

Afghanistan

Contested spaces briefing paper

SUMMARY

Few countries demonstrate the challenges of aid delivery in contested spaces and the costs of the politicization and militarization of aid more than Afghanistan. For more than 30 years, it has been embroiled in conflict, and it continues to host the largest deployment of international military and development actors in the world. Tens of thousands of people have been killed by fighting or died in the ensuing humanitarian crisis; and as of August 2013 there were close to 600,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and millions of refugees between Afghanistan and its neighbors.¹ Since 2001, the international community has provided Afghanistan with nearly \$30 billion in humanitarian and development assistance, compared to almost 10 times as much in military aid. The United States is by far the largest donor in all assistance categories.²

Experience from around the world regularly demonstrates that conflict environments are more sensitive to competing interests and face greater human and physical consequences as a result of those competing interests, while all types of access are limited (including to beneficiaries and to information). Violence levels and conflict actors often change in a volatile way, rendering entire aid and development programs more vulnerable to short-term changes of context. Coordination and cohesive aid strategies are strained as actors leave large gaps in delivery because of their different mandates, agendas, capacities, and “red lines.” Clearly, conflict significantly affects the capacity to deliver aid effectively. However despite the familiarity of this argument, the international community has yet to enact the necessary adjustments to its policies. This has had serious consequences that the case of Afghanistan lays bare.

Oxfam research in Kunduz, Nangarhar, and Kabul Provinces reveals that humanitarian and development programs there suffer from the international community’s battle of strategic objectives between counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and development frameworks that has been the Afghan reality. This has created and intensified a gap between policy and reality that undermines aid effectiveness. The gap here refers to the fact that the policies employed by donors, implementers, and Afghan officials frequently fail to

reflect or sync with the reality on the ground, both in terms of designing programs and reacting to accurate impact assessments. Given the magnitude of its 12-year intervention in the country, the international community has much to learn from the experience. Although this briefing paper looks closely at US assistance, the lessons learned through the research are relevant for the entire aid and development sector.

The gap between policies designed by aid actors (particularly donors), and the reality of how they are deployed and their actual impact is visible in the target geographical areas and beneficiary groups that receive aid, as well as project types, methods, and means of engagement. Programs have emphasized quantifiable outputs instead of overall outcomes, and have lacked the coordination and cohesion (internal and external) to achieve long-term humanitarian and development aims such as sustainable livelihoods. Remote management, lack of contact at the point of implementation, and deficient direct engagement with communities (due to politics, insecurity, or pure geographical barriers) have had severe effects on program viability, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) capacity, accountability, and impact.

The research found that aid programs were more effective when donors and implementers created linkages among projects or among actors; developed a detailed understanding of the sociopolitical and conflict context during program planning; and worked on the priorities identified by beneficiary communities. When aid actors failed to do these things, they generated or exacerbated conflict; created risk for beneficiaries and project implementers; alienated the government and a range of other stakeholders; and undermined high priority humanitarian and development objectives.

In order to improve the effectiveness and impact of aid programs across Afghanistan and other contested spaces, donors and implementing organizations should:

1. Base aid priorities and strategies on participatory approaches and the genuine engagement of intended beneficiary communities, local civil society, and local government in the planning, design, implementation, and M&E of all development and humanitarian projects. Implemented programs should be needs driven, based on objectives articulated by the communities and legitimately respected leadership, and transparently communicated.
2. Implement policies, programs, and projects on the basis of in-depth understanding of the social, political, and economic context, and regular, detailed conflict analysis that prioritizes long-term outcomes

and sustainable livelihoods strategies. This has the added benefit of better illuminating what exists and can be built on rather than constantly promoting the creation of something new that has variable levels of legitimacy.

3. Build flexibility into strategic planning and program implementation so that programs can adjust to the changing dynamics characteristic of conflict and post-conflict environments. Special focus should be given to less rigid and less linear log frames and empowering field-based staff with greater authority to adapt to changing circumstances. This will strengthen organizational capacity to adjust to and push back on negative consequences created by the pressure of objectives that jeopardize humanitarian and development work.
4. Carry out common assessments based on agreed principles and standards, including regular assessments of aid beneficiary needs and vulnerabilities, to make sure that aid targets the people who need it, and that particularly vulnerable regions or populations are no longer “invisible.”
5. Ensure that M&E is continuous, realistic, outcomes oriented, and more than just financial reporting; it should go deeper to examine long-term impact, emphasizing qualitative feedback on the social, political, and conflict contexts from local communities and leadership that do not just rely on official structures.
6. Ensure that all projects have clear communication channels and grievance procedures at the community level, so that issues can be addressed before they generate conflict.
7. Realign incentive structures and program policies at the planning stage and throughout project implementation in order to prioritize quality of outcomes rather than quantity of outputs and make impact assessments more accurate and useful.
8. Reduce short-term incentives to program managers to inflate budgets to ensure future finances; instead, create mechanisms to provide long-term funding based on need rather than subjecting programs to annual budget cycles; to increase flexibility, put greater emphasis on core funding rather than solely program-specific financing; and offer longer-term (multi-year) budget support instead of only short-term project funding.

9. Allow program managers and implementers to be more open about the challenges of humanitarian and development activities in the country, including failed activities; more honest and transparent reporting would go a long way toward helping programs to be presented in a realistic light, assessed more accurately, and altered accordingly to make improvements.
10. Harmonize aid priorities and strategies within individual agencies and across development organizations so that aid is more cohesive, making greater efforts to integrate humanitarian inputs with long-term development objectives at planning and implementation stages.
11. Give greater attention to meaningful technical and management capacity building of local actors, especially at the provincial, district, and community level; this should include more substantive use of local partners able to operate more freely in a conflict context.
12. Ensure that development activities are designed to empower existing economic realities—such as actual labor markets and value-chain development—instead of creating overly artificial environments that are unsustainable in the long run without aid inputs.

INTRODUCTION

Embroiled in war for more than 30 years, Afghanistan is stuck in a state of protracted crisis and political violence that has had a devastating impact on the country in terms of human lives, as well as social and physical infrastructure. According to estimates by the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), Human Rights Watch, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), and NATO, among others, nearly 12,000 civilians were killed between 2007 and 2011. Estimates before 2007 are weak but indicate that at least 6,500 civilians were killed directly by the invasion and armed conflict between 2003 and 2007, with many tens of thousands of people dying as a result of the humanitarian crisis that followed. Although these numbers are not yet as high as those for other protracted crises, Afghanistan's conflict has generated extremely high numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). As of August 2013 there were approximately 600,000 IDPs, along with 500,000 refugees from neighboring countries, asylum seekers, and returning Afghan refugees. Meanwhile, the UN Refugee Agency and other refugee organizations estimate that there are still close to 3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Iran, and other Central Asian countries.³

Since 2001, the characteristics of Afghanistan as a “contested space”—an area of persistent, low-intensity conflict—have severely hampered the delivery of humanitarian and development aid. Although the challenges faced in Afghanistan are not necessarily unique, they are more intense and the problems are more clearly manifest than other cases.

Already a widely discussed phenomenon, the politicization and militarization of aid is probably more extreme in Afghanistan than anywhere else and has led to a competition of objectives that has severely undermined aid effectiveness: the debate among international actors favoring the counterinsurgency (COIN), counterterrorism (CT), and development approaches has resulted in competing aims and strategies, including determining which of these frameworks has primacy in determining donor funding and policies.⁴ For example, donors dispute whether it makes more strategic sense to focus development activities in the south, where military and political actors have prioritized their security agenda, or in the north, where arguably the aid would go further to alleviate poverty and lead to sustainable development.

The conflation of COIN and CT terminology (and at times tactics) has created confusion on the ground. Although official definitions vary, for the purposes of this briefing paper, COIN refers to political, military, economic, social, and psychological strategies intended to oppose and forcefully suppress an insurgency. Ultimately it is a competition among the contending actors to mobilize the population in support of their agendas. Counterterrorism refers to the detection and prevention of potential acts of terror, and the response to (and neutralization of) related events and actors. Tactics and strategies adopted by governments and security forces to address terrorist threats and acts range from screenings, metal detectors, and checkpoints in public areas to arrests, prosecutions, raids, assassinations, and military action. Counterterrorism can be part of a broader COIN doctrine, but it focuses narrowly on specific acts of terror rather than mobilization of public support. The development framework emphasizes long-term political, social, and economic objectives. Some of the aid agency representatives and implementers whom we interviewed spoke of “development for development’s sake,” with short-term political and military considerations removed from the equation.

Feedback from Afghan civil society representatives to whom we spoke indicates that “pure” development objectives have never been the priority of international engagement. Instead the intervention since 2001 remains mostly CT- and COIN-focused, with “development” understood as a means to support these efforts. “Stabilization” has been the overriding principle guiding

activities, but stabilization for the purpose of facilitating political and military ends rather than humanitarian and development objectives. The issue is not whether stability is a worthy goal, but what stability actually looks like and the strategies used to achieve it. For development actors, long-term stability comes from representative and legitimate political systems able to manage conflict and change peacefully as well as societies in which rule of law and human rights are respected, basic needs are met, and everyone enjoys security and economic opportunities. However, in Afghanistan, where political and military pressures have been so strong, what qualifies as “stability” and the means to get there have been contested.

An Afghan civil society leader put the problem in these terms:

There is a distinct difference between capacity building to govern and capacity building to fight. The bottom line is that coming into Afghanistan was not about nation building, it has been about COIN and CT, in which development was to be used to fill a gap afterwards. The system in the country has not been built to function but instead to protect security interests. Development priorities were subsumed into power structures and powerbrokers that could provide externally-decided, acceptable versions of security.⁵

Although the military intention to “win hearts and minds” has greatly increased the budget for “development,” using aid to coerce target populations into serving political agendas also skews the fundamental standards and processes of development and humanitarian actors in conflict environments. There is no consensus on who gets to assess and prioritize objectives and decide strategy: target beneficiaries, types of projects and means to achieve them, measures of effectiveness, and success are all different, if not contradictory. Competing objectives among the three frameworks has led to an ever-increasing divergence between the types of aid provided and what communities actually need, a distinct gap between policy and reality that weakens humanitarian and development programs. The gap has emerged because the policies of aid donors and implementers frequently fail to reflect or sync with the reality on the ground, both in terms of initial program design and adjustments made in light of impact assessments. This gap between policy and reality is both intensified by and in turn reinforces the competition of strategic objectives—making the two issues difficult to tease apart.

As part of wider research on aid delivery in contested spaces, Oxfam America’s investigation in Afghanistan involved a series of surveys and in-depth interviews over the course of a month with communities and their leadership, local aid actors and international non-governmental organizations

(INGOs), donors, government officials, and development experts. It examined humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding activities to see how donor and implementer policies and actions have affected aid impact for better or worse, put beneficiaries at risk, and generated conflict in the target areas. The research areas included the provincial center and an outlying district in Kunduz Province in the north and Nangarhar Province in the east (Kunduz City and Imam Sahib district, and Jalalabad City and Kama district, respectively; see map).



The field sites were chosen for their high levels of international donor engagement (particularly by the US government/US Agency for International Development, or USAID, and its contractors) and their different local conflict environments. Whereas Kunduz experiences significant ethnic tension and violence based on widespread political and socioeconomic marginalization (and a high number of armed militias and criminal groups), Nangarhar experiences higher levels of activity and attacks by armed opposition groups, cross-border regional influence (political, security, and economic) from Pakistan, and tribal conflict. The research also included extensive interviews in the Afghan capital of Kabul, where donors, nongovernmental organizations

(NGOs), and aid-implementing organizations have their country headquarters.

Due to the profusion of general literature on aid effectiveness and the politicization and militarization of aid, this paper focuses tightly on the research findings from Kunduz and Nangarhar. Although the competition among CT, COIN, and development objectives is critical to understanding Afghanistan's aid environment and overall context, the aim is to illustrate this by examining the gaps between policy and reality revealed in the research. This examination will allow the specific issues and criticisms raised in the interviews to stand as a case study and a narrative on the challenges to aid and development initiatives in Afghanistan as a contested space.

The key finding of the research is that the gap between policies and reality, underscored by the divergent objectives among the COIN, CT, and development frameworks, has led to international aid interventions that are wrong for the context. The gap results in weaknesses in projects, organizations, and overall coordination that undermine development objectives, and in turn result in ineffective aid and increased conflict. Recognizing the inherent challenges to delivering aid in contested spaces, and the particular complexity of the Afghan context, this paper seeks to expand on what drives this gap at donor and implementer levels and the consequences in Nangarhar and Kunduz. The paper concludes with recommendations aimed at more effective aid in Afghanistan.

Although many of the issues and solutions discussed are probably familiar, and there has been some work by donors to address them, the international community still has not made changes sufficient to address the problems. Given plans for sharp reductions in international troops and assistance in 2014, aid will have a limited role in the coming years. This adds pressure on humanitarian and development actors to "get it right" with what time is left.

THE GAP BETWEEN POLICY AND REALITY

The gap between on the one hand the policies used by donors and implementing organizations, and on the other the reality of impact at the community level is weakening aid and development initiatives in Kunduz and Nangarhar. This gap appears to be driven by a number of factors, each of which is discussed in this section.

REMOTE MANAGEMENT

One of the primary drivers of the policy-reality gap is most donors' reliance on remote management and monitoring of projects—specifically, the physical and theoretical distance and lack of direct communication between many aid actors and the communities they are trying to serve. This is a fact for most contested spaces and is clear even in areas with heightened donor activities and presence, such as Nangarhar and Kunduz. But the reality of remote management and lack of donor contact at the point of aid implementation is that it has undermined donor capacity to decide on appropriate projects and timing of their delivery, monitor and evaluate ongoing programs, and assess the projects' impact or adapt them to a changing local context.

Overly bureaucratic processes and rules developed in a way that is out of touch with ground-level realities have hamstrung implementers and undermined program effectiveness. The problem with delays is one manifestation of this issue: One of the biggest complaints voiced in field interviews is that “everything takes so long that projects risk becoming meaningless.”⁶ Aid agency representatives and the relief community discussed how even funding to respond to the 2011 drought “emergency” took nine months to come through. Meanwhile, implementing partners complained that even approved project proposals can be delayed for more than a year, rendering entire strategies vulnerable to context changes that can make projects anything from weak to impossible.⁷

Remote management has had a severe impact on the capacity to monitor projects, which is key to providing insight on effectiveness and guidance on necessary adjustments. Operating in contested spaces means that many of the large-scale donors sign on with partners and then aim to monitor them. But in Afghanistan this has been incredibly difficult for security and logistical reasons. Donors and implementers alike identify this as a major problem.

One example raised in Nangarhar was the case of a \$42 million contract to build flood protection walls in three provinces. The contract was awarded not directly by USAID but by a presumed subcontractor; the man who thought he had an agreed contract later went to USAID to request payment for the first phase work (\$420,000 worth), but was refused. The result was widespread conflict in all of the communities where there had been work, as the man was unable to pay his employees. According to community elders, this led to several months of violent attacks, until the man was forced to sell all of his properties to make the payments.⁸ To try to avoid similar situations, some organizations have established compliance units and complaint hotlines

particular to each program, so that beneficiaries can try to resolve grievances relating to development projects.

The distance between donor planning and community demands has been a significant problem in Afghanistan and has hurt aid programs. Respondents from both provinces argue that unless projects are developed in consultation with target communities so that beneficiaries themselves can articulate what they need and over what period of time, there is a serious risk that aid will be ineffective, incite conflict, or both. Among the most common complaints are the multiple cases in which project beneficiaries have not been those who most deserve aid in the eyes of the locals. This discrepancy is often blamed on elders and *shuras* (local councils), whom they accuse of being as corrupt as the national government in delivering aid. Implementers in Afghanistan rely on such traditional structures to make their programs culturally appropriate but rarely monitor their own accountability, resulting in negative perceptions toward aid actors and tension in communities.⁹

OUTPUTS OVER OUTCOMES

Afghanistan aid programs have experienced a dangerous overemphasis on outputs instead of outcomes, which has been intensified by the competing objectives of COIN, CT, and development actors. Outputs are activities or services as well as final “products,” whereas outcomes are more directly linked to the effects on beneficiaries or differences made. For example, the number of children who received vaccinations is an output; the resulting reduction in child mortality is an outcome. The output emphasis creates a division between policy and reality that frequently weakens potential positive impact, generates negative community perceptions, and can lead to conflict. This is not unique to Afghanistan or even contested spaces more generally, but the default mode of assessing aid effectiveness by quantifiable outputs is hazardously prevalent in conflict zones. Outputs are easier to measure than quality or long-term impact and usefulness, and they provide easier sound bites in donor-country capitals. But development actors on the ground argue that the value and success of a program should be determined by assessing outcomes.

Institutionally, the approach has focused on the number of projects implemented and the amount of money spent rather than long-term impact. As a donor agency representative said:

Unfortunately our offices and programs have mostly been judged on burn rate [how quickly the budget got spent], not long-term outcomes. Which is easy to do here as we basically never see our projects when they are implemented because we are stuck

*behind walls. Accountability, M&E [monitoring and evaluation] are too easy to glaze over here. Impact assessments seem to barely matter in the big picture.*¹⁰

Although this unofficial policy has been changing, the long institutional emphasis on outputs rather than development outcomes is reflected in the field where it has created weak, conflict-generating projects. One of the examples raised by community leaders and focus groups in Nangarhar was how road construction funded by USAID and the US Department of Defense has actually led to active conflict and violence amongst the local population. Judging project success by the output measure of miles of road built ignored the outcomes of disproportionate development, distorted land value, and years of new inter-tribal violence over those roads, which have severely inhibited sustainable economic development for the area.¹¹

Cash for Work

The popular cash-for-work (CfW) program illustrates the tendency in Afghanistan to prioritize outputs over outcomes. Donors have relied heavily on CfW for two understandable reasons. First, they assume that providing daily wages to local laborers will inject cash into target populations, thus helping alleviate poverty and offering an alternative to joining the insurgency. Second, CfW is one of the few financially quantifiable activities that can be deployed comparatively easily at the community level in a conflict context where oversight and long-term planning are strained at best.

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Given the difficult continuum from relief to development in Afghanistan, there has been an unfortunate tendency by many, particularly aid contractors, to use CfW schemes as a de facto development strategy for job creation and casual labor, and specifically as an easy means of creating the “quick impact” prioritized by political stabilization strategies. Pointing to these activities as outputs has outweighed the importance of understanding how they are used and to what end. In Afghanistan, one of the key challenges has been appropriately identifying the most vulnerable populations in need of such activities, because proponents of COIN often hold opinions that are different from development actors’. CfW is still an important humanitarian tool in certain contexts and has the potential to contribute to longer-term development when used appropriately. Moreover, Oxfam’s global experience indicates that in many humanitarian emergencies, when people lack the money to get sufficient food—even when there are no food shortages—cash interventions are preferable to in-kind food aid. However, as the examples of Kunduz and Nangarhar demonstrate, without the needed community-based impact assessments and oversight, CfW programs have often actually

undermined development objectives, created resentment among communities, and generated conflict.

Community leaders in both provinces complain that poorly planned and executed CfW projects have negatively affected existing community cohesion practices, such as *hashar* activities—traditional community collective action (building canals, flood walls, and local roads, canal cleaning, etc.). They also say these projects have made people “lazy,” because they are waiting for someone to pay them for simple maintenance jobs, such as removing minor debris from a canal instead of taking it care of themselves as they used to.

CfW programs have further generated negative community perceptions of the projects and aid actors. As CfW in many places has been used as a substitute for long-term development activities, the association among CfW, building infrastructure, and “achieving development” has generated tension in two ways. The first is one of waste: For example, in Nangarhar, a community had to rebuild a CfW-supported road five times, because each year floods destroyed it and there was no development project aimed at addressing the flooding.¹² Local people thus see CfW projects as low quality programs that put money in pockets (of the local contractors, not the beneficiaries) rather than developing good infrastructure. Second, CfW generates tension between those who do not see themselves as benefitting from the projects and the communities that have. This is a common complaint, but it becomes a significant problem when it is a reflection of corrupt, non-transparent, or non-participatory processes for identifying target beneficiaries and selecting activities. Feedback from communities in both Nangarhar and Kunduz noted the inter- and intra-community friction that poorly executed (and communicated) CfW projects have produced.

LACK OF COORDINATION AND COHESION

The lack of coordination and cohesion among the multitude of actors trying to operate drives and amplifies the policy-reality gap. Despite the number of efforts prioritizing donor and implementer cohesion, aid coordination still lags in practice. Actions such as the creation of the Joint Coordination Monitoring Board (JCMB) and the introduction of humanitarian clusters (formal sectoral groups of humanitarian organizations that are supposed to coordinate relief efforts and reduce duplication) continue to struggle to link actors’ strategies and activities. Part of this problem stems from organizations’ limited ability to attend multiple coordination meetings—which in their own right often provide more of a veneer than genuine coordination. In the case of local organizations, often the challenge is that these sessions are not always conducted in a language their program implementers understand. Most

importantly, development actors have different priorities and demands from their own donors and mandates. The lack of cohesion is as much strategic as it is operational.

Aid and development programs in Kunduz and Nangarhar have been subject to the “Balkanization” experienced by political and military actors (including USAID and other US government agencies) trying to operate through Afghanistan’s Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs).¹³ Although these programs sought to fill provincial-level gaps in government service delivery, this happened in an ad hoc manner. PRTs (and consequently the programs run through them) ended up with different authority structures and separate rules, aims, outputs, and “development strategies.”

In the case of Kunduz, US government objectives, strategies, and projects were not necessarily aligned with those of the German and Dutch PRT leadership, leading at times to contradictory and weakened programs, according to local community leaders.¹⁴ In Nangarhar, interviewees gave the example of competing veterinary programs, one supported by the US government and the other by local NGOs outside of the PRTs. The two sets of actors had totally different pricing and local investment structures. One organization required people pay a percentage of the price for services in order to support sustainable practices, local veterinary actors, and longer-term financial planning, whereas the other provided services for free. The contradiction distorted the local agribusiness value chain, negatively affecting livelihoods in the area.¹⁵ Overall the varying capacity to engage and the lack of meaningful communication among relevant actors resulted in an incohesive strategy across most of the country.

Aid implementers and civil-society organizations (CSOs) face coordination and cohesion problems similar to those affecting the PRTs: personality-driven meetings, high staff turnover, and limited resources to begin with, which means that any momentum or degree of coordination tends to be fragile. According to local aid and development actors, what is more important is that the focus of donor meetings has so far been largely the high-level issues such as national policies and institutional capacity building, with less time and focus given to planning, implementation, and operational strategies at subnational levels. Budgets for cooperative action are rarely fused or harmonized, either. Agency and international NGO (INGO) respondents all mentioned competition and territorial behavior among implementing actors and government offices, which further inhibit potential synchronization and cooperation. There is some coordination on specific issues (such as the 2011 drought response), but overall cohesion is not what it could be:

The bottom line is that there are different donor priorities and means, which tends to put each of them onto independent paths.... Coordination should be more than just information sharing, it needs to look at cohesion and cooperation of all actors – government, donors, and implementers – in both a strategic and operational way.¹⁶

Coordination within organizations is slowly improving as aid actors begin to think more about linking their own humanitarian and development activities. Evidence from both provinces indicates that at least where organizations are operating on the ground, there has been some information sharing and at times external collaboration among relief actors. The example was raised especially in terms of disaster response.¹⁷ That said, it is clear that development programs have rarely shown the higher degrees of coordination seen in the humanitarian response field because they are challenged by the less uniform nature of their objectives, operational mandates, and red lines. Linkages that do exist between activities tend to be informal, ad hoc, and personality driven, despite the high number of bodies aimed at ensuring cohesive action (including donors, country directors' meetings, various working groups, sectoral clusters that are supposed to ensure humanitarian coordination, etc.). For example, some of the organizations interviewed admitted they might belong to a humanitarian cluster but were not actively using it to coordinate their programs.

CONSEQUENCES

The issues outlined in the previous section have weakened humanitarian assistance, development, and peace-building objectives, resulting in several aid programs across both Nangarhar and Kunduz that would never withstand the scrutiny of non-politicized assessments. Further, they undermine certain actors' own security, stabilization, and "hearts and minds" objectives by contributing to the conflict, insecurity, and popular resentment aimed at some or all of the international community. Feedback from the interviews in the provinces and Kabul describe inadequate attention to effective, decentralized delivery of public services;¹⁸ too much focus on programs generating money (or turning a blind eye when it disappears) as a means of "buying off" problems and troublemakers; power structures that look like a revolving door of actors who are simultaneously politicians, warlords, and members of company boards, rather than a legitimate meritocracy;¹⁹ and the distorted geography of years of aid investments that have resulted in the warped context in which insecurity is profitable.

There are consequences to the gap between policy and reality that are readily identifiable in both Kunduz and Nangarhar, all of which undermine

basic aid and development aims; increase risk to programs, staff, and beneficiaries; and exacerbate tensions as well as generate new local-level tensions and conflict.

INAPPROPRIATE PROGRAMS

The lack of consistent engagement with target communities challenges aid actors' ability to design and implement programs that are viable, context appropriate, and sufficiently tailored to the diverse local opinions and needs of the Afghan landscape. Several donor-driven policies in Kunduz and Nangarhar have struggled in this regard, such as engaging on women's rights. Backlash against programs that are out of touch with community demands and leaders' realistic comfort range for change has at times been violent and led to targeting of projects and staff, such as attacking girls' schools. Kunduz elders and religious leaders, particularly in the remote parts of Imam Sahib District, were openly critical of "so many" women's programs; meanwhile, the province sees some of the country's most frequent recorded incidents of violence against women,²⁰ even though international donors have made women's rights and gender mainstreaming top priorities. This example underscores the importance of organizations' detailed contextual understanding of the area and the issues, as well as communicating with local staff at the point of project implementation about tensions that arise, so that programs can adapt.

A Kunduz elder raised another example of inappropriate programs when he brought up how his community's local economy has struggled for years, despite foreign aid support. He attributed this struggle to programs that have either not taken into account or ignored the key local economic challenge: the community's need for refrigeration capacity, so that local melon farmers no longer need to sell at a loss immediately after the harvest. Because donors lack direct engagement at the ground level, they have missed a vital development opportunity that could positively affect local communities' resilience and economic productivity. The activities donors have implemented have been inappropriate for the area's contextual reality. This discrepancy has in turn hindered the activities' long-term effectiveness.

A commonly cited problem from communities in both Nangarhar and Kunduz is the inundation of low-level job training programs promoting select skills, such as sewing or basic carpentry. These programs have had little substantive connection to natural market demand or local economic potential, and they continue to depend on external funding. Years of such training has created a glut of skilled people in a weak market, with few to no jobs outside direct donor requests. According to implementing organizations, donor job

training plans have seldom sought to match skills with realistic opportunities beyond the “aid program” context.²¹ This mismatch creates an unsustainable type of programming and is another example of emphasizing outputs over outcomes: The output of delivering job training programs has led to a failure to contribute to the desired long-term outcome of strengthening sustainable economic opportunities.

At a more basic level, even the location of programs appears inappropriate to many of the communities. Development actors and CSOs alike (especially in the north) argue that greater strides could be made on overall peace, stability, and sustainable livelihoods by targeting aid to more stable areas, rather than to insecure areas’ “preferred” populations—as has been the overwhelming outcome of USAID/US government stabilization initiatives. This policy has created de facto financial and political incentives to propagate greater insecurity and has sparked bitter criticism from communities in more stable areas who feel they are “penalized” for being peaceful.²² One interviewee in Nangarhar confirmed this idea:

*I think projects should be implemented in areas which are peaceful and secure.... In insecure areas the quality of all activities is worse and there is no good change. If they did the work in secure places all the results would be good. Why don't they work where it will actually help?*²³

Aid Branding

Another issue that has been particularly problematic in Kunduz and Nangarhar (as well as the rest of Afghanistan) has been aid branding, which should be understood as more than just logos on supply boxes or vehicles. Branding encompasses the public presence of aid actors and their agendas, and how they choose to attach that presence to programs.

Branding is a delicate and inconsistent issue in contested spaces, both in terms of donor approaches to it and its usefulness; although there are times where certain bodies’ visibility and recognition can be helpful and provide protection for projects and staff (particularly for those seen to be “neutral”), at other times it has led to insurgent retaliation that endangers staff and communities for cooperating with international actors. This reality has led aid-implementing actors to emphasize that for the most part, less visibility is better. Interviewees repeatedly stated: “The less political the aid can be, the more effective.”²⁴ International NGOs in Nangarhar mention documented cases where communities have expressed the desire to refuse help from certain donor countries (especially the United States), both because of the risks that branding policies incur to the villages in terms of opposition

targeting, but also based on sentiment toward a donor in this contested environment.

LOSING IMPARTIALITY AND BALANCE

The gap between policy and reality has undermined many of the conflict sensitivity measures that aid actors normally employ, because these measures are hamstrung by the priorities that do not align with those of long-term development strategies. The perception of impartiality is one of the key means of minimizing risk and conflict centered on project delivery. But in the current environment, aid impartiality is challenged both by the difficulties of access and by the confusion in the aid sector generated by military actors carrying out development activities to further COIN strategies in Afghanistan. This is a widely acknowledged problem when looking at the militarization of aid globally.

In terms of basic infrastructure and humanitarian assistance, communities are often willing to accept what they can get from whoever is operating in the area. However, some armed opposition groups have increasingly targeted projects they associate with military actors and aid contractors, no matter who the actual implementers are. These obstacles have been part of the erosion of armed groups' general policy of letting NGOs carry out development and humanitarian work, and it has further led to direct attacks on local and international aid projects and staff.

Policy Barriers to Access

Access is a complex and crucial issue for aid delivery in Afghanistan, and it is affected by the competing objectives of political, military, and development actors. Policy barriers put in place by international donors or the Afghan government—barriers relating to target geographical areas, beneficiary groups, and project types—can negatively affect perceptions of impartiality, which can lead to greater risks for programs, beneficiaries, and long-term development aims. A civil society representative said, “Sometimes NGOs just work in specific areas and don’t work anywhere else; this causes conflict among the peoples in the area.”²⁵ Although some aid implementers are devising ways of getting around this issue by working through intermediaries, it is a profound challenge to their ability to engage in conflict mitigation and to the viability of their efforts. As articulated in one interview, “How does one provide balanced delivery to all those in need when you can only access a few areas?”²⁶

Conflict sensitivity measures normally employed by aid actors have been hamstrung by the prioritization of objectives that do not align with those of long-term development strategies.

The lack of balanced or “neutral” interventions has led to the common perception among many Afghans that there is distinct favoritism along ethnic and tribal lines, conflict history, or geographic location. For example, there is a general narrative in the north that local ethnic Pashtun populations are often ignored or actively undermined, whereas communities and social groupings traditionally aligned politically with the Northern Alliance or at least the current government administration prosper. This view is substantiated (at least in theory) by political appointments, development and construction contract awards, and the alleged weak presence of NGOs in Pashtun areas. According to respondent opinions, such marginalization happens even at the district level in most northern provinces: Key district government positions and development contracts reward specific patronage networks in select areas while excluding local Pashtuns. In Kunduz, perceptions such as these have frequently generated conflict between beneficiary and non-beneficiary communities and led to resentment against certain programs.²⁷

UNDERMINING CAPACITY BUILDING

Meaningful capacity building of local actors is strategically vital to delivering aid well. However, problematic aid delivery in Afghanistan has undermined this primary development objective. By failing to support effective capacity building of Afghan organizations and government bodies, aid donors are missing not only opportunities to strengthen the effectiveness of their assistance and get the most value from their investment, but also ultimately to achieve the key aims of humanitarian and development aid.

The process of capacity building and local ownership of programs are critical features of sustainable development and long-term stability. Emphasis on training and improvement of local actors’ skills entails more than just equipping them to take over the activities themselves; it is also intended to give stronger voice to community priorities and facilitate public debate, in turn enabling community participation in all stages of development. In Afghanistan, the competition among objectives has intensified aid actors’ struggle to balance the need to achieve their immediate project implementation requirements with their long-term aims. The reigning strategy emphasizes quick delivery of outputs, which has meant that the need to deploy projects rapidly is often more important than how these are done or how engaged local actors are. This has been a particularly potent criticism of USAID and related US government agency development programs.

Feedback given in Kunduz, Nangarhar, and Kabul suggests that capacity building in many cases has been reduced to slideshow presentations, conferences, and high-level consultants completing their work. These

activities have replaced a focus on the active participation and ongoing mentoring of local actors' steadily increased responsibilities, which is the stronger model in this context. Organizations that work through local partners received better overall reviews but in many cases still lack the capacity building commitment that would empower their partners to act on their own. Notably, respondents revealed that organizations unable to deliver outputs quickly are more likely to lose their funding. This means that, given the policies of many donors, taking the time to genuinely develop local capacities is not really an option.²⁸

LACK OF OWNERSHIP AND ALIGNMENT

Donor and implementer policies have resulted in problems with local ownership and program alignment with national plans as well as overall objectives. There can be no doubt of the difficulties in working through the government in Afghanistan, where weak capacity and politicization can be rampant. In addition, government priorities do not in reality always line up with the objectives and means identified by the international community or local populations. Government offices in contested spaces are notorious for varying degrees of corruption and ineptitude, which makes the aims of ownership and alignment at times directly contradictory to aid program goals. At the same time, without alignment and local ownership, development will not be sustainable in the long-term.

It is clear from the field research that humanitarian and development actors are not necessarily aligning their activities with Afghan government priorities or capacity. Interviewees reported very little communication between donors and many of their implementing partners, let alone the officials or community leadership where projects are being deployed. For example, only two of the government officials interviewed had even heard of the cluster system, and neither knew anything about how humanitarian coordination is supposed to operate. One commented, "There is no coordination. Government offices do not know about most projects or how target areas and people are chosen. I am called up to give audience for project completions or sign papers, but I do not know what is happening."²⁹ Several government representatives at the local and national level echoed these sentiments. They readily complained that they are not involved in decision-making or implementation, which undermines the goal of local ownership:

Up to this point, NGOs do not have alignment with the plans of the government. In fact we are not aware of the projects and aid that some organizations implement here. Sometimes we get lists, but they do not give us information about the funding, the types of projects, or other support. We do not know impacts. Currently there are

*more than 2,500 households in this district – some receive help, others don't. But we do not have the authority to ask or learn about the plans.*³⁰

Another negative consequence of the lack of transparent local ownership is that it contributes to negative perceptions of aid at the community level—especially allegations of corruption among development actors. This was apparent in individual interviews as well as focus group discussions in both Kunduz and Nangarhar:

*It is clear the government and NGOs have relationships. Governors and deputies introduce their relatives to NGOs; they settle their business with each other and every one of them takes their share from that. Elders too. But not us, we get almost nothing. There is deep corruption.*³¹

Alignment and local ownership are areas where the international community has shown some recent improvement, and these efforts will be furthered by the substantive move to on-budget funding for post-2014 aid. However, it will be the responsibility of aid actors to ensure that these policies do not enable greater government corruption or lack of commitment to subnational development priorities.

LACK OF CONNECTION BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN RELIEF AND DEVELOPMENT

The policy-reality gap weakens the connection between relief and development that could be relied on for improving resilience and stability. The range of stakeholders discusses these missing ties and their consequences in different ways. One of the primary complaints was that long-term solutions are lacking compared to the immediate short-term assistance programs in place. Another complaint is that the efforts are not connected. Several implementing organizations brought up the example of the 2011 drought emergency response. Afghanistan's northeast has experienced drought in eight of the past 11 years. Despite widespread understanding that addressing root causes requires integrated water basin management, most assistance is limited to emergency relief—11 years of it for droughts, floods, and extreme winters. A number of respondents echoed the sentiments of one humanitarian actor: "It's not that relief aid isn't necessary, but when it does nothing to address the issues of why the crises are repeating themselves, it becomes wasteful and ineffective."³²

The point is that humanitarian assistance that is not synced with or does not contribute to long-term development planning is wasteful. Feedback from communities acknowledges that relief aid plays an important role in meeting

social needs in a time of crisis and is critical to keeping people alive. However, there are weaknesses in the implementation of relief aid that affect how it might support long-term development. Despite the broad consensus among implementers and communities that humanitarian actors generally know how to deliver their programs and have experience doing so, the procedures often take too long, are not sufficiently sensitive to contextual change, and at times have objectives that vary across the sector. In addition, elders complain that the perceived over-use of emergency relief programs insufficiently related to long-term development outcomes is that being given free aid for a long period of time creates laziness.

More importantly, communities have come to put greater value on interventions designed to provide longer-term inputs and capacity building on what they refer to as “fundamental projects.” Many beneficiaries see emergency programs as not as valuable or effective as long-term development:

*I think our main purpose must be development because it is permanent and we need it. All of these temporary activities don't have any benefits. They aren't good enough. We should change humanitarian to development aid because it will have a positive impact for a long time.*³³

This sentiment was reaffirmed by government officials in both Kunduz and Nangarhar: “It is more important in the long run for development programs to take root than to stave off one crisis after another. In Afghanistan, things are always a crisis. If we keep waiting then we will never get to real development.”³⁴

Further, as noted by a Kunduz focus group, the lack of connection can even foster conflict:

*Development has a good impact on our people but humanitarian aid doesn't always. This is because most of it does not go to the poor or worthy people. Sometimes humanitarian aid makes conflict among the villagers, because the aid only goes to 10 percent of the villagers. So the remaining 90 percent have conflict with each other and they even blame the local elders. So development is better.*³⁵

Although this opinion presents an unbalanced criticism of humanitarian aid using speculative percentages, it does indicate that local Afghan communities are tired of the limits of relief assistance alone. Rather, these communities believe there are risks to over relying on relief assistance—to the point of open conflict—and they see greater potential in development. Clearly, humanitarian relief saves lives in an emergency. Thus what aid actors should

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—Kunduz government official

understand is that the connection between humanitarian relief and development need to be stronger and better communicated in order to minimize communities' negative perceptions.

Actors in Kunduz and Nangarhar could have focused more on a livelihoods and resilience approach in order to provide the necessary link between emergency relief and development. This approach assesses socioeconomic issues more comprehensively and places emphasis on outcomes—such as improving people's capacity to provide for themselves in the long term and deal with shocks with limited resources. This ultimately shapes a more cohesive agenda for the range of humanitarian, recovery, and development responses and brings the emphasis back to the community level, allowing programs to integrate varying local contexts into their design and impacts. For their part, beneficiaries repeatedly identified a preference for approaches linking humanitarian outputs with development outcomes.³⁶

The need to strengthen the connections is as strategic as it is operational. Some organizations are doing this internally, for example moving from pure food aid to a broader, more complex toolkit to address the root causes of hunger and food insecurity. This includes looking at nutrition, climate change impacts, and an overall livelihoods approach to aid strategies so that humanitarian activities align with long-term development objectives. Several respondents pointed out that relief work may focus on urgent needs—but in practice “good” relief should be done through building local capacities that naturally follow a development trajectory. To date this has not been strong in Afghanistan.

Programs that have tried to link humanitarian and development aid so far have struggled with the time required to plan and implement development as opposed to emergency assistance, and with managing both the policies of resource allocation and the programs' ability to adapt to changes of context. One aid implementer explained that “there is an instinctive push to try to ‘wrap up’ the emergency in order to be able to move on to long-term development, but as the principles are not the same this can make for damaging inconsistencies.”³⁷ Further, the large inputs and free aid typical of emergency relief responses can distort the planning needed for long-term solutions. This perspective is supported by the relative success of the National Solidarity Program (NSP), where beneficiaries make financial commitments to cover 10 to 15 percent of the costs of community-development projects. Many respondents felt that to date these programs have been more successful than those that simply hand out resources.

Although certain crises are clearly more conducive to long-term planning, overall, respondents believed that international aid actors should integrate

longer-term development with their humanitarian activities, as opposed to responding to the same repeated crises every year. This problem is also found in other countries and will require a significant commitment by the aid and development community to change policies to account for intended beneficiaries' lived reality. As one international NGO representative articulated: "We are just going through the motions...We have gotten stuck in the humanitarian mode, which means that everything is in a sort of 'dump it in' method. We focus on our impermanent presence, with little responsibility for outcomes."³⁸

DRIVING CONFLICT

Strategies and projects designed and implemented without accurate, detailed, and ongoing analysis of the context that accounts for the root causes of violence have frequently undermined the "Do No Harm" aid principle and exacerbated conflict. For example, many donors have worked in Kunduz but without sufficiently understanding the social, political, and economic context. In identifying the most vulnerable, program designs often overlook the general ethnic breakdown of the districts and government power structures. As a result, projects frequently provide most or all of their resources to a single ethnic group and select patronage networks. This has become a serious generator of conflict across the region.³⁹ At the other end of the country, the south and east are more homogenous ethnically but are tribally fractious, so when aid actors access only certain areas it generates the local perception of favoring some tribes over others, again exacerbating existing tensions and undermining sustainable development.

It is clear that many aid delivery programs have underestimated or do not account for the full range of local conflict drivers. An example we have already seen is that programs are a greater risk to beneficiaries when they are seen to be too aligned with the government or are visibly linked to military outposts, which has certainly been the case in most provinces where PRTs are the primary base for aid programs. Connecting beneficiaries to, with, or through political or military projects and actors frequently leads to armed opposition retaliation across the country. Programs and implementers are also at greater risk when projects directly oppose local cultural norms, as has been the case with several programs designed for national implementation without the flexibility to adapt to local contexts.

Further, aid decisions have repeatedly driven insecurity in both provinces. Evidence shows that expending resources in chronically insecure areas (which has been the predominant US policy under a COIN framework) with weak governance structures, and a civil society unable to play a strong

Strategies and projects designed and implemented without accurate, detailed, and ongoing analysis of the context that accounts for the root causes of violence have frequently exacerbated conflict in both Nangarhar and Kunduz.

accountability role, tend to fuel corruption, intercommunal strife, and competition among local powerbrokers. Feedback from Nangarhar and Kunduz (confirmed by research carried out elsewhere in the country⁴⁰) corroborates this and shows that more often than not, the same local strongmen benefitting from aid and development contracts are those using their militias to perpetuate insecurity in order to continue receiving funding.⁴¹ This involvement includes controlling conflict economies, such as the smuggling trade (timber, arms, opium, etc.), racketeering schemes masquerading as “local security providers,” and armed targeting of donor-funded infrastructure projects.⁴²

Similar criticisms have been leveled by community elders at local government offices receiving donor support that do not emphasize key development objectives such as merit-based governance. Although development is an inherently political process, it is a particular challenge when there is little focus placed on local legitimacy or capacity and “bad” leaders are protected because they provide a more predictable security environment. This has been the case for several communities that are the site of COIN and CT initiatives. As one aid beneficiary focus group participant in Nangarhar articulated, “Why do Americans support bad officials that only line their pockets and only help their own people? This I do not understand.”⁴³ This gap between donors’ policies and outcomes on the ground significantly undermines potential impact at the community level.

Organizations’ lack of understanding of the full programmatic context has also led to conflict vis-à-vis other implementing organizations in an area. Communities are sensitive to how projects are carried out in neighboring areas, and differences have been known to create inter- and intra-community clashes. In Kunduz, conflict broke out between communities because of two NGOs’ different policies. Both delivered tree saplings to improve agriculture and help strengthen farmers’ livelihoods. One required recipients to pay back 30 percent of the saplings’ value (a known means of improving project sustainability and community buy-in); the other distributed the trees for free. The result has been long-running tensions between the two areas.⁴⁴ A cohesive strategy between the NGOs could have deterred the conflict.

IDP issue

Feedback from communities in both provinces has further suggested that targeting humanitarian relief to IDPs and refugees has in some cases generated new tensions. The impact of many aid programs has elevated the status of chosen beneficiaries, rather than necessarily improving the overall structures that could benefit everyone, and this has at times led to tensions.

This dynamic is in part a consequence of the international community's greater experience and quick response funding mechanisms for relief programs (which frequently focus on identifiable refugees and IDPs). It is also partly due to a lack of substantive engagement with communities and monitoring of long-term impact.

Potential for peacebuilding

Avoiding negative impacts is only half the story. Working effectively and strategically in a contested space is also a matter of promoting a positive impact on the factors driving the fragility and conflict. With a solid analysis of the conflict drivers and the working context in place, aid actors should be able to ensure that their approaches and programs can have a deliberate and positive impact. This is not to suggest that development and humanitarian actors should also necessarily become peacebuilders. Feedback from the research suggested that it is very difficult to combine these activities and attempting to do so can undermine aid initiatives. However, aid actors can look at how to incorporate potential peacebuilding elements into other program areas at both strategic and project levels.

CONCLUSIONS

The research findings from Kabul, Nangarhar, and Kunduz parallel those of broader investigations of Afghanistan's aid environment⁴⁵ and raise issues articulated by aid delivery debates the world over. The competition over strategic objectives and priorities among political, security, and development actors is not unique but it is more extreme in contested spaces than elsewhere. In Afghanistan, it drives a dangerous gap between policy and reality that has undermined the effectiveness of humanitarian, development, and peace-building programs. These failings are both exacerbated by and contribute to the lack of access to beneficiaries; the absence of strategic and operational cohesion and coordination in program planning and implementation; and a range of shortcomings in general aid processes that have not only crippled development aims in Afghanistan but also generated conflict and greater insecurity.

It is worth reflecting that many of the arguments and recommendations have been raised before, in Afghanistan as well as other contexts. This gives rise to several questions, including why these issues have not already been addressed, particularly in such a high-profile country with enormous aid programs; and whether there is any reason to expect that implementing the recommendations below will be easier and more feasible now or in the future

than they have been in the past. Some argue that the reduction of military presence in 2014 will allow development actors to reassert their priorities over political and military objectives, and the reduction in overall aid will force more effective and efficient policies. “Doing more with less” would support the idea suggested here that the quality of projects and outcomes is more important than the quantity. Others believe that the loss of Afghanistan’s high-profile status will mean that the impetus to improve programs will be lost.

International discussions, including the idea of a “transition decade” for aid to Afghanistan and the 2011 “New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States,” endorsed by the 4th High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, in Busan, suggest that there is better understanding of the need to apply a different development paradigm to conflict-afflicted and fragile states that is at its core driven by in-depth political and conflict analysis. But what these discussions of policy and international agreements mean for the reality of implementation in contested spaces has yet to be seen.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommended steps would improve the effectiveness of aid programs in Afghanistan as well as the viability of their long-term aims. These are relevant to both donors and implementers and are applicable across contested spaces as well as other aid delivery contexts.

1. Base aid priorities and strategies on participatory approaches and the genuine engagement of intended beneficiary communities, local civil society, and local government in the planning, design, implementation, and M&E of all development and humanitarian projects. Implemented programs should be needs driven, based on objectives articulated by the communities and legitimately respected leadership, and transparently communicated. Current donor practices are ineffective because of limited field consultations before policies are decided upon, and the policies themselves are mostly dictated from headquarters instead of responding to proposals from the field.
2. Implement policies, programs, and projects on the basis of a thorough understanding of the social, political, and economic context, and regular, detailed conflict analysis that prioritizes long-term outcomes and sustainable livelihoods strategies. This is important for linking humanitarian and long-term development goals, minimizing risk to programs and beneficiaries, and mitigating conflict. The analysis will highlight where and how peace-building activities might be supported

and will fundamentally allow for a better understanding of how to make programs more cohesive across an organization or sector. It has the added benefit of further illuminating what exists and can be built on so that the focus is shifted from the constant need to creating something new with uncertain legitimacy.

3. Build flexibility into strategic planning and program implementation so that programs can adjust to the changing dynamics of conflict and post-conflict environments. Give special focus to less rigid and less linear log frames and empowering field-based staff with greater authority to adapt to changing circumstances. This will strengthen organizational capacity to adjust to and push back on negative consequences created by inappropriate objectives and practices that jeopardize humanitarian and development work (such as branding, quick funding turn-around, and budget earmarking for unrealistic outputs).
4. Carry out common assessments based on agreed-upon principles and standards, including regular assessments of aid beneficiary needs and vulnerabilities, to make sure that aid targets the people who need it, and that particularly vulnerable regions or populations are no longer “invisible.” All aid programs would benefit from this action, as implementers and coordinating bodies alike note the distinct lack of information available for comprehensive (and contingency) operational plans or conflict assessments.
5. Ensure that M&E is continuous, realistic, and outcomes oriented, and provides more than just financial reporting. M&E should go deeper to examine long-term impact, emphasizing qualitative feedback on social, political, and conflict contexts from local communities and leadership that do not just rely on official structures.
6. Ensure that all projects develop and rely on clear community communication channels and grievance procedures, so that any problematic issues can be addressed before they generate conflict.
7. Realign incentive structures and program policies at the planning stage and throughout project implementation in order to emphasize quality of outcomes rather than quantity of outputs and make impact assessments more accurate and useful.
8. Reduce short-term incentives to program managers to inflate budgets to ensure future finances. Instead, create mechanisms to provide long-term needs-based funding rather than subject programs to

annual budget cycles and disjointed strategic frameworks. In addition, put greater emphasis on core funding rather than only program-specific financing to increase flexibility. Finally, offer multi-year budget support with numerous funding cycles instead of restricting the support to short-term project funding. Strategies can be longer-term, less competitive, and more cohesive, all of which would encourage aid actors to work together on a common goal.

9. Allow program managers and implementers to be more open about the challenges of humanitarian and development activities in the country, including failed activities; more honest and transparent reporting would go a long way toward helping programs to be presented in a realistic light, assessed more accurately, and altered accordingly to make improvements. Donors need to create the space for a more candid environment that will not “punish” those actors who are honest about the problems—these implementers need to be free of these fears for the project and future support. Moreover, donors need to understand that some objectives cannot be achieved within given timeframes or contexts, and implementers must also be pragmatic about what they promise under the circumstances.
10. Harmonize aid priorities and strategies within individual agencies and across development organizations so that aid is more cohesive, making greater efforts to integrate humanitarian inputs with long-term development objectives at planning and implementation stages.
11. Give greater attention to meaningful technical and management capacity building of local actors, especially at the provincial, district, and community level; this should include more substantive use of local partners who are able to operate more freely in a conflict context.
12. Ensure that development activities are designed to empower existing economic realities instead of creating overly artificial environments that are unsustainable in the long run without aid inputs, as for example in the case of job training efforts and agricultural programs that do not base their strategy on accurate labor market and value-chain assessments.

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Oxfam America has carried out research in Afghanistan, Colombia, and Sudan, aimed at improved knowledge about on how the United States and other international aid donors can provide humanitarian, recovery, and development assistance in what we call “contested spaces” in ways that do not leave these areas even less safe. We define contested spaces as areas of persistent low-intensity conflict.*

*We adopt the definition of “low-intensity conflict” used by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program: armed violence that results in more than 25 but fewer than 1,000 deaths in a year (see http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/publications/data_publications/).

NOTES

¹ IDP figures fluctuate, as many are driven by internal conflict dynamics and thus cannot always account for those displaced by natural disasters, urban IDPs, and others who cannot be accessed. For estimates see: UN Refugee Agency, “2013 UNHCR Country Operations Profile—Afghanistan,” last modified December 2012, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486eb6.html>; Nina Schrepfer and Dan Tyler, “Afghanistan Consults on an IDP Policy,” *Forced Migration Review* 40 (2012): 40-43, <http://www.fmreview.org/young-and-out-of-place/schrepfer-tyler.html>; Costs of War, “Afghan Refugees,” last modified November 2012, <http://costsofwar.org/article/afghan-refugees>; and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Afghanistan: Humanitarian Dashboard,” August 31, 2013, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Afg_Humanitarian_Dashboard_August2013.pdf.

² Lydia Poole, “Afghanistan: Tracking Major Resource Flows 2002-2010,” *Global Humanitarian Assistance Briefing Paper* (January 2011), <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/gha-Afghanistan-2011-major-resource-flows.pdf>; see also Lydia Poole, “Aid to Afghanistan Grew by US\$1.3 Billion in 2009, While Humanitarian Aid Fell,” last modified December 23, 2010, (<http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/aid-to-afghanistan-grew-by-us1-3-billion-in-2009-while-humanitarian-aid-fell-2155.html>), reporting total official development assistance (humanitarian and development aid) of \$29 billion between 2001 and 2009; Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), “Afghanistan: Money Well Spent?,” March 22, 2010, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/88502/afghanistan-money-well-spent>, citing an Afghan Ministry of Finance report that aid during 2001-2009 totaled \$36 billion; Kenneth Katzman, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and US Policy,” *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress* RL30588 (September 21, 2012); Curt Tarnoff, “Afghanistan: US Foreign Assistance,” *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress* R40699 (August 12, 2010); and Matt Waldman, “Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan,” *ACBAR Advocacy Series* (March 2008), http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/ACBAR_aid_effectiveness_paper_0803.pdf.

³ See note 1 above.

⁴ Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder, *Winning Hearts and Minds: Examining the Relationship Between Aid and Security in Afghanistan* (Medford, MA: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2011).

⁵ Interview with INGO, Kabul, April 2012.

⁶ INGO and implementer interviews, Kabul, April 2012.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Nangarhar focus group, April 2012.

⁹ Kunduz and Nangarhar focus groups, April-May 2012.

¹⁰ Development agency interview, Kabul, April 2012.

¹¹ Kama district elders’ and Nangarhar focus group discussions, May 2012.

¹² Nangarhar official interview, May 2012.

¹³ Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are small, civilian-military units that assist provincial and local governments to govern more effectively and deliver essential services. The first PRTs were established by the United States in Afghanistan in 2002. The purpose was to combine military leadership with representatives of civilian government agencies. The NATO force in Afghanistan eventually sponsored 25 PRTs, led by the United States and 12 other NATO and Coalition partners. See Robert M. Perito, “The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan,” testimony before the Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, US House of Representatives, October 18, 2007, <http://www.usip.org/publications/the-us-experience-provincial-reconstruction-teams-in-iraq-and-afghanistan>.

¹⁴ Kunduz focus group discussion, May 2012.

¹⁵ Nangarhar focus group discussion, May 2012.

¹⁶ UN Agency interview, Kabul, April 2012.

¹⁷ INGO interviews, Kabul, April 2012; Kunduz focus group, May 2012.

¹⁸ INGO interviews, Kabul, April 2012; Kunduz government official interview, April 2012.

¹⁹ Civil society organization (CSO) interview, Kabul, April 2012.

²⁰ Imam Sahib focus group, May 2012.

²¹ Kunduz focus group, May 2012; INGO interviews, Kabul, April 2012.

²² Fishstein and Wilder, *Winning Hearts and Minds*, 6.

²³ Nangarhar government official interview, May 2012.

²⁴ Kunduz research; INGO and expert interviews, Kabul, May 2012.

²⁵ Kunduz CSO interview, April 2012.

²⁶ INGO interview, Kabul, April 2012.

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- ²⁷ Pashtun elder interview, Kunduz City, April 2012; and a common theme of discussion across the north of the country.
- ²⁸ INGO interviews, Kabul, May 2012.
- ²⁹ Kunduz government official interview, May 2012.
- ³⁰ Nangarhar government official interview, May 2012.
- ³¹ Nangarhar focus group, April 2012.
- ³² UN Agency, INGO, and expert interviews, May 2012.
- ³³ Kunduz focus group, Kama district, April 2012.
- ³⁴ Kunduz government official interview, April 2012.
- ³⁵ Kunduz focus group, Kama district, April 2012.
- ³⁶ Feedback from Kunduz and Nangarhar interviews, April-May 2012.
- ³⁷ INGO interview, Kabul, May 2012.
- ³⁸ INGO interview, Kabul, May 2012.
- ³⁹ Kunduz focus group discussion and elder interview, May 2012.
- ⁴⁰ Fishstein and Wilder, *Winning Hearts and Minds*; Waldman, "Falling Short."
- ⁴¹ Nangarhar focus group discussion, Jalalabad.
- ⁴² Nangarhar elder interview, Kama district, April 2012.
- ⁴³ Nangarhar focus group, April 2012.
- ⁴⁴ Kunduz government official interview and focus groups discussions, May 2012.
- ⁴⁵ Fishstein and Wilder, *Winning Hearts and Minds*; Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance;" International Crisis Group, "Aid and Conflict in Afghanistan," *Asia Report* No. 210 (August 4, 2011), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/210-%20Aid%20and%20Conflict%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf>; Waldman, "Falling Short;" Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *2006 Survey on Monitoring the Paris Declaration: Country Chapters* (Paris: OECD, 2006), <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/38949502.pdf>; internal assessments of aid effectiveness carried out by the UK Department for International Development, the Canadian International Development Agency, and the French and Norwegian governments and provided to the author.

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