy-in from the local population. In intervention, there is often too quick a transition from stabilization to statebuilding and disarmament. Multiple actors compete to go where the funding is which leads to a system of incoherence. Ideas of stability become mixed and clouded on the ground. Using money to make people fall in line with government goals does not address the reasons why they were resisting in the first place. Much of this has to do with the perceived legitimacy of the
government. The question of the Afghan government’s legitimacy needs to be resolved. Many Afghans are against their own government because they perceive it to be predatory.

The Role of Aid Organizations

Aid agencies have grown more risk-averse over time. This attitude leads to cookie-cutter solutions, more outsourcing, less interaction with local populations and more government-funded programs. In contrast, high-risk programs involve working more directly with local populations, projects that are more tailored to local cultures and circumstances and more private funding.

Local populations are most angry about bad governance and inequitable distribution of resources. One man, who was interviewed in the course of research, stated “In the past, we had no government offices. Now we have government offices and they take from us.”

Long-term relationships between aid organizations and local populations are needed to establish trust. The National Solidarity Program was viewed as a positive actor but in general aid organizations are viewed with mistrust.

Negative perceptions of Aid organizations include: 1) nothing/too little has been done, 2) unequal distribution, 3) poor execution, 4) corruption, 5) broken promises, and 6) military methods.

The presence of Aid organizations— in hiring locals and in distributing aid— creates tension between the haves and have-nots. Aid organizations need to recognize that conflict is about bad governance. They also need to learn how to recognize perverse incentives (i.e. people know that more aid goes to less stable areas, so there is an incentive created for more violence). They must also recognize that aid can be destabilizing. Finally, they must learn how to fix incentive structures.

Conclusions

People’s perceptions cannot be changed until trust is established. This process requires years. The typical 5 year cycle of US policy means that in the first two years, the people implementing the programs are ignorant and make a lot of mistakes. By year three, they start to realize that something is wrong but are not sure how to fix it. By year five, people are finally in a position to know what is going on, but then the administration changes and people with knowledge are replaced to start the cycle anew.

At an embassy level, people are concerned with events on the national-level and with elites. They are not seeing what happens on the local level and are thus surprised when violence erupts. They are not prepared because of distance from the host population.

Aid agencies must recognize that governance is everything. They must be prepared to do less and take more time. They must be clear about program context and goals. They must also realize that money alone cannot win support. Real stability and governance reform (through establishing relationships) takes years and sometimes even decades. If it took thirty years in Northern Ireland where there was a relatively educated population, how can we expect quick reform in a country like Afghanistan?