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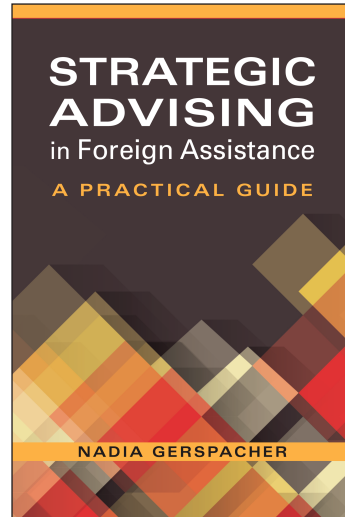
Strategic Advising in Foreign Assistance: A Practical Guide

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1

Introduction

THIS BOOK OFFERS A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE ART OF “strategic advising.” Strategic advising is a tool used by the international community to build the capacity of governments to govern societies emerging from conflict or transitioning from authoritarian to democratic regimes. A strategic adviser is sent by the international community to work alongside a high-ranking official in a transitional or postconflict state and offer guidance that can contribute to the development of effective policies and procedures. Like the related but distinctively different tasks of training and mentoring, strategic advising is fundamentally an exercise in transferring knowledge. Transferring knowledge is just one of the approaches to strengthening capacity in fragile or postconflict environments, but it is a key component.

Capacity-building endeavors are not new, but the way in which they are conducted is. The old model of building capacity entailed transferring capital and individuals from stable, wealthy countries to unstable, usually poor countries to implement foreign assistance projects. That model is now largely discredited and has been replaced by a paradigm that emphasizes the transfer of knowledge, skills, and information. However, there is no consensus on which knowledge, skills, and information should be shared. In many instances, for example, the only skills that are shared are those required to use the

new equipment that has been transferred as part of a foreign-assistance package. This approach is gradually coming to be recognized as the final—not the first—step in an effective capacity-building strategy.¹

Another problem posed by the current approach to knowledge transfer is that it recruits practitioners who are undoubtedly expert in their subject areas, but who are not trained to impart that expertise in a way that local officials will find helpful. The judges, police officers, logistics experts, human resources professionals, and other practitioners who are recruited and deployed know how to manage programs in their own systems, but that expertise is not necessarily relevant to the contexts and cultures in which they find themselves. Moreover, they are doers, not teachers; they are accustomed to getting things done in the way they want them done, not to giving others advice and options that may well be ignored or discarded.

If they are to be effective, strategic advisers need to learn *how* to transfer knowledge and how to mitigate the dynamics that threaten the completion of their mission. For example, a US police officer may have much to offer when it comes to sharing practices and procedures for investigating crimes, strengthening a case so that it is admissible in court, and arresting an alleged perpetrator while respecting civil and human rights. And these skills can be significant assets to a transitional society—but only if they are used to help prepare the individuals in the host society who will actually carry out reforms in that country. The police officer-turned-capacity builder will not practice his craft in the capacity-strengthening mission. Instead, he must act as an information and knowledge broker. A knowledge broker's job is to identify and diagnose needs or gaps in the local system, and to draw from his experience ideas and approaches that fit the local context and can contribute to the functioning of the local system.

The transfer of knowledge, skills, and information is a complex process with many moving parts. It requires a keen understanding of the various factors that can indicate success or failure. This book provides that understanding. In doing so, it fills a gap in the literature. Advising is only slowly coming to be seen as a separate practice from training and mentoring, and in the past advisers had few resources to which they could turn for advice on how to perform their specific role. To create such a resource, I conducted a series of

comprehensive needs assessments and focus groups, debriefed numerous returning advisers, and drew on the knowledge and expertise acquired over five years spent helping to prepare advisers as capacity builders for their missions. I also mined various disciplines and fields such as international education, project planning, social work, and international development for relevant ideas and insights, knowledge, and tools.

This book is not a review of past or current practice; instead, it draws on the lessons of the past to develop a new, more effective approach to strategic advising. It offers a conceptual framework within which to understand the role of the strategic adviser, presents a fund of practical advice on how to perform that role, and lays out a variety of tools that can be used in the field. It explains how to make the shift from an experienced practitioner who practices his craft to a knowledge broker who participates in reform efforts by contributing ideas and supporting the process of planning and implementing reform of government institutions and policies. In short, this book describes what a high-quality adviser looks and acts like and what she hopes to accomplish.

This book is divided into ten chapters (plus a short conclusion), the order of which follows the logic of the advising mission. The book begins where any advising mission should begin: by developing a clear understanding that such a mission is fundamentally a capacity-building activity (Chapter 2), and that it requires the transformation of a practitioner into an adviser (Chapter 3). The book then accompanies the adviser when she arrives in country and begins to develop relationships with the relevant actors, including local officials, stakeholders (such as the officials' staffs), potential beneficiaries of an enhanced service, other agencies that need to be involved in reform efforts, and a variety of international organizations and their staffs.

From the start of the deployment, the adviser needs to manage her expectations, anticipate a variety of commonly encountered dilemmas, nurture institutional buy-in, and start establishing authority, credibility, and legitimacy (Chapter 4). At the same time, the adviser must assess what capacity already exists locally (Chapter 5), thereby beginning to build an in-depth understanding of the local situation, developing respect for what capacity already exists, and avoiding proposing ideas that have already been tried. Equally

important is identifying the local actors who will play key roles in the process of change, either as partners in promoting change, as the targets of change, or as agents of change (Chapter 6).

Equipped with this understanding of local realities, the adviser can then press ahead with the task of knowledge sharing. To accomplish this task effectively, the adviser must not only possess expert knowledge but also know how to transfer that knowledge. The effective adviser appreciates the importance of dialogue, is familiar with the methods and principles of adult learning, and is sensitive to the trauma that many local actors will have experienced (Chapter 7). Relationship building lies at the heart of the adviser's work, especially the task of building a relationship with the adviser's "counterpart"—the official whom the adviser has been deployed to work alongside and support. The adviser must be aware of the various stages through which the adviser-counterpart relationship should progress, and must be careful to adopt a constructive, supportive, respectful approach at each of those stages. Throughout, he must recognize the essential elements of an effective working relationship: mutual respect, trust, good rapport, cultural adaptability, language sensitivity, capable interpreters, denationalized models, and professional distance (Chapter 8).

The adviser has to work within an environment crammed with a multitude of actors with differing interests, goals, approaches, and cultures. Learning how to coordinate with these actors, especially the international ones, is invaluable if the adviser wants to avoid duplicating, complicating, undermining, or being undermined by the work of those actors (Chapter 9).

All the adviser's efforts will count for nothing if they do not continue to bear fruit when the adviser's deployment ends and she heads home. In other words, the adviser needs, from the start to the completion of her mission, to build sustainability into her capacity-building activities. Promoting sustainability requires recognizing the major obstacles to the development of sustainable systems and solutions, and abiding by principles that make it possible to overcome those obstacles in each of the five phases of the advising mission (Chapter 10).

The switchover between an outgoing and an incoming adviser can be a trying time for everyone concerned, including the counterpart and his staff, who may see projects nurtured by the outgoing

adviser neglected by her replacement, and whose patience may be taxed by a new arrival who wants to ask the same questions that were already answered for the benefit of the outgoing adviser. To ensure that her work is not wasted and that the confidence of local actors in the advising mission is not severely dented, the outgoing adviser should engage in continuity planning. This involves carefully documenting the information that the adviser acquired at each of the five phases, and passing this documentation on to the incoming adviser (Chapter 11).

The book directly addresses strategic advisers, yet the awareness, knowledge, and tools presented in the following chapters should be of interest to anyone working to support change in transitional societies. To build capacity in society, everyone—from foreign advisers to local elites to everyday citizens—needs certain tools and skills. While numerous international bodies and many US agencies agree that capacity building is vital, until now there has not been a book that offers an academically well-informed and practitioner-friendly explanation of how to build capacity. The ultimate goal of this book is to help everyone working to promote well-functioning government institutions capable of delivering enhanced services to citizens and of managing conflict peacefully.

Note

1. David H. Bayley and Robert M. Perito, *Police in War: Fighting Insurgency, Terrorism, and Violent Crime* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2010).

