

From the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

Transcript for: Operation Oversight – Episode 1: USAID’s Promote

Description: Hear about SIGAR’s latest audit of Promote, USAID’s largest gender-based program and the program’s sustainability.

Related SIGAR Work: SIGAR-18-69-AR: Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs (Promote): USAID Needs to Assess This \$216 Million Program’s Achievement and the Afghan Government’s Ability to Sustain Them

Released: September 2018

[ Background Music ]

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Hi, and welcome to Operation Oversight, the official podcast of the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR as we’re often called. I’m Jen George-Nichol with SIGAR’s Office of Public Affairs and I’ve got Dan Chen with me today from SIGAR’s audit division. Welcome to the podcast, Dan.

[ Daniel Chen ] Thanks for having me, Jen. Glad to be here.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] I’ve got Dan with me here today to talk about SIGAR’s newest audit which digs into a major U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, program that was intended to improve the status of women in Afghanistan. The program was launched to great fanfare by the former Administrator of USAID and has become USAID largest gender-based program in history.

Dan, what can you tell us about the program? What did the audit find and what was the bottom line?

[ Daniel Chen ] So, the program’s called Promote and it’s a \$216 million program that’s supposed to help 75,000 Afghan women. The bottom line is we’re not sure if it has. We raise questions about whether Promote is sustainable at all and we also raise concerns that it could put USAID’s investment in jeopardy. It’s unclear to us whether USAID can even deliver the opportunities it promised the women of Afghanistan. So overall, what we have is a program with a lot of promises however, we don’t have any assurances of whether or not those promises can be delivered.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      So, we can't even really tell what's been achieved. How is that?

[ Daniel Chen ]                                      First, they didn't have a baseline study or an understanding of where we were before the program began and where we went during the first two years. Without that kind of study, we can't thoroughly understand where we've been and without that understanding we can't be sure of how far the program has taken us or the program's overall impact on Afghan women. USAID didn't have a starting point from which to evaluate Promote's progress.

Also, USAID has made extensive changes to the program's performance indicators. It's like moving the goal posts on a kicker as he's lining up. He can't possibly know what he's aiming for when the target is changing. There were numerous problems that were outside of USAID's control like poor security and the economic climate. We can't fault USAID for those, but there were a number of problems within USAID's control that they failed to correct.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      Dan, it sounds like we've come all this way to unclear, if not shoddy, results. What does that mean for the future of the program?

[ Daniel Chen ]                                      USAID told us that it does not expect the Afghan government to be able to sustain Promote outside of providing internships and employment opportunities for women who participate in the program. We can't even be sure if that's possible. It's unclear to us whether the Afghan government will be able to hire all of these women or whether the sluggish and poorly performing Afghan private sector will be able to employ them. USAID has failed to demonstrate whether the program's results are sustainable.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      That doesn't sound like a lot of good news for the program or Afghan women but why should Americans care about a program that's literally around the world?

[ Daniel Chen ]                                      Well, what we're hoping for is that this program's still ongoing and with our recommendations, USAID can help make some improvements and set this program back on track, to make it more successful for the women of Afghanistan. The U.S. has invested a lot in this area. It's important to us that our investment is well-spent and makes valuable gains for Afghan women.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      Great points. Thanks, Dan and thanks for joining us on the podcast today. If any of our listeners would like to learn more, you can find the audit we discussed today, as well as all SIGAR products, on our website: [www.sigar.mil](http://www.sigar.mil) and you can follow us on Twitter [@sigarhq](https://twitter.com/sigarhq) or on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/sigarhq). Thanks for listening and we'll catch you next time on Operation Oversight.