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A Strategic Design Approach to Crafting Acceptance Strategies[1]

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From 2005 through 2010, the Security Needs Assessment Protocol (SNAP) project at the United Nations Institute of Disarmament Research has been working to improve the field-level effectiveness of peace and security programming by the United Nations and its partners. The project's attention has been focused on two distinct but related activities: A) devising and field-testing new methods for generating local knowledge and B) the applying local knowledge to the design of projects and programmes.

Our work has been deliberately situated at the nexus among security, development and humanitarian action. While designed within the UN system, SNAP was not designed exclusively for it. By focusing on cultural research for the benefit of designing actions in local context, SNAP is of use whenever the local and the international encounter one another in a set of practices (such as receiving or providing aid, engaging in development projects, or building community security).

In recognizing a gap between "best practices" and actual field-level realities, SNAP is structured as a "best process" approach to programme design, one that closes the gap between current best practices and field-level realities. The process begins with the assumption that effective programming for local communities starts with local knowledge, and that local knowledge is best applied through an innovative process of design.

In our efforts over the past five years we have learned some valuable lessons for the design of humanitarian staff security strategies that are trying to achieve local acceptance. These lessons hold the potential for taking us beyond mere observations that "local perceptions about humanitarian action matter", and towards the achievement of deep understandings about local social systems relevant to the design of appropriate local conduct.

Making this move, however, is not only about institutional adaptation and evolution. It is about the development of better methodologies for the gathering

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and use of local information that can assist and improve humanitarian efforts. Even modest efforts towards this end can save lives — both staff lives and those of beneficiaries.

An upsurge of interest in "local perceptions"

A 2005 study conducted by the Feinstein International Famine Center at Tufts University investigated whether or not peace support operations (PSOs) and assistance agencies (AAs) "tend to define security in their own terms, with little cross-referral, and that the security needs, aspirations and priorities of the local communities are imperfectly understood by both the military and humanitarians."[2]

The study reported that, in the three places investigated (Afghanistan, Kosovo and Sierra Leone):

> PSOs, AAs and local communities constitute three distinct but overlapping worlds, with significantly different understandings of peace and security. As regards the outside actors—that is, PSOs and AAs—some of these differences, as would be expected, are due to institutional mandates, agendas, and functions. Others are due to their limited interest in, and analysis of, local community perceptions. Local communities have their own histories, agendas, idiosyncrasies and perceived needs as well.

The authors concluded that there is a value to "increased assessment and analysis of local perceptions" and that the systematic investigation of local perceptions, "is essential for effective programming as well as of enhancing the acceptability of outside agencies."[3]

Likewise, in a recent issue of *Humanitarian Exchange* in 2009 Medicine Sans Frontier, also expressed a growing interest in "perceptions" as they pertain to acceptance strategies.[4] Haddad explained that,

> A lack of awareness of how we are perceived is proving to be a growing impediment to the effective implementation of programmes. This may lead to security risks and reductions in access and services. Although looking to the population for a better understanding of how NGOs are perceived might seem obvious, it has taken the humanitarian community a long time to put this into practice.

"Putting this into practice", at one level, has meant conducting assessments in order to learn about perceptions. But, as explained in ALNAP's 2010 *State of the Humanitarian System Report*[5],:

> Despite improvements … humanitarian actors felt that needs assessment remained a weakness in the system. Evaluations and beneficiary consultations continue to note problems of multiple assessments without sufficient follow-up. Beneficiaries continue to be inadequately consulted and involved in assessments and subsequent programme design.

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2   Antonio Donini, Larry Minear, Ian Smillie, Ted van Baarda and Anthony Welch, Mapping the Security Environment: Understanding the Perceptions of Local Communities, Peace Support Operations, and Assistance Agencies, 2005, p. 52.

3   Donini, et. Al (2005) p. iv.

4   Saleem Haddad (2009) Perception and Acceptance at Community Level: The Case of MSF in Yemen, in Humanitarian Exchange, Issue 45, December 2009. Available at http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=3051

5   Harvey, Paul, Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, Glyn Taylor, with Victoria DiDomenico, and Lauren Brander (2010) The State of the Humanitarian System:Assessing Performance and Progress. A Pilot Study, ALNAP. Overseas Development Institute.

It is now both well documented and widely accepted that understanding, responding to, and helping craft local perceptions is a matter of key concern. As such, this new direction for research and operational conduct orients us towards a kind of knowledge that we now need to seek out, as well as new techniques for its application. It is helpful, though, to remember that this new recognition for better understanding local cultural systems and communication is not a new field of study or application. It is simply new to humanitarian action. And that makes possible some new forms of cooperation for positive operational effect.

From local perceptions to local knowledge

As far back as 1962 the philosopher J.L. Austin wrote that the meaning of one's actions is not necessarily what one intends but rests as well upon how these actions are interpreted by others, and it is such interpretations that explain the social import of one's actions.[6]

If, as Feinstein shows us, the significance of our presence in some local scene is going to be made sense of with local systems of interpretation, then the implication for our work is clear: We need to know what meanings our actions have in particular communities —those in which we hope to be of service — in order that we can design lines of action that will be acceptable while, of course, holding out the possibility that a solution might not, in some cases, be there to find.

Likewise, if it is true that the type of local knowledge to which we here refer is mission critical for successful local security efforts, then we now need to advance a rigorous — but rigorously pragmatic and cooperative — way of doing research. Currently, we are not yet there. We need to move beyond what Donini (et al) call "our perceptions of their perceptions" and towards what Clifford Geertz — the anthropologist who coined the term "local knowledge" — called "understanding of understandings not our own."

Towards a New Research Programme for Humanitarian Action

On 23 November, 2009, the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, the Conflict Research Unit at Clingendael, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands co-hosted a workshop on Strategic Design in Public Policy: Revisiting the Knowledge- to-Action Nexus.

The background paper to this event stated that, "[f]or the knowledge-to-action nexus to function well, and in the service of better projects and programmes, new attention needs to be directed towards fundamental challenges, in both the generation and application of knowledge in public policy, that have heretofore been ignored or unrecognized."

The outcome document from the event, *Hague Conclusions from the Workshop on Strategic Design in Public Policy,* is co-signed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNIDIR and Clingendael. The subject of the *Conclusions* is the creation and application of research to the design of social actions. While the workshop focused thematically on community security, the implications are more wide-reaching. In point number two of that agenda, the *Hague Conclusions* noted that:[7]

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6   Austin, J.L. (1962) *How to Do Things with Words.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. See in particular the discussion about illocutionary force and perlocutionary force, to see how the "illocutionary intent" of humanitarian actors is not, and cannot be assumed to be the same as the "perlocutionary force" of what is being achieved from the local point of view. And since Austin, ethnographers of speaking have discovered a wide range of data, throughout the world, suggesting deep-seated cultural dispositions in the codes that people use to make such interpretations of others' actions (see, for example, Gerry Philipsen, *Speaking Culturally: Explorations in Social Communication*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1992., pages 128-131)

7   The *Hague Conclusions* can be found on the webpage for the Security Needs Assessment Protocol project

Attention needs to be directed to the means by which knowledge is generated, and the ways in which it is used. In particular:

- There needs to be discussion about the kinds and sources of knowledge needed in order to take different forms of responsible action in the public domain

- There needs to be greater clarity on the roles, responsibilities and vested interests of parties that are involved in bringing knowledge to action in public policy

- There needs to be creative attention directed towards, and the improvement of, the design processes that bring knowledge to action

From our experience in working with numerous governments and international organizations over the past several years, it is our strong impression that there is widespread dissatisfaction over research and its use in the humanitarian sector. This reflects issues of quality, timing, and applicability among other matters, and perhaps goes some way towards explaining why research is always cut from budgets when times constrict resources. But evidence-based programming is not a fad. It constitutes the professionalization of the sector and opens both challenges and rewards for those committed to it.

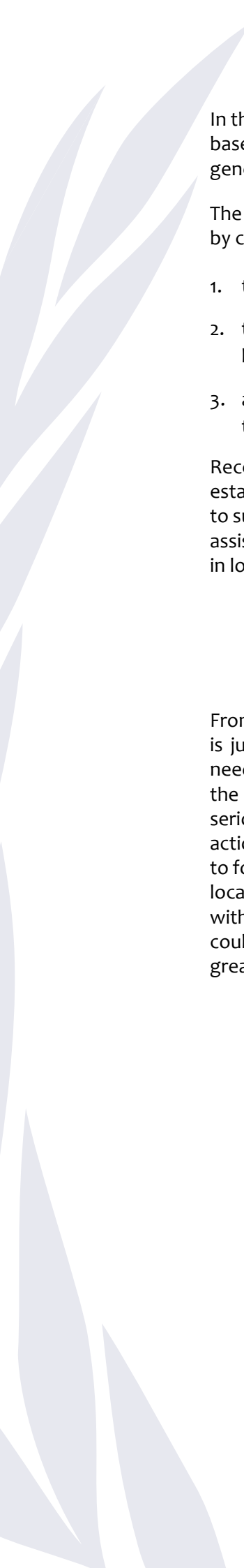## The Conceptual Framework for Strategic Design

It is hard to generate local knowledge to better understand and design local action. In social research, as in life, everything seems to be connected. So in trying to understand context, researchers often try and tackle the vast array of themes that could be implicated in the matter of staff security. Similarly, many assessment tools also assert the importance of learning about context, and therefore direct assessors to consider history, religion, tribal relationships, class, race, gender, power, perceptions, kinship systems, political systems, cultures of violence and more. But with little or no guidance on just what aspects of these complex phenomena are relevant for addressing the matter being assessed, such an endeavor can feel akin to searching for a needle in a haystack without knowing a needle looks like. We could be staring at valuable knowledge, but in the absense of a conceptual framework to select phenomena to study and them employ towards a clear end, we have no basis upon which to recognize or use it.[8]

However common, this approach to attending generally to context does not facilitate sufficient learning to inform action. In the absence of a conceptual framework to guide choices for the selection of social phenomena to study, and a means of interpreting the phenomena observed, research is inevitably undisciplined even as it may be mistaken for being "multidisciplinary". While a portrait can be readily painted from such a rich selection of thematic material, the process is too often fraught by the arbitrary selection of facts and stories. The interpretations — as from dreams — can often tell us more about ourselves and our own biases than the world we seek to understand.[9]

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at UNIDIR: http://www.unidir.org/bdd/fiche-activite.php?ref_activite=337

8   This error goes some way towards explaining the dissatisfaction that many practitioners feel when trying to use descriptive, but utilimately inapplicable, research.

9   This severely limits not only its soundness and validity, but also its very utility and ethical use. In the effort to "do no harm," one should never forget the harm done to the world through poor social research. It is worthwhile to revisit *The Mismeasure of Man*, by Stephan J. Gould to recall some of the injustices perpetuated by poor social research and decisions made under its guidance.

In the final analysis, we arrive at a position that foregrounds the need for local knowledge based on the rigorous study of local social systems, while facing the challenges over generating this knowledge and also applying it — as the Hague Conclusions underscore.

The strategic design approach advanced by Miller/Rudnick responds to these challenges by conceptualizing the movement of research to action through three distinct steps:

1. the generation of local knowledge through local strategies research;

2. the explicit and systematic development of situated theories *for* action in given localities and;

3. a new means of bringing knowledge to action through the tools of design and "design thinking."

Recently, the University of Washington, under the direction of Professor Gerry Philipsen, established the Center for Local Strategies Research, which is aligned with, and positioned to support this research programme. Its purpose is "to support research that informs and assists efforts to develop and implement practices and policies for meeting human needs in local communities" with a clear focus on "local knowledge". As Philipsen explains it,

> "Local strategies research" is the investigation of tactical processes for managing and improving social life that are developed in, and indigenous to, a given locale or community. It involves not only local tactics, enacted and articulated, but also local notions of the problematic and the possible in social life.

From our reading of the challenges, staff security — both inside and outside the UN — is just such a problem. As the international community increasingly converges on the need for more systematic local knowledge to inform situated action, and starts to take the design phase of programming beyond the political art and further into the realm of serious engineering, a new global agenda will need to form around the knowledge-to-action nexus for the design of local actions. We believe the time is now ripe for this agenda to form given the wide adoption of acceptance strategies, an appreciation of the need for local knowledge, and the increasing mobilization of the academy to work cooperatively with humanitarian actors. Together, this strategic design agenda for humanitarian action could enrich our capacity to achieve greater operational effectiveness in a context of greater staff security.

About UNIDIR

The United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR)—an autonomous institute within the United Nations—conducts research on disarmament and security. UNIDIR is based in Geneva, Switzerland, the centre for bilateral and multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation negotiations, and home of the Conference on Disarmament. The Institute explores current issues pertaining to the variety of existing and future armaments, as well as global diplomacy and local tensions and conflicts. Working with researchers, diplomats, government officials, NGOs and other institutions since 1980, UNIDIR acts as a bridge between the research community and governments. UNIDIR's activities are funded by contributions from governments and donor foundations.