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Stop the Blanket Militarization of Humanitarian Aid

William G Moseley, *Macalester College*



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Stop the Blanket Militarization of Humanitarian Aid

The U.S. military has performed successful aid missions in war zones. But that doesn't mean it will work everywhere.

BY WILLIAM G. MOSELEY | JULY 31, 2009



U.S. foreign aid has never been perfect, but the seeping of military and antiterrorism initiatives into development work threatens to take humanitarian efforts to a new low.

In an attempt to win the hearts and minds of local populations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. military reasoned that it must demonstrate the concrete benefits of collaborating with Americans in the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban. They used soldiers and other military personnel to build schools and bridges in these countries -- with mixed success. This engendered a tendency to apply the approach anywhere in the world where there was a whiff of al Qaeda activity. To this end, the percentage of U.S. foreign aid channeled through the military increased from 6 to 20 percent worldwide between 2002 and 2007.

But though using the military as a development agency can make sense in a war zone, mixing their two very different missions is enormously problematic in most other contexts.

In the West African country of Mali, where I have been researching agricultural development issues for more than 20 years, there has been low-grade al Qaeda activity occurring in the northern frontier over the past few years. The marginal desert region between Mali and its neighbors is appealing real estate for would-be terrorists because it is difficult to control and monitor. It provides space for camps and opportunities for terrorist cells to tax cross-border trade and occasionally kidnap foreign nationals for ransom. The U.S. government provides assistance to Mali's military to manage and contain the few, mostly foreign, al Qaeda bands in this small area of the country.

But now the U.S. military is getting involved in development work across Mali and in several other countries in the Sahel region of West Africa -- as it did in Iraq and Afghanistan -- despite the *de minimis* al Qaeda threat. Now, military personnel repair schools, wells, health centers, roads, and bridges. Army doctors provide basic treatment and vaccinations. In fiscal year 2008, the Defense Department gave the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) mission in Mali \$9.5 million to run a counterterrorism program, with close coordination between the two. The program provides curriculum advice to Koranic schools and job training for young men (who are seen as highly susceptible to Islamist rhetoric). USAID has also built 14 community radio stations that broadcast programming on peace and tolerance.

But this reframing of aid to Mali within the fight against terrorism could prove counterproductive. The Pentagon has taken its conceptualization of the fight against al Qaeda in war zones and applied it broadly in a peaceful country. In the past, U.S. involvement in West African countries like Mali has focused intently on humanitarian assistance, not a geopolitical agenda.

And there is little reason to think military-supplied aid assistance will work better. Malians may resent it reflexively: The United States has a checkered history and a terrible reputation for its involvement in other African states, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then Zaire) during the Cold War. It can also mean making development take a back seat to other goals -- recipients sense that their welfare is not the real priority and fear political interference. Development aid for its own sake is the best way to maintain strong allies in the region and foster healthy, pluralistic societies.

The U.S. government has long provided such valuable help. Organizations such as the Peace Corps and USAID have worked in Mali for more than 40 years, since it gained independence from France. Volunteers live in villages, speak local languages, and have facilitated community development work for decades, cultivating friendships and lasting positive change. The gains are significant in healthcare, agriculture, forestry, sanitation, small-enterprise development, and education.

Malians have a mostly positive attitude toward the United States as a result -- and President Barack Obama is very popular as well. In contrast, most Malians with whom I have spoken in recent months are deeply suspicious of al Qaeda, which they consider an outside organization dominated by foreigners with little interest in the Malian people.

There have of course been many problems with U.S. foreign assistance (including the provision of aid to dictators), but many of these failures occurred because lasting development was not the first priority. But skilled aid workers have the soft skills, historical and cultural knowledge, and technical expertise needed for effective development. The U.S. military, on the other hand, is good at fighting and building temporary infrastructure -- not human development.

As such, recent attempts by the U.S. military to become involved in development in Mali and its neighbors make little sense. The United States is already viewed positively by the local population. Other agencies are better positioned to facilitate and have a track record of positive change. When the military becomes involved in development work, the local population comes to see these efforts as part of a larger military campaign. And that's a dangerous precedent to set.

Flickr user Peter Casier and the World Food Programme

William G. Moseley is associate professor of geography, and director of the African Studies Program, at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minn. He is author of Taking Sides: Clashing Views on African Issues.

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