A Military Guide to Accessing Research on Fragile States

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As of 2011, 73 percent of active component soldiers in the U.S. Army had deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan , experiencing firsthand the complexity of getting things done in ungoverned and under-resourced places. A new breed of civil-military structures was born during the wars —including Provincial Reconstruction Teams, the Task Force for Business Stabilization Operations, and the Human Terrain System — to bring civilian knowledge and perspectives to bear on military operations. But as major ground operations wound down, these structures were mostly done away with. The armed forces are left with a paradoxical situation: a generation of service members who have an unprecedented appreciation of the need for civilian knowledge in fragile states, alongside an absence of structures to provide such knowledge at the tactical level. While such expertise is available within USAID and State, these institutions face personnel and budget constraints and focus their support at the strategic level. As natives of the research community, we've seen the military reach out to NGOs and academics again and again trying to establish formal liaisons or define universal best practices. But formal, top-down approaches are both high-risk and low-reward for most non-government researchers and practitioners. Effectively tapping into this body of knowledge requires a new strategy: The military should focus on building long-term but informal relationships with intermediaries in the non-governmental development and humanitarian communities who can act as guides to the civilian knowledge base.

The value of such civilian knowledge is very high, especially in phase four stability operations or phase zero "shaping" operations. Researchers at universities and NGOs are studying topics like:

But navigating this learning is challenging. Rigorous evaluations show that the impacts of governance and poverty alleviation interventions are context-specific and often very different from their intended effects. For instance, micro-loans for small businesses, once hailed as a panacea that would lift entrepreneurs out of poverty and create jobs in their communities, has shown relatively disappointing results when rigorously evaluated. Based on randomized trials in India, South Africa, Bosnia, and the Philippines, it appears that increasing microfinance access did not, as experts had long claimed, produce sweeping transformations in people's lives. It did not significantly change women's power within their own households, or cause businesses to grow dramatically.

The first step in using research is simply to know what kinds of topics are being studied and by whom. There are sources to look at for "research translation" — outlets that specialize in producing high-quality research on conflict, poverty, and development and in distilling it for implementer audiences, including:

- The Empirical Studies of Conflict Project (ESOC) is a consortium of professors who identify, compile, and analyze micro-level conflict data and information on insurgency, civil war, and other sources of politically motivated violence worldwide, often in collaboration with governments.

- The Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) is a network of researchers based at MIT who conduct randomized evaluations of anti-poverty programs. They also house a policy team, which produces implementer-oriented summaries of the latest research from their network.

- [Political Violence at a Glance](#) is a blog run by political science professors whose stated goal is to "anticipate the questions you have about violence happening around the world and to offer you simple, straight-forward analysis before anyone else does."

Of course, assigning service members to read every new study would be deeply impractical and would not be enough in any case. A deep dive into the literature will expose contradictions and puzzles: two studies which look at the same question but reach different conclusions or would support different courses of action. The ability to understand why these contradictions arise (Is it a difference in statistical methods? A different framing of research questions? A contextual difference that has implications for *where* the results apply?) is something that is acquired only through training. Understanding what lessons an implementer should take from a group of studies takes real-world experience in translating research into action. For this, military units need to build the capacity to reach out to day-to-day users of this research, and gain their insight into how to apply the complex body of learning.

But how do you get such people to engage? The kinds of people you want are rarely motivated by consulting fees, both in the research and implementation communities. Getting tenure at top universities (essentially a lifetime appointment) pays off financially in the long run, but depends on publishing a large number of papers in top journals. Taking time out to disseminate the results of research to the non-academic community can seriously damage their career prospects. Even collaborating with the military on potentially publishable research projects can be risky. For a young scholar, two failed projects can mean the difference between having many job offers and having to leave academia altogether. Forging relationships with development practitioners can be equally tricky. These individuals are rarely financially motivated and the fact that their home organizations have projects in the same area of operations means that it is problematic for them to visibly work with the armed forces in-country. The very thing that gives them a valuable perspective — the focus on long-term peace and prosperity irrespective of political considerations — also means that their goals are not necessarily aligned with those of the U.S. military.

To fill this knowledge gap, the military must also overcome a cultural gap, learning to engage informally with individuals rather than contractually with institutions. Because the incentives of academic and development institutions do not incline them to form connections with the military, the best bet is to seek out *individual* intermediaries. Find people who are disposed towards helping the military operationalize the lessons that they produce and use in their daily work, and form long-term relationships with them.

Such people are out there. Large implementing organizations like the Mercy Corps or the International Rescue Committee have entire departments dedicated to advising their field offices on the latest research and best practices. The staff members of these departments stay abreast of research in their area of specialization and spend their professional lives translating this research into action in difficult contexts. And many of them understand the value of engaging with the military because they have worked in places where the U.S. military and its allies have tried to advance development goals.

If you can provide such professionals the opportunity to leverage their knowledge to improve the quality of non-kinetic operations, this cadre of people could act as informal advisors. The development community has recognized that ongoing discussion with military counterparts is necessary, and civilian-military panels at forums like the annual [InterAction meeting of NGOs](#) are common. Service members can use these venues to meet counterparts with experience in certain regions or topics. As emphasized above, trying for formal contractual relations is likely to be risky and off-putting for the kinds of people you want to learn from. Rather, the military should seek to build long-term professional relationships with people who can help units reach into the necessary research and practical knowledge when the time comes. For example, [the Mitra Network](#) is a group of development professionals who provide long-term, independent advising to units deployed in fragile states. Mitra's goal is steady-state engagement between military and civilian practitioners that fosters a process of continual learning and adaptation to the realities of insecurity and conflict.

Different humanitarian and development professionals will be motivated to engage for different reasons (and there may be some who do not wish to engage at all). The best thing that you can offer potential civilian counterparts is a

respectful interest in learning and exchanging ideas. This is a group of people with tremendous experience and expertise who care deeply about outcomes in fragile and conflict-affected states, but are often frustrated at the actions of political and military actors in those spaces. Mutual trust and understanding will need to be built up over a long period of interaction, so it is crucial to begin forming these connections long before you need to call on them. If you build up trust and rapport, people in this community can act as navigators for the body of research you want to tap into, pointing towards relevant studies and, most importantly, helping you understand how to apply those results to practical situations.

Bringing this body of knowledge to bear on the military's lines of effort will require the kind of long-term engagement that the United States has applied building military-to-military ties with our allies. Just as we have specializations dedicated to liaising with these foreign defense forces and understanding their strengths and limitations, we need a cadre of service members who know how to speak to and work with individual intermediaries such as development practitioners. This is a task at which the modern U.S. military can and should excel.

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Image: U.S. Army