

A pair of hands, one on the left and one on the right, are shown from the wrist down, holding a small, vibrant green plant seedling with several leaves. The hands are positioned over a dark, rich soil surface. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the skin and the soil.

WORKING

with the

A F G H A N S

By

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International donors need to improve the way
they deliver assistance to Afghanistan

In the 20th century,

the international community repeatedly failed to facilitate the stabilization of Afghanistan at crucial stages of its development. This failure has caused a boomerang effect, making subsequent re-engagement by international actors more costly for both the Afghans and the international forces involved. The United States and the United Kingdom did not support the reforms of Afghan King Amanullah Khan back in the 1920s, and similar opportunities were wasted in the 1950s by ignoring then Prime Minister Mohammad Daud's cooperation inquiries and his drive for Afghan modernization. As a result, Afghanistan drifted into the Soviet sphere of influence. Later on, the international community did not engage and effectively manage the post-Soviet-Afghan war chaos in the 1990s, a perfect example of how sudden departures can leave behind poorly equipped governments.

Darulaman Palace, built in 1923 by reformist King Amanullah Khan to house the Afghan parliament, was destroyed in the civil war. The Afghan government has proposed rebuilding it but lacks money for the project. REUTERS



2014, the deadline set for NATO withdrawal, is approaching fast. However, there are strong indications that NATO-led military operations might end even sooner. After that, the primary focus of international assistance will be “civilian boost,” or engagement in governance capacity building and development cooperation. This shift sets a significant milestone for the international community’s engagement in Afghanistan, as well as inviting a sober self-assessment of what has been achieved and what still needs to be done. Civilian-led efforts have been ongoing in Afghanistan since the beginning of the current war, but have not been as successful as desired. Bearing in mind the tight drawdown schedules currently on the table and predicted reductions in international aid, there is little hope that civilian efforts will succeed. The success of these efforts can only be achieved as a result of serious self-critical evaluation, in which shortcomings are acknowledged and appropriate changes pursued.

GOVERNANCE, RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT

Since the early years of NATO engagement in Afghanistan, there seems to have been a basic understanding of what needs to be done to develop well-functioning institutions and basic infrastructure that would allow for a successful exit strategy. However, those requirements have not found their way into a clearly defined and universally agreed strategy implemented through cooperative development policies. If we take a look at the pillars of the International Security Assistance Force, *security* has received most of the Allies’ attention; *reconstruction and development* have brought some progress but at the perceived waste of donors’ funds; while strengthening *governance* has performed the lowest so far.

For various reasons, too much focus has been placed on quick-fix solutions. Many existing Afghan institutions are facing serious professionalism and public confidence issues, making it even harder to reform and achieve desired performance outputs within desired deadlines. The Afghan National Police is a good example: The international community, at the cost of sustainability, chose to establish parallel mechanisms that seemed to address issues much more efficiently, such as the creation of the much debated Afghan Local Police in Afghanistan’s rural areas. Although this is a short-term solution to urgent problems, it takes resources away from capacity building of original law enforcement institutions that will have to operate long after ad-hoc units are incorporated into the Afghan police force structure.

Few will argue that governing can be based on the army and police alone, even if these forces are functioning well. The government’s legitimacy will depend on its ability to provide services, the most urgent being justice and the rule of law. While the national government is not capable of providing justice around the country, the Taliban are more than happy to provide these services in their own distorted way. Thus, to prevent Afghanistan from transforming from a criminalized war economy to a criminalized and unstable peace economy, one of the most urgent requirements is building a relevant judiciary and other law enforcement structures.

If measured by treasure and promises, investments in development cooperation and governance building have yet to yield matching results. Measuring inputs, rather than outputs, has created an illusion of current or impending success. This provides a distorted picture to the decision-makers and disillusion the Afghans, who do not see the promises and well-advertised enormous expenditures materializing into improvements in their own well-being. Throwing money at a problem as soon as it arises seldom delivers the desired outcome. A more realistic and result-oriented approach is needed.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

A large part of the blame should be shared by the international donor community. An extremely fragmented and nontransparent decision-making system for development cooperation projects has made a truly strategic approach to nation building impossible. The result is an almost annual shifting of priorities and contribution levels that depend on donors’ domestic considerations. Since the early years of engagement in Afghanistan, the ambitions of international donors – in terms of achievable goals – have been constantly shrinking. The Afghanistan National Development Strategy, approved at the Paris Conference for Afghanistan in 2008, has much lower and realistic objectives than the Afghanistan Compact, adapted at the London Conference in 2006. Both documents acknowledge the need to channel a much larger portion of development and reconstruction funding through the Afghan government. Nevertheless, in 2010, when the Kabul Conference took place, 80 percent of international assistance went directly to projects in the field without first passing through Afghan ministries. Commitments made by the international community at the Kabul Conference aim to reduce this amount to 50 percent by 2012. Donors still prefer to manage assistance programs themselves or allocate



Children attend a ribbon cutting to celebrate the reopening of a school in Herat Province. The school was damaged during fighting but rebuilt with foreign aid.

referenced aid to projects they are more comfortable with. However, this also increases fragmentation of aid, making assistance much harder to coordinate and choosing which programs to support much more dependent on shifts in donor countries' domestic policies.

Even with a coherent strategy for stabilizing the country and developing governance, it would be a utopian task to implement it with the current donor-driven management system in place. Donor agencies and officials often do not even communicate among themselves. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has not been allotted any real authority, making real-world coordination of civilian assistance impossible. Donor coordination has not been systematic – it more often than not depends on individual initiatives and personal relations. In the end, the system does not look much different from the Afghan-style patronage networks that foreign donors criticize so extensively.

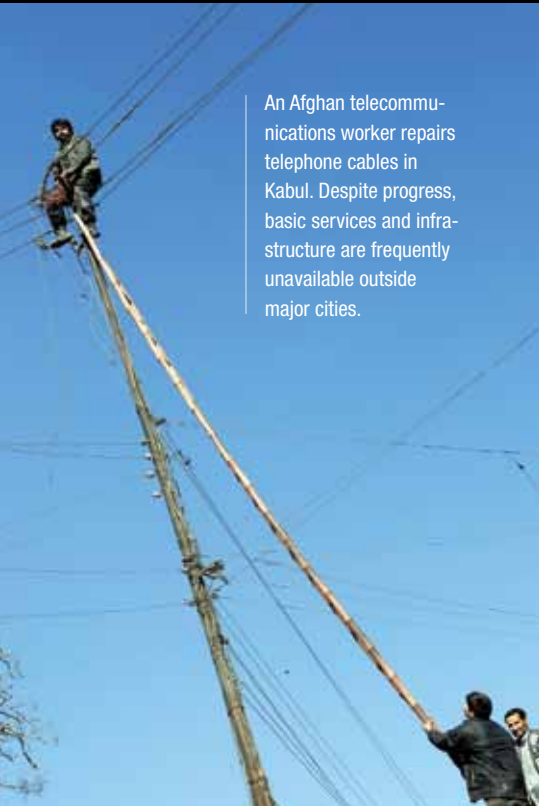
Development assistance and governance strengthening efforts, of both Afghan government and donor agencies, are also hampered by overreliance on centralized Kabul-oriented organizational structures. Strong and centralized government rule has never been successfully implemented in Afghanistan, despite its 250-year-old history as a unified state. Instead, the most important skill of successful leaders has been the ability to balance various regional and tribal interests. Therefore, the fates of governments and their legitimacy are decided in the regions, not in the capital.

Right now the limits of governance are most obvious in the provinces and districts where executive branches are underfunded and lack capacity, while the legislative ones are insignificant. As a result, services remain undelivered and the population is kept disillusioned about the capabilities of the Kabul government. Nonetheless, many donor agencies and organizations still rely on the expertise of their comparatively populous Kabul headquarters instead of expanding staff into the provinces. This often results in a rather limited understanding of what is really going on in the country and, most importantly, an obscuring of the needs and results of the assistance programs under their administration.

On the other hand, it becomes increasingly difficult to explain the costs of governance and development assistance to the citizens of donor countries, especially those struck by economic hardships. Donor fatigue is increasing, although there are practical considerations that might interest countries in continued engagement in development assistance exercises: Afghanistan, if it achieves administrative and economic self-sustainability, will be a great business partner. Because of its geographical location, it used to be a vital transit crossroads and has the potential to regain this status. It also possesses enormous mineral wealth, which would become available to global markets.

THE CHALLENGE OF 2014

Afghanistan is approaching a time of change, and this important transition to Afghan sovereignty should benefit both Afghans and their international allies. However, as previously discussed, transitioning without sufficient preparation and care would risk wasting the international community's investment in Afghanistan. Therefore, a number



An Afghan telecommunications worker repairs telephone cables in Kabul. Despite progress, basic services and infrastructure are frequently unavailable outside major cities.

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Middle: Afghan President Hamid Karzai, right, and NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen speak at the presidential palace in Kabul in April 2012. Rasmussen renewed NATO's commitment to Afghanistan once combat troops withdraw in 2014.

Bottom: Afghan police officers graduate from a six-week Provincial Reconstruction Team police training program run by Canadian soldiers in Kandahar in February 2010.

of transition-related challenges need to be considered and addressed, each of which requires different inputs to provide satisfactory results.

The first challenge is building capacity in the entire rule-of-law sector, not just security institutions. Direct links between crime and security make issues such as drug trafficking, high crime rates, corruption and the involvement of criminal organizations in politics primary concerns for future stability in Afghanistan. As a result, developing a functional rule-of-law sector may be among the most crucial milestones in achieving long-term peace in Afghanistan.

Nation building is an effort that requires the cooperation of many varied actors. However, there has never truly been donor cooperation in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, trust between Afghans and the international community seems to be at the lowest ebb ever. The recent series of incidents involving international troops resulted in public relations disasters, adding fuel to the fire. On the other hand, increased attacks on international personnel – both military and civilian – by rogue or dissatisfied locals put the whole notion of development cooperation at risk. The killing of advisors in the Ministry of Interior in the winter of 2012, resulting in a significant reduction in civilian activities in Kabul, has already shown the threat that security incidents pose to the “civilian surge.” Upcoming reductions of international troops may place even more limitations on international development workers, without whose advice and oversight many donors may not be willing to entrust money to Afghan institutions.

According to the World Bank, withdrawals of international troops from conflict-affected areas tend to be followed by reductions in civilian aid, with negative implications for economic growth and governance service delivery. Considering the weight of donor contributions in Afghanistan’s budget and their importance to the economy in general, diminishing foreign aid could reduce Afghanistan’s growth rate by 50 percent or more, a factor that could cause the Afghan economy to collapse.

In addition, there are serious problems with efficiently allocating funds from the capital to the provinces and considerable weaknesses in government capacity at subnational levels. With aid levels decreasing and Provincial Reconstruction Teams wrapping up their work, many regions will face economic hardship. It is important not only to sustain development cooperation and governance support levels for many years to come, but also to pay close attention so that this assistance actually reaches intended recipients beyond Kabul.

The challenges faced by the current Afghan government and the international community are no less than before the military operation began. In some sectors, particularly governance and development, the challenges are even greater for the simple reason that these issues were not addressed during the reign of the Taliban and were of secondary importance during the military phase of NATO operations. However, not addressing these challenges

risks throwing Afghanistan back into despair and chaos. Therefore, it is crucial to focus all of the international community’s attention on developing Afghanistan after the troop withdrawal and avoid the temptation to declare victory, leave and forget.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Civilian assistance, although desperately needed, has not achieved the desired goals in Afghanistan, especially in the crucially important fields of developing operational governance and justice systems. However, success here will determine the outcome of stabilization in Afghanistan. Therefore, previous assistance setbacks must be reviewed and acknowledged to build upon those valuable lessons. All involved parties can use the last years of international military presence in Afghanistan to set the stage for improved UNAMA-led civilian assistance mechanisms, including more centralized donor coordination and security provisions for civilian personnel:

- Build development cooperation and governance under the auspices of joint Afghan-UN supervision, using a plan that is long-term oriented. Commitments should be evenly distributed over many years, even if a reduction in annual contributions is initially required. Just as rushing a transition to full Afghan control over security could be catastrophic for stability, sudden and large influxes of nonmilitary assistance could damage development, leading to more waste, corruption and public resentment.
- Channel a much larger proportion of aid through the Afghan government budget to mitigate the adverse economic impacts of declining aid. A transition to Afghan leadership in implementing development projects should be pursued and greater involvement of officials from respective Afghan ministries in management of aid programs should be practiced. However, this should be done with preparation and caution by engaging in concerted efforts to build local capacity and ownership.
- Manage the allocation of resources to the provinces and avoid large differences in spending among them. Development cooperation projects and technical assistance programs should deploy more personnel in the provinces instead of maintaining the current Kabul-centered presence in Afghan government ministries and the headquarters of donor organizations.
- Protect civilian aid workers through increased trust building and provision of security. That will help keep development programs running effectively after 2014.
- Maintain smaller numbers of international forces in the country even after the transition of responsibility to Afghan institutions. An international presence will be required for many years until Afghanistan develops the capabilities to stand alone. Rebuilding a country requires time and patience. □