

From the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Transcript for:  
Operation Oversight – Episode 9: IWA - SIGAR’s Eyes and Ears in Afghanistan

Description: Hear about SIGAR’s partnership with Integrity Watch Afghanistan, an Afghan nongovernmental organization

Released: March 2019

[ Background Music ]

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Welcome to Operation Oversight, the official podcast of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. I’m Jen George-Nichol and today I have a special guest with me. Scott Harmon is the Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Inspections based in SIGAR’s office in Kabul, Afghanistan. Welcome to the podcast, Scott.

[ Scott Harmon ] Thanks for having me, Jen.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] With only 30 people and in a country like Afghanistan, how are you guys able to conduct oversight, especially with the worsening security situation? How have you guys been able to adapt to continue implementing SIGAR’s mission and overseeing American programs there?

[ Scott Harmon ] We have a civil society organization that we work with by the name of Integrity Watch Afghanistan, or IWA. We’ve had to, as the years went by, we’ve had to rely a great deal on them. They call SIGAR the eyes and ears of the American taxpayer in Afghanistan, however, IWA is our eyes and ears.

Over the last, I’d say three years, which we’ve really utilized them, they’ve been able to travel to 28 of the 34 provinces. They’ve done about 500 inspection-type reviews for us, 500 different facilities. So, we’ve relied on them a great deal and that’s really worked out. What makes us special, in terms of both the other inspectors general and the regular USAID and Department of State and how they can conduct their duties around Afghanistan is that. They don’t really have an IWA type that can be their eyes and ears. So generally, we get out more, if you take what SIGAR can do, what our locals can do, and what IWA does for us, we get out more than any other agency in Afghanistan for oversight. [[end at 2:02]]

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] It sounds like IWA is a really important and interesting organization.

[ Scott Harmon ] They can really be utilized a lot more than what they are. We’re trying to figure out new ways to use them. For example, when we did our Promote and our Rural Agricultural Development Program audits, we utilized IWA extensively to conduct telephone surveys. Their reach is tremendous. They actually do have outreach in every province. I think it’s just up to us to be able to utilize them to their fullest and we have some ideas in the next year or so that I think, we’ll be able to utilize them to the maximum extent. When I, we, first started

working with them almost four years ago I was like “Wow, I’m not really sure what we can do with these guys.” However, that’s back when we were getting out and we could do this work ourselves. I think what’s outstanding about IWA’s capabilities is even in the time, back in 2012, when we could travel to the maximum extent that we could ever travel, we would never have been able to hit all the provinces that IWA does nor could we stay on-venue. Even if we do go out to a site, typically, we can only be on the venue for about an hour or two and then we can only do it once a week. With IWA they give us the capacity – two, three, four, five, six hours on venue, which we could never do and also go to five, six, seven, eight times in consecutive days which we were never able to do. So honestly, I think our programs have gotten stronger as we personally, our SIGAR employees, may have been able to access sites less.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      That’s important since the U.S. taxpayers’ dollars have gone to all the areas you’re talking about, all the sites that you mentioned, and if we can’t get out there to see what’s happened, it sounds like what you’re telling me is State or AID is certainly not out there conducting oversight to see what’s happened to their facilities or DOD.

[ Scott Harmon ]                                      Even DOD, with all the might and resources that our U.S. military has, they just don’t have the reach. Unfortunately, what we’ve seen in our audits and inspections is monitoring and evaluation. Inspector General Sopko, on his last trip, stated that again and again that we put these programs and build this infrastructure I would say in the hinterlands, but it doesn’t even have to be in the hinterlands it can just be five miles outside the city and we just have zero visibility over that. So, when we send our civil society partners, IWA or our locals, out there that’s painfully obvious.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      We can’t see where the money’s gone and I’m assuming there’s a much greater chance, or risk rather, of it having been wasted.

[ Scott Harmon ]                                      Absolutely.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      It seems like a really unique, if not, unprecedented model you’ve set up with IWA over there that seems like it’s making a big difference for SIGAR’s ability to conduct oversight. Can you tell us a little more about how that model works? Why it’s been able to be so effective?

[ Scott Harmon ]                                      Well, I think two reasons why it’s been able to be so effective is cost and also just access. They have a team of Western-educated engineers who have the same goals as we do. They realize that not only is integrity in their name, but they want Afghanistan to work. A lot of their staff are Western-educated. They came back, which to me means that they want their country to prosper and they have the same goals as we do. They want to see the money spent wisely.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      They’re all Afghans?

[ Scott Harmon ]                                      Yes, they’re all Afghans, either Afghan or Afghan-Canadian, British, German, American, but they’re all born in Afghanistan. A lot of them went and received their education in the West and they came back. As a matter of fact, a couple of

them have come back to IWA, which I think is another testament to what their organization stands for. But, they're incredible.

There is one inspection when we first started working with them, of course we wanted to see what they could do and they weren't really sure what we wanted. So we sent them to a couple of sites that we had already performed inspections on and so we knew what they were going to see. One of them was Sheberghan Teacher Training Facility. One of them was Gardez Hospital and two, even three, four years ago they were not in very good areas, now those areas are completely contested. And one of the IWA inspectors told me they had to wear certain clothing at certain times of the day where they were going through Taliban checkpoints. It's pretty scary stuff considering they're risking their life to inspect a facility that was paid for by U.S. funds. You know, that's what I think makes them really valuable is that they really care about the work.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      Something built in an area that the United States assumed would retain is now an area that even local Afghans have to conduct costume changes to be able to safely operate in.

[ Scott Harmon ]                                      Absolutely. With the way Afghanistan, its culture, is it's also – to be clear, the costume is probably also to fit in to more of the local tribes, but certainly to be able to pass safely through these contested areas because the Taliban set up checkpoints. You know, they set up checkpoints to both collect money and also see, you know, who's working with the foreigners. So, they have to dress to fit in. One of these inspections I received a call from one of the inspectors and they said "We're going to need a couple extra days because this area's going to be shut off for a couple days because the Taliban are marching in. So, once it clears, we'll start inspecting again."

So, to my earlier point, we would have never been able to have access like that. That's what makes them really incredible, both in terms of their work product and then their courage.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      How big is IWA?

[ Scott Harmon ]                                      They have, the paid staff numbers about 30. So, they're a very small organization. However, they have volunteers throughout all the provinces, in all the districts in the provinces, and these volunteers all want to see Afghanistan develop, flourish, so they extend IWA's reach as well into just about every nook and cranny of Afghanistan. As far as volunteers, Inspector General Sopko gave a speech at their latest conference in June where they called a lot of these volunteers in and there was at least 150 in the auditorium. They came into Kabul, risking their lives, to receive an award that really amounted to just a piece of paper. I was extremely impressed that these people could get in from the areas that they got in from just to come in and receive these awards. When Mr. Sopko was there, they were truly appreciative that he came there and recognized them.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      That's great. That seems like a very productive model. We were so glad that you were able to join us today on the podcast and we hope you'll come back sometime soon.

[ Scott Harmon ]

Absolutely.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]

Thanks again, Scott. Thanks to our listeners for tuning in and we'll see you next time on Operation Oversight.

[ Background Music ]