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Title

Challenges in Assessing Progress in Multifunctional Operations: Experiences from a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan

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Abstract

In multinational civil-military operations, where different actors work in the same area to achieve their particular goals, it is not always easy to determine causal relationships, e.g. what impact different actions have on the overall development in the country. Albeit difficult, is vital to understand these relationships and continuously assess mission progress and feed this information into the C^2 process. In an attempt to get a better comprehension of how practitioners understand and apply assessment, 15 interviews were conducted with personnel from Regional Command North (RC North) and the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Mazar-e-Sharif. The results show that the PRT had difficulties in measuring the effects of ongoing operations and determining whether the mission was on track. The methodology for assessment of progress was underdeveloped, and the participants had different appreciations of wherein the main challenges lay. The study concludes that a developed ability for the PRT to measure progress includes: a well managed relationship with relevant actors, an agreement between these actors on the operational objectives, a systematic and structured approach to the assessment of all lines of operations, a more coordinated approach from the RC North towards the PRT, a reinforced link between planning and assessment, and adapted staff skills.

Introduction

Contemporary armed conflicts are becoming increasingly multifaceted. As a result, international military interventions have to contribute towards abstract objectives such as improved socio-economic development, respect for human rights, increased democracy and good governance. The ongoing Swedish contribution to the intervention in Afghanistan deals with these complex objectives in a multidimensional response. This involves leading a Swedish-Finnish Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) that has to harmonize both civil and military means in stability and reconstruction operations, counterinsurgency operations, and peace support operations.

This type of multinational civil-military operation has raised the issue of how to measure progress, effectiveness and relevance of the implementation of planned actions. Measuring progress is important in order to ensure that future actions lead to anticipated effects and that these actions do not hamper the efforts of other actors necessary in the strategy towards the overarching intervention goals. The intrinsic difficulties associated with assessment of progress are often amplified due to the difficulty of determining cause and effect, i.e. it is difficult to determine which military actions lead to which effects.

An initial literature review showed that the concept to evaluate both progress and effects has been studied in depth in the civilian context, but there is little documentation available on how assessment is actually done in PRT organizations today[1]. The need for military studies is therefore important, especially in the case of Afghanistan where one of the largest ongoing multinational civil-military operations, led by NATO through the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), is being implemented. The issue of progress lies at the very core of the operation, not least with respect to the recognized need for it (see e.g. McChrystal, 2009; US Department of Defense, 2009 pp 4-7).

In 2009 the former Commander of ISAF - US General Stanley McChrystal - issued a multidisciplinary assessment of the situation in Afghanistan. This resulted in a substantial change in ISAF's strategic approach. It made clear that the key to operational progress was the population's perception of the intervening forces' behavior and not the kinetic fight against the insurgents (McChrystal 2009a; 2009b). A major challenge facing the mission is how to ensure that its actions do contribute to the progress of the mission according to the strategy. Consequently, this study has examined how assessments have been conducted and utilized within the Swedish-Finnish PRT to date, and what the main problems were perceived to be.

By examining how it works today this study seeks to create a basic understanding of the challenges that exist in contemporary work on assessment of progress and identify potential development areas. Therefore, interviews with key personnel have been the primary source of information. The result indicates that the assessment of progress methodology is underdeveloped and that several interaction and coordination issues exist. This study also shows that it is possible to carry out research and development in this area of interest. More specific or other questions are possible to explore within the different *question areas*[2] identified by this study.

[1] This will be explained in more depth in the *background* section of this report.
[2] These question areas will be explained in the *background* and *method* section of this report

Background

In the past, military assessments were conducted as Battle Damage Assessments (BDA), which in broad terms meant data collection concerning target hits and validation of the physical damage caused by the weapons used (Diehl & Sloan, 2005). Essentially, there has been no attempt to systematically measure the results or effects in an all-inclusive way, and it has proven to be a significant challenge to evaluate the physical damage (Janiczek, 2002; Baily, 2001). Traditionally a few key staff members have accomplished an evaluation of performance and progress by combining information from different sources when needed (Curry, 2004). However, the development of Effects Based Approach to Operations (EBAO), and similar concepts, has rendered improvements in the ability to carry out more qualified assessments, even if several challenges still remain. In 2007, NATO released the Engagement Space Assessment Handbook. (ESA Handbook, 2007). This handbook is based on the experience from NATO operations and the U.S. Joint Forces Command Multinational Experiment Series. The method in the handbook declares a shift in focus from activities, to effects or results to be met.

Some of the ideas behind this shift in focus are likely to be derived from the model of results-based management (RBM), which has its origin in Drucker's (1954) work with goal-oriented management. RBM is a concept with focus on performance and achievement of results in the short and long term. RBM's distinctive feature is considered to be the emphasis on outcomes rather than outputs. A key part of RBM is to plan and assess desired results, or effects, broken down into a chain of objectives, actions and resources, with a causal and logical relationship to each other (see figure 1). The concept of monitoring is linked to the early steps in the chain, while evaluation rather focuses on the effects of these measures. Assessment of progress can thus be seen as a process consisting of monitoring and evaluation activities (Sida, 2007).

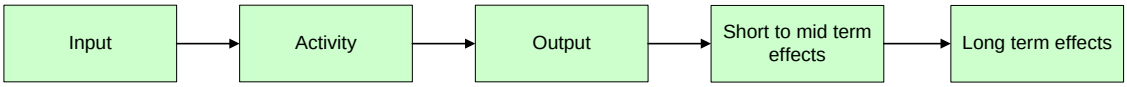

Figure 1: RBM result-chain

In general, the Western military community has accepted this approach to assessment, but unfortunately there are examples of a too hasty implementation of the techniques, without any deeper theoretical or practical understanding of its possibilities and limitations (Williams & Morris, 2009). This is reinforced by Meharg's (2009) experiences. She concludes that many military organizations in today's multinational civil-military operations are experiencing difficulties in measuring the effects of ongoing operations. Instead, the focus is on what is easy to measure. She also claims that the majorities of military assessments are carried out after the completion of an operation and are often referred to as After Action Review (AAR) or lessons learned. This way of working involves a substantial risk of confirmation bias, which means to seek information that confirms own beliefs and thus risking ignoring certain facts, which results in an imminent validity problem.

Assessing effects is inherently difficult. Some effects appear directly due to the activity, whereas others are expected to appear only in the long term. According to Brusset et al. (2007) there are three different levels of effects: 1) Outputs are the immediate effects that come from an implemented action; 2) Outcomes are the secondary effects resulting from the outputs, i.e. the consequence; 3) Impacts are the *change* that can demonstrate a clear connection between our actions, outputs, and outcomes. A well known problem is that the causal link between different levels of effects often is difficult to establish and assess. It is more complicated to assess effects on the impact level than on the lower levels of the result chain (Bandstein, 2010).

Today many assessments are carried out through theory-based design, which can be seen as a fundamental methodology to support assessment in an EBAO. However, with an increased focus on impacts other approaches such as experimental designs or goal-free evaluations have emerged (Bandstein, 2010). Theory-based design had a relatively strong development during the 1980-90s. It was especially Chen's (1990) book on the theory-based evaluation that that have paved the way for other development efforts in the area. The most significant progress has taken place in the field of program theory (Bickman, 1987; Chen, 1990, 1994, 2005; Scheirer, 1987). Programs are time bound interventions involving multiple activities e.g. projects, which in turn requires more detailed planning (Project Management Institute, 2008). A program theory aims at clarifying the objectives of a program and the necessary actions to reach them. The theory builds on logical reasoning about the nature of problems and how these are tackled, which leads to assumptions about mechanisms that link inputs to outcomes, and outcomes to impacts (Rossi et al 2004).

The Swedish military concept development in the area has found that the assessment process needs to provide appropriate stimulation and motivation for "re-planning" throughout the campaign, to increase the efficiency in the conduct of contemporary military operations. This requires a systematic assessment of progress, which means to continuously monitor and evaluate the implementation of planned activities and the creation of results (Marklund & Svanerholm, 2008). According to Williams and Morris (2009), such a process benefits from a theory-based approach. They also argue that assessment of progress is essential to improve understanding of how the operational plan is working in relation to the changing environment.

Some military practitioners imply that assessment of progress is essentially about the quality and success of the plan, and nothing more. But, Chen (1994) argues that it is important to determine the causal relationship between the mechanisms that led to program success or failure. Otherwise it is difficult to discover credible shortcomings and address necessary changes in either the design or the execution of the plan. The aspiration to improve the plan is therefore an important goal in evaluating the program (Chen, 1994). This type of assessment is seen by Bickman (1987) as key to both the design of new plans and their following evaluation. If the link is clear between planning and assessment, the plan can serve as a foundation upon which indicators can be identified in order to create an assessment plan (Scheirer, 1987).

If one considers Bickman's (1987), Scheirer's (1987) and Chen´s (1994, 2005) approach to program theory as a reasonable concept for how a military operational plan will function, the plan should express the necessary actions identified to generate the effects that are expected to lead to the desired end state. These actions can be seen as a series of hypotheses and assumptions. The purpose of assessment will then be to confirm or falsify these assumptions, if the preferred results are not met. According to Chen, (2005) the objective of assessment is not only to measure progress in the execution of the plan and in the achievement of results, but also to find reasons why the scheme is successful or not.

As noted earlier, there are considerable challenges in knowing what is to be assessed, how it should be done and how the results should be utilized. More specifically, the challenges can relate to either: a) the input/guidelines of what is to be assessed, i.e. identifying variables from the operational plan, b) the assessment itself, i.e. the ability to evaluate the right variables and causal links, and/or c) the feedback of the result, i.e. credible information and when needed. These challenges are exacerbated by the frictions generated in real operations like the ones that exist in Afghanistan.

Assessment of progress in Afghanistan is often complicated. The operational environment is complex, dangerous and rapidly changing, which means that measures, indicators and frameworks quickly become obsolete. These kinds of interventions have abstract objectives and the path to these objectives is difficult to concretize, monitor and measure. The matter of how specific missions are conducting assessment of progress is important, as several governmental and non governmental organizations put a lot of effort into various programs. These missions are facing different challenges depending on the circumstances in the area of responsibility.

Sweden, with support from the Finnish Armed Forces, took over the tactical command of the British PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif in the northern Afghanistan in March 2006, which is part of the RC North (Olsson et al. 2009). RC North is one of six regional commands under ISAF Joint Command, and as such it is to be recognized as higher tactical level with six PRTs within its responsibility (ISAF, 2010). The PRT consists of approximately 500 people and the basic structure is composed of a PRT Commander supported by civilian advisors from Sweden, Finland and the US. The advisors assist the Commander in the fields of development, governance and political affairs. The commander is also supported by a military staff consisting of G1 (Personnel), G2 (Intelligence and Security), G3 PRT Commander and his staff are leading the operation in order to reform the security sector in a rather extensive area of responsibility. This area consists of four provinces located within RC North, in the northern part of Afghanistan (Swedish Armed Forces, 2010). This area is considered to be a fairly stable and secure. However, there are localized security problems in three of the four provinces in which insurgency groups are prominent.

Williams and Morris (2009) claim that it is only the operational (ISAF Joint Command) and the military strategic (ISAF HQ) levels that implement assessment of progress within the ISAF mission. This would imply that no systematic assessment of progress is carried out in RC North and the Swedish-Finnish PRT. The question is – is this true, and if so, why?

Aim and scope

To be able to undertake assessment of progress, planning and assessment needs to be integrated to some extent. The hypothesis is that successful assessment of progress requires a clear link between *the input/guidelines for what to assess*, i.e. the objectives in the operational plan, *the assessment activity as such*, and *the feedback to the current plan*. How this is working within the Swedish-Finnish PRT today is not known.

The aim of this study is hence to investigate how assessments has been conducted and utilized within the Swedish-Finnish PRT to date, and what the main problems were perceived to be. More specifically, the study tries to find out what the biggest challenges are within the three areas below:

- the input/guidelines of what to assess
- the assessment in practice
- the feedback of assessment results to planning

In order to answer the questions, interviews have been the primary source of information. The purpose of the interviews was to examine how primarily military practitioners understand and apply assessment of progress within the PRT today. To capture the participants' views on this relatively complex area semi-structured interviews, supported by follow-up questions, were conducted.

Method

Participants

Fourteen men and one woman were interviewed: twelve of the participants had worked in the Swedish lead PRT in Afghanistan between 2008 and 2010 and three of the participants had worked in the RC North HQ. All men were army officers and their ranks ranged from lieutenant to colonel (one lieutenant, seven majors, three lieutenant colonel, and three colonels). The woman was a civilian development advisor. The interviewees were selected based on their experiences from working at key positions with responsibility for planning and assessments. In view of how difficult it can be for a specific type of staff member to have a full understanding of what governs, limits and comprises the PRT assessment activity, a broad representation was chosen to get different perspectives on the problem.

The interview study was divided into two sub studies. The first investigation (sub study one) interviewed seven participants, and the second investigation (sub study two) interviewed eight participants. The interviewees held the following key positions within ISAF:

Table 1: The participants

Sub study one	Sub study two
• Commanding Officer PRT Mazar-el-Sharif, Nov 2008 – Maj 2009. • Assisting Chief of Staff G2 PRT Mazar-el-Sharif, Nov 2008 – Maj 2009. • Assisting Chief of Staff G3 PRT Mazar-el-Sharif, Nov 2008 – Maj 2009. • Staff Officer G5 PRT Mazar-el-Sharif, Nov 2008 – May 2009. • Commanding Officer PRT Mazar-el-Sharif, May 2008 – Nov 2009. • Chief of Staff, PRT Mazar-el-Sharif, May 2008 – Nov 2009. • Deputy Chief, G5, PRT Mazar-el-Sharif, May 2008 – Nov 2009.	• Staff Officer Plans, CJ5, RC North, May 2008 – Nov 2009 . • Chief, CJ5, RC North, May 2008 – May 2010. • Commander, PRT Mazar-el-Sharif, Nov 2009 – May 2010. • Chief of Staff, PRT Mazar-el-Sharif, Nov 2009 – May 2010. • Chief, G3, PRT Mazar-el-Sharif, Nov 2009 – May 2010. • Deputy Chief, G5, PRT Mazar-el-Sharif, Nov 2009 – May 2010. • Staff Officer Plans, CJ5, RC North, Nov 2009 – May 2010. • Development Adviser, PRT Mazar-el-Sharif, May 2008 – May 2010.

Instrument

Since this investigation aims to identify and describe a relatively complex area, semi-structured interviews were chosen for data collection. This interview technique allows a degree of dialog about the questions and the answers, that is, it gives the interviewer the possibility to clarify the questions when needed and also to ask follow-up questions. The aim was to ensure that the participants' positions on various questions were captured in a correct way. The study was divided into two sub studies with somewhat different interview questions. Sub study one focused on three parts, one for each of the three variables that were hypothesized to have an effect on assessment – input/guidelines, the assessment in practice, and feedback to planning. Sub study two focused on interaction and collaboration issues and was divided into three parts. Part one examined how the operational objectives were stipulated and shared. Part two examined external and internal collaboration associated with the assessment work. Part three collected the interviewee's view on necessary improvements. Each part was operationalized into 3-8 questions (see annex A).

The actual scheme for the investigation was to find out how the various positions among the participants responded to the different questions. The questions in each part focused on identifying the main challenges and creating an understanding of how the effort in assessment of progress was working. The questions were arranged in order of priority for an easy opt-out of questions when conducting time-limited interviews. The most important and general question was discussed first, followed by more specific ones to ensure that certain facts concerning the topic appeared. To end with, questions were asked to sum up the interview and weighed together the different parts. There were more questions asked in the interviews but all these questions are not presented in this paper.

Procedure

Initially, a literature study was conducted to get a deeper understanding of the problem area. After the research question and the variables were identified, interview questions were created. The questions were critiqued by two independent individuals before the interviews took place. Sub-study one was conducted in March 2010 and sub-study two was conducted in September 2010. Before each interview session the interview questions were sent out to the participants along with a brief description of the purpose and scope of the study. This was done to give the participants an opportunity to reflect on the problem area and prepare for the interview. When the meeting with each participant took place, the purpose and background of the study was presented again, and the notion of *assessment of progress* was explained. The participants were asked for permission to do audio recording and they were told that we would not be quoted without their permission.

The interviews were conducted in Swedish by two interviewers, one was dominant in the conversation and the other was more focused on taking notes. Control questions were regularly asked to check if the answer was correctly comprehended. The interviews were recorded by a digital audio recording device. The results were not transcribed because the timeframe of this study did not allow it. However, the interviews have been documented with extensive notes to allow in depth analysis of the material afterwards. The interviews lasted for 45 - 90 minutes depending on how much time the participants were able to set aside for the interview. Since several of the participants were very busy with other work, but still wanted to participate in the study, ten interviews were conducted in the evenings. On these occasions, participants were given a sandwich and a soft drink. At the end of the interview, the participants were thanked for their contribution.

Results

The participants' responses to the questions have been categorized and compared to find similarities and differences. This chapter starts with presenting the results from sub-study one and subsequently ends with presenting the results from sub-study two.

Sub-study one

Sub-study one was focused on three parts – one for each of the three variables that were hypothesized to have an effect on assessment (input/guidelines, the assessment itself, and feedback to planning).

Part 1 – The Input

This section presents the results divided into two sub-sections, starting with the main challenges and thereafter the basis for input.

The main challenges

The results show that the participants identified various challenges associated with input, i.e. to identify what should be assessed. The responses have been divided into two main categories, problems related to: 1) unclear guidelines and 2) formulating measurable objectives. All participants except one stated that the guidelines of what was to be assessed were vague and left much room for personal interpretation. Three participants highlighted the difficulty of formulating measurable objectives, that is, the problem of how to relate to the operational objectives and how these should be monitored and evaluated.

Basis for input

The results show that long-term objectives came from the ISAF Operational Plan (OPLAN) and these objectives had a time extent that was difficult to interpret. Medium-term objectives were created by the PRT commander and his staff in the form of end-states. Short-term objectives were also created by the PRT personnel and were linked to specific operations or stages. The objectives in the PRT Operations Order (OPORDER) were not strictly military.

All participants declared that they “inherited” the valid parts of previous rotations’ operational plans and orders. In the preparation phase they analyze the ISAF OPLAN and the RC North OPLAN with the aim of gaining enough knowledge to create an OPORDER for the PRT 6-8 months upcoming period. The purpose of this was to identify the most important civilian and military objectives. The ISAF OPLAN included only strategic and operational objectives which were of long term nature and therefore fixed during the entire period of the rotation. Normally, they formulated end-states for the rotation (6-8 months view), and objectives (1-3 months view) when crafting the OPORDER for the PRT. All participants also stated that these objectives were not strictly military, they were related to the different lines of operations i.e. the civilian aspects of the PRT were included.

Part 2 – The Assessment in practice

This section presents the results divided into three sub-sections, starting with the main challenges, thereafter the principal assessment variables, and finally what was assessed and why.

The main challenges

The results show that the participants identified various challenges associated with assessment. The responses have been divided into three main categories. Problems related to the: 1) identification of assessment variables, 2) the difficulty of measuring the relevant variables and 3) timing. Four of the participants pointed out the difficulty of identifying assessment variables and interpreting them. Four of the participants stated that the relevant variables were difficult to measure, especially soft values, e.g. changes in the attitudes of local people. Four of the participants indicated challenges associated to timing. More specifically, problems related to different time horizons and information gaps when rotating the staff. Hence, the results show that there was a limitation of what was possible to assess within the time frame they had to work in. The challenge of evaluating the effects associated with long-term objectives during the rotation was reinforced by the lack of resources. It was also a challenge to make timely assessments to create sufficient lead time in planning.

Principal assessment variables

This sub-section section presents the result from investigating whether the PRT was using measures of effectiveness (or similar) to monitor and evaluate objectives in the operational plan. The diagram below (Figure 1) shows a summary of the assessment variables that emerged during the interviews. There are different levels of abstraction in the diagram in order to discern the dignity of the variables. Note that the highest level of abstraction is in the ellipses, and these are closely intertwined with the objectives of the campaign. "Local population's view" is placed at the top of the diagram to show the importance and influence upon all other assessment variables. All variables outside the ellipses have been regarded as measurable.

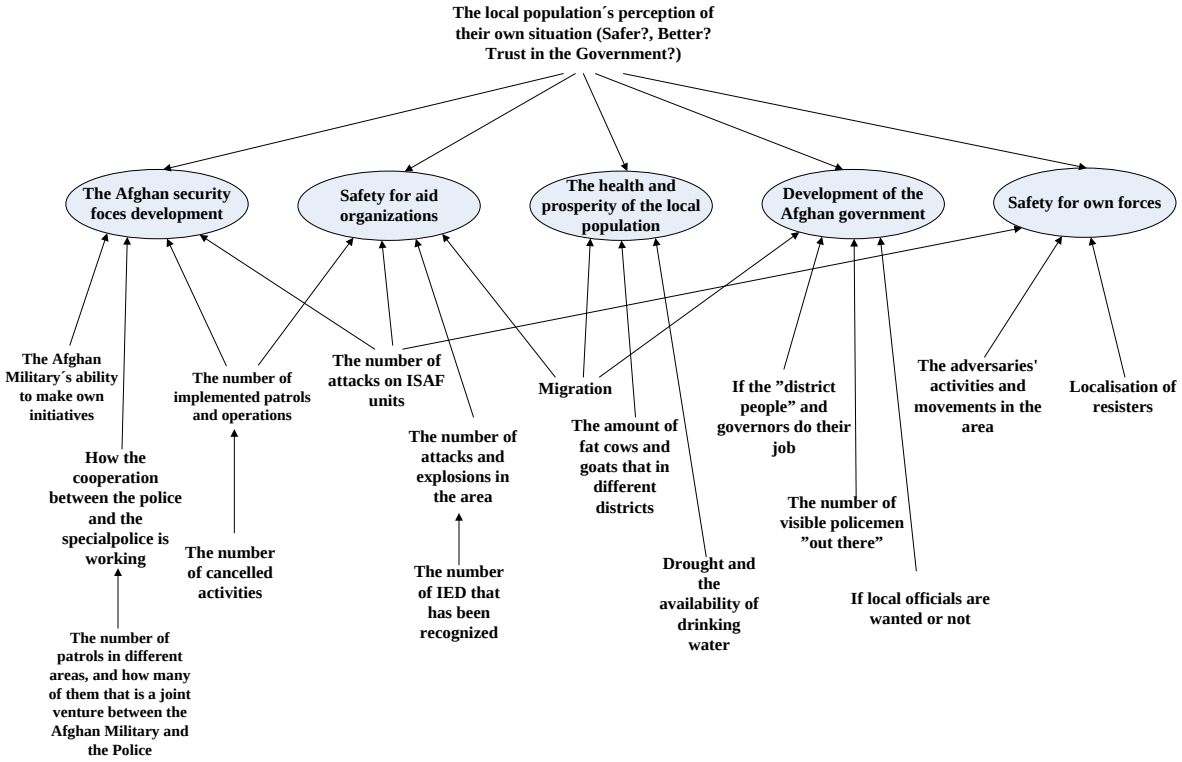

Figure 1: A summary of the assessment variables stated in the interviews

The diagram shows an overview of the key assessment variables. It demonstrates that the priority was to assess threats, own actions and the local people views. The diagram only shows the assessment variables that the participants stated during the interviews. The links between the variables were created during the analysis of the interview material and there may be other connections than the ones shown here.

What was assessed and why

The results show that all participants has a desire to find out what impact own operations were creating, or why certain things happened, but resources, time and skills did not allow this. It is therefore difficult to measure what they wanted to assess. Instead they assessed what was possible to measure, e.g. number of events or activities. According to two participants this were only done when considered necessary. There was awareness among the interviewees that there are many factors that affect the outcome and that it is not easy to assess how operations go in terms of effects and implications.

Part 3 – The Feedback

This section presents the results divided into three sub-sections, starting with the main challenges, thereafter if assessment led to any review of the current plan or changes within it, and finally how assessment fed back into the planning.

The main challenges

The results show that the participants identified different challenges that are related to feedback. The responses have been divided into three main categories, problems related to: 1) time constraints, 2) difficulties in interpreting the results, and 3) learning from the results. Six participants identified time constraints as a problem. It was obviously difficult to get enough time, and there was a time-consuming process for decisions and changes. Three participants indicate that it was difficult to interpret the results and determine the relevance of the information depending on varying credibility. Three participants highlighted the problem of learning from the results, i.e. to be able to make useful predictions/forecasts on the outcome from the analysis.

Plan review

The results show that the assessment results did not led to a review of the current plan (OPORDER), but the participants still believed it had some effect on decisions regarding ongoing operations. However, there were different views on this. Six participants said that the PRT OPORDER was not revised, but that the assessment was effective nonetheless. This effect was shown in new Fragmentary Orders (FRAGOs). One participant stated that when certain objectives in the OPORDER were not reached, resources could be scheduled to other activities. One participant also mentioned that tasks and allocation of resources were dependent on the outcome of the assessment. One participant stated that the reason for not changing the OPORDER was due to lack of time for staff work. By reason of the different responses, it is possible to say that it is unclear how the experiences were captured, and whether it was done in a systematic way.

How assessment was fed back into the planning

The results indicate that it was no systematic way of making use of the assessment results. However, there were certain meetings for progress reports. Three participants said that assessment was usually performed after completed operations and at the end of the mission/rotation in the form of AAR and Lessons Learned. Three participants said that their

branch compiled information that was related to their function and then carried out weekly reports to the PRT Commander. Three participants stated that information from the branches was considered at weekly meetings and that the PRT Commander, with support from subject matter experts, subsequently took the necessary decisions. These decisions were normally presented at monthly meetings (Commander's conference) in which the civilian advisors participated. According to one participant, the process to reach a common decision could sometimes take a week from presentation to consensus. One participant said that the implementation of decision in general was done by providing guidelines for future staff work.

Sub study two

Sub study two focused on interaction and collaboration issues and was divided into three parts. Part one examined how the operational objectives were stipulated and shared. Part two examined external and internal collaboration during the assessment work. Part three captured the participants view on the need for improvements.

Part 1- Operational objectives

This section presents the results divided into two sub-sections, starting with the configuration and design of objectives and concludes with participation and interaction when producing the objectives.

Configuration and design

The results show that the ISAF Joint Command OPLAN, RC North OPLAN, and Swedish-Finnish PRT OPLAN were synchronized to some extent. However, many of the military interviewees at the PRT emphasized that the objectives and decisive points were hard to measure as they perceived them as too generic and unspecific. Discrepancy between the formulation of objectives and plans at the RC North and the ability to break down and measure the achievement of them at the PRT obstructed assessment of progress.

Two participants stated that the RC North OPLAN contained planned actions and planned achievement of effects and objectives for the entire northern region. This enabled the RC North Commander to utilize the forces at the PRT level based on where they could best serve the overall objectives of the mission. The RC North OPLAN was detailed, with decisive points and decisive conditions against which progress could be assessed. RC North's OPLAN formed the basis for the development of plans, objectives and decisive points at the PRT level. Four participants pointed to the lack of benchmarks, timelines and/or established geographical places for the lines of operation. This was especially prominent for the lines of operation relating to governance and development objectives. The military interviewees perceived them as too broad and complex to handle at the PRT level.

One participant stated that it was easy to lose track of the larger operational context in which the PRT was situated. It was difficult to maintain such a perspective at the PRT. This could exacerbate incoherence between activities and objectives as well as between the formulation of objectives and the ability to measure their achievement.

Participation and interaction
The results show that all relevant actors did not share the operational objectives and sometimes they were not even informed of them.

Four participants stated that the civilian components at the PRT and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) were not always informed of the current objectives. According to one participant, the main reason for why the civilian components did not always share the objectives was the limited integration and understanding between the Swedish Armed Forces and SIDA at the domestic interagency level. Four participants said that the military and SIDA personnel had been sent to the PRT with different mandates, objectives and cultures, without practical instructions on how to cooperate and coordinate. Consequently, the civilian and military parts came to interpret each other's roles differently; it became a question of who should be supporting whom rather than a question of exploiting the synergy effects that civil-military cooperation could provide. Two participants pointed to the fact that the military officers in the PRT were recruited and trained to lead security activities and had limited training in civil-military cooperation.

Two participants stated that RC North and the Swedish-Finnish PRT only interacted with the ANSF, since it is United Nations Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) that is responsible for coordinating with the civil authorities. Unfortunately, UNAMA, and other relevant civilian organizations, were not involved when *governance* and *development* objectives were established at the RC North and the PRT. As a result, UNAMA was not part of the implementation of the OPLAN, despite its importance in achieving progress within these areas. Coordination between ISAF and UNAMA is therefore important in order to establish common objectives.

One participant mentioned that they continually discussed within the PRT HQ whether or not, as well as how, to include the ANSF in the process of planning and setting objectives. The inclusion of the ANSF remained limited and as the ANSF are a vital partner in all military operations this created problems. One obstacle that prevented the OPLAN from being shared with the ANSF was that they were classified as "secret" and were only accessible to ISAF staff with security clearance. Two participants pointed out that the ANSF and the Afghan government did not always share the priorities and objectives set by ISAF and the Swedish-led PRT. One reason for this was the steadily changing priorities and power struggle between different actors within domestic Afghan politics, which meant that their objectives were easily changeable.

Two participants emphasized that the ISAF attitude towards the ANSF changed with the implementation of US General McChrystal's revised counter insurgency (COIN) strategy. The strategy emphasized that operations were to take place with Afghan ownership and resulted in an increased involvement of Afghans in the planning process of some operations at the tactical level. However, the ANSF still had limited influence on the setting of the PRT objectives: this was demonstrated, for instance, by the lack of ANSF participation in the design of the PRT OPLAN. One participant elaborated on the difficulty of coordinating and sharing objectives between the Afghans, ISAF and the civilian components. The reason was partly due to their differing temporal perspectives. Military time perspectives on planning are typically sequenced, focusing on stated objectives and effects that are to occur according to stipulated timelines. According to the same participant, the ANSF had a more ad hoc approach to planning, which caused difficulties when it came to setting up common

objectives, plans and assessments, based on the twelve to eighteen-month cycle specified in McChrystal's revised order.

One participant stated that the military's sequenced approach also contrasted with the traditional civilian operational approach, which was more process oriented. Temporal differences affected the formulation of operational objectives within the PRT in the sense that objectives relating to development came to build on a linear approach, i.e. first security, then development and eventually a sustainable Afghanistan. The same participant maintained that the military's sequenced approach gave the civilian component a short-term perspective on the operation focusing on quick fixes rather than long-term effects. An explanation for this is the political pressure for mission progress as well as the demand from upper ISAF levels for continuous assessment reporting from the PRTs. This urges forces on the ground to focus on immediate outputs rather than processes and long-term impacts. Two other participants stated that short rotations – four to six months – cause the military to look for short-term results as they want to know what they have achieved during their deployment.

Part 2 - External and internal collaboration

This section presents the results divided into three sub-sections, starting with responsibility and coordination, thereafter procedures, and concludes with integration of assessment results.

Responsibility and coordination

The results show that the interviewees believe that the coordination between the RC North and the PRT was unsatisfactory. The reasons seem to depend on unclear responsibility within the respective HQ.

According to one participant, important parts of the assessment work at the RC North suffered from limited coordination between the different branches. Branches responsible for compiling assessment data from the PRTs on development, governance and reconstruction did not always coordinate their efforts with branches in charge of assessment reporting and plan adjustment. Three participants stated that the management of the assessment data collected at the PRT was deficient and the weekly assessments from the PRT to the RC North was unstructured. They also stated that the branches within the PRT did not systematically share assessment information and results with each other. Consequently, they lacked a comprehensive view on the situation that they could pass on to their respective branches at the RC North.

Three participants at the PRT identified general problems concerning the relationship between different command levels throughout the assessment process. For instance, RC North demanded assessments on a regular basis, sometimes as often as once a week, but without providing usable assessment tools, e.g. for measuring decisive points. They also thought that the RC North level where uncoordinated since different branches demanded the same information and assessment results time and again. Two participants at the RC North confirmed this impression.

One participant stressed that the PRT inherited many reporting routines from the previous rotation which they did not entirely grasp. They were not sure why, how or to whom they reported. After a while they realized that the reporting system was detached from the objectives in the OPLAN. For example, during one of the operations, the RC North asked the PRT to report on their activities despite the fact that they had already done so.

Procedures
The results show that both the RC North and the PRT used several methods to gather assessment information, but the procedures were unstructured and took place without an explicit data collection plan. This made it hard to collaborate in a timely manner on substantive issues.

One participant explained that planning at RC North was a key procedure to ensure that the PRTs breaks down strategic objectives into achievable tasks, performs them accordingly, and then evaluates them. Another participant stated that this was not working properly, i.e. the military system might have to adopt a more flexible method that start from how to achieve all desired objectives, rather than merely adding complex objectives to the traditional ones. This is especially true for objectives that demand attitudinal and behavioral changes among the wider public. Two participants said that they assessed military objectives with emphasis on outputs and, to some extent, outcomes. Often collaboration centered on BDA and/or tangible aspects, e.g. whether a search operation was successful, whether contact was made with a village elder, or whether books were delivered to a specific school. Two participants said that the military part of the operation had only limited capacity and knowledge on how to assess progress within the development and governance sector, which made it hard to collaborate with the civilian component.

Two participants stated that there was no structured and systematic procedure for collecting assessment data within the PRT. The PRT largely relied on liaison reports from different units and on data from the intelligence function and the Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) team within the PRT. They also said that they often used reports from civilian organizations, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAiD) when trying to establish benchmarks and assess progress on development and governance in theatre. The civilian component at the PRT largely relied on secondary data, e.g. from local organizations and project implementers, for information on the progress of developments efforts.

One participant stated that the procedure for reporting assessment to RC North concerning ongoing operations was largely done by PRT Commanders, but this was not done in a structured and systematized way throughout the mission.

Integration of assessment results
The results show that the outcome from the assessment process were regularly shared and discussed on a monthly basis. The information was used to adjust plans and orders, but the revision primarily concerned the military objectives. Collaboration about lessons identified and lessons learned did not work satisfactorily.

Three participants said that the PRT made a concerted effort to use information compiled to support further planning, either by substantiating existing plans and tasks or by revising them. More specifically, they used the results to check on decisive conditions relative to the lines of operation in order to assess the current position compared to the estimated time schedule. The revisions of plans and tasks primarily came to concern the military objectives rather than the developmental or governmental ones.

Two participants stated that the PRT arranged monthly Commanders' conferences where assessment results were presented and discussed and plans were adjusted. This process provided a common understanding of the operation and existing challenges for the progress of the OPLAN.

According to two participants, the RC North used assessment results provided by the PRT's for the purpose of planning and adjusting current plans. The key questions the RC North sought to answer revolved around whether they were going in the right direction, whether they were taking the right actions and whether they were moving too fast or slow. Unfortunately, the process had some flaws. For example, the planning staff at RC North had difficulties in obtaining assessment results from other branches. This limitation made it difficult for those in charge to make evidence-based adjustments to the plan being executed and look at achieved effects and objectives.

Two participants from the PRT said that the ability to follow-up on assessment results between the levels was generally poor. To reinforce this they mentioned that they only got feedback from RC North, in terms of adjusting the tactical-level OPLAN based on assessment results, on one occasion.

Several interviewees stated that the results from assessments were not compiled in functioning and well-established databases. They also said that the lack of systems and methods at RC North and the PRT had a direct negative impact on their ability to find information and store new information, and thus assess the progress of long-term objectives. One participant described how deficiencies in information management can undermine the operational objectives as a result of flawed data collection and use of results from them, e.g. surveys on the Afghan population's needs have been done over and over again without anything ever happening, which has created local frustration and resentment against ISAF.

Part 3 - The need for improvements

This section presents the results from the question - what needs to be done to make assessment in the field easier?

The results show a wish to improve the capability to conduct assessment of progress by developing a common framework of methods and terminology. All participants stated that the ability can be improved through more and adequate training prior the mission in theatre. Two participants emphasized the need for better methods to measure important variables and the need for broader competence, i.e. the importance of having heterogeneous groups with broad expertise. Three participants highlighted the need for more common training of the civil and military components. One participant pointed out the importance of having long-term objectives that are clearly decomposed into a set of milestones to make it easier for each rotation to assess the "big picture". He also emphasized the need for a systematic approach to assessment of progress, and to have access to "objective analysis", since those who are involved in the operation are biased and there are many sources that are unreliable. One participant stated that there is a need for a review to identify what competences are needed to improve the capability to implement monitoring and evaluation in general and also, to identify what is needed to improve the ability to transfer knowledge between rotations.

Discussion

This study has examined how assessments has been conducted and utilized within the Swedish-Finnish PRT and what the main challenges were perceived to be. The study has provided a valuable contribution to increase the knowledge concerning the challenges with assessment of mission progress. The results show that the PRT had difficulties in measuring the *effects* of ongoing operations and determining whether the mission is on track. Assessment was normally carried out *after* completed operations and at the end of the rotation/mission. The methodology for systematic assessment of progress *during* execution was underdeveloped, and the participants had different appreciations of wherein the main challenges or problems lay.

The data comes from fifteen semi-structured interviews and the results reflect the views and experiences of the participants. The questions were perceived as relevant to the investigation even if the study area was experienced as difficult by the participants. The interviewees represented different positions involved in the PRT assessment activities, which made it possible to get different perspectives on the problem. The weakness was the small number of participants on each position. Consequently, the results do not have enough rigour. However, the validity can be increased with more interviews of the same representation both nationally and internationally, and the results from this study can be used as a starting point for further studies.

The hypothesis was that successful assessment of progress requires a clear link between the guidelines for what to assess, i.e. the objectives in the operational plan, the assessment activity as such, and the feedback. The study has not provided strong evidence for or against the hypothesis, due to lack of data points. However, there are some interesting results which are worth mentioning.

Although the results from the study show that the *input/guidelines* of what was to be assessed was unclear and that it is difficult to formulate measurable objectives, it was a strength that the mission objectives were both military and civilian by nature. Even so, this mix is likely to involve different time perspectives, terminology, and need for data. An important lesson from this study is that civilian and Afghan actors were largely excluded from the formulation of objectives at both the RC North and the PRT Mazar-e-Sharif. It is vital in a multinational civil-military operation that all actors agree on the objectives in order to be able to reach the desired end-state. A comprehensive approach is not only important for the process of planning and formulating objectives, it is also important for the assessment of progress. Otherwise, there is a risk, as seen in this study, that only issues of concern to the military will be addressed.

This is particularly important in the case of Afghanistan where the overall strategy presupposes and requires mutual reinforcement and synergies between security, governance and development activities. It is therefore imperative to have a common operational plan for the PRT, in which there is consensus on the various key concepts, and thereby creating a common framework to relate to when assessing mission progress. The content in this plan needs to have a clear link between objectives, desired effects, and planned actions. If this is met, the operational plan is likely to provide a clear direction for what should be assessed, i.e. to provide a framework for identification of assessment variables and indicators. This finding is in line with the results from Bickman (1987) and Scheirer (1987) earlier research relating to program theory.

An additional factor of importance is the ownership dimension of contemporary operations. It is especially important to address this issue in operations where one objective is to encourage host country ownership of the peace and stabilization process. In the case of Afghanistan the national actors have only limited influence during the process of creating the operational plan. From an assessment point of view, a well managed relationship with the host country's authorities and armed forces could contribute positively to the process of assessing progress and adding to trustworthy results. This is especially true when it comes to collecting information and determining effects. The host country partners are experts on their culture, the behavior of the population and the interpretation of public opinion. They have access to the population in ways that the expatriate community could not have in any extensive way. In order to take advantage of this expertise, there is a need to develop tools and methods which are appropriate for the specific context and level of education of the partners. This is only possible if the host nation's representatives are aware of the operational objectives and are trusted actors.

The study also shows that problems with *the assessment in practice* are timing, identification of assessment variables, and measuring the relevant variables- i.e. it is difficult to measure what you want to measure within the prevailing situation - instead you measure what you can measure. It is reasonable to claim that there is interconnectivity between the problem of not having measurable objectives and the difficulties to identify assessment variables or indicators. For that reason, it has to be a functional link between the operational plan and the assessment activity as such. This part of the result supports what Meharg, (2009) claims to be an issue that military assessors often deal with. A positive thing with the results is the fact that the assessment variables that are being used seem to be related to the mission objectives. Unfortunately these variables are only evaluated when it is deemed important, i.e. in relation to an event that has occurred or after a completed operation. Consequently, this says little about the effectiveness of the PRT intervention. It is therefore reasonable to argue that you need to understand the relationship between the effects identified and the actions carried out in order to assess the effectiveness and progress. For this to be convincing, you need to describe the causal relationship between the mechanisms that led to success or failure. From an analytical perspective, it is not meaningful to refer changes in the operational environment as progress if these cannot be linked to the actions and objectives, even if change is perceived as positive. This finding is in line with Williams and Morris (2009) and Chen's (1994) research in this area.

The study has identified different assessment variables used within the PRT, but the question is - how useful are these indicators? Do they actually indicate if the military operation is on the right track? It is not enough to simply count events and make quantitative analysis. It is likely that the indicators require qualified interpretation, which by the participants in this study were seen as problematic to accomplish. It is not fair to expect that the Commander, by himself, can master all nuances and time perspectives when doing this; the staff needs to help out with informed judgments. Since the study shows that staff rotations create problems in this respect, it is reasonable to propose that the ability to interpret indicators should be developed by using staff in the assessment process with experience from having worked in the theater for a long time. Then there is a reasonable chance to detect changes between rotations and thereby discover more than the immediate outputs, but also outcomes and impacts of executed actions. For this to be possible, all staff members cannot be replaced at the same time when the time has come to change manning. However, further investigation is required to determine which indicators can be deceptive and which are appropriate to assess when the mission is moving towards long-term objectives despite a rapidly changing environment.

A crucial element of any assessment is the collection and management of requested data and information in order to be able to determine the progress of the mission. This is especially true in a multinational civil-military operation where different components have different responsibilities; conflicting approaches on how to achieve the expected effects; and competing interpretations of the situation on the ground. Based on the experiences from this study, it is crucial to adopt a systematic and structured approach to the assessment of all lines of operations, whether they are led by civilians or by the military.

In the case of *feedback to planning,* the study shows that the problem areas were time constraints, difficulties in interpreting the results and learn from the results. The results show that the PRT OPORDER was not revised, but new FRAGOs were made. Assessment was usually performed after completed operations and at the end of the rotation in form of AAR and Lessons Learned. With this way of working, there is a risk that the feedback does not happen when it is actually necessary and that the PRT does not take into account the reasons to change planned operations as they occur. This finding is in line with Mehargs, (2009) research in this area.

In order for the Joint Command to be able to assess the overall progress of the operation it is important to have functioning collaboration between the RC and PRT levels. This study showed that there was poor coordination concerning assessment results between the branches at the RC North. This led to confusion about what kind of information was needed and available. It also added to the workload of the PRT staff that had to report the same assessment results over and over again. The RC level has to adopt a more coordinated approach towards the PRT level with regard to collection of assessment results in order to be able to adjust the OPLAN as well as function as the intermediate between the PRT and Joint Command. Also, there is a need for a more structured and systematic use of measurements and tools, e.g. a database, for the compilation of results. If this is met it would contribute to a more robust platform for the management of evidence based assessment results.

Tracking progress in a complex and fast-changing intervention like Afghanistan, where several actors are involved, is problematic. Nevertheless, in order to respond effectively to changes and to gain initiative, the PRT needs to improve the ability to measure progress against the operational plan and the environment itself. Furthermore, if the results from the assessment of progress are not systematically fed back to planning, the value of such activity will be limited. Therefore, it is imperative that the link between planning and assessment is reinforced. Feedback to the current plan is a vital mechanism to accomplish this.

This study has identified incentives to improve the current ability to conduct assessment of progress. The participants themselves believe that a common framework of suitable methods and terminology is key to improve the ability to conduct assessment. They also believed that more and adequate training prior the mission is absolutely necessary. In this respect, it is important to reflect on what the staff needs to know about other sectors in the society. It is crucial that commanders and their staff have an open mind and understanding for all actors of importance. In addition to that, the organization within the PRT also needs to be reviewed. It is of great importance to have specialized staff with responsibility for assessments and compilation of results. As seen in this study, there is otherwise a risk of losing important information and baselines to measure against in the future.

Concluding Remarks

The study has shown that there are several challenges associated with assessing progress of multifunctional missions. Not only must the assessment staff be able to identify suitable indicators of progress but they must also relate all observed changes to the overall strategic landscape in the environment. Results from assessment of progress are imperative to ensure that operations do not affect complex environments negatively and that missions are in line with the adopted strategy.

Experience from this study indicates that it is vital to have a well managed relationship with the host country's authorities and armed forces. If so, these actors could contribute positively to the assessment process and contribute to more trustworthy results. Furthermore, if these and other relevant actors can agree on the operational objectives it might be possible to accomplish a more comprehensive approach to assessment of progress.

Having that in place, it is crucial to adopt a systematic and structured approach to the assessment of all lines of operations, whether they are led by civilians or by the military. In this respect, the RC level has to adopt a more coordinated approach towards the PRT level concerning data collection and information management to improve organizational responsibility.

In order to respond effectively to changes and to gain initiative, the PRT needs to improve the ability to measure progress against the operational plan and the environment itself. Further investigation is required to determine which indicators can be deceptive and which are appropriate to assess when the mission is moving towards long-term objectives despite a rapidly changing environment.

In order to accomplish a more rigorous process, it is imperative that the link between planning and assessment is reinforced. Feedback to the current plan is a vital mechanism to accomplish this, but there is a need to develop more structured and systematic measures and use of tools.

Finally, the PRT need to improve their competence and capacity to conduct assessment of progress. The recommended measures to accomplish that, are purposeful recruitment and adequate education and training prior the mission in theatre as well as manning of specialized staff like Operational Analysts (OA) that can bridge normal personnel rotations.

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Annex A – The interview questions

Sub study one

Sub study one focused on three parts, one for each of the three variables that were hypothesized to have an effect on assessment - input/guidelines, the assessment itself, and feedback to current plan.

Part 1: Input/guidelines

The questions focused on the objectives in the plan to find out the basic terms for the assessment, and the possible problems with this perspective. The selected questions in this area were: (1) what were the main challenges/problems in identifying what to assess? (2) Did you have short-, medium-, and long-term goals/objectives/effects? (3) Were all these goals/objectives/effects strictly military (relation to other actors and overall goal)?

Part 2: The assessment in practice

The questions focused on assessment variables and identifying opportunities and limitations with the actual assessment work. The selected questions in this area were: (1) What were the main challenges/problems in assessing the progress of the mission? (2) Which were the most important assessment variables? (3) What did you assess and why? What did you want to assess? Was there anything you did not assess (failed to assess, refrained from assessing)?

Part 3: Feedback to planning

The questions focused on if/how the result from the assessment work was fed back to the planning process to determine if the assessment had any effect on current plans. The selected questions in this area were: (1) What were the main challenges (problems) in using the results from the assessment? (2) Did the assessment have any effect on the plan(s) - If so, what effect? If not, why? (3) How did the assessment feed back into the plan (in what way)?

Sub study two

Sub study two focused on interaction issues and was divided into three parts. Part one examined how the operational objectives were stipulated and shared. Part two examined external and internal collaboration during the assessment work. Part three collected the interviewees view on necessary improvements.

Part 1: Operational objectives

The questions focused on the configuration and design of the operational objectives as well as on how they were stipulated and shared. The selected questions in this area were: (1) were all of the actors concerned aware of the objectives and did they share and accept them? (2) How were the objectives designed? (3) In which plans and documents were the objectives stipulated? (4) Did the higher echelons provide objectives that were possible to assess at the tactical level?

Part 2: External and internal collaboration during assessment

The questions focused on external and internal interaction issues concerning the assessment work. The selected questions in this area were: (1) did any system, structure or process exist to integrate assessment results into the organization? (2) Which aspects were included in the assessments, e.g. military, gender? (3) When during the mission/operation was the assessment conducted? (4) Did any special function responsible for assessments exist? (5) Who was the receiver of the assessment results, i.e. function, rank etc.?

Part 3: The need for improvements

The questions were designed to capture the participants' views about what needs to be improved. The selected question in this area was: (1) what needs to be done to make assessment in the field easier?