



CONFERENCE REPORT

LESSONS FROM THE COALITION

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES FROM THE AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

APRIL 19-20, 2016 | WASHINGTON, D.C.







Message from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction and the U.S. Institute of Peace

The international effort to rebuild Afghanistan has been unprecedented in many respects, including its cost, duration, and diversity of donors. While unprecedented, it seems that efforts such as this may become the new normal. As conflict ravages countries like Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Somalia, planners are working on ways to assist in the reconstruction of these countries. In addition, our efforts in Afghanistan are far from over; it appears the coalition will continue to be engaged there for many years to come.

Since 2001, each of the more than 45 nations involved in the Afghanistan reconstruction has had unique experiences influenced by its own history and culture, as well as the specific geographic area and mission it has focused on. A wellspring of government and academic efforts have attempted to capture these nations' best practices and lessons. In late 2014, SIGAR initiated its lessons learned program to identify and preserve lessons from the U.S. reconstruction experience and make recommendations to Congress and executive agencies on ways to improve our efforts in Afghanistan, as well as in future operations. In 2015, USIP hosted a conference on "State Strengthening in Afghanistan: Lessons Learned, 2001–2014," which was published as a USIP Peaceworks report this year.

We recognize that no one nation holds a monopoly on lessons and best practices from our shared experiences in Afghanistan. Thus, SIGAR and USIP convened a conference to gather policy makers and experts from major donors in the coalition to share their perspectives and gain insight into ways we can learn from our common reconstruction challenges.

The daily work of many conference participants is still focused on current challenges and opportunities in Afghanistan. This conference provided an opportunity to stop, examine what has worked well, and discuss what needs improvement.

At the same time, it is crucial we capture the lessons we have collectively identified from our difficult and costly effort to rebuild Afghanistan and apply them to current and future reconstruction efforts. We owe it to ourselves and future generations to do no less.



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This report provides the ideas and concerns of the conference participants. It does not reflect consensus or agreement among the attendees, nor does it necessarily reflect the views of SIGAR or USIP.



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Executive Summary

From April 19–20, 2016, SIGAR and USIP hosted a conference on “Lessons from the Coalition: International Experiences from the Afghanistan Reconstruction.” Participants included senior officials and experts from the nations and organizations involved in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, whose discussions provided many valuable insights. Four themes emerged from the conference:

- 1. Conflicting goals and actors:** In Afghanistan, where warfighting and development often shared the same space, there was a need to negotiate the tensions between short-term security and longer-term development goals. Trying to pursue both often led to discordant efforts. The *United States Integrated Civilian-Military Plan* and Denmark’s interministerial strategy papers were two innovations that attempted to bridge the gap between these two sets of goals.
- 2. Effective donor coordination:** Shared goals were the fundamental basis for effective coordination between donors. Without shared goals, coordination was little more than information sharing. There were several examples of donors with shared goals who engaged in robust coordination, including those involved with the Nordic Plus group on development assistance, those that funded the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), and those that contributed to international donor trust funds.
- 3. Improving chances of success through local knowledge and buy-in:** The success of development efforts hinged on donors’ knowledge of the local areas in which they worked and their ability to obtain the buy-in of Afghans living there. Donors’ ability to gather information to tailor their efforts to local conditions and needs was often undermined by their focus on measuring progress through sometimes inappropriate metrics, their inability to freely move around the country due to worsening security, and their short tours and frequent rotations. Donors sought buy-in from the local population and Afghan government to sustain development efforts; however, donors struggled to find capable and reliable partners with whom to work in Afghanistan. To overcome this challenge, donors turned to on-budget assistance to help build Afghan capacity, and conditioned aid to incentivize Afghans to adopt policies favored by donors. Unfortunately, donors largely failed to use on-budget assistance effectively to build capacity of Afghan ministries, often embedding consultants who focused less on training Afghans and more on doing the work themselves. Similarly, conditionality was not effective in pressuring Afghans to adopt policies and take actions for which there was no existing Afghan support. Conditionality was further undermined by the presence of multiple donors that could provide alternative sources of aid.
- 4. Institutionalizing lessons from Afghanistan for the future:** To better deal with future reconstruction efforts, donors must find ways to avoid “business-as-usual” practices and instead support the establishment of flexible, adaptable, and integrated civilian and military entities that are allowed to take risks and change plans as needed. Institutionalizing this change may require funding and other initiatives designed to incentivize bureaucracies to embrace and learn lessons.

Introduction

The international effort to rebuild Afghanistan since 2001 has been unprecedented in many respects. In terms of monetary cost, the coalition of donor nations and organizations has provided billions of euros, yen, dollars, and pounds to the reconstruction effort, making this collective investment in Afghanistan one of the largest in history. Donors have also paid a steep human cost, with many civilian and military personnel killed or wounded in the pursuit of a peaceful and secure Afghanistan.

The coalition of donors has been impressive in its diversity, with more than 45 nations and numerous international organizations involved since 2001. Each of these donors has its own theories and practices of development, as well as a unique domestic culture and political environment. Additionally, each has had a unique experience in Afghanistan resulting from the variety of assigned missions and geographic locations. For example, the security, economic, and political dynamics faced by the Germans in Kunduz differed significantly from those faced by the British in Helmand.

SIGAR and USIP convened a conference to bring together senior policy makers and experts to share lessons and best practices identified from their experiences in Afghanistan. The conference was held April 19–20, 2016, at USIP in Washington, DC, and included representatives from Afghanistan, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Japan, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, the UK, and the United States, as well as from the European Union, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), United Nations (UN), and World Bank. A full list of conference participants is provided in appendix A.

The conference included four panel sessions: (1) ambassadors currently or recently engaged in the Afghanistan reconstruction effort discussing best practices and lessons from their experiences, (2) experts and implementers describing the dynamics of civil-military relations and how those relationships affected the overall effort, (3) experts and implementers delineating best practices and lessons from development efforts in Afghanistan, and (4) officials engaged in lessons learned efforts describing their approaches to institutionalizing lessons from Afghanistan. The conference also featured two keynote speeches focused on the role of international coordination in the reconstruction effort. To encourage candid discussions and the free exchange of ideas, comments were not for attribution.

Many issues were raised that cut across the panel topics, and other issues of importance to the participants fell outside the agenda, as originally conceived. To capture the breadth of these discussions, this report is organized around the four key themes that emerged: (1) conflicting goals and actors and how these conflicts impeded the reconstruction, (2) the limitations of and opportunities for international donor coordination, (3) improving chances of development success through local knowledge and buy-in, and (4) institutionalizing lessons from Afghanistan for future operations.

Theme 1: Conflicting Goals and Actors

Conference participants discussed the political goals that guided their nations' involvement in Afghanistan. Most participants agreed their nations faced a tension between pursuing goals focused on short-term military achievements, including counterterrorism efforts, and those focused on longer-term development, including building the Afghan economy and government. Participants stated that national and coalition strategies did little to effectively balance these competing goals and left many unresolved issues.

Participants described how tensions over national political goals were exacerbated by difficulties between civilian and military actors working together in donor nation capitals and on the ground in Afghanistan. These actors often had little experience working together while military forces were actively fighting a war; as a result, there was some uncertainty about their roles vis-à-vis one another. The working relationships between civilian and military actors were further strained by uneven resourcing that favored the military.

The confluence of conflicting goals and divided actors led to a situation in which countries were often pursuing disparate and sometimes ill-defined missions in Afghanistan.

Conflicting Goals: Short-term Warfighting vs. Long-term Development Goals

Conference participants identified the tension between warfighting and development goals as a defining feature of the Afghanistan reconstruction. A key component of this dichotomy was the corresponding difference in time horizons, with warfighting goals focused on immediate effects on the battlefield and development goals oriented toward sustainable achievements in Afghanistan's economy and government resulting from multi-year efforts. Participants acknowledged that, as a result, decision makers faced the unenviable task of trying to resolve the tensions between these two goals.

Participants generally agreed that warfighting goals predominated the intervention, but especially so in the early years after 2001. Because the coalition initially went into Afghanistan as a result of the terrorist actions of 9/11, its goals were narrowly concentrated on counterterrorism operations. There was strong international support to intervene in Afghanistan to combat the terrorists and support the United States, leading to a primarily military focus of effort.

Conference participants recalled that, as a result of this initial focus, many senior policy makers envisioned the commitment to Afghanistan as a short-term military deployment. For example, the initial legislation that authorized Sweden's involvement in Afghanistan approved 45 people to go to Afghanistan for four months, with the possibility of a two-month extension of this mandate. Many conference participants believed the initial focus on these warfighting goals had lasting ramifications for later development efforts. For example, the United States initially relied on warlords as proxies in their military efforts against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. These warlords later became problematic forces, undermining efforts to build a democratic and accountable Afghan government.

Participants agreed that, as the intervention continued, development goals played a greater role, but the relationship between them and the warfighting goals was often unclear. One unambiguous change was a shift toward longer time horizons that were more conducive to development. For example, at the 2012 Tokyo Conference, donor countries pledged to continue their support to Afghanistan throughout the “transformation decade” (2015–2024). This shift to a ten-year timeframe was in sharp contrast to initial time periods that were measured in months. However, the goals countries were seeking to achieve remained, in the words of one conference participant, “fuzzy.” Many nations were unclear as to what they were trying to achieve in Afghanistan or how to prioritize their warfighting versus development goals. Part of this lack of clarity stemmed from countries seeking to satisfy domestic constituencies and concerns. National governments often added goals to their strategies to obtain buy-in from these groups, diluting the clarity of these plans for those operating on the ground.

Conflicting Actors: Lack of Experience and a Resource Mismatch

While policy makers struggled to balance short-term warfighting and longer-term development goals, this difficulty was compounded by institutional divisions between the military and civilian actors tasked with accomplishing these goals.

Conference participants discussed the struggles civilian and military actors faced in working together. The coalition nations’ ministries for military and development efforts were often working from different sets of assumptions and operating procedures. In Afghanistan, where there was the simultaneous pursuit of both warfighting and development, the working relationships between civilian and military actors often blurred and resulted in confusion.

Participants described how many coalition nations lacked experience integrating the efforts of their civilian and military personnel in an active war zone. Some nations had extensive experience conducting humanitarian operations, in which civilian and military actors often worked closely together. However, in Afghanistan, military forces were still on an active war footing, a situation quite different from humanitarian operations. This active war footing included civilian and military institutions operating in different organizational structures and chains of command. Military units were controlled through the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), while civilian actors were outside of ISAF and reported to different entities. Although the UN had previous experience integrating civilian and military actors in active war zones, conference participants stated this institutional knowledge was neither sought nor applied; they noted the United States and others minimized the role the UN played in Afghanistan during the early years of the intervention.

Conference participants recounted how military and civilian actors struggled with their respective roles and how best to work together. For example, both sets of actors were often uncertain as to whether their mission was primary or if they were in a supporting role. They struggled to understand whether development aid was being provided to win hearts and minds and further military goals, or if military forces were securing areas to

enable development—or some combination of the two. In the case of Germany, the military's role was clear: Provide security for Germany's development assistance. For some countries, domestic law was decisive in these discussions; legislation prevented the use of development aid for military goals. For example, most European nations could use development aid to help establish civilian police forces in Afghanistan; however, they were unable to support a more militarized police force, as desired by the United States.

Despite this uncertainty, several participants discussed how military actors often had the greater ability to influence policy and affect decisions than their civilian counterparts, due to the military forces' larger numbers. Generally, each coalition nation's military contingent was significantly larger than its civilian cohort. The participants discussed how this imbalance manifested in provincial reconstruction teams (PRT). For example, according to participants, U.S. PRTs typically had 1–3 civilians and 80–100 military members. Similarly, participants stated the Norwegian PRT in Faryab also had a small civilian component. The Dutch PRT in Uruzgan, a PRT mentioned by several participants as being very successful, had a more balanced civilian-military ratio.

As a result of this skewed resourcing, military actors would often find themselves filling gaps in civilian staffing. While some military units had advantages in terms of access and resources, their personnel often were not professionally trained to provide development assistance. Many conference participants were therefore critical of instances when military forces undertook development work, indicating their efforts often ended up costing more and being less effective than those of their civilian counterparts.

Despite these difficulties, the majority of conference participants lauded the efforts of military forces and civilian personnel to work together on the ground. Much of the learning to coordinate only occurred when people were in country and working together. At the provincial level, the Dutch and Australian PRTs in Uruzgan were frequently cited as examples of civilian and military staff working well together.

Conference participants identified several nations that attempted to overcome the divide between military and civilian actors at the national level, as well as to resolve some of the underlying tension between warfighting and development goals. Denmark adopted interministerial strategy papers that were co-created by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense. The first of these papers was written in 2007 and focused on the Danish plan in Helmand. These interministerial strategy papers proved successful and were subsequently reformulated for use in other countries, including Somalia and Libya.

In 2009, the United States issued a plan to integrate and resolve the tensions between its civilian and military goals and actors—the *United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan*. Participants stated, while the U.S. plan was a good step toward addressing the civilian-military divide, it was released eight years after the start of the intervention and lacked details on how the plan could be effectively implemented.

Theme 2: Effective Donor Coordination

Conference participants discussed coordination among donor nations and organizations and widely agreed that shared goals formed the basis for effective coordination. However, nations and organizations had difficulties agreeing on their own goals and strategies, making the process for finding shared goals across the coalition more challenging. Because of this, the focal point for coordination became the establishment of shared goals; without shared goals, coordination amounted to little more than information sharing.

Shared Goals among Donors: Precursor of Effective Coordination

Conference participants generally agreed the coalition lacked shared, well-defined objectives and goals. For example, many countries were primarily motivated by their alliance commitments to the United States, rather than specific strategic goals related to Afghanistan—and these nations were often more focused on what was happening in Washington than in Kabul.

Participants discussed how coalition nations sometimes held contradictory strategies for accomplishing shared goals. For example, the efforts to build the Afghan National Police (ANP) were divided by a conflict between the United States and several of its allies. The United States sought to make the ANP a paramilitary force that could actively fight the Taliban. European, Japanese, and Canadian donors, however, favored a civil policing model for the ANP, which would focus on preventing, disrupting, and solving crimes.

Participants described how the lack of shared international objectives was compounded by the absence of agreed-upon goals at the individual donor level. Several conference participants described how a lack of U.S. interagency consensus further complicated coordination. For example, one participant recalled how a foreign delegation met with members of the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). During those meetings, they discussed on-budget assistance to the Afghan government. DOD personnel expressed their desire to do more on-budget assistance, while USAID members were skeptical this type assistance was appropriate. The division caused confusion in terms of the preferred goals and strategy of the United States. Conference participants were nearly unanimous in agreeing that, when it came to internal disagreements between U.S. civilian and military actors and institutions, there was very little they could do other than accept and work with the resulting ambiguity.

In situations where there was a lack of shared goals, participants stated that coordination risked becoming an end unto itself. For example, one conference participant discussed the international planning efforts for the “disbandment of illegal armed groups,” noting “the plan was the action, and [when] the plan came up against political opposition, a new plan was devised.” Participants criticized the common belief that all that was needed in Afghanistan was “more coordination,” a belief rooted in the idea that if only donors had more meetings, they would somehow work better together.

Participants agreed that overcoming inherent differences in the priorities and policies of coalition donors was essential for effective coordination.

Conference participants stressed the need for broad outreach to countries outside the core group of the coalition, including regional actors with interests in Afghanistan. Engaging with Pakistan was of particular interest, with several participants noting efforts to reduce the insurgency in Afghanistan were ineffective when not combined with serious engagement with Pakistan. Participants also noted, even if non-coalition nations were not active donors to the reconstruction effort—and some had goals that were at cross-purposes to coalition goals—engagement was still necessary. Participants agreed regional actors should be engaged as early as possible and lamented many regional players were not included until very late in the reconstruction effort.

Coordination Mechanisms: Varied Effectiveness in Afghanistan

While conference participants agreed having shared goals was the first and most important aspect of international coordination, they also highlighted several coordination mechanisms that improved donor efforts.

Participants pointed to the Nordic Plus donor group of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden as an effective way for like-minded donors to aggregate their influence and establish a division of labor to amplify their individual strengths. After 2008, this group formalized a collaborative planning process to improve its ability to coordinate and harmonize assistance. This coordination allowed the donor group members to more easily work together when they found an issue of mutual interest or importance. In those cases, members could engage in “delegated cooperation,” in which one nation took the lead on an issue and other nations assumed supporting roles. The Nordic Plus members put this to use in Afghanistan to leverage their individual strengths and aggregate their economic and political clout to have a larger influence on issues that were important to them. However, while the Nordic Plus group allowed for better coordination among its members, it was only used in Afghanistan when the members had shared goals there. To that end, Nordic Plus members spent a significant amount of time engaged in “development diplomacy,” during which they worked to create shared goals.

Participants identified another example of successful coordination in donor support to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). The donors streamlined their support to the organization by pooling their money, agreeing to one set of donor reporting requirements, and establishing joint donor meetings with the commission. While conference participants described this as a successful example of reducing the duplication of donor efforts, they noted that even though the AIHRC was a small organization with a specific mandate, it still took months for donors to agree how best to coordinate their efforts.

Conference participants briefly discussed the role of international donor trust funds in improving the coordination of donors. Some participants believed trust funds earmarked to provide on-budget assistance, such as the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) administered by the World Bank, helped align donor funds with the

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strategies and goals of the Afghan government, thus improving the overall coherence of development efforts. In addition, trust funds were described as good vehicles for donors to provide assistance for recurring costs, including the salaries of Afghan civil servants.

Participants pointed to the establishment of coalition Special Representatives for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) as an effective mechanism for enhancing coordination among donors, as well as improving diplomatic engagement with regional actors. The United States established the first SRAP in 2009 and other major donors, including Germany, the UK, Japan, Italy, and Denmark, established similar positions shortly thereafter. SRAPs helped to regularize discussions among donors through the concurrent establishment of the International Contact Group (ICG). The ICG, which consists primarily of SRAPs and other representatives from donor countries and organizations, has met regularly since 2009 to coordinate efforts.

SRAPs were able to help establish agendas and goals for major donor conferences. For example, in advance of the 2012 Tokyo Conference of donors, SRAPs helped organize three large preparatory conferences in Istanbul, Bonn, and Chicago. These meetings were crucial to helping establish the agreement between donors that led to the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF) on development assistance.

Participants credited the SRAP structure with improving diplomatic engagement in the region. The inclusion of Pakistan in the SRAP mandate was significant in helping to improve donor nations' engagement with and understanding of Pakistan and its role in the successes and failures in Afghanistan. Similarly, SRAPs helped promote engagement with other countries in the region. For example, SRAPs helped organize the 2011 Istanbul Conference in which regional actors adopted the "Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan." This process established the commitment of regional actors to work to support the peace and stability of Afghanistan and meet on an annual basis to discuss this cooperation.

Participants cited the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB) as an effective mechanism for information sharing. The JCMB was established in 2006 to assist with the implementation of the Afghanistan Compact on shared donor and Afghan development goals. The JCMB comprised members of the Afghan government, representatives of international donor nations and organizations, and regional actors. However, conference participants stated the JCMB was not an effective mechanism for reaching agreement on goals, as it included too many donors to support meaningful discussions. Additionally, even though the JCMB generally functioned well in terms of information sharing, it was hampered at times by donors' reluctance to share details of their bilateral assistance to Afghanistan. Conference participants believed the JCMB could be a more effective body if donors committed to greater transparency regarding the terms of their assistance.

Participants pointed to the "lead nation" approach and PRTs as two mechanisms that at times impeded effective donor coordination. The lead nation approach, adopted early in the intervention, placed one nation in the lead for a particular reconstruction effort: Germany for ANP development, the United States for the Afghan National Army, Italy for the justice sector, the UK for counternarcotics efforts, and Japan for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of militias. Participants were critical of this

approach as being ineffective and prone to breaking down quickly when disagreements arose among donors. For example, the conflict between the United States and Germany over the ANP as a paramilitary force or civilian police caused the United States to resist Germany's lead on the issue.

While PRTs were sometimes successful in pursuing activities at the provincial level, participants discussed how they sometimes impeded international coordination at the national level. Conference participants believed nations often simply pursued their individual goals in the provinces where their PRTs were located. Because of the lack of unified coalition goals and strategies, PRTs were not linked into a larger strategic effort and were instead driven by the particular goals of the nation in charge of the PRT, as well as the local conditions on the ground. One participant stated the PRT model had resulted in the partition of Afghanistan into geographic areas controlled by different donors, and that, if one looked out from Kabul, one saw “a number of different flags with different policies, with different strategies, [and] with different priorities.”

Theme 3: Improving Chances of Success through Local Knowledge and Buy-In

Conference participants discussed how the success of development projects was often contingent upon donors' local knowledge of Afghanistan and the degree of Afghan buy-in they could obtain. This, in turn, depended on good security and personnel with substantial experience on the ground in Afghanistan.

Local Knowledge: Addressing Needs and Avoiding Negative Outcomes

Conference participants agreed that donors were best able to implement their development projects when they understood the local area, including political dynamics and the true wants and needs of the population—and that lack of this knowledge often had unintended consequences. For example, participants discussed how donors' inability to understand the local context led to projects that unintentionally benefitted corrupt officials, threatened local governance, led to escalating violence and sabotage of the project itself, and wasted resources.

Participants agreed that donors often lacked knowledge of Afghanistan. Because the intervention was driven by the attacks of 9/11, there was very little time at the outset to obtain a full understanding of the situation on the ground. However, several participants noted there were missed opportunities to learn from other nations' earlier engagements in Afghanistan, especially from their involvement in Afghanistan during the 1980s.

Conference participants discussed how an emphasis on measuring progress tended to overshadow the importance of true local knowledge. In order to demonstrate progress, coalition nations turned to metrics that did not always provide an accurate reflection of the situation on the ground. For example, the TMAF focused on large issues related to Afghan governance and accountability—and, while conference participants agreed these issues were generally the right ones, they were critical of how TMAF tried to reduce these complex issues to interim indicators that did not necessarily predict progress on desired goals. Additionally, participants noted that once metrics had been established, there was often strong pressure to report success, undermining their ability or willingness to report a sometimes bleak situation.

Participants described how security conditions further limited their ability to obtain firsthand local knowledge. For example, in the Dutch PRT in Uruzgan, development professionals who were trained to understand the needs of local communities helped the entire PRT better understand the local environment. However, at the same time, a worsening security situation decreased their ability to access the population and understand the local context, affecting their ability to undertake and monitor development projects. In a second example, Germany conducted a strategic portfolio review in 2013 and asked each German development project officer to assess how well their project would fare under varying security situations. Approximately 50 percent of respondents said their projects would fail in an insecure environment. Contrary to conventional wisdom, conference participants tended to agree that development projects did not “buy” security. They believed that when development projects occurred

in insecure places, the projects either benefited the insurgency or insurgents increased violence to counteract any potential gains.

Conference attendees noted that short tours of duty further compounded the challenges of accruing local knowledge. Many civilian and military personnel had short tours of duty to mitigate the psychological and physical difficulties of operating in a war zone. Participants noted coalition military units often had brief rotations, with several nations having six-month rotations. The effect of these personnel policies was a constant loss of knowledge and experience. Participants agreed that it often took more than a year to achieve useful knowledge of the local context. By the time individuals finally achieved this understanding, they were rotated out. One participant referred to the regular turnover of personnel as an “annual lobotomy.” Conference participants suggested mitigating this effect by creating longer tours in which individuals rotate between headquarters and in-country assignments, and requiring senior officials, such as ambassadors and military commanders, to stay in country for longer tours. Participants stated that attempting to require everyone, particularly mid-career professionals with young children, to have longer tours would likely not be a viable solution.

The Importance of Afghan Buy-In

Conference participants stressed the importance of obtaining Afghan buy-in for development efforts, a natural corollary of the need for local knowledge. They discussed how donors often had to seek national-level buy-in from the Government of Afghanistan while also working at the subnational level with local stakeholders.

Participants described how one of the primary ways to align donor efforts with the Afghan government was the use of on-budget assistance. On-budget assistance provided funding directly to the Afghan government, which then used these funds to implement development projects. For example, Germany undertook extensive work to align its assistance with the Afghan government. Today, German representatives annually sit down with the Ministries of Economic Affairs and Finance to align the German assistance to Afghan priorities. However, participants raised questions about what “alignment” through on-budget assistance really means. The Afghan government itself, similar to the donor nations, often lacked clarity on its strategies and goals, making “alignment” a challenge.

Additionally, several conference participants remarked that while on-budget assistance was intended to help build the capacity of the Afghan government, often donors had consultants embedded in the Afghan government who did all the work and did not focus on helping Afghans build their own capacity. This ultimately created a counterproductive system in which on-budget money was provided to help obtain Afghan buy-in and build national capacity, but the actual implementation was done by non-Afghans.

Donors faced difficulties finding reliable Afghan counterparts with whom to work. Conference participants were critical of the overall accountability of Afghan leadership, pointing to the high levels of corruption found throughout the government. Participants noted that donors had unfortunately contributed to this corruption. For example, the “light footprint” that defined the early intervention meant a reliance on warlords and

abusive local strongmen as proxies. Further complicating the situation, the donors' lack of local knowledge often meant it was difficult for them to tell the difference between legitimate and corrupt actors.

Participants discussed how one method of trying to obtain Afghan buy-in was to condition aid, or provide aid only after the government fulfilled a certain condition, usually a reform of some kind. Theoretically, this transactional approach meant both donors and the Afghan government would get something out of the exchange. However, participants were generally skeptical of the effectiveness of conditioning aid in getting the Afghan government to undertake a reform that was counter to its perceived interests. For instance, donors set conditions on their aid to require the Afghan government to prosecute individuals involved in the Kabul Bank scandal. However, the Afghan government was unwilling to do so.

Participants cited credibility as a primary limitation on the effectiveness of conditionality. Donors sometimes tried to condition funds required for the functioning of the Afghan government, for example, paying the salaries of the ANP. These conditions were often not credible, as donors were ultimately unwilling to withhold funds that were essential to preventing the collapse of the Afghan government. Additionally, many threats of conditionality were not credible because, if the donor followed through on the threat of not providing money, they would face problems with securing money from their legislatures in subsequent years. Afghan officials were aware of these limitations and were able to call donors' bluffs.

Conference attendees remarked that the presence of multiple donors in Afghanistan also undermined the effectiveness of conditionality. When faced with a donor's unwanted conditions, Afghan officials could often obtain funding from another donor. Additionally, donor nations' civilian and military actors were often not aligned, which provided further opportunities for Afghan officials to find alternative sources of money. As one participant stated, Afghans were seeking the "apple of development, and they didn't care which tree it came from."

Despite these limitations, conference participants found there were instances where conditionality seemed to be practical and achieved good results. They agreed conditionality worked best when it was tied to extra funds that were used to incentivize institutions to reform, rather than trying to condition base budgets that were necessary for the government's continued functioning. Successes tended to be the result of these incentive funds being used in conjunction with reform-minded officials in the Afghan government. For example, the World Bank's Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) was able to work closely with the Ministry of Finance (MOF) to create changes in other ministries. MOF officials were already trying to increase their oversight of budgets in other ministries and the World Bank was seeking to make the budget process more transparent. This alignment of donor and Afghan interests, in combination with conditioned aid, helped facilitate changes in these ministries. Similarly, donors worked with specific offices and key ministries in which officials had demonstrated a desire for reform. Donors would prioritize these specific donors and dedicate more funding to them. Unfortunately, in the long-term, the multitude of donors and their corresponding priorities undermined this system, as each donor chose pet ministries and priorities.

Theme 4: Institutionalizing Lessons from Afghanistan for the Future

Conference participants discussed how their respective nations and organizations are institutionalizing lessons from Afghanistan and the successes and challenges they face in these efforts.

The majority of participants believed the most important lesson to learn from Afghanistan was the value of organizations that were flexible, adaptable, and able to work at the local level. Participants suggested that trying to institutionalize specific lessons was not as important as institutionalizing the willingness to adapt to the specific local conditions encountered in future operations. They noted one of the key limitations to institutionalizing lessons was that it was difficult to know which activities that worked in Afghanistan would work in other environments.

Many of the development successes discussed at the conference were small in scale. Several participants warned against the temptation to try to “scale up” these small successes into larger efforts that could be incorporated into standard operating procedures. They stated these projects were successful because they were small-scale and focused on the local environment. And, even if there were elements of a project that could be scaled up, it often would take months of trial and error to properly pilot and test the model in other environments.

In order to embrace flexibility and adaptability, conference attendees argued that donors needed to more realistically understand and appreciate risk. Working in an environment like Afghanistan meant development efforts were exposed to a wide variety of risks related to local politics, insecurity, and limited government capacity. This reality contrasted with the pressures implementers faced to provide positive reporting on their efforts. Attendees expressed the need for donors to be more accepting of the fact that, in difficult operating environments like Afghanistan, some initiatives will inevitably fail. As such, donors need to avoid creating incentives that cause organizations to hide their failures and instead seek to incentivize them to honestly report and learn from failures. Similarly, those attending the conference stated that plans needed to be flexible enough to change as situations and contexts changed.

Conference participants stressed a primary limitation to learning lessons: Core issues are often political and difficult to institutionalize. Important topics, like agreement on the goals and strategies of a reconstruction effort, occurred at the highest level of domestic politics and were not necessarily amenable to institutionalization. A further limitation was bureaucratic, where different actors and organizations had the lead for operations. For example, the Ministry of Defense might have the lead for a current effort and institutionalize the related lessons, but in the next conflict, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs might have the lead. Similarly, while participants urged donors to become more accepting of risk, they realized this was often not a politically viable option.

Conference participants noted bureaucratic obstacles could sometimes be resolved through the allocation of resources and funding. Participants agreed that providing funds that specifically incentivized or required bureaucracies to learn lessons was an effective way of coaxing them to do so. For example, to address the lack of coordination

between civilian and military actors, the UK established the Conflict, Stability, and Security Fund that pooled money between the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs. In order for either ministry to access the funds, they had to work together, effectively requiring civilian and military actors to learn to coordinate. Denmark and the United States undertook similar efforts with the Peace and Stabilization Fund and Global Security and Contingency Fund, respectively. These joint funds seem to have improved coordination between civilian and military actors and ensured they were aligned in their goals and strategies for interventions. Similarly, the establishment of bodies specifically focused on stabilization and reconstruction created institutional repositories for related lessons. Examples of such bodies include the German Stabilization and Post Conflict Reconstruction office in the Federal Foreign Office and the UK's Stabilisation Unit.

Appendix A: Conference Participants

Name		Affiliation
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Greg	Bauer	SIGAR
Brig Gen Paul	Bauman, USAF	U.S. Department of Defense
Jaryd	Bern	SIGAR
Joe	Brinker	USAID
Dr. Bill	Byrd	USIP
Dr. Graciana del	Castillo	Macroeconomics Advisory Group
Nikolai	Condee-Padunov	SIGAR
Chelsea	Cowan	SIGAR
Matt	Cox	SIGAR
Amb. James	Cunningham	Atlantic Council
James	Cunningham	SIGAR
Karen	Decker	U.S. State Department
Michael	Earnest	SIGAR
Marvin	Fernandez	Japanese International Cooperation Agency
Jason	Foley	USAID
Amb. Michael	Frühling	Inquiry on Sweden's Engagement in Afghanistan
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Jennifer	George-Nichol	SIGAR
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Alexandra	Hackbarth	SIGAR
Nick	Heun	SIGAR
Clint	Hougen	SIGAR
Cathy	Johns	SIGAR
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Nicholas	Krafft	Formerly World Bank
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LESSONS FROM THE COALITION

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Lael	Mohib	Afghanistan's Embassy in the United States
Masataka	Nakahara	Japanese International Cooperation Agency
Amb. Ron	Neumann	American Academy of Diplomacy
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Source: P.L. 110-181, “National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008,” 1/28/2008.

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